

POLITENESS STRATEGY ON STUDENTS' PODCAST: A PRAGMATIC STUDY FOR SPEAKING LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Speaking skills constitute a basic component of English language mastery; yet many tertiary-level EFL students demonstrate insufficient performance in interactive spoken tasks. This study investigates the deployment of politeness strategies in English-language student podcasts and examines their implications for speaking skill development among college students at a private university in Bandung, Indonesia. Adopting a descriptive qualitative approach, data were sourced from students' recorded podcast assignments on themes such as "English for Global Career", "Students' Hobbies, Interests, and Talents". Transcriptions of the student utterances were coded into the four politeness strategy categories proposed by Brown & Levinson (1987): positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record, and off-record. Results show that 56.25% of utterances employ positive politeness, 18.75% negative politeness, 18.75% bald-on-record, and 6.25% off-record. The findings suggest that politeness strategies function as an effective medium for improving speaking skills by promoting interactional engagement, argument construction, and critical response. The study contributes to applied pragmatics and offers pedagogical insights for improving students' communicative and pragmatic competence in EFL speaking tasks.

Keywords: Politeness strategies; Podcast; Speaking learning; College students

A. INTRODUCTION

Speaking skills are the absolute minimum requirement for proficient English communication; however, numerous EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students encounter challenges in achieving communicative proficiency in spoken English (Alsarairh, 2022). In the context of Indonesian higher education, particularly at private universities, college students frequently generate spoken assignments, such as podcasts. However, EFL learners often lack the necessary pragmatic awareness to effectively manage interaction, turn-taking, listener engagement, and face-maintenance (Gaffar et al., 2025). Politeness theory provides a useful way to examine how learners manage their speech in spoken tasks, which helps them improve their speaking skills. These challenges indicate that speaking ability should be viewed not only as linguistic performance, but also as socially situated interaction that requires pragmatic competence.

One of the major obstacles in EFL speaking development lies in student's limited pragmatic competence, particularly in managing interactional meaning. Students often encounter difficulties in adapting their linguistic choices to align with social life and communicative objectives. In interactional speaking tasks, insufficient pragmatic control may result in unintended impoliteness, reduced communicative effectiveness, and breakdowns in interpersonal communication. Politeness theory provides a useful way to examine how learners manage their speech in spoken tasks, which helps them improve their speaking skills. Prior research indicates that podcast-based learning can enhance speaking fluency, confidence, and learner engagement in higher education contexts (Yeh et al., 2021; Nursanti et al., 2023). However, the use of podcasts does not automatically guarantee pragmatic appropriateness. Students may still struggle with politeness, managing face-threatening acts, and navigating relationships in their spoken assignments.

Politeness strategies proposed by (Brown et al., 1987) explains how speakers mitigate face-threatening acts through four major strategies: positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record, and off-record strategies. Politeness strategy offers a structured approach for analysing how speakers regulate interpersonal meaning and manage social relations in spoken interaction. This framework has been employed in prior research to investigate politeness strategies within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom and during interactive speaking assessments (Fitriyah et al., 2020; Jaafar & Ageli, 2022; Syting & Gildore, 2022). In digital communication contexts, politeness strategies have also been examined in platforms such as online discussions, YouTube podcasts, and virtual interactions, demonstrating how speakers shift between directness and indirectness to manage face and engage audiences (Kusmanto & Widodo, 2022; Hassan et al., 2022; Valdellon & Cuarte, 2024).

Research on politeness strategies in EFL speaking indicates that students frequently apply positive politeness to build rapport and maintain interpersonal closeness, while negative politeness and bald-on-record strategies are used to manage formality, efficiency, and task progression (Chaqmaqchee & Jasim, 2022). However, much of the existing research focuses on teacher–student interaction, text-based online communication, or professionally produced digital content, rather than student-generated spoken media. Despite the growing utilization of podcasts as instructional resources to enhance speaking proficiency in Indonesian universities (Aprianto et al., 2020; Nursanti et al., 2023), empirical investigations into politeness strategies within student-generated English podcasts are still relatively scarce. Specifically, there are only few studies that systematically apply Brown and Levinson's four politeness strategy categories to student-generated podcast discourse and quantitatively assess their prevalence.

Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the use of politeness strategies (Brown et al., 1987) in English podcast assignments produced by students at a private university in Bandung, Indonesia, and examines the implications of these strategies for students' speaking skills. By integrating applied pragmatics and podcast-based speaking pedagogy, this study seeks to demonstrate how politeness strategies function as a contextualised resource for developing interactional speaking competence. The study contributes theoretically by improving the application of politeness strategy to student-generated podcast in a tertiary EFL context. Pedagogically, the findings are expected to inform EFL teachers on how podcast-based speaking tasks can be designed to improve pragmatic awareness and interactional speaking competence.

B. METHOD

A descriptive qualitative methodology is implemented in this investigation (Villamin et al., 2025). Descriptive qualitative methodology is a method that is frequently employed in the fields of social sciences. It is regarded for its adaptability and emphasis on the provision of clear, detailed descriptions of phenomena. It endeavours to provide detailed, factual accounts of events or experiences that are closely aligned with the words and perspectives of the participants, without the need for extensive theoretical interpretation. The data were obtained from recorded podcast assignments produced by college students at a private university in Bandung. The episodes included themes such as “English for Global Career” and “Students’ Hobbies, Interests, and Talents”. The corpus is composed of student utterances from podcast episodes collected during the General English class of college students at a private university in Bandung, Indonesia. The podcasts featured four to five students, each of whom possessed a distinctive set of characteristics and a diverse range of English-speaking abilities. One of them served as the podcast's moderator, ensuring that the conversations flowed smoothly. Each podcast lasted for 5 – 10 minutes. The students composed each script, and the lecturer provided some acknowledgements.

The study employed content or thematic analysis as the primary analytical approach, and the findings were reported to closely reflect the participants’ original descriptions. The method does not employ high-inference or abstract interpretation but rather concentrates on the summarisation of data in everyday language (Sandelowski, 2000). The main goal is to understand how students use politeness strategies in their English podcast recordings, and to examine the effects of these strategies on the development of their speaking skills. In the first stage, the transcribed utterances were coded into the four categories of politeness strategy as defined by (Brown et al., 1987); positive politeness: refers to language strategies that are employed to convey friendliness, solidarity, and respect, with the objective of ensuring that the listener feels included and valued (Moorthi et al., 2023), negative politeness: a communication strategy that is designed to minimise imposition and respect the autonomy of the listener (Suyono & Andriyanti, 2021), bald-on-record: a politeness strategy that is distinguished by direct, clear, and unambiguous communication, in which the speaker delivers their message without attempting to soften, mitigate, or disguise the intent (Athuman & Tibategeza, 2021), and off-record: a politeness strategy in which speakers communicate indirectly, allowing their intentions to be inferred rather than explicitly stated (Huong & Ky, 2019).

In the second stage, the analysis focused on the relationship between politeness strategies and speaking skill indicators. Speaking skills were identified through the presence of reasons, explanations, or justifications supporting an opinion; critical response was identified when students evaluated, reacted to, or elaborated on their peers’ statements; communicative competence was reflected in the ability to maintain interaction through turn-taking, topic continuity, and appropriate responses; and interactional engagement was indicated through inviting responses, acknowledging others’ contributions, and managing conversational flow. Each utterance was first coded for its politeness strategy and subsequently examined for the presence of one or more speaking skill indicators. This two-layered coding allowed the analysis to capture how politeness strategies functioned pragmatically within spoken interaction and how they contributed to students’ speaking performance in podcast-based tasks.

