A Descriptive Qualitative Analysis of Politeness Strategies in the Classroom Discourse of Pakistani undergraduate Business Students

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Abstract

Politeness remains a fundamental aspect of English language teaching, serving as a crucial mechanism for fostering effective classroom interactions. Both teachers and students, as key participants in the educational process, must actively employ politeness strategies to cultivate a respectful and conducive learning environment. This study aims to explore politeness strategies in the classroom discourse of undergraduate Business students in a public-sector university in Karachi, Pakistan. A descriptive qualitative research method was employed for the study. Subsequently, 42 undergraduate Business student participants were purposively selected. The primary data sources were individual student presentations, each recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were analyzed using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. Unlike previous Pakistani studies that focused on written business correspondence (Gillani & Mahmood, 2011) or isolated speech acts such as requests and apologies, this research examines live oral discourse in professional academic settings. Through qualitative content analysis of 42 recorded presentations (ranging from 5 to 8 minutes each), the study categorizes politeness strategies and assesses their

frequency in peer-directed speech. The findings reveal a predominant use of positive politeness strategies by undergraduate business students. The students employ politeness strategies in presentations deliberately and contextually, using greetings, thanks, apologies, address terms, and fillers to manage relationships, preserve face, and enhance communication.

Key Words: Politeness Strategies, ESL Teaching, Business Communication, Speech, Discourse

Introduction

English proficiency remains a critical priority within Pakistan's education system, yet numerous challenges, such as inadequate instructional strategies and uneven classroom interactions, continue to hinder students' communicative development (Kausar, 2016). Effective classroom discourse, underpinned by politeness, plays a vital role in facilitating language acquisition and learner engagement.

Politeness, conceptualized by Brown & Levinson (1987), operates to mitigate face-threatening acts and promote harmonious communication. In Pakistan, empirical research on politeness has mainly explored written genres like business letters (Gillani & Mahmood, 2011), discrete speech acts such as requests (Alam et al., 2021), and teacher-centered DCT studies (Khan & Ali, 2017). However, **oral presentations among Business undergraduates, especially live classroom discourse, remain largely unstudied**, leaving a gap in understanding how students manage politeness in real-time academic communication.

The lack of research on student-generated oral discourse presents a critical gap. Presentations in professional-speech courses offer rich data to examine contextual politeness management, including strategies directed at peers and audience members (e.g., instructors). To address this, the present study investigates live classroom interactions by **42 Business undergraduates** at a public sector university in Karachi, focusing particularly on their use of politeness strategies during speeches and presentations.

This research contributes substantially in two ways, first **Theoretically**, it extends politeness theory into the oral academic discourse of Pakistani business students, offering new insights into cultural and professional communication norms. **Second, Pedagogically**, it informs instructional design within business communication and EFL programs by highlighting how students exercise pragmatic competence in real world academic settings.

Literature Review

Scholars have long debated the meaning of politeness. Geertz (1960) defined it as a form of "etiquette," while Scupin (1988) and Agha (1994) interpreted it as "honorification", a way of

honoring others. Sifianou (1992) viewed politeness as a method to "restrain feelings… to avoid conflicts", and Holmes (1995) described it as "formal and distancing behaviour" that respects others. More recently, Senowarsito (2013) emphasized politeness as a tool for character building, and Mahmud (2018) linked it to educational motivation and character development, all highlighting its multifaceted role in interpersonal interaction.

Brown & Levinson's (1987) face-saving model remains one of the dominant frameworks in politeness theory. They describe "face" as the self-image individuals wish to present publicly, and categorize politeness strategies into four types including positive politeness, negative politeness, bald on-record, and off-record, to manage face-threatening acts (FTAs) and maintain harmonious communication.

In the Pakistani context, much of the politeness research has centered on written genres or isolated speech acts rather than live oral discourse. For example, Gillani & Mahmood (2011) analyzed a corpus of 1,000 Pakistani business letters and documented frequent use of opening and closing strategies consistent with Brown & Levinson's framework. Shahzadi et al. (2021) explored cross-cultural request strategies among Pakistani and Chinese undergraduates, noting a preference for mood-derivable and conventionally indirect forms. Meanwhile, Khan et al. (2022), using Discourse Completion Tasks, discovered that female students tend to employ positive politeness more frequently in apology contexts. Additionally, Khan & Ali (2017) examined teacher politeness in Karachi University classrooms through DCT and classroom observations, revealing gender-influenced variations in politeness strategy use, but they did not analyze student speech.

