ACCIDENTAL IMPOLITENESS AND DIGITAL DEFERENCE: A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF FRESHMEN INTERACTIONS IN AN INDONESIAN EFL VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

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Abstract: In an increasingly globalized academic landscape, understanding the pragmatic dynamics of EFL classroom interactions in culturally nuanced contexts like Indonesia is essential. This study offers an exploration of the interplay between politeness and impoliteness strategies within the hierarchical and communal culture of an Indonesian higher education setting. Using a qualitative case study design, the research was conducted at a public university in East Java, involving one lecturer and 50 first-year students. Data were collected through video recordings of classroom interactions, followed by transcription and coding using a framework based on Brown and Levinson's politeness theory and Culpeper's model of impoliteness. Findings indicate that while positive politeness predominates to foster a collaborative atmosphere, a unique pattern of accidental impoliteness emerges among freshmen. This lack of pragmatic awareness suggests that impoliteness in this context is not a tool for social friction, but a byproduct of the transitional struggle between secondary school norms and university expectations. These findings imply that EFL pedagogy in Indonesia must go beyond linguistic accuracy to include explicit pragmatic instruction. Specifically, there is a need for curriculum adjustments that help students navigate the socio-cultural expectations of higher education to prevent unintentional communication breakdowns in the classroom.

Keywords: *Brown and Levinson theory, Culpeper theory, Indonesian context, pragmatics, undergraduate EFL classroom*

INTRODUCTION

In second language acquisition (SLA), pragmatic competence, the ability to comprehend and produce language appropriate for the situational and sociocultural context (LoCastro, 2003), is essential for effective communication. This competence moves beyond grammatical and lexical knowledge, enabling learners to navigate complex social interactions (Laughlin et al., 2015). Within pragmatics, the study of politeness and impoliteness is central to understanding classroom dynamics. Politeness strategies are linguistic and non-linguistic tools used to preserve social harmony and mitigate face-threatening acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Conversely, impoliteness comprises behaviors that attack an individual's 'face' needs, often resulting in conflict or communication failure (Culpeper, 1996, 2011).

The investigation of these strategies in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom is particularly complex. EFL environments often feature inherent power differentials and potential mismatches between the pragmatic norms of teachers and students, which can affect the expression and perception of (im)politeness (Anugrawati et al., 2020; Senowarsito, 2013). While previous studies confirm that politeness helps foster a positive learning atmosphere (AlAfnan & Cruz-Rudio, 2023), the specific ways these strategies function in the unique EFL context warrant deeper analysis.

Despite the extensive literature on politeness strategies in Indonesian EFL settings, research focusing on impoliteness remains notably scarce. Most existing studies prioritize harmonious discourse, often overlooking the instances of face-threatening friction that occur during the transitional period of higher education. Furthermore, there is a lack of focus on freshman students who navigate high-power distance cultures like East Java while simultaneously adapting to the informalizing effects of virtual learning platforms. This study addresses this gap by positioning accidental impoliteness not merely as a linguistic error, but as a byproduct of the pragmatic struggle between students' native cultural backgrounds and the professional expectations of a university environment. By examining both politeness and impoliteness in tandem, this research provides a more holistic view of the pragmatic challenges faced by new university learners.

Therefore, this study aims to identify and analyze the politeness and impoliteness strategies employed by teachers and students during EFL classroom interactions. It

further seeks to explore how these strategies are used to navigate the power dynamics inherent in the learning environment. The findings may offer insights to educators for refining pedagogical practices and improving overall classroom communication. This research addresses the following questions: 1) What politeness strategies do the lecturer and students employ in EFL classroom interactions? 2) What impoliteness strategies do the lecturer and students employ in EFL classroom interactions?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This section synthesizes the theoretical underpinnings and empirical developments in the study of (im)politeness. Rather than viewing these strategies in isolation, the review examines the tension between social norms and individual agency, first in general social contexts and subsequently within the specific hierarchy of the classroom.

