

# EFL Undergraduate Students' Politeness Strategy in Online Classroom Interaction

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**Abstract:** In an online classroom, the students rely on the textual message to construct and interpret meaning. They should select their sentences carefully to avoid misunderstanding by delivering them politely. This study aims to investigate the type of politeness strategies used by undergraduate students in online interaction in WhatsApp Groups. Using descriptive qualitative, with a case study design, this study used Documentation as the instrument. The data was collected from the screenshots of the interaction in the Class WhatsApp Group. The result showed that the undergraduate students used four types of politeness strategies with positive politeness shown to reflect their good relationship with classmates. The sub-category of politeness was found dominantly in giving gifts. The students used it to compliment and thank their classmates. It is a form of appreciation and acknowledgment to other students. This study was limited by the narrow focus of politeness strategy while it is possible to investigate further the different situations of the classroom and the platform.

**Keywords:** Politeness Strategy, Online Interaction, WhatsApp Groups, Online Learning, Learning Platform

## Introduction

In classroom interaction, it is needed for students and teachers to have effective communication in the teaching and learning process whether it is in offline or online learning (Wahyuni, 2018). Dagarin (2004) asserted that classroom interaction encourages effective communication. Effective communication is shown from the interaction which occurs in the classroom activities when they transfer their ideas in communication. When teaching and learning activities in the classroom run effectively, there will be a harmonious condition that will make the process of enquiring new knowledge run well. However, effective communication in classroom interaction does not only should occur in the real classroom setting but in the online written context as well.

Unfortunately, sometimes this communication does not run well. For example, in online written classroom interaction, students tend to write something freely to their friends and do not really pay attention to their word choices and other response. They assume that their partners will have no problem and would not feel offended, which can be led to an uncomfortable atmosphere or even conflict. Meanwhile, in other cases, students often make fun of their friends and write something impolite as a joke during the interaction. They seem to have little awareness when they communicate with their peers. Therefore, the politeness strategy is needed to build a good relationship in online written interaction. Politeness strategies are essential due to the effective interaction provided among students in online learning. Fitriani and Hardjanto (2023) elaborated that politeness strategy is an interpersonal relationship to promote human interaction by eliminating outcoming problems or confrontations which could be happening in people's communication. Furthermore, applying the politeness strategy is also useful to achieve effective communication.

Politeness strategy in the online classroom had been discussed in some facets. Sembiring, Girsang, and Sianturi (2021) discussed politeness strategy based on the platform used in online learning. In other views, Sembiring, Sianturi, Simanjutak, and Tarigan (2021) discussed politeness strategy based on the subject of communication, in this case, the educator and the students. Fitriani and Hardjanto (2023) discussed a politeness strategy based on the cultural context of multicultural students from different countries. All of those perspectives lead to the implication that a politeness strategy is needed to help the students to get engaged in the real world, understand someone's culture for the interaction, and ensure the effectiveness of the online learning process.

Some research has been conducted related to politeness strategy. First, Mahmud (2018) reported that students consider politeness essential in classroom interaction. One of the ways to show politeness is by avoiding disruptive behaviors. In her further research, Mahmud

(2019) added that students used many kinds of expressions to show their politeness, and these forms of expression can be influenced by their cultural and religious aspects. The third study was from Sülü (2015), who reported that politeness in the classroom makes students have positive feelings toward the lesson, encourages mutual understanding and harmonious relationships, and motivated them during the class. And the last was from Adel et al. (2016), which exposed that Iranian learners frequently used positive strategies in a class blog to indicate their close relationship, reciprocity, and friendship.

Although those previous researches investigate politeness strategies on students' perspectives and utterances in the real classroom setting and written posts in a class blog. A little study exploring how students enact politeness strategy in EFL online classroom interaction via WhatsApp groups. There must be differences between real classroom interactions and online written interaction. Because in online written interaction, students cannot rely on intonation, gesture, or facial expression to help them express their ideas. They only rely on textual messages to construct and interpret the meaning. Therefore, this current study focused on investigating undergraduate students' politeness strategies in EFL online classroom interaction at one of the private universities in West Java.

## Research Method

To investigate the politeness strategies used by undergraduate students, the researchers used the descriptive qualitative method with a case study design (Cresswell, 2014) to describe the factual data of the phenomenon of online interaction in WhatsApp Groups.

