

Influence of Politeness Strategies in Classroom Discourse in Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study explores the influence of politeness strategies on classroom discussions in Delta State University, Abraka. It examines how various politeness techniques employed by students and lecturers shape communication dynamics, enhance participation, and foster a conducive learning environment. The research employs a mixed-method approach, including qualitative observations of classroom interactions and quantitative surveys administered to both students and lecturers. The paper also identifies challenges posed by the misuse or lack of politeness and suggests ways to improve classroom interactions through the effective use of appropriate strategies. Recommendations for integrating politeness training into academic settings are proposed for improved discourse and learning outcomes.

Keywords: Politeness strategy, classroom, discourse.

Introduction

Language is a means of communication among humans. Effective communication is a prerequisite for human coexistence. To achieve effective communication especially in classroom discourse, which includes communication between teachers and students and among students in a classroom, one must consider the politeness approach because it appears to be the key idea and a necessary part of interpersonal communication. Helmi (2022) sees politeness as a behaviour that occurs in society to make people respect each other and reduce the possibility communication gaps and conflicts among members of society. This implies that politeness is a courteous social practice or etiquette within a society. It entails the speaker's intention not to offend the listener during the interaction. Politeness is a system of interpersonal relations aimed to ease engagement by reducing the conflict and confrontation inherent in all human interactions. In other words, politeness is a conflict-averting strategy. Its primary function is to preserve the social status quo while avoiding devaluing others (Nugrahanto and Hartono, 2019).

Politeness strategies vary from language to language and from culture to culture. This means that what a particular society considers polite may not be polite to other groups of people of different races, cultures, and genders since what they do or act when they communicate is determined by their social groups. Thus, various factors significantly impact social interaction, like social distance and closeness, gender, age, power, social values, and the degree of politeness imposed on interaction. Onyemuru and Okata (2020) note that politeness is influenced by cultural background, social background, historical, and geographical elements. Thus, it is important to pay attention to politeness since people live in a country that consists of different ethnic groups that have their own cultures and norms regarding how they should interact with one another. Furthermore, the awareness of differences in social power or distance is to be encouraged when communicating with other people. In the school setting, especially among undergraduate students from diverse cultural backgrounds who tend to get easily influenced by their environment, encouraging students on the importance of using politeness strategy in communication will develop their awareness not only in communicative competence but also cultural awareness, and build their character values. Effective politeness strategies are also needed to build a good relationship in classroom interaction between instructors (lecturers) and learners.

Politeness Strategies

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), there are four strategies of politeness namely; bald-on-record strategy, positive politeness strategy, negative politeness strategy, and off-record strategy. Through these strategies, the speaker can choose the appropriate strategy which can be used when he/she wants to prevent threatening acts to the hearer's face or at least minimize or soften it.

Bald-on-Record Politeness Strategy

This is used to convey information or message directly to the hearer (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Faud, 2022, p. 5). Moreover, this strategy is used to avoid misunderstanding and misinterpretation between interlocutors since the speaker speaks effectively and directly. Thus, the utterances have to be spoken directly, vividly, unambiguously, and succinctly. Brown and Levinson (1987) as cited in Umayah et al. (2018, p. 21) declare that direct imperative or direct command is one form of bald-on-record strategy. They further explain two cases where the speaker uses this strategy. The first case is the non-minimisation of the face threat through four conditions. First, when the speaker is in an urgent situation. Second, when the speaker has more power than the listener, third is when the speaker desires to show sympathy; and last, when the speaker does not want to maintain the face. In addition, they state that the second case occurs when this strategy is oriented to face. It occurs in three situations: welcoming or inviting, farewells, and offers.

