

Exploring Teacher's Views on Linguistic Politeness of Students Across Communication Media

Strawberry G. Lapaddic^{1*}, Luz. S. Cacamo¹

¹ University of the Cordilleras Governor Pack Road, Baguio City, Philippines

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Email of Corresponding Author: strawberrylapaddic26@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explored teachers' views on students' linguistic politeness across face-to-face and digital communication media within educational settings. Guided by a qualitative research design, the study sought to examine how students' politeness practices differ across communication contexts and how teachers interpret these differences amid the increasing integration of digital technologies in education. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers from selected secondary schools in the Philippines who had extensive experience interacting with students both in person and through digital platforms such as emails, messaging applications, and social media. The findings revealed that students generally adhered to expected norms of politeness in face-to-face interactions, where verbal and non-verbal cues such as tone, gestures, and eye contact supported clearer expressions of respect. In contrast, teachers reported greater difficulty interpreting politeness in digital communication due to the absence of non-verbal signals, the asynchronous nature of online interactions, and the prevalence of informal language influenced by casual internet culture. These challenges often led to ambiguity and misunderstandings regarding students' intentions. Teachers also emphasized their active role in guiding students toward appropriate language use, particularly in digital contexts, to maintain respectful and effective communication. The study highlights the importance of explicitly teaching pragmatic language skills and digital communication etiquette to support students' linguistic politeness across communication media. It further underscores the need for pedagogical strategies that address the evolving demands of communication in increasingly digitalized educational environments.

Keywords: Linguistic Politeness; Communication Media; Teachers

1. Introduction

Linguistic politeness is a fundamental aspect of human communication, reflecting how individuals use language to demonstrate consideration, respect, and social sensitivity toward others. It is deeply embedded within social and cultural norms that govern interaction and is essential for maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships, particularly in contexts where power dynamics and social roles are salient, such as educational settings. Politeness functions not only as a social lubricant but also as a mechanism for managing face such as the positive social value a person claims for themselves by mitigating face-threatening acts that could damage interpersonal rapport (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In today's modern era, there is a limited understanding of how teachers perceive and interpret students' politeness across different communication channels, including both traditional face-to-face interactions and various digital platforms such as emails, messaging apps, and social media. While existing research has examined politeness strategies in classroom settings, there is a scarcity of qualitative studies that delve into teachers' nuanced perspectives on the variations and challenges of politeness in digital communication contexts. Furthermore, little is known about how these perceptions influence teachers' communicative behavior, classroom management, and pedagogical approaches.

The concept of linguistic politeness has been extensively studied through various theoretical frameworks, with Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory being among the most influential. This theory posits that speakers employ a range of politeness strategies wherein it includes positive politeness, negative politeness, bald on-record, and off-record strategies which are intended to protect both their own and their interlocutors' social "face" or self-esteem during communicative exchanges. According to Lacmodin (2018), these strategies are particularly relevant in educational contexts, where interactions between teachers and students are shaped by institutional roles and social hierarchies. Exploring teachers' views across these different communication channels can reveal how institutional roles and social hierarchies continue to shape expectations and interpretations of politeness, thereby informing more effective communication practices in contemporary educational settings.

In educational settings, linguistic politeness plays a critical role in shaping the teacher-student relationship, which is inherently asymmetrical due to differences in authority, knowledge, and social status (Yoga, Ketut, & Hery, 2018).

Teachers and students engage in a dynamic communicative process where politeness strategies help manage authority, express respect, and facilitate effective learning. Research shows that politeness is enacted through specific linguistic choices such as pronoun use, forms of address, and sentence types including declarative, interrogative, and imperative constructions which vary in politeness levels depending on factors such as age difference, social distance, and classroom norms. For example, teachers often use polite and direct utterances to maintain clarity and respect, while students' politeness levels may fluctuate according to their familiarity with the teacher and the learning environment (Yoga et al., 2018). Additionally, students' politeness levels may fluctuate based on their comfort level, cultural background, and the communication medium used whether face-to-face or digital. This fluctuation shows the complexity of politeness as a social practice that is continuously negotiated and adapted within the educational context. Understanding these nuanced interactions is essential for developing pedagogical strategies that support respectful and effective communication, ultimately contributing to a more conducive learning environment.

