

An Analysis of Politeness Strategies in an English Textbook for University Students

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Abstract

This study investigates the types and distribution of politeness expressions in an English textbook for university students in Indonesia. Drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory as the analytical framework, the study employs a qualitative content analysis design to systematically identify and classify politeness expressions across the textbook's dialogue sections. A total of 121 utterances from nine dialogues were analyzed and categorized into four politeness strategies: Positive Politeness, Negative Politeness, Off-Record, and Bald On-Record. The findings reveal that Positive Politeness is the most dominant strategy ($f = 77$, 63.6%), followed by Off-Record ($f = 17$, 14.0%), Negative Politeness ($f = 16$, 13.2%), and Bald On-Record ($f = 11$, 9.1%). While all four strategies are represented in the textbook, their uneven distribution suggests it presents a pragmatically imbalanced model of English communication. These findings indicate that the textbook is primarily oriented toward solidarity-building and informal interaction, at the expense of preparing learners for formal, asymmetrical, and register-sensitive communicative contexts. The study concludes with recommendations for textbook developers and EFL practitioners to incorporate a more balanced and explicitly contextualized range of politeness strategies in university-level English instructional materials to foster socio-pragmatic competence for real-world communication.

1. Introduction

Language is not merely a system of structures and grammar, but also a social phenomenon for maintaining social relationships. In language communication, speakers are expected to convey messages appropriately while considering social norms. One important aspect that emphasizes interpersonal communication is politeness. According to Brown & Levinson (1987), politeness enables speakers to minimize conflict, maintain harmony, and demonstrate respect towards other speakers. Therefore, the study of politeness has become a significant area of study in pragmatics, particularly in language learning and teaching contexts. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, politeness is a core component of pragmatic competence, dealing with the ability to use language appropriately across social and cultural contexts (Leech, 2014). Such competence is critical for university students who are frequently engaged in academic and professional communication in English. Learners who possess language and linguistic knowledge but lack politeness pragmatic awareness may produce grammatically correct utterances that are perceived as impolite. As Salih & Kurt (2025) demonstrate, the biggest barrier to acquiring pragmatic competence among EFL learners is the dominance of grammar-oriented instruction that disregards pragmatic features to communicate appropriately in real-world social contexts. As a result, English instruction mainly in textbooks should facilitate students' understanding of how politeness is expressed in communication.

Furthermore, textbooks are among the primary tools through which language learners acquire pragmatic knowledge. Textbooks provide learners with dialogues and expressions that shape their understanding of language use (Tomlinson, 2012). However, a recurring concern is that some EFL textbooks inadequately represent pragmatic content, including politeness expressions. Recent scholars highlight a deficiency in how pragmatics is taught at various educational levels. For instance, Jakupčević & Čavar Portolan (2024) observe that EFL textbooks for young learners often omit to properly contextualize speech acts and politeness markers. This lack of situational framing extends to higher education, where Shariq (2025) emphasizes that while pragmatic competence and politeness strategies are essential for university EFL writing and communication, they remain largely neglected. Furthermore, Darong (2024) argues that speech acts in EFL instruction are often overlooked, despite their importance in developing

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learners' socio-pragmatic competence. Together, these studies expose a distinct barrier between classroom resources and pragmatic skills that learners require.

Politeness itself has been widely discussed in pragmatic studies. One of the major theoretical frameworks of linguistic politeness was proposed by Brown & Levinson (1987). Brown and Levinson proposed that all social actors possess a "face" that consists of positive face and negative face. Their framework categorizes politeness into four strategies to mitigate Face Threatening Acts (FTA): bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies. Their theory has been applied to examine politeness in various contexts. Despite growing attention to politeness in language use, this framework has been applied rarely to English textbooks designed for university-level learners, particularly in the Indonesian EFL context. Existing studies have focused on politeness in spoken classroom interaction between teachers and students (Sudar et al., 2025; Syting & Gildore, 2022; Wati et al., 2025).

