

## **AN ANALYSIS OF POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN ESP ONLINE INTERACTION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Politeness strategies play a crucial role in maintaining social harmony and effective communication, particularly in language learning settings. Some studies have explored the use of politeness strategies in EFL offline classes, emphasizing their role in fostering interaction between students and instructors. However, few studies have focused on online interaction in the context of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) context. This study investigates and analyzes the types and functions of politeness strategies produced by ESP students and a lecturer in online interaction via WhatsApp group. The participants were sophomore accounting students at a private university in Banten. Their use of politeness strategies in requesting assignments, seeking confirmation, and other academic interactions was analyzed using Brown and Levinson's politeness strategy framework. The results revealed that: (1) positive politeness strategies were most frequently used in the WhatsApp interaction, and (2) these strategies contributed to fostering harmonious relationships and minimizing conflict in online communication. The findings highlight the importance of developing pragmatic awareness in online interaction, and guide future research to investigate politeness in different contexts.

*Keywords:* ESP, Online Interaction, Politeness Strategies, WhatsApp

### **A. INTRODUCTION**

Effective Learning and polite communication are essential for achieving educational goals, particularly in EFL classroom interactions. Lecturers support students in solving linguistic challenges and generating language through engagement. Jenks & Seedhouse (2015) identified the linguistic elements covered in classroom instruction, illustrating how interaction and education are intertwined. Therefore, to create effective interaction in the learning process, teachers and students should apply politeness strategies. According to Tan et al. (2016) the teachers need to apply politeness strategies. Teachers' use of politeness strategies can enhance students' learning motivation, foster positive teacher-student relationships, and support the holistic development of language skills. A lack of fluency in a lingua franca, such as English, can contribute to perceived impoliteness, especially in

interactions where it is not the speakers' first language and their understanding of it is limited (Fauzi et al., 2014).

Several studies have explored the role of politeness strategies in fostering effective communication in EFL classrooms (Eshghinejad & Moini, 2016; Mahmud, 2019; Nurmawati et al., 2019; Fitriyani & Andriyanti, 2020). These studies emphasize how politeness strategies help address potential communication breakdowns. However, with the rise of digital communication, face-to-face interactions are increasingly being replaced by online platforms. Despite this shift, limited research has investigated politeness strategies in online interactions, particularly in the ESP context. John (2011) states that nearly 70% of our time is spent communicating, whether in person or through digital media. One form of synchronous communication that enables multiple participants to engage in real-time while awaiting responses is WhatsApp. Currently, WhatsApp is the most popular instant messaging (IM) application in Indonesia. Its widespread use is driven by various features, including multimedia sharing, group chats, unlimited messaging, cross-platform compatibility, offline messaging, cost-free usage, and the absence of pins or usernames. WhatsApp group chats can serve as a platform for instruction, information sharing, and communication. This aligns with the findings of Surani & Chaerudin (2020) who explored the role of WhatsApp group chats in enhancing English language skills. Their study confirmed that WhatsApp groups are widely used in academic settings, not only for everyday communication but also for disseminating information and knowledge, much like a traditional lecturer environment. Many lecturers utilize WhatsApp group chats to engage and interact with their students, including the 2A class group for accounting students. This group was initially created to facilitate communication and online interaction among students and their lecturer, specifically for discussions related to the English for Economics course.

Online communication involves unique situations that can disrupt equilibrium in a variety of ways. Even when talking through online message or chat we still need to be polite, nevertheless in online classroom. In social interaction, to maintain politeness is to maintain harmonious and smooth social interaction, and avoid the use of speech acts that are potentially face-threatening or damaging. The principle is based on the use of politeness intimacy, closeness, and relationships, as well as the social distance between the speaker and the hearer (Senowarsito, 2013; Mulyono & Amalia, 2019). Meanwhile, relevant previous studies have mentioned that the use of politeness strategies helps make online interactions in lectures more effective in an EFL context (Sembiring et al., 2021; Amanda et al., 2021; Valdellon & Cuarte, 2024; Adel et al., 2016; Zhang, 2022). Along with the results and the use of politeness strategies from previous studies, further research in other contexts remains open for investigation, especially in the ESP context.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the types and function of the politeness strategies used by a lecturer and ESP students in the WhatsApp online interaction group. This study is significant because it examines politeness in online interaction via IM WhatsApp groups where communication barriers may negatively impact interpersonal relationships. More importantly, this study is conducted within an academic discourse, focusing on English for Economics as ESP for accounting students. The findings of this study provide a basis for comparing politeness strategies in offline and online classroom interactions.

