

The Coagulation of Politeness and Character in Indonesian Language Learning in the Digital Era

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

character;
digital communication;
language learning;
politeness

Article history:

Received 2025-01-06

Revised 2025-05-29

Accepted 2025-06-17

ABSTRACT

The digital era has reshaped higher education, particularly in how students communicate both face-to-face and through digital platforms. This study explores linguistic politeness as a key component of student character development and examines its role in shaping communicative behavior in academic settings. A descriptive-analytical approach was used with 30 university students, assessed across five politeness indicators: respectful greetings, polite requests, appropriate language use, avoidance of harsh expressions, and responsiveness. Data were collected through observations of classroom discussions and digital communications (e.g., WhatsApp and E-learning platforms). A frequency-based coding system was applied, and descriptive statistics were processed using Microsoft Office tools. The findings revealed high levels of politeness in face-to-face interactions, particularly in greetings and responsiveness. However, digital contexts showed a decline in polite request strategies and a limited awareness of hierarchical norms. For instance, while students consistently used formal greetings in person, these were often omitted in emails. This variation indicates a gap in students' ability to adapt politeness strategies across contexts. It highlights the importance of integrating digital etiquette into language learning to support ethical and respectful communication. Linguistic politeness should be emphasized in both physical and digital academic environments to cultivate ethical, inclusive, and socially responsible communicators. Interactive learning methods—such as role-play, simulations, and collaborative discussions—are effective in developing these skills and should be embedded in curriculum design.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of information and communication technology (ICT) in the digital era has significantly transformed various aspects of human life, including higher education. Universities,

as centers of academic learning, are undergoing a major shift in how students learn, communicate, and interact (Onyema et al., 2019; Afnita, 2022; Efrianto et al., 2024). Students today engage not only in face-to-face learning but also through digital platforms such as emails, discussion forums, social media, and messaging applications (Dahdal, 2020; Aditiawarman et al., 2025; Rachman et al., 2024). While these advancements offer new opportunities for academic communication, they also bring challenges—one of which is the decline of linguistic politeness in digital interactions (Gan et al., 2015). In this context, politeness is no longer confined to formal written or spoken discourse, but also applies to the often informal and spontaneous nature of digital communication.

Brown and Levinson's politeness theory offers a foundational framework for understanding such interactions. They distinguish between positive politeness, which aims to establish closeness and solidarity, and negative politeness, which respects autonomy and personal space (Alenezi, 2019; Tennakoon, 2024). This model is closely related to Goffman's concept of "face," or the self-image individuals seek to maintain in social interaction (Peräkylä, 2015). In digital communication, where non-verbal cues are absent and expressive freedom is heightened, the complexity of managing one's own face and respecting others' becomes increasingly significant (Bloch-Wehba, 2019). Integrating these theories highlights the dual nature of digital politeness—balancing social engagement and respectful distance.

Beyond theoretical perspectives, linguistic politeness is influenced by pragmatic and cultural variables. Leech identifies six components of politeness, including generosity, exaggeration, and tactful downgrading (Alsout, 2018; Beck, 2021). Ide (Al-Duleimi et al., 2016) emphasizes that politeness is culturally bound, while Brown (Agovino et al., 2024) underlines the contextual variability of politeness norms. Aburous & Kamla (2022) similarly note that appropriate language use in social interaction requires not only linguistic competence but also sensitivity to local cultural expectations. For example, in Indonesian academic settings, students may fail to adhere to politeness conventions in digital communication with lecturers—such as omitting greetings, being overly direct in requests, or neglecting proper self-introduction—thus unintentionally displaying impoliteness.

This decline in politeness is a concern in character education, as language reflects not only grammatical accuracy but also a speaker's values, respect, and integrity (Jdetawy & Hamzah, 2020). Politeness is essential in shaping students' social conduct and is integral to language education. Haryanto et al. (2024) and Pranowo & Wahyuni (2022) recommend indirectness, euphemism, and figurative language as strategic tools for maintaining politeness in communication. Therefore, Indonesian language learning in higher education should aim not only to build linguistic accuracy, but also to cultivate ethical, empathetic, and culturally aware communicators.

One approach to this is through integrating intercultural competence, as proposed by Byram (Nemouchi & Byram, 2019). He asserts that language education must include a cultural component, encouraging learners to recognize and respect diversity in social norms and communicative behavior (Byram & Golubeva, 2020). Krashen further suggests that creating an emotionally supportive learning environment enhances learners' motivation and fosters positive, polite communication habits (Alnefaie, 2024; Kapukaya, 2020).

Additionally, Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences supports a holistic view of language learning (Makki et al., 2023). Linguistic intelligence, when developed through language instruction, enables students to select appropriate expressions across formal and informal settings, including digital contexts (Fitriyani & Ma'mun, 2022; Kessler, 2018). Therefore, fostering both linguistic competence and linguistic politeness can reinforce character development by encouraging respectful, thoughtful communication in academic and social interactions.

