

Politeness in Making Requests:
A Study on EFL Learners' Communicative Strategies and Attitudes

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Abstract

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This study highlights the importance of politeness strategies in making requests, particularly for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). While numerous studies have examined politeness strategies in teacher-student interactions within EFL classrooms, few have focused on EFL learners' own perceptions and attitudes toward these strategies in making requests. This study aims to investigate how EFL learners perceive and apply politeness strategies in request speech acts in relation to their communication strategies and pragmatic awareness. Employing a quantitative descriptive design, the study involved nine students from the English Education study program who had completed the Semantics and Pragmatics course. Data were collected using a closed-ended questionnaire based on a Likert scale, developed in reference to Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. Responses were gathered via Google Forms and analyzed using descriptive statistical methods to determine the frequency and percentage of politeness strategy preferences. The findings indicate that participants predominantly preferred positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies, while bald on-record strategies were generally avoided due to their perceived impoliteness. The study concludes that EFL learners demonstrate a solid level of pragmatic competence and tend to select politeness strategies that promote respectful and harmonious communication. These findings suggest the need for more explicit instruction on pragmatic aspects of language use in EFL curricula to further enhance learners' communicative effectiveness.

Kata Kunci:

*Strategi kesopanan,
 pemelajar bahasa
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Abstrak

Studi ini menyoroti pentingnya strategi kesopanan dalam mengajukan permintaan, khususnya bagi pembelajar Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing

*tutur permintaan,
strategi komunikasi dan
sikap*

(EFL). Meskipun banyak studi telah meneliti strategi kesopanan dalam interaksi guru-murid di kelas EFL, hanya sedikit yang berfokus pada persepsi dan sikap pembelajar EFL terhadap strategi ini dalam mengajukan permintaan. Studi ini bertujuan untuk menyelidiki bagaimana pembelajar EFL memahami dan menerapkan strategi kesopanan dalam tindak tutur yang diminta dalam kaitannya dengan strategi komunikasi dan kesadaran pragmatik mereka. Dengan menggunakan desain deskriptif kuantitatif, studi ini melibatkan sembilan mahasiswa dari program studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris yang telah menyelesaikan kursus Semantik dan Pragmatik. Data dikumpulkan menggunakan kuesioner tertutup berdasarkan skala Likert, yang dikembangkan dengan mengacu pada teori kesopanan Brown dan Levinson. Respons dikumpulkan melalui Google Forms dan dianalisis menggunakan metode statistik deskriptif untuk menentukan frekuensi dan persentase preferensi strategi kesopanan. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa peserta lebih menyukai kesopanan positif, kesopanan negatif, dan strategi tidak resmi, sementara strategi resmi secara gamblang dihindari karena dianggap tidak sopan. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa pembelajar EFL menunjukkan tingkat kompetensi pragmatik yang solid dan cenderung memilih strategi kesopanan yang mendorong komunikasi yang penuh rasa hormat dan harmonis. Temuan ini menunjukkan perlunya instruksi yang lebih eksplisit tentang aspek pragmatik penggunaan bahasa dalam kurikulum EFL untuk lebih meningkatkan efektivitas komunikasi pembelajar.

INTRODUCTION

Politeness in communication plays an important role in maintaining interpersonal relationships and creating a harmonious atmosphere, especially in the context of learning English as a foreign language (EFL) (Rahayuningsih et al., 2020). One important aspect in communication is the speech act of requesting, which often involves the use of politeness strategies to reduce potential threats to the interlocutor's face (Adolph, 2016). In the EFL context, understanding and applying politeness strategies in the speech act of requesting becomes important, considering the differences in culture and social norms between native speakers and

learners (Adhari & Sesmiyanti, 2022). This study aims to explore the communication strategies and attitudes of EFL learners in making speech acts of requesting, as well as the factors that influence them. This study contributes to the understanding of pragmatics in the EFL context and its implications for English language teaching (Gunas et al., 2023).