## Research Instrument

The instrument that was used in this study is documentation. Creswell (2008) claimed that documents represent a good source of word data for qualitative research. So, documentation is an instrument that can take data from written texts or even pictures.

## Research Participant

The participants for this study were the students from the eighth semester of the English Education Department, Wiralodra University who took the Discourse Study subject. These participants were sixteen students that consist of a male and fifteen females from the age of twenty to twenty-five years old. The reason for choosing the participants was because they fill the requirement of this study and conduct learning activities through WhatsApp Group.

## Data Collection Method

Thus, to obtain the data in this study, the researchers used screenshots of the undergraduate students' interaction from one meeting in the Discourse Study subject in the WhatsApp group. The screenshots were then printed out and classified into Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in several stages. Miles and Huberman in Afrizal (2015), data analysis in qualitative research was done by categorizing the data or the process of finding patterns or themes and searching for the relationship between the categories that have been found in the data. The first step is reducing the data by focusing on the significant things. The second is displaying the data narratively. The final step is conclusion and verification. It is done by interpreting the data and verifying it with the relevant theories.

## Results

There are 30 data of the undergraduate students' interaction that contain politeness strategies from one meeting. There are four types of politeness strategies found that use by undergraduate students in EFL online classroom interaction. Those were bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record. The detailed analysis will explain below.

**Table 1 Politeness Strategies Used by The Undergraduate Students**

<b>Politeness Strategies</b>	<b>Sub-Strategy</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Bald on Record	Task-Oriented/Paradigmatic Form of Instruction	Whilst Activity	2
	Welcoming	Pre-Activity	1
	Farewells	Post-Activity	1
Positive Politeness	Use In-group Identity Markers	Whilst-Activity	1
	Seek Agreement	Whilst-Activity	7
	Seek Agreement	Whilst Activity	1
	Offer, Promise	Whilst Activity	7
	Be Optimistic	Whilst Activity	1
	Include Both Participant	Whilst Activity	1

	Give (or Ask For) Reason	Whilst Activity	1
	Giving Gifts	Whilst Activity	1
		Post-Activity	6
Negative Politeness	Be Conventionally Indirect	Whilst Activity	2
	Apologize	Post-Activity	1
Off-Record	Presuppose	Whilst Activity	1
	Be Ironic	Whilst Activity	1
	Be Vague	Whilst Activity	1
	Total		30

## Bald on Record

### Pre-activity

#### Welcoming

##### Extract 1

Presenter 1: *Assalamu'alaikum, Good afternoon* class. *How are you? I hope everyone is in good condition. Aamiin.*

Audience 12: *Walaikum sallam wr wb. Good afternoon is, I'm fine thank you. Amiin*

From the extract above, it was shown that the undergraduate student who became the presenter of the presentation used two kinds of greeting at the same time when she wanted to start the presentation. These two kinds of expressions were commonly used by undergraduate students when they wanted to greet others or to open the learning activity. "Assalamu'alaikum" is an Islamic greeting that is appeared usually in the Muslim community. Since all of the undergraduate students are Muslim, they often used this kind of expression to greet each other. Meanwhile, "Good afternoon" as an English greeting was also used by the undergraduate student since they were English education students and it was necessary for them to greet each other by using English during a learning activity. These two kinds of greetings were used in order to make the presentation more formal.

## Whilst Activity

### Task Oriented/Paradigmatic Form of Instruction

Extract 2

Presenter 1: **Please check your book or the slide of PPT for the example**

These instructions were used when the undergraduate students asked the other students to follow their commands during the learning activity. Meanwhile, the words please above are used to soften the command that is given by the presenter.

## Post Activity

### Farewell

Extract 3

Presenter 2: And the last I say **wassalamualaikum**.

It can be seen in above that the expression of farewells was in the form of an Islamic greeting using the word “wassalamualaikum”. This kind of greeting was mostly used when the undergraduate students wanted to close their presentation and make the atmosphere of the activity more formal.

## Positive Politeness Strategy

## Whilst Activity

### Use in-Group Identity Markers

Extract 4

Presenter 1: Okay so **class**, today is the turn for the 5th group to perform.

On this occasion, the undergraduate student that became a presenter was used the address term “class” to referring to the audiences. This address term was used to show that the participants if this conversation were in a same group and also to show their friendliness.

