

Analyzing Politeness Strategies in Students' Directive Speech Acts: Evidence from an Indonesian Teacher Education Context

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ABSTRACT

Politeness in directive speech is essential for prospective teachers because it reflects their ability to communicate professionally in academic and instructional settings. However, studies examining politeness strategies in the academic interactions of Indonesian teacher-education students remain limited. This study investigated the politeness levels and directive speech strategies employed by students of the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education at Universitas Muhammadiyah Palembang. The study employed a qualitative descriptive design supported by quantitative data. Fifty students participated in a Discourse Completion Test containing academic communication situations. Their responses were examined to identify politeness levels, directive strategies, and linguistic devices used to reduce the force of directives. The findings indicated that 20% of the students demonstrated a "very good" level of politeness, while 40% were classified as "good." Indirect directive strategies and linguistic mitigation were the most frequently employed approaches. These strategies enabled students to express requests, suggestions, and instructions while minimizing potential threats to the interlocutor's face. Nevertheless, the variation in politeness levels suggests that some students still require further development in selecting contextually appropriate expressions. The findings demonstrate the importance of integrating pragmatic competence and directive politeness into teacher-education curricula. Explicit instruction and contextual communication practice may strengthen prospective teachers' ability to manage interpersonal relationships and communicate professionally in future classroom environments.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language constitutes the primary medium for establishing social interaction, particularly within academic settings. In higher education, language functions not only as a tool for communication but also as a means of fostering harmonious relationships between students and lecturers. Proficiency in polite language is a significant indicator of communicative competence, especially for prospective educators (Rahmawati et al., 2025; Yalew, Amogne, & Chanie, 2025). Pragmatic studies emphasize that the meaning of language is shaped by both its linguistic structure and its context of use. According to Yule (1996), pragmatics examines the meanings that speakers convey and that listeners interpret within specific contexts. Therefore, effective communication relies substantially on the ability to comprehend social contexts and speech situations.

Speech is a central aspect of pragmatics. According to Searle (1979), speech constitutes an action performed through language. Among the various types of speech acts, directive speech acts are particularly significant because they are intended to influence interlocutors to take action. These acts encompass commands, requests, suggestions, prohibitions, and questions. However, directive speech acts may function as face-threatening acts. Brown & Levinson (1987) argue that individuals require both respect (positive face) and autonomy (negative face). Consequently, the use of directive speech acts necessitates politeness strategies to avoid conflict or perceived impoliteness.

Language is the main medium in building social interaction, especially in the academic environment, where language serves to foster a harmonious relationship between students and lecturers. The ability to speak polite language is a significant indicator of communicative competence (Leeming et al., 2024; Thao, 2023), especially for prospective teacher students who will become role models in the future. Pragmatically, directive speech acts—such as commands, requests, and prohibitions—have a high risk of face-threatening acts because they try to influence the speech partner to do something. Therefore, the use of politeness strategies is necessary to minimize potential conflicts and maintain harmony in interactions.

Politeness in language is a crucial factor in maintaining harmonious communication. According to Leech (2014), the principle of politeness aims to minimize rudeness and maximize respect in social interactions. Within academic settings, language politeness is not only an ethical consideration but also reflects professionalism and individual character (Culpeper, Haugh, & Kádár, 2017). However, the use of directive speech among students continues to exhibit varying degrees of politeness. Research indicates that students frequently employ direct speech without sufficient attention to politeness, particularly in informal contexts or when interacting with peers (Rahardi, 2009). These findings suggest that students' pragmatic competence requires further development (Rahardi, 2017).

Previous research has primarily analyzed acts within media, literary works, and digital communication. However, studies specifically addressing the politeness of directive speech in student academic communication remain limited (Tagugurad & Rosita, 2023). Furthermore, the Discourse Completion Test has not been thoroughly investigated as an instrument for assessing students' pragmatic abilities (Arcara & Bambini, 2016). Although important, previous research has focused more on the analysis of speech actions in films or digital texts, so there is a gap in the literature on how prospective teacher students manage directive speech in real academic situations. This research is here to fill this gap by formulating three main problems: the form of directive speech used, the level of politeness of students, and the factors that influence it.

