An Exploration of the Factors Influencing the Use of Politeness Strategies in the EFL Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Politeness plays a vital role in social interaction, as it reflects cultural norms, social relationships, and the speaker's communicative intentions. This study aims to explore and analyze the factors that influence the use of politeness strategies in both spoken and written forms of communication. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed, with data collected through observations, interviews, and document analysis across various communicative settings, The findings indicate that several key elements such as social status, interpersonal distance, The researcher also found the factors that influence the use of politeness strategies based on Brown and Levinson's theory. They are pay-off in 10 times and relevant circumstances in 6 times (social distance in 1 time, relative power in 5 times). Pay-off was the highest of the factor that influence the use of politeness strategies. These insights are expected to support the development of pragmatic theory and foster greater awareness of polite language use in diverse communicative contexts.
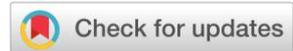
1. Introduction

Communication between teachers and students plays a crucial role in the teaching and learning process. Beyond the simple transmission of knowledge, classroom interaction also reflects social relationships, power dynamics, and cultural values. In this context, politeness strategies are essential for creating a respectful, comfortable, and effective learning environment. Classroom interaction is a crucial component of the educational process, not only serving as a medium for knowledge transmission but also as a space where social roles, relationships, and institutional norms are continuously constructed and negotiated (Weda et al., 2022; Said et al., 2021; Rahman et al., 2019). One important aspect of language use in this context is politeness, which functions as a pragmatic strategy to manage face, establish rapport, and maintain harmonious communication between teachers and students (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In classroom settings where hierarchical roles are clearly defined politeness plays a vital role in balancing authority with approachability, and in fostering a conducive learning environment. Classroom interaction plays a vital role in the educational process, not only as a medium for delivering academic content but also as a platform for developing social relationships, managing classroom dynamics, and building a respectful learning environment. Among the various elements that contribute to effective communication in the classroom, politeness strategies are often overlooked despite their critical function. These strategies, which refer to the ways speakers maintain respect and avoid conflict during interaction, are essential in shaping how teachers and students relate to one another (Rahman & Weda, 2018; Salsabila et al., 2025; Yaumi et al., 2023).

Politeness in classroom discourse is not limited to expressions of courtesy; it encompasses a range of linguistic behaviors aimed at reducing the imposition of speech acts and respecting the interlocutor's social identity and autonomy. Teachers often employ politeness strategies to soften commands or correct students without discouraging them, while students use similar strategies to show respect and navigate power differentials. These interactions are governed by both institutional expectations and cultural values, making the study of politeness inherently multidimensional (Holmes, 1995; Watts, 2003; Rahman & Weda, 2019; .Youngsun et al., 2024). Importantly, politeness is not a universal phenomenon with fixed interpretations; its forms and functions are shaped by sociocultural norms and contextual variables such as age, gender, power relations, and linguistic background (Ide, 1989). In multicultural or multilingual classrooms, misunderstandings may arise when differing expectations about politeness are not aligned, potentially leading to pragmatic

failure (Thomas, 1983; Sabila et al., 2025; Hasnia et al., 2022). This highlights the importance of raising both teachers' and students' awareness of pragmatic norms in intercultural communication.

Brown and Levinson's politeness theory distinguishes between positive politeness (strategies that express solidarity) and negative politeness (strategies that show deference), both of which are commonly observed in classroom interactions (Brown & Levinson, 1987). For example, a teacher may say, "Let's try solving this together," rather than issuing a direct command, in order to involve students collaboratively and reduce the imposition. Similarly, students may mitigate disagreement or requests using hedging expressions like "I think..." or "Maybe..." to maintain face and avoid confrontation. These strategies reflect the speakers' pragmatic competence and sensitivity to the social dynamics of the classroom (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993). Despite the relevance of politeness in educational contexts, research on classroom interaction has often prioritized cognitive and instructional aspects, leaving pragmatic elements like politeness underexplored, particularly in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and non-Western settings (Nguyen, 2013). As classrooms become more culturally and linguistically diverse, understanding how politeness is enacted and interpreted becomes increasingly necessary for effective teaching and learning.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the factors influencing the use of politeness strategies in classroom interaction, with a specific focus on power dynamics, cultural context, and the role of pragmatic awareness. By analyzing real-life classroom discourse, the study seeks to contribute to both pragmatic theory and pedagogical practice, offering insights into how polite communication can enhance teacher-student relationships and learning outcomes.