Although these studies enrich our understanding of politeness in Pakistani academic and professional settings, they share limitations: emphasis on written modalities, focus on single speech acts, or attention only to teachers rather than students. Notably, live oral discourse, such as student speeches and presentations, remains largely unexplored. Given the importance of such oral academic events, this gap is both significant and timely.

To address this, the current study examines the natural politeness strategies employed by 42 Business undergraduates at a public-sector university in Karachi. It draws upon Brown & Levinson's taxonomy to analyze recorded 5–8-minute student presentations, seeking to identify and compare the use of positive, negative, bald on-record, and off-record strategies. By focusing on live classroom discourse directed at both peers and instructors, this research not only fills a critical niche in Pakistani pragmatics research but also informs pedagogical approaches aimed at enhancing communicative effectiveness in business education.

Methodology

This study employs a **descriptive qualitative research design** to explore the use of politeness strategies among Pakistani Business undergraduates during classroom speeches and presentations. It is "the collection, analysis, and interpretation of comprehensive narrative and visual data in order to gain insights into a particular phenomenon of interest" (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006). A qualitative approach is particularly suitable for examining the exclusive ways in which students manage face and rapport in real-time academic interactions, as it allows for an in-depth understanding of the participants' communicative behaviors and strategies. In this study specific data pertaining to one phenomenon has been collected, analyzed and interpreted.

The study focuses on **42 undergraduate Business students** at a public-sector university in Karachi. **Purposive sampling** technique was used for the selection of study participants. It ensures that they were actively engaged in the course and had ample opportunities to demonstrate their oral communication skills. The sample includes both male and female students, providing a balanced perspective on gendered use of politeness strategies.

Data were collected through **audio-recorded classroom presentations**. Each student was required to deliver a 5–8-minute presentation on a business-related topic. These presentations were recorded during regular class sessions, ensuring that the data reflected authentic classroom interactions. The recordings were transcribed verbatim to capture the exact language used by the students.

The analysis in this study draws on the principles of discourse analysis, which involves the processes of recording, transcribing, selecting, and interpreting spoken language. According to Gee (2011), discourse analysis examines "language-in-use; the study of language at use in the world, not just to say things, but to do things" (p. 9). For this study, transcriptions from 42 students served as the primary data source. The excerpts were purposefully selected to align with the objectives of the research, focusing on relevant content. These transcribed interactions were then interpreted and presented as conversation extracts. Within these extracts, instances of politeness were identified, examined, and analyzed using the theoretical framework of politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987).

While the study provides valuable insights into the use of politeness strategies among Pakistani Business undergraduates, it is limited by its focus on a single institution. The findings may not be generalizable to other contexts or populations. Additionally, the analysis is based solely on oral presentations and does not consider other forms of classroom interaction, such as group discussions or written communication.

Findings

Drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, the data reveal that students employ a range of linguistic and pragmatic strategies to maintain respectful, engaging, and culturally appropriate interactions with both peers and instructors. The identified strategies include greetings, expressions of thanks, address terms, apologies, and fillers. These strategies were examined in terms of their form, function, and frequency, with particular attention to how students managed face-saving acts and audience engagement in a formal academic setting. Selected extracts are presented to illustrate the pragmatic use of these strategies, followed by a discussion of their implications for communicative competence in English as a Second Language (ESL) business education.

Use of Politeness Strategies

Greetings

This section explores the politeness strategies employed by students during the opening moments of their classroom presentations. Specifically, it focuses on the use of greetings, which reflect both cultural norms and communicative intentions. Across the recorded presentations, greetings were observed in the form of **Islamic salutations, English formal greetings**, and **informal peer-oriented phrases**. These strategies functioned to create rapport, establish formality, and demonstrate respect toward the audience.

Extract 1: Initiating with Religious Greeting

Presenter: *Assalamu Alaikum*

Audience: *Wa Alaikum Salam*
Presenter: Today, I am going to present...

