

Pragmatic Competence and Politeness Strategies in Classroom Discourse

Maryam Alhussan¹

¹Department of English Language & Translation, College of Arabic Language and Social Studies,
Qassim University, Buraydah, Saudi Arabia.

Abstract: However, pragmatics competence, i.e. appropriate usage of language in a particular social context, in relation to some goal and in terms of the social relationship of interlocutors, is the key element of classroom communication that is frequently neglected in language teaching due to preoccupation with grammatical accuracy. The current paper analyzes the implementation of pragmatic competence in terms of the usage of politeness strategies in classroom interaction through politeness theory, the notion of face, and the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) model. It is claimed that classroom talk creates a specific discourse situation in which institutional hierarchies between the teacher and learner influence the usage of different types of politeness strategies: the teacher mostly uses positive politeness as well as bald-on-record directives, whereas the learner frequently resorts to negative politeness and off-record politeness in order to avoid the threat to face while interacting with a superior interlocutor. Empirical studies on the usage of politeness strategies in EFL and ESL classroom discourse are analyzed, their results are generalized in a comparative typology of politeness strategies in the classroom with examples, and some implications for teacher education and explicit pragmatic competence instruction are discussed.

Key Words: pragmatic competence, politeness strategies, classroom discourse, face theory, second language pragmatics

Introduction

However, competent communicators in a particular language not only know how to construct grammatically correct sentences but they also know when to use such sentences in a specific social setting (Pérez-Sabater & Montero-Fleta, 2014). The concept of pragmatic (or sociolinguistic) competence was developed, which is one of the components of communicative competence along with grammatical, discourse, and strategic competence (Kannadhasan, 2025). Pragmatic competence guides, inter alia, the appropriate use of strategies for requesting, refusing, apologizing, and giving directions in a manner that is considered appropriate by others in a speech community and there is no place where it is used more persistently than in the classroom, where teachers and students establish their face, power, and rapport in every interaction (Tan & Farashaiyan, 2012; Mulyono et al., 2019).

The present study tries to investigate the issue of pragmatic competence in classroom discourse in the form of politeness strategies (Gazioğlu & Çiftçi, 2017). There are three questions to be investigated here: (a) What are the theoretical approaches that can help explain the selection of politeness strategy in an institution where there is asymmetric distribution of power, e.g., classroom; (b) How do empirical studies show the distribution of politeness strategies in real classroom settings; and (c) Implications for teaching pragmatic competence explicitly rather than incidentally.

Theoretical Framework

These two theoretical strands are united in the study of classroom politeness (Rahayuningsih et al., 2020). First, there is politeness theory proper. Developed the notion of "face," defined as the positive social value that people claim for themselves during interactions, and suggested that interactional participants co-operate in maintaining each other's face. In continuation of this line of thinking, the theory of face-threatening acts posited that many speech acts, requests, corrections, criticisms are face-threatening by nature, and that interlocutors make use of a limited set of strategies to lessen the threat of face: bald on-record performance, when the efficiency of the utterance takes precedence over face considerations; positive face-redressing of the hearer via solidarity and approval; negative face-redressing of the hearer via deference and indirectness; off-record performance by implication of the act. Politeness maxims (tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, and sympathy) provide another, pragmatically oriented perspective on the same phenomenon (Salim et al., 2025).

Table 1: Politeness Strategies in Classroom Talk

Strategy Type	Description	Illustrative Classroom Example
Bald on-record	The face-threatening act is performed directly, with no redress, typically when efficiency outweighs face concerns	"Open your books to page 12."
Positive politeness	Redress appeals to the hearer's positive face by expressing solidarity, approval, or shared identity	"Great thinking, let's build on that idea together."
Negative politeness	Redress appeals to the hearer's negative face by minimizing imposition through hedges, questions, or deference	"Would you mind sharing your answer with the class?"
Off-record (indirect)	The act is performed indirectly, allowing the speaker to avoid full responsibility for the imposition	"It's getting a little noisy over there." (meaning: please quiet down)

The second tradition involves classroom discourse analysis (Sitinjak et al., 2023). The IRF model, which is the Initiation-Response-Feedback model of classroom discourse, analyzes classroom talk in terms of an exchange pattern where the teacher makes an initiation, usually a question or command, the student provides a response, and then the teacher provides feedback or evaluation. Such a format is important to politeness studies in that the power relationship is coded directly into the discourse; teachers initiate most of the talk, and students become responders, making such a model predict that there will be systematic ways in which politeness acts will differ between the two Manzura, (2025). Table 1 illustrates the four main politeness acts.