Furthermore, Lai & Economidou-Kogetsidis (2025) demonstrate that pragmatic instruction could improve learners' pragmatic awareness and their ability to produce appropriate politeness in written communication. Their study further underscores the need to examine whether EFL textbooks provide such development. To address this gap, the present study analyses the politeness expressions found in an English textbook for university students in Indonesia. By drawing on Brown & Levinson (1987) politeness theory as an analytical framework, this study aims to identify the types of politeness expressions present in the textbook, analyze the distribution and frequency of each politeness type across the textbook, and analyze the implications of these findings for EFL pragmatic instruction at the education level in Indonesia.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative content analysis to investigate politeness expressions in an English textbook for university students. Content analysis is a systematic technique for analyzing textual data by dividing it into categories based on established theoretical frameworks (Krippendorff, 2019). The analytical framework adopted in this study draws on Brown & Levinson's (1987) theory, which categorizes politeness strategies into bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies. The data source of this study is the book entitled *"English for University Students: A Handbook of Activities & Classroom Teaching"*. The unit of analysis is limited to dialogues and conversational excerpts throughout the textbook, as these represent the primary sources in which politeness expressions are contextualized for learners. The example of dialogues and conversations presented in the book is shown below in Figure 1:

Figure 1. The example of dialogues from the *"English for University Students: A Handbook of Activities & Classroom Teaching"* textbook.

Source: Thalib et al. (2017)

Kate	:	Hello, I'm Catherina Aguilar.	
Fasya	:	Hi! My name is Alfasya Wardana, but please call me Fasya.	
Kate	:	Nice to meet you, Fasya. Please call me Kate. Anyway, where are you from?	
Fasya	:	I'm from Indonesia.	
Kate	:	That's great. It's a nice country.	
Fasya	:	Thank you, and where are you from, Kate?	
Kate	:	I'm from Manila. The Phillipines.	
Fasya	:	OK. And what's your last name again?	
Kate	:	Aguilar.	
Fasya	:	How do you spell your last name?	
Kate	:	A-G-U-I-L-A-R	

Data collection of this study follows the stages of the content analysis procedure. First, the researcher read the textbook systematically to identify the dialogue sections containing politeness expressions. Second, the identified texts were divided into their component units, such as in individual utterances and sentences. Third, the data were categorized according to Brown & Levinson's (1987) four politeness strategies. Fourth, each data unit was assigned to its politeness category and subcategory. Fifth, the frequencies of each politeness strategy were calculated to provide an overview of their distribution across

the textbook. Lastly, the categorized data were further analyzed for qualitative interpretation and discussed in terms of their implications for EFL instruction at the university level.

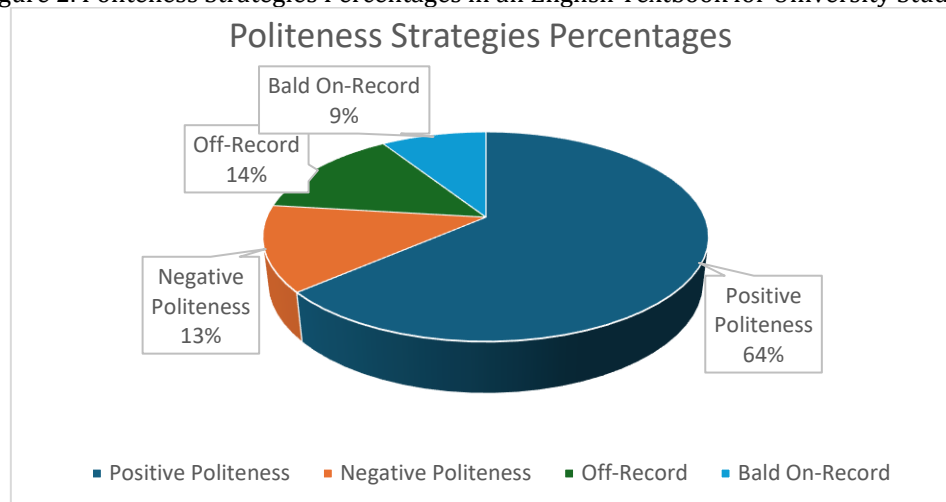
3. Result and Discussion

The study found 121 utterances from textbook dialogues, according to Brown & Levinson (1987), four politeness strategies: Positive Politeness, Negative Politeness, Off-Record, and Bald On-Record. The overall distribution of the findings is presented in Table 1 and Figure 2.