Politeness and Impoliteness in Social Context

Politeness is fundamentally guided by a triad of social norms, cultural values, and contextual adaptation (Sapitri et al., 2019). While Brown and Levinson's (1987) foundational theory (i.e., categorizing strategies into bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record) provides a universal taxonomy, empirical applications reveal significant cultural and gendered variations. For instance, while Hutahaean et al. (2021) found that positive politeness dominates Indonesian entertainment media to maintain social harmony across different statuses, Ali (2023) suggests that these choices are heavily gendered, with males favoring direct Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs) and females prioritizing indirect criticism.

This gendered and cultural divide extends into the realm of impoliteness. While Culpeper (1996) identifies five strategies (i.e., bald on-record, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, sarcasm, and withholding politeness), perceptions of these acts are context-dependent. Aydinoglu (2013) and Wibowo and Kuntjara (2013) present a striking contradiction in how impoliteness is used: in Turkish social settings, men use direct impoliteness for convenience, whereas in Indonesian digital subcultures (e.g., football communities), impoliteness is used deliberately to mock and bond. This suggests a gap in the literature regarding accidental or non-adversarial impoliteness; most studies view

impoliteness as a deliberate attack, leaving the unintentional pragmatics of language learners largely unexplored.

(Im)politeness in the Pedagogical Sphere

The classroom serves as a unique microcosm where cultural emphasis on respecting elders often mandates a high frequency of politeness (Pradita et al., 2024). However, recent studies introduce a critical tension regarding the role of social status in academic settings. While Suwarni and Bestari (2021) argue that impoliteness is nearly non-existent in well-mannered Indonesian classrooms, Onebunne and Ugwumba (2024) offer a counter-perspective from Nigeria, suggesting that politeness is not distributed equally but is instead awarded based on the student's perceived influence.

Furthermore, a debate exists in the literature regarding the impact of impoliteness on learning. Udoh and Ugochukwu (2024) maintain a traditionalist view that any impoliteness disrupts the educational quality. Conversely, Sedkey et al. (2024) suggest that controlled pragmatics from educators, which may include directness or withholding certain politeness markers, is actually a necessary pedagogical tool for enhancing students' pragmatic awareness. This study enters this debate by examining the freshman condition in Indonesia. Unlike Suwarni and Bestari (2021), who found almost no impoliteness, this research posits that impoliteness does exist in the Indonesian classroom, but it functions as a byproduct of transitional pragmatic incompetence rather than the deliberate adversarial mocking found in Wibowo and Kuntjara's (2013) social study. By synthesizing these views, the present study moves beyond the binary of polite vs. impolite to explore how these strategies are negotiated during the shift from traditional to higher education.

METHOD

Participants and Research Setting

The research was conducted within the English Department of a public university located in East Java, Indonesia. This specific locus was chosen to examine how local cultural values, such as hierarchy and indirectness, manifest in an EFL academic environment. The participants consisted of one female lecturer with over a decade of teaching experience and 50 freshman students aged 18 to 19. This demographic is particularly significant as it represents a transitional phase where students are still

adapting to the pragmatic expectations of higher education, which differs substantially from their secondary school experiences. To protect the privacy of these individuals, the study employed pseudonyms for all participants and secured informed consent prior to any data collection.

Data Collection Procedures

Primary data were gathered through non-participant observations of synchronous online sessions conducted via Google Meet. The use of a virtual classroom platform was a deliberate choice to examine how pragmatic strategies are negotiated in a digital environment, which often lacks the physical cues of a traditional classroom. There were two recording videos of classrooms. Each video originated from different classes and different courses, and each session lasted 100 minutes. Since the recordings were generated directly through the Google Meet recording feature, the data captured high-fidelity audio and clear visual transitions of the participants' "tiles," ensuring that both verbal and available non-verbal cues (e.g., facial expressions and chat-box interactions) were preserved for analysis.

Data Processing and Coding Analysis

The transformation of the digital recordings into analyzable data began with a meticulous manual transcription process. Every verbal exchange was transcribed verbatim, while significant digital-contextual elements (e.g., use of the "raise hand" feature, microphone muting/unmuting delays, and text-based comments in the meeting chat) were noted in brackets. These elements were treated as essential components of the illocutionary force of the interactions. From these transcripts, a total of 450 relevant utterances were identified. The coding procedure followed a deductive thematic approach where each utterance was categorized based on the established taxonomies of Brown and Levinson (1987) and Culpeper (1996). To ensure the reliability of the findings, the data underwent a triangulation process through peer-debriefing, where a second coder reviewed the classifications to reach a consensus. This systematic processing ensured that the transition from raw digital video to the final qualitative findings was transparent, consistent, and theoretically grounded.