The rise of digital communication media such as emails, messaging applications, and social media platforms has transformed traditional face-to-face interactions, introducing new challenges and opportunities for linguistic politeness (Mudiono, 2022; Pratama & Penerbit, n.d.). Digital communication often involves informal language, abbreviations, slang, and emoticons, which can both enhance and undermine politeness depending on context and user expectations. Unlike in-person communication, digital platforms often lack immediate nonverbal cues like tone of voice, facial expressions, and gestures, which are crucial for conveying politeness and mitigating misunderstandings. Studies focusing on student-teacher interactions via platforms like WhatsApp and other social media reveal that while students generally attempt to comply with politeness norms, breaches frequently occur in greetings, message content, and closing remarks, highlighting the need for explicit instruction in digital language etiquette. Furthermore, the asynchronous and text-based nature of these media can obscure paralinguistic and nonverbal social cues, making the strategic use of politeness markers even more crucial for preventing misunderstandings and maintaining respectful communication. Teachers' perceptions of students' linguistic politeness across these diverse communication channels are vital for understanding how politeness is negotiated in contemporary educational environments. Teachers not only interpret politeness but also model and enforce norms that influence students' pragmatic competence—the ability to use language appropriately in social contexts (Lacmodin et al., 2018). This competence is especially important for second language learners, who must be socialized into the politeness norms of the target language to communicate effectively and naturally. The development of pragmatic competence through exposure to and practice in polite language use contributes significantly to students' communicative success and social integration within academic communities.

Moreover, politeness strategies in teaching and learning have significant implications for classroom atmosphere and educational outcomes. Research indicates that when teachers employ politeness strategies that reduce imposition and foster cooperation, the teaching-learning process becomes more efficient, respectful, and meaningful (Yoga et al., 2018). The sense of togetherness and mutual respect created through polite communication supports student engagement, motivation, and positive attitudes toward learning, which are crucial predictors of academic achievement. Conversely, perceived impoliteness or disrespect in communication can lead to misunderstandings, decreased participation, and conflicts that undermine the educational environment. Given these complexities, this study aims to explore teachers' views on the linguistic politeness of students across different communication media. By examining how teachers perceive and respond to politeness in both face-to-face and digital interactions, the research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of linguistic politeness in education and to inform pedagogical approaches that promote respectful and effective communication in increasingly digitalized learning environments.

This study aims to investigate teachers' perceptions of students' linguistic politeness across different communication media, considering the influence of media-specific language use and the challenges posed by digital and face-to-face interactions. Specifically, it aims to answer the following question: How do teachers perceive students' linguistic politeness in face-to-face and digital communication, and how do these perceptions influence their teaching practices and classroom management?

2. Material and Methods

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore teachers' views on students' linguistic politeness across different communication media. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate as it allowed for an in-depth examination of teachers' lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of politeness in both face-to-face and digital communication contexts. The study focused on understanding how teachers perceived variations in students' politeness practices, the challenges associated with interpreting politeness cues across media, and the implications of these perceptions for classroom interaction and management.

2.2. Locale and Population

The study was conducted in selected secondary schools in the Philippines, where both face-to-face and digital communication were actively used in instructional and academic interactions. These schools were chosen because of their regular use of digital platforms such as emails, messaging applications, and social media for teacher-student communication, alongside traditional classroom interactions. The participants consisted of teachers who had direct and sustained experience communicating with students in both face-to-face and digital environments. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who could provide rich and relevant insights into students' linguistic politeness across communication media. The teachers varied in terms of teaching experience and subject specialization, ensuring diverse perspectives on the phenomenon under investigation.

2.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the selected teachers. This method allowed the researchers to obtain detailed accounts of participants' experiences while maintaining flexibility to probe emerging issues related to linguistic politeness. An interview guide was developed to ensure consistency across interviews and included questions focusing on teachers' observations of students' politeness in face-to-face interactions, their experiences with student communication in digital platforms, challenges in interpreting politeness cues, and the effects of students' language use on classroom atmosphere and teacher-student relationships. Interviews were conducted either in person or online, depending on the availability and preference of the participants. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent. Field notes were also taken to capture contextual details and non-verbal cues during the interviews. All collected data were handled with strict confidentiality, and participants were assured that the information would be used solely for academic research purposes.

