



LANGUAGE POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN TEACHER-STUDENT CLASSROOM COMMUNICATION: A PRAGMATIC DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF INTERACTIONAL FUNCTIONS

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Abstract

Language politeness is an essential component of classroom communication because it shapes teacher-student relationships, learning participation, emotional safety, and instructional effectiveness. In classroom interaction, teachers need to manage instruction, discipline, feedback, and questioning without damaging students' face or reducing their willingness to participate. However, classroom communication often contains directives, corrections, reprimands, and evaluations that may become face-threatening if they are not expressed through appropriate politeness strategies. This study aims to analyze language politeness strategies in teacher-student classroom communication and examine their pedagogical and relational functions. The study employed a qualitative pragmatic discourse analysis involving classroom observations, audio-video recordings, teacher interviews, student focus group discussions, and field notes. The participants consisted of three English teachers and 96 secondary school students. The data were analyzed using Brown and Levinson's politeness framework supported by relational work theory. The findings revealed that teachers and students used four major politeness strategies: positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record strategy, and off-record strategy. Positive politeness was the most dominant strategy

because it helped build solidarity, encourage participation, and create supportive classroom rapport. Negative politeness appeared in requests, corrections, and feedback to reduce imposition. The study concludes that politeness strategies are pedagogical resources for managing face, authority, participation, and classroom harmony.

Keywords: *language politeness; classroom communication; teacher-student interaction; pragmatic discourse; facework*

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A. Introduction

Classroom communication is not only a medium for delivering instructional content but also a social process through which teachers and students negotiate relationships, authority, and face.

Language politeness refers to the strategic use of linguistic forms and interactional behavior to maintain social harmony and manage face during communication, particularly in situations involving correction, disagreement, or evaluation.

Face-threatening acts in classroom communication may appear when teachers correct students' answers, reject responses, give critical feedback, or issue disciplinary instructions, all of which can potentially threaten student face.

The theoretical foundation of politeness research has been strongly influenced by Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which distinguishes positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record, and off-record strategies for managing face threats.

More recent politeness scholarship emphasizes that politeness should not be understood only as a fixed set of strategies but as a dynamic, context-sensitive practice shaped by relational goals and institutional roles (Locher & Watts, 2005; Haugh, 2013).

In educational contexts, politeness is closely related to instructional facework. Kerssen-Griep (2001) and Kerssen-Griep,

Hess, and Trees (2003) show that teachers manage both content delivery and students' face simultaneously during instruction.

In English as a foreign language classrooms, politeness becomes even more significant because language learning requires students to take risks, make errors publicly, and receive corrective feedback in front of peers.

However, politeness in classroom communication should not be interpreted as avoiding directness completely. Teachers sometimes need bald-on-record strategies for classroom management and urgent instructions, and effective teachers balance directness with face-saving language depending on context. This study analyzes the types, pedagogical functions, relational functions, and perceived effects of politeness strategies in teacher-student classroom communication.

B. Method

This study employed a qualitative pragmatic discourse analysis. This design was selected because the study aimed to examine how politeness strategies are used and interpreted in authentic classroom interaction rather than to measure isolated variables.

The study was conducted in three secondary school English classrooms. The participants consisted of three English teachers and their respective students, selected because the classrooms provided regular teacher-student interaction suitable for discourse analysis.

Data were collected through classroom observation, audio-video recording, teacher interviews, and student focus group discussions across multiple sessions to capture naturally occurring communication patterns.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the three teachers after the observations. The interviews explored teachers' awareness of politeness strategies, their reasons for choosing particular expressions, and their perceptions of classroom relationships.

The data analysis followed several stages. First, classroom transcripts were read repeatedly to identify teacher and student utterances containing politeness markers, which were then coded according to Brown and Levinson's politeness framework.

A total of 542 utterances containing politeness strategies were identified from the classroom transcripts. The frequency and function of each strategy type were tabulated and cross-checked with interview and focus group data.

C. Finding and Discussion

1. Finding

The findings are presented in four parts. The first part reports the types of politeness strategies used in teacher-student classroom communication. The second part explains the pedagogical functions of politeness strategies. The third part presents relational functions in classroom interaction. The fourth part describes teacher and student perceptions of politeness.