## **B. METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative case study design, aiming to uncover and develop a specific understanding of the main phenomenon (Creswell, 2018). The research focused on interactions within a WhatsApp chat group, specifically in an ESP class at a private university in Banten. The participants of this study were 38 accounting students from the 2A ESP class who were member of a WhatsApp group, along with their lecturer for the English for Economics course. This class was selected because the students were capable of engaging in WhatsApp group interactions. The data were gathered from members' daily conversations in the ESP WhatsApp group.

The data for this study were obtained from WhatsApp text messages exchanged between students and their lecturer, collected from March 30 to June 4, 2023. The data consisted of students' WhatsApp messages to their lecturer, in which they applied politeness strategies while requesting assignments, seeking confirmation, and engaging in academic discussions. The data collection process involved several steps. First, screenshots were taken of all interactions within the WhatsApp group. Next, the chat texts were organized and reviewed to familiarize the researcher with the content. The researcher then carefully read through all the data and transcribed the chat interactions. Following transcription, codes were assigned, and certain utterances, phrases, or words related to politeness strategies were identified and categorized.

A systematic approach was employed to analyzing data, following several steps. First, the interactions from the 2A ESP WhatsApp group were examined, and relevant segments of the conversations were categorized. Next, the categorized data were analyzed using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which classifies politeness strategies into four types: bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies. Subsequently, the frequency of each politeness strategy was calculated as a percentage to illustrate the politeness strategies employed by ESP students and lecturers in the WhatsApp group. The data were then qualitatively interpreted to provide insights into the types and functions of politeness strategies used in online interactions. Finally, conclusions were drawn based on the findings and aligned with the research objectives.

## **C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **1. Types of politeness strategies**

To address the first research question regarding the types of politeness strategies used by the lecturer and ESP students in the WhatsApp group, the frequency of each strategy was calculated. The findings indicate that both ESP students and the lecturer predominantly employed positive politeness strategies in their WhatsApp interactions. According to Brown & Levinson (1987), positive politeness strategies aim to establish social approval and build rapport by fostering a sense of solidarity among speakers. These strategies reflect the desire to be accepted and appreciated by others, thereby reducing social distance in communication. In contrast, bald on-record strategies were also frequently used, particularly by students, while negative politeness and off-record strategies appeared less frequently in both groups. The distribution of politeness strategies in the ESP WhatsApp group is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Politeness Strategy Types in the ESP WhatsApp Group**

No	Politeness strategies	Percentage %	
		Students	Lecturer
1.	Bald On Record	28.71%	22.47%
2	Positive Strategies	39.60%	70.79%
3	Negative Politeness	29.70%	3.37%
4	Off-Record	1.98%	3.37%
TOTAL		<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Based on the data presented in Table 1, it was found that both the ESP students and lecturer utilized all types of politeness strategies, each with specific sub-categories, during their online interactions in the WhatsApp group. As shown in Table 1, students employed a different politeness in their interactions. Specifically, 28.71% used bald-on-record strategies, 39.60% applied positive politeness, 29.70% utilized negative politeness, and 1.98% used off-record strategies. On the other hand, the lecturer's use of politeness strategies during the online interaction showed that positive strategies accounted for the highest percentage at 70.79%, followed by bald-on-record strategies at 22.47%, negative politeness at 3.37%, and off-record strategies also at 3.37%.

The findings confirm the politeness theory proposed by Brown & Levinson (1987) that ESP students and the lecturer use four politeness strategies: bald on record, positive, negative, and off-record. Classroom interaction helps students and lecturer to involve in communication by using all politeness strategies. As indicated in Table 1, the predominance of positive politeness strategies among both students and the lecturer suggests that the majority of the students and the lecturer utilized these strategies in their interaction. The result reinforces the previous studies from Amanda et al. (2021), that 42% students positive politeness strategy in their chatting group as group identity markers.

Moreover, the most frequently used politeness strategy among students was positive politeness, accounting for 39,60% of the interaction. Positive politeness was used when students talked to each other and when students talked to the lecturer. The students did this to show how close they were to each other and to avoid misunderstandings and fights. This is supported by study result by Izadi (2013) using politeness strategies is a good way to lessen the bad effects of the given actions, which can help people get along better with each other. However, this study's findings contrast with Eshghinejad & Moini (2016) who found that most participants preferred to maintain respect, deference, and distance when communicating with professors rather than demonstrating friendliness and involvement.

