

## **Students' Politeness Strategies in Messaging a Lecturer: A Discourse Analysis**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the politeness strategies used by students when communicating with a lecturer via WhatsApp messages. The researcher conducted this study using discourse analysis, with data obtained from 22 final-year students of the English Education Study Program at Universitas Tanjungpura Pontianak, in the form of screenshot messages. The messages were analyzed using referential analysis to examine each utterance. Based on the findings, the students mostly used a combination of positive politeness strategies and negative politeness strategies when messaging a lecturer. Each strategy served its own function; for example, positive politeness strategies were mostly found at the beginning of the message as a form of greeting, while negative politeness strategies were used to indirectly convey intentions and to soften requests. The results of the analysis showed that most students applied politeness strategies appropriately based on the context when communicating with the lecturer, but some still inappropriately used certain words and terms in their messages. Therefore, it is necessary for students to be more aware of appropriate language use, especially in written communication, in order to maintain effective communication and foster a good relationship with the lecturer.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Politeness is crucial for effective communication between students and lecturers, especially with the widespread use of instant messaging platforms such as WhatsApp and Gmail for academic discussions (Daulay et al., 2022). As defined by Leech (1983), politeness helps prevent conflict and fosters mutual respect. However, lecturers often encounter issues such as students failing to introduce themselves, directly stating their intentions without proper openings, using overly informal language, or sending messages at inappropriate times (Mulyono & Suryoputro, 2019). These missteps can frustrate lecturers and, in some cases, lead them to ignore the messages (Gazdar, 1979). Therefore, politeness is essential for ensuring successful interactions and avoiding misunderstandings.

The concept of “face,” which refers to an individual’s self-image and sense of pride, is particularly important in these interactions (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Students must be mindful of a lecturer’s “face” to avoid “face-threatening acts” (FTAs) and instead employ “face-saving acts” (FSAs) (Yule, 1996). Brown and Levinson (1987) further categorize face into positive face (the desire to be accepted) and negative face (the desire for independence). Understanding these

concepts enables students to demonstrate respect and communicate appropriately (Trisna Dewi et al., 2021).

Previous research has consistently highlighted challenges related to politeness in academic communication. Studies by Rahmi (2020) and Pratiwi and Anindyarini (2021) found that students often neglected greetings and used informal language, indicating a lack of awareness about social distance and power dynamics (Mahmud, 2019). Conversely, Algiovan (2022) observed that lecturers frequently used “bald-on-record” politeness to assert authority, while students employed “positive politeness” to show deference during thesis guidance sessions.

The present study aims to investigate the politeness strategies used by final-year English department students at FKIP Universitas Tanjungpura when communicating with their lecturers, particularly in the context of thesis consultations. Specifically, it will explore the types and functions of these politeness strategies, with the ultimate goal of providing insights into student communication behaviors and offering guidance on appropriate interaction with lecturers.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **Pragmatics**

Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that examines the relationship between linguistic forms and the people who use them (Yule, 1996). The phenomena discussed in pragmatics mostly deal with how language is used by its speakers. According to Yule (1996), pragmatics is concerned with four main areas. First, it involves the study of the speaker’s utterances and the effort of the hearer to interpret those utterances. Second, it focuses on interpreting a speaker’s utterance in a particular context, which requires both the speaker and the hearer to be aware of the contextual background surrounding the utterance. Third, pragmatics examines the recognition of the implied meaning within a speaker’s utterances. Finally, it emphasizes the expression of closeness or social distance between the speaker and the hearer.

According to Gazdar (1979), the most prominent meaning of pragmatics is that it is the study of deliberate human acts. This means that pragmatics requires the interpretation of actions in order to understand the intended meaning of utterances. Therefore, paying attention to the context of an utterance is essential to achieving an accurate interpretation. This aligns with Yule’s (1996) statement that context provides important details and helps the hearer understand the utterances more effectively.

The study of language through pragmatics has both advantages and disadvantages. One of its strengths is that it allows for the discussion of a speaker’s implied meaning, communicative intentions, and the types of actions being performed through speech. However, a challenge of pragmatics is that it can be difficult for humans to remain consistent and objective when analyzing these concepts (Yule, 1996). Consequently, pragmatics is a fascinating field because it involves understanding others linguistically, yet it is also complex, as it requires a deep comprehension of what people intend and think when they communicate.

