

## The Employment of Language Politeness Strategies in Student-Lecturer Virtual Interaction

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### Abstract

Language politeness is a critical element to be incorporated in communication for its worth across social status, power, or position. In this study, WhatsApp text conversations between students and lecturers were utilised in analysing its politeness strategies used by the students. Purposive sampling which involved WhatsApp texts from two classes of English for Oral Presentation (ELC590) subject was conducted and text messages from thirty (30) students were selected. The text messages were then analysed using descriptive qualitative and quantitative analysis studies according to the four (4) politeness sub-strategies by Brown and Levinson (1987). All four (4) types of language politeness strategies were observed in the respondents' texts. Negative politeness strategy is the highest strategy used among respondents, followed by bald-on, positive politeness, and lastly off-record strategies. Based on the results, a number of respondents were not communicatively competent as some of the text messages contained Face-threatening Acts (FTA) that would damage the lecturers' face and be considered as impolite thus breaking down effective communication. Hence, it is recommended that other elements could be explored in future research such as time, use of emoji, punctuation or capitalisation. The findings would result in better understanding of language politeness strategies used in students' communication with lecturers.

**Keywords:** Language Politeness, Face-threatening Acts (FTA), Virtual Conversation

### Introduction

Communication is one of the crucial fundamental elements to ensure the sustainability of living in a community. Effective communication occurs when the intended message is successfully sent to the receiver. Malaysians, especially, are expected to have High Power Distance and Collectivism in nature based on (Hofstede's cultural theory, 2011). Therefore, it is expected that the person holding more power in conversation is the one who has higher hierarchical power. In written communication, there are more complex elements that we need to understand for us to send our message across. Language politeness is one of the elements that people need to comprehend. This element is crucial, especially when communication occurs among people with different social status, power, or positions. One of the most prominent examples of communication involving people of different social status is

a conversation between students and lecturers. Lecturers are known to have a higher position or power compared to students. Hayati (2021) mentioned that communication between lecturers and students is a type of communication that has different power relations, in which the lecturers have more power than the students. Therefore, when a conversation between them takes place, language politeness should be applied to avoid miscommunication or misunderstanding when getting the message across.

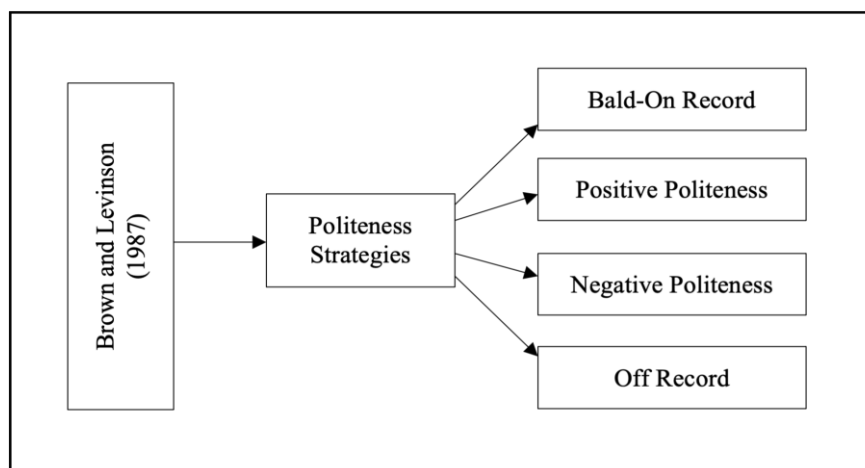
There have been a plethora of instances in which Whatsapp is used as a social media communication platform in the educational context in Indonesia. In similar situations, Malaysians are also using Whatsapp as the main communication platform. In Indonesian universities, Whatsapp is used to disperse information regarding campus activity, discuss various topics as well as research collaboration projects among students, teaching staff and campus administrators (Mulyono et al., 2019). Virtual or online interaction opens up more communication issues especially in the interaction between people with higher social status and people with lower social status. One of the examples of this situation is the interaction between lecturers (higher social status) and students (lower social status).