Table 1. Distribution of Politeness Strategies in an English Textbook for University Students

NO	POLITENESS STRATEGIES	NUMBER OF FREQUENCIES
1	Positive Politeness	77
2	Negative Politeness	16
3	Off-Record	17
4	Bald-On Record	11
TOTAL		121

Figure 2. Politeness Strategies Percentages in an English Textbook for University Students



As shown in Table 1 and Figure 2, Positive Politeness ($f = 77$, 63.6%) is the most frequent strategy across all the strategies, followed by Off-Record ($f = 17$, 14%), Negative Politeness ($f = 16$, 13.2%), and Bald On-Record ($f = 11$, 9.1%). All four strategies indicate that the textbook exposes learners to a range of communicative politeness behaviors. Furthermore, pragmatic knowledge is significant for EFL learners because it shows how they can understand social relationships in a target language, specifically in intercultural communication (Wang et al., 2024). The patterns identified in this study carry implications not only for how politeness is implied in the textbook, but for how adequately the textbook assists students with the pragmatic context needed for real-world English communication. Moreover, the following subsections discuss each strategy.

3.1. Positive Politeness Strategy

Positive politeness is shown as a dominant strategy in the textbook with a frequency of 77 (63.6%). This finding aligns with the research around politeness in EFL materials and classroom discourse, which identifies positive politeness as the most frequent strategy in pedagogic contexts (Hieng et al., 2025; Jayanti et al., 2024; Wati et al., 2025). Expressions such as "That's great," "Wow, that sounds interesting," "Nice to meet you," and "It's a nice country" recur across the dialogues, functioning to minimize social distance and affirm solidarity between interlocutors. Mulyono et al. (2025) affirm that positive politeness consistently emerges as the dominant strategy in educational and politically oriented discourse, reflecting how speakers adapt themselves towards face strategies and inclusive communication. The dominance of positive politeness across the textbook's dialogues is pedagogically significant in two aspects. This strategy equips learners with an accessible expression for initiating interactions in English. Learners' communicative attitudes toward positive politeness support the effectiveness of communication and social harmony in the

EFL context. Also, teaching pragmatics alongside cultural awareness is essential for the learners to adjust their communication strategies to prevailing social norms (Gunas et al., 2023).

3.2. Negative Politeness Strategy

Negative politeness is the third most frequent strategy found in the textbook, with a frequency of 16 (13.2%). This politeness is the most evident in dialogues involving formal situations, such as the job interview in the "Listening" section dialogue, where utterances like "May I know who's calling?", "I have no intention of going abroad, Sir," and "Thank you for your time". Those utterances reflect a speaker's orientation towards minimizing imposition and respecting the hearer. Furthermore, evaluating EFL learners' pragmatic competence in the context of negative politeness is important, as it investigates learners' ability to show social distance and power relations toward their addressees. Alemi & Maleknia (2023) show that non-native English university students actively draw on both positive and negative politeness markers in academic email communication. These findings underscore the critical importance of exposing learners to negative politeness in varied communication contexts. It is the competencies that are foundational to making communication appropriate in social contexts.

The low frequency of negative politeness strategies (13.2%) in EFL textbooks presents a major challenge for students' pragmatic development. Because these textbooks often introduce speech acts without context or clear information about speaker-hearer relationships, learners struggle to determine the appropriate level of politeness required in real-world situations. This lack of guidance is particularly damaging for negative politeness, which is highly sensitive to social variables such as power dynamics, social distance, and the degree of imposition involved (Diepenbroek & Derwing, 2013). University students urgently need these strategies to navigate academic emails, formal requests, and professional interactions successfully.