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research method to analyze the data, as it provides an in-depth understanding of how individuals or groups interpret and construct meaning from their experiences, particularly in relation to social or human issues (Creswell, 2009). The qualitative approach typically involves flexible and evolving research procedures, where data are collected in natural settings and analyzed inductively moving from specific observations to broader patterns or themes. Interpretation plays a central role, as the researcher seeks to derive meaning from participants' perspectives and behaviors within their context.

A key characteristic of qualitative research is the emphasis on direct engagement with participants, allowing the researcher to observe how individuals act and interact in real-life situations. According to Hennink (2020), this approach enables detailed exploration of human experiences through methods such as in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, observation, content and visual analysis, and life histories.

3. Result and Discussion

Brown and Levinson (1987) explain that the selection of politeness strategies is influenced by two main factors: payoffs and contextual circumstances. These elements guide speakers in choosing how to express themselves politely during interaction, as every utterance is shaped by underlying considerations that affect communicative choices.

3.1 Factor Payy-Off

In Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, payoff is identified as one of the key factors influencing a speaker's choice of politeness strategies. The payoff refers to the pragmatic advantages or social benefits that a speaker expects to gain by employing a particular strategy when communicating.

When a speaker selects a politeness strategy whether it be positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record, or bald-on-recordthey do so by considering the potential benefits that may result from that choice. These benefits may include enhancing interpersonal relationships, minimizing the risk of face-threatening acts, or achieving better acceptance of the intended message. There are utterances belonged to pay-off. The detail explanation below:

Extract 1

		"I know you've worked hard on this assignment, and I really appreciate that.
Teacher	:	But it would be even better if you could pay closer attention to the instructions"

This utterance reflects illustrates the pay-off. In this context, shows a pay-off because it uses a polite way to give feedback. The teacher starts by praising the student's effort, which makes the student feel respected and valued. This praise makes the correction easier to accept and helps the student avoid feeling upset. Because of this, the student is

more likely to listen to the advice and try to improve. The pay-off is that the teacher can give important feedback while keeping a good relationship with the student. This way helps create a positive and supportive learning environment.

Extract 2

Teacher	:	"I'm glad to see you all actively participating in today's discussion. But don't forget, every opinion should be shared respectfully."
Students		Thank you mam

This sentence is a clear example of the use of a politeness strategy that demonstrates the pay-off within classroom interaction. how a positive communication strategy. By starting with praise, the teacher encourages students and makes them feel appreciated for their involvement. Then, the teacher gently reminds them about the importance of respect during discussions. This approach helps maintain a positive atmosphere in the classroom and guides students to behave appropriately without feeling criticized. The pay-off of this strategy is that students stay motivated to participate while also learning to respect others' opinions, which creates a productive and respectful learning environment.

Extract 3

Teacher   :   " Jadi let's make it enjoy ya"

The pay-off in this context lies in the positive emotional and social effect that such a phrase has on students. It helps students feel more comfortable, motivated, and open to engaging in the learning process. By using polite and encouraging language, the teacher fosters a supportive and welcoming learning environment. This not only enhances students' willingness to participate but also strengthens the teacher-student relationship. In this way, the use of polite, inclusive language results in clear communicative benefits a key aspect of the pay-off of politeness strategies in educational settings.

Extract 4

Teacher   :   " Thank you so much for your attention"

The utterance above showed that the teacher influenced by the factor pay-off.The pay-off comes from the positive effect it has: the students feel respected and valued, which makes them more likely to listen and respond well in the future. In a classroom, for example, when a student or teacher says this sentence, it helps build good communication and a positive relationship. So, the sentence is not just polite it also gives a real benefit in keeping the interaction smooth and respectful.