Virtual communication to some extent is challenging since it requires some rules to run proper interactions between lecturers and students (Algiovan, 2022). There have been some issues surfaced from this interaction especially when the education atmosphere had to experience a change from physical to virtual interaction. Educators and learners had to resort to virtual interaction to communicate and online communication platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram were used on a daily basis. According to Pratiwi and Anindyarini (2021), one of the issues that students face today is a lack of politeness in their language. Thus, it is crucial for students to emphasise on the use of language politeness strategies and employ them in their text messages. Numerous studies have been focusing on the use of politeness strategies among students in communicating with their lecturer, but this study has not been widely documented in Malaysia especially during online learning sessions.

### **Politeness Strategies**

According to Lakoff (1973), the use of politeness strategies in communication acts as a strategy to avoid conflict. People need to employ politeness strategies in daily conversations to create effective communication (Hayati, 2021). A number of past studies conducted on politeness strategies found that almost all politeness strategies are practised in the context of classroom settings. The novelty of this current study is in its different dimension from the past study. Although WhatsApp is still used as the main communication platform, the setting in which lecturer-student consultation for speaking tasks are focused. In lieu of the pandemic being imposed, WhatsApp has been the only communication tool used by both the students and lecturers to disseminate information as well as to share ideas, hence, making research in the area is still relevant.

According to Pasaribu et al (2022), the practice of inculcating politeness strategies in communication is considered as good manners or etiquette, but it is still a socially constructed concept in which what constitutes as polite differs from one culture to another. However, no matter how different cultures perceive politeness, being polite is a sign of basic human decency (Ye, 2019). Brown and Levinson (1987) divide the politeness strategies that can be used by participants to maintain their respective face. Politeness strategies that have been



devised occur in four sub-categories; Bald-on-Record Politeness, Positive Politeness, Negative Politeness and Off-record Politeness.

Figure 1: Brown and Levinson (1987) politeness strategies

### Literature Review

Karimkhanloo and Vaezi (2017) investigated the association between the proficiency level and politeness strategies and external/internal modifications in written communication skills in the speech act of request among English learners in Iran. This study involved 120 students which were categorised according to their English proficiency groups which are upper-intermediate and intermediate respectively. The data of this study were analysed using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies taxonomy. This study found that both groups (upper-intermediate and intermediate) used politeness strategies differently. It was reported that students from upper-intermediate groups used more appropriate politeness strategies than students in intermediate groups. This study also compared the use of politeness strategies among gender but no significant difference was found, even though it was suggested by Xinjian (2008) that females used politeness strategies more than males.

Mulyono et al (2019) analysed the politeness strategies used by students in texting their teachers using a messaging application called Whatsapp. This study analysed 200 texts from Whatsapp using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies. It was found that students employed politeness strategies more than the teachers. With the emphasis on age and social status, these learners perceived teachers to be of a higher social status where students were required to highly respect them. Students' respect towards teachers and the gap between them and the teachers affect students' preference of negative politeness. It was also reported that there was a significant difference between students' and teachers' use of politeness strategies. Teachers were found to practice bald-on-record, positive politeness strategies, and negative politeness strategies, while students were found to use all types of politeness strategies. This study suggests that both teachers and students should understand all types of politeness strategies so that they can choose appropriate strategies in communication to avoid any misunderstandings.

In another study by Yuliawati et al (2019), it was discovered that most students employed politeness strategies in sending text messages to their teachers. This study was conducted based on the theory proposed by (Leech, 2014). The data for this study was collected from 39 engineering students and 36 non-engineering students totaling 460 WhatsApp messages. Those messages were sent by the students to five lecturers; two Bahasa Indonesia lecturers, Physics lecturer, Mathematics lecturer, and English lecturer. One instrument was created using Leech's (2014) theory to analyse the language politeness strategies. The results showed that most of the students' messages begin with greetings, followed by an apology, self-introduction, content, and thanks with greetings. All the components show different maxims. Greetings show tact maxim; an apology for sending messages shows generosity maxim; self-introduction shows modesty maxim; conveying the message briefly shows agreement maxim; expressing thanks with greetings shows the sympathy maxim (Yuliawati et al., 2019). Based on the results, the study claimed that the text messages show the use of both positive and negative politeness strategies.

