

SOCIAL DISTANCE AND POLITENESS IN SCHOOL INTERACTIONS: A DCT-BASED STUDY

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Abstract: This study explores the politeness strategies used by junior high school students in classroom interactions and how these strategies are influenced by social distance, specifically in peer versus teacher interactions. Grounded in Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, the study focuses on four types of speech acts—agreeing, disagreeing, making requests, and making suggestions—across two social contexts. Using Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) and follow-up interviews, five participants' responses were analyzed to identify the use of positive, negative, and bald on-record politeness strategies. The findings show that students tend to use more elaborate and formal expressions when addressing teachers, employing politeness markers such as hedging, modal verbs, and honorifics. In contrast, peer interactions were often more casual and direct, marked by brief affirmations, bald on-record disagreements, and assertive suggestions. Interview data supported these patterns, revealing that students consciously adjust their tone and language based on the perceived social hierarchy. These results suggest that social distance plays a critical role in shaping students' pragmatic choices, and that explicit instruction in politeness strategies is necessary to enhance students' communicative competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings.

Keywords: Politeness strategies, social distance, speech acts, EFL classroom pragmatics

1. INTRODUCTION

In any social setting, language functions as a means of conveying information and a tool for managing interpersonal relationships. In school environments, where interactions occur across various levels of power and familiarity, such as between students and teachers or among peers, speakers make linguistic choices that reflect sensitivity to these social dynamics. A critical aspect of such language use is politeness, which plays a central role in maintaining harmony and showing respect within communicative acts.

Politeness is particularly significant in classroom discourse, where students must often request, offer refusals, or express opinions reflecting their understanding of social norms. This becomes even more relevant in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, where students are learning a new language and developing pragmatic competence, including the appropriate use of politeness strategies in different contexts.

Despite the importance of pragmatics in communication, many EFL learners struggle with choosing the appropriate politeness strategies due to differences in cultural norms or a lack of exposure to authentic language use. Moreover, social distance—the perceived closeness or distance between interlocutors—can significantly influence how politeness is expressed. In a school setting, students are expected to navigate interactions with peers differently from those with teachers. However, little research has been conducted on how Indonesian junior high school students adjust their politeness strategies according to social distance in classroom

communication. With this background in mind, the researcher aims to answer the following research questions: (1) What politeness strategies do students use when interacting with peers versus teachers in everyday school-related situations? (2) How does social distance influence the choice of politeness strategies among junior high school students?. This study investigates how students' politeness strategies vary when interacting with teachers compared to when interacting with peers. It seeks to explore the influence of social distance on the type and frequency of politeness strategies used, using Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987)

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory remains foundational in understanding how individuals navigate social interactions. The concept of "face" is central to their framework, which refers to a person's self-esteem or emotional needs during communication. They identify two types of face: positive (the desire to be liked and approved of) and negative (the desire to be autonomous and free from imposition). To mitigate face-threatening acts (FTAs), speakers employ bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record indirectness. Factors like social distance, power relations, and the rank of imposition influence the choice among these strategies.

2.2 Influence of Social Distance on Politeness Strategy Choice

Several recent studies have investigated politeness strategies in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom settings, particularly in Indonesia and other EFL contexts. Harmia (2024) conducted a qualitative study in junior high school EFL classrooms in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, exploring how teachers and students employed various politeness strategies. Her findings highlighted the types of strategies used and the challenges and opportunities that arise when attempting to implement effective politeness practices in classroom discourse. The study underscored the need to better understand how politeness functions in pedagogical settings, especially among young learners.

Similarly, Soviana and Mukminatien (2020) analyzed the use of illocutionary acts and politeness strategies by academic staff in EFL classrooms at Universitas Negeri Malang. Their research revealed that positive politeness strategies were the most frequently used, followed by negative politeness, bald on-record, and off-record strategies. The study also examined how students perceived their teachers' language choices and found that these strategies played a key role in shaping the dynamics of classroom interaction. The results suggest that teachers' communicative styles can influence students' comfort levels and motivation to participate. This aligns with Sitinjak et al. (2022), who also emphasized that the strategic use of politeness in classrooms directly impacts students' willingness to engage in classroom discussions.