Given these gaps, the present study examines the politeness of student directive speech in academic communication. The objectives are to: 1) describe the forms of directive speech used by faculty of teacher training and education students of the University of Muhammadiyah Palembang, 2) analyze the degree of politeness in students' language, and 3) identify factors influencing politeness in academic communication. The findings are expected to advance pragmatic research, particularly in language politeness, and to inform the development of language-learning strategies that promote polite and effective communicative competence in higher education. The urgency of this research lies in the need to ensure that aspiring educators have sufficient pragmatic awareness to support their professionalism.

Through a critical synthesis of Brown and Levinson's theories and Leech's principle of politeness, this study is expected to provide pedagogical implications for language learning in college.

2. METHODS

2.1. Research Design

This study uses a descriptive mixed-methods design dominated by qualitative elements. This design is appropriate because it allows researchers to provide contextual-interpretive analysis of linguistic phenomena while presenting numerical data to support the credibility of the findings. According to Sugiyono (2019), qualitative research investigates the condition of natural objects, with researchers serving as key instruments.

2.2. Research Subject and Location

The subjects in this study are 50 students from the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education (FKIP) at the University of Muhammadiyah Palembang. These students were selected through purposive sampling, based on the assumption that they possess basic competencies in academic communication. As Creswell (2014) explains, purposive sampling involves selecting informants who are considered most knowledgeable about the research problems.

2.3. Data Collection Techniques

The data in this study were obtained through the Discourse Completion Test: The main instrument of the study was the Discourse Completion Test, which contained 30 communication situations. This instrument is used to measure students' pragmatic ability in producing polite directive speech. According to Dörnyei (2001) the Discourse Completion Test, it is an effective method to assess pragmatic competencies in a specific context.

2.4. Research Instruments

The main instrument is the Discourse Completion Test (DCT), which includes 30 communication situations designed to represent formal and informal contexts in the campus environment. The research instrument was developed based on six types of directive speech actions: Request, Order, Prohibition, Question, Request for permission, and Suggestion. These instruments are designed to represent a wide range of academic communication contexts, both formal and informal.

2.5. Data Analysis Techniques

The coding procedure is carried out manually through data reduction, data presentation based on the classification of politeness strategies, and conclusion drawing, namely:

- a. Data Reduction: The data obtained are selected and focused on speech containing directive actions.
- b. Data Presentation: Data are classified by speech type and politeness strategy.
- c. Conclusion Drawn: The data were interpreted to determine the level of politeness and the factors that influenced it.

This stage of analysis refers to the interactive data analysis model of Miles & Huberman (1994).

The determination of the score in Table 1 is based on three main criteria: (1) Strategy Accuracy, namely the selection of strategies (direct or indirect) that are in accordance with social distance and power; (2) The use of mitigation, namely the existence of refining words such as "please", "sorry", or "please"; and (3) Context Suitability, which is the ability to adapt speech to academic situations. The assessment categories are set as follows.

Table 1. Categories of Politeness Assessment

Score Range	Category
85–100	Excellent
70–84	Good
55–69	Enough
40–54	Less
<40	Very Less

1. Excellent (85–100): Consistently use indirect strategies and appropriate language mitigation to keep the "negative face" of speech partners at bay.
2. Good (70–84): Speech is generally polite, but there are some uses of direct strategies that lack mitigation in formal contexts.
3. Reasonable (55–69): The use of a direct strategy without mitigation is predominant, which risks triggering the Face Threatening Act (FTA).
4. Less & Very Less (<55): Speech is coercive in nature, imperative without refinement, and ignores social hierarchy.