Pratiwi and Anindyarini (2021) investigated students' politeness in communicating with their lecturers. This study also employed Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies theory. This qualitative descriptive study was carried out at a private university in Indonesia. Purposive sampling was employed in selecting the participants for this study. WhatsApp conversation screenshots were collected and used as the source of data. The results revealed that the students employed almost all politeness strategies outlined by (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Bald on-record was found to be the most common strategy employed by students, implying the presence of an FTA, while off-the-record was the least used strategy. Pratiwi and Anindyarini (2021) explained that some students are unaware of the social distance, roles and status, and power relations when communicating with their lecturer which can result in lecturers' feeling affected by the students' interaction. This study also found that students did not greet lecturers before stating and discussing their intentions and purposes which can threaten the lecturer's face.

The elements of politeness strategies were further explored by Hayati (2021) using the same medium of communication, WhatsApp messenger. This study employed a content analysis technique to analyse the messages sent from students to their respective lecturers. The theory that was used in this study was Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies theory. In comparison to other studies, this study only focused on analysing negative politeness strategies. It was reported that apologising was highly used by these students, followed by indirectly stating their messages and asking questions. The reason why apologising strategies were used often by these students is because they acknowledge the social status of their lecturers and they apologise in the first place in case they are disrupting the lecturers' time or schedule. Hayati (2021) added that apologising could save the self-image of the students. Another factor that contributes to the reason students apologise before stating their purpose is the social distance between them and the lecturers. In addition, the relation that they have with their lecturers is merely for study purposes and it is a formal relation.

Another study by Sembiring and Sianturi (2021) reported contradicting findings. This study employed the same theory by Brown and Levinson (1987) and analysed proof of text messages from WhatsApp messenger. However, instead of analysing personal one-to-one interaction, this study analysed student-lecturer interaction in group chats. Instead of choosing random interactions, only students' responses to lecturer's instructions were selected as the main data. It was found that both positive and negative politeness strategies were employed by the students when responding to the lecturer's instructions. As for the positive politeness, students used greetings to begin their sentences which show that the students emphasise on their manner when interacting. Students also frequently thanked the lecturer when the lecturer asked to do something which shows that students appreciate and respect the lecturer. As for negative politeness, most students minimise the face threat of the lecturer by apologising before asking for clarifications on the instructions. This shows that students are aware of social distance.

Pasaribu et al (2022) conducted a study on the use of politeness strategies in online conversation. The interaction selected as the main focus of the study was lecturer-student interaction. Four types of politeness were found during analysis. In comparison to previous studies that analysed the interaction between one student and one lecturer, this study took a different approach by scrutinising the proof of interaction between one lecturer and ten students. 50 screenshots of the text messages from WhatsApp messenger were analysed using Brown and Levinson's (1987) taxonomy. The data from the screenshots were described, coded, grouped, and interpreted to get insights into the strategy patterns used by lecturers and students. The results reported differences in the strategies used by lecturers and students. For bald on strategy, it was found that lecturers employed the strategy more than the students which are similar to off-record politeness strategy. Pasaribu et al (2022) stated that lecturers often employed a bald-on strategy to show they have power and higher status than the students. On the other hand, students utilised positive and negative politeness strategies more frequently than lecturers in the interaction. It was claimed that students used positive strategies to show respect and maintain the closeness between them and the lecturers as well as to please the lecturers. Students also employ negative strategies when they make mistakes and try not to worsen the situation. Pasaribu et al (2022) added that there are times when lecturers employ positive strategies frequently to make the students comfortable when discussing important matters with them.

Another study investigating politeness strategies was done by Algiovan (2022) which also involved student-lecturer interaction. Using the same theory by Brown and Levinson (1987), this study analysed the text messages obtained from WhatsApp messenger. Different from other studies, this study only chose postgraduate students and lecturers as the participants. The results reported that both lecturers and students employed four types of politeness strategies in their interactions including bald-on, positive, negative, and off-record strategies. However, it was found that students used positive and negative strategies more often than the lecturers. Similar to the claims made by other researchers, students employed positive and negative strategies often to show their respect to their lecturers and to minimise face threats.

## **Methodology**

### *Research Design*

This descriptive qualitative and quantitative analysis study was designed and conducted in one of the public universities in Malaysia over the duration of one semester. A descriptive qualitative design is a research method applied by describing the data and explanation of the set of circumstances as it presents in context (Mishra & Alok, 2017). Quantitative methods were also used in the study as the frequencies of each sub-categories were recorded. This follows as quantitative studies deal with numbers and countable results (Mishra & Alok, 2017).