## 2. Functions of Politeness Strategies

This section discusses the specific functions of each type of politeness strategy used by ESP students and the lecturer in their WhatsApp group interactions. As outlined by Brown & Levinson (1987), there are five main strategies for managing face-threatening acts (FTAs). These strategies were employed by both ESP students and the lecturer during their interactions in the WhatsApp group chat. The detailed findings related to the functions of these politeness strategies are presented in Tables 2, 3, 4, and 5. Throughout the interactions, both students and the lecturer made use of off-record strategies.

### Bald on Record Strategies

People who are comfortable with each other, such as close friends or family members, often use this type of strategy in their conversations. There are also occasions when a person must speak directly due to external circumstances, such as tight deadlines, communication limitations, or emergencies. In these cases, the speaker tends to prioritize the content of their message over the interpersonal nuances. This approach is often seen in classroom settings, where the lecturer uses bald-on-record strategies to provide students with clear hints about the intended message. This strategy requires a solid level of English proficiency from students to fully understand both the teacher's words and the context in which they are said. Tan (2012).

**Table 2.** Distribution of Bald on Record Strategies

No	Strategies	Frequency
1	Power, distance, and rank guaranteed	19
2	Emergency happens	1
3	Conventional politeness	29
	Total	49

As shown in Table 2, the interaction between ESP students and their lecturer in the WhatsApp group produced 49 bald on record utterances. Among these, 19 utterances were categorized under the power, distance, and rank guaranteed strategy, 1 utterance occurred in emergency situations, and 29 utterances represented conventional politeness. The first and the second strategy were dominated by the lecturer. The lecturer predominantly uses the bald-on-record strategy when giving commands, instructions, and making requests. This approach involves direct speech acts, where the lecturer does not attempt to soften the impact on the students' faces, thus imposing pressure on them. This aligns with Brown & Levinson's (1987) assertion that the speaker, having power, demands the listener's compliance without concern for retaliation or noncooperation. The bald-on-record strategy is expressed through direct imperative sentences, particularly in supervisory actions and instructions that are meant to capture attention during an activity.

In this study, the lecturer employed a direct, no-nonsense strategy to express directive utterances, such as giving orders, instructions, and permissions, as illustrated in excerpt 1:

Excerpt 1

*Lecturer* : Dear students topic next week is about asking and giving opinions. The discussion will be through this group. Please be active!

*Student* : okay miss. I'll do my best.

(Source: Students-Lecturer WA Interaction)

The results of the analysis on the direct strategy category indicate that the speaker's intention is directly conveyed, as seen in Excerpt 2 below:

Excerpt 2

*Lecturer* : Assalamualaikum Luv, here is the material for today!

*Student* : Wailaikum salam. Thanks a lot for information miss.

(Source: Students-Lecturer WA Interaction)

In excerpts 2, there was also an expression called "bald on-record politeness strategy," which was used by lecturer in direct utterance. There is no need for face redress when it is very important to be as efficient as possible (Brown & Levinson, 1987). It means that if something is very important, the speaker may use the most efficient way to talk. The speakers perform the face-threatening act (FTA) in the most direct, clear, and unambiguous way because they believe there are situations where individuals are forced to communicate straightforwardly due to specific constraints. In here, the lecturer as the speaker in a significant time crunch, so she needs to be efficient with her time so that she can be effective.

The conversational politeness as bald on-record strategy also seen in table 2, it was given totally by students in WhatsApp group. The conventional politeness used mostly by students involved greeting such as "good morning", moslem greeting "Assalamualaikum, Waalaikum salam", and "See you soon". They used this strategy to provide maximum efficiency against lecturer said and to respect their a lecturer because she is the most important person who has the highest position in the class. students' good manner as indicator of politeness. The study finding is in line with Senowarsito (2013) which show teachers dominated in terms of instruction, explanation, showing appreciation, encouraging, motivating, and answering questions from students. The majority of the students' responses were to the teacher's instructions, questions, and encouragement. The strategies they employed were heavily influenced by the cultural norms of their native Indonesia, where students are taught not to threaten a teacher's face out of respect for the authority figure.

### **Positive strategies**

In digital communication, maintaining social harmony is essential, particularly in educational settings where power dynamics exist between students and lecturers. The analysis indicates that speakers employ positive politeness strategies when conveying directive utterances, such as orders, requests, advice, instructions, invitations, suggestions, and guidance. These strategies are primarily used to maintain a positive face, particularly in interactions with lecturers. Since people generally aim to be polite when addressing individuals of higher social status or older age, they tend to adopt strategies that foster respect and inclusivity. One of the most common ways speakers express positive politeness is through the use of group identity markers and expressions of sympathy. These linguistic choices help convey respect, strengthen relationships, and create a warm, friendly atmosphere.