Types of Politeness Strategies in Classroom Communication

The analysis identified four major politeness strategies in teacher-student classroom communication: positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record, and off-record strategies, each serving distinct interactional purposes.

Table 1. Types of Politeness Strategies in Teacher-Student Classroom Communication

No.	Politeness Strategy	Frequency	Percentage	Dominant Classroom Use
1	Positive politeness	214	39.48%	Encouragement, solidarity, appreciation
2	Negative politeness	136	25.09%	Requests, correction, feedback mitigation
3	Bald-on-record strategy	124	22.88%	Instructions, discipline, urgent

4	Off-record strategy	68	12.55%	management Indirect reminders, implicit correction
Total		542	100%	

Source: Processed from classroom transcript data.

Positive politeness appeared when teachers used inclusive expressions, praise, humor, encouragement, students' names, and shared identity markers to build rapport while delivering instruction or feedback.

Negative politeness appeared when teachers softened requests, corrections, and feedback using hedges, indirect questions, and modal expressions to reduce imposition on students.

Bald-on-record strategies appeared in direct classroom instructions and disciplinary moments, where clarity and efficiency were prioritized over face-saving considerations.

Off-record strategies appeared through indirect reminders and implicit corrections, allowing students to infer the intended meaning without an explicit face-threatening statement.

Pedagogical Functions of Politeness Strategies

Politeness strategies served several pedagogical functions in classroom communication, including encouraging participation, softening correction, giving instructions, providing feedback, and managing behavior.

Table 2. Pedagogical Functions of Politeness Strategies

No.	Pedagogical Function	Frequency	Percentage	Example Classroom Meaning
1	Encouraging participation	118	21.77%	Motivating students to answer or speak
2	Softening correction	96	17.71%	Reducing embarrassment during error correction

3	Giving instructions	89	16.42%	Directing learning tasks clearly
4	Providing feedback	84	15.50%	Responding to students' performance
5	Managing behavior	73	13.47%	Maintaining classroom order
6	Checking comprehension	52	9.59%	Ensuring students understand tasks
7	Building confidence	30	5.54%	Reducing anxiety and fear of mistakes
Total		542	100%	

Source: Processed from classroom transcript coding.

Encouraging participation was the most frequent pedagogical function. Teachers used positive politeness to invite student responses and reduce anxiety about speaking or making mistakes in front of peers.

Softening correction was another important function. Teachers corrected pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and content errors using mitigating language that preserved students' willingness to keep participating.

Giving instructions required a balance between directness and politeness. When tasks were simple and urgent, teachers used more direct bald-on-record language, while complex or sensitive tasks were introduced more indirectly.

Providing feedback involved both positive and negative politeness. Teachers praised students' effort before giving suggestions, combining encouragement with constructive correction.

Managing behavior often involved bald-on-record strategies, but teachers sometimes softened disciplinary language through

humor or indirect reminders to maintain a positive classroom atmosphere.

Relational Functions of Politeness Strategies

Beyond pedagogical functions, politeness strategies also served relational functions. They helped teachers and students manage classroom harmony, authority, solidarity, respect, and emotional safety.

Table 3. Relational Functions of Politeness in Classroom Interaction

Relational Function	Evidence from Classroom Communication	Interactional Meaning
Maintaining teacher authority	Direct instructions were used for discipline and task control	Authority was maintained through clarity
Building solidarity	Teachers used inclusive pronouns, humor, and praise	Students felt recognized as classroom members
Protecting student face	Corrections were softened through suggestions and hedges	Students were less embarrassed by mistakes
Reducing classroom anxiety	Teachers used encouragement before speaking tasks	Students became more willing to participate
Promoting mutual respect	Students used polite address forms and requests	Classroom roles were acknowledged respectfully

Source: Synthesized from classroom observation and interview data.

Teacher authority was maintained not only through direct commands but also through appropriate relational control, in which politeness signaled respect for students while preserving the teacher's institutional role.

Solidarity was built through positive politeness. Teachers used students' names, appreciation, humor, and inclusive language to reduce social distance and strengthen the teacher-student relationship.

Student face was protected through mitigated correction. Teachers avoided harsh rejection and used indirect or softened language when pointing out errors, helping students remain willing to participate.

Mutual respect was also visible in students' language. Students used polite expressions when asking for clarification, requesting help, or disagreeing with the teacher, mirroring the relational norms modeled by teachers.