### **Procedures for Data Collection**

The WhatsApp conversations taken from 2 lecturers teaching the same subjects are the primary source of the data used in this study. The study used purposive sampling as Campbell et. al (2020) highlighted that the participants are selected as they are the ones who can provide information that the researcher needs. The students-lecturer WhatsApp conversations were collected and analysed according to the 4 sub-strategies of politeness strategies as highlighted by (Brown and Levinson, 1987). The politeness strategies were coded and interpreted according to the sub-categories; Bald-on-record, Positive, Negative and Off-record Politeness. The total number of frequencies for each of the sub-categories were counted and tabled.

### **Participants**

There were 30 students in total taken from 2 classes which are from 1 faculty; Islamic Contemporary Studies. The students were taking the same subjects, ELC590 (English for Oral Presentation), which requires them to have individual consultation with the lecturers to be done via WhatsApp. This study applied a descriptive qualitative method in investigating the students' WhatsApp messages that was sent personally to the lecturers with respect to the use of positive and negative politeness strategies, based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory.

### **Results and Discussion**

All four types of language politeness strategies have been observed in the respondents' WhatsApp messages to their lecturers. Negative politeness strategy is the highest strategy used among the respondents, where it is found in half of the text messages. It is followed by the bald on strategy, with nine occurrences in the text messages. The positive politeness and off-record strategies have been identified as among the least preferred strategy among the respondents with only four and two occurrences in the text messages, respectively.

### **Negative Politeness**

Majority of the respondents preferred the negative politeness strategy compared to the other three types. It is noticeable that they would start the text conversation with greetings and self-introduction. Furthermore, they would apologise for any inconveniences caused to the lecturers. Upon completing the steps, they would unveil their intention for sending the message either in a form of asking questions or stating their concerns. This can be seen that the respondents were aware that texting their lecturers after class hour would probably be inconvenient and may cause harm to them. This explains their use of strategy as an act to

minimise the threat. Below is one of the examples of negative politeness strategy found in the respondent' WhatsApp text conversation with their lecturers:

Respondent 1: assalamualaikum, mdm. im siti rokiah binti safwan from IC1234. Sorry for interrupting u this evening. for the visual aids, is it possible to include some points of our speech in the slide? or just put the pictures and videos without any words?  
Lecturer B: Wsalam. Point forms are fine - words, not sentences  
Respondent 1: alright madam, thank you

From the above instance, it can be seen that the respondent has used negative politeness in starting the conversation with the lecturer. The respondent started with common salutation followed by the self-introduction. Then, as highlighted, the respondent apologised and afterwards continued with the intention of the conversation. This shows that the respondent is aware of the power dynamics imposed in social convention and is able to communicate effectively of the respondent's intention.

### **Bald-on**

Bald-on strategy is the second highest strategy used by the respondents after negative politeness strategy. It is highlighted that the respondents stated their decision directly upon greetings and self-introductions. It is observed that there was no room for discussion between the respondents and the lecturers as the conversation was centred on the respondents. This shows the respondents did not put into consideration in minimising the threat as the message was crafted and later, delivered. Below is an example of bald-on strategy found in the WhatsApp text conversation between Respondent 14 and Lecturer A:

Respondent 14: Assalamualaikum madam, my name AHMAD TARMIZI BIN RASIP from IC1221.  
Some people did not choose modern method in medical such as vaccine, birth child etc. So here i will explain the fact between Traditional and modern method in health issue in order to asnwer why certain people still use traditional method such as herbs, Religious diet etc  
this is my detail on topic selection  
\*IC1234  
Lecturer A: Okay sure  
Don't forget to change on the sheet and delete the status yeah  
Respondent 14: okay miss noted

As shown in the above instance, the respondent initiated the conversation by greeting the lecturer and introducing himself to the lecturer. Then, the respondent immediately informed the lecturer the details. It is clear that no or less consideration was given by the respondent on the receiver of the message. The priority was given solely to the information that the respondent wanted to deliver. The way this conversation was delivered would probably cause the lecturer to lose face.