## Seek an Agreement

Extract 5

Audience 11: Well, **I think** we need to know about it

Audience 12: **I think** soo ja

Extract 6

Audience 8: Is it an example?

Presenter 1: **Of course**, as we can see in our book and PPT

Based on these extracts, it can be seen that the undergraduate students were using many ways in expressing their agreements with the other students. Those expressions demonstrated that they were in the same notion and opinions with the others

#### Offer, Promise

Extract 7

Presenter 1: **Should we discuss the example?**

Audience 3: Sure

Audience 6: Yapp

This expression showed that the presenter giving offer to the other students by asking the question above. She did this in order to make the others more understand towards the material that was delivered by her.

#### Be Optimistic

Extract 8

Presenter 1: It is **hopefully** that we can understand what the genre is, class

In this expression, it was showed that the presenter showed her optimism to the other students by expressing her hope within her statement.

#### Include Both Participants

Extract 9

Presenter 1: **Let's** imagine that **we** visit Australia, and **we** are in Alishan International Guest House, specifically in their kitchen.

In this statement, the presenter used the term “we” (while referring to the presenter and audiences) to show that both of them were contributed in the conversation. Besides, it also can demonstrate the solidarity between them. As it has been mention above, “let’s” also can be a mark of this sub-strategy which also often be used by undergraduate students during their online interaction.

#### Give (or Ask for) Reason

Extract 10

Presenter 1: **What make you confuse?**

Audience 1: **The terms of the three parts is.** But, its okay. Lets move to another one

From the extract above, it can be seen that the presenter was asking to the audience about the reason of why she is still confused towards the materials. Then, the audience told in which part of the material she have not understood.

### Giving Gifts

Extract 11

Audience 12: Step is like procedures

Presenter 1: **Good** devi. So where is the step for this example?

Audience 12: Instruction is. Right?

Presenter 1: Yes that's right. Then, what genre it is devi?

Audience 12: I think receipe is. Recipe I mean.

Presenter1: That's **great**

In these extracts, it can be seen that the presenter gave praises to the audience. These kinds of expressions were mostly used by the presenter when giving complement towards the understanding of the audience, and also to complement their effort for being active and participating during learning activity. The other examples of this strategy can be seen below.

Extract 12

Audience 1: Fighting deuiss

Presenter 1: Aww **thanks** nes

Extract 13

Presenter 1: Yup, that's all from me. Please consider the features above to analyze the genre. **Thank you.** Now it's the turn for the second presenter

Audience 1: Okay, **thank you** Deuis for the explanation

The undergraduate students usually give thanking by stating "thanks" when they were in the whilst activity. However, when the presentation would be continued by the next presenter, they were stating "thank you" to the previous presenter.

### Post Activity

#### Giving Gifts

Extract 14



Presenter 2: **Thank you** to the class that has give a respon and always stay in our presentation.

In this situation, the presenter wanted to close the presentation and end the learning activity by giving thanking first to the other students.

## Negative Politeness Strategy

Based on the table, it can be seen that there are 3 data found that applied negative politeness strategy during the whilst activity and post-activity.

### Whilst Activity

#### Be Conventionally Indirect

##### Extract 15

Presenter 1: **Could we move to the other point?**

Audience 1: Sure, Deus!

From these expressions, the presenter tried to be more polite by using modal verbs when she was requesting or asking the audience, so they would not feel forced to do what the presenter want.

### Post-Activity

#### Apologize

##### Extract 16

Presenter 2: I think that's all from me, I have applogize if I have many mistakes

In these expressions, the undergraduate students expressing her apologize when she wanted to close the presentation in the end of their learning activity.

## Off-Record Strategy

Based on the table, it can be seen that there are 3 data found that applied off-record strategy during the whilst activity.

### Whilst Activity

#### Presuppose

##### Extract 17

Presenter 1: It has been discussed previously that genre contains a communicative purpose, structures, or even a particular setting.

These statements showed that the presenter was indirectly reminding the audience of the previous explanation that she has conveyed.

### Be Ironic

Extract 18

Presenter 1: To make it clear. Just say stage as a step or move. Do you know the step class?

Audience 14: I don't know is

Presenter 1: Wah really?

In this expression, the presenter was expressing her sarcasm to the other student by being ironic. She made a response by using an expression that make her sentence seem excited and surprised while the truth was not like that.