In this extract, the presenter initiates the session with a traditional Islamic greeting. The audience reciprocates using the customary response. This exchange reflects not only religious identity but also a culturally embedded strategy for expressing politeness and goodwill. The use of *Assalamu Alaikum* signifies more than a greeting; it aligns with Islamic principles emphasizing respectful interpersonal relations. For Pakistani Muslim students, this phrase is deeply ingrained in daily interactions and serves as a respectful, contextually appropriate way to gain attention and set a polite tone. It also marks the beginning of a formal discourse event, signaling the transition from informal classroom behavior to a more structured academic interaction.

Extract 2: Combining Islamic and English Greetings

Presenter: *Assalamu Alaikum and Good morning, guys.*
Audience: *Wa Alaikum Salam, Good morning!*

Presenter: How are you, guys?
Audience: Good, thank you.

In this instance, the presenter combines both religious and English greetings, reflecting a hybrid approach to politeness. While *Assalamu Alaikum* acknowledges cultural and religious norms, the use of *Good morning* and *How are you,guys?* caters to the expectations of English-medium academic communication. This blend demonstrates students' awareness of both sociocultural and linguistic norms. It also shows an effort to establish rapport, foster inclusivity, and maintain an appropriate level of formality, especially within an ESL (English as a Second Language) context.

Extract 3: Informal Peer-Focused Greeting

Presenter: Hello guys, good morning!
Audience: Morning
Presenter: The topic for today's presentation is...

Here, the presenter adopts an informal and conversational tone using phrases like *Hello guys* and *Good morning*. These expressions reflect a friendly, peer-oriented approach, commonly used among students to reduce social distance. While less formal than the greetings in previous extracts, still function as effective politeness strategies by setting a cooperative tone and easing the audience into the presentation.

b.   Expressions of Thanks

This section explores the students' use of *thanking expressions* as a form of politeness during classroom presentations. Across the recorded sessions, thanking was commonly employed at two key moments: at the beginning of the presentation to express gratitude for the opportunity, and at the conclusion to acknowledge the audience's attention and engagement. These expressions served as pragmatic tools for demonstrating respect, humility, and awareness of social roles in an academic setting.

Extract 4: Thanking for the Opportunity

Presenter: *Assalamu Alaikum*

Thank you very much for providing me this opportunity to present my...

In this extract, the presenter begins with a religious greeting, followed by an expression of gratitude. The phrase *"Thank you very much for providing me this opportunity..."* is directed toward the instructor and the class, recognizing their role in facilitating the speaker's participation. This not only marks the start of the formal interaction but also reflects humility and appreciation, core components of politeness in both Islamic and academic traditions. Such

thanking expressions help establish a respectful tone and signal the student's awareness of hierarchical classroom roles.

Extract 5: Thanking the Instructor Explicitly

Presenter: *Assalamu Alaikum* and *Good morning*
Audience: *Wa Alaikum Salam, Morning*
Presenter: First of all, I am really thankful to our teacher for providing us the chance to present... Today I'm going to...

Here, the student extends appreciation directly to the teacher, using the phrase *"I am really thankful to our teacher..."*. This expression further reinforces a deferential tone, especially important in cultures where educators are viewed as authority figures deserving of verbal acknowledgment. The use of dual greetings, religious and English, mirrors the sociolinguistic awareness discussed earlier. Gratitude here serves as a bridge between respectful cultural norms and formal academic discourse.

Extract 6: Thanking the Audience and Managing Closure

Presenter: That's all from my side. Thank you very much for your patient listening. Now, you may ask questions if any.
Audience: …………………..

Presenter: Yes…..any questions, please?
Audience: ………………………..
Presenter: Okay. That's all. Thank you.

In this extract, the presenter uses a thanking expression to mark the transition from the main presentation to the question-and-answer session. The phrase *"Thank you very much for your patient listening"* functions as a closing strategy, recognizing the audience's engagement and maintaining a courteous tone. Even in the absence of audience feedback, the student reaffirms politeness with a final *"Thank you"*. This pattern reflects the importance of face-saving and interactional balance in classroom discourse, aligning with Brown and Levinson's notion of positive politeness, fostering inclusion and appreciation.

c. Address Terms

This section focuses on the address terms used by student presenters during classroom presentations. The use of address terms, whether general (e.g., *guys*, *everyone*) or specific (e.g.,

personal names), plays an important role in managing social relationships, creating engagement, and marking degrees of formality and familiarity. In an ESL business classroom, such strategies reveal how students navigate peer and authority dynamics using culturally and contextually appropriate forms of reference.