Previous studies have shown that politeness strategies used in requesting speech acts are influenced by various factors, including social distance, power, and level of imposition (Ardianto et al., 2023). Then, Rahayuningsih et al. (2020) found that in EFL classroom interactions, teachers more often use positive politeness strategies to show solidarity and maintain close relationships with students. In addition, the bald on record strategy is also used to provide clear and unambiguous instructions, while the negative politeness strategy is used to minimize coercion against students. Social factors such as social distance, power, and level of imposition influence the choice of politeness strategies in EFL classroom interactions (Erlinda & Rahmi, 2015). Furthermore, Adhari & Sesmiyanti (2022); and Khusnia (2017) add the importance of understanding politeness strategies in creating a comfortable and effective learning environment.

In the context of EFL classroom interactions, positive politeness strategies are often used by teachers and students. As stated by Adhari & Sesmiyanti (2022) in their study found nine types of positive politeness strategies used in EFL classroom interactions, with "Seek Agreement" being the most frequently used strategy. This strategy includes efforts to seek agreement, avoid disagreement, and show optimism. The use of this positive politeness strategy shows that students and teachers are trying to build harmonious and mutually supportive relationships in the learning process (Nurmawati et al., 2019). It is important because by implementing positive politeness strategies creates a conducive classroom atmosphere for English language learning (Widana et al., 2018).

Other studies also show that EFL learners' pragmatic awareness and communicative competence greatly influence how they choose and apply politeness strategies in everyday communication (Jaafar & Ageli, 2020). For example, a study by Sunra et al. (2022) found that learners who have a better understanding of the

target culture tend to use positive politeness and negative politeness strategies more appropriately and effectively, compared to learners with minimal cultural knowledge. This confirms that cultural aspects are crucial factors in language learning and communication, especially in the context of politeness. Therefore, English language teaching needs to include pragmatic materials that emphasize understanding social contexts and politeness norms so that learners can communicate more naturally and politely according to the situation.

Furthermore, research by Fitriyani & Andriyanti (2020) revealed that the use of off-record strategies in requests by EFL learners can be an indicator of their level of pragmatic maturity and social sensitivity. Indirect strategies like this are often chosen to avoid potential conflict or social pressure, while maintaining the face of the interlocutor. However, the use of this strategy also requires good interpretation skills from the listener so that the intent is conveyed clearly. This finding underlines the importance of developing pragmatic skills as a whole in the language learning process, not only in terms of language structure but also in terms of culture and social context that surround communication interactions. Thus, the integration of pragmatic material in the English language learning curriculum is very necessary to improve holistic communication competence.

In addition, research by Gunas (2024) revealed that in EFL classroom interactions in Manggarai, Indonesia, teachers often use politeness maxims such as tact and approbation in their requests. The tact maxim is related to efforts to minimize interference with the wishes of the interlocutor, while approbation is related to giving praise or appreciation (Gunas et al., 2023). The use of these politeness maxims shows that teachers try to maintain positive relationships with students through polite and respectful communication. This study provides insight into the application of politeness theory in the context of EFL classrooms in Indonesia, especially in a local culture that values politeness norms (Wijayanti et al., 2020). The results of this study also support the importance of integrating pragmatic aspects in English language learning.

However, although many studies have examined politeness strategies in EFL classroom interactions, there is still a significant gap in understanding how EFL

learners apply these strategies in their requesting speech acts. Addressing this gap is essential, as the ability to use appropriate politeness strategies reflects learners' pragmatic competence and supports their success in achieving effective and socially appropriate communication in diverse contexts. Most previous studies have focused more on the role of teachers in using politeness strategies, while the role of EFL learners in applying these strategies has not been widely explored (Bahrun & Putri, 2021; Meiratnasari et al., 2019). In addition, studies that discuss EFL learners' attitudes towards politeness strategies in requesting speech acts are also still limited (Oktarina et al., 2020; Rejeki & Azizah, 2019). This indicates a research gap that needs to be filled in order to better understand how EFL learners use and view politeness strategies in their communication (Fathira & Utami, 2018).

From the previous explanation, the aim of the research is to find out how EFL learners perceive politeness strategies in the speech act of requesting related to their communication strategies and attitudes. It is hoped that the results of this study can contribute to the development of English language learning that is more pragmatically aware, as well as supporting the integration of polite communication aspects into teaching materials and teaching methods.