### **Politeness Strategies**

Politeness is one of the key phenomena studied in pragmatics. One of the most influential theories was proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), which is based on the concept that people have a social self-image, commonly referred to as face. In all cultures, it is generally expected that speakers are aware of the hearer’s needs regarding their face, take their feelings into consideration, and minimize face-threatening acts (FTAs). An FTA is any action that threatens a person’s face. In brief, politeness can be defined as the act of showing awareness of the hearer’s social self-image (Yule, 1996).

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), the primary aim of politeness strategies is to minimize FTAs. They argue that every individual possesses two types of face: positive and negative. A positive face refers to the individual’s need to be respected and accepted in social interactions, while a negative face refers to the individual’s need for independence and freedom

from imposition. Brown and Levinson identify four politeness strategies: bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies. Each strategy serves a different function for both the speaker and the hearer in maintaining effective and respectful communication.

### **Bald on-Record**

Brown and Levinson (1987) state that when a speaker uses a bald on-record politeness strategy, they make a piece of advice, demand, offer, or invitation directly. The most direct utterances in this strategy typically use the imperative form without any mitigating devices. Speakers often apply the imperative form when speaking to close relatives or friends.

Bald on-record strategies generally do not attempt to minimize the threat to the hearer's face. However, in certain situations, they can be used in ways that implicitly reduce face-threatening acts (FTAs). Because such directness can often shock or embarrass the hearer, bald on-record strategies are most commonly used when there is a close relationship between the speaker and the hearer, such as among family members or close friends.

In the context of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, bald on-record refers to a direct and straightforward communication style in which a speaker makes a statement or request without employing any politeness strategies to mitigate potential FTAs.

### **Positive Politeness Strategy**

Positive politeness strategies, as proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), are communication techniques used to maintain and enhance the hearer's positive face—their need to be respected, liked, and accepted in social interactions. These strategies aim to save the hearer's positive face by expressing intimacy, engaging in friendly interactions, making the hearer feel valued, and showing that the speaker shares common ground with them.

Such strategies are employed when speakers want to demonstrate friendliness, solidarity, and a willingness to establish a positive social relationship with the hearer. Examples include using compliments, inclusive language, and shared humor to strengthen the bond between speaker and hearer.

### **Negative Politeness Strategy**

Negative politeness strategies are communication techniques used to mitigate or reduce the threat to a person's negative face—their need for autonomy and freedom from imposition. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), these strategies aim to maintain social distance, minimize imposition, and respect the hearer's personal space and boundaries.

Negative politeness is often employed when speakers wish to convey respect, deference, and consideration for the hearer's autonomy. Cutting (2002) notes that speakers can avoid imposing by emphasizing the value of the hearer's time and concerns, using apologies and hesitations, or framing statements as questions to give the hearer the opportunity to decline.

### **Off-Record**

An off-record strategy is an indirect way of communicating a message or making a request without explicitly stating it. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), this strategy involves utterances that are not directly addressed to the hearer, thereby leaving room for interpretation. By using indirect language, the speaker avoids imposing directly on the hearer and allows them the freedom to decide whether and how to respond.

Off-record strategies often involve hinting, suggesting, or alluding to the intended message. For example, a speaker might say, "Wow, it's getting cold in here," implying that it would be nice if the hearer adjusted the thermostat without directly asking them to do so. The effectiveness of this strategy depends on the hearer's ability to recognize and correctly interpret these indirect cues.

This strategy is often used when directness might be considered impolite or overly assertive. It allows the hearer to maintain a sense of autonomy and discretion in their response. However,

its success depends heavily on cultural norms, the relationship between speaker and hearer, and the broader context of communication.

## METHOD

In this research, the writer employed discourse analysis within a qualitative research framework, as the data were in the form of words and sentences. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), discourse analysis is concerned with investigating what language is used for. It is generally defined as the study of language beyond the sentence, focusing on language in texts and conversations. Moreover, discourse analysis is an interdisciplinary field that examines language and communication within their broader social, cultural, and contextual settings. It aims to understand how language conveys meaning, constructs identities, establishes power relations, and shapes social interactions. This approach goes beyond analyzing individual words or sentences to explore how language operates within larger texts, conversations, or even entire social practices.