Extract 7: Informal and Direct Address to Peers

Presenter: *Guys, any questions?*
Thank you, guys.
Adil, could you please explain this concept……………?

In this extract, the presenter uses the informal collective term *guys* to address the entire audience. While casual, *guys* is a common peer-oriented term that reduces social distance and creates a sense of group solidarity, a hallmark of positive politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Additionally, the presenter shifts from general address to individualized attention by calling on a peer using his first name (*Adil*) along with the polite request structure *"could you please…"*. This combination maintains respect while encouraging participation, balancing informality with cooperative tone.

Extract 8: Alternating Between Group and Individual Address

Presenter: *Hello, guys… okay, he is going to tell us more about this point.*
Ali, can you share your part with us?
Thank you, everyone.

This extract demonstrates the speaker's fluid movement between addressing the group (*guys*, *everyone*) and individuals (*Ali*, *he*). The use of first names (e.g., *Ali*) reflects a friendly and informal tone common in peer interactions, especially in group presentations. The shift to third-person reference (*he is going to tell us*) subtly manages turn-taking and maintains the collaborative dynamic. The concluding *thank you, everyone* broadens the politeness gesture to the whole audience, closing the segment with an inclusive and appreciative tone. Table 1 below, elaborates the frequencies of utterances of these politeness expressions:

Table 1: Use of Politeness Expressions

Features	Expressions	Frequencies of Utterance (out of 42)
Greetings	*Assalamu Alaikum, Good morning, Hello guys, How are you today?*	42
Thanking expressions	*Than you, Thanks, Thank you very much, I am really thankful to….. , Thank you for your attention and patience, That's all. Thank you……………*	37
Address terms	*Guys*, Dear fellows, Names (*Ali, Adil etc…*),	32

	everyone, he is going to tell us...	
Apology	*Excuse me, Sorry, Please, I am Sorry, Pardon*	26
Fillers	*Well, I mean, hmm, , so, you know, guys…Well, It is….*	31

d. Apologies

Apologetic expressions in classroom discourse function not only to acknowledge minor social infractions but also to maintain harmony and smooth transitions during interaction. In the context of student presentations, apologies were used strategically to regain attention, manage interruptions, acknowledge unintentional disruptions, and facilitate respectful turn-taking. These expressions, though brief, reflected a high level of pragmatic awareness and social sensitivity among the presenters.

Extract 12: Regaining Attention through Polite Interruption

Presenter: *Excuse me? Excuse me?*
Audience: *Yes... yes.*

In this extract, the presenter faces a distracted audience, as classmates are engaged in side conversations. Instead of using direct or confrontational language, the presenter repeatedly uses the phrase *"Excuse me?"* to politely request attention. This strategy reflects a positive politeness approach attempting to mitigate the imposition by acknowledging the audience's autonomy, even in a disruptive moment. The repetition adds emphasis while maintaining courtesy, which helps preserve the overall respectful tone of the presentation.

Extract 13: Correcting Behavior with Apology

Presenter: *Sarim... Please…*
[pauses] Sarim... okay, I am sorry...

In this instance, the presenter attempts to manage classroom behavior by asking specific students to stop talking during the presentation. The initial address (*"Please"*) shows an effort to be polite despite the interruption. When the presenter realizes the instruction might come off as too direct or potentially confrontational, they quickly follow up with *"I am sorry"*. This apologetic phrase softens the command and restores politeness, minimizing any perceived harshness and maintaining peer rapport. It illustrates how students navigate the tension between authority and peer solidarity in academic settings.

