



A Pragmatic Study on Politeness in Classroom Discussion Among University Students

¹Desry Nurliana^{ID}, ²Khairun Nisa^{ID}, ³Sahfitri Ahwani^{ID}, ⁴Nadila Adelia Putri^{ID},
⁵Deasy Yunita Siregar^{ID}

¹²³⁴⁵⁶TBI, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Indonesia, Medan

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Article history:	A study on politeness strategies in classroom discussions highlights their role in fostering respectful and effective communication among university students. Using qualitative methods, the research observes a class of 30 students, focusing on verbal and non-verbal interactions during discussions. Four main politeness strategies are identified based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework: positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record strategies, and bald on-record strategies. Positive politeness dominates in collaborative contexts, encouraging rapport and active participation, while negative politeness helps manage disagreements and maintain respect in hierarchical settings. Contextual factors such as cultural background, discussion topics, and classroom dynamics significantly influence the choice of strategies.
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INTRODUCTION

Politeness plays a crucial role in effective communication, especially in educational settings such as classroom discussions. As an essential aspect of pragmatics, politeness strategies help facilitate respectful and productive interactions, fostering a positive learning environment. Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that politeness is a universal phenomenon, although its application varies across cultures and contexts. Understanding how university students employ politeness strategies during classroom discussions offers insights into their pragmatic competence and social dynamics within academic settings.

According to Okta Fiani et al., (2023) politeness is defined as formal behavior that reflects politeness without coercion or interference. In the context of education, the role of lecturers in the learning process is not only limited to delivering material in front of the class, but also serves as a motivator as well as a second parent for students. Therefore, students are expected to respect and show politeness, both through actions and in communicating with lecturers. Students need to understand the different ways of communicating according to the interlocutor. Through this research, it is expected that lecturers can assess students not only from the aspect of grammar, but also from the aspect of language politeness. Communication is also a means to express opinions, such as in discussions, debates, and others, especially in learning in English classes.

Classroom discussions, especially at the university level, provide a unique context for examining politeness. Unlike casual conversations, classroom interactions often require participants to balance academic rigor with social sensitivity. Students must express opinions, challenge viewpoints, and negotiate ideas while maintaining respect for their peers and instructors. These interactions can involve potentially face-threatening acts (FTAs), such as interruptions, disagreements, or criticisms. As such, the use of politeness strategies becomes critical in ensuring that discussions remain constructive and inclusive. Leech (2014) highlights that politeness in such scenarios serves not only to avoid conflict but also to foster collaboration and mutual understanding.

Furthermore, Ayu & Putri, (2024) argue pragmatics learning is considered important in daily conversation because it is closely related to human interaction. In every interaction, individuals try to understand the meaning of the words conveyed by their interlocutors and relate them to the context of the ongoing situation. According to Nurdiana (2019), pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that focuses on the meaning of speech. This understanding helps reduce the risk of misunderstanding in communication. Politeness in language also includes language use, both orally and in writing. Language politeness is an attitude that influences how people live their lives. It is important to study because politeness is used in social interactions and in various specific contexts, with the aim of understanding what to say, how to say it, and how to behave towards others.

Across various contexts, politeness strategies are used to mitigate face-threatening acts and ensure smooth communication. However, recent research has highlighted that politeness can also be manipulated for harmful purposes. For instance, Alvarez and Miller-Ott (2022) examined how politeness theory can be used as a tool for face-threatening acts in emotionally abusive romantic relationships. Their study revealed that, in this context, messages that appear polite on the surface can be employed to attack the partner's face and exert

emotional control.

While Alvarez and Miller-Ott (2022) contributed significantly to the literature by uncovering the “dark side” of politeness in abusive interpersonal relationships, their focus remains limited to romantic relationships. This leaves unexplored how politeness functions in other communication settings, such as academic contexts. Classroom discussions, particularly at the university level, possess unique dynamics where politeness strategies are often utilized to support collaboration and collective learning. This context demands a distinct approach, as the interaction norms and pragmatic goals differ significantly from those of interpersonal or romantic relationships.

