

Linguistic Politeness Strategies in Teacher-Student Interactions Across Diverse Disciplines

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Abstract

The current research aims to investigate how linguistic courtesy techniques are developed in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) as well as in the social sciences and humanities at universities in Iraq. This study is grounded in the politeness theory by Brown and Levinson alongside Goffman's concept of face, this study used a mixed-method design with two data collection instruments. Questionnaires were distributed to 200 students and 20 faculty members, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 faculty members. The findings show that faculty from the humanities tend to employ a more indirect and inclusive language, while STEM/science instructors prefer clear and direct language. The academic discourse and culture of the Iraqi population play a major role in Iraqi education. The paper concludes with practical suggestions for context-sensitive academic.

Keywords: linguistic politeness, academic discourse, Iraq, STEM, humanities, pragmatic

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Significance

Communication within educational settings is an important part of creating a positive and inclusive educational environment that promotes both learning and mutual respect. Although the process of effective communication involves a variety of dimensions, including verbal, nonverbal and, more recently, digital communication, linguistic politeness strategies are central to balancing the fine line of authority, respect and collaboration between teachers and students (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967). Within the academic culture of Al-Mustansiriya University in Baghdad, these strategies have a particular importance, since they are used for the purpose of keeping social harmony and saving face while representing the deep-rooted cultural values of respect and hierarchy.

In the past studies of politeness in education have most often been written from both a cultural and a pedagogical perspective (Kasper and Rose 2002; Leech 1983; Watts 2003). However, there is still a lack of knowledge regarding the application of these strategies to various fields of study -

especially to the unique sociocultural and linguistic reality of Iraqi higher education. Examining linguistic politeness in and across various academic disciplines can help us to understand how academic disciplinary norms interact with local cultural expectations to determine the communicative behaviours of teachers and students alike. Ultimately, language in education is not only used as a vehicle for knowledge transmission, it is used as a tool for social relationship building and institutional order. The Iraqi culture's emphasis on respect for elders, cooperation among group members and deference to authority figures greatly influences the way people interact in schools and universities. However, studies that explore the impact of these values on politeness across disciplines substantiate such claims only to a limited extent.

1.2 Research Problem

Politeness strategies have been extensively looked at in EFL/ESL settings, but regarding the variability of these strategies across disciplines and how this should be affected by Iraqi context culture in universities, little is still known

1.3 Research Gap

Despite a great deal of research, linguistic politeness strategies have not been thoroughly examined across academic disciplines. Previous research frequently ignores comparative analyses between disciplines like STEM and the humanities in favor of concentrating on particular cultural or educational contexts, especially in teacher-student interactions. There has never been a systematic comparison of linguistic politeness in STEM, scientific, and humanities classrooms in Iraq that takes into account the perspective of both faculty and college students. This study attempts to address this gap.

1.4 Research Objectives

The purpose of this study is to determine and contrast linguistic politeness techniques across academic fields, as well as to assess their cultural significance and influence on academic communication.

1.5 Research Questions

1. What politeness strategies do the instructors in the two disciplines adopt?
2. How do students perceive these strategies?
3. What is the role of Iraqi cultural norms in shaping these practices?
4. Are there notable differences in strategies across disciplines?

1.6 Overview of Methodology

This study uses a mixed-methods approach comprising structured surveys and detailed interviews conducted at two universities in Iraq. The quantitative

data were analyzed using ANOVA, and the qualitative data were analyzed thematically.

2 . Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Politeness

The study of linguistic politeness has most often been based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness, which identifies four types of strategies: positive politeness (show of solidarity and friendliness), negative politeness (deference and indirectness), bald-on record (direct speech acts), and off-record strategies (hints or vague language). They build this model on Goffman's (1967) concept "face" that concerns one's social self-image about how people look at them and the need to guard this during interaction. These theories have already been tested in educational settings and multiculturalism discourse.

2.2 Politeness in Academic Contexts

Politeness in a classroom extends far beyond simple good manners. It actually shapes how well students learn, how motivated they feel, and even how much they respect their teacher. Back in 1993, Tannen suggested that the way we speak reflects power and closeness, meaning how teachers talk can influence how students see their authority and their connection to others. For instance, Fitriyani and Andriyanti (2020) studied English as a Foreign Language classes and found that students responded better to teachers who used encouraging words, softened their language, and offered gentle criticism. Similarly.

