

POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN STUDENTS' INTERACTION DURING ACADEMIC SPEAKING CLASS

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ABSTRAK

Kesantunan merupakan aspek penting dalam komunikasi akademik, namun penggunaannya di kalangan mahasiswa EFL dalam kelas Academic Speaking masih kurang dieksplorasi. Penelitian ini mengkaji jenis dan fungsi strategi kesantunan yang digunakan oleh mahasiswa dalam interaksi kelas Academic Speaking. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui rekaman video dari tiga sesi perkuliahan dan wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan tiga mahasiswa EFL semester lima di sebuah universitas di Pekalongan. Data dianalisis menggunakan teori kesantunan Brown dan Levinson (1987) serta model analisis tematik Braun dan Clarke (2006). Temuan penelitian mengungkapkan tiga dari empat strategi kesantunan, yaitu: kesantunan positif, kesantunan negatif, dan bald on record, sedangkan strategi off record tidak ditemukan. Kesantunan positif menjadi strategi yang paling dominan, digunakan melalui ungkapan seperti “*Okay, great*” dan “*Thank you for the insightful presentation*” untuk membangun kedekatan hubungan. Kesantunan negatif muncul dalam permintaan tidak langsung seperti “*Can you please mention it?*” untuk meminimalkan tekanan, sementara bald on record digunakan untuk pernyataan langsung dan informatif yang mengutamakan kejelasan. Temuan-temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa memiliki kesadaran pragmatik dalam mengelola Face Threatening Acts (FTA) selama interaksi akademik berlangsung.

Kata kunci: strategi kesantunan, academic speaking, mahasiswa EFL, Brown dan Levinson, pragmatik

ABSTRACT

Politeness is a crucial aspect of academic communication, yet its use among EFL students in Academic Speaking classes remains underexplored. This study investigates the types and functions of politeness strategies used by students in Academic Speaking class interactions. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through video recordings of three class sessions and semi-structured interviews with three fifth-semester EFL students at a university in Pekalongan. The data were analyzed using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis model. The findings revealed three out of four politeness strategies: positive politeness, negative politeness, and bald on record, while off record was not found. Positive politeness was the

most dominant, used through expressions such as “Okay, great” and “Thank you for the insightful presentation” to build rapport. Negative politeness appeared in indirect requests such as “Can you please mention it?” to minimize imposition, while bald on record was used for direct, informative statements prioritizing clarity. These findings demonstrate that students possess pragmatic awareness in managing Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) during academic interactions. This study contributes to EFL pragmatics research and offers practical insights for educators in fostering students’ communicative competence in academic speaking contexts.

Keywords: *politeness strategies, academic speaking, EFL students, Brown and Levinson, pragmatics*

INTRODUCTION

Academic speaking skills are one of the main aspects of English language learning at the university level. This skill is not only related to fluency in speaking, but also includes the ability to express ideas, opinions, and arguments logically, coherently, and in accordance with the academic context. In various activities such as presentations, discussions, seminars, and debates, students are required to use English effectively and formally in order to demonstrate critical thinking and good academic communication skills (Tuan & Mai, 2015). Thus, mastery of academic speaking skills can be considered one of the markers of student success in learning English in higher education.

One important aspect of speaking skills is politeness. Politeness relates to the speaker’s ability to adjust their speech based on social relationships, status, and communication situations. In an academic context, politeness plays an important role because it reflects communication ethics and respect for the interlocutor, such as lecturers and classmates. According to Yule (1996), politeness functions as a social tool that helps maintain harmony in verbal interactions. Thus, applying politeness in speaking helps students maintain a positive image and improve the effectiveness of communication in academic classes.

In general, politeness strategies are ways that speakers use to save face for themselves and their conversation partners in communication. Brown and Levinson (1987) state that there are four types of politeness strategies, namely bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off record. These strategies are used

based on social distance, power, and the level of threat to face in communication. Fathi (2024) asserts that Brown and Levinson's politeness theory remains relevant in the context of modern communication, including in academic interactions that demand high formality and social sensitivity.

However, there is still a lack of research on politeness strategies, especially in the context of student interactions in academic speaking classes. Previous studies have mostly focused on teacher-student interactions or classroom discussions in general. Based on the researcher's experience in academic speaking classes, many students still find it difficult to balance fluency, academic language, and politeness when speaking in English, particularly when expressing disagreement, critical opinions, or responding to arguments. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the types and functions of politeness strategies used by students in interactions during Academic Speaking lessons.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative descriptive approach to describe and analyze the types and functions of politeness strategies used by students in academic speaking class interactions. Creswell (2014) states that qualitative research aims to explore and understand the meaning that individuals or groups give to social phenomena. Lambert and Lambert (2012) explain that qualitative descriptive design is suitable for presenting a comprehensive picture of an event using natural and easy-to-understand language.

This study involved three fifth-semester students enrolled in the Academic Speaking course at one of the universities in Pekalongan, consisting of one male and two females aged 19–22 years. The participants were selected purposively based on the following criteria: (1) active participants who usually play an active role during presentations, seminar discussions, or question and answer sessions; (2) able to express opinions, rebuttals, and arguments in English clearly; and (3) willing to be recorded during the data collection process.

Data were collected through two techniques. First, observations were conducted through video recording to document student interactions during Academic Speaking sessions. Recordings were made once in three different

Academic Speaking classes, with a duration of approximately 90 minutes for each class. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected students, each lasting about 10 minutes, to find out why they chose certain politeness strategies and what factors influenced their choices.