In digital communication, Rowiyah et al. (2025) examined how EFL students used politeness strategies in pedagogical WhatsApp group chats. Their findings demonstrated that students adopted various strategies to maintain effective and respectful communication in online learning environments. This study highlights the growing importance of teaching pragmatics and politeness in virtual spaces, as learners increasingly engage in digital interaction as part of their academic

experience. A similar concern was raised by Sudar et al. (2023), who found that technology-mediated communication between students and lecturers often prompted shifts in politeness forms, requiring explicit instruction to avoid misinterpretation.

Social distance, the perceived familiarity or solidarity between speakers, has been shown to significantly influence the use of politeness strategies in educational contexts. Rahayuningsih et al. (2020) explored this dynamic in EFL teacher-student interactions at SMP Semesta Bilingual School. Their research found that teachers tended to favor positive politeness strategies to promote a sense of solidarity and comfort within the classroom. On the other hand, students' choices were more influenced by their perceptions of the social hierarchy and power imbalances between themselves and their teachers. This supports Brown and Levinson's (1987) claim that social distance, power, and imposition shape speakers' decisions in formulating polite utterances. This trend was also noted by Codina-Espurz and Victoria (2021), who investigated how EFL learners adjusted their politeness strategies in academic email communication. Their study showed that learners were sensitive to power dynamics and social distance, often shifting to more indirect and formal strategies when writing to authority figures such as professors. In line with this, Sa'idah and Toyyibah (2022) argue that teacher modeling of politeness in speech and behavior serves as a strong scaffold for students navigating these interpersonal complexities.

2.3 Implications for EFL Teaching and Learning

The insights from these studies carry significant implications for English language teaching. Soviana and Mukminatien (2020) emphasized that teachers' appropriate politeness strategies can positively affect students' classroom engagement, motivation, and confidence. Their study suggests that deliberate training and awareness in pragmatic competence, particularly in politeness, can enhance the quality of teacher-student communication and contribute to a more respectful and collaborative classroom atmosphere. This is further supported by Pratiwi et al. (2023), who found that both teacher awareness and explicit teaching of politeness can create safer learning environments and improve learner confidence.

In addition, Rowiyah et al. (2025) argued for integrating pragmatics instruction into EFL curricula, particularly in digital learning environments. As students increasingly communicate through digital platforms like WhatsApp and email, they must develop the ability to interpret and use politeness strategies in online contexts effectively. Teaching these skills supports learners' communicative competence and equips them to navigate diverse linguistic and social interactions in the real world. Sudar et al. (2023) echo this view, emphasizing that pragmatic competence in digital communication is no longer optional in 21st-century language learning. Similarly, Aufa (2021) highlights the effectiveness of explicit instruction in pragmatic features, such as requests and responses, for enhancing real-world communication readiness.

Moreover, Unaina et al. (2023) stress the importance of assessing learners' use of politeness strategies through discourse-based tasks to monitor progress and inform instruction. Incorporating such assessments allows teachers to scaffold student awareness of when and how to shift politeness strategies depending on the context. Teacher training is also essential; Widiati and Cahyono (2018) and Hartini et al. (2023) found that many Indonesian EFL teachers lacked preparation in teaching

pragmatics and often relied on intuition rather than structured approaches. To address this, Sutyrjmi et al. (2022) advocate for pre-service and in-service training that includes modules on pragmatic awareness and cultural sensitivity to equip teachers with practical strategies for classroom use.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design using Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) to explore the politeness strategies used by junior high school students in different classroom interaction contexts. The primary aim was to identify how students modify their language when interacting with peers versus teachers while performing common classroom language functions such as agreeing, disagreeing, making suggestions, and making requests. The participants for this study were 5 junior high school students who were active members of their school's English club. The selection was purposive, as these students had higher exposure to English and more opportunities for speaking practice compared to their peers in regular classes. All participants had studied English for at least 7 years. To protect their real identities, the researcher used pseudonyms to refer to the participants: Mario (Student 1), Waluigi (Student 2), Bowser (Student 3), Yoshi (Student 4), and Wario (Student 5).