Extract 5

Teacher   :   "You all did a great job learning today, thank you"

The utterance above showed that the teacher influenced by the factor pay-off. The pay-off in this situation comes from how it improves the relationship between the teacher and students. When students feel appreciated, they become more motivated. The communication stays smooth and stress-free because the teacher has delivered the message while considering the students' feelings. Using kind and polite language in class is important for creating a positive and supportive learning environment. So, even a simple sentence like this can have a big, positive effect this is the pay-off, the benefit of being polite and thoughtful in communication.

Extract 6

Teacher	:	"Great job, Now, let's review it together and see if we can improve any parts".

The utterance above showed that the teacher influenced by the factor pay-off. The teacher begins by praising the students for finishing the assignment and recognizing their hard work. This makes the students feel good about their effort. Then, the teacher suggests reviewing the work together, which helps the students improve without making them feel criticized. The pay-off here is that the students feel more motivated. They are proud of what they did, and the review gives them a chance to learn more. This helps build a positive relationship between the teacher and students, encouraging them to keep working hard. By using kind and supportive language, the teacher creates a classroom where students feel confident and excited to learn, which helps both their progress and the teacher's connection with them.

Extract 7

Teacher   :   "See you"

The utterance above showed that the lecturer influenced by the factor pay-off because the phrase "See you" said by the teacher at the end of the class can be considered a pay off because it shows the result of a good relationship between the teacher and students. This phrase indicates that the atmosphere in the class was positive and not too stiff. When the teacher says "See you," it means that the relationship between the teacher and students is friendly and comfortable. This is the result of efforts made to maintain good communication and make students feel valued during the class. So, "See you" is a sign that the positive classroom environment paid off, resulting in a more relaxed and less formal relationship.

Extract 8

Teacher   :   "Good morning,class"

The utterance above showed that the teacher influenced by the factor pay-off because the phrase "Good morning, class" said by the teacher at the start of the lesson can be seen as a payoff because it creates a positive and welcoming atmosphere. When the teacher greets the students with "Good morning," it shows that the teacher is friendly and values the students. This greeting helps set the tone for a respectful and engaging class. It's the result of the teacher's effort to make the classroom a comfortable place for learning. So, "Good morning, class" is a payoff because it helps build a positive relationship between the teacher and students from the start of the lesson.

Extract 9

Teacher   :   "How are you today?"

The utterance above showed that the teacher influenced by the factor pay-off because the phrase "How are you today?" said by the teacher is considered a payoff because it creates a positive and engaging atmosphere in the classroom. When a teacher asks students "How are you today?", it shows that the teacher cares about the students' well-being, helping to build a supportive and comfortable environment. This simple question can encourage students to feel more relaxed, valued, and ready to participate in the lesson. It reflects the teacher's effort to create a welcoming space where students feel heard and respected. So, the phrase "How are you today?" is a payoff because it leads to better student engagement, trust, and a more positive relationship between the teacher and students.

Extract 10

Teacher   :   "Thank you for answering the question Adrian"

The utterance above showed that the teacher influenced by the factor pay-off because it shows the teacher appreciates the student's participation. When the teacher says this, it makes the student feel good and valued. It also encourages the student to keep answering questions in the future. This creates a positive and friendly classroom environment, where students feel confident and motivated to keep joining in. So, it's a payoff because it rewards the student's effort and helps make the class better.

3.2 Factor Relevant Circumstances

There is 1 utterance belonged to relevant circumstances in relative power :

Extract 11

Teacher   :   "Let's close our class today by saying hamdallah together"

The utterance above showed that the lecturer influenced by factor of relevant circumstances in relative power. The sentence "Let's close our class today by saying hamdallah together" shows relative power because it shows that the teacher has the authority to guide the class but still invites the students to join in. The word "let's" means "let us," which is a way of suggesting something together, not giving an order. Even though the teacher decides how to end the class, they are asking the students to do it with them. This shows that the teacher's power is not used alone, but in a way that includes the students. It reflects a balance between the teacher's authority and the students' participation.

Extract 12

Teacher   :   " Excuse me, Hello we will finish the class right now!"

The sentence "Excuse me, Hello we will finish the class right now" shows relative power because, even though the teacher is saying that the class will end, the way it's said shows a balance of power between the teacher and students. The use of the word "we" (us) means that the decision to end the class is something being done together, not just by the teacher. This shows that while the teacher has the authority to manage the class, they are inviting the students to be part of that decision. In other words, the teacher still leads, but they include the students in the process, making the relationship more balanced and respectful.