METHOD

This study used a quantitative descriptive approach with a survey design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This design was chosen because it is suitable for revealing perceives, tendencies, and patterns of communication strategy use. The aims to find out how EFL learners perceive politeness strategies in the speech act of requesting related to their communication strategies and attitudes by using Likert scale.

The population in this study were students of the English Language Education study program. The sample used consisted of 9 students who had taken the Semantics and Pragmatics course. The purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who had a background as active learners of English in the Semantics and Pragmatics courses. The selection of this technique was based on the

consideration that participants already had basic knowledge of the pragmatic aspects of communication.

The main instrument in this study was a closed questionnaire developed based on the theory of Politeness Strategies by Brown & Levinson (1987). This theory classifies politeness strategies into four main categories: bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record. The statements in the questionnaire were designed to represent the four categories, for example: statements that reflect the use of direct expressions without mitigation (bald on-record), the use of greetings and humor (positive politeness), formal or non-coercive forms of requests (negative politeness), and implicit forms of conveying intent (off-record).

Data were collected by distributing questionnaires in the form of Google Forms to students of the English Literature study program at one of the universities in Indonesia. The questionnaire was designed to explore their perceptions of politeness strategies in the speech act of requesting.

The data were analyzed quantitatively using descriptive statistical techniques, including frequency distribution of likert scale, mean score, and standard deviation. In addition, indicators were carried out based on the general understanding and four type of politeness strategy in the speech act of requesting related to their communication strategies and attitudes. The results of the analysis were then interpreted by referring to the Brown and Levinson theoretical framework and compared with previous findings from similar studies.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings and discussions in this section are structured to describe in detail to find out how EFL learners perceive politeness strategies in the speech act of requesting related to their communication strategies and attitudes. The data findings were analyzed based on five main indicators referring to Brown and Levinson's politeness strategy theory: general understanding and four types of politeness strategy: bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record. To see the data of frequency distribution of Likert scale, mean score, and standard deviation, it can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: EFL learners' Perceive of Politeness in Making Request

Indicator	Item	SA	A	D	SD	Mean Score	Std. Dev.
General Understanding	1. Polite requests in English help maintain a good relationship between the speaker and the listener.	9	0	0	0	14.9	1.27
	2. Politeness in making requests reflects good communication skills in English.	6	2	1	0		
	3. I believe that understanding politeness strategies is important for EFL learners to interact effectively with native speakers.	5	4	0	0		
	4. I feel that using politeness strategies makes communication more comfortable and reduces the possibility of conflict.	7	2	0	0		
Bald on Record	5. Making requests directly (e.g., "Give me the book") is an effective way in English.	1	4	4	0	8.44	3.13
	6. I feel that there is no need to use additional words such as "please" in simple requests.	1	0	3	5		
	7. I find the direct request style faster and more efficient even though it sounds rude.	1	2	4	2		
	8. I rarely consider the other person's feelings when making direct requests.	1	1	3	4		
Positive Politeness	9. I prefer to use requests that show familiarity, such as "Can you help me, buddy?"	1	5	2	1	11.3	2.6
	10. I feel that using the person's name when asking for help (e.g., "John, could you...") makes the request more polite.	2	4	2	1		
	11. I often use humor or compliments when making requests to make the atmosphere more friendly.	1	6	1	1		
	12. I believe that building familiarity is important in making polite requests.	2	6	1	0		
Negative Politeness	13. I prefer to use phrases such as "Would you mind..." to show respect to the listener.	6	3	0	0	12.9	1.62
	14. I feel it is important to apologize before making a request (e.g., "I'm sorry to bother you, but...").	4	5	1	0		

	15. I often use passive sentences such as “It would be appreciated if...” to sound more polite.	1	6	2	0		
	16. I avoid making requests that are too direct so as not to interfere with the freedom of others.	2	6	1	0		
Off Record	17. I prefer to convey my wishes indirectly so as not to sound pushy (e.g., “It’s cold in here...” instead of “Close the window”).	1	4	3	1		
	18. I believe that making implicit instructions is more polite than making explicit requests.	1	3	5	0		
	19. I find indirect strategies appropriate when I do not want to put pressure on others.	2	5	2	0	10.1	2.42
	20. I sometimes intentionally let the other person interpret my intentions rather than stating my request explicitly.	0	1	7	1		

Table 1 shows that politeness in making request based on five indicators: general understanding and four types of politeness strategy: bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record. These are the description of each indicator.