FINDINGS

Politeness Strategies

Based on the classroom interactions, we found that both the lecturer and students utilized a variety of politeness strategies to maintain social harmony. To analyze these interactions, we applied the framework of Brown and Levinson (1987), which categorizes strategies into four main types: bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record. Each of these strategies serves to manage FTAs and maintain harmonious social interactions.

Bald on-record

Excerpt 1

> L: "Who wants to go for the first presentation? Who wants to go first? Group one!"

In Excerpt 1, the lecturer is straightforwardly asking for volunteers for the first presentation without using indirect language. The first sentence, "Who wants to go for the first presentation?" is a direct question aimed at soliciting volunteers. It is clear and unambiguous, leaving no room for misinterpretation. By using "Who wants to go," the lecturer is openly seeking individuals who are willing to present first. The second sentence, "Who wants to go first?" reiterates the same question in a slightly different way, emphasizing the urgency or importance of finding volunteers to start the presentation sequence. Finally, the phrase "Group one!" is a direct assignment of responsibility, indicating that the first group to volunteer will be the one to present. It is a concise and efficient way to organize the class activities in this regard.

Positive politeness

Excerpt 2

> L: "Everybody, nice to meet you again. Sorry about a lot of delays in our classes."

In Excerpt 2, the lecturer greets the students warmly with "Everybody, nice to meet you again," and follows it with an apology for the delays in their classes. This greeting sets a positive tone and acknowledges the students' presence, while the apology shows consideration for their time and schedules, thereby reducing social distance and maintaining a respectful relationship.

Excerpt 3 shows that the lecturer encourages participation by asking the students to give a thumbs-up if they have completed the previous week's task. This inclusive

language invites the students to engage in a non-threatening manner. Following this, the lecturer reinforces their participation with, "Very good. I have a lot of thumbs," providing positive reinforcement and acknowledging the collective effort, which helps to create a supportive and encouraging environment.

Excerpt 3

> L: "So, give me your thumbs up if you have done the task from last week."
> (students give thumbs up)
> "Very good. I have a lot of thumbs."

Excerpt 4

> L: "Alright. Thank you very much, Rose and friends, for your presentation. As you may have seen, everyone, this presentation is consisting of two. So they decided to discuss all of the aspects. They talk about word senses. And also, they discuss a little bit of the speech act, which is very good."

In Excerpt 4, the lecturer begins by expressing gratitude, saying, "Thank you very much, Rose and friends, for your presentation," which recognizes the students' efforts and contributions. The lecturer then addresses the entire class with, "As you may have seen, everyone, this presentation is consisting of two," thus including everyone in the feedback and fostering a sense of community. By providing specific positive feedback on the presentation's content, "They talk about word senses. And also, they discuss a little bit of the speech act, which is very good," the lecturer not only affirms the presenting group's efforts but also sets a positive example for other students.

Excerpt 5

> L: "So, I think it's a good idea for you to put this on the title slide. So instead of saying section of novel analysis, you can say the analysis of Little Weirds by Jenny Slade."

In Excerpt 5, the lecturer uses positive politeness by framing the feedback as a suggestion and including the phrase "I think." This softens the directive and makes it more collaborative. It shows respect for the student's autonomy and encourages them to consider the suggestion rather than feeling compelled to obey. The use of "you can say" instead of "you should say" further emphasizes this politeness. It implies that the student has a choice, which is a key aspect of positive politeness.

Excerpt 6

> Lily : "Please tell me if there is no sound of the video. Is there …."
> L : "This is usually the problem with Google Meet. If you give me the link in the WhatsApp group, I can try to play it for you."

In Excerpt 6, the lecturer is addressing a technical issue raised by a student (Lily) during an online class. The lecturer uses positive politeness by normalizing the issue with Google Meet, making it clear that the problem is not the student's fault but a common technical glitch. This helps to maintain the student's face. The use of "if you give me the link" is a polite request, showing respect for the student's autonomy. The lecturer does not demand the link, but suggests it as a helpful solution.

