

## **STUDENTS' POLITENESS STRATEGY IN ONLINE LEARNING CLASSROOM**

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### **Abstract**

In recent years, online learning platforms have grown rapidly and become one of the most common choices in the world. However, there is still a limited amount of research about the use of politeness strategy in an academic online classroom setting. This research revealed the multicultural students' preferences for politeness strategy from different countries. It used a qualitative descriptive method and utilized the theory of politeness from Brown and Levinson. The interactions analyzed are teacher-student discussion, peer-to-student feedback, and individual and class discussions on writing format. The research results revealed that the most used strategies were positive politeness strategies (49%), negative politeness strategies (35%), off-record strategies (8%), and bald-on-record strategies (8%). The significant factors influencing these strategies were training and learning contracts that began before class.

**Keywords:** Multicultural education; online learning; students' politeness strategy

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Many online classes provide learning services that involve many students from various parts of the world. Developing countries in Asia, such as China, India, and Indonesia, are the main targets for online classroom providers to offer their services, so online learning in these countries is developing rapidly (Xiaojing, Shijuan, Seung-hee, & Richard, 2010, p. 178). Most of these classes have learning procedures with the same flow as face-to-face classes, where there is teacher-student interaction, a discussion between students, assignments, and feedback.

It must be realized that teachers' and students' different backgrounds may have different characteristics, approaches, thoughts, and approaches to learning. For example, it is found in group work that U.S. students are more action-oriented and pragmatic in seeking results or giving solutions, South Korean students are more social and contextually driven, and Finnish students are more self-reflective and theoretically driven (Kyong & Bonk, 2002). In terms of motivation in online learning, students in the U.S. showed a significantly higher motivation mean score than students from South Korea (Lim, 2004).

Not only showing different characteristics in learning and personality, but some students from different cultural backgrounds also sometimes show different politeness strategies. Politeness strategies implemented by a person to not threaten others are important because they can provide effective interaction between one another. This strategy can make the class closer, less distant, friendly, and lively in teaching and learning. In the EFL classroom, politeness enhances teaching, benefits the students, contributes to an effective learning process, and makes the atmosphere lively (Jiang, 2010). The politeness strategy itself has several types. For example, in theory, proposed by Brown and Levinson regarding Face Threatening Acts (FTA), there are four types of politeness strategies: Bald on Record, negative politeness, positive politeness, and indirect off the record (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The four strategies can be applied with different objectives in different situations.

Seeing the importance of politeness strategies adopted by students from different backgrounds in the same class, which the class made into a class and running smoothly, the research was conducted.

Several previous studies have revealed politeness strategies in online and offline classrooms. A study that discovered a teacher's strategy in English classrooms for EFL made students feel positive about learning and feel motivated to participate more in class (Sulu, 2015). Furthermore, research reveals the politeness strategies possessed by students in distance learning, which reveals the inability of students to provide appropriate politeness strategies that have a negative impact on the course of the class (Almoaliy, 2018). In Indonesia, it was found that teacher-student interactions in the English classroom revealed that teachers were adapting positive politeness strategies and students were adapting negative politeness strategies (Purnomo, 2019). Besides, the domination of a teacher increases the students' passivity, which needs to be emphasized in better interactions in the future. My research at this time also reveals politeness strategies. Nevertheless, the learning context occurs in online learning, which involves various students from different backgrounds. This is important because students must understand politeness strategies in order to minimize conflict. Moreover, in online classes, students act as learners and are responsible for being ambassadors of the country who are feared of being labeled negatively if they cannot act properly.

Therefore, this study aims to reveal the politeness strategy used in the interaction between teachers and students in international online classes. Further, it is also hoped that the research could describe the politeness strategies that positively contribute to an online class and determine whether the differences in cultural background influence the politeness strategies in an online academic setting. Thus, the research answered the research questions as follows:

1. What politeness strategies do students use in international online classrooms?
2. Which factors contribute to the student's use of politeness strategies during online learning?

After answering the research questions, hopefully, the research will give significance to language teaching and politeness strategies, which theoretically serve as references for similar research. This research can also help teachers broaden their horizons about what teaching strategies can be applied in English and Indonesian classes for foreign speakers.

