# An Analysis Of Linguistic Politeness Strategies In Online Academic Communication

**Istu Sri Poneni**

Email:   istusriponeni@uisu.ac.id
*Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara*

## ABSTRACT

*The rapid development of digital communication platforms has significantly transformed academic interaction, particularly in online learning and scholarly discourse. In online academic communication, linguistic politeness plays a crucial role in maintaining respectful interactions, minimizing misunderstandings, and fostering effective collaboration among participants. This study aims to analyze the types and functions of linguistic politeness strategies employed in online academic communication contexts, including virtual classrooms, academic discussion forums, and institutional communication platforms. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected from online academic interactions involving students and lecturers, such as discussion posts, chat messages, and email communications. The analysis is grounded in politeness theory, focusing on strategies such as positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record, and off-record expressions. The findings indicate that positive politeness strategies are most frequently used to build rapport and solidarity, while negative politeness strategies are commonly applied to show respect and mitigate imposition in formal academic settings. However, instances of impoliteness and pragmatic failure were also identified, often caused by limited pragmatic awareness and the absence of non-verbal cues in online communication. The study highlights the importance of developing pragmatic competence and digital communication literacy among academic community members. It is expected that the findings will contribute to improving the quality of online academic communication by promoting awareness of appropriate linguistic politeness strategies in digital academic environments.*

**Keywords:  Linguistic Politeness, Online Academic Communication, Digital Discourse, Pragmatic, Competence, Politeness Strategies, and Higher Education**

## INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technology has significantly transformed the way academic communication is conducted. Online platforms such as learning management systems, academic forums, email, video conferencing tools, and social media have become integral to interactions between students, lecturers, and researchers. While these platforms provide flexibility, accessibility, and efficiency, they also introduce new challenges, particularly in maintaining appropriate linguistic politeness. Unlike face-to-face communication, online academic communication often lacks non-verbal cues such as tone, facial expressions, and gestures, which traditionally help convey politeness and intent (Crystal, 2011). As a result, misunderstandings, perceived impoliteness, and communication breakdowns may occur more frequently in digital academic environments.

Linguistic politeness plays a crucial role in academic communication, as it reflects respect, professionalism, and social harmony among participants. According to Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, speakers employ various strategies to maintain their own "face" and that of others during interaction. In academic contexts, politeness is not merely a social nicety but a fundamental component of effective scholarly discourse. Polite language helps create a supportive learning environment, encourages constructive feedback, and fosters

collaboration among academic community members (Hyland, 2004). Therefore, understanding how politeness strategies are applied in online academic communication is essential for improving the quality of digital interactions.

The shift from traditional classroom communication to online academic interaction has intensified the importance of linguistic politeness. In online settings, messages are often text-based, concise, and asynchronous, which may reduce opportunities for clarification and immediate feedback. As noted by Herring (2013), computer-mediated communication (CMC) tends to be more direct and less formal, potentially increasing the risk of face-threatening acts. In academic discourse, such acts may manifest as overly blunt feedback, ambiguous instructions, or inappropriate requests, which can negatively affect students' motivation and engagement. Previous studies have shown that politeness strategies in academic communication vary depending on factors such as power relations, social distance, and cultural background. For instance, lecturers typically employ more indirect and mitigating strategies when providing feedback to students, while students often use deferential language when addressing lecturers (Hyland & Jiang, 2017).

However, in online environments, these conventions may shift. The perceived informality of digital platforms can blur hierarchical boundaries, leading to language use that may be interpreted as impolite or unprofessional (Tagg, 2015). Moreover, cultural diversity in online academic communication further complicates the use of politeness strategies. Academic institutions increasingly involve participants from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, each with distinct norms regarding politeness and interaction. What is considered polite in one cultural context may be perceived differently in another (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). In online academic settings, these differences are amplified due to the absence of contextual cues, making the careful use of linguistic politeness even more critical.