Although previous research has provided valuable insights into the role of politeness in emotionally charged interpersonal interactions (e.g., Alvarez & Miller-Ott, 2022), there remains a significant gap in understanding how politeness strategies are employed in classroom discussions. This gap is critical, given the role of politeness in managing disagreements, maintaining harmony, and fostering a productive learning environment. This study aims to address this gap by conducting a pragmatic analysis of politeness in classroom discussions among university students. It focuses on how politeness strategies are employed by students to support or avoid conflict during discussions and how the classroom context influences perceptions of politeness.

Communicative politeness is becoming an increasingly important aspect of foreign language teaching, particularly in the context of classroom discussions. However, its integration into teaching materials is often limited and lacks depth. From a pedagogical perspective, politeness is essential to address as it poses unique challenges in teaching and requires the use of authentic materials that reflect the sociocultural context of the learning environment. In language education, oral communication serves as a critical indicator of students’ competence. Politeness is a learned behavior developed through social interactions, making it an essential component to include in teaching, especially in activities focused on oral interaction and communicative skills (Ramos-González & Rico-Martín, 2015).

Misunderstandings and communication breakdowns can often occur when politeness norms are not adhered to, highlighting the importance of teaching these rules. Incorporating ample opportunities for oral interaction helps students internalize conversational and socio-pragmatic norms. Additionally, teaching polite elements of speech, such as intonation and word choice, is crucial for effective communication during classroom discussions. This ensures that students can engage respectfully and meaningfully, fostering a productive and supportive learning environment.

This research is significant for several reasons. First, it addresses the growing diversity in university classrooms, where students from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds interact. Understanding politeness strategies can help educators design inclusive discussion formats that respect and accommodate different communication styles. Second, with the rise of collaborative and discussion-based learning approaches, understanding the role of politeness becomes even more critical in ensuring productive exchanges. Lastly, this study has implications for the development of communication skills among students, preparing them for professional and social interactions beyond the university setting.

In other hand, this study seeks to explore how politeness strategies are utilized by university students during classroom discussions. It focuses on the types of politeness strategies employed, the factors influencing their use, and the potential impact these strategies have on communication and learning outcomes. The primary objective of this research is to analyze the linguistic and pragmatic features of politeness in the context of university classroom discussions. By examining how students navigate sensitive topics, manage disagreements, and collaborate effectively, this study aims to uncover the underlying mechanisms that promote harmonious interactions. The findings are expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of how politeness supports learning, critical thinking, and interpersonal relationships in higher education.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to explore and analyze the politeness strategies employed by university students during classroom discussions. Qualitative methods were chosen because they allow for an in-depth understanding of social interactions and the contextual factors that shape communication. Through direct observation, this research captures the dynamic and nuanced nature of politeness as it occurs naturally in classroom settings. The study focuses on understanding how students navigate politeness when expressing opinions, managing disagreements, and collaborating in discussions. By examining authentic interactions, this method enables the researcher to uncover patterns, themes, and cultural influences that may not be apparent in quantitative data. Furthermore, qualitative research is particularly suited for exploring pragmatics, as it emphasizes the significance of context, intent, and interpretation in communication.

The emphasis on real-life interactions ensures that the findings are grounded in actual practices rather than hypothetical scenarios. This approach also provides the flexibility needed to adapt to the diverse and unpredictable nature of classroom discussions. Overall, the qualitative methodology aligns with the study's goal of providing a comprehensive and contextualized understanding of politeness in educational settings.

1. Data Collecting

The data were collected through direct observation of a classroom discussion involving 30 university students at a university in Medan. The selected class was part of a discussion-intensive course where students frequently engaged in group debates and collaborative learning activities. Over the course of six weeks, the researcher observed the students during scheduled class discussions, capturing their interactions in a natural, unaltered environment.

Each session was recorded using audio and video devices to ensure accuracy in data transcription. In addition to recording verbal exchanges, the researcher took detailed field notes to document non-verbal behaviors such as gestures, tone of voice, and facial expressions, which often play a crucial role in conveying politeness. The observations focused on identifying instances where students employed politeness strategies, such as mitigating disagreements, expressing agreement, or addressing peers respectfully. To ensure ethical

compliance, participants were informed about the purpose and scope of the study and consented to being observed and recorded. The class was chosen based on its active use of discussion-based teaching methods, ensuring rich and relevant data for analysis.

2. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed manually through a detailed process involving transcription and thematic analysis. First, the audio recordings of classroom discussions were transcribed verbatim to capture every detail of verbal interactions, including pauses, tone, and hesitations, which are often significant in understanding politeness strategies. The transcriptions were then carefully reviewed alongside the video recordings to ensure accuracy and to incorporate non-verbal cues such as gestures, facial expressions, and body language.

Field notes taken during the observation sessions played a critical role in enriching the analysis. These notes provided contextual insights that complemented the transcriptions, such as the seating arrangements, the flow of discussions, and any notable moments of tension or cooperation among students. The integration of these notes ensured a holistic understanding of the interactions and their pragmatic implications.

Thematic analysis was conducted to identify patterns and categorize politeness strategies based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework. The analysis focused on four main types of politeness strategies: positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record strategies, and bald on-record strategies. Each instance of politeness was examined in its specific context, taking into account factors such as the nature of the discussion, the relationship between participants, and the cultural or linguistic background of the speakers.

By manually coding and categorizing the data, the researcher was able to delve deeply into the nuances of politeness in classroom discussions. This manual approach also allowed for flexibility in interpreting subtle or unexpected aspects of the data that automated tools might overlook. The findings from this analysis provide a comprehensive view of how politeness strategies are employed by university students and their significance in fostering respectful and effective communication.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into how university students employ various politeness strategies during classroom discussions. Through direct observation and analysis of interactions in a class of 30 students at a university in Medan, the research reveals a nuanced approach to communication, where politeness plays a critical role in maintaining respectful and productive exchanges. The analysis identified several key politeness strategies, including positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record strategies, and bald on-record strategies. These strategies were observed to vary depending on the context of the discussion, the relationship between participants, and the nature of the topic being discussed.

Dowlatabadi et al. (2014) explored these strategies within the formal context of dispute resolution councils in Iran, focusing on how participants employed positive politeness strategies. Their study underscores the influence of

cultural and institutional norms on politeness, particularly in structured, hierarchical environments. However, while their research sheds light on politeness strategies in a formal legal context, little attention has been given to how these strategies manifest in semi-formal and collaborative environments, such as classroom discussions. This limitation highlights the need to examine the role of politeness in academic settings, where students navigate peer dynamics, manage disagreements, and achieve educational goals through strategic language use.

Furthermore, Lin et al. (2023) investigates the significance of politeness strategies in online tutoring interactions, highlighting their role in fostering positive tutor-student relationships and enhancing learning outcomes. The study finds that politeness not only helps maintain a respectful and collaborative learning environment but also encourages student engagement and motivation. These findings are crucial when considering politeness strategies in the context of classroom discussions among university students, as explored in this study. Like the online tutoring context, classroom discussions benefit from the strategic use of politeness to mitigate potential conflicts and foster effective communication. Both studies emphasize that the application of politeness strategies can influence the quality of academic interactions and contribute to a more supportive and productive learning environment. This suggests that a similar emphasis on politeness could be integral to enhancing discourse dynamics in face-to-face classroom settings, as students navigate the balance between assertiveness and respect in academic discussions.

Students' use of politeness was influenced by factors such as power dynamics, cultural backgrounds, and the urgency of the discussion. Understanding these patterns helps to highlight the complex ways in which students navigate social norms and manage face-threatening situations in an academic environment. The findings also demonstrate that while some strategies, like positive politeness, are used frequently to build rapport, others, like bald on-record strategies, are employed when there is a need for directness or urgency. Overall, these findings contribute to the understanding of how politeness strategies shape classroom discourse and learning outcomes.

This study analyzed the use of politeness strategies among university students during classroom discussions, with data collected through direct observation of a classroom of 30 students at a university in Medan. The primary focus of the study was to explore how politeness is navigated in real-time academic interactions and the types of strategies that students use to facilitate respectful communication. The findings are categorized into two sub-sections: (1) types of politeness strategies used during discussions and (2) contextual factors influencing politeness strategies. These findings not only shed light on the diverse approaches to politeness but also highlight the nuanced role of social and environmental factors in shaping communication. The observed data revealed patterns in the ways students engage with one another, whether in agreement, disagreement, or collaboration. These findings are supported by specific examples of student interactions observed during the study, providing a comprehensive view of the various linguistic and pragmatic strategies at play in everyday academic discourse.