Based on these definitions, the researcher concludes that discourse analysis is the study of language use in social interactions as manifested in written texts and conversations. In this study, discourse analysis was used to identify and analyze the types and functions of politeness strategies employed by students when texting a lecturer. The research data were obtained from students' chat histories with a lecturer, specifically through WhatsApp messages. The analyzed data included phrases, greetings, and expressions sent by the students in their text communications with the lecturer.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Findings

Answering first research questions: types of politeness strategies that are used by the final-year students of English Education Department study program. The following section provides more detailed information about the analysis results for the politeness strategies used by the students in messaging a lecturer.

**Table 1. Analysis result politeness strategies**

No	Politeness strategies	Frequency
1	Bald on record	22
2	Positive politeness strategies	42
3	Negative Politeness strategies	44
4	Off record	1
	Total	89

The analysis results show that most of the students used positive politeness strategies followed by negative politeness strategies, bald on-record and off-record. It indicates that the students mostly maintaining positive relation with a lecturer. In addition, the information about the second research purpose: finding out the function of each politeness strategy.

### Bald on-Record

Bald on-record strategy is the most direct approach in politeness theory. It prioritizes getting the message across clearly and efficiently, with little to no effort to soften the potential impact on the hearer's feelings. Bald on-record strategy is used when the speaker and the hearer have a close relationship for example, among friends and family. Moreover, bald on-record is also used in urgent situations and when the speaker has authority figures. In communication between a student and a lecturer, bald on-record is acceptable when used by the lecturer otherwise, it is not acceptable if the student uses it to the lecturer.

The message in excerpt 1 contains an example of this strategy that the student employs to a lecturer.

*“..... Here I want to consult my proposal that I have finished to revised ma’am, therefore do you have free time so I can come to meet you ma’am? .....” (P1)*

The message above was sent by student 1. The sentence “Here I want to consult my proposal that I have finished to revised ma’am” indicates that the student used bald on record strategy. He didn’t attempt to minimize the FTA. He mentioned his intention directly and did not consider the hearer’s status. He also damaged the hearer’s face by uttering “Do you have free time so I can come to meet you, Ma’am?” in asking a question the student did not use modal auxiliary verbs to lessen the FTA.

### **Positive Politeness Strategies**

Positive politeness strategies aim to make the hearer feel good about themselves in the interaction. This strategy also focused on highlighting shared interest between the speaker and the hearer, expressing warmth, and making the hearer feel valued. The message of excerpt 2 contains an example of a positive politeness strategy uttered by a student in the message for a lecturer.

*“Assalamualaikum Warahmatullahi Wabarakatuh, Good morning, Ma’am .....  
Thank you. Have a nice day, Ma’am” (P2)*

The student 2 using positive politeness strategy as an opening of the message and closing of the message. Student 2 uttered formal greetings “Assalamualaikum Warahmatullahi Wabarakatuh, Good Morning, Ma’am” the use of positive politeness strategy as greetings still considered as polite. Student 2 also uttered “Thank you. Have a nice day, Ma’am” The expression of gratitude and a benediction are also categorized as positive politeness strategies and it is appropriate to be used by a student to thank the lecturer and have a good wish for the lecturer. The next example of the use of positive politeness strategy in the message that might be inappropriate to be used for messaging a lecturer.

*“.....  
Congratulations, barakallah and alhamdulillah to Ma’am little baby who must be very cute.  
I wish and pray that she will be Ma’am happiness, penghapus Lelah dan penghibur dikala sedih...  
Also, may her life is full of happiness and be blessed by Allah.  
Selamat for Ma’am Yes.  
Anyway, I have input my LIRS for this semester. May Ma’am check them please.  
Thank you very much, Ma’am.” (P4)*

The student 4 using positive politeness strategies in the whole message. The opening and closing of the message are still appropriate “Assalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh” without mentioning his name, student 4 directly congratulated the lecturer for gave birth. “congratulations, barakallah and alhamdulillah to Ma’am little baby who must be very cute” in this utterance, the student might be done imposition. These expressions may be fine if it is used by the lecturer’s colleague. Student 4 also threatened the lecturer’s face by uttering “Anyway, I have input my LIRS for this semester. May Ma’am check them please.” The word “anyway” is considered inappropriate to use for a lecturer because it sounds informal. Student 4 also use mix language in the sentence “Selamat for Ma’am Yes” which sounds unconventional and unusual.