### Positive Politeness

Positive politeness strategy has been found in four WhatsApp text messages between the respondents and their lecturers. This made it the second least preferred strategy among the respondents. The respondents would start their WhatsApp text conversation with their lecturers by greetings and introducing themselves. Then, they would initiate the discussion by seeking for agreement or requesting something from the lecturers. Their actions show how they minimise the threat in a subtle manner, where they sought for approval from the lecturer rather than forced the idea to the lecturer. Below is an example of positive politeness strategy, taken from the WhatsApp text conversation between Respondent 1 and Lecturer A:

Respondent 1: Hello Miss Haslina, Im Ryhan from IC1234. Can i have an excuse for coming late to class tomorrow? ....because i have muet speaking examination in the morning.....So i may attend the class a lil bit late...

Lecturer A: Sure  
May godspeed dear!  
You can do it!

Respondent 1: Thank you miss 😊😊

Lecturer A: No worries

In the instance provided above, the respondent started the conversation with the greetings and self-introduction similar to negative politeness. However, it can be clearly seen in the highlighted part that the respondent then continued his intention of messaging the lecturer by asking a question. This still shows that the respondent is still respecting the lecturer's position and power in the conversation by politely asking the question and greeting the lecturer in starting the conversation. The respondent is also being thoughtful in his request. He would have requested to be excused from the class due to having to deal with an important national examination, but he requested to be allowed to come late to class. He even reassured the lecturer that he would be coming a bit late. This indicates his respect and effort to maintain a good rapport with the lecturer.

### Off-record

Based on the results, it is significant that off-record strategy is the least used strategy among the respondents. In their WhatsApp text conversations, they raised their issues and concerns, without attempting to discuss or suggest solutions. This can be viewed as a strategy to minimise the threat as they eliminated the risk that could possibly happen should they make a request to their lecturer directly. Thus, they gave clues in the hope for solutions from their lecturers. Below is an example of off-record strategy used by Respondent 2 in her conversation with Lecturer B:

Respondent 2: Madam i have problem 😞 i dont know why my mic does not want to work. I already use laptop and my headset. Both not working

Lecturer B: Noted Sameha. You can try using your phone. If still not possible



record yourself using your phone. Make sure to record it in 1 take. I need to see a live presentation. Then submit in GC. I'll open a section in GC under Week 6.

Respondent 2: Noted madam. Actually i know its working because i use it for recording but for some reason it does not want to work during this live session 😞 i apologise madam

In off-record politeness strategy, usually the speaker (student) would give hints of the actions they desired from the hearer, being indirect to reduce or minimise the direct threat to the face of the listener (lecturer). As can be seen from the example provided, instead of giving salutations before starting the requests, the respondent goes straight away into telling the listener the problem without actually posing a question or sending a request, by doing so hinting that she needs more time in doing the activity that has been planned by the lecturer as a way of off-record politeness.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, it is found that negative politeness and bald-on strategies are commonly practised among students in their WhatsApp text communication with the lecturers. The tendency to state their intention directly without considering the receivers' social status, power and position shows their judgement has been limited to their needs and wants. They were not aware that it is considered impolite when their messages contained Face-Threatening Acts (FTA) and it could damage lecturers' face as the lecturers' authority in teaching and learning process is denied. The findings are parallel to the study conducted by Rahmi (2020) where students stated their intentions directly in their messages without careful selection of words or terms when conversing with their lecturers leaving the collocutor's face threatened. The lecturers viewed the situation as unpleasant, thus some of them chose to ignore the texts while some advised the students in their replies.

Besides, it has also been found that although some of the students might have tried to use the appropriate politeness strategies when communicating with their respective lecturers, the students still threaten the face of the lecturer as shown in the above off-record politeness. The off-record politeness strategy can be considered as negative politeness, however, as it was not done properly, these utterances threaten the face of the interlocutors. This is similar to the findings to the study by Savic (2018) where he mentioned that lecturers felt that informal opening seems blunt and demanding, making the utterances feel like it is coming from a superior. Thus, although the use of off-record politeness is suitable in a conversation between a student and a lecturer where it could minimise the risk of face threatening, the improper use of the strategy still leaves the impression of impoliteness. Therefore, the awareness among undergraduate students on language politeness strategies in communication is crucial regardless of communication channels, in and outside the classroom.

In this paper, the focus was solely given on the content of students' text messages to the lecturers despite other available elements that could be retrieved and analysed from the data. Hence, it is recommended that elements such as time, use of emoji, punctuation or capitalisation can be explored in future research for better understanding on language politeness strategies used in students' communication with lecturers.

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