### **Politeness Strategy**

Many experts reveal politeness strategies. Some of the most well-known are (1) Lakoff Rules of Politeness, (2) Leech's Politeness Principle and maxim of interaction, and (3) Brown and Levinson Face Saving / Threatening Act. The first maxim of politeness (1) has 3 sub-rules, namely "don't impose," which relates to distance and formality, "give options," which relates to "hesitancy", and "be friendly" which relates to "equality" (Lakoff, 1973). Unfortunately, this notion has received a lot of criticism because it needs to explain the different theories of politeness that exist in different cultures (Shahrokhi & Bidabani, 2013). The second theory (2) states that the politeness theory has several maxims. They are the tact maxim which means maximizing the benefits of others. The generosity maxim minimizes profits for yourself; the modesty maxim praises others highly; the agreement maxim maximizes approval for others; and the maxim of sympathy, which is maximizing sympathy for others (Leech, Principles of Pragmatics, 1983). This maxim has received praise and criticism because experts argue that new maxims can always be added to this theory (Locher, 2004). The third theory (3) outlines the positive and negative faces (Brown & Levinson, 1987). This theory has also received criticism for being too egocentric and incompatible with some collectivist cultures, such as Japan (Werkhofer, 1992).

### **Brown and Levinson Politeness Strategy**

In this research, the theory used as a research perspective is Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness. Because, in general, this theory is considered capable of explaining various perspectives that exist from various cultural points of view. This theory looks at the politeness value of the similarity of individualism, namely "self-esteem," which is manifested in "saving face" and "losing face" during social interactions (Brown & Levinson, 1987). This "face" is inspired by Chinese culture in the 19th century; the concept of face here means how someone wants to be seen by others when communicating or other people's views of the self-image or traits a person has as an adult (Hinze, 2012). Negative face-threatening acts are debilitated when a person does not maintain a strategic

distance from or proposes to maintain a strategic distance from the obstacle of their interlocutor's flexibility of activity (Brown & Levinson, 1987). But positive face-threatening acts debilitate when the speaker or listener does not care about their interactor's sentiments, or needs, or does not need what the other needs (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

**Table 1**

*The differences in politeness strategies*

Politeness Strategies	Meaning	Example and Situations
Bald on-record	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● An endeavour to play down the danger to the hearer's confrontation.</li> <li>● Frequently utilising such a procedure will stun or humiliate the recipient, and so this methodology is most regularly utilised in circumstances where the speaker includes a near relationship with the audience, such as family or near companions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Task-oriented</li> <li>● Little or no desire to maintain someone's face</li> <li>● Doing the face-threatening act is in the interest of the hearer</li> <li>● Situations where the threat is minimised implicitly</li> </ul>
Negative politeness	Negative politeness strategies are oriented towards the hearer's negative face and emphasise avoidance of imposition on the hearer. By attempting to avoid imposition from the speaker, the risk of face-threat to the hearer is reduced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Be indirect</li> <li>● Use hedges or questions</li> <li>● Be pessimistic</li> <li>● Minimise the imposition</li> <li>● Use obviating structures, like nominalizations, passives, or statements of general rules</li> <li>● Apologetic</li> <li>● Use plural pronouns</li> </ul>
Positive Politeness	Positive politeness strategies seek to minimise the threat to the hearer's positive face. These strategies are used to make the hearer feel good about themselves, their interests or possessions, and are most usually used in situations where the audience knows each other fairly well, or an individual's positive face needs, or self-worth, have to be met.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Try to understand interests, needs, wants.</li> <li>● Use solidarity in-group identity markers</li> <li>● Be optimistic</li> <li>● Include both speaker and hearer in activity</li> <li>● Offer or promise</li> <li>● Exaggerate interest in Hearer and his interests</li> <li>● Avoid Disagreement</li> <li>● Joke</li> </ul>
Off-record (indirect)	This strategy uses indirect language and removes the speaker from the potential to be imposing. The speaker can get credit for not imposing on the hearer or giving the hearer a chance to be helpful and generous.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Minimising the threat toward the hearer's freedom</li> <li>● Giving the hearer a chance to show good personality in caring for others</li> </ul>

*Adapted from Brown & Levinson (1987)*

### Politeness Strategy in Different Cultures

The use of expressions of politeness is indeed interesting if it is related to one's cultural background. Many studies have found that cultural differences will also produce different expressions of politeness. For example, the Japanese speakers were more direct and did not appear to be as appropriately polite as the Australians (Tanaka, 1988). In addition, other research also shows the difference between Chinese and American politeness strategies in dealing with problems. One of the

reasons for this is the cultural differences in the western and eastern worlds. Because usually, in the eastern education system, teachers dominate the classroom, and this method is done as an attempt to assess student performance and abilities (Zhang, 2007). In education, in the east, the teacher also has absolute authority over the students' questions, and the knowledge of students and students should not challenge the teacher during class (Biggs & Watkins, 1996). On the other hand, when students challenge their teachers in the western education system, it is considered a process of dialogue, a process of self-improvement. And the desired process during class (Robinson, 1999). However, the findings have been criticised by George Leech, saying that despite differences, each of the languages and cultures discussed herein constitutes a more or less unified system in terms of politeness norms (Leech & Larina, Politeness: West and East, 2010).