2.4. Treatment of Data

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis. After the interviews were transcribed verbatim, the researchers read each transcript multiple times to achieve familiarity with the data. Initial coding was then conducted to identify significant statements and recurring patterns related to teachers' perceptions of linguistic politeness across communication media. The codes were subsequently grouped into broader themes that reflected shared meanings and variations in participants' responses. These themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and accuracy in representing the data. Throughout the analysis, constant comparison was applied to examine similarities and differences between face-to-face and digital communication contexts. The final themes were clearly defined and interpreted in relation to existing literature on linguistic politeness and educational communication, thereby strengthening the credibility and depth of the findings.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Politeness as multi-dimensional

The concept of politeness in classroom settings extends beyond merely using polite words such as "po" and "opo." It is a holistic practice that encompasses verbal, non-verbal, cultural, and social behaviors. Teachers emphasize that politeness involves how students carry themselves through respectful gestures, tone of voice, eye contact, and posture, which together reflect a multi-dimensional understanding of respect in the classroom environment. Politeness as a multi-dimensional phenomenon involves both spoken and embodied forms of respect. According to Lo and Howard (2009), classroom politeness includes verbal politeness strategies such as indirect requests, hedging, and use of polite markers ("please"), as well as embodied behaviors such as maintaining eye contact, using respectful tone, and appropriate body language. These verbal and non-verbal strategies work together to create a climate of respect and collaborative social interaction between teachers and students, fostering productive learning environments. The multi-dimensional perspective also recognizes how cultural and social expectations shape these behaviors. Non-verbal indicators of politeness commonly highlighted in research include posture, facial expressions, gestures, and body orientation. These non-verbal signals convey respect and can sometimes be more significant than verbal markers in communicating politeness. For example, a respectful posture, attentive body language, and calm tone of voice all contribute to politeness. Teachers who consciously address both verbal and non-verbal aspects are better positioned to cultivate a well-rounded respect culture in classrooms. The implication of this holistic understanding for teaching practice is that educators should explicitly teach and model both verbal and non-verbal politeness strategies. This approach helps students internalize the cultural and social nuances of respect, beyond simple speech markers, enhancing interpersonal relations and classroom management. A multi-faceted approach also acknowledges students' cultural backgrounds and social cues, thus helping avoid misunderstandings and promoting mutual respect. Furthermore, politeness in classrooms is best viewed as a multi-dimensional construct involving verbal strategies like indirectness and polite markers, alongside embodied behaviors such as tone of voice, eye contact, and body language. Lo and Howard (2009) validate this approach, emphasizing that respectful communication mobilizes both spoken and embodied forms of politeness, reflecting complex cultural and social expectations.

3.2. Advantages of Face-to-Face Interaction

Teachers emphasized that politeness is more clearly expressed in face-to-face communication. They shared that greetings, smiles, and respectful gestures help them easily recognize students' intentions. As one teacher stated, "It is easier to sense respect when students greet you in person with a smile or bow." This finding highlights the role of physical presence in making politeness more genuine and easily interpreted. Codes under this theme pointed to the visibility of non-verbal cues as a key factor in communication. Physical presence in face-to-face communication enables individuals to pick up subtle non-verbal indicators such as facial expressions, body posture, tone of voice, and eye contact. These cues add layers of meaning beyond words and help interpret emotions, sincerity, and respect more accurately. This rich communication context facilitates immediate feedback and adjustments in behavior, enhancing mutual understanding and reducing the risk of misinterpretation or conflict. The implication of these findings is that face-to-face interaction fosters stronger teacher-student relationships because it involves embodied, multi-sensory communication. This mode helps build trust, rapport, and a sense of belonging in the classroom, which are crucial for productive learning environments. Digital communication, lacking many of these physical and embodied cues, often cannot replicate the same quality of polite, respectful exchanges as face-to-face contexts. Carlo and Yoo (2020) support this assertion by emphasizing that non-verbal behaviors such as smiles, nods, and body orientation reinforce linguistic politeness in face-to-face settings. Their research confirms that these non-verbal signals are vital in making politeness more apparent, genuine, and effective in classroom interactions. Thus, the physical presence is not simply about co-location but about access to a fuller suite of communication channels that strengthen respect and understanding.