To ensure the study's reliability and credibility, several methodological strategies were implemented. Data triangulation was employed to corroborate findings across multiple sources, thereby enhancing the trustworthiness of the analysis (Denzin, 2012). The analysis incorporated three student-generated podcast episodes, each addressing distinct discussion topics; this enabled the researcher to examine the application of politeness strategies across episodes, thereby avoiding dependence on a singular interaction. Excerpts from these episodes were examined to confirm the consistency of coding decisions and emerging interpretations. Peer review was conducted during the data analysis stage to minimize subjective bias in categorizing politeness strategies. After the initial coding was completed by the researcher, the coded transcripts were independently reviewed by a fellow EFL lecturer with a background in pragmatics, who examined the classification of utterances into the four politeness strategy categories proposed by Brown and Levinson. Discrepancies in coding were discussed until agreement was reached, resulting in a refined and consistent coding scheme.

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Distribution of Politeness Strategies

The descriptive coding of the podcast transcripts resulted in 32 student utterances across several podcast episodes. Each utterance was categorized according to Brown et al., (1987) four politeness strategies as described in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency of Politeness Strategies Found in Student Podcasts.

Politeness Strategy	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Typical Example Utterance
Positive Politeness	18	56.25	"Hello everyone." / "We hope you enjoy it. See you again."
Negative Politeness	6	18.75	"Before we start, let me introduce myself." / "Could you share your talk on talents?"
Bald-on-Record	6	18.75	"Okay, today we are going to make a video about talents, hobbies and interests."
Off-Record	2	6.25	"The taste is not good." / "Honestly, joining the program wasn't really my choice ..."
Total	32	100	

Each student's utterance was treated as one coding instance. Frequencies and percentages were calculated with the results as follows (56.25% positive politeness; 18.75% negative politeness; 18.75% bald-on-record; 6.25% off-record). Qualitative data were then analysed to illustrate how these politeness strategies manifest and how they relate to speaking skill indicators (argument construction, responding to opinions, critical thinking, turn-taking). Coding was conducted iteratively: initial coding, peer review, final consensus coding. The dominance of positive politeness (56.25%) indicates that students prioritise solidarity, inclusiveness, and shared identity when communicating. Negative politeness (18.75%) and bald-on-record (18.75%) occur at moderate levels, while off-record strategies appear least frequently (6.25%), reflecting limited indirectness.

Analysis of the podcast transcripts indicates a clear pattern in students' employment of politeness strategies. Positive politeness was the most frequently observed strategy, indicating that students prioritised solidarity, inclusiveness, and interpersonal closeness in their spoken interaction. This prevalence implies that podcast-based speaking assignments foster a communicative atmosphere characterized by friendliness and cooperation. This observed pattern is consistent with prior research conducted within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) environment, which indicates that learners often utilize positive politeness strategies to facilitate interaction and mitigate social distance in spoken exchanges (Maula et al., 2023, Saragih et.al., 2025).

Furthermore, negative politeness strategies were implemented to convey respect and minimize imposition, especially when introducing topics or posing questions, whereas bald-on-record expressions were utilized to effectively manage transitions and articulate task objectives. The presence of negative politeness and bald-on-record strategies, although less frequent, reflects students' awareness of situational demands such as task management, role allocation, and clarity of message delivery. Negative politeness strategies were used to show respect and minimise imposition, particularly when initiating topics or directing questions, while bald-on-record expressions were employed to efficiently manage transitions and state task objectives. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that EFL learners strategically balance politeness and efficiency depending on interactional goals (Chaqmaqchee & Jasim, 2022). In contrast, the limited use of off-record strategies indicates that indirect pragmatic expression may still be underdeveloped, as such strategies require higher pragmatic sensitivity and confidence in managing implicit meaning.

2. Qualitative Patterns of Each Strategy

To illustrate the pragmatic functions of each strategy, selected data are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Examples of Positive Politeness in Student Podcasts

Line	Utterance	Explanation
1	“Hello everyone.”	Greeting establishes rapport and friendly atmosphere.
4	“Uh, in this video I’m not alone, I’m joined by some lovely sister.”	Compliment builds closeness and appreciation.
7	“You can call me Za.”	Offering nickname invites friendliness and solidarity.
9	“Let’s start with introductions, okay? This will be a sharing session ...”	Inclusive “let’s” creates cooperative tone.
30	“Your interests are very serious.”	Compliment shows attentiveness and admiration.