Initially, the researcher contacted the participants via WhatsApp about the purpose of the study and answered any questions they had about the study. After that, the researcher provided a questionnaire to be filled by the participants. The main instrument for data collection was a set of Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs). The DCT included eight classroom scenarios, with two scenarios for each of the four targeted language functions (agreeing, disagreeing, making suggestions, and making requests). Each function was tested in two social contexts:

- a. Student-to-student (low power, low distance)
- b. Student-to-teacher (high power, high distance)

There were two data analysis stages: a questionnaire based on Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) and semi-structured interviews. Both were designed using the same set of 12 prompt scenarios, covering four key language functions: agreeing, disagreeing, making requests, and making suggestions in two interactional contexts: student-to-student and student-to-teacher. The students' written responses were analyzed using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategy framework, which classifies strategies into:

- a. Bald on-record
- b. Positive politeness
- c. Negative politeness

Each response was coded according to the politeness strategy used. The analysis also considered contextual variables such as the speaker's relationship with the interlocutor (peer or teacher), the level of directness, and the presence of politeness markers (e.g., modals, apologies, honorifics).

4. FINDINGS

This study aims to answer the following: a) What politeness strategies do students use when interacting with peers versus teachers in everyday school-related situations? (b) How does social distance influence the choice of politeness strategies

among junior high school students? The following subsections will show themes resulting from the data analysis as the answers to the research questions. The four themes are the answers to the first and second research questions.

4.1. Theme 1: Agreement is marked by increased elaboration with teachers and informality with peers

In contrast to earlier findings that reported minimal variation in student politeness across social roles (e.g., Harmia, 2024; Soviana & Mukminatien, 2020), the present study reveals that most students tend to elaborate more and employ polite affirmations when agreeing with teachers, while peer-to-peer agreement often features brief, informal, and expressive responses.

That is a good idea, Sir/Mam. I agree with your suggestion.

[Waluigi / DCT response]

Ohh yeeaa! That's the idea that I've been searching for my group assignment. I agree, thank you so much ma'am/ms/mr!

[Yoshi / DCT response]

In peer interactions, agreement was typically informal and minimal.

I agree with this bro.

[Bowser / DCT response]

That sound's good, let's go with that idea.

[Waluigi / DCT response]

These patterns were reflected in the interview data. Students described adapting their language depending on the social role of the listener.

When I am about to agree politely, I use formal words, not slangs... with friends I usually joke with them, use funny slangs.

[Yoshi / Interview]

I usually agree politely by using formal language. But if it's with friends, I often agree casually or just nod my head.

[Wario / Interview]

Several students also confirmed that they elaborate more when agreeing with a teacher.

Yes, I did. For example, I say 'that's a good idea to do' or 'what a great idea.'

[Bowser / Interview]

Yes, I usually say more than just 'I agree.' I usually add my opinion about something that I agreed.

[Yoshi / Interview]

4.2. Theme 2: Disagreement with teachers involves hedging and mitigation, unlike peer interactions

Echoing previous research (e.g., Codina-Espurz & Victoria, 2021; Rahayuningsih et al., 2020), student responses demonstrated that the expression of disagreement differs significantly depending on social distance. Most students employed hedging, apologies, or formal address when disagreeing with teachers.

Sorry Sir/Mam, I can't accept that idea because...

[Waluigi / DCT response]

I'm sorry teacher, I don't agree, how about if we...

[Yoshi / DCT response]

With peers, disagreement tended to be more direct or abrupt.

No, let's just change our plan.

[Yoshi / DCT response]

Bro! It's risky!

[Bowser / DCT response]

The interviews corroborated this contrast in politeness strategies. Students reported more concern when responding to teachers.

I will direct the idea and give a new idea... if not a close friend, I will wait for them to give me a chance to speak.

[Waluigi / Interview]

Sometimes I feel afraid to disagree, because some of the next activity that teacher give is different from our expectation.