In language learning contexts, Gardner, with his multiple intelligence theory, emphasizes the importance of developing linguistic intelligence to enhance effective and polite communication (Sarani & Malmir, 2020). Dweck adds that developing a growth mindset is crucial in language learning processes (Lou et al., 2022). By providing students with opportunities to learn from mistakes and continually improve their language skills, language education is expected to serve as a platform

for fostering perseverance and resilience. Amidst technological advancements and shifting communication patterns, Indonesian language education that emphasizes politeness and character not only equips students with language skills but also fosters a strong and virtuous personality (Asror et al., 2024; Mariyono, 2024; Marlina et al., 2024; Putri et al., 2025; Sari et al., 2024; Asmawati et al., 2023).

In the context of Indonesian language learning, the development of linguistic politeness pertains not only to technical aspects of language, such as grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure, but also to how students learn to communicate with empathy and respect for others (Umbar, 2019; Ulya & Jaya, 2015; Ulya et al., 2017). Thus, students are expected not only to communicate effectively but also to understand the values that apply in social interactions, both face-to-face and digitally (Mali & Lim, 2021). In this regard, linguistic politeness is not merely a matter of courtesy but also reflects how students demonstrate respect for interlocutors and prevailing social norms.

The development of politeness also aligns with Dweck's concept of a growth mindset, which encourages students to learn from mistakes and accept constructive feedback in their language use (Simile, 2024; Huda et al., 2016). This process not only enhances linguistic skills but also promotes reflective thinking, resilience, and self-awareness. As digital interactions become faster and more frequent, language learners must be equipped not just with technical skills but also with the moral and social sensitivity to communicate appropriately and ethically (Pradita et al., 2024; Ulya, 2024).

Despite its importance, the issue of linguistic politeness in digital academic contexts remains underexplored, particularly within Indonesian language education. According to Haleem et al. (2022), interactions via social media, email, and other digital platforms allow students to communicate more freely, often leading to language use that may lack politeness or be overly direct, disregarding politeness norms (Abu-Rumman et al., 2024; Ferdiansyah et al., 2023). This issue is important to study because the use of polite language reflects one's attitude, values, and character in interactions with others. Existing studies have often focused on politeness in traditional or oral communication, with limited attention to how digital platforms affect politeness practices or how cultural and technological variables can be integrated into language instruction. This study seeks to address that gap by combining classical politeness theories with culturally responsive pedagogies and digital literacy.

Specifically, this research aims to: (1) conceptualize linguistic politeness as an element of character formation, (2) explore effective learning strategies to promote politeness in higher education language courses, and (3) examine the relationship between linguistic politeness and student character within academic environments. The findings are expected to contribute both theoretically and practically by informing curriculum design that prepares students to communicate with politeness, integrity, and cultural awareness in both face-to-face and digital academic settings.

2. METHODS

This study employed a descriptive-analytical approach to investigate linguistic politeness as an integral component of character formation in student communication within the context of higher education. A mixed-methods design was utilized, combining quantitative and qualitative strategies to measure politeness behaviors and explore underlying communicative patterns.

2.1 Participants and Sample Justification

The research involved 30 undergraduate students enrolled in a teacher training program in Indonesian language education at a public university in Indonesia. These participants were selected using purposive sampling, targeting students who had completed core courses in communication and language pragmatics. The sample size of 30 was determined based on practical constraints such as class availability and alignment with sample sizes used in previous sociolinguistic and politeness studies (Taguchi, 2018), which commonly operate within the 20–40 participant range for observational-pragmatic analyses.

2.2 Contexts of Data Collection

Data were collected from student interactions across three primary contexts to capture a comprehensive view of linguistic politeness in various modes of academic communication: (1) classroom Interactions, spoken language during discussions, presentations, and question-answer sessions; (2) digital communication, written exchanges through WhatsApp groups, E-learning comments, and email correspondence between students and lecturers; and (3) extracurricular activities, language used during student-led seminars, group projects, and mentoring sessions. These contexts were selected intentionally, as each represents varying levels of formality, power dynamics, and modality, all of which influence the expression and interpretation of politeness strategies.

2.3 Instruments and Data Collection Procedures

Data collection involved structured observation and document analysis, guided by a checklist of politeness indicators. Students' utterances were assessed based on five categories: use of respectful greetings, polite forms of requesting, appropriate and context-sensitive language, avoidance of harsh or offensive expressions, and responsiveness in conversation. Digital communication artifacts were collected with informed consent and anonymized to protect privacy. A politeness behavior frequency sheet was used to record the presence of these behaviors across contexts. Role plays, case studies, and group discussions were also observed to identify real-time application of polite language in simulated and authentic settings.

2.4 Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative data derived from frequency sheets were analyzed using descriptive statistics. For each politeness category, frequencies, percentages, and mean scores were calculated to assess the prevalence and consistency of polite language use across contexts. Microsoft Excel was used for data tabulation.