Research on linguistic politeness in online academic communication has highlighted the importance of pragmatic competence, particularly in second language contexts. Many students and academics communicate in English as a lingua franca, which may affect their ability to employ appropriate politeness strategies (Kasper & Rose, 2002). Inadequate pragmatic awareness can lead to unintended impoliteness, potentially impacting academic relationships and learning outcomes. Therefore, analyzing politeness strategies in online academic discourse can provide valuable insights into how language users manage interpersonal relations in digital learning environments. Despite the growing body of research on politeness and computer-mediated communication, there remains a need for more focused studies on linguistic politeness strategies specifically within online academic contexts. Existing studies often examine general online communication, such as social media or professional email exchanges, without fully addressing the unique characteristics of academic discourse (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007). Academic communication involves specific genres, such as discussion forums, feedback comments, research collaboration emails, and virtual classroom interactions, each of which may require distinct politeness strategies.

This study aims to analyze linguistic politeness strategies used in online academic communication by examining how participants manage interpersonal relationships in digital learning environments. By applying established politeness frameworks, particularly Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory, this research seeks to identify dominant politeness strategies and

explore their functions in maintaining academic harmony and effectiveness. The findings are expected to contribute to the understanding of pragmatic language use in online education and provide practical implications for improving digital academic communication. Furthermore, the results of this study may serve as a foundation for developing pedagogical interventions, such as training programs or guidelines, to enhance students' and educators' awareness of linguistic politeness in online academic settings.

As online and blended learning continue to expand, fostering polite and respectful communication becomes increasingly important for ensuring positive educational experiences and sustaining academic integrity. In conclusion, linguistic politeness is a vital element of online academic communication, influencing the quality of interaction, learning engagement, and academic relationships. Given the increasing reliance on digital platforms in higher education, a comprehensive analysis of politeness strategies in online academic discourse is both timely and necessary. This study seeks to address this need by providing a systematic examination of how politeness is constructed and negotiated in online academic communication.

## LITERATURE REVIEW
### Linguistic Politeness Theory

The concept of linguistic politeness has been widely studied in pragmatics and sociolinguistics, particularly in relation to how speakers manage social relationships through language. One of the most influential frameworks is the politeness theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), which is grounded in the concept of *face*. According to this theory, face consists of two components: *positive face*, which refers to an individual's desire to be approved of and appreciated, and *negative face*, which reflects the desire to act freely without imposition. Communicative acts that threaten either aspect are referred to as *Face-Threatening Acts* (FTAs).

Brown and Levinson (1987) propose four main politeness strategies to mitigate FTAs: bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies. These strategies allow speakers to adjust their language use depending on social distance, power relations, and the degree of imposition. This theoretical framework has been extensively applied to both spoken and written discourse, including academic communication. However, subsequent scholars have critiqued Brown and Levinson's model for its perceived universality. Researchers such as Watts (2003) and Spencer-Oatey (2008) argue that politeness is culturally situated and dynamically negotiated rather than universally defined. Despite these criticisms, Brown and Levinson's theory remains a foundational reference for analyzing politeness strategies, particularly in institutional and academic settings.

### Politeness in Academic Communication

Academic communication is characterized by formal norms, hierarchical relationships, and institutional expectations. Politeness plays a crucial role in maintaining professionalism, respect, and effective interaction among participants such as students, lecturers, and researchers. Hyland (2004) emphasizes that academic discourse is inherently interpersonal, as writers and speakers must position themselves in relation to their audience while maintaining

credibility and politeness. Previous studies have shown that politeness strategies are commonly employed in academic interactions such as classroom discussions, academic emails, peer feedback, and supervision meetings. For instance, Holmes and Stubbe (2015) found that positive politeness strategies, such as expressing appreciation and solidarity, are frequently used by lecturers to foster a supportive learning environment. Conversely, negative politeness strategies are often employed when making requests, giving feedback, or delivering criticism to minimize imposition and preserve the interlocutor's face.