Positive Politeness Strategy

The second strategy is positive politeness. It is addressed to enhance the hearers' positive face. Brown and Levinson (1987) as cited in Kamlasi (2017) elaborate that the positive politeness strategy can be expressed by satisfying the hearers' face to make them feel that they are appreciated by others. Furthermore, Brown and Levinson (1987) propose three broad strategies of positive politeness including; claiming common ground, convey that the speaker and the hearer are cooperators, and fulfil the hearer's wants for some X. In claiming common ground, they state that both the speaker and the hearer share the same specific wants, goals, or values. Thus, the speaker may perform the claim by stating that he/she also feels interested in the hearer's wants. The second main strategy of positive politeness is conveying that the speaker and the hearer are co-operators. It implies that they are involved in the same interest, so they share the same goals. As a result, this strategy can improve the hearer's positive face. The last strategy on positive politeness is complying with the hearer's wants for some X. Satisfying the hearer's positive face is the form of this

strategy. It can be performed by fulfilling the hearer's wants directly such as showing encouragement or giving items (Kamlasi, 2017). According to Qiongyan and Simin (2021), positive politeness strategy emphasizes the speaker's and the hearer's sense of intimacy and belonging. By catering to the listener's interest and expressing sympathy in a friendly manner, the speaker hopes to boost the hearer's positive face. In other words, when the speaker expresses desires that are equally desirable to others, such as good health, self-esteem, dignity, and honor, a positive face emerges; nevertheless, it is undermined when the individual is criticized or insulted. According to Purnomo (2019), disapproval or rejection, complaint, disagreement, contradiction, unleashed negative emotions, irreverence, bad news, noncooperation, interruption, and inattention are threats to a positive face.

Negative Politeness Strategy

Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 129) define negative politeness strategy as 'regressive action' which is oriented to hearer's negative face. This strategy aims to reduce the interference with the hearer's freedom of action. The speaker usually uses this strategy when he or she has social distant or feels awkward towards the hearer. The speaker can perform this strategy by being indirect, using hedges, conveying pessimism in the utterance to express doubt, reducing the imposition, or giving respect to the hearer, (Brown and Levinson, 1987). In other words, the negative politeness strategy addresses the speaker to interact with the hearer in a non-imposing way through hedging, being indirect, or apologizing. It highlights the hearer's right to freedom of action, which can be a defensive technique. Brown and Levinson (1987) theory assumes that most speech actions, such as requests, offers, disputes, and compliments, intrinsically threaten either the hearer's or the speaker's face wants and that politeness is involved in resolving such face-threatening acts (FTA).

Off-Record Strategy

Off-record strategy enables the speaker to perform FTA indirectly. Thus, the speaker's utterance consists of more than one possible interpretation. Since there are many interpretations that can be drawn from the speaker's utterances, it is up to the hearer to decide how to interpret it.

Brown and Levinson (1987), as cited by Sadeghohgli and Niroomand (2016), posit that the least threatening linguistic strategy is performing the FTA off-record. The off-record strategy takes some of the pressure off of the speaker. Its utterances indirectly use language whose precise meaning has to be interpreted. The FTA performs off-record, typically by deploying an indirect illocutionary act that has more than one interpretation. Thus, it allows for plausible deniability on the speaker if the intended recipient takes offence at the face threat inherent in the utterance (Bousfield, 2008). It allows the speaker to do FTA indirectly.

Statement of the Problem

The issue of students' lack of politeness in their interaction with others has become a major problem in Nigerian tertiary institutions. Many undergraduate students these days in Nigeria are rude in the way they talk and show lack of respect to instructors and school authorities. Disrespectful behaviour among students which sometimes consist of disrespectful comments or acts that disturb the learning environment is common in Nigerian schools today. In classrooms, uncivilized behaviour is becoming more widespread. This type of behaviour is frustrating for the instructor and can also be detrimental to other students in the class. In other words, many undergraduate students, though they are in the university, cannot still conduct polite conversations and act politely in class. This could be as a result of ignorance of politeness strategies. Many researchers and scholars (Lestari and Ketut, 2018; Nugrahanto and Hartono, 2019; Onyemuru and Okata, 2020; Helmi, 2022) have investigated this topic focusing on classroom interaction by the teacher, others examine the manner of courtesy employed by male and female educators, and some analyze the implications of using politeness strategies in teaching and learning. However, it was observed that the previous studies had some limitations. Specifically, none of the previous studies focused on undergraduate students in Delta State, whereas this present study investigates politeness strategies among undergraduate students from Delta State University, Abraka using an observational technique.

Research Questions

The study specifically attempted to answer the following questions:

- i. Which politeness strategy is predominantly used in lecturer-student and student-student interaction in classroom discourse?
- ii. What is the influence of politeness strategy on lecturer-students and student-student interaction in the classroom?

