# "Politeness Strategies and EFL Context of University"

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**Abstract:**

This study tried to consider the politeness strategies use in the EFL context of university. The participants of the study were 12 male and female university lecturers including 6 male and 6 female ones with the age range of 33 to 45 years old and 48 male and female students including 25 male and 23 female ones at MA level at University of kufa and University of Babylon, in Najaf, whose age ranged between 24 to 36. To answer the research questions, a questionnaire for considering politeness strategies used by teachers and students in their interactions was used. The analysis of the data through SPSS revealed that the null hypothesis was rejected. Based on the results gained from the study, university lecturers used off-record politeness strategies more and among students positive politeness strategies were used more than other types in the EFL context of university. The analysis of the data and the findings of the study suggested several pedagogical implications for teachers, students, instructors and curriculum developers of institutions.

**Key words:** Politeness Strategies, EFL Context

## 1.Introduction

The ability of using language can be considered as one of the most important differences between human being and animals and this language can be one important communication medium smong people (Barón, 2016). Communication can be defined as the process of transferring thoughts, ideas and attitudes from one person to another. As Halliday (1973) stated, to fulfill the communication functions, people use langue during interaction with others.

Language and society are interrelated. Language, is related to society and culture (Trudgill, 2019). As Schiffrin (1994) stated, the system of language and its related rules and norms are bounded to the culture and the major source of culture is knowledge.

Language classroom is a sociolinguistics environment and it is a discourse community interaction in which communication happens between teacher and students or students and teacher in the classroom. The interaction should appear to support teaching and learning process in the classroom. Accordingly, Celce-Murcia (2007) said that interaction or human interaction has been defined as a process whereby two or more people engaged in reciprocal actions.

Moreover, teaching is an interactive activity, and successful practitioners rely largely on interaction in the classroom. Belkhadir(2016) refers to different types of interaction in the classroom context. Communication and interaction that happens between students is an important phenomena which provides students with a way to practice different items in the attractive manner. Students view pair practicing as a constraint-free activity, one outside the control of the teacher. In this type of interaction, students are motivated and they find it interesting to be engaged in a lesson when assisted by their peers. Interaction in the classroom can slow down for many reasons. A number of studies proved that having strategies in the class to communicate ideas effectively is an important task for both teachers and students (Moazen, Kafipour, & Soori, 2016; Tan, Nor, & Jaradat, 2012).

In the classroom interaction, teachers and students are the main actors while having different styles in communicating to each other. Kingwell (1993) stated that to communicate is not only phrasing interests and arguments or the maximally efficient transfer of information but also not hurting other people's feelings. In other word, politeness is the expression of the speakers' intention to mitigate face threats carried by certain face threatening acts toward another. Furthermore, based on Yule (1996), politeness is a system of interpersonal relations designed to facilitate interaction by human interaction by minimizing potential conflict and confrontation inherent in all human interchange. Moreover, the use of politeness strategies is important in classroom teaching of a foreign language. It is related to Lakoff (1973) in the sense that politeness is a strategy used by the speaker to avoid conflict with the hearer. It means that problem can be found in a communication process because of different assumptions, conventions or others.

Based on the above mentioned issues, the present study aimed to investigate Kurdish learners of English language politeness strategies in the classroom and considering the fact that whether they use these strategies in the classroom interaction or not. To the best of the knowledge of the researcher there weren't studies in the EFL context of universities to consider these strategies especially in the EFL context of Najaf, Iraq in University of kufa and University of Babylon. The findings of this study could contribute to the study of politeness pragmatics in EFL classroom interactions. It might also serves as beneficial inputs for practitioners of classroom interaction especially English teachers and students in order to create effective EFL classroom interaction. Issues. In order to fill the gap in the research literature, the present study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1.What types of politeness strategies are used by EFL university lecturers in the EFL context of university?

2. What types of politeness strategies are used by EFL students in the EFL context of university?

3.Is there a relationship between politeness strategies used by university lecturers and students in the EFL context of university?