2.3 Politeness in Arab and Iraqi Educational Settings

Politeness negotiations within the Arab academic community exemplifies the value system within the culture: respect for age and rank of others; public disagreement and face saving are all avoided. Softening speech to respect and ensure harmony in the class is a frequent practice of Arab professors (Al-Issa, 2003). In her study of Arab university discourse, Feghali (1997) mentions that particularly in the humanities, directness, is seen as rudeness in discourse. Iraq studies show that college students employ negative politeness (e.g., indirectness, hedging, and modal expressions) and that this is particularly the case for studies in which formality is a must, such as English literature, law, and religious studies (Hassoon, 2025; AlAzzawi, 2019). Methods like these are utilized to lessen the impact of proximity, which is essential in environments with significant power distance, commonly found in Arab societies. "Politeness is key when students ask for something or when a student has to say 'no.' According to Hasan (2025), this situation greatly

depends on the students' knowledge of English. This has been particularly the case for students in linguistics or English language programs”.

They tended to put softer words and supportive phrases when speaking to their instructors. Science students, on the other hand, were prone to utilise words of more standard messages either because they didn't like or didn't develop new communication habits from Arabic. (Nordin et al., 2025).

Within Iraq, recent studies have explored the culturally specific dimensions of academic politeness. In an attempt to avoid conflict, Iraqi teachers tend to use various politeness strategies such as praise and inclusion as found by Mahmood and Abdul Sattar (2019). Al-Bassam and Al-Tamimi (2018) also discovered a difference between what humanities educators do relative to STEM faculty in order to get students interested: indirectness and emotional rapport (humanities), versus efficiency (getting straight into the content) and clarity (STEM). Yaseen (2020) further observed that students across disciplines have different interpretations of politeness cues, which may suggest the need for field-specific training in academic communication.

2.4 Gap in the Literature

Although previous research has explored politeness in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings and in Arab classrooms more generally, very little is known about how politeness actually differs across academic disciplines in Iraq. Most existing studies tend to focus on a single university or rely on anecdotal observations, offering only a partial picture. Moreover, few have used a mixed-methods approach that brings together both faculty and student perspectives. This study seeks to fill that gap by providing a comparative and context-aware instigation of how politeness strategies are used in STEM, science, and humanities classrooms within Iraqi universities.

3. Methodology

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods approach, where quantitative and qualitative information were used to explore linguistic politeness strategies used in Iraqi academic settings. The quantitative component used structured questionnaires distributed to students and faculty, while the qualitative part involved semi-structured interviews with faculty members.

3.1 Participants

A total of 100 undergraduate students and 20 professors from two Iraqi public universities participated in this study. Students were categorized into three distinct academic categories: arts and humanities (34), scientific fields (33), STEM areas (33), along with 20 scholars representing two state universities in Iraq

3.2 Instruments

Students evaluated their classroom experiences through 12 rating-scale questions which assessed respect levels and student participation and teacher politeness. The survey contained 10 questions which focused on professors' communication methods and their cultural awareness and feedback delivery techniques based on their teaching specialties. The interview questions examined how teachers maintain classroom authority while delivering clear information and showing proper respect to students.

For 12 questions, students indicated on a rating scale how respectful their classes were, how frequently they themselves participated and how polite their teachers

were. Ten questions questioned professors about their styles of communication, cultural awareness and how they provided feedback, specific to the work carried out in their fields. Questions in the interview focused on how teachers combine authority, clarity, and politeness in class.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were gathered between January and March 2025. Online and on-campus surveys were distributed. With participants' permission, in-person interviews were recorded. The participating universities granted ethical approval, and all responses were kept anonymous.