In analyzing the data, the findings were categorized based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness, which outlines four main strategies:

positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record strategies, and bald on-record strategies. The data showed that positive politeness was the most frequently used strategy, particularly in collaborative settings where students sought to build rapport and encourage participation. Negative politeness emerged as a significant strategy during moments of disagreement or when interacting with authority figures, reflecting students' desire to avoid imposing and to show respect. Off-record strategies, used sparingly, were often employed when students needed to offer indirect critiques or address sensitive topics, while bald on-record strategies were typically reserved for situations requiring urgency or directness. This categorization, based on Brown and Levinson's framework, provided a clear structure for understanding how different politeness strategies are deployed in classroom discussions, offering insights into the balance students strike between cooperation and autonomy in academic communication.

1. Politeness Strategy

The analysis identified four main types of politeness strategies based on Brown and Levinson's framework: positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record strategies, and bald on-record strategies. Positive politeness was the most frequently observed, often used to build rapport and solidarity among students, followed by negative politeness to minimize imposition. Off-record and bald on-record strategies were used less frequently and often depended on the context of the discussion.

Table 1. Examples of Politeness Strategy in Classroom Discussion

Politeness Strategy	Example of Utterance	Contexts
Positive Politeness	"That's a great point! I think we can add this idea too."	During group brainstorming for a project.
Negative Politeness	"Sorry, but I think we might need to revisit that idea."	Addressing a disagreement cautiously.
Off-Record Strategy	"It's interesting how some ideas might not fit here."	Suggesting a critique indirectly.
Bald-on Record Strategy	"We should finish this part now to stay on schedule."	Giving direct instructions during time pressure.

From the observations, students frequently used positive politeness to show agreement, appreciation, or encouragement, especially when discussing shared goals or group tasks. For instance, students often began their responses with affirmations like "I agree with you" before adding their opinions. Negative politeness was employed when students disagreed with their peers, often framed with hedging phrases like "maybe" or "I'm not sure." Off-record strategies appeared in cases where students were hesitant to criticize, opting for indirect suggestions. Bald on-record strategies were typically reserved for situations requiring urgency or directness, such as meeting deadlines.

2. Contextual Factors Influencing Politeness Strategy

Several contextual factors played a significant role in shaping the politeness strategies employed by students during classroom discussions. One of the key factors was the power dynamics present within the classroom. The presence of an instructor or a dominant peer often influenced the way students expressed themselves. For instance, when addressing the instructor or more authoritative figures, students tended to use negative politeness strategies to show respect and avoid imposing. This included using hedging language, indirectness, and expressions that minimized the risk of challenging authority directly. In contrast, when peers were equally positioned in terms of power, students were more likely to engage with each other using positive politeness strategies to build rapport and maintain camaraderie.

Another important factor was the cultural background of the students. Those from more collectivist cultures, for example, were observed to favor indirect communication and politeness strategies that emphasized harmony and group cohesion. This reflected cultural norms that prioritize maintaining face and avoiding direct confrontation. Conversely, students from more individualistic cultures seemed more comfortable with directness, though they still employed polite strategies to maintain respect in the group setting.

The nature of the discussion topic also influenced how students navigated politeness. Sensitive or controversial topics, such as ethical dilemmas or disagreements on important issues, elicited more cautious, indirect language. Students were more likely to use off-record or negative politeness strategies to soften the impact of their opinions and avoid confrontation. On the other hand, when discussing neutral topics, such as project logistics or administrative matters, students used more direct language, often resorting to bald on-record strategies, as the conversation was less likely to involve personal stakes or face-threatening acts. These contextual factors combined to create a complex landscape in which students continuously adjusted their politeness strategies based on the situation at hand.

Table 2. Observed Discussion Contexts Corresponding Politeness Strategy

Discussion Context	Dominant Politeness Strategy	Example
Group project brainstorming	Positive politeness	"Great idea! How about we also include this?"
Debating a controversial topic	Negative Politeness	"I see your point, but maybe there's another way to look at it."
Time-sensitive task coordination	Off-Record Strategy	"We need to wrap this up now."
Instructor-led discussion	Bald-on Record Strategy	"I think this could work, but I'm open to suggestions."