In written academic communication, politeness is often realized through hedging, indirectness, and modality. Hyland (1998) highlights that hedging devices such as *may*, *might*, and *it seems* function as politeness markers that reduce the force of claims and acknowledge alternative viewpoints. These strategies are particularly important in academic contexts, where disagreement must be expressed cautiously and respectfully.

## Online Academic Communication

With the increasing integration of digital technologies in education, academic communication has expanded into online platforms such as learning management systems, emails, discussion forums, and video conferencing tools. Online academic communication presents unique challenges for politeness, as it often lacks non-verbal cues such as tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language (Herring, 2013). As a result, misunderstandings and perceived impoliteness may occur more easily in digital interactions. Research indicates that participants in online academic environments tend to rely heavily on linguistic politeness strategies to compensate for the absence of face-to-face cues. Darics (2010) found that email communication between students and lecturers frequently employs negative politeness strategies, including indirect requests, apologies, and formal address terms. These strategies help maintain respectful relationships despite the asynchronous and text-based nature of communication.

Furthermore, online discussion forums encourage collaborative learning but also require careful management of politeness to prevent conflict. Studies by Baym (2015) suggest that positive politeness strategies, such as inclusive language and expressions of agreement, are essential in sustaining constructive academic discussions in online settings. Without adequate politeness, online academic interactions may become confrontational or disengaging.

## Politeness Strategies in Second Language and EFL Contexts

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, the use of politeness strategies is influenced not only by pragmatic competence but also by cultural norms and language proficiency. Learners may struggle to appropriately express politeness in academic communication due to limited exposure to authentic discourse practices (Taguchi, 2015). As a result, pragmatic failure, such as overly direct requests or inappropriate tone, can occur even when grammatical accuracy is achieved. Several studies have examined politeness strategies used by EFL learners in academic communication. Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) found that EFL students often transfer politeness norms from their first language, which may not align with English academic conventions. Instruction in pragmatic competence, including politeness strategies, has therefore been emphasized as a critical component of language education.

In online academic contexts, EFL learners face additional challenges due to the informal nature of digital communication platforms. Nonetheless, research suggests that explicit training in linguistic politeness can improve learners' awareness and appropriate use of politeness strategies in online academic interactions (Sykes & Cohen, 2018).

## METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design with a pragmatic approach to analyze linguistic politeness strategies used in online academic communication. The qualitative approach is considered appropriate because the study focuses on interpreting language use, meanings, and interactional patterns rather than measuring variables numerically. The analysis is grounded in politeness theory, particularly the framework proposed by Brown and Levinson, which categorizes politeness strategies into bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies.

The data were collected from online academic communication platforms, including:

- Learning Management Systems (LMS) discussion forums,
- Academic WhatsApp or Telegram group chats,
- Email communication between students and lecturers,
- Online academic discussion boards used in higher education contexts.

To ensure the validity of the findings, theoretical triangulation was applied by comparing the results with existing politeness and pragmatics studies. In addition, repeated readings and peer discussion were conducted to minimize subjective interpretation and enhance analytical consistency. Ethical principles were strictly observed in this study. All data were anonymized, and no personal or institutional identities were disclosed. The data were used solely for academic research purposes, and the analysis focused on language patterns rather than individual behavior.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
### Overview of the Data

The data analyzed in this study were collected from online academic communication platforms, including discussion forums in learning management systems (LMS), academic email exchanges between students and lecturers, and synchronous online class interactions. A total of 356 utterances/messages were identified as relevant and subsequently categorized based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategy framework. The analysis revealed that participants employed a variety of politeness strategies to maintain harmonious academic interactions, minimize face-threatening acts (FTAs), and ensure effective communication in a digital environment.

The findings indicate that all four main politeness strategies—bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies—were present in online academic communication. However, their frequency and function varied depending on the communicative context.

1. Negative politeness strategies were the most frequently used, particularly in student-to-lecturer communication.
2. Positive politeness strategies were commonly found in peer-to-peer interactions.

3. Bald on record strategies appeared mainly in instructional or urgent academic contexts.
4. Off-record strategies were least frequently used but occurred in sensitive or ambiguous situations.