[Bowser / Interview]

Yes, because in my opinion, [teachers] have more experience and knowledge... but if they are clearly wrong, sometimes I try to give corrections.

[Yoshi / Interview]

They also described using specific language to soften disagreement.

The word that I usually use is 'I think I suggest that we...' or 'I think we must...'

[Bowser / Interview]

I will make my tone more smooth and use words that are not offensive.

[Waluigi / Interview]

4.3. Theme 3: Polite requests are more commonly directed at teachers than peers

Students generally exhibited more awareness of politeness strategies when making requests to teachers, often using modal verbs, respectful address forms, and

softening devices. These findings mirror those of Rowiyah et al. (2025), who observed that students tend to apply greater pragmatic effort in formal contexts.

Miss, may you make a simple plan for the group task, please?

[Bowser / DCT response]

Peer-directed requests were largely absent or expressed as casual suggestions. Interview data show that students are aware of the need for formality in teacher interactions.

I speak differently when talking to a teacher compared to talking with a friend. I will be more polite and mindful of my language when speaking with a teacher.

[Wario / Interview]

I always use the formal way when I am speaking to someone who is older than me like teachers...

[Yoshi / Interview]

In contrast, informal peer speech was perceived as more relaxed and less structured.

If it's with friends, I use a more casual and friendly tone, not formal.

[Wario / Interview]

With friends, I usually joke with them or just agree by saying short opinions.

[Yoshi / Interview]

4.4. Theme 4: Suggestions to teachers are more indirect and deferential than peer suggestions

The data also indicate that students adapt the tone of their suggestions based on the recipient. When making suggestions to teachers, participants were more cautious and often framed their ideas within explanations or embedded them in feedback.

Miss, I think we need the class safety. So we must pick one student to become the class guard.

[Bowser / DCT response]

I would politely and gently reject the idea, trying not to hurt their feelings, and give constructive feedback.

[Wario / DCT response]

Suggestions to peers, however, were more assertive and informal.

We must pick one of the students to become the class guard.

[Bowser / DCT response]

That idea won't work, let's look for a better one.

[Waluigi / DCT response]

The interviews supported these observations. Students reported paying more attention to their tone and language when speaking with teachers.

I always try to think before I speak formally... I have to be more cautious because English is not my first language.

[Yoshi / Interview]

I consider my words carefully. I also avoid word mistakes and understand the right time to joke.

[Wario / Interview]

In contrast, some students felt more free to express themselves when speaking with peers.

If friend's, I actually not afraid because it's normal for us. But teacher, yes, because they will be mad.

[Waluigi / Interview]

5. DISCUSSION

This research aims to address the following questions: (1) what politeness strategies do students use when interacting with peers versus teachers in everyday school-related situations? (2) how does social distance influence the choice of politeness strategies among junior high school students? The findings of this study provide important insights into exploring the politeness strategies employed by junior high school students when interacting with teachers and peers, and how social distance influences those strategies in everyday school-related situations. Using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework and drawing on DCT responses and follow-up interviews, the findings reveal distinct patterns shaped by social roles, familiarity, and perceived authority, supporting and extending previous research in several ways.

The first theme discussed how agreement is marked by increased elaboration with teachers and informality with peers. Findings from the DCT and interview data reveal that students generally use more elaborate and polite expressions when agreeing with teachers, while peer agreements are marked by brevity and a casual tone. This aligns with Soviana and Mukminatien (2020), who found that EFL students in Indonesian classrooms preferred positive politeness strategies when interacting with figures of authority, often using praise, affirmation, and gratitude to convey alignment. In this study, participants such as Yoshi and Waluigi exemplified this tendency, offering elaborated responses like "That's a good idea, Sir/Mam" and "Thank you so muah, Ma'am."

However, with peers, students tended to respond more briefly and informally—using phrases such as "I agree with this, bro" or "That sound's good." This distinction was supported in interviews, where students like Wario and Yoshi reported adjusting their language depending on formality: "With friends, I usually joke with them" and "I use formal words when agreeing with teachers." These results suggest that social role and context are central to agreement strategy choice, confirming Brown and Levinson's emphasis on face and formality, and aligning with Harmia's (2024) observation that student politeness fluctuates depending on perceived expectations.