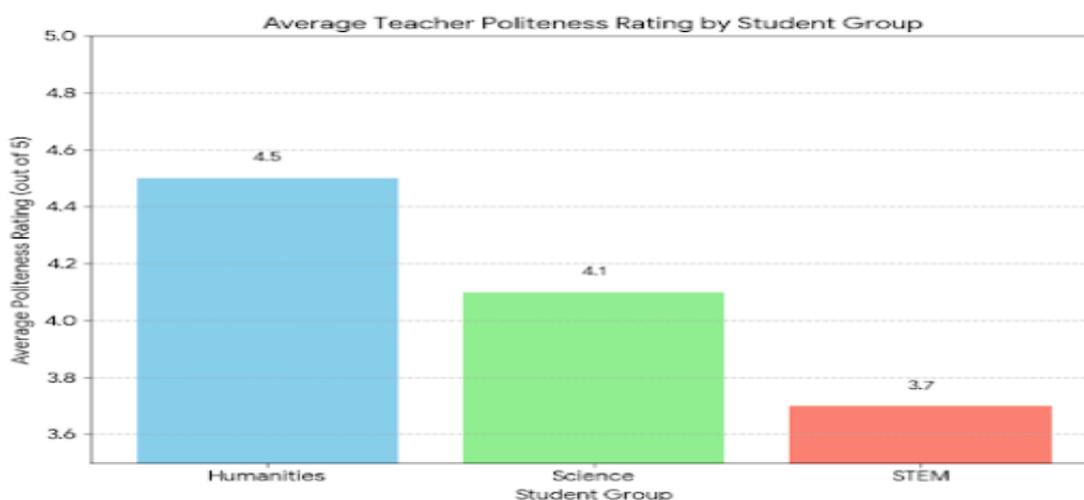
3.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis was performed using SPSS. For all survey questions, descriptive statistics such as the mean and standard deviation were computed. Differences between fields were tested by one-way ANOVA. Interview responses were transcribed and coded thematically to identify language use patterns, and cultural strategies.

4. Results

4.1 Quantitative Findings

Humanities students rated their teachers the politest on average (4.5 out of 5), science students were next (4.1) and then STEM students (3.7). These differences were statistically significant, so they could not be explained by chance. Responses from faculty members paralleled student responses; humanistic faculty used positive politeness strategies more than biochemical and physical science professors (e.g., praise, the use of we and other inclusive pronouns, softening correction). Faculty stressed clarity and conciseness of speech, often employing bald on-record strategies, particularly during technical training.



4.2 Qualitative Themes

Three key themes were identified from the interviews:

12 semi-structured interviews with faculty in different academic fields have been conducted, namely Humanities, Social Sciences, scientific disciplines, analyzed using thematic analysis in accordance with the 6 phases process described by Braun (2006) and Clarke (2006). Inductive coding of the data was then done to show recurring patterns of meaning with regard to the politeness in teacher student communication. Three major themes were distinguished: (1) Cultural Calibration, (2) Disciplinary Assumptions, and (3) Politeness as Engagement. All of these themes bring out a distinct dimension of the perceptions and execution of politeness strategies, as it is perceived and performed by academics' people, in the environment they work, and as a part of the institution they teach.

5. Discussion

We will discuss how our findings relate to our initial questions and theories while trying to keep in mind the Iraqi university context as a particular social and academic institution.

5.1 Addressing Research Questions

RQ1: What politeness strategies do the instructors in the two disciplines adopt?

We found that humanities professors typically exercise positive politeness — compliments galore, inclusivity and kind criticism. In science and technology (STEM) classes, though, lecturers tend to be more direct and value clarity above all else. This is consistent with Brown and Levinson (1987) who claimed that different domains really do favor different styles.

RQ2: What are students' perceptions of these strategies?

Humanists were more satisfied and engaged when their teachers used polite and encouraging language. STEM students valued efficiency, but sometimes perceived direct communication as impersonal or intimidating. Second, this indicates that student constructions of politeness are context-dependent and led by disciplinary specific norms.

What role do cultural norms of Iraqi people play complicating the effectiveness of these practices?

Interview data indicated that teachers from all disciplines adapt their own strategies to the Iraqi culture, specifically not criticizing students in public, preserving face, and deferring to age and rank. Teachers are aware of their tone that students will not

feel disrespected; this reflects Goffman's (1967) concept of face and the sociocultural grounding of politeness

Research Question 4: Are there notable differences in strategies between disciplines?

According to the results of ANOVA, it was found that disciplinary norms significantly affect people's choice of politeness strategy ($p < 0.01$). STEM classes focus on task-oriented communication (doing together) while Humanities on relational engagement (being together).

5.2 Interpretation Through Theoretical Lens

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), politeness is used to mitigate face-threatening acts (FTAs). This study demonstrates that Iraqi instructors, particularly in humanities, rely on positive politeness to manage the power differential inherent in teacher-student interactions. STEM instructors, guided by the epistemological demands of their fields, employ more direct communication, reflecting a bald-on-record approach. Nonetheless, even in STEM, faculty still show concern for face through non-verbal politeness and after-class reassurance.