General Understanding

The data from indicator of general understanding. It can be seen that the majority of participants show a positive understanding of the importance of politeness in making requests in English. For example, the statement “Polite requests in English help maintain a good relationship between the speaker and the listener” received a standard deviation value of 1.27. From a 4-point Likert scale, mean scores above 3.50 are typically interpreted as a very high level of agreement (Upura & Chusanachoti, 2023) . This is supported by similar responses to other items under the same indicator, which emphasize that politeness reflects good communication skills, is essential for effective interaction with native speakers, and helps create more comfortable and conflict-free communication. These findings suggest that learners not only understand but also value the role of politeness strategies in successful English communication. No respondents showed significant disagreement with these statements, indicating that a general understanding of the

importance of politeness strategies in the EFL context has been possessed by learners. This finding indicates that in general, participants understand that the use of politeness strategies is not only part of social norms, but also an essential communication strategy in learning and using English as a foreign language.

Based on the findings from general understanding, it indicated learners not only understand the function of politeness strategies in theory, but also adapt them to their social experiences and perceives. It proves from the reflective attitudes towards various politeness strategies, with different preferences according to the situation. It is supported by Fathira & Utami (2018); and Khusnia (2017) stated politeness in making requests is an important aspect of communication, especially for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners who must adapt their communication strategies to different social and cultural contexts. In addition, Adhari & Sesmiyanti (2022); and Bahrin & Putri (2021) emphasized a positive communicative attitude towards these politeness strategies is important for building harmonious social relationships and avoiding interpersonal conflicts.

Bald on Record

The data obtained from indicator of the Bald on Record shows that most respondents do not fully agree with the direct and explicit request approach. Although one respondent stated that making a direct request such as “Give me the book” was effective, the majority of others chose to be neutral or disagree. Other statements such as not needing to use additional words such as “please”, or not considering the feelings of the interlocutor when making a direct request, also tended to receive negative responses. This reflects that although the bald on record strategy may be considered efficient, EFL learners tend to avoid it because it is considered impolite and has the potential to cause interpersonal conflict.

From the findings, the bald on-record strategy that is direct and explicit, received a less positive response from the majority of respondents in the study. Although there was one respondent who considered direct requests such as “Give me the book” effective, most of the study participants considered this strategy impolite and potentially tense in communication. The statement that there is no need

to add the word “please” or ignore the feelings of the interlocutor in direct requests was also rejected. This is in accordance with the findings of Adolph (2016) that although efficient, the use of bald on-record can damage social relationships in the context of EFL learners. Therefore, this strategy tends to be avoided because the learner’s communicative attitude prioritizes social harmony.

Positive Politeness

Positive politeness strategy seemed to be more accepted and used by the majority of respondents. Some respondents stated that they preferred a request style that showed familiarity, such as using informal greetings or using names directly to build closeness, for example “Can you help me, buddy?” or “John, could you...”. In addition, the use of humor or compliments in requests was also recognized as helping to create a friendly atmosphere. The majority of respondents also believed that building familiarity was an important part of politeness in communication. These findings indicate that positive politeness strategies are seen as an effective approach in maintaining social relationships and creating enjoyable communication among EFL learners.

From the findings, positive politeness is the strategy that is most accepted and chosen by the majority of respondents. Respondents prefer a request style that shows familiarity and closeness, such as using informal greetings and mentioning the name of the interlocutor directly, for example “Can you help me, buddy?” or “John, could you...”. It is supported by Adhari & Sesmiyanti (2022); and Nurmawati et al. (2019) revealed that the use of humor and compliments is also considered to strengthen a friendly atmosphere, which supports positive interpersonal relationships. This open and warm communicative attitude shows how EFL learners place an important value on pleasant and effective social relationships.

Negative Politeness

Negative politeness strategy also received strong support from respondents. Many of them stated that they preferred to use polite expressions such as “Would you mind...” or apologize before making a request, which shows caution and

respect for the listener. The use of passive sentences such as “It would be appreciated if...” and efforts to avoid too direct forms of requests also show learners’ preference for this strategy. These results indicate that EFL learners tend to value an approach that considers the autonomy and comfort of the interlocutor, in accordance with the principle of negative politeness according to Brown and Levinson’s theory.