Positive politeness is often used because students consciously try to create a friendly and cooperative atmosphere. This approach reflects the collectivist values found in Indonesian culture, where harmony and group unity are highly valued. The frequent use of inclusive pronouns (*we, let’s*), compliments, and laughter demonstrates pragmatic awareness of audience engagement, which enhances fluency and turn-taking skills in speaking. A closer qualitative examination of the podcast demonstrates how politeness strategies function pragmatically within students’ spoken interaction. Positive politeness was frequently

realised through greetings, compliments, inclusive expressions, and informal address terms, which served to establish rapport and sustain conversational flow. These strategies enabled students to collaboratively construct meaning and maintain audience engagement, supporting findings from earlier studies that highlight the role of positive politeness in improving interactional competence and speaking fluency in EFL classrooms (Kusmanto & Widodo, 2022; Nursanti et al., 2023).

Table 3. Examples of Negative Politeness

Line	Utterance	Explanation
3	“Before we start, let me introduce myself ...”	Use of “let me” shows deference and indirectness.
10	“Could you share your talk on talents?”	Indirect request mitigates imposition.
11	“I don’t have any specific talents, by the way ...”	Self-effacing comment avoids self-praise.
16	“And Kak Lufy sendiri ...”	Honorific “Kak” conveys respect and distance.

These instances in Table 3 demonstrate that negative politeness serves to maintain respect and reduce social imposition. The use of modal expressions and honorifics illustrates learners’ ability to encode social hierarchy linguistically. Negative politeness strategies appeared in contexts where students displayed deference or mitigated requests, such as when inviting peers to share opinions or introducing discussion topics. The use of modal expressions and honorific forms reflects learners’ sensitivity to social roles and interpersonal distance, which is particularly common in Asian EFL contexts (Liu, 2022). Bald-on-record strategies, on the other hand, functioned primarily as task-oriented language, enabling students to manage turn-taking and topic progression efficiently. Such directness may seem less polite, however it is pragmatically appropriate in collaborative tasks where clarity and efficiency are required.

Table 4. Examples of Bald-on-Record and Off-Record Strategies

Line	Utterance	Category	Explanation
2	“Okay, today we are going to make a video about talents ...”	Bald-on-Record	Direct instruction to state purpose.
21	“Horror?”	Bald-on-Record	Direct question, efficient turn-taking.
24	“It’s scary.”	Bald-on-Record	Straightforward statement of opinion.
12	“The taste is not good.”	Off-Record (Humour)	Joking self-criticism to invite laughter.
17	“Honestly, joining the program wasn’t really my choice, but I believe ...”	Off-Record	Indirect expression showing modesty and faith.

Table 4 explains that the relatively small proportion of off-record strategies indicates that students are more comfortable expressing themselves directly. However, the humorous and modest utterances show emerging sophistication in pragmatic control, as students begin to manipulate indirectness for rhetorical or interpersonal effect. Off-record strategies occurred less frequently but were notable for their use in humorous or self-effacing remarks. These instances suggest emerging pragmatic sophistication, as students experimented with indirectness to manage face threatening acts without explicit confrontation. This finding supports previous research indicating that indirect politeness strategies tend to develop later in EFL learners' pragmatic competence (Hassan et al., 2022; Valdellon & Cuarte, 2024).

3. Interpretation and Pedagogical Implications

The dominance of positive politeness strategies in the students' podcasts indicates that they tend to prioritise solidarity, inclusiveness, and interpersonal harmony during spoken interaction. This tendency is reflected in discourse features such as greetings, inclusive markers and explicit acknowledgements of peers' contributions, which helped sustain turn-taking and conversational continuity. These interactional features suggest that positive politeness may contribute to the development of communicative competence, particularly in managing interactional flow and maintaining audience engagement, rather than directly improving speaking proficiency.

