

Politeness Strategies used by Students in Communicating Through WhatsApp

Wardah Ismail^{1*}, Mafarhanatul Akmal Ahmad Kamal²

Aina Athirah Rozman Azram³, Najwa Zulkifli⁴, Nur Liyana Johari⁵

¹Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia.
Email: wardahismail@uitm.edu.my

²Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia.
Email: mafarhanatulakmal@uitm.edu.my

³Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia.
Email: aathirah@uitm.edu.my

⁴Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia.
Email: najwa.zulkifli@uitm.edu.my

⁵Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia.
Email: liyanajohari@uitm.edu.my

ABSTRACT

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR (*):

Wardah Ismail
(wardahismail@uitm.edu.my)

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Lack of politeness in society has begun to increase irrespective of the interlocutors in the communication process. There have been some concerns pertaining to the way people talk digitally, mainly because in today's digital world there are massive ways of communication. Hence, certain communicators tend to apply distinct strategies when communicating, especially when using an advanced and instant platform such as WhatsApp. This is due to the differences in the nature of information exchange between the traditional oral and the online written communication. This research was conducted to identify the types of positive and negative politeness strategies used by students in WhatsApp conversations. Positive and negative politeness strategies refer to strategies which are implemented when interlocutors interact with each other regardless of the social distance they share. This research is based on [Brown and Levinson's \(1987\)](#) theory of politeness. This qualitative research was conducted in several stages. It involved collecting 50 WhatsApp conversations from students. The frequency and percentage of positive and negative politeness strategies were tabulated, and the type of positive and negative politeness strategies used by students in these WhatsApp conversations were identified. The major finding of the study indicates that students demonstrated more positive politeness strategies when sending WhatsApp messages to those they are close to such as family and friends, but used more negative politeness strategies when communicating with strangers. Therefore, this study may impact WhatsApp users particularly students with reference to decency even though this study is limited to only written form of data using WhatsApp

application. However, the limitation is not prominent since maintaining politeness or decent manners may come from various platforms regardless written or verbal.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by providing additional and significant insights into the usage of positive and negative politeness strategies among students as well as some justifications of the utilisation. Through rigorous research and thorough analysis, this study too offers further understanding of Brown and Levinson's framework.

1. Introduction

Communication is extremely vital in humans' lives. Whether communication is done in written or verbal form, the act of politeness is to be sustained as every individual must pay attention to politeness. This is due to the fact that the goal of effective communication is not only to properly relay messages to the intended recipients, but also to develop comfortable conversation between the interlocutors, which can produce a sense of connection and familiarity. However, sometimes politeness is not well-observed and thus it will negatively affect communication such as humiliation and social group conflicts especially in the context of communication on social media like Twitter ([Anwar et al., 2021](#)). [Wardhaugh \(2011\)](#) and [Rika Ningsih et. al \(2021\)](#) stated that interlocutors should consider each other's feelings by using language politely and being mindful of not offending others when using language, as this will aid in effective communication among interlocutors.

According to [Brown and Levinson \(1987\)](#), politeness strategies are concerned with a person's face or better known as self-esteem when maintaining interactions with others. Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) occur when an interlocutor threatens another person's face, for instance, a person's positive face is threatened when an addressee does not approve or show support to a speaker by criticising, while a speaker's negative face is threatened when a speaker is restricted from freedom such as, a speaker is bonded to promises and offers. Moreover, [Santi Fitriyani and Erna Andriyanti \(2020\)](#) defined a positive face as the desire for approval, recognition, and respect. It is linked to the need to be liked, valued, and included in social circles. Negative face is about freedom, liberty, and independence. It is linked to the need to do something without restriction. By way of explanation, in interacting, certain words or conversations may threaten the face of interlocutors through Face Threatening Acts (FTAs), and, in order to avoid these threatening acts, interlocutors can employ positive and negative politeness strategies that essentially may assist in creating effective and smooth social interactions. Thus, it can be stated that the two types of faces, positive and negative faces, depict distinct social desires ([Wang Yue, 2022](#)).