The negative politeness strategy also received strong support from respondents. They preferred the use of polite expressions such as “Would you mind...” and an apology before making a request, which reflects respect for the freedom and personal space of the interlocutor (Ardianto et al., 2023; Gunas, 2024). The use of passive sentences and efforts to avoid direct requests indicate a high level of caution in communication. This finding is in accordance with the findings from Bahrin & Putri (2021); Meiratnasari et al. (2019) stated about the principle of negative politeness which emphasizes respect for the autonomy of the interlocutor and maintaining social distance so that interactions remain comfortable.

Off Record

Finally, as for the Off Record strategy, respondents showed a significant tendency towards the use of an indirect approach. Many of them admitted that they preferred to convey their wishes implicitly, such as giving subtle hints or letting the listener interpret their own intentions. For example, saying “It’s cold in here” instead of “Close the window” is considered more polite and less pressuring. This approach is considered effective in avoiding the impression of being pushy or causing social pressure. These findings indicate that EFL learners have a fairly high level of pragmatic awareness and choose off-record strategies as a way to maintain harmony in social interactions that are sensitive to context and politeness norms.

In the off-record strategy, the results of the study showed a tendency for EFL learners to use an indirect approach as a way to maintain harmonious communication. Many respondents stated that they preferred to give subtle hints or implicit statements, for example saying “It’s cold in here” instead of the direct request “Close the window”. This findings is in line with Jaafar & Ageli (2020);

and Sunra et al. (2022) that stated about this strategy considered more polite because it does not pressure or force the interlocutor. In addition, (Rejeki & Azizah, 2019; Sitinjak et al., 2023) emphasized that pragmatic attitude that prioritizes social sensitivity and cultural context indicates a high level of awareness of politeness norms, which are important in EFL social interactions.

In conclusion, the results of the study show that EFL learners generally avoid the bald on-record strategy which is directly considered impolite, while positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record are preferred because they are considered more appropriate in maintaining social relationships and politeness. Learners' reflective communicative attitudes towards these politeness strategies support the effectiveness of communication and social harmony in the EFL context (Adhari & Sesmiyanti, 2022; Khusnia, 2017). Teaching pragmatics and cultural awareness is essential so that learners are able to adjust their communication strategies to prevailing social norms, strengthening the quality of cross-cultural interactions (Gunas et al., 2023; Nurmawati et al., 2019). Therefore, teaching pragmatics and cultural awareness becomes very important in English Literature study programs, especially in the field of linguistics, so that students are able to adapt their communication strategies to prevailing social norms and improve the quality of cross-cultural interactions.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion of the study, it can be concluded that EFL learners tend to avoid the bald on-record strategy that is direct and explicit because it is considered impolite and has the potential to cause interpersonal conflict. Positive and negative politeness strategies are more favored as they help build familiarity, maintain social harmony, and respect the interlocutor's autonomy. The off-record strategy is also popular, as it allows learners to avoid social pressure and preserve communication harmony. These results demonstrate that EFL learners possess good pragmatic awareness and adapt their politeness strategies according to social context. In addition, the indirect and implicit off-record strategy is also a popular choice because it helps avoid social pressure and maintain communication

harmony. These findings indicate that EFL learners possess good pragmatic awareness and adapt their politeness strategies according to social context. This study contributes to the understanding of EFL learners' pragmatic competence and offers valuable insights for language teachers. Specifically, it highlights the importance of incorporating politeness awareness into communicative activities to enhance learners' social and intercultural communication skills. This study contributes to the understanding of EFL learners' pragmatic competence and offers valuable insights for language teachers. Specifically, it highlights the importance of incorporating politeness awareness into communicative activities to enhance learners' social and intercultural communication skills.

However, this study has limitations in the form of a limited number of samples so that the results are less representative of the wider population, as well as the use of data collection methods with a Likert scale that is less able to capture the depth and complexity of attitudes and communication strategies in detail. Therefore, it is recommended for further research to use qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews or participant observation to gain a deeper understanding of politeness strategies, on other aspects of language politeness, such as refusals, saying thank you, or apologizing.

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