Methodology

This study is anchored on the theoretical framework of politeness proposed by Penelope Brown and Stephen .C. Levinson. The theory posits that politeness utterances are based on contextually expected concerns for face, which they call politeness weightiness. It centers on the notion of politeness, construed as efforts on redressing the affronts to a person's self-esteem is effective in claiming positive social values in social interactions. Such self-esteem is referred to as the sociological concept of face (as in "save face" or "lose face") to discuss politeness as a response to mitigate or avoid face-threatening acts such as requests or insults. Notable components in the framework of the theory include positive and negative faces, face threatening act (FTA), strategies for doing FTAs and factors influencing the choices of strategies. There are three basic assumptions in Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory that are universally applicable regardless of culture, they are;(1) everyone has face; (2) any speech acts can threaten face; and (3) speakers attempt to minimise the threat by employing various linguistic strategies. The rationale for these assumptions is that speakers rationally select a strategy to maintain their face, especially in a classroom discourse. In other words, rationality and face play a key role in determining a speech strategy in politeness. Nugrahanto and Hartono (2019, p. 729) argue that although the three factors included in the model provide a simple and concise theoretical framework and may be universally applicable, the effects of each factor are likely to vary across cultures in terms of the social perception and verbal expressions of politeness. Despite arguments by other scholars against this theory, it has become influential in politeness studies in different cultures, hence, it is adopted for this study.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Observed politeness strategies employed in teacher-student and student-student interaction in the classroom

Politeness strategies	Description	Observations (illustrations)
Positive politeness	Emphasising common interest.	Using inclusive pronouns like “we” or “us” in discussions.
	Offering compliments and praise.	“you did a fantastic job on your presentation”
	Expressing interest and enthusiasm.	“I am really excited to hear your thoughts on this topic”
	Showing empathy and understanding.	“I understand that this assignment has been challenge for you”
	Using polite gestures and non-verbal cues.	Smiling and nodding while listening to someone’s ideas.
	Using polite language and manners in interactions.	Saying “please” and “thank you” regularly in conversations
Negative politeness	Using indirect language	“I hope it’s not too much trouble, but could you possibly lend me your notes”
	Apologising for interruptions	“I’m sorry to interrupt, but I have a quick question.”
	Avoiding direct commands	“If you have a moment, could you please review this document?”
	Using softening language	“I was wondering if perhaps we could reschedule the meeting.”
	Giving options or alternatives	Would it be possible to meet later today or tomorrow?”
	Using polite closings	“Thank you for considering my request”
Bald-on-record politeness	Asking direct questions	“Can you explain this concept again?”
	Making clear request	“Please provide feedback on my essay by tomorrow.”
	Giving direct feedback	“I think there are errors in this report.”
	Expressing disagreement	“I disagree with your interpretation of the text.”

Off-record politeness	Making request indirectly.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I was wondering if you could possibly extend the deadline for the assessment” • “would it be too much trouble for you to provide additional resources for this topic”
	Giving suggestions politely.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Maybe we could consider revising this topic in more detail.” • “Perhaps it would be helpful to review the key points again.”
	Expressing uncertainty and seeking permission.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I am not sure if I’m understanding this correctly, but could I ask a question?” • “I hope it is okay to share my thoughts on this matter.”
	Apologising before disagreeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I’m sorry, but I have a slightly different perspective on this issue”
	Offering help indirectly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Let me know if you need any support with your presentation preparation.”

Research Question 1

Table 2: The predominantly used politeness strategies in classroom discourse.

S/N	Observed predominantly used politeness strategy	Description
1	Using “please” and “thank you”	Students use polite language when making requests or expressing gratitude.
2	Showing interest and respect	Students demonstrate interest in classmates’ ideas and show respect during discussions.
3	Asking for permission or clarification	Students seek permission before speaking or ask for clarification politely.
4	Using inclusive language	Students use language that includes everyone in their conversation or discussion.
5	Offering compliments or encouragement.	Students provide feedback or encouragements to peers and instructors.
6	Apologising for interruptions	Students apologise if they interrupt others or need to interject during discussions.
7	Using polite gestures and body language	Students use non-verbal cues such as nodding and smiling to show politeness.
8	Acknowledging others’ contributions.	Students recognise and acknowledge the contributions of their classmates.