Apart from that, as the world becomes more technologically advanced day by day and the use of smartphones and mobile broadband connections becomes more prevalent, mobile text messaging or mobile instant messaging is regarded as one of the most preferred communication tools ([Mahatanankoon & O'Sullivan, 2008](#); [Tang & Hew, 2022](#)). Some of the messaging applications online that existed and among the popular ones are email, Telegram, WhatsApp ([Noh et al., 2023](#)) Line and WeChat ([Amanullah & Ali, 2014](#); [Tang & Hew, 2022](#)), in which WhatsApp application is regarded as the main concern in this research. Hence, this study intends to investigate the types of positive and negative politeness strategies used by students in WhatsApp conversations that may indirectly portray how politeness is applied among students when communicating with those of

casual acquaintance or otherwise so as to maintain courtesy. This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- i. What are the types of positive politeness strategies used by students in WhatsApp conversations?
- ii. What are the types of negative politeness strategies used by students in WhatsApp conversations?

1.1. Research Objectives

Specifically, this study seeks to:

- i. Identify the types of positive politeness strategies used by students in WhatsApp conversations.
- ii. Identify the types of negative politeness strategies used by students in WhatsApp conversations.

2. Literature Review

2.1. WhatsApp application

The emergence and development of technology have influenced the growth of social networking sites including WhatsApp (WA). According to [Shalihah and Winarsih \(2023\)](#), WhatsApp is a substantial text messaging application for smartphone users that can be downloaded easily via Play Store or AppStore. WhatsApp is a well-known smartphone application for sending rapid and instantaneous messages to individuals or groups, with a variety of features including the ability to communicate images, audios, files, videos, documents, and links ([Rekha Asmara, 2020](#); [Van den Berg & Mudau, 2022](#)). It is designed to be accessible for various smartphones such as iPhone and android, further, WhatsApp uses the same amount of Internet data as email and website without any additional charge which makes it convenient to use. Due to this, the usage of WhatsApp has surprisingly increased since 2010 by which the number of users has reached over 300 million in 127 countries every day ([Bouhnik & Deshen, 2014](#); [Ramraj & Usha, 2023](#)), and by 2020 it had more than 2 billion active users globally ([Nobre et al., 2022](#)).

Apart from that, the application of WhatsApp assists in making one's life easier in communicating and helps in strengthening networking among users. [Enakrire and Kehinde \(2022\)](#) pointed out that WhatsApp has become a necessity among various populations of students in online communities as it provides the opportunity to communicate with others, whether for personal or formal purposes. Owing to WhatsApp is designed to be a user-friendly application, almost all users of smartphones these days have a WhatsApp application to communicate with each other. In addition, [Dahdal \(2020\)](#) asserted that students rely heavily on social media to remain connected with their surroundings and the world, with WhatsApp being one of the most significant applications that nearly every student uses.

2.2. Politeness strategies

[Brown and Levinson \(1987\)](#)'s positive politeness strategies relate to the positive face of interlocutors, whereby speakers and hearers save each other's positive face. Through this technique, both speaker and hearer do not threaten one another's positive face. With regard to communication, positive politeness strategies are commonly about the notion

of familiarity and closeness where addressers treat addressees like friends and families in an informal manner as they support each other. Interestingly, as discovered by [Heriyanto and Ananda \(2014\)](#), familiarity and closeness goes beyond well-established relationships and intimacies as they found that anonymity diminishes the role of social gaps and distances and opens the opportunity for honest opinion exchange. This increases the sense of connection and closeness. A study by [Karappan \(2016\)](#) also confirmed that individuals are willing to go to a great length in accommodating and preserving the reputation of others. This shows the significance of face-saving behaviour in social interactions.