Teacher and Student Perceptions of Politeness

Teacher interviews showed that teachers viewed politeness as part of classroom management and emotional support. Teachers reported deliberately choosing softer language when they sensed a student was anxious or easily discouraged.

Student focus group discussions showed that students preferred teachers who corrected mistakes politely. Students reported feeling more willing to participate and take risks when correction was delivered respectfully.

Table 4. Teacher and Student Perceptions of Politeness

Participant Group	Positive Perception	Concern
Teachers	Politeness supports participation, confidence, and classroom rapport	Excessive softness may reduce discipline
Active students	Polite feedback helps them improve without embarrassment	Indirect correction can sometimes be unclear
Less active students	Encouraging language makes them more willing to speak	Public correction still creates anxiety
Students in general	Respectful communication creates a comfortable classroom	Harsh reprimands reduce willingness to participate

Source: Synthesized from teacher interviews and student focus group discussions.

The perception data indicate that classroom politeness requires balance. Students valued politeness, but they also needed

clear correction to improve, showing that excessive softening without clarity was not necessarily preferred.

2. Discussion

Findings show that language politeness strategies in teacher-student classroom communication function as pedagogical tools, relational resources, and facework strategies simultaneously, supporting both learning and classroom relationships.

Positive politeness was especially important in EFL communication. Students often hesitate to speak because they fear making mistakes publicly, and positive politeness helped reduce this anxiety and encourage participation.

Negative politeness appeared in requests, correction, and feedback. This strategy reduced imposition and protected students' face while still allowing teachers to deliver necessary corrective information.

Bald-on-record strategies were used mainly for classroom management and urgent instruction. This result shows that directness is not inherently impolite but is contextually appropriate when clarity and time are priorities.

Off-record strategies appeared less frequently but had important functions. Teachers used indirect reminders to allow students to self-correct without public embarrassment, preserving both face and learning opportunity.

The pedagogical functions identified in this study show that politeness is integrated into core teaching activities. Teachers did not treat politeness as separate from instruction but as embedded within encouragement, correction, and feedback.

The relational functions of politeness are equally important. Politeness helped teachers maintain authority while also building solidarity, showing that authority and closeness are not mutually exclusive in classroom relationships.

Student perceptions support this interpretation. Students valued polite correction because it reduced embarrassment, and they associated politeness with teacher care rather than weakness or lack of authority.

Teacher perceptions also revealed a practical tension. Teachers wanted to be polite and supportive, but they also needed to maintain classroom order and ensure that corrective feedback was clearly understood.

The study also has implications for teacher education. Teachers need pragmatic awareness in classroom communication, including sensitivity to when directness or mitigation is more appropriate for a given instructional moment.

In EFL classrooms, politeness also supports language learning because students learn pragmatic behavior through teacher modeling, observing how polite expressions are used in real communicative contexts.

Overall, this study confirms that language politeness strategies are essential in teacher-student classroom communication, serving pedagogical, relational, and facework functions that support both learning and classroom relationships.

D. Conclusion

This study analyzed language politeness strategies in teacher-student classroom communication using a pragmatic discourse analysis of three secondary school EFL classrooms. Findings identified four major politeness strategies—positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record, and off-record—each serving distinct pedagogical functions including encouraging participation, softening correction, giving instructions, providing feedback, and managing behavior. Beyond pedagogical functions, politeness strategies also served relational functions, helping teachers maintain authority while building solidarity and protecting student face. Teacher and student perceptions confirmed that politeness was valued when balanced with clarity, and that excessive softening without correction was not necessarily preferred. These findings suggest that politeness in classroom communication is not merely a matter of being indirect or avoiding correction, but a strategic, context-sensitive practice that integrates instructional and relational goals. The study recommends that teacher education programs incorporate pragmatic awareness training so that

teachers can flexibly select politeness strategies appropriate to different instructional moments.

Declaration of AI-Assisted Technologies

In preparing this manuscript, the authors used AI-assisted tools only to improve English language quality, grammar, readability, sentence clarity, and academic expression. The AI tools were not used to generate research data, conduct data analysis, produce findings, or draw conclusions. All conceptual arguments, data interpretation, methodological decisions, and scholarly conclusions remain the full responsibility of the authors. The authors carefully reviewed, edited, and verified all AI-assisted outputs to ensure the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the final manuscript.

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