The politeness strategy is wider than face-to-face classes but also online classes. Results show that politeness conventions in email, a text-only medium with little guidance in the academic institutional hierarchy, appear to be a work in progress, and native speakers demonstrate greater resources in creating e-polite messages to their professors than non-native speakers (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007). The polite version yielded better learning outcomes. The effect was amplified in learners who preferred indirect feedback, had less computer experience, and lacked engineering backgrounds (Ning, et al., 2008). Therefore, it is very important to implement a suitable strategy in online classes, especially if you have students with different cultural backgrounds.

## **METHOD**

This research used a qualitative descriptive method. The descriptive method involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The descriptive method used and functioned to see, review, know, and describe something as it was at the time the research was held in a complex and holistic way (Cresswell, 1994). The method of collecting and processing data is divided into several stages as follows:

### **Data Sources**

This research used data from student and teacher interactions in an international online class. This online class was collaborative between the OPEN (Online Professional English Network) institution and the United States Embassy. The name of this online class was integrating critical thinking, and the World Learning institution conducted this course. Classes were held for eight weeks, from September 29, 2020, to November 24, 2020. This class was free class for English teachers from all over the world. The participants needed to answer a placement test, and those who fulfilled the requirement could participate in the class. The selection itself was carried out by the United States embassy, where prospective candidates were asked to fill out a questionnaire regarding the background of the class they teach and their level of English language skills. After a few weeks, teachers who passed the selection stage attended the online orientation stage for two weeks before classes began. The teacher in this class was an American teacher, and the students were Spanish, Mexican, Venezuelan, Indonesian, Chinese, Indian, Russian, and Nigerian participants.

In this class, researchers can observe, discuss, and access all conversations between teachers and students. Because this class was open to only some people, it was impossible for non-participants to access the lectures. Since the class had finished, the class was deleted by the organisers, but participants were allowed to download all the talks and materials that had been given. The class's objective was to improve teachers' critical thinking skills and integrate them with the culture to which English language learners belong.

Every week the teacher posted assignments that must be completed by the students in the form of group discussions, writing personal comments on certain issues and quizzes. Often the teacher asked the participants in the class to comment on each other and ask questions about things that captured students' attention by each participant in the class. The interaction during the class had the following criteria, (1) reciprocal response from fellow students and (2) students' comments to teachers. The conversation was in the form of discourse, comments, proposing ideas, and teachers' materials and explanations. In identifying this data, the researcher took statements made by students in response to

conversations given by teachers and friends in online classes in the form of salutations, positive and negative comments, students' questions and statements and points of view of agreement or disagreement.

### **Methods of Data Collection**

The researcher used observation, classification, and note-taking techniques to retrieve the data. First, the researcher read and paid attention to what information was disclosed by the participants in the online class from week two to week seven. The interaction during class was written in a language only. In analysing the students' politeness strategies, researchers analysed the conversation by copying and downloading all the talks that were available during the week. This analysis was followed by reading the conversation's text and marking the students' politeness strategies. Then, the information was recorded and classified based on the types of expressions. After that, the data were matched with the existing classification in the theory of politeness by Brown and Levison.

### **Methods of Data Analysis**

In analysing the data, the researcher classified the types of expressions based on the politeness strategies in theory. Then, the percentage of the politeness strategies was calculated. After getting the percentage of the most dominant expressions based on politeness theory, the researcher analyses what causes politeness strategies to be more dominant than others. The researcher tried to see whether any intervention from the teacher caused students to have a certain politeness strategy. In addition, the researcher also tried to reveal whether there were differences in politeness strategies that students from different country backgrounds have since the previous theory has been discussed that different perspectives on how to view politeness are different kinds of an individual who comes from the countries in the west and the east. These results were then narrated, discussed, and drawn conclusions regarding politeness strategies in online classes.