Meanwhile, the notion of a negative face is related to the affairs of one's freedom. It is closely related to one's freedom in actions. For example, when a person is currently speaking, that particular person would never want others to interrupt while he/she is speaking. Thus, that person is applying a negative face which is also known as the freedom of personal rights ([Brown & Levinson, 1987](#)). Hence, with reference to being polite, in order to be concerned with an addressee's face as well as protecting one's own rights, an individual needs to take into account both strategies of saving face by conducting positive and negative politeness strategies when necessary. Negative politeness strategies differ from positive politeness strategies to such a degree that negative politeness strategies are conducted in order to perform a deference circumstance and save a speaker's negative face. It can occur when an interlocutor does not interfere with the addressee's freedom and action. Thus, this helps in minimising Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) towards the hearer which indirectly proposes the importance and relations between face and FTAs ([Ismail, 2017](#)). For instance, [Al Afnan \(2014\)](#) stated that this can commonly be seen in the workplace setting where professionalism is given a strong emphasis since hierarchy plays a vital role in communication. [Wang Yue \(2022\)](#) reiterates that both positive and negative politeness strategies can mitigate face-threatening acts and promote social harmony. The conversations gathered are analysed according to the strategies of positive and negative politeness proposed by [Brown and Levinson \(1987\)](#). Table 1 shows a brief illustration of positive and negative politeness strategies as established by [Brown and Levinson \(1987\)](#).

Table 1: Positive and Negative Politeness Strategies

Positive Politeness Strategies	Negative Politeness Strategies
1. Notice/attend to hearer's wants	1. Be conventionally indirect
2. Exaggerate interest/approval	2. Question, hedges
3. Intensify interest	3. Be pessimistic
4. Use in-group identity markers	4. Minimise imposition
5. Seek agreement	5. Give deference
6. Avoid disagreement	6. Apologise
7. Presuppose/assert common ground	7. Impersonalize
8. Joke	8. State the imposition as a general rule
9. Assert knowledge of hearer's wants	9. Nominalize
10. Offer/promises	10. Go on record as incurring a debt
11. Be optimistic	
12. Include both speaker and hearer in the activity	
13. Give (or ask for) reasons	
14. Assume/assert reciprocity	
15. Give gifts to hearer	

Source: [Brown and Levinson \(1987\)](#)

3. Research Methods

This study aims at analysing the types of positive and negative politeness strategies used by students in WhatsApp conversations. A total of 50 WhatsApp conversations were collected which encompass random topics owing to the fact that the study is based on daily communication. Conversations from each participant were garnered through email and through the emails acquired, every text message was analysed and categorised into positive or negative politeness strategies. Then, the frequencies of both politeness strategies were quantified and converted into percentages to help in comparing both elements.

The examined conversations were based on the criteria stated below:

- i. Conversations that were written fully in English.
- ii. Conversations that were written fully in Malay.
- iii. Conversations that were written using both English and Malay.

This study is anchored in Brown and Levinson (1987) politeness theory, in addition, a qualitative research method was applied as it is descriptive in nature. Hence, content analysis was deemed to be the most well-suited tool.

Illustrated below is an example of the utilised analysis table in labelling positive and negative politeness strategies for each text message to establish a clear distinction of both strategies. All data inserted in Table 2 further simplified the categorisation process in analysing different messages acquired from the samples.

Table 2: Labelling of Positive and Negative Politeness Strategies

No	Messages	Positive Politeness Strategies															Negative Politeness Strategies									
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

4. Results

The study found that students employed both positive and negative politeness strategies when communicating through WhatsApp (WA). Table 3 presents the frequencies for positive and negative politeness strategies used by the students.

Table 3: Frequencies of Positive and Negative Politeness Strategies

No.	Type	Positive Politeness Strategies	Negative Politeness Strategies
1	Frequency (n)	757	316
2	Percentage (%)	71	29

The total percentage of positive politeness strategies in the data presented is higher compared to negative politeness strategies where 71% of the conversations were classified as positive politeness strategies while only 29% of the conversations were considered as negative politeness strategies. [Table 4](#) and [Table 5](#) below depict the percentages of the leading positive and negative politeness strategies obtained in this study.