### Be Vague

Extract 19

Audience 16: Ouhh yeah so long

In this situation, the undergraduate student stated something unclearly about the object she meant in the conversation. Meanwhile, what she truly means by "so long" was the explanation of the material that provided by the presenter.

## Discussion

Based on the finding, positive politeness strategy was found as the most frequent strategy used in the online interaction. The finding of this study was in line with the previous research from Adel et al. (2016) that found learners mostly used positive strategies in their interaction in a class blog. The undergraduate students used politeness strategies to create an enjoyable atmosphere and being friendly during the interaction. It was supported by Wardhaugh (2006) who claimed that positive politeness leads to a move to achieve solidarity through offers of friendship, the use of compliments, and informal language use as we treat others as friends and allies.

The undergraduate students used seven sub-strategies of positive politeness, but the dominant sub-strategy was found in the form of giving gifts. This strategy was used when the undergraduate students were thanking the other students. This strategy was also used to appreciate the audiences' effort for being active during the learning activity. It was usually applied by giving them praises, so they would feel appreciated and increase their positive feeling. This strategy was also used when the audiences thanking to the presenters who had provided the materials, and from the presenters to the audiences for their nice attention and cooperation during the learning process, so the learning activity could run well. It is mostly used at the end of learning activities when they want to close the meeting. It is in line with Leech (2014), who stated 'thanks' often indicates the end of a conversation, but closure is not

the only function; it also commonly conveys an appreciation and acknowledgment that the conversation has been beneficial for the speaker.

However, the next sub-strategy is seeking agreement. Seek an agreement is included as the way to get common ground with the interlocutor by highlighting the agreement to them (Njuki & Ileri, 2021). They applied this strategy when the presenter showing her agreement to the audiences' questions to indicate that their questions are right, showing that the audience understood the materials being conveyed, and to show the same opinion among them. The finding in this study is in line with Lestari et.al (2018) who asserted that seek agreement was used to show that both participants of the conversation had the same perception during the learning process.

The next sub-strategy is include both participants. This strategy is applied to express that the presenter and the audiences will do the same activity. The inclusive "we" form was supposed to enhance friendliness and construct positive politeness by treating the addressee as equals (Harwood, 2005). This strategy was used to convey that both of the participants are cooperators and to show their solidarity towards each other. This is in line with Rahayuningsih et al. (2020) who stated that this strategy was used to show that the participants of the conversation are cooperators and claim reflexivity. By using this strategy, the participants would look more friendly to the others and showing their closeness as well.

The strategy afterward is the use of in-group identity markers. This strategy was used to indicate the same group of membership. According to Chilton in Rahayuningsih et al. (2020), in-group identity marker was used to claim the common ground and in-group membership with the addressee. Then, it is followed by offer, promise strategy. In this strategy, the presenter was offering to the audiences whether they want to discuss more about the example or not. According to Leech (2014), an offer is speaker-oriented because it envisages a favor to be performed by the doer. And for the last sub-strategy is be optimistic. In this strategy, the presenter was being optimistic by conveying her hopes to the other students that all of them could understand the material. According to Brown & Levinson in Saragih et al. (2019), that this strategy was showing the nature of optimism. People who are always optimistic are more fun than those who always pessimistic. Especially if the person was showing her optimism to the addressee.

Then, the second common strategy was found in bald on record with three sub-strategies found. The frequent strategy found in task-oriented/ paradigmatic form of instruction. This strategy was used when the presenter requesting directly to the receivers to do something she wants, although the she also used a mitigating device in her command. Mitigating device such as please was used to soften the command (Yule, 1996).

Then, the next sub-strategies are welcoming and farewells. Welcoming strategy was used in the opening of the presentation. There are two types of welcoming, those are Islamic greetings and English greetings. The Islamic greeting was occurred because of the influence of the religious aspect in their social interaction and also to make the presentation look more formal. While the English greeting was used to greet each other since they are EFL students and expected to communicate in English ways. Then, the farewells strategy was used when the presenter wanted to close her presentation. It is usually by using Islamic greeting to maintain the formality of the presentation. The finding was in line with Tan, et al. (2016) who claimed that greetings have important functions such as acknowledging the interlocutors. It is also supported by Laver (quoted in Qian, 1996) who asserts that greetings as conversational routines are part of the linguistic repertoire of politeness. The forms of greeting that used Islamic greeting was in line with Bouchara (2015) who showed that politeness can be expressed when greeting one another by using religious vocabulary and giving religious praises.