Extract 13

| Teacher | : | We will have a group discussion now, and I want everyone to participate |

The utterance above showed that the teacher influenced by factor of relevant circumstances in relative power. The sentence "We will have a group discussion now, and I want everyone to participate." shows relative power because it shows that the teacher is in charge of organizing the class and leading the discussion, but still invites all students to take part. The teacher has the authority to decide that the class will have a group discussion, but by saying "I want everyone to participate," the teacher emphasizes the importance of students being involved. The teacher isn't just telling the students to listen; they are encouraging active involvement, which gives students a role in the lesson. This shows that while the teacher leads, they also recognize that students' participation is essential. In this way, the teacher's power is not absolute, and students are given a chance to contribute. Relative power means there's a balance, where both the teacher and students work together to make the class more effective.

Extract 14

| Teacher | : | Hello.. Yang berdiri tetap berdiri. Just only 15 minutes and you may sit down |
| Students | | oh my god mam |

The utterance above showed that the teacher influenced by factor of relevant circumstances in relative power, because even though the teacher is giving the instruction for students to stay standing, the teacher also sets a time limit of 15 minutes. This gives the students the sense that they won't have to stand for too long. Additionally, the phrase "you may sit down" gives students a choice to sit down after the time is up. While the teacher is in control, students still have a bit of control over when they can sit, as long as they follow the rule. This creates a more balanced relationship where the teacher is still in charge of the class, but students feel they have some influence over their actions within the given limits.

Extract 15

| Teacher | : | You may choose your friends, but stay focused on the task |

The utterance above showed that the teacher influenced by factor of relevant circumstances in relative power, because the teacher gives students a choice, but also gives a rule. The teacher lets students choose their own friends, which makes them feel trusted and happy. But at the same time, the teacher reminds them to still do their work and not get distracted. This means the teacher is leading the class, but also letting students take part in small decisions. So, the teacher has power, but uses it in a fair way. This is relative power when the teacher and students share control in the classroom.

Extract 16

| Teacher | : | Would you mind explaining your answer to the class ? |

The utterance above showed that the teacher influenced by factor of relevant circumstances in social distance. because the teacher is using polite language to ask the student something. Social distance refers to the difference in status or position between two people, in this case, between the teacher and the student. The teacher uses "Would you mind...", which is a softer and more polite way of asking, instead of giving a direct command. This shows respect for the student and maintains a formal, professional relationship. It indicates that the teacher understands their higher position and wants to keep the interaction respectful, without sounding rude or authoritative.

From the data finding above, the researcher uses table to make easier to know the factor influence the use of politeness strategies. The table is below:

Table 1. Factors of politeness strategies

No	Factor	Extracts	Total
1.	Payy-off	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10	10
2.	Relative power	11,12,13,14,15	5
3.	Social Distance	16	1

The table above shows the factors that influence the use of politeness strategies based on the researcher's data analysis. There are three main factors: pay-off, relative power, and social distance. The most dominant factor is pay-off, which appears in 10 extracts. This means that speakers often use politeness strategies to gain benefits, such as maintaining good relationships, avoiding conflict, or achieving a goal. The second factor is relative power, found in 5 extracts. This shows that speakers tend to be more polite when talking to someone with higher authority, like a teacher. The third factor is social distance, which appears only once in the data. This suggests that the closeness or distance in the relationship between the speaker and listener is not a major reason for using politeness strategies in this case. In conclusion, the use of politeness strategies is mostly influenced by the expected benefits and power differences rather than the level of social closeness.

4. Conclusion

Based on the data finding, it was mentioned that there are 16 data which have been identified as factors that influence the use of politeness strategies. The data finding shows that pay-off had the most frequent used by the teacher. It showed that the teacher used pay-off in 10 times, the relevant circumstances in social distance used in 1 times, relative power in 5 times. Pay off is the most frequent used by the teacher. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of understanding politeness as a culturally and situationally sensitive aspect of discourse. Raising awareness of pragmatic norms among both teachers and students can enhance classroom interaction, reduce miscommunication, and contribute to a more inclusive and respectful learning atmosphere.

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