### **Negative Politeness Strategies**

Negative politeness strategy focuses on minimizing the imposition on the hearer and respecting their right to choose. It prioritizes the hearer's "negative face"- their desire for freedom of action and minimal intrusion. Moreover, this strategy uses indirect language, offering options, apologizing for any trouble, and hedging statements (using phrases like "maybe" or "if you do not mind"). This strategy is also used when the speaker and the hearer have a distance for example a student and a lecturer. The excerpt 5 contains negative politeness strategy.

".....  
*I am sincerely apologize for disturbing your time. I hope you are all good and healthy. My name is \_\_\_\_\_ one of your advisees from batch 2019. I would like to reconfirm that I have sent the revised draft of my thesis last week. I am looking forward to your further feedback and suggestion, Bu. Thank you in advance, Bu. I really appreciate any help that you can provide"*  
(P5)

Student 5 used negative politeness strategies as an opening of the message. She uttered "*I am sincerely apologize for disturbing your time...*" it is indicated as a sub-strategy of negative politeness strategy, apologizing. Student 5 also minimized imposition by using a modal auxiliary verb when she wanted to deliver her intention, "*I would like to reconfirm that I have sent the revised draft of my thesis last week....*". The next excerpt by student 6 also contain negative politeness strategies.

"...  
*I would like to apologize for taking up your time, Sir. I kindly request your guidance regarding the progress of my research. Here is the soft-file of my thesis draft, Sir. I would greatly appreciate your insights on any potential improvements to my thesis draft."* (P6)

The data above show that the student 6 used negative politeness strategy in texting the lecturer. the sub-strategy that applied by the student 6 is apologizing, "I would like to apologize for taking up your time, Sir". The student 6 also lessen the FTA by saying "I kindly request your guidance regarding the progress of my research" the request might be damaged the lecturer's face as the hearer but the student 6 soften the sentence and give deference in line with Brown and Levinson (1987) negative politeness sub-strategy, give deference. Student 6 also knew how to request politely by uttering, "I would greatly appreciate your insight on any potential improvements to my thesis draft". it also indicated that the student showed respect to the lecturer.

"..... *I am sorry for disturbing your time. My name is \_\_\_\_\_ from batch 2018. Excuse me, Sir I would like to consult regarding my revised proposal. May I know, when can I meet you, Sir? .....*" (P7)

Student 7 applied negative politeness strategies. Student 7 as the speaker uttered "I am sorry for disturbing your time" indicated that student 7 used sub-strategy of negative politeness strategy, apologizing. Student 7 also lessen the FTA by uttered, "*Excuse me, Sir I would like to consult regarding my revised proposal*" she used modal auxiliary verb to lessen the FTA. "Excuse me, Sir" also indicates that student 7 applied negative politeness sub-strategy, give deference to show respect to the lecturer before delivering her intention. In conclusion, most of the students used negative politeness strategy to apologize before delivered their intentions when messaging a lecturer.

## Off-Record

Off-record strategy is a way to communicate indirectly to avoid imposing on the hearer's face (their sense of self-worth and desire for freedom from imposition). This strategy helps navigate potentially face-threatening situations by giving the hearer more control over interpreting the message. Moreover, this strategy is well-known as a non-risking strategy because one of the sub-strategy is giving hints.

*" ....Hereby, I would like to send my thesis draft, surat undangan ujian skripsi, and surat penguji for my thesis examination that will be held on Thursday, 7 december 2023.... "*  
(P10)

The data above showed that the student used off-record in texting the lecturer. Although she used a negative politeness strategy because she used questions in the message as sub- strategy, the whole message can be concluded that student 10 expected the lecturer will come to her thesis examination and it can be concluded that student 10 gave hints that her thesis examination will be held on the date that she mentioned and expected the lecturer to come. Giving hints is one of the sub-strategies of off-record.