3.3. Challenges of Digital Communication

Teachers admitted that showing and interpreting politeness in digital communication is more difficult. Without gestures, tone, or immediate feedback, written messages could sometimes feel ambiguous. One participant shared, "In chat or email, it is sometimes hard to know if the student is being polite or sarcastic." This observation shows the complexity of pragmatic competence required in digital communication. Politeness in digital contexts depends almost entirely on linguistic forms and lexical choices, which may be insufficient to convey subtle social nuances and emotional tones. Without nonverbal signals to supplement the message, the interpretation of politeness relies heavily on the recipient's subjective inference, which may lead to erroneous judgments about the sender's intent. Consequently, messages may be perceived as overly harsh, sarcastic, or insincere, even when politeness was intended. Moreover, the asynchronous nature of many digital communications eliminates the possibility of real-time clarification or adjustment, thereby heightening uncertainty and the risk of interpersonal friction. The absence of immediate feedback inhibits the natural conversational flow that helps regulate politeness in face-to-face exchanges. Thus, politeness must be explicitly encoded in digital messages through carefully crafted language, honoring social norms and relational dynamics. This requires users to develop enhanced linguistic sensitivity and pragmatic awareness to compensate for the loss of embodied cues. In educational settings, this challenge emphasizes the need for explicit instruction on digital communication etiquette. Future educators and students must cultivate digital literacy that includes pragmatic skills for expressing and interpreting politeness online. Such competence is essential to maintain respectful, effective, and culturally sensitive interactions in increasingly virtual academic environments. Without these skills, digital communication risks undermining rapport and mutual respect between teachers and students, which are foundational to successful learning experiences. This theme highlights the significant challenges that online platforms present in effectively conveying politeness, as the codes frequently indicate confusion, uncertainty, and misinterpretations when politeness is expressed through digital communication. The lack of nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice generates ambiguity, making it difficult for recipients to accurately discern the sender's intended level of respect or sincerity. As a result, digital messages that are meant to be courteous can be misread as sarcastic, insincere, or even rude. This situation emphasizes the necessity for individuals to develop heightened pragmatic awareness and digital communication skills to navigate the limitations of online interactions. Educational interventions that focus on digital communication etiquette are essential to reduce misunderstandings and promote respectful exchanges in virtual learning environments.

The implication of this finding is that teachers and students alike must be more intentional in using clear and respectful language online. Digital literacy must include guidance on how to show politeness in the absence of non-verbal cues. Kim and Park (2021) observed the same issue, noting that digital platforms restrict the expression of non-verbal signals and often lead to misinterpretations. Their work confirms the need for explicit teaching of digital politeness. Additionally, their research highlights how the lack of these embodied cues often leads to frequent misunderstandings and misinterpretations in digital interactions. This deficiency underscores the critical necessity for deliberate and explicit instruction in digital politeness to equip individuals with the skills needed to navigate these challenges successfully. By fostering an increased awareness of pragmatic and linguistic strategies suitable for online communication, educators can help learners maintain respectful and culturally appropriate exchanges despite the inherent limitations of digital environments. This emphasis on explicit teaching not only addresses potential communication breakdowns but also prepares students and educators to engage in more effective, nuanced interactions within increasingly digital academic and professional contexts.

3.1 Effects on Classroom Atmosphere

Teachers noted that students' politeness influenced the classroom atmosphere in significant ways. Respectful communication made the environment lighter, calmer, and more conducive to discussion. As one teacher explained, "When students are respectful, the whole class becomes lighter, and discussions are smoother." Teachers consistently observe that students' polite behavior significantly enhances the classroom environment, making it lighter, calmer, and more conducive to meaningful discussion. Polite communication reduces hostility and tension, which fosters a psychologically safe space where students feel respected and encouraged to participate openly. When respect permeates interactions, interpersonal relationships within the classroom improve, resulting in smoother exchanges and heightened cooperation. According to Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989), politeness strategies mitigate face-threatening acts and contribute to positive social relations, facilitating harmony within institutional settings such as classrooms. Moreover, Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) underscore that a respectful communicative atmosphere promotes both academic engagement and emotional well-being. This nexus between politeness and classroom climate is vital, as outlined by Wang and Guan (2020), who found that classrooms characterized by respectful interactions exhibited higher levels of student motivation and reduced disruptive behaviors. Thus, the cultivation of politeness is not merely a social nicety but a crucial pedagogical element that enriches the learning environment and optimizes student outcomes. This theme reflects how politeness contributes to positive classroom dynamics. Codes under this theme consistently linked respectful behavior with better cooperation and reduced tension among students. The implication is that politeness should be encouraged not only for individual behavior but also for the benefit of the whole classroom. Respectful interactions foster collaboration and strengthen teacher-student relationships. Lo and Howard (2009) support this, noting that mobilizing respect in classrooms helps create supportive learning environments where students feel more engaged and comfortable. This aligns with the teachers' observations in this study.