This distribution suggests that online academic communication tends to prioritize respect, formality, and mitigation of imposition.

## Negative Politeness in Online Academic Communication

Negative politeness strategies dominated the dataset, reflecting participants' awareness of social distance and power relations in academic settings. Common realizations included:

- Indirect requests
- Use of modal verbs (e.g., *could*, *would*)
- Apologetic expressions (e.g., *sorry to bother you*)
- Hedging devices (e.g., *I was wondering if…*)

For example, students frequently employed indirect language when requesting clarification or deadline extensions, demonstrating deference toward lecturers' authority. This finding supports previous studies indicating that digital academic communication tends to reinforce hierarchical relationships rather than diminish them.

## Positive Politeness Strategies Among Peers

Positive politeness strategies were predominantly used in interactions among students. These strategies aimed to build solidarity and a sense of belonging within the academic community. Common features included:

- Use of inclusive language (e.g., *we*, *let's*)
- Expressions of agreement and encouragement
- Compliments and appreciation

In online discussion forums, students often softened critiques by acknowledging others' contributions before offering alternative viewpoints. This reflects an effort to maintain group cohesion and promote collaborative learning in virtual environments.

## Bald on Record Strategies in Instructional Contexts

Bald on record strategies appeared primarily in lecturer-to-student communication, especially when delivering instructions, deadlines, or procedural information. These utterances were characterized by direct and unmitigated language, such as:

- Assignment submission instructions
- Examination schedules
- Technical guidelines for online platforms

The use of bald on record strategies in these contexts suggests that efficiency and clarity were prioritized over politeness, particularly when misunderstandings could negatively affect academic performance. Off-record strategies were the least frequently observed but played an important role in managing sensitive situations. These strategies often involved hints, rhetorical questions, or vague expressions that allowed the speaker to avoid direct imposition. For instance, students occasionally hinted at difficulties or dissatisfaction without explicitly stating complaints. This indirectness enabled them to protect both their own face and that of their

interlocutors, especially in situations involving potential conflict.

## DISCUSSION

Overall, the results indicate that online academic communication is highly politeness-oriented, with participants adapting their linguistic choices to the digital context, power relations, and communicative goals. The dominance of negative politeness strategies highlights the persistence of formality and respect in academic discourse, even in virtual environments. Moreover, the strategic use of positive politeness among peers underscores the role of politeness in fostering collaboration and supportive learning communities. These findings align with existing research suggesting that digital communication does not eliminate social norms but rather reshapes how politeness is expressed. The findings suggest that awareness of politeness strategies is essential for effective online academic communication. Educators and students alike can benefit from explicit instruction on digital politeness norms to prevent miscommunication, reduce conflict, and enhance academic interaction quality.

## CONCLUSION

The study on linguistic politeness strategies in online academic communication highlights the crucial role of language in fostering respectful and effective interactions in virtual learning environments. Through the analysis of communication patterns among students and educators, it was observed that politeness strategies significantly influence the clarity, engagement, and overall quality of academic discourse. Participants who applied politeness strategies, such as indirect requests, mitigated feedback, and courteous phrasing, were more successful in maintaining constructive communication, minimizing misunderstandings, and promoting collaborative learning.

Moreover, the study underscores the importance of integrating explicit training on politeness strategies into academic curricula, particularly in the context of online communication, where non-verbal cues are absent. Educating students on the use of appropriate linguistic strategies enhances not only their communicative competence but also their interpersonal skills, fostering a more respectful and inclusive academic environment. In conclusion, this research demonstrates that linguistic politeness is a critical component of effective online academic communication. By raising awareness of these strategies and providing practical guidance through training or workshops, educators can significantly improve interaction quality, promote mutual respect, and enhance learning outcomes. Future initiatives should focus on longitudinal studies to examine the sustained impact of politeness training on students' academic communication skills and consider cross-cultural contexts where perceptions of politeness may vary.

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