The use of negative politeness and bald-on-record strategies, although less frequent, played an important role in task management and message clarity. In the podcast excerpts, negative politeness strategies were often realised through mitigated requests and polite invitations, while bald-on-record expressions appeared in transitions and task-oriented statements. These patterns indicate that students were able to balance efficiency and politeness depending on interactional goals, a tendency also observed in previous EFL classroom studies (Chaqmaqchee & Jasim, 2022). With regard to speaking skill indicators, claims related to fluency, confidence, and critical thinking should be interpreted cautiously. Rather than measuring these constructs directly, the analysis identified observable discourse features such as extended responses containing reasons or explanations, follow-up questions responding to peers' ideas, and evaluative comments that built upon prior turns. These features indicate emerging abilities in argument construction and critical response, which may be facilitated by the supportive interactional space created through politeness strategies. Similar findings have been reported in EFL studies suggesting that pragmatic appropriateness supports more elaborated and reflective spoken responses (Alshamrani, 2023).

In general, the statistics back up (Brown et al., 1987) notion that speakers find a balance between politeness and efficiency based on the situation, their level of authority, and the distance between them and the other person. A notable trend in current research suggests that the comprehension and implementation of politeness strategies substantially contribute to effective communication and foster positive classroom dynamics. Studies conducted in both English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts and general classroom environments consistently reveal that when instructors and students are aware of and actively employ politeness strategies; including positive politeness, negative politeness, and the application of politeness maxims, the classroom communication is improved in terms of cohesion, mutual respect, and overall productivity (Urbis et al., 2022). In Indonesia, student podcasters show the same level of awareness by using politeness in their digital speaking performances.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings suggest that podcast-based speaking activities may serve as a meaningful context for improving students' speaking outcomes and enhance pragmatic awareness. However, these implications should be viewed as suggestive rather than conclusive, given the limited scope of the data. Explicit instructional guidance on politeness strategies may further help students align linguistic form with interactional function and reduce the risk of pragmatic failure, as suggested in previous pedagogical research (Hassan et al., 2022).

D. CONCLUSION

This research examined how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students used politeness strategies in podcast speaking tasks, and how these strategies related to their speaking skills. The results showed that students mainly used positive politeness strategies. These strategies were used to build relationships, show agreement, and encourage teamwork. This pattern reflects the interactive nature of podcast discussions, which encourages students to engage with each other and consider their audience, as well as their desire to maintain positive relationships. Other strategies, like negative politeness and direct statements, were used to manage respect, clarity, and the flow of the task. In contrast, indirect strategies were used less often, suggesting that this type of indirect communication is still developing. These findings indicate that podcast-based speaking tasks create interactive and audience-aware communicative environments that promote both pragmatic sensitivity and oral performance. The strategic use of politeness devices supported students in organizing arguments, managing turn-taking, responding critically, and sustaining interaction. In this way, politeness strategies functioned not merely as interpersonal tools but as mechanisms that facilitated effective spoken communication.

Theoretically, this study contributes to applied pragmatics by extending Brown and Levinson's politeness theory into the context of student-generated digital podcasts in university-level EFL classrooms. By conceptualizing politeness strategies as observable pragmatic resources in technology-mediated spoken interaction, the research highlights the dynamic relationship between pragmatic competence and speaking skill development. From a pedagogical perspective, the findings suggest that podcast-based activities can enhance not only fluency but also pragmatic awareness, argumentative competence, and interactional skills. Integrating explicit instruction on politeness strategies within digital speaking tasks may therefore strengthen students' communicative effectiveness and critical engagement.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted in a single institutional setting with a limited number of participants, which may constrain the generalizability of the results. Additionally, the analysis focused on recorded podcast performances within a specific instructional period, limiting insights into the long-term development of pragmatic competence. The reliance on task-based digital interaction also means that findings may not fully represent spontaneous face-to-face conversational behavior. Future research could expand this investigation by including multiple institutions, varying proficiency levels, or cross-cultural comparisons to examine differences in politeness strategy distribution. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to explore how pragmatic competence evolves over time in digital speaking environments.

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