The findings highlight that politeness strategies are an integral part of classroom discussions, shaping how students interact and collaborate. Positive

politeness dominates in group settings, fostering a sense of camaraderie, while negative politeness is essential for managing disagreements respectfully. The choice of strategies is influenced by power dynamics, cultural norms, and the sensitivity of the discussion topics. These insights underscore the importance of understanding and fostering effective communication strategies to enhance learning experiences in diverse educational settings.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study provide significant insights into the use of politeness strategies among university students during classroom discussions. These findings are relevant not only in understanding how students navigate social interactions in academic settings but also in highlighting the dynamic factors that influence communication. The analysis of politeness strategies aligns with the initial focus of the study, which sought to examine the strategies students use to maintain respectful and effective communication in classroom discussions. The methods employed direct observation, transcription of discussions, and manual thematic analysis were successful in capturing the nuances of politeness behavior, reinforcing the validity of the findings.

The study found that positive politeness was the most frequently used strategy, a pattern that resonates with the goal of maintaining harmony and rapport among peers. This finding is consistent with previous research on communication in educational settings, where students often prioritize group cohesion to foster productive learning environments. Positive politeness allows students to express agreement, show enthusiasm, and encourage others, creating a collaborative and supportive atmosphere in discussions. In the context of the classroom, this strategy is not only a tool for effective communication but also for promoting participation and engagement.

On the other hand, negative politeness was frequently employed during moments of disagreement or when addressing figures of authority, such as instructors or group leaders. This reflects the study's hypothesis that students use politeness strategies to navigate power dynamics and avoid face-threatening acts. The use of negative politeness serves to mitigate potential threats to face, particularly in hierarchical settings, where students seek to maintain respect for authority while expressing differing opinions. The study highlights the importance of understanding how students manage power relations in academic discourse, as it influences the tone and direction of discussions.

Contextual factors, such as cultural background and discussion topics, also played a crucial role in shaping students' choice of politeness strategies. Cultural influences were particularly evident in the way students from collectivist backgrounds employed indirect language to preserve harmony and avoid confrontation. This finding aligns with broader research on intercultural communication, where the preference for indirectness in collectivist cultures is well-documented. In contrast, students from individualistic cultures were more comfortable with directness, though they still engaged in polite behavior to ensure mutual respect. This variation in communication styles highlights the complexity of classroom interactions in diverse settings and underscores the need for educators to be sensitive to the cultural backgrounds of their students when facilitating discussions.

The type of discussion also influenced the use of politeness strategies. Sensitive topics such as ethical issues or controversial debates triggered more cautious and indirect communication, with students relying on off-record strategies to soften their responses and avoid direct confrontation. These findings suggest that when the stakes are higher, students are more likely to protect face by using indirect or hedging language. In contrast, neutral topics, like project logistics, led to more direct communication, where bald on-record strategies were appropriate. This is in line with the study's findings that the nature of the topic influences the intensity and formality of politeness strategies employed in academic discussions.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the use of politeness strategies among university students during classroom discussions, revealing how various strategies are employed to maintain respectful communication and navigate the dynamics of group interaction. By analyzing data collected through direct observation, transcription, and manual thematic analysis, the study identified four main types of politeness strategies: positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record strategies, and bald on-record strategies. These strategies were employed in different contexts, with positive politeness being most common in collaborative settings and negative politeness predominantly used during disagreements or when addressing authority figures. Off-record strategies were applied in more sensitive discussions, while bald on-record strategies appeared when directness was necessary, particularly in time-sensitive situations.

Furthermore, the study also highlighted the impact of contextual factors, such as power dynamics, cultural backgrounds, and the nature of discussion topics, on the choice of politeness strategies. Power dynamics in the classroom, for instance, influenced how students interacted with instructors or dominant peers, often leading to the use of negative politeness to show respect. Cultural differences were reflected in students' communication styles, with collectivist students favoring indirectness and individualistic students more comfortable with directness. Furthermore, the nature of the discussion topic whether neutral or sensitive affected the level of formality and indirectness employed.

Moreover, the findings provide valuable insights into how university students manage politeness in academic settings. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of how politeness strategies are essential not only for effective communication but also for maintaining group cohesion, managing disagreements, and fostering an inclusive learning environment. The findings suggest that educators should be mindful of these dynamics to create a classroom atmosphere that encourages respectful, open, and productive discourse.

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