Excerpt 7

Daniel   : "Do you guys hear the sound of the movie clip?"
Other students : "No!"
Daniel   : "I am sorry, wait, wait."
L   : "I think, I can help you presenting again because usually when we use sound, it's difficult if you presented from your side. Send it to WhatsApp group, I will open it for you."

Excerpt 7 indicates Daniel's initial question, "Do you guys hear the sound of the movie clip?" employs a politeness strategy of seeking confirmation, showing consideration for the others' experience and ensuring their engagement with the material. His subsequent apology, "I am sorry, wait, wait." demonstrates the use of positive politeness by expressing regret for any inconvenience caused, thereby maintaining social harmony within the group.

In addition, the lecturer's response also reflects politeness strategies. Firstly, by acknowledging the difficulty of presenting sound from the students' side and offering assistance, the lecturer employs positive politeness to show concern for the students' predicament and willingness to help resolve the issue.

Negative politeness

Excerpt 8

L: "Can I see the slide where you say the word 'senses'?"

Excerpt 8 indicates the lecturer's requests to access specific information but also recognizes the student's ownership of the presentation material. By asking for permission "Can I", the lecturer demonstrates awareness of the student's control over the slides, thereby respecting their autonomy. This approach minimizes the potential imposition of the request while still achieving the desired outcome.

Excerpt 9

Nana: "Is that okay if Aura joins my audio?"

Similarly, this question in Excerpt 9 demonstrates the speaker's consideration for the listener's preferences and boundaries. By seeking permission from the lecturer before adding Aura to the audio or same frame (using only one account for the meeting), the student acknowledges the potential disruption or inconvenience this action might cause. This request shows respect for the listener's autonomy and gives them the opportunity to decline if they prefer not to have Aura join her friend's account.

Off-record

Excerpt 10

> L: "If you have opinions or if you have questions, you can also raise your hand and talk to the class."

Excerpt 10 involves conveying a message indirectly, allowing the students to infer the lecturer's intention without stating it explicitly. In this context, the lecturer is indirectly suggesting to the students that they are welcome to start the discussion and participate by sharing their opinions or asking questions during the class. By framing the invitation as a conditional statement "If you have opinions or if you have questions", the lecturer offers students the opportunity to engage without directly requesting their input. This indirect approach is considerate because it allows students to decide whether they want to participate without feeling pressured or obligated to do so. It also maintains the students' autonomy and avoids putting them on the spot by providing an alternative means of participation (e.g., raising their hand and speaking to the class) rather than directly calling on them to contribute.

Impoliteness Strategies

From the observed classroom interactions, we identified several impoliteness strategies as described by Culpeper's framework. Specifically, we uncovered instances of positive impoliteness, sarcasm or mock politeness, and withholding politeness. These strategies reveal the complex nature of classroom communication, showing how impoliteness can appear in both subtle and obvious ways in an educational setting.

Affective and self-directed impoliteness

Excerpt 11

> L   : "I'm waiting for it, I'm waiting for it on WhatsApp, okay?"
> Nia   : "Yes, Ma'am."
>   (accidentally opened the wrong file)
>   "*Anjir* (darn it), so embarrassing, I'm dead."
> L   : "Hey, are you okay?"

The use of the taboo word "*Anjir*" and the phrase "I'm dead" in Excerpt 11 is a manifestation of affective impoliteness. It is not an attack on the lecturer's face, but rather an emotional outburst triggered by the stress of a technical error during an online presentation. This represents a Self-Face Threatening Act common among freshmen, where the boundary between informal slang and formal academic discourse collapses under pressure.

Sarcasm or mock politeness

Excerpt 12

> L   : "Why didn't you join IISMA, Ryan?"
> Ryan   : "Pessimistic at the beginning, Ma'am."
> L   : "Ah, what did you say Ryan?"
> Ryan   : "I give up hope at first."
> L   : "Giving up people is not my people, you should not."