## 2. Literature Review

Language is used for communication to convey one's intention to each other in social interactions. It conveys meaning and makes other people know what other people say and express. Gamble (2005) stated that language has an important role of the behavior and culture in society. Language is used as a medium of sharing information and as a medium to deliver important message among the community. The speaker communicative competence deals with pragmatics (Glaser, 2009). Pragmatics determines our choices of wording and our interpretation of language in different situation.

Politeness has been defined by many different scholars. Geertz (1960) in his study on Javanese community, Indonesia referred politeness as a kind of etiquette. To be polite for Javanese people is to follow sets of etiquette. Scupin (1988) referred politeness as a form honorification or honorific. This means that to be polite is to honor people. Lakoff (1976) stated that politeness is "forms of behaviour which have been developed in societies in order to reduce friction in personal interaction", whereas Sifianou (1992, p. 82) formulated politeness as "a means to restrain feelings and emotion to avoid conflicts". Holmes (1995) viewed politeness as formal and distancing behaviour, which does not intrude or impose and therefore, to be polite is persistent with respects. Mahmud (2010) referred politeness for Bugis people as mutual understanding expressed in the terms of sipakatau to treat each other as humans, sipakalebbi to treat each other modestly, and sipakaraja to treat each other as a great person. In the study of politeness in classroom interaction, Senowarsito (2013) defined that politeness is a tool for character building whereas Mahmud (2018) claimed that politeness is a need in education, a strategy to build character, and as a motivation in the class. The popular theory of politeness is he Brown and Levinson face-saving view (1987). The central idea of this theory is the notion of "face" (Goffman, 1967, p. 5). Brown and Levinson (1987) stated that face is the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself. Every person wants to maintain each other's face, otherwise Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) such as being offended, or annoyed may result. To be polite is to preserve face and to avoid acts that threaten each others' face.

Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed five strategies of politeness. The first strategy is baldly on record without redressive action, which is to follow what it says. The speakers do the FTA in the most direct, clear and unambiguous way because they believe that there are occasions when some constraints force people to speak very directly. For example, if there is an emergency or if there is a major time constraint in which the speaker saves time in order to be effective. The second strategy is positive politeness strategy. It is an appeal to solidarity towards others, that is how to make hearer feel good or to make him feel that his values are shared. Positive politeness utterances are used to extent intimacy, to imply common ground or to share wants. The third strategy is negative politeness strategy which refers to an attempt to demonstrate awareness not to be imposed on, that is, to avoid interfering the interlocutor's freedom of action by using hedges and apologies among others. Brown and Levinson (1987) consider this strategy as the heart of respect behavior because it performs the function of minimizing the imposition over the hearer. The fourth strategy is off record. Generally, it is the use of utterances that are not directly addressed to another. It is called indirect speech. In this strategy, the speaker performs the FTA by saying something indirectly (implicative).

People in their society commonly use polite way to cover their communication. Politeness is an important aspect in communication. Seken (2007) stated that when talking about politeness communication, language will be a behavior of the human in social interaction. When people follow the convention, regulation, norms, value in the society, and keep good relationship in communication, they will be judged as polite.

Teacher and students who communicate to have good relationship in the teaching and learning process need also to concern the strategies that they used to communicate one another in order to create good learning atmosphere. However, someone mostly talk spontaneously. Sometimes, someone say something without noticing the other's response. The politeness strategies can be chosen as politeness behavior to the students by teacher or by the students to their teacher as the function of the politeness strategy is to make a good relationship. Carniasih (2011) stated that communication in the classroom interaction is influenced by the social distance, where the teacher has more power than students. In addition, Seken (2007) stated that there are three parameters which are influenced to the chosen of politeness strategy, namely social distance, power, and imposition.

Moreover, the aim of learning a language is to be communicative, thus the theory proposed by Celce-Murcia (2007) about communicative competence is needed by language learners to communicate the language in a proper way. Providing effective classroom interaction for the students can contribute to the students' language development (Consolo, 2006). The effectiveness can be shown from the interactions that occur in the classroom activity when teachers and students transfer their ideas in communication. However, to achieve the same understanding between the speakers is quite challenging because in speaking language learners such as the EFL students tend to be insufficiently equipped which causes psychological factors such as afraid of making mistakes and fear of criticism (Al-Jamal & AlJamal, 2013; Shen & Chiu, 2019). As a result their self-confidence to communicate in English is low and they often face some difficulties in transferring their ideas to be well understood by the hearers (Zhang, 2009). Moreover, both teachers and students have different communication style. Thus, a strategy to communicate in the classroom setting is needed to create effective classroom interactions between teachers and students (Tan et al., 2016).

Politeness strategies can occur in the social media platform .Jeanyfer and Tanto (2018) had investigated the politeness phenomena in the text messages between students and teachers from different ranking power status. The results of their study

revealed that the use of these strategies is evident in some messages between teache4rs and students, but not all of them applied the strategies.

Ambarwati, Harja, and Thamrian,(2020) argued that politeness strategies occurred as a reflection of humanistic learning. They elaborated politeness strategies in the social media platform as a process to show how students choose appropriate speech, maintain the politeness strategies in doing communication. It showed that students try to apply politeness strategies in their communication but aren't aware of its categories and how to express them. In addition, Widiadnya et al. (2018) investigated the implication of politeness strategies used in the classroom interactions. The result showed that the use of politeness strategies in the classroom interactions imply positive results, for instance, it could create effective communication between teacher and students which contain respect value, improve their interactions, and lessen the interference in their communication.

Nor and Azis (2010), studied politeness relation in decision making. They found a relationship between the use of different politeness strategies and the way students make decisions about the strategies they select to do classroom assignments. In social media, politeness also became a good strategy of communication (Maros & Rosli, 2017). For example, Maros and Rosli (2017) found that Malaysian teenagers frequently used positive politeness as compared to other politeness strategies when they are speaking with each other in social media. Another recent study by Sukarno (2018) compared those people who try to be polite while making requests in comparison to those that don't use politeness strategies in their request. The results revealed that the first group gained better results. All of these studies proved that politeness has important roles in communication. Politeness issues do not merely attract attentions of scholars in the field of sociolinguistics and anthropolinguistics as explained above. Other settings of communication, such as education and classroom setting, also highlight the important roles of politeness. Jiang (2010) claims that in the context of language teaching, politeness is believed to enhance learning by providing a lively and friendly atmosphere in the classroom. Payne-Woolridge's (2010) study had focused on face work in the classroom, which in fact can become an alternative to introduce a fresh way of considering the way teachers speak to pupils about behavior. Findings of these studies confirm that politeness is important in the classroom interaction.

Eshghinezad and Moini (2016) carried out research in the implementation of politeness strategies used in text-messaging. The study investigated if there was significant difference between male and female EFL students, in their use of positive and negative strategies when sending text messages to their university professor. To this end, a total of three hundred Persian and English written text message were analyzed. Findings of the study found positive evidence in that male and female students employed all politeness strategies offered by Brown and Levinson (1987) to maintain politeness to their professor. However, there was no significant difference between the two groups and there was no significant difference between the use of positive and negative strategies in the text messages as well. According to the results of the study conducted by Ambarwati et al.(2019) it was realized that requests done by students in the EFL context of Indonesia were in English, but with Indonesian ways of grounding, getting pre-commitment, checking availability in polite manner. Some researchers found that students in higher and secondary education showed positive and negative politeness strategies in their classroom interactions. For example according to the study conducted by Umayah et al. (2018), the university students as investigated showed the politeness strategies in their presentation activities in the classroom context. It shows the fact that in the classroom students were aware about politeness strategies and the formal situation.

## 3.Method

This study was carried out with the participation of 12 male and female university lecturers including 6 male and 6 female ones with the age range of 33 to 45 years old and 48 male and female students including 25 male and 23 female ones at MA level at University of kufa and University of Babylon, in Najaf. The participants' age ranged between 24 to 36. To answer the research questions, a questionnaire for considering politeness strategies used by teachers and students in their interactions was used.
To begin with, due to the spreading of the Corona virus, the researcher created a group in WhatsApp and added participants both university lecturers and students to the group. He got their phone numbers from the administrator of the university. Then he explained the purpose of the study exactly to the participants in their native language. After that, he created the questionnaire in the Google Docs and send its URL to the group and asked participants to fill out the questionnaire within 3 days.

Prior to this stage, he translated the questionnaire that was based on Rejeki and Azizah (2019) to Arabic language to make it easier to understand for the participants. But after that, again it was used in English language.

In order to check the reliability of the questionnaire, before conducting the main study, a pilot study was conducted. The researcher administered the same questionnaire to the participants. To conduct the pilot study, 6 teachers including 3male and 3 female teachers and 15 students including 10 female and 5 male students were selected and took part in the pilot study. They were asked to fill out the questionnaire within 3 days and they did it.

Finally the researcher put the obtained data into SPSS to obtain the objectives of the study that mainly was to consider politeness strategies in the EFL teaching situation in the University.

## 4. Results and Discussion

In order to achieve this goal, the data was calculated by SPSS version 24 from the applied instruments. The first research question was as follows:

*1. What types of politeness strategies are used by EFL university lecturers in the EFL context during classroom interaction?*

To compare the frequencies and percentages of four types of politeness strategies used by Iraqi EFL university lecturers, descriptive statistics was computed. Table 4.1 shows the results of this test.

Table 4.1

*Frequencies and Percentages of Politeness Strategies used by Iraqi EFL University Lecturers*

| | | Choices | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Not at all True | Slightly True | Somewhat True | Quite True | True | Very True | Total |
| Positive Politeness | Frequency | 44 | 112 | 115 | 75 | 75 | 59 | 480 |
| | % | 8.99 % | 23.35 % | 23.98 % | 15.68 % | 15.68% | 12.32 % | 100 % |
| Negative Politeness | Frequency | 38 | 66 | 67 | 59 | 63 | 43 | 336 |
| | % | 11.31% | 19.64% | 19.93% | 17.59% | 18.77% | 12.76 % | 100 % |
| Off-Record Politeness | Frequency | 55 | 53 | 77 | 95 | 156 | 127 | 563 |
| | % | 9.55% | 9.11% | 13.42% | 17.22 % | 28.46% | 22.24% | 100 % |
| Bold-on Politeness | Frequency | 11 | 9 | 14 | 15 | 20 | 27 | 96 |
| | % | 11.48% | 9.42% | 14.61 % | 15.65 % | 20.91 % | 27.93 % | 100% |

As is shown in Table 4.1, a number of the university lecturers (43.68%) believed that they use positive politeness in their classes, but a few number of them (32.34%) believed that they don't use positive politeness in their classes. Also, majority of the them(49.12%) claimed that they use negative politeness in their classes during an interaction, while (30.95%) believed that university lecturers never use negative politeness in their classes. As well, most of the them(67.92%) believe that they always use off-record politeness in their classes; however, (18.66%) of university lecturers believed that they don't use off-record politeness. Moreover, (64.49%) of tthem believed that they mostly use bold-on politeness , while a few number of them(20.9%) claimed that they don't use bold-on politeness in their classes.

Also, to compare the mean scores of the four types of politeness strategies on a 6-point-likert scale, the researcher computed descriptive statistics including mean, and standard deviation. The results of this test are indicated in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2

*The means and Standard Deviations for the Four Types of Politeness Strategies Used by Iraqi EFL Students*

| Politeness Strategies | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|---|---|---|
| Positive Politeness | 34.21 | 4.02 |
| Negative Politeness | 24.58 | 3.55 |
| Off-Record | 49.33 | 6.12 |
| Bold-on | 8.19 | 2.30 |

As Table 4.2 indicates, the most dominant and important politeness strategy needed for interaction by EFL Iraqi university lecturers was off-record (M= 49.33,SD=6.12) followed by positive politeness (M=34.21, SD=4.02), negative politeness(M=24.58,SD=3.55), and bold-on( M=8.19,SD=2.30). Therefore, most of the Iraqi EFL them use off-record politeness in their classes. Figure 4.1 shows the percentages of the politeness strategies.
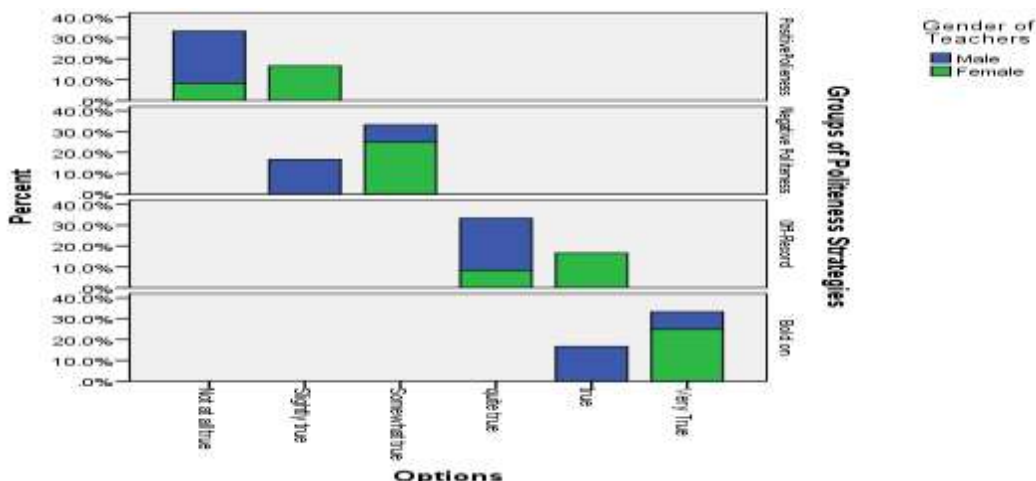


*Figure4.1*. Percentages of politeness strategies used by Iraqi EFL university lecturers

## 4.2.2 Results of the Second Research Question

*2. What types of politeness strategies are used by EFL students in the EFL context during classroom interaction?*

Table 4.3 displays the frequencies and percentages of the four types of politeness strategies used by Iraqi EFL students.

Table 4.3

*Frequencies and Percentages of Politeness Strategies used by Iraqi EFL Students*

| | | Choices | | | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | | Not at all True | Slightly True | Somewhat True | Quite True | True | Very True | Total |
| Positive Politeness | Frequency | 9 | 81 | 71 | 127 | 48 | 108 | 444 |
| | % | 2.1 % | 18.9 % | 16.6 % | 28.95 % | 12.76% | 20.69 % | 100 % |
| Negative Politeness | Frequency | 12 | 61 | 98 | 80 | 59 | 42 | 352 |
| | % | 8.15 % | 18.1% | 20.62% | 19.99% | 16.98% | 16.16 % | 100 % |
| Off-Record Politeness | Frequency | 19 | 78 | 115 | 7 | 117 | 127 | 463 |
| | % | 6.0% | 18.05% | 20.0% | 5.0 % | 22.0% | 28.95% | 100 % |
| Bold-on Politeness | Frequency | 11 | 32 | 62 | 78 | 100 | 105 | 388 |
| | % | 5.0% | 13.73% | 17.57 % | 19.95 % | 20.95 % | 22.8 % | 100% |

Based on the results of Tables 4.3, it can be concluded that majority of students(62.40%) believed that they always use positive politeness in their classes, but a few number of students (21.0%) believed they don't use positive politeness. In addition, a large number of students (53.13%) believed that they mostly use negative politeness. Another (26.2%) believed that they don't use negative politeness. Also, more than half of the students(55.95%) believed that they use off-record politeness; while, (24.05%) claimed that students never use off-record politeness. Finally, most of the students(63.7%) claimed that they use bold-on politeness in their classes; on the other hand, (18.73%) of the students claimed that they don't use bold-on politeness in their classes.

On the other hand, the descriptive statistics including mean and standard deviation of the four types of politeness strategies used by Iraqi EFL students was computed. Table 4.4 presents the results of this test.

Table 4.4

*The Means and Standard Deviations for the Four Politeness Strategies Used by Iraqi EFL Students*

| Politeness Strategies | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|---|---|---|
| Positive Politeness | 43.42 | 4.49 |
| Negative Politeness | 24.48 | 3.75 |
| Off-Record | 36.25 | 6.55 |
| Bold-on | 7.21 | 2.52 |

According to the results of Table 4.4, the most important politeness strategy needed for interaction by EFL Iraqi students was positive politeness (M= 43.42,SD=4.49) followed by off-record politeness (M=36.25, SD=6.55), negative politeness(M=24.48,SD=3.75), and bold-on( M=7.21,SD=2.52). Therefore, most of the Iraqi EFL students use positive politeness in their classes. Figure 4.2 shows the percentages of the politeness strategies used by Iraqi EFL students.
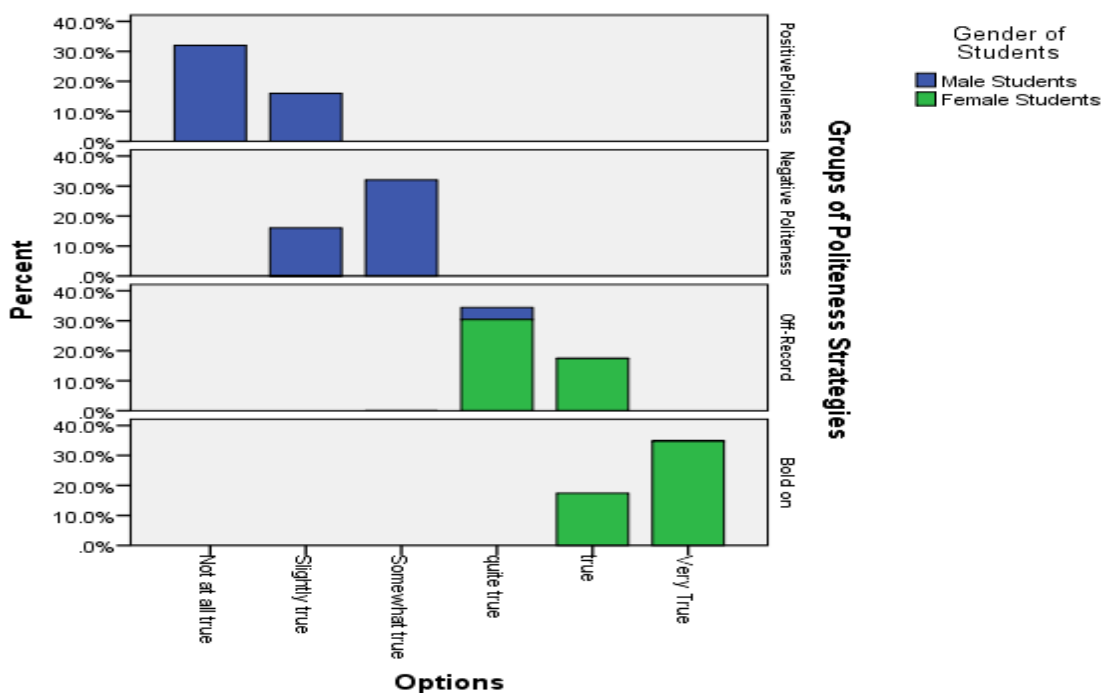


*Figure 4.2.* Percentages of politeness strategies used by Iraqi EFL students

**4.2.3 Results of the Third Research Question**

*3. Is there a relationship between politeness strategies used by university lecturers and students in the EFL classroom interaction in the university?*

To see whether there is a significant relationship between politeness strategies used by university lecturers and students in the EFL classroom interaction, the researcher used Chi-Square test. Table 4.5 indicates the results of this test.

Table 4.5

*Relationship between politeness strategies used by university lecturers and students in the EFL classroom interaction*

|  | Value | df | Asymptotic Significance (2-sided) | Exact Sig. (2-sided) | Exact Sig. (1-sided) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pearson Chi-Square | .083[a] | 1 | .003 |  |  |
| Continuity Correction[b] | .055 | 1 | .000 |  |  |
| Likelihood Ratio | .084 | 1 | .000 |  |  |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | .082 | 1 | .012 |  |  |
| Phi | .042 |  | .003 |  |  |
| N of Valid Cases | 48 |  |  |  |  |

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 11.50.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

As is shown in Table 4.5, since the Zero cells(0.0%) have expected count less than .05, we conclude that the assumption is met. The results revealed that there was a significant small relationship between politeness strategies used by Iraqi EFL university lecturers and students in the classroom interaction in the university context as the ($\chi^2$ (1) = .055, p= .000 < .05, Phi = . 042 representing a weak effect size ). Therefore, the answer to the third research question is affirmative and the third null hypothesis is rejected.

## 5.Conclusion and Implications

Being communicative is one important aim of language learning, thus the theory proposed by CelceMurcia (2007) about communicative competence is needed by language learners to communicate the language in a proper way. Providing effective classroom interaction for the students can contribute to the students' language development (Consolo, 2006).

In addition, politeness is a very important code of conduct in human society. In any social activity human language use has to obey this code too. Researches on politeness is closely related to Leech (1983), and Brown and Levinson (1987). Among them, Brown and Levinson's politeness theory is claimed to be universally valid. Since the publication of their politeness research, many later researchers are following their track more or less. Normally in EFL classrooms, teachers are unavoidable to correct something that a student has said, done, or written. When this correction involves a negative evaluation of a student's trying, a face-threatening act happens. When the student is asked for further explanations, teachers' instructions might be a threat to him/ her because teachers are threatening the student's freedom of action, thus further threaten his/her negative face. Teachers' offering for help might also regarded as an FTA because it threatens students' negative face when teachers suggest that students may owe a debt to teachers and threaten students' positive face when teachers imply that students are in need of help.

Politeness is influenced by cultural background, social background, historical, and geographical elements. Thus, it is important to pay attention to politeness since we live in a country that consists of different ethnic groups that have their own culture and norms regarding how they should interact with one another. Besides that, the awareness of differences in social power or distance should be encouraged when communicating with other people. Encouraging the students related to the importance of having politeness strategy in communication will develop their awareness not only in communicative competence but also cultural awareness, and build their character values. Especially for students from the senior high school level which tend to get easily influenced by their environment either in the real or cyber world in a positive or negative way.

The analysis of the data and the findings of the study suggest several pedagogical implications for the instructors and curriculum developers of institutions. In addition, the findings of this study can be useful for both teachers and learners. If teachers utilizes positive politeness strategy to claim association by virtue of the fact that teachers and students are cooperators in most cases it can increase the chance of success of teaching and learning process.

In addition, if politeness strategies are used in the classroom interactions among teachers and students, students can not recognize social distance between themselves and the teacher that it would increase the positive outcomes of the learning happening in the EFL context in the classroom and it could prepare them for more broad social interactions in the society.

Another implication that can be raised from the results of the present study is that teachers should attempt to raise their students' awareness of basic pragmatic issues, like politeness because the cultural difference between English - speaking communities. The findings can also become input to other universities, especially for practitioners of the EFL classroom interaction about how they should behave in the classroom in order to reach effective ways of interaction in the English language teaching.

The findings of this study are also expected to contribute to the literature of politeness research in classroom context in particular and in Asian context, in general.

Finally, politeness also contributes to the effective interaction and friendly, lively atmosphere in an EFL classroom. So administrators and teachers can use the findings of this study to ensure the fact that this friendly and effective interactions in the classroom context can highly influence the quality of teaching and learning process.

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