2.6. Data Validity Test

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the DCT instrument was developed based on established theories of politeness proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) and Leech (2014). Prior to data collection, the instrument was reviewed by experts in pragmatics to ensure content validity. Students' responses were coded systematically according to predetermined categories of directive speech acts and politeness strategies to maintain consistency in the analysis.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Findings

This study uses the Discourse Completion Test (DCT), which consists of 30 academic communication scenarios representing six types of directive speech actions, namely requests, questions, orders, prohibitions, permission requests, and advice. Each type of speech action is represented by five scenarios, so that by involving 50 respondents, 1,500 written responses were obtained (50 respondents × 30 scenarios). All responses were analyzed based on the type of speech and politeness strategies used.

Table 1. Data Distribution Based on Types of Directive Speech

Types of Speech Acts	Number of Scenarios	Number of Responses
Request	5	250
Questions	5	250
Commands	5	250
Prohibition	5	250
Permission Request	5	250
Advice	5	250
Total	30	1.500

Based on Table 1, each type of speech act has the same number of responses, namely 250 responses, so the analysis of each category is carried out based on a balanced amount of data.

Further, each response was classified based on the politeness strategy used. The results of the analysis show that the indirect politeness strategy is the most dominant strategy used by students in most types of speech acts.

Table 2. Distribution of Politeness Strategies in Each Type of Speech

Types of Speech Acts	Total Responsibility	Dominant Politeness Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Request	250	Indirect strategy	190	76.0%
Questions	250	Indirect strategy	...	...
Commands	250	Respect strategy	192	76.8%
Prohibition	250	Apology strategy	41	16.4%
Permission Request	250	Face-saving strategies	45	18.0%
Advice	250	Mitigation strategies	180	72.0%

In the request category, out of 250 responses analyzed, 190 responses (76.0%) used indirect politeness strategies. This strategy is characterized by the use of excuse expressions, apologies, and non-coercive forms of requests, such as "Sorry to interrupt, sir. Can I consult about my thesis proposal?". These findings show that most students try to minimize threats to the opponent's face when submitting requests in an academic context.

In the command category, as many as 192 out of 250 responses (76.8%) indicated the use of a respect strategy, especially when students communicated with lecturers or parties with higher social status. This strategy is realized through the use of respectful greetings, expressions of supplication, and more subtle sentence forms than direct imperative sentences.

In the ban category, only 41 respondents (16.4%) explicitly used the apology strategy as a form of mitigation before conveying the ban. Most of the other responses were delivered in the form of outright bans without adequate mitigation elements, so they have the potential to create a sense of impoliteness in the context of academic communication.

Furthermore, in the category of permit requests, 45 responses (18.0%) were found that applied face-saving strategies. This strategy is seen through the use of expressions of permission and respect, which aim to give the opposite person the freedom to accept or reject the request submitted.

Meanwhile, in the advice category, as many as 180 out of 250 responses (72.0%) used mitigation strategies, such as the use of better, better, or indirect forms of advice. This strategy shows that there is an effort by students to convey advice without giving the impression of patronizing or imposing opinions on the opponent.

Overall, the results of the study show that indirect politeness strategies, respect strategies, and mitigation strategies are the most dominant forms of strategies used by students in producing directive speech actions in various academic communication situations. These findings indicate that most students have a pragmatic awareness in adapting the form of speech to the context of communication, although in some categories, there is still the use of strategies that do not pay attention to the politeness aspect.

Based on the results of the Discourse Complement Test on 50 FKIP students of the University of Muhammadiyah Palembang, data on the ability to politely act in a directive were obtained as follows:

Table 3. Student Directing Speech Ability Test Results

Score Range	Frequency	Percentage	Category
85–100	10	20%	Excellent
70–84	20	40%	Good
55–69	12	24%	Enough
40–54	6	12%	Less
<40	2	4%	Very Less

Based on Table 1, most students are in the good (40%) and very good (20%) categories, indicating that student-directed speech is generally good. However, 28% fall into the sufficient-to-very poor category, indicating variation in the use of politeness strategies. This indicates that there is a significant variation in the use of politeness strategies, where some students have not been able to adjust the form of speech to the social context appropriately. Analytically, this distribution shows that although

awareness of communication ethics has been established, mastery of complex linguistic strategies to mitigate threats to the face still needs to be improved in order for students to communicate professionally in various academic situations.