Extract 14: Softening Turn-Taking with Apology

Presenter: *I think that's all from my side. If you have any questions, you may ask. Yes... sorry, Adil.*

Adil: *Thanks for the chance.*

After concluding the presentation, the speaker opens the floor for questions. When a classmate indicates interest in speaking, the presenter uses the phrase *"sorry, Adil"* before inviting him to contribute. Though no obvious offense has occurred, the apology serves as a discourse softener, signaling attentiveness and humility in managing the interaction. It reflects a respectful orientation toward peers and contributes to the overall cooperative atmosphere in the classroom. Adil's response (*"Thanks for the chance"*) further confirms the mutual politeness shaping the exchange.

e.   Fillers

Fillers are short, often non-lexical expressions used to maintain the flow of speech during moments of hesitation, uncertainty, or cognitive processing. In the context of undergraduate business students' classroom presentations, fillers such as *"well," "I mean," "hmm," "aaa,"* and *"you know"* etc were commonly used. While typically associated with speech disfluency, these expressions can also serve pragmatic functions, such as **softening transitions, managing self-presentation**, and **reducing the risk of face-threatening acts,** especially in public speaking situations**.**

Extract 15: Managing Hesitation During Explanation

Presenter: *Well, guys, ………………….. I mean,……………………*

Presenter*: .Hmm…………, Aaaa, …………..Okay……….something like that (clears throat)* etc……….

In this extract, the presenter makes frequent use of fillers such as *"well," "I mean," "hmm,"* and *"aaa"* while elaborating on a topic. These expressions function as discourse management tools, allowing the speaker time to organize thoughts while maintaining a connection with the audience. In particular, *"I mean"* serves to clarify or expand ideas, while *"hmm"* and *"aaa"* reflect natural pauses that help avoid abrupt silence, which may be perceived as uncertainty or incompetence. Importantly, these fillers also **mitigate the impact of potential linguistic gaps,** helping the speaker appear more confident and politer.

Extract 16: Use of Fillers During Conceptual Explanation in Presentation
Presenter: So, umm… brand equity is basically the value that a, like, um… a brand adds to a product. I mean, ee… not just the name but the perception—how, hmm… customers feel about it, you know? And… and customer loyalty plays a role here, hmm, because it affects how people repeatedly choose one brand over another.

In this example, the speaker employs a range of fillers (*"I mean," "ee," "hmm," "so"*) while explaining abstract concepts. These expressions act as cognitive scaffolding, allowing the speaker time to retrieve language while maintaining coherence. The strategic use of *"I mean"* clarifies the speaker's intention, while *"hmm"* indicates ongoing reflection. The fillers **buffer potential breakdowns in fluency**, making the speech sound more thoughtful rather than disjointed, and reinforcing a polite, listener-aware communication style.

Extract 17: Fillers in Question Formulation
Presenter: So, um… you know what is… what is brand positioning, right?
Audience:] ……………

Presenter: Hmm… well, it's like… I mean, it's about where your brand stands in the mind of the customer, compared to, umm… other brands.
Presenter: So, yeah… have you ever thought, like, why people prefer one coffee brand over another?
This extract shows the use of *"so"*, *"you know"*, and *"well"* as transitional phrases while formulating a question. These fillers function as **discourse markers** that introduce new information or clarify intentions. The phrase *"you know"* assumes shared knowledge and **invites the audience to co-construct meaning**, a key element in maintaining a cooperative discourse. After a brief pause, the speaker uses *"well"* to gently reframe the explanation. In this way, fillers are not simply hesitation devices but polite communicative strategies that **preserve face** for both the speaker and the audience. Table 2 , blow, explains the functions of politeness strategies :

Table 2: Functions & Types of Politeness Strategies

Politeness Strategy	Excerpt (Key Phrases)	Function	Politeness Type
Greetings	*Assalamu Alaikum*, *Good morning*, *Hello guys*, *How are you today?*	Formal opening, religious-cultural identity, establishing rapport	Positive politeness
Thanking expressions	*Thank you very much*, *I am really thankful to our teacher*	Gratitude to teacher/audience, showing appreciation	Positive politeness
Thanking at closure	*Thank you for your attention and patience*, *That's all. Thank you*	Polite closure, audience acknowledgment	Positive/ negative politeness
Address terms	*Guys*, *Ali*, *Adil*, *everyone*, *he is going to tell us...*	Peer bonding, directing attention, informal engagement	Positive politeness
Apology for interruption	*Excuse me? Excuse me?*, *Please….*	Regaining audience attention politely	Negative politeness
Apology after directive	*Please... I'm sorry*	Correcting peer behavior without confrontation	Negative politeness