The validity and reliability of the findings were ensured through triangulation techniques (Denzin, 1978; Sugiyono, 2015), applied in three ways: method triangulation (observation, interview, documentation), data triangulation (comparing information from various sources), and theoretical triangulation (using multiple theoretical perspectives). The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis model in six stages: familiarization, coding, theme identification, theme review, theme definition, and report writing, guided by Brown and Levinson's (1987) four politeness strategy categories.

DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis of video recordings and interview data, three out of four politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) were identified in the students' interactions during Academic Speaking class: positive politeness, negative politeness, and bald on record. Off-record strategy was not found. In this study, each utterance is treated as a single unit of data, labeled individually as Data 1, Data 2, Data 3, and so on.

Positive Politeness

Positive politeness emerged as the most dominant strategy. Expressions identified include: *"Please repeat after me"* (Data 1), *"Okay, great"* (Data 2), *"Good morning everyone"* (Data 3), *"So exciting"* (Data 4), *"Yes, exactly engagement"* (Data 5), *"Give applause to Mr. Michael"* (Data 6), and *"Thank you for the insightful presentation"* (Data 7). All three students consistently used expressions of greeting, encouragement, appreciation, and audience engagement throughout their presentations, revealing that students approach Academic Speaking as an interpersonal performance requiring active audience management.

Negative Politeness

Negative politeness appeared as the second most frequent strategy, primarily in situations where students made requests or invited others to participate. Expressions identified include: *"Can you please mention it?"* (Data 8), *"Which of*

these do teachers often overlook?” (Data 9), *“I would like to invite Mr. Michael”* (Data 10), and *“Please, Miss Meisi Folio, come forward”* (Data 11). Each student avoided direct imperatives and instead constructed requests using modal auxiliaries, interrogative forms, and softening expressions.

Bald on Record

Bald on record strategy was identified in contexts where students prioritized clarity and efficiency. Expressions include: *“The red one shows the students need urgent help”* (Data 12), *“The yellow one shows that the students are okay but inconsistent”* (Data 13), *“The green one shows that the students are on track”* (Data 14), *“The number one is academic”* (Data 15), *“The second is behavior”* (Data 16), *“The third is engagement”* (Data 17), *“The last one is demographic”* (Data 18), *“She will deliver the material about one part of digital literacy”* (Data 19), and *“You have 30 minutes to present your material”* (Data 20). Notably, bald on record was used exclusively during content delivery and logistical management contexts.

Politeness in Speaking Class

The dominance of positive politeness in this study is consistent with Brown and Levinson’s (1987) framework, which identifies positive politeness as fundamentally oriented toward satisfying the interlocutor’s positive face the desire to be liked, respected, and included. Students’ use of expressions such as *“Okay, great”* (Data 2) and *“Thank you for the insightful presentation”* (Data 7) directly fulfills this face want. Turculet (2022) further supports this, noting that positive politeness strategies in higher education settings play a critical role in strengthening solidarity and mutual respect among students. This finding aligns with Anugrawati and Syam (2024), who found that positive politeness promotes a more collaborative atmosphere in academic settings.

Negative politeness findings strongly support Brown and Levinson’s (1987) concept of negative face, which refers to the individual’s right to autonomy and freedom from imposition. By using modal auxiliaries, interrogative structures, and open-ended questions, students constructed requests in ways that preserved the interlocutor’s freedom to respond without feeling coerced. Fathi (2024) confirms that in academic interactions, requests and questions are the most common sources of negative face threat. Notably, all three students arrived at similar indirect

strategies independently, suggesting that negative politeness is a shared pragmatic norm within the Academic Speaking classroom community rather than individual stylistic preference.

The use of bald on record in this study was not a failure of politeness awareness but a purposeful communicative choice, consistent with Brown and Levinson's (1987) account that speakers may legitimately choose direct forms when urgency, clarity, or efficiency outweigh face concerns. Arundale (2020) argues that the relationship between utterance form and face threat is highly context-dependent. What distinguishes this study from previous research is that bald on record is shown here in peer-to-peer interactions rather than exclusively in teacher-student communication, demonstrating that EFL students are active and strategic communicators who can independently identify contexts where directness serves the interaction best.

Regarding the reasons behind strategy use, interview data revealed three main motivations: (1) to create a comfortable and interactive atmosphere, (2) to avoid pressure and maintain respectful interaction, and (3) to maintain clarity and professionalism in the presentation. These motivations directly reflect Brown and Levinson's (1987) face theory. The co-occurrence of all three strategies within the same Academic Speaking context confirms that students possess a nuanced, context-sensitive politeness repertoire, reflecting pragmatic competence that extends beyond basic linguistic accuracy.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the types and functions of politeness strategies used by EFL students in Academic Speaking class interactions at a university in Pekalongan. Based on the analysis of video recordings and semi-structured interviews, three out of four politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) were identified: positive politeness, negative politeness, and bald on record. Positive politeness was the most dominant strategy, followed by negative politeness and bald on record. Off-record strategy was not found in the data.

The findings demonstrate that students possess pragmatic awareness in managing Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) during academic interactions. They

consciously select and adjust politeness strategies based on the communicative context, social relationships, and communicative goals. This study contributes to EFL pragmatics research by showing that politeness strategies in peer-to-peer academic speaking contexts are not merely reactive but are actively and strategically deployed. The findings offer practical insights for educators in designing speaking tasks that cultivate students' communicative and sociopragmatic competence. Future research may expand the scope by involving more participants, different academic settings, or comparing politeness strategy use across cultural backgrounds.

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