3.5. Politeness as Culturally Situated

Teachers recognized that politeness is deeply influenced by culture. While honorifics and greetings are essential in the Filipino context, they acknowledged that in other settings, students might show respect differently. One participant shared, "Using honorifics is important in Filipino culture, but in other contexts, students might express respect differently. This theme highlights the cultural relativity of politeness. Codes here often referred to the idea that respect must be understood within its cultural framework rather than measured by one universal standard. The implication is that teachers must remain open-minded and flexible when interpreting politeness, especially in culturally diverse classrooms. Spencer-Oatey (2008) emphasizes this perspective, stressing that politeness is always context-dependent and shaped by cultural expectations. This corroborates the teachers' awareness that politeness cannot be defined in absolute terms.

3.5. Teacher Adaptation and Guidance

Teachers shared that they often adjust their expectations and guide students in showing politeness, particularly in digital communication. They said that reminders, such as including greetings in emails, are common. One participant explained, "We remind students to use greetings in emails or messages, because many forget to include them." This finding points to the active role of teachers in shaping and modeling polite communication. Codes under this theme highlighted how teachers scaffold students' awareness of what is considered respectful in different contexts. The implication is that teachers are not just evaluators of politeness but also mentors who help students practice respectful communication both in person and online. Carlo and Yoo (2020) support this, arguing that teacher scaffolding is crucial in developing students' understanding of appropriate communication practices. This confirms that teacher guidance is essential in sustaining politeness across different modalities. Overall, the results show that teachers view politeness as a complex, multi-layered practice that affects not only individual interactions but also the classroom environment as a whole. While face-to-face communication offers clearer expressions of respect, digital contexts pose unique challenges that require explicit guidance. Politeness is also seen as culturally dependent, reminding teachers to remain sensitive to diverse expressions of respect. Finally, teachers play an important role in guiding students toward effective and respectful communication, underscoring the broader value of politeness in education.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study demonstrated that teachers perceive students' linguistic politeness as a multi-dimensional practice shaped by verbal, non-verbal, cultural, and contextual factors. Politeness was found to be more clearly expressed and interpreted in face-to-face interactions, where tone of voice, gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact provide rich cues that support respectful communication. In contrast, digital communication posed greater challenges due to the absence of these non-verbal signals, often leading to ambiguity and misinterpretation of students' intentions. Teachers expressed concern over the increasing informality of students' language in online platforms, which they associated with casual internet culture and limited pragmatic awareness. Overall, teachers' perceptions of politeness significantly influenced their classroom management strategies, their expectations of student behavior, and their efforts to foster respectful and supportive learning environments across both traditional and digital communication media.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that schools and educators place greater emphasis on explicitly teaching linguistic politeness and pragmatic language skills in both face-to-face and digital contexts. Instructional programs and classroom practices should incorporate guidance on appropriate language use in emails, messaging applications, and social media, including the use of greetings, respectful tone, and context-sensitive expressions. Teachers are encouraged to continue modeling polite communication and to provide consistent reminders and feedback to help students develop awareness of appropriate language choices across different communication media. Additionally, professional development initiatives may be designed to equip teachers with strategies for addressing digital politeness and for managing communication challenges arising from technology-mediated interactions. Such efforts can contribute to more respectful, effective, and culturally sensitive communication in increasingly digitalized educational environments.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The research was limited to a small group of teachers from selected secondary schools in the Philippines, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other educational levels or cultural contexts. The study relied solely on teachers' perspectives and did not include students' views or direct analysis of actual communication exchanges, which could have provided a more comprehensive understanding of linguistic politeness across media. Furthermore, the qualitative nature of the study focused on depth rather than breadth, limiting the ability to quantify patterns of politeness behavior. Future studies may address these limitations by including larger and more diverse participant groups, incorporating students' perspectives, and examining authentic face-to-face and digital interactions to further enrich the understanding of linguistic politeness in educational settings.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare a potential conflict of interest in that both authors are practicing teachers who may apply the findings and recommendations of this study within their own classrooms. If the authors have developed or regularly use specific digital communication tools, messaging applications, or classroom etiquette guides referenced or evaluated in the manuscript, their professional reputation and future opportunities could potentially be influenced by the study's outcomes. Additionally, involvement in teacher training or the development of school policies related to digital politeness may have influenced the interpretation and presentation of the data.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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