Apology in Q&A	*Sorry, Adil*	Softening transition to peer's question	Negative politeness
Fillers in explanation	*Well*, *I mean*, *hmm*, *eee*, *so*, *you know*	Managing hesitation, processing ideas, making speech more fluid	Indirect negative politeness
Fillers in questioning	*So, you know...?*, *Well, it is...*	Smooth question transitions, confirming audience understanding	Indirect negative politeness

Discussion

The analysis of student presentations reveals an explicit use of politeness strategies that reflect both cultural values and pragmatic awareness among Pakistani undergraduate business students. Drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness, this study illustrates how students employ a range of linguistic tools like g**reetings, expressions of thanks, address terms, apologies, and fillers,** to manage social relationships, establish rapport, and navigate formal academic interactions.

One of the most distinctive features observed in the data is the **integration of Islamic greetings (e.g.,** *Assalamu Alaikum***)** alongside conventional English expressions (e.g., *Good morning*, *Hello*). These greetings, used predominantly at the beginning of presentations, serve not only as markers of politeness but also as **identity affirmations** rooted in Islamic teachings. In doing so, students demonstrate an awareness of how **religious-cultural norms intersect with academic expectations**, creating a hybrid discourse that accommodates both.

Expressions of **thanks** also reflected this dual orientation. Students consistently used thanking strategies at the beginning and end of their presentations, thanking the teacher for the opportunity or the audience for their attention. These practices align with both **Islamic values of humility and gratitude** and **academic norms of formal courtesy**, indicating a strong **socio pragmatic alignment** with their communicative environment.

Terms of address such as *guys*, *everyone*, or personal names were frequently used to **reduce social distance and establish a friendly, inclusive tone**, key components of positive politeness. In peer-to-peer interactions, such as calling on classmates or acknowledging group members during joint presentations, the tone remained informal but respectful. These address terms contributed to **group cohesion and shared participation**, especially in a collaborative classroom setting.

Moreover, the use of informal fillers and discourse markers like *you know*, *I mean*, *well*, and *hmm* further contributed to a conversational and approachable tone. These elements softened

the delivery, helping presenters manage hesitation without appearing abrupt or overly authoritative, thus enhancing relational dynamics.

While peer interactions were generally marked by informality, students displayed **increased use of negative politeness strategies** when engaging with authority figures (e.g., the teacher) or during moments of correction or uncertainty. For instance, in moments of disruption or when addressing inattentive classmates, presenters employed **apologies (e.g.,** *Sorry***,** *excuse me***)** to regain control without sounding rude or confrontational. These apologies worked to **minimize imposition and uphold the speaker's politeness,** even under potentially face-threatening conditions.

Similarly, fillers and hesitation markers allowed students to delay responses or reformulate ideas without appearing disrespectful or unprepared. In this way, these non-fluent features served a protective role, **shielding both speaker and listener from communicative breakdowns** and maintaining mutual respect.

Overall, the use of politeness strategies across all categories reflects a **growing pragmatic competence** among Pakistani business students in an English-medium environment. While English may not be their first language, students showed a strong ability to **adjust their language for formality, audience, and context,** drawing on both cultural intuition and academic training. The blending of Islamic expressions, English discourse markers, and polite formulae suggests that students are actively developing **intercultural communicative skills** that will be valuable in both local and international business contexts.

Importantly, these strategies also function as **coping mechanisms**, helping students manage performance anxiety, organize their ideas, and adhere to the expected decorum of professional communication, all while maintaining a polite and respectful atmosphere.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that politeness strategies in student presentations are **not random or accidental,** but **deliberate and context-sensitive.** Through greetings, thanks, apologies, address terms, and fillers, students demonstrate a deep understanding of how to use language for relational management, face-saving, and effective communication.

These insights have significant implications for **business communication pedagogy in ESL settings.** Instructors can build on students' existing pragmatic knowledge by providing explicit instruction in **contextual politeness**, encouraging reflection on cultural-linguistic norms, and designing activities that simulate professional discourse environments. This, in turn, will contribute to students' ability to function successfully in multilingual and multicultural business contexts, both within Pakistan and beyond.

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