Analysis of directive politeness strategies using the Discourse Completion Ability Test identified several approaches present within the six types of directive speech, as outlined below:

This study identified 190 instances of demand-directive speech employing indirect politeness strategies across situations 1–5. Key indicators were the frequent use of 'please' and 'sorry,' which function as pleas before making a request. For example, in situation 1, respondents used phrases like, *"Excuse me, sir, sorry to interrupt. May I ask for your time to discuss thesis guidance?"* *"Thank you,"* and *"Assalamualaikum, good morning, Mrs. MKS. With permission in advance, I apologize for interrupting your busy schedule. I would like to seek guidance for my thesis proposal. Thank you very much."* This analysis shows that students consciously try to maintain the "negative face" of lecturers by providing options or space for speech partners to refuse without feeling pressured, which is a crucial strategy in hierarchical communication in the campus environment.

The key finding is that in situations 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10, students' question-directed speech frequently employs the FTA (Face Threatening Act) politeness strategy, occurring in as many as seven speeches. This indicates that students' directive speech consistently considers the feelings of the speaking partner, as shown by the use of more subtle language. For example, situation 6 features the speech, *"Just give me this vase!"*, which was identified as a direct form of FTA without mitigation, which analytically indicates a failure to maintain social harmony. An example of speech that does not use FTA is in situation 7: *"S (pseudonym), have you done the pragmatic assignment last week given by our lecturer?"* showed students' efforts to remain directive but still respect the autonomy of speech partners through an information-based approach.

A total of 192 command directive speeches in situations 11-15 used politeness strategies expressing respect, especially when addressing older people. This indicates that most FKIP UM Palembang students employ respectful strategies in direct communication with elders. For example, in situation 14: *"Sorry, Uncle, can you just put the suitcase in the room?"* and in situation 15: *"Let's pray together, Sis."*

A total of 41 prohibition directive speeches using the apology politeness strategy were identified in situation 17. Most students in this situation use apologetic language to minimize offense or threat, particularly when speaking to older peers. For example: *"Sorry, friends; please don't talk to me during class hours."* This analysis strengthens the evidence that students' politeness is strongly influenced by social distancing variables and power relations, where the marker of politeness is used to maintain authority as well as the harmony of the relationship between speaker and listener.

Among the respondents, 45 used consent directive speech to avoid threatening the interlocutor's face, particularly in situation 22. In contrast, 5 respondents did not address face-threatening situations in their answers. For example, speech that does not threaten face includes *"Go ahead, ma'am; it's okay later when it's finished, and then return, ma'am."* In contrast, a face-threatening response appeared in situation 21: *"You can't; just find another boarding house!"* Analytically, this strategy reflects the student's competence in providing input or permission without appearing to patronize or degrade the position of the interlocutor.

In situations 26–30, 180 instances of advice directive speech using politeness strategies to minimize losses were identified. This strategy was applied to prevent threatening the interlocutor's face. For example, in situation 28, a respondent said, *"You should discuss with the lecturer before deciding on a research topic."* In contrast, the answer in situation 29, *"Just play the phone continuously!"* did not minimize losses.

The final analysis shows that orders and requests are the most dominant forms of speech used in academic interactions. This is functionally closely related to the nature of the campus environment, which requires coordination, instruction, and requests for assistance in teaching and learning activities. This dominance shows that students are more often in situations that require them to influence the

actions of others, so mastering politeness strategies in these two types of speech is the main key to the success of their academic communication.

3.2. Discussion

The results of the study showed that most students used indirect politeness strategies when delivering directive speech in an academic context. These findings not only show students' pragmatic ability to choose the appropriate form of speech but also reflect their awareness of the social structure that prevails in the university environment. In academic interactions, lecturers are seen as having higher institutional authority, so that students tend to avoid direct forms of directives. Instead, they prefer to use apologies, excuse expressions, and interrogative sentences as a form of mitigation against potential face-threatening acts.