Research Question 2:

Table 3: The influence of politeness strategies on lecturer-student and student-student interaction in the classroom.

Observed politeness strategies	Observed influence on lecturer-student interaction	Observed influence on student-student interaction
Using “please” and “thank you”	Enhances mutual respect and positive communication between lecturer and students.	Promotes cooperation and friendliness among peers during discussions.
Showing interest and respect.	Demonstrates attentiveness and encourages active participation from students.	Builds rapport and encourages a supportive learning environment among peers.
Asking for permission or clarification.	Encourages open communication and clarifies doubts effectively.	Facilitates clear and respectful communication between students in group activities.
Using inclusive language	Creates an inclusive environment where all students feel valued and involved.	Fosters inclusivity and promotes collaboration among students from diverse backgrounds.
Offering compliments or encouragement	Boosts students’ confidence and motivation to engage with the lecturer.	Builds camaraderie and positive relationships among classmates.
Apologising for interruptions	Shows consideration and politeness, improving overall classroom etiquette.	Demonstrates respect for peers’ contributions and encourages turn-taking.
Using polite gestures and body language	Contributes to positive non-verbal communication and classroom dynamics.	Reinforces positive interactions and attentive listening among peers.
Acknowledging others’ contributions.	Highlights students’ efforts and encourages active participation in discussions.	Reinforces a culture of appreciation and mutual support among classmates.

Discussion of Findings

Table 1 shows the observed politeness strategies employed in teaching and learning processes. It was discovered that the majority of the students and lecturers use inclusive pronouns such as “we” and “us” in their interactions in the classroom. Again, the result shows that the use of polite language like saying “please” and “thank you” was observed to be frequently used among students and lecturers alike. Furthermore, it was also revealed that majority of the participants observed, offer compliments and praise, express interest and enthusiasm, show empathy and understanding, and often use polite gestures and non-verbal cues such as smiling and nodding in their interaction during classroom discourse. Therefore, the foregoing shows the use of positive politeness among students and lecturers in teaching and learning processes.

Furthermore, the use of indirect language, and apologising for interruptions was found to be common among students in their interaction. For example, while asking questions, the students often say “I’m sorry to interrupt, but I have a quick question.” Also, it was found that majority of the students avoid the use of direct commands, for instance, to make a request in the classroom, one of the students put it this way “if you have a moment, could you please review my document?” In another instance, asking a lecturer to reschedule their lecture hour to a more convenient time, a student say “I was wondering if perhaps you could reschedule the meeting time.” Moreover, it was discovered that the majority of the participants give options or alternatives in their interactions in the classroom. For example, it was observed that the participants often say “would it be possible to meet later today or tomorrow.” Again, the use of polite closings, such as “thank you for considering my request” was commonly used by the participants. Thus, the above results show the use of Negative Politeness among the participants in classroom discourse.

Moreover, it was also observed that some of the participants sometimes ask direct questions, like “can you explain this concept again?” Similarly, some of the lecturers make clear request from their students. For instance, one of the lecturer told his students “please submit my assignment on Monday in our next class.” Some lecturers were also observed giving direct feedback to students, for example “I think there are errors in your report.” Again, some were

found expressing disagreement. For instance, a lecturer told a student that “I disagree with your interpretation of the text.” Therefore, the above shows the use of Bald-on-record Politeness in the classroom discourse.

Lastly, it was found that some of the participants (students) make request indirectly, for example a 400 level student says “I was wondering if you could possibly extend the deadline for the assessment.” Here, the student was indirectly asking for extension of the assessment deadline. In addition, majority of the participants were observed giving suggestions politely, for example “perhaps it would be helpful to review the key points again”; expressing uncertainty and seeking permission, for instance “I hope it is okay to share my thoughts on this matter?” Again, it was found that some of the participants apologise before disagreeing. For example, a 300 level student was found saying to another student that “I’m sorry, but I have a slightly different perspective on this issue.” Furthermore, some lecturers were also observed offering help to students indirectly. For example, a lecturer was telling a 200 level student that “let me know if you need any support with your presentation preparation.” The above, therefore, shows the use of off-record politeness strategy.