Politeness Strategies in Teacher Talk

Empirical research on classroom discourse has shown that teachers make use of all four politeness strategies in varying degrees depending on their pedagogical function (Zhu, 2012). The bald-on-record strategy is frequently used in instructional directives ("Turn to page 12," "Be quiet!"), because the institutional power of the teacher's role eliminates the potential face-threatening effect of the directive outside the classroom environment. The positive politeness strategy is widely employed for creating a community atmosphere in the classroom, for example by praising students, using such inclusionary devices as "let's," "we," and humor, which was shown in research on EFL teacher-student interaction in an

Indonesian bilingual school to be preferred by teachers precisely to preserve their close relationship with students. Negative politeness occurs when teachers use hedges, modals, and questions rather than direct orders to soften the correction or request towards individual learners, especially the older ones for whom the need for face-saving is greater. The use of off-record moves by teachers in the classroom is relatively infrequent; it mostly happens in indirect rebukes ("It's getting rather noisy there"). A qualitative analysis of the discourse of an EFL teacher in the Indonesian bilingual school classroom discovered just this pattern: the use of positive politeness for establishing rapport while the bald-on-record move is used only for explicit instructions.

Politeness Strategies in Student Talk

Politeness decisions of students are driven by their relatively inferior status during the IRF. Due to the high face risk associated with speaking up, disagreeing with a teacher, and asking a teacher something, empirical studies indicate that students tend to resort to negative politeness and off-record strategies when they speak up or ask for something. One study of teacher-student WhatsApp messaging in a secondary school in Indonesia showed that students resorted to using politeness strategies more frequently than teachers did. Researchers explained this phenomenon as the result of students treating teachers as high-status interlocutor's worthy of extra respect, even though they communicated via an asynchronous medium in an informal digital space that was out of the classroom.

Table 2: Selected Empirical Studies of Politeness in Classroom Discourse

Study	Year	Context	Key Finding on Classroom Politeness
Rahayuningsih et al., (2020)	2020	EFL classroom interaction, Indonesian bilingual school	All four Brown and Levinson strategies were realized in teacher talk; teachers favored positive politeness for solidarity and bald on-record for clear instruction
Mulyono et al., (2019)	2019	Teacher-student WhatsApp communication, Indonesia	Students used more politeness strategies than teachers, reflecting perceived power asymmetry and social distance

It appears that the power imbalance built into the structure of classroom discourse remains the same in other forms of communication and is not an aspect of face-to-face interaction only. Table 2 highlights the key aspects of three empirical studies on politeness.

Pragmatic Competence as an Instructional Target

One common theme in the literature reviewed here is that pragmatic competence, which includes knowledge of how to choose the correct politeness strategy depending on the role and relationships in a given classroom context, is never explicitly taught despite the constant modeling of these skills. This means that learners have to infer the politeness norms based on their observations, an issue that has been extensively noted in the literature in interlanguage pragmatics as a cause of pragmatic failure, whereby students may have developed a high level of grammatical competence in a target language, but they can commit pragmatic failures, such as making inappropriate requests and expressing disagreements in ways that native or more socially competent speakers of the same language would see as abrupt or overly deferential. Research into the use of politeness strategies in the EFL classroom indicates that appropriate use of these strategies increases student participation and improves the general classroom climate (Tan & Farashaiyan, 2012).

This implies a need for explicit teaching: bringing the politeness strategies to awareness by analyzing examples of bald-on-record, positive, negative, and off-record speech acts in real classroom discourse could allow learners to have conscious control of their pragmatic skills.

Limitations of the Current Evidence Base

The vast majority of empirical studies concerning classroom politeness are based on English language learning environments within a few selected national educational contexts, mostly Southeast and South Asia (Taguchi, 2018). In this connection, there are serious doubts regarding the validity of these results when they are applied to the classroom context in other cultural and educational environments where norms of authority and deference can be very different. Moreover, the existing research is predominantly focused on either teachers' or students' linguistic behavior without taking into account that the politeness strategies chosen by each participant in classroom interaction determine those of the other participant (Syting & Gildore, 2022). In general, longitudinal studies of learners' politeness strategy development are underrepresented.

Conclusion

The classroom is a space for constant but largely unspoken work of face in which both teachers and students strategically employ varying degrees of bald on record, positive, negative, and off record politeness strategies depending on their differential position within the structure of the Initiation Response Evaluation sequence. The politeness approach, based on the notion of face, along with Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) model of discourse structure in the classroom, provide two complementary approaches to explain why teachers tend to employ positive politeness and directness whereas students tend to resort to deference and indirectness. It may be useful to explicitly treat pragmatic competence and politeness strategies in particular as an objective of instruction rather than as a side effect of classroom interaction.

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