Table 4: Frequencies of Leading Positive Politeness Strategies

Positive Politeness	Percentage (%)
Assert knowledge of hearer's wants	28
Joke	19.55
Seek agreement	13.74

The first three leading positive politeness strategies used by students were asserting knowledge of the hearer's wants, joking and followed by seeking agreement. Words such as *Yay hee, tired being fat, hahaha, i know right, you drove????* were utilised which indirectly portray that both speaker and hearer did not threaten one another's positive face as positive politeness is bound to exhibit being positively perceived or to show closeness in a relationship.

Table 5: Frequencies of Leading Negative Politeness Strategies

Negative Politeness	Percentage (%)
Question/hedge	56.33
Be conventionally indirect	18.99
Give deference	16.46

Meanwhile, question/hedge, be conventionally indirect and give deference were observed to be among the most significant categories performed by the students when employing negative politeness strategy. In attempting to minimise Face Threatening Acts of the hearer, students tended to use hedge including *I think, maybe* and *around* in order to soften their conversations. Indirectly asking the hearer to fulfil something by not directly giving a command was also discovered as well as the usage of the title *kak*, which emphasises that the speaker was implying politeness by displaying deference.

Thus, according to the analysis gathered in this study, positive politeness strategies are seen to be more frequently utilised compared to negative politeness strategies where this claim is supported by and similar with a study conducted by [Karappan \(2016\)](#), who analysed the use of politeness in 'sms your view' column in The Star Daily. Author's findings indicated that positive politeness was prominently used and embraced by Malaysians. A study carried out by [Heriyanto and Ananda \(2014\)](#) on politeness strategies in anonymous online discussion also depicted that positive politeness was widely applied when exchanging information through discussions. As stated by [Al Afnan \(2014\)](#) in his study, commonly positive politeness strategies were used in order to maintain a friendly working environment in which according to his research, the positive politeness strategy

of being optimistic is used regularly among his participants especially between close workmates. Therefore, in other terms, the outcomes of these researches are of the same findings with the analysis of this study.

Meanwhile, negative politeness strategies are said to be mostly popular in emails rather than other medium of communication (Al Afnan, 2014) and this is probably because emails are typically used when it involves a formal way of communication, for example, for sending and receiving letters or information, and also for a student-lecturer channel of interaction (Al Afnan, 2014). As a matter of fact, negative politeness strategies might be less employed in WhatsApp application as they are mostly used in emails between people with a high distance. Hence, the referred research indirectly supports the outcome of this study.

Despite the huge difference between positive and negative politeness strategies used in this current study, it could be seen that students tend to apply both politeness strategies in their conversation as a way to save another person's face. This is supported by Ismail (2017) where the author claims that Malays specifically are believed to be very polite and careful in arranging words as it would assist in developing and maintaining the harmonious relations among interlocutors. Santi Fitriyani and Erna Andriyanti (2020) define a positive face as a desire for approval, acknowledgement, and respect. It is related to wanting to be liked, valued, and accepted socially. In essence, having a positive face entails seeking positive perceptions and affirmations from those around them. Therefore, given that Wang Yue (2022) asserted that both positive and negative faces represent different social goals, which ultimately contribute to reducing face-threatening situations and fostering social harmony, this explains why both politeness strategies are prevalent in almost all of their conversations.

5. Conclusion

This study has clearly answered the two research questions proposed. Positive politeness strategies were employed to a great extent by students and this is probably because most respondents were interacting with friends and families which indirectly led them to employ positive more than negative politeness strategies. Contrastingly, the number of negative politeness strategies employed was quite small, possibly due to respondents might not communicate much with unfamiliar people from a different status. They only used these strategies at a certain time which explains why the number calculated is lower than positive politeness strategies. The results of this study may contribute some pedagogical implications where teachers and students may gain details and explanations concerning positive and negative politeness strategies particularly, in conversations as well as acknowledging each other's dos and don'ts including the code of conduct.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Prior to the commencement of data collection for a Master's study in 2019, obtaining Research Ethics Committee approval was neither mandated nor emphasised. However, consent was obtained from all participants before they began their involvement, and they were all furnished with sufficient information regarding the research. Participants were additionally provided with the option to withdraw from the study at any given time.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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