The findings support the theory of Brown and Levinson (1987), which explains that politeness strategies are used to minimize threats to the face of the opponent. However, this study also shows that the choice of politeness strategy is not solely influenced by the linguistic characteristics of a speech, but by the social context in which communication takes place. In the academic environment, the power relationship between students and lecturers is the dominant factor that determines the choice of the form of directive. The higher the social status of the opponent, the greater the tendency of students to use indirect strategies and mitigation forms.

Conversely, when speech is addressed to peers, students more often use a direct directive form. This condition shows that social distance affects the level of politeness used. Although this form is acceptable in relationships between friends, the use of the same strategy against lecturers has the potential to be perceived as less polite. Thus, students' pragmatic competence is not only related to the ability to choose language forms, but also the ability to adjust language choices to the social communication context.

The results of this study also expand the application of Leech's (2014) theory. The principle of politeness in academic communication not only serves to maintain the harmony of interpersonal relationships but also serves as a mechanism for showing respect for academic norms and institutional structures. Therefore, language politeness in a university environment can be seen as part of the professionalism of prospective educators, not just compliance with linguistic norms.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings show that pragmatic learning in higher education should not only focus on mastering forms of speech but also provide opportunities for students to practice using politeness strategies in various academic communication situations. Simulations of consultations with lecturers, class presentations, group discussions, and communication through digital media can be used as a means to develop students' sensitivity to power relations, social distancing, and the level of communication formality. This approach is expected to be able to improve students' communicative competence more comprehensively so that they are ready to carry out their professional role as educators.

The findings of this study are also in line with the research of Tagugurad and Rosita (2023), which shows that indirect politeness strategies are more widely used to reduce threats to the face of the opponent in directive speech actions. However, this study makes a different contribution because it examines the use of this strategy in the context of academic communication of prospective teacher students in Indonesia. Using the Discourse Completion Test (DCT), this study shows that the power relationship between students and lecturers is the most influential factor in the selection of politeness strategies, an aspect that has not been widely discussed in previous studies.

Theoretically, the findings of this study have important implications for the development of the pragmatic field, particularly in understanding how communicative competence operates in the academic public space. These results confirm that pragmatics is not just a static subdiscipline of language, but a dynamic practice in which social identity and power are negotiated through word choice. Language politeness proves to be an integral component of students' communicative competencies that allow them to navigate the hierarchical social structure of the campus. This supports

the thesis that linguistic mastery alone is not enough to guarantee the success of communication if it is not accompanied by sociopragmatic sensitivity to the position and role of the interlocutor.

Pedagogically, this research provides explicit implications for the direction of language education in higher education. Given the inappropriate use of imperatives in formal situations, language learning at the higher education level should no longer focus only on structural or grammatical aspects, but must integrate pragmatic aspects more intensively and explicitly into the curriculum. As emphasized by Tarigan (1981), Effective speaking skills include linguistic, social, and pragmatic dimensions simultaneously. Therefore, educational institutions need to design learning models that simulate various social contexts to strengthen students' pragmatic awareness. Strengthening the learning of language politeness is very crucial to help students build academic communication that is not only effective in terms of information, but also professional and in accordance with the social norms that apply in the scientific community. Thus, language education is expected to be able to produce graduates who are not only intellectually intelligent, but also polite and socially capable in interacting in the professional world later.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that prospective teachers generally demonstrated positive levels of politeness in directive speech, with 20% categorized as "very good" and 40% as "good," while indirect strategies and linguistic mitigation emerged as the most frequently used approaches for reducing the force of requests, suggestions, and instructions in academic communication. These findings indicate that many students possess an adequate awareness of context-sensitive and respectful communication, although differences in politeness levels suggest that some still require further development in pragmatic competence. However, the study was limited by its relatively small sample, its focus on students from a single institution, and its reliance on a Discourse Completion Test, which elicited hypothetical responses rather than naturally occurring interactions. Future studies should involve larger and more diverse samples, compare students across institutions or study programs, and combine discourse completion tasks with classroom observations, recorded conversations, and interviews to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of directive politeness in teacher education.

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