In Excerpt 12, when the lecturer responds with "Ah, what did you say Ryan?" after Ryan's response about being pessimistic at the beginning, it is not a genuine inquiry but rather a way to mockingly draw attention to Ryan's statement, suggesting that it is unexpected or contrary to expectations. Similarly, when L responds with "Giving up people is not my people, you should not," it is a form of mock politeness or indirect criticism. The lecturer is indirectly suggesting that giving up hope is not an acceptable behavior, but the tone and phrasing imply a layer of politeness while delivering the critique.

Withhold politeness

Excerpt 13

> (The lecturer helps the group in presenting their PowerPoint)
> L   : "You can start your presentation."
> Daniel : "The clip first, Ma'am."
>   (The lecturer shows the clip from the movie)
>   (The clip ends)
> Daniel : "Okay."
> L   : "Okay, where I should go now?"
> Tyler : "Next, Ma'am."
> L   : "Next or previous?"
> Tyler : "Next."

In this interaction, withhold politeness occurs through the omission of expected markers like "please" or "thank you". In a high-power distance culture like Indonesia, these omissions might normally be perceived as discourteous. However, in the context of

a Google Meet session, this transactional directness serves a functional purpose: efficiency. The lack of softening elements suggests that the digital environment may encourage a task-first pragmatic style, particularly among students who are still acclimating to university-level discourse. For instance, when the lecturer says, "You can start your presentation," it is a direct instruction without any preceding polite phrases like "Please start your presentation" or "Could you start your presentation now?" Similarly, Daniel's response, "The clip first, Ma'am," while respectful with the use of "Ma'am," lacks additional politeness markers such as "please". The lecturer continues with a direct question, "Okay, where I should go now?" without using "please" or "could you," making the interaction efficient, but less warm. Tyler's brief directive, "Next, Ma'am," although respectful, also omits extra politeness, making it more abrupt. This pattern continues with the lecturer's straightforward query, "Next or previous?" In a formal classroom setting, where hierarchical relationships are common, the absence of these politeness strategies might be perceived as a withholding of expected courteous language, making the interactions more transactional and potentially less courteous.

DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that classroom interactions in the Indonesian EFL context are a complex negotiation of traditional hierarchy, modern pedagogical goals, and the informalizing influence of digital platforms. The findings align with Karimnia and Khodashenas (2017), which suggest that (im)politeness strategies are fundamental to the social and educational success of the classroom environment. However, a deeper look at the data shows a significant pragmatic gap among first-year students. While the lecturer consistently uses positive politeness to reduce social distance, similar to the findings of Rahayuningsih et al. (2020), the students often struggle to balance the high-level respect required in Indonesian culture with the transactional nature of a Google Meet environment. This suggests that the freshman condition is a transitional state where students have not yet mastered the professional linguistic softening expected in a university setting.

Regarding politeness, the most frequent strategy is positive politeness, predominantly initiated by the lecturer. Since positive politeness focuses on an individual's positive self-perception, the lecturer utilizes this to foster a strong connection

with the students (Rahayuningsih et al., 2020). By employing various linguistic techniques to establish common ground and share interests, the lecturer treats students as part of an in-group, which helps meet the students' positive face needs and protects their negative face (Peng et al., 2014). This collaborative approach ensures students feel appreciated, fostering active participation and cooperation (Senowarsito, 2013; Tsamratul'aeni, 2019).

Moreover, the findings also reveal a shift in student pragmatics. While students often use positive politeness to show gratitude and respect to the lecturer as a respectable individual (Fitriyani & Andriyanti, 2020), their communication can also be perceived as abrupt. For example, when students say, "Thank you, Ma'am," they acknowledge the lecturer's assistance, showing gratitude and maintaining positive social interactions. In their interactions, the students demonstrated a desire to refer to their lecturer, whom they regard as a respectable individual, using a term of honor (Fitriyani & Andriyanti, 2020). This approach also aligns with Brown and Levinson's notion of positive politeness, which emphasizes the speaker's efforts to show respect.