2.5 Qualitative Inductive Analysis

An inductive thematic analysis was conducted to interpret qualitative data. The process involved the following steps:

- Data familiarization. Transcripts and digital messages were read multiple times to identify key utterances.
- Open coding. Individual expressions were assigned initial codes (e.g., indirect requests, softened disagreement, honorifics).
- Categorization. Similar codes were grouped into categories reflecting pragmatic strategies.
- Theme Development. Broader themes such as "contextual variation in politeness" and "impact of modality on expression" were constructed.
- Peer Review and Validation. Themes were cross-checked by two independent reviewers to ensure reliability and interpretive consistency.

2.6 Operationalization of Politeness Theories

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory was used as the principal framework for analyzing utterances. Each coded instance was classified as reflecting positive politeness or negative politeness. Goffman's notion of face informed the interpretation of how students navigated power hierarchies in digital versus face-to-face contexts. Additionally, Ide's (1989) concept of culturally grounded politeness and Leech's (2014) maxims were employed to contextualize behaviors within the Indonesian sociocultural landscape. Triangulation of theories, including those on code-mixing, code-switching, and language interference, was used to enhance the credibility of findings and ensure that interpretations were grounded in broader sociolinguistic perspectives.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The digital era offers rapid access to information and communication but also brings challenges to social behavior and polite language among the younger generation. This article discusses how Indonesian language learning can serve as a platform for instilling values of politeness and character through an approach relevant to the digital world. It includes an analysis of teaching strategies that prioritize values of politeness, as well as the role of technology in supporting education that shapes students' good character in both online and offline realms.

Table 1. Linguistic Politeness as Part of Character

No.	Aspect of Linguistic Politeness	Example	Analysis	Frequency
1	Greeting	"Good morning, Sir/Madam"	A polite greeting shows respect and consideration towards the interlocutor.	28
2	Polite Request	"Excuse me, could you...?"	A polite request demonstrates courtesy and respect for the interlocutor.	25
3	Appropriate Language Use	Using Standard Language	Appropriate language use reflects a good level of education and culture.	29
4	Avoiding Harsh Words	Not using harsh language	Avoiding harsh words shows politeness and respect towards the interlocutor.	27
5	Responsiveness	"Thank you for the information"	Providing a polite response shows politeness and respect towards the interlocutor.	30

The data analysis illustrates the level of linguistic politeness in everyday interactions among a sample of 30 individuals. From this data, it can be concluded that the majority of respondents demonstrate a high level of politeness in communication. This is evident from the high frequency observed in each aspect of linguistic politeness. For example, polite greetings such as "Good morning, Sir/Madam" and responsive replies like "Thank you for the information" exemplify behaviors reflecting high levels of politeness. Additionally, the appropriate use of language and avoidance of harsh words stand out as indicators of good communication politeness. This suggests that the respondents have internalized norms of linguistic politeness in their daily interactions.

However, some interesting findings should be noted. Although the frequency for each aspect of linguistic politeness is generally high, there was a slight difference in polite requests, with only 25 out of 30 individuals adhering to politeness norms in their requests. This suggests that awareness regarding how to ask or request something politely may need further improvement. Nevertheless, overall, this data provides a positive portrayal of linguistic politeness awareness and practices among the sample.

Further discussion could examine the implications of this level of linguistic politeness on the quality of social interactions and interpersonal relationships in various contexts, such as academic, professional, and social environments. High linguistic politeness not only creates a more harmonious and inclusive communication environment but also enhances trust and mutual understanding among interacting individuals. Therefore, it is important to continue promoting linguistic politeness awareness and practices as an integral part of a well-rounded communication culture within society.

Table 2. Alternatives for Learning Linguistic Politeness

No.	Learning Alternatives	Description	Frequency
1	Role Play	Students take on roles in various communication situations to practice linguistic politeness.	8
2	Case Study	Students analyze case studies of impolite communication and formulate more polite alternatives.	5
3	Communication Simulation	Students participate in communication simulations where they must use linguistic politeness in interactions.	7
4	Group Discussion	Students discuss in groups to explore concepts of linguistic politeness and apply them in scenarios.	6
5	News Text Analysis	Students analyze news texts or articles to identify the use of linguistic politeness by the authors.	4

The data analysis shows variation in the frequency of selecting alternative learning methods for linguistic politeness among 30 students as the research sample. From the data, the most frequently chosen learning alternative is Role Play, followed by Communication Simulation and Group Discussion. This indicates that methods involving direct interaction and hands-on practice in communication situations tend to be preferred by students for learning linguistic politeness. Role Play allows students to practice linguistic politeness directly in real-life situations, while Communication Simulation provides an opportunity for students to refine their politeness skills in interactions. Group Discussion also provides a platform for students to exchange opinions and apply politeness concepts in specific situations.

On the other hand, Case Studies and News Text Analysis are less favored learning alternatives, with lower frequencies. This may be due to the lack of interactive elements and direct practice in these methods. Nonetheless, Case Studies still add value by allowing students to analyze impolite communication situations and formulate more polite alternatives, while News Text Analysis offers students the opportunity to identify polite language use in media contexts. Therefore, while some learning methods are more popular than others, it is important to consider a variety of teaching methods in order to comprehensively meet students' needs and preferences in learning linguistic politeness.

Table 3. Character Behaviors in the