Additionally, lecturers often reinforce students' opinions, feelings, and ideas to reduce the perceived power imbalance. This approach aligns with previous studies, which suggest that such strategies enhance the effectiveness of teacher-student interactions. Furthermore, when making requests or engaging in conversations, individuals must be mindful of their tone and delivery. The perception of friendliness is often linked to specific linguistic behaviors that demonstrate politeness. As Rajagukguk et al. (2021) highlight, the best way to define politeness is through concrete examples of courteous speech and respectful communication. The following table presents the distribution of positive politeness strategies employed in the interactions:

**Table 3.** Distribution of Positive Politeness Strategies

No	Strategies	Frequency
1	Acknowledge	4
2	Focus on Hearer	1
3	Exaggerate	10
4	Use ingroup identity markers	13
5	Seek agreement	13
7	Assert common ground	4
8	Joke	2
9	Presupposition of what hearer wants	4
10	Offer or promise	1
11	Be Optimistic	14
12	Include speaker and hearer in the utterance	18
13	Give or acquire reasons	9
14	Give gift	10
	Total	103

As shown in table 3, a total of 103 instances of positive politeness strategies were identified in WhatsApp group interactions. The most frequently used strategy was including both the speaker and hearer in the utterance (18 instances), followed by expressing optimism (14 instances) and using ingroup identity markers (13 instances). This indicates that use ingroup identity markers were mostly used as politeness strategies during the interaction in WhatsApp group. Expressions such as “*Hai all,*” “*Hi Miss,*” “*Luv,*” “*Yes, dear,*” and “*Assalamualaikum, my beloved students*” were commonly used by both students and the lecturer. These forms of address helped establish harmonious relationships, reducing social distance and fostering a sense of belonging. Brown & Levinson (1987), for example, say that a speaker (WA group member) can show membership in a group in many ways, such as by using ingroup address forms, language or dialect, jargon or slang, and ellipsis. People do more than just exchange information with one another when they communicate; they also shape the relationships they have with one another. Positive politeness used to show solidarity and friendliness (Syting & Gildore, 2022). Further analysis in Excerpt 3 demonstrates how this strategy was implemented, while Excerpt 4 illustrates how students used positive politeness not only to establish their group identity but also to express emotions and strengthen interpersonal connections.

Excerpt 3

*Lecturer: How is your day Estu?*

*Student: I'm so tired miss*

*Lecturer: I think you should take staycation 😊*

*Student: I don't feel like it miss, i prefer to sleep all day, until i get angry my mom miss 😊*

(Source: Students-Lecturer WA Interaction)

In the excerpt 3, both students and lecturec use expressions of positive politeness to increase intimacy, imply common ground, or share desires with another person. Positive politeness is the second most common way to move the discussion forward. Positive politeness is usually used to show friendliness and pay attention to what the other person wants. As the psychologically close relationship, reciprocity and friendship in a group (Adel et al., 2016).

Additionally, the use of politeness strategies in online interactions has been found to support the effectiveness of online communication in learning process (Modesta et al., 2021), and create mutual benefits by constructively engaging and offering encouragement through positive strategies in teacher-student interactions (Valdellon & Cuarte, 2024).

### Negative Strategies

By utilizing distancing strategies like modal verbs, hesitation, apologies for imposition, or requesting permission to ask a question, negative politeness strategies reduce the likelihood of the hearer feeling imposed upon. The students used these strategies to separate themselves from the lecturer and their fellow students. The following table presents the distribution of negative politeness strategies observed in the WhatsApp group interactions.

**Table 4.** Distribution of Negative strategies

No	Strategies	Frequency
1	Be unconventionally indirect	9
2	Question, hedge	1
3	Be pessimistic	14
4	Apologize	9
	Total	33

As shown in Table 4, the most frequently used negative politeness strategy among students was pessimistic expressions, with a total of 14 utterances. This strategy was predominantly used during discussions in the WhatsApp group, reflecting students' hesitation, uncertainty, and attempts to soften their statements. The use of such strategies minimizes imposition and maintains politeness, making interactions more respectful and considerate. To illustrate how these strategies were employed, the following excerpt presents examples of students' utterances:

Excerpt 4

*S1: Mmmm I'm still quite nervous for that*

*S2: In my opinion, an entrepreneur is someone who carries out entrepreneurial activities. please correct me if there are mistakes 🙏*

*S3: I'm being worried for now miss 😊*

*(Source: Students-Lecturer WA Interaction)*

Based on the data, it was also found that ESP students employed negative politeness strategies to maintain politeness in WhatsApp group interactions. Negative politeness is used to show that a person is warm and formal. The use of this strategy can be seen in Excerpt 5:

Excerpt 5

*S4: sorry miss, do you mean the business we want to have?*

*S5: assalamualaikum night miss, I'm estu Surya Adi permission to ask, Miss sorry, I want to make sure again for the presentation material on the economic system, are there any sub-materials or are all groups discussing the economic system or how, miss? thank you miss 🙏*

*(Source: Students-Lecturer WA Interaction)*



The excerpt 5 demonstrates that students are extremely polite when asking questions. They want to clarify the lecturer's instructions, so they ask polite questions to ensure that they do. In general, employing negative politeness strategies such as apologizing, using indirect language, and showing deference enables students to uphold respectful communication while reducing the pressure their requests may impose (Valdellon & Cuarte, 2024).

### Off-Record Strategies

Off-the-record politeness is an indirect strategy. Brown & Levinson (1987) clarify that when a speaker performs the FTAs and allows the addressee to decide how the utterance should be interpreted, the communication is off the record. The FTA is accomplished through the use of this tactic by the speaker, who will say something in a roundabout way (implicative). While the speaker may say they want to deal with FTA. Brown & Levinson (1987) further found that their research suggests they actually want to avoid it. Therefore, the speaker conveys their message indirectly, allowing the listener to interpret it in their own way. The students effectively communicated their intentions using this strategy, which relies on the principle of defensible interpretation. The following table illustrates the distribution of off-record strategies observed in the students' interactions:

**Table 5.** Distribution of Off-record strategies

No	Strategies	Frequency
1	Give hints	3
2	Give association clues	2

Table 5 revealed that both students and the lecturer used off record strategies in the interaction. The lecturer utilized bald-off strategy in her interaction with students in such a way as to provide clues as the tactic for the utterance. These strategies foster respect and preserve positive face in teacher-student interactions, minimize direct impositions, and provide room for interpretive flexibility, encouraging a communication dynamic that is polite, respectful, and effective (Valdellon & Cuarte, 2024).

The use of indirect cues can be observed in Excerpt 6, as demonstrated in the following examples:

Excerpt 6

*S6 : I really want to own a restaurant or cake shop, because I love to make desserts and heavy meals ma'am. and I also really like looking for food that I have never tried before.*

*L: make it real...heheeh*

Excerpt 7

*S: Mmmm I'm still quite nervous about that*

*L: a lot of practice makes perfect 🍷*

(Source: Students-Lecturer WA Interaction)

The excerpts illustrate that the online interaction between students and lecturer also supported with positive emoticon. These smileys drew attention to the speaker's interests, wants, or needs by showing interest, approval, and sympathy for the comment. This may have been done to show that the speaker and the reader have something in common (Kavanagh, 2016). The freedom of expression in WhatsApp lead students and lecturer

produced joke or humor as sign of intimate interaction among group members. When interacting in groups, both in person and online, humor has always been a great conversation starter (Pratama, 2019). Using humor in a conversation is seen as a form of politeness, since joking is one of the best ways to put someone at ease (Brown & Levinson, 1987). When someone talks about something too seriously, it can sound rude.

#### D. CONCLUSION

The study has examined the types and functions of politeness strategies used by ESP students and their lecturer in WhatsApp group interactions. The findings show that both the students and lecturer produced all politeness strategies as proposed by Brown & Levinson (1987). The most frequently used strategy is positive politeness, with a significant portion of sub-categories such as including both the speaker (S) and hearer (H) in the activity, being optimistic, using in-group identity markers, and seeking agreement. This indicates that the student and lecturer aimed to create a harmonious relationship and avoid conflicts with each other, despite the online nature of their interaction. Regarding the function of politeness strategies, the study reveals that all four strategies are applicable in online interactions, particularly in instant messaging (IM) via WhatsApp groups. These findings provide insights into how politeness strategies function in online learning environments, highlighting their role in maintaining social harmony.

However, this study has certain limitations. The data were limited to a single WhatsApp group, which may not fully represent politeness strategies used in broader online learning contexts. Additionally, the analysis focused primarily on textual interactions, without considering multimodal aspects such as emojis, GIFs, or voice messages, which could also influence politeness expression. Methodologically, this study relied on qualitative interpretation without statistical validation, which could be explored in future research. To address these limitations, future studies could expand the scope by analyzing politeness strategies across multiple online platforms, such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom chat, or discussion forums, to compare how different digital communication environments influence politeness. Additionally, a larger dataset incorporating diverse student groups and instructors could provide a more comprehensive understanding of politeness strategies in online learning. Employing mixed-method approaches, including quantitative analysis, could also enhance the reliability and generalizability of the findings.

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