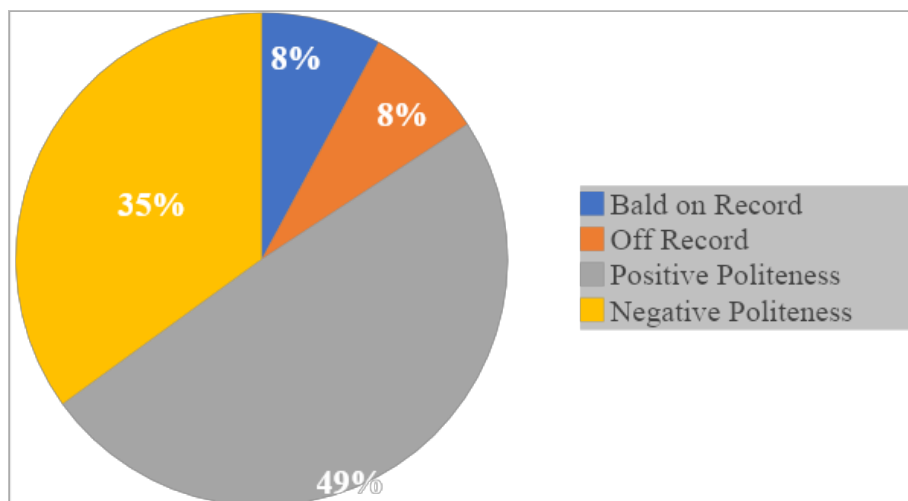
## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Politeness Strategies Students Use in International Online Classrooms**

Figure 1 shows politeness strategies concluded from five meetings and three kinds of discussion forums: discussion forums between teachers and students at the beginning of the week, discussion forums between groups, and individual discussion forums. It was found that most politeness strategies appeared very often positive and negative politeness strategies. This was because the conversations were written-based. So, writing would be easier to convey politeness, such as positive and negative strategies. These politeness strategies were also one of the easiest to understand without multiple interpretations and less threatening because these strategies were considered too direct.

### **Figure 1**

*The Students' Preferences for Politeness Strategy*



The strategy of politeness, named bald-on record, was the least used by the students because it was considered impolite to other class participants. This strategy frequently utilising such a procedure may stun or humiliate the recipient. So this methodology is often utilised when the speaker includes a close relationship with the audience, such as family or close friends (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The participants, in this case, were only students who did not know each other before, came from different backgrounds, and did not have an intimate/close relationship.

The off-record politeness strategy was also somewhat infrequent because this strategy usually contained an implied meaning behind everyone needing help understanding. This is quite difficult to find if it is only based on writing and without seeing the pragmatic aspects that occur by the speaker. The off-record strategies often indicate an implicature and modesty in communications (Yanti, 2017), so it is easier to be found in spoken utterances with a clear context. In this study, the number of off-record speeches the researchers took was based on the content delivered in discussion with a clear conversation context to understand the meaning behind the speaker's utterances. So, it showed the true intentions of the speaker.

Specifically, many positive politeness strategies were conveyed during group discussions when they commented on each other's work and provided positive suggestions. In providing the commentary sections, the participants tried to clarify and criticise the work of the other participants by highlighting the strengths of the person being criticised. This strategy was considered suitable in online classes because they keep both speakers able to convey the message, do not feel inferior, and can still accept the information conveyed.

In terms of negative politeness is conveyed, especially when teachers and students indirectly give feedback on comments that could perform better or do not even meet the stated assessment criteria. Teachers usually do this to keep the participants motivated and their "faces" from embarrassment because of negative comments that all the participants may read. Negative politeness in this context was also useful for enhancing good relations and maintaining a positive class situation. These are some examples of conversation and the categorizations of the politeness strategies:

**Table 2**  
*Example of Politeness Strategy utterances students*

Politeness Strategies	Meaning	Examples
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<b>Positive Politeness</b>	<p>Positive politeness strategies are intended to avoid giving offence by highlighting friendliness.</p> <p>These strategies include juxtaposing criticism with compliments, establishing common ground, and using jokes, nicknames, honorifics, tag questions, special discourse markers (please), and in-group jargon and slang.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Dear. Mr. Liu, <b>I'd appreciate it if you'd let me express</b> my point of view based on your condition...</li> <li>● <b>Good point,</b> ____ But, I feel like students need to share their opinion regarding different cultural celebrations, <b>don't they?</b></li> <li>Robert, <b>could you please share with me</b> about how you use this strategy in your class?</li> </ul>
<b>Negative Politeness</b>	<p>Negative politeness consists of: indirect; question; be pessimistic; give respect; apologise; personalise speakers and listeners state the FTA</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>I am sorry,</b> but I have a different opinion, I think ....</li> <li>● <b>I really understand being in your shoes,</b> you must be in a <b>complicated situation,</b> however ....</li> </ul>
<b>Bald on Record</b>	<p>The infamous bald on record strategies are used to straightforwardly address the other person or the hearer to express the speaker's needs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Can you <b>send me the link?</b></li> <li>● <b>Hold on!</b></li> <li>● <b>Write more clearly.</b> I don't understand.</li> </ul>
<b>Off Record</b>	<p>The main goal of this strategy is indirectness, to reduce or minimise the pressure on the speaker.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>My previous students used to make a video as a farewell.</b></li> <li>● ....I <b>wish we could appreciate</b> everyone's differences.</li> </ul>

### Factors Contributing to The Students' Politeness During the Online Learning

Several factors were believed to contribute to the preferences of students' politeness strategy. The first was the choice of students' preferences in politeness strategy was performed based on the study contract set at the beginning of the lesson. At the beginning of each learning, the class participants were trained and attended initial seminars on how to follow online learning, the technical way to operate the learning system, and some guidelines for communicating with teachers and fellow participants. These regulations also always reminded the class instructors at the beginning of the week that they should respect each other, write comments politely, and not provoke fights. There are some benefits in establishing classroom rules; one of them is maintaining class routines and student expectations for classwork and behaviours (Rademacher, J. A., Callahan, K., & Pederson-Seelye, V. A. (1998), allow students to quickly accomplish day-to-day tasks that are required of both the teacher and students and create smoother transitions between activities and therefore allow fewer opportunities for disruptions to occur (Burden, 2003; Docking, 2002). In line with this research, this classroom contract and initial training to prepare students for the class are effectively proven to maintain the utterances produced by students in the writing form. Therefore, it is advisable to implement these strategies in any language classroom.

The second was an internal condition of the course participants. Most of the participants in this course were adults, so they understood how to put themselves and implement politeness strategies. Many adult learners are considered cooperative with the classroom environment compared to others, such as children or teenagers. This fact supports the finding that adult learners are highly motivated, able to lead new ideas, self-directed, and generally more practical (Pappas, C., 2013). In line with this, during all courses, most of the learners could do homework and answer questions and discussions in almost every meeting. Even though the instructions were only given in written form several times, all learners obeyed the teachers' regulations and completed the questions.

### CONCLUSION

Based on the research finding, it can be concluded that all students have a mutually supportive and positive relationship with each other. Politeness strategies that are widely applied by students, in this case, are positive and negative. This strategy was found when students asked questions and expressed their views, agreeing and disagreeing. There was no difference between the politeness strategy produced by the learners if it is viewed according to the student's country.

All participants in this international online class consider the politeness strategy a very important strategy to be applied in the learning process, both online and offline. In the online learning process, this strategy can be useful for maintaining classroom conditions, fostering empathy among fellow participants, and maintaining high learning motivation. Because in online learning, usually, motivation is only in the form of internal motivation, and it is rather difficult for a teacher to provide external motivation other than inside other than when in class. This research discusses one online class that successfully runs its program from start to finish. However, not all politeness strategies have become students' preferences. If students from multicultural backgrounds and unfamiliar with each other are located in the same class, they will prefer a strategy of indirectness.

After examining the factors that support the success of this class, it can be concluded that differences in culture and country of origin do not cause significant differences. The strategies chosen by the students in the online class were the same each week, albeit with different people. These situations were influenced by the classroom instructors, the classroom environment, and the clearness of terms and conditions at the beginning of the program.

In the end, it can be concluded that in online learning, it is better if the program applies training and provides clear guidance to students and instructors before the learning process begins. This can minimise problems that may arise in the future. I believe the politeness strategy will be more different if the study analyses face-to-face learning because students will feel a more dynamic class, and the communication patterns are influenced by many other external conditions such as facial expression, intonation, eye contact, gestures, word stress, and intonation which the L1 and cultures of each participant may influence. In the future, the researcher hopes that similar research can be carried out in a wider research domain and subject or the analyses based on the different gender of the speakers.

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