The second theme explored how disagreement with teachers involves hedging and mitigation, unlike peer interactions. Consistent with prior research (Codina-Espurz & Victoria, 2021; Rahayuningsih et al., 2020), this study found that students employed more mitigated and cautious language when disagreeing with teachers. DCT responses such as “I’m sorry teacher, I don’t agree” or “I think that answer is incorrect” were common, often accompanied by apologies or hedging. In contrast, disagreements with peers were frequently bald on-record: “No, let’s just change our plan” or “Bro! It’s risky!”

Interview data further supported this difference. Participants like Bowser admitted feeling “afraid to disagree” with teachers due to fear of being wrong or disrespectful. Waluigi echoed this view, noting that he would “make [his] tone smooth and use words that are not offensive.” These findings align with Brown and Levinson’s claim that speakers employ negative politeness strategies to preserve the addressee’s face when power imbalances exist. However, with peers, directness appears to be normalized, reflecting the lower social distance and minimal face threat perceived in those interactions.

The third theme is how polite requests are more commonly directed at teachers than peers. Students’ requests in teacher-directed contexts were more likely to include modal verbs and politeness markers such as “may” and “please,” which corresponds with previous findings by Rowiyah et al. (2025), who observed a stronger preference for formal politeness in digital learning requests. For instance, Bowser wrote, “Miss, may you make a simple plan for the group task, please?” demonstrating an awareness of rank and imposition.

In peer contexts, requests were often implicit or replaced with directives or suggestions, such as “Let’s do that idea.” Interviews confirmed that students speak more casually with friends. Wario explained that while he maintains politeness in class, he’s “more casual and friendly” when speaking with peers. This suggests that students view peer requests as less threatening, thus requiring fewer politeness strategies. This differentiation illustrates students’ pragmatic sensitivity to context, though in line with Harmia’s (2024) conclusion, not all students show consistent control over politeness forms.

The last theme is how suggestions to teachers are more indirect and deferential than peer suggestions. Similar to the patterns seen in disagreement and request speech acts, students were found to be more indirect and respectful when offering suggestions to teachers. Responses such as “I think we must pick one student to become the class guard” and “I would politely and gently reject the idea” reflect a reliance on modal verbs, indirect constructions, and feedback framing. Interview participants like Wario and Yoshi stated they often consider “the right time to joke” and “choose words cautiously” with teachers, signaling a recognition of social boundaries.

On the other hand, peer suggestions often contained assertive language or lacked hedging entirely, such as “We must pick one of the students...” or “Let’s use that idea.” This supports the findings by Rahayuningsih et al. (2020), who observed that students are more confident expressing ideas with peers, and by Codina-Espurz and Victoria (2021), who noted that social distance and power strongly impact strategy choice.

6. CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the politeness strategies used by junior high school students in school-related interactions, particularly focusing on how they differ when directed at teachers versus peers. By employing Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework, the study investigated the speech acts of agreeing, disagreeing, making requests, and making suggestions through Discourse Completion Tasks and follow-up interviews.

The findings revealed that students showed a clear awareness of social roles and adjusted their language accordingly. Teacher-directed utterances tended to employ more polite and elaborate forms, including positive and negative politeness strategies, while peer-directed utterances were often more casual, brief, and direct. Agreement with teachers was marked by formal affirmation and appreciation, while peer agreement was often expressed in short or humorous terms. When disagreeing, students used hedging, apologies, and mitigation strategies with teachers, but were more straightforward and blunt with peers. The same pattern extended to making requests and suggestions, with teacher interactions often including modal verbs and indirect phrasing, while peer interactions relied on directness and shared assumptions.

These findings demonstrate that social distance plays a significant role in shaping students' pragmatic choices. Students exhibited a general understanding of politeness norms, especially in formal settings, though some inconsistencies were present in their peer interactions. The study highlights the importance of teaching pragmatic competence in EFL classrooms and suggests that further instructional attention should be given to helping learners develop awareness of context-sensitive politeness strategies across social roles.

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