Therefore, the result shows that the various politeness strategies used by both students and lecturers in classroom discourse include; positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record politeness, and off-record politeness strategy.

Table 2 shows the politeness strategies observed to be predominantly used in classroom discourse. The result from the observation shows that positive politeness and negative politeness were the politeness strategies often used by students and lecturers in classroom discourse. In particular, it was observed that the majority of the students use polite language when making requests or expressing gratitude by using “please” and “thank you.” It was also found that students seek permission before speaking or ask for clarification politely. Again, it was discovered that students demonstrate interest in classmate’s ideas, show respect during discussions, and often use inclusive language in their conversation. Furthermore, offering compliments or encouragement was found predominant among the participants as they oftentimes provide feedback or encouragements to peers and instructors.

Similarly, students were also found to avoid direct commands in their discussion, use indirect languages, give options or alternative when making requests or suggestions, use softening language, and use polite closings. Additionally, it was observed that students most times use non-verbal cues such as nodding and smiling to show politeness. They also recognise and acknowledge the contributions of others, and apologise when they interrupt others or need interjection during discussions. Generally, these politeness strategies contribute to creating a respectful and collaborative classroom environment where students communicate effectively and engage constructively in academic discussions. While these strategies are commonly observed, individual communication styles and cultural backgrounds can also influence the specific politeness strategies used by undergraduate students in classroom discourse shows the influence of politeness strategies on lecturer-students and students-students interaction in the classroom. From the table, it was seen that while the use of “please” and “thank you” enhance mutual respect and positive communication between lecturer and students, it also promotes cooperation and friendliness among peers during classroom discourse. Again, it was observed that showing interest and respect in the classroom brings about attentiveness and encourages active participation from students. This also helps in building rapport, promote student-student interaction, and encourages a supportive learning environment among peers as seen from the observation. Furthermore, it was found that asking for permission or clarification encourages open communication between lecturers and students, whereas, it facilitates clear respectful communication between students in group activities. Similarly, it was revealed from the observation that the use of inclusive language such as “we” and “us” creates an inclusive environment where all students feel valued and involved. This was also found to foster inclusivity and promotes collaboration among students from diverse backgrounds.

Moreover, offering compliments or encouragement was found to boost students’ confidence and motivation to engage with lecturers. This also builds camaraderie and positive relationships among classmates. Also, it was observed, especially in 100 level and 200 level classes that apologising for interruptions show consideration and politeness, and it improves overall classroom etiquette. This also demonstrates respect for peers’ contributions and encourages turn-taking. Again, the study found that the use of polite gestures and body language contributes to positive non-verbal communication and classroom dynamics. It also reinforces positive interactions and attentive listening among peers. Additionally, it was observed that acknowledging others’ contributions highlights students’ efforts and encourages

active participation in classroom discussions. It was also seen that it reinforces a culture of appreciation and mutual support among peers during classroom discourse. Thus, these politeness strategies play a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of interactions within the classroom. They contribute to a respectful and supportive learning environment, fostering effective communication, engagement, and collaboration among both lecturers and students, as well as among peers. Implementing these strategies promotes mutual respect, builds relationships, and enhances the overall quality of academic interactions in the classroom setting.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the results and findings of this study show that positive and negative politeness strategies emerge as prevalent mechanisms in shaping classroom discourse. While positive politeness fosters a sense of inclusion, friendliness, and cooperation among students and between lecturers and students, negative politeness helps maintain social distance and respect boundaries.

This study also demonstrated that the impact of lecturers' politeness utterances on students' compliance in the classroom cannot be overstated. Politeness strategies employed by lecturers significantly influence students' behaviour, attitudes, and engagement levels. Positive politeness utterances, such as expressions of gratitude and encouragement, motivate students to comply with instructions and actively participate in academic activities. On the other hand, negative politeness strategies, such as indirect requests and apologies, help maintain classroom order and decorum, contributing to students' compliance with established norms and rules. By creating a respectful and supportive classroom environment, these strategies enhance student motivation, satisfaction, and academic performance. Effective communication facilitated by politeness strategies promotes meaningful interactions, fosters critical thinking, and encourages collaborative learning among students. Additionally, politeness strategies contribute to a positive teacher-student relationship, leading to increased student engagement and retention.

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