## Discussion

The findings of this study largely align with the foundational framework of politeness theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). The frequent use of positive politeness (e.g., using greetings, showing interest) and negative politeness (e.g., using hedges, apologizing for imposition) indicates that students are, for the most part, consciously attempting to mitigate potential face-threatening acts (FTAs) when communicating with their lecturers. This demonstrates an implicit understanding of the lecturer's 'face' needs—both the positive face (the desire to be liked and approved of) and the negative face (the desire to be unimpeded). This behavior confirms that politeness functions as a crucial social mechanism for maintaining harmony in asymmetrical power relationships, a concept also supported by pragmatic frameworks from Yule (1996) and Leech (1983).

The students' strategic language choices show they are navigating the delicate balance between getting their message across and showing deference, which is a core component of pragmatic competence (Cutting, 2002). The employment of these strategies supports the argument by Trisna Dewi et al. (2021) that an analysis of politeness is fundamentally linked to face theory.

The results of this research resonate with several previous studies conducted in similar contexts. The finding that students often employ positive politeness to show deference is consistent with Algiovan (2022), who observed this strategy during thesis guidance consultations. Similarly, the use of negative politeness strategies corresponds with findings from Mulyono and Suryoputro (2019) and Pratiwi and Anindyarini (2021), whose research on WhatsApp communication highlighted students' attempts to minimize imposition on their lecturers. This suggests a widespread awareness among students of the social distance and power dynamics inherent in the student-lecturer relationship, a point also emphasized from the students' perspective by Daulay et al. (2022).

However, this study also identified instances of communication that could be perceived as impolite, such as overly direct requests or the use of informal language. This particular finding is consistent with research by Rahmi (2020) and Mahmud (2019), who both found that students sometimes neglect politeness conventions in digital communication. This discrepancy does not necessarily indicate a lack of respect, but rather a potential gap in pragmatic awareness or a negative transfer of informal social media language into a formal academic setting. This aligns with observations made by Rahayuningsih et al. (2020) on the challenges EFL learners face in applying politeness strategies appropriately in classroom interactions.

The findings have significant pedagogical implications. The inconsistencies in students' application of politeness strategies highlight a need for explicit instruction in digital

communication etiquette within the academic environment. As suggested by Mahmud (2019), a focus on pragmatic competence should be integrated into the curriculum to help students understand the nuances of formal and informal registers. This could prevent miscommunication and improve the quality of student-lecturer interactions, ultimately fostering a more positive and productive academic relationship.

This study was limited to text-based communication within a single department. Future research could expand on these findings by conducting a comparative analysis across different faculties or universities to identify broader patterns. Furthermore, future studies could analyze the dynamic interplay of politeness from both sides of the conversation, building on the work of Algiovan (2022) and Indriani et al. (2019) who examined lecturers' politeness strategies. Investigating specific speech acts within high-stakes academic events, such as thesis examinations as explored by Susilawati (2019), would also provide a more comprehensive understanding of politeness in academic discourse.

## CONCLUSION

Based on findings and discussions, the results of this research can be concluded that most students are generally using negative politeness strategies to deliver their intentions. The students seemed to obey the rules while messaging the lecturers regarding time, message arrangement, and politeness. The findings showed that the students combined politeness strategies in one message. Apologizing, minimizing imposition, and questioning are the most used sub-strategies of negative politeness strategy. Many students uttered apologies after greeting the lecturer. The students also minimized imposition by using modal auxiliary verbs to soften the face of the hearer in this context lecturer. They used questions to ask about the lecturers' availability to have a consultation.

Positive politeness strategies, on the other hand, were used by the students as greetings and benedictions to the lecturers. Greetings as positive politeness is considered as polite and convivial. In this context, most of the students were using formal greetings as the opening of the messages. There was one message that contained a different use of positive politeness strategy. The student was not aware of the lecturer's position and messaged the lecturer informally which was considered impolite and could threaten the lecturer's face. Although in the context of the message, the student congratulated the lecturer but the choice of words were not appropriate because the lecturer needs to be respected. Bald on record was only found in one message in this research. The student was not soften the words and delivered the intention directly although the whole message contains positive and negative politeness strategies. As well as bald on-record strategy, off-record strategy was only found in one message in this research findings. The students did not deliver the intention but only gave a hint and this is not risking a FTA.

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