Furthermore, the use of bald on-record strategies by the lecturer is straightforward and unambiguous, as seen in Excerpt 1, where the lecturer directly asks for volunteers for the first presentation. This approach minimizes confusion and ensures that the request is clearly understood by the students (Rahayuningsih et al., 2020). Such directness can be effective in maintaining order and clarity in classroom activities, especially when immediate responses are necessary. For the negative politeness strategies, both lecturer and a student used this approach to show deference and respect for the students' autonomy. In Excerpt 8, the lecturer asks for permission to see specific slides, recognizing the student's control over their presentation material. Similarly, in Excerpt 9, a student seeks permission before adding a peer to the audio, showing consideration for the lecturer's preferences and maintaining respectful boundaries (Senowarsito, 2013). Lastly, off-record strategies, as demonstrated in Excerpt 10, involve indirect communication that allows students to infer the lecturer's intentions. By suggesting that students raise their hands to share opinions or ask questions, the lecturer provides an opportunity for voluntary participation without exerting direct pressure. This approach respects students' autonomy and encourages engagement in a non-threatening manner. Thus, the use of

politeness strategies contributes significantly to creating a respectful and supportive learning environment (Karimnia & Khodashenas, 2017).

The identification of impoliteness strategies provides a significant contribution to Culpeper's framework within the EFL setting. A key finding is the presence of Affective Impoliteness, illustrated by self-deprecating remarks and the use of taboo words like "*Anjir*." While such expressions can create an uncomfortable atmosphere (Udoh & Ugochukwu, 2024), this study posits that they are often unintentional outbursts of anxiety rather than directed attacks on the lecturer's face. This nuances the traditional understanding of impoliteness, suggesting that in the freshman condition, impoliteness can be a symptom of pragmatic failure during the transition to higher education.

Furthermore, the use of sarcasm or mock politeness by the lecturer serves as a form of indirect criticism. While intended to challenge a student's pessimistic attitude and encourage perseverance, it is important to note that indirectness does not always equate to politeness (Nguyen & Ho, 2022). Finally, the observed withholding of politeness in transactional exchanges, such as omitting "please" or "thank you" during rapid slides transitions, suggests that the digital environment of Google Meet may prioritize efficiency over formal courtesy. In a formal educational context, while this omission can be perceived as purely transactional (Níkleva, 2018; Udoh & Ugochukwu, 2024), it likely represents a new pragmatic adaptation to the constraints of online learning. These findings imply that EFL pedagogy must include explicit pragmatic instruction to help students bridge the gap between their native cultural norms and the professional expectations of the university.

The theoretical and pedagogical implications of these findings are clear: Impoliteness Theory must be broadened to include the unintentional or developmental errors made by language learners. The lapses in politeness observed in this study are not signs of disrespect but of a transitional identity. For EFL teachers, this means that instruction must go beyond teaching polite vocabulary and instead focus on explicit pragmatic instruction. Students need help navigating the hidden curriculum of university discourse, especially in online settings, to ensure their respectful intentions are matched by appropriate language. By recognizing accidental impoliteness as a learning stage rather than a behavioral problem, lecturers can better guide students toward becoming competent, professional communicators.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This paper investigated the pragmatic landscape of EFL classroom interactions, demonstrating how the strategic use of politeness and impoliteness by both lecturers and students shapes the social and pedagogical fabric of higher education. The findings establish that while lecturers rely heavily on positive politeness to bridge social distance and maintain engagement, students often navigate a more precarious pragmatic path. Particularly in the virtual setting of Google Meet, student politeness tends to be formulaic, while their lapses into impoliteness are frequently accidental. These instances of face-threatening friction (e.g., abrupt requests or self-directed outbursts) are not necessarily markers of hostility but are indicative of the freshman pragmatic gap. This gap represents the transitional struggle between secondary school norms, native cultural values in East Java, and the professional expectations of a university environment.

The theoretical implications of this research extend Culpeper's impoliteness framework by illustrating that in high-power distance cultures like Indonesia, impoliteness can function as a byproduct of linguistic anxiety rather than intentional aggression. Practically, these results suggest that EFL pedagogy must move beyond teaching grammatical accuracy to include explicit pragmatic instruction. Educators are encouraged to address the hidden curriculum of academic interaction, helping first-year students translate their respectful intentions into appropriate L2 forms. Furthermore, this study highlights the need for digital pragmatic awareness as classrooms continue to utilize online platforms. Future research should expand on these findings by conducting longitudinal studies to observe how these freshman pragmatic strategies evolve as students progress through their degree programs, providing deeper insight into the long-term acquisition of pragmatic competence.

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