3.3. Off-Record Strategy

Off-Record strategies comprise 14.0% from 17 frequencies, ranking as the second most frequent strategy. This politeness is predominantly found in Government and Daily Routine dialogues, which employ rhetorical questions, understatement, and irony to convey frustration or criticism. Based on Brown & Levinson's (1987) theory, this strategy allows speakers to perform Face-Threatening Acts (FTA) while letting the listener determine the ultimate interpretation. Pedagogically, the inclusion of this strategy provides a valuable resource for developing communicative competence. Successfully interpreting off-record utterances requires learners to actively engage their contextual knowledge, cultural familiarity, and pragmatic inference skills. Aporbo et al. (2024) confirm that off-record strategies are the least frequently employed in EFL educational settings and are deployed only when speakers seek to avoid direct responsibility for a Face-Threatening Act (FTA). Hieng et al. (2025) show that EFL education traditionally prioritizes directness and instructional clarity over interpretive depth.

3.4. Bald-On Record

Bald On-Record is the least frequent strategy with a total of 11 utterances (9.1%). This strategy appears mainly in Giving Advice and Sports dialogues through directives and minimal responses. Brown & Levinson (1987) argue that this strategy prioritizes efficiency and clarity over politeness when communicative goals outweigh face concerns. In the textbook, the use of Bald-On Record strategy is justified because of the social urgency of medical advice (where directness benefits the hearer) and the informality of peer interactions. Additionally, imperative forms often serve a functional and instructional role to maintain clarity in academic contexts (Nuramdani et al., 2023). Moreover, without pragmatic guidance or explicit commentary, learners might lack a complete understanding of its social condition and may overgeneralize the use of Bald-On Record strategies that actually require polite mitigation. To prevent these Face-Threatening misapplications and enhance communicative effectiveness, EFL curricula must incorporate more explicit instruction on the pragmatic boundaries of direct language (Elsara & Masbiran, 2025).

Overall, the distribution of politeness strategies in the university-level textbook reveals a set of data that is pragmatically functional but communicatively narrow. The predominance of Positive Politeness (63.6%) creates a pedagogical model heavily biased toward solidarity and social warmth. Conversely, the underrepresentation of Negative Politeness (13.2%) and Bald On-Record (9.1%), combined with the complete absence of explicit metapragmatic guidance across all strategies, limits the textbook's ability to prepare university students for the diverse academic and professional contexts they will encounter in real

life. As Wu (2024) notes, pragmatic competence is just as vital as linguistic competence for language teachers and learners to ensure appropriate communication across varied situations.

An effective textbook must include pragmatic awareness-raising activities, detailed contextual information, diverse linguistic forms for specific speech acts, and rich cultural data to guide socio-pragmatic choices, features that are frequently missing from EFL materials (Vellenga, 2004). Consequently, textbook developers are urged to feature a more balanced distribution of politeness strategies combined with explicit metapragmatic commentary. By directly addressing the contextual, relational, and cultural variables that dictate language choices, materials can help learners develop both linguistic accuracy and the socio-pragmatic sensitivity required for successful real-world communication.

4. Conclusion

This study analyzed the distribution of politeness expressions in an Indonesian university English textbook, evaluating 121 utterances across nine dialogues using Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework. The findings reveal a highly uneven distribution: Positive Politeness heavily dominates the data at 63.6%, followed by Off-Record (14.0%), Negative Politeness (13.2%), and Bald On-Record (9.1%). While the predominance of positive politeness fosters solidarity-building, the underrepresentation of negative politeness limits learners' preparation for formal, asymmetrical interactions like academic requests and professional negotiations. Furthermore, although off-record and bald on-record strategies are contextually present, the complete absence of metapragmatic guidance risks leaving students unable to interpret indirect meanings or properly navigate the social boundaries of direct language.

To address these limitations, textbook developers must design more balanced, contextually diverse materials that feature negative politeness and off-record expressions across various registers, paired with explicit commentary explaining why specific strategies are socially appropriate. Concurrently, educators should supplement dialogues with authentic input and awareness-raising activities to bridge the gap with real-world interaction. Moving forward, future research should explore how explicit pragmatic pedagogy impacts real-world proficiency across different EFL levels, while expanding the analytical scope to include multiple textbooks or actual learner production data to see how effectively these strategies are acquired.

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