Then, negative politeness and off-strategy followed with the same amount of data. Be conventionally indirect strategy was used when the presenter was asking and requesting in a more polite way. Blum-Kulka in Siburian (2016) suggests that conventionally indirect requests are interpreted as polite because they are mitigated, but also because they do not require the work to interpret. In this study, the presenter showed her politeness by using modal verbs in her sentences, which also showed her respect and formality to the addressee when she delivering the requests. It is in line with Gervasio et al. (2019) who stated the use of modal verbs by the students is meant to minimize the imposition and maintain their cardinal relationship. The presenter also used this strategy when she was asking the other students whether they can continue to the next materials or not, which aimed to make sure that there as no other question and that the addressee had understood the materials.

The next sub-strategy is in the form of apologies. Apologize strategy was used when the presenter wanted to close the presentation. It is in line with the study from Anugrawati et al (2020) who stated that the speaker who apologizes may not necessarily regret their mistakes, it is just a way to be formal to maintain rapport among them. Such ritual apologies are commonly made in a formal meeting, especially at the beginning or during the last part of the meeting. Meanwhile, according to Yule (1996), negative politeness will tend to include an apology for the imposition or interruption.

The last strategy is off-record. The first sub-strategies found is presuppose strategy. The undergraduate students using this strategy when they wanted to state something that connected with the previous events or activities. It is supported by the theory from Leech (2014) who asserted that presuppose strategy was used usually to showed the previous action

by the doer. In this study, this strategy was used by the undergraduate students to remind her classmates of the previous explanation. So, she expected that her classmates will still remember it and can make a connection between the previous material and the current one.

Then, be ironic strategy. This strategy was used when the undergraduate student stated something contradictory to what she truly means. According to Leech (1983), he defined that the irony principle as “if you must cause offence, at least do so in a way which does not overly conflict with the positive politeness, but allows the addressee to arrive the offensive point of your remark indirectly, by way of implicature”. In this study, the presenter used this strategy to show her sarcastic when responding the other’s statement.

And the last one is be vague strategy. This strategy was used when the undergraduate students being unclear towards the object, they meant. According to Craig et al. (1986), in applying this strategy, the doer made a statement but did so in a vague way, leaving the interpretation of the comment open to the addressee. In this study, the undergraduate student being vague when commenting on the explanation from the presenter that was too long. However, her vague statement might be interpreted differently by the presenter and the other students.

From this study, it can be seen that most of the undergraduate students used positive politeness. It might be because they were interacting with their classmate that they have already known for years. So basically, they have known each other very well. Therefore, positive politeness strategy was found as the most frequent strategy that express their strong friendship and closeness.

## Conclusions

Politeness strategies during the learning activity in EFL online classroom interaction which conducted via WhatsApp group were used by the students. Four types of politeness strategy were used by the students such as bald on-record strategy, positive politeness strategy, negative politeness strategy, and off-record strategy with most frequently used is positive politeness strategy such as in-group identity markers, seek agreement, offer promise, be optimistic, include both participants, give (or ask for) reasons, and giving gifts. Giving gift was the dominant sub-strategy used by students to convey praising and thanking the interlocutor. It is also used to give appreciation and acknowledgment to other students. A bald on-record strategy is also used in the form of a task-oriented strategy. The students used this strategy to look or read the materials being discussed in the learning process. Negative politeness strategy used such as be conventionally indirect and apologize for strategy. The dominant sub-strategy was in the form of be a conventionally indirect strategy that is used this strategy when asking

and requesting to the receivers to avoid interrupting the addressee because of her/his sentences. For the off-record strategy, the students used presupposed, be ironic, and be a vague strategy. Although the interaction was conducted through WhatsApp group, the undergraduate students tend to use a positive politeness strategy in the EFL online classroom interaction. It is because this strategy can reflect their good relationship with the other students. It confirms Fitriani and Hardjanto (2023) that in the online learning interaction, the students showed mutual support and positive relationship. Due to the limitation of this study, this study just focuses on the types of politeness strategies used by undergraduate students and the most frequent type of politeness strategy used by undergraduate students in EFL online classroom interaction. This study could lead further researchers to conduct another study related to politeness strategy with different participants and settings and might be more specific about the types of politeness strategies that want to be investigated.

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