5.3 Cultural Dynamics in Politeness Strategy Use

Culture does not only determine the strategies to employ but also affects the understanding of the strategies. In Iraq, indirectness is perceived as a respectful way of doing things; it is in this country where the concept of face is applied and therefore, criticism must be refined either way or an individual stands a risk of being offended. Teachers of humanities appeared to be more responsive to these forces and explained their decisions to use particular language by referring to personal experience and classroom unity. STEM faculty explained difficulties in finding a balance between high-technical language and socialized cultural deference.

5.4 Pedagogical Implications

Results show that it is important to place discipline-specific strategies of communication in diverse classroom environments in professional development programs. The training of the faculty should be focused on:

- The ways of exercising authority without driving away students.
- Positive and negative politeness as contextual phenomenon.
- Cultural sensitivity in giving feedback and correction
- Moreover, teacher training and professional development courses has to include pragmatic knowledge and classroom discourse plans.

6 .Conclusion and Implications

The study investigated the extent to which STEM faculty and humanities professors utilize politeness in their lectures at universities of Iraq. The study found field-specific patterns of formal language use as well as local convention in polite speech. The study was conducted on several levels of observation of students and teachers which resulted in a comprehensive understanding of classroom politeness behavior.

6.1 Summary of Key Findings

Findings indicate that humanities professors are less direct and more oriented to the development of relationships and, STEM professors value clarity, speaking, and writing a lot and being direct to the point. The cultural concepts of respect, hierarchy, and shunning embarrassment that dominate the Iraqi culture are significant in the communication practices of professors in the classroom. The element of polite communication among students is viewed as supportive and encouraging, particularly in the humanities.

There was statistically significant difference in politeness strategies between disciplines ($p < 0.01$), which proves that the communication style depends on the pedagogy as well as culture.

6.2 Practical Implications

Teacher Development: Universities ought to institute culturally sensitive communication workshops based on academic discipline

Curriculum Design: Practical skills in communication ought to be introduced in the teacher education programs.

Institutional Policy: Institutions can take into consideration teaching evaluations on the basis of interpersonal effectiveness of instructors.

Linguistic Awareness: Reflective teaching practices that would encourage classroom rapport and student engagement would help to improve language and politeness awareness.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

Despite the useful information given in the investigation, there are certain limitations should be acknowledged:

Size and Scope of The Sample: The sample size was from two public universities. Broader fairly large national or regional samples would increase generalizability.

Language Context: Material was gathered in Arabic and is translated into English Possibly leading to loss of subtle content.

Temporal Context: The cultural development is change; future studies into adjustments or changes of politeness strategies in digital/online learning is hoped to be undertaken.

Future Research Directions:

Research should compare the educational programs between public and private universities in Iraq. It could be worthwhile for research to investigate how students utilize politeness strategies, during their postgraduate studies and in distance learning class sessions. The research investigates how students from different genders understand politeness in academic communication .

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استراتيجيات المجاملة اللغوية في التفاعلات بين الأساتذة والطلبة عبر التخصصات

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مستخلص البحث:

الدراسة الحالية هي محاولة لاستكشاف إنتاج استراتيجيات التأدب اللغوي في سياق تخصصات العلوم التطبيقية (STEM) والعلوم الإنسانية في الجامعات العراقية. واستناداً إلى نظرية المجاملة ليراون وليفنسون، ونظرية الوجه لغوفمان، استخدمت هذه الدراسة منهجاً مختلطاً شمل أداتين لجمع البيانات. تم توزيع الاستبيانات على 200 طالب و20 عضو هيئة تدريس، كما أجريت مقابلات شبه مهيكلة مع 10 من أعضاء هيئة التدريس. تشير النتائج إلى أن أعضاء هيئة التدريس في التخصصات الإنسانية أكثر ميلاً إلى استخدام لغة غير مباشرة وشمولية، في حين يفضل مدرّسو تخصصات العلوم التطبيقية (STEM) لغة واضحة ومباشرة. وتلعب الثقافة والخطاب الأكاديمي للمجتمع العراقي دوراً مهماً في تشكيل التعليم الجامعي في العراق. وتختتم الورقة بتقديم مقترحات عملية تتعلق بتطوير ممارسات أكاديمية تراعي خصوصية السياق الثقافي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التأدب اللغوي، الخطاب الأكاديمي، العراق، العلوم التطبيقية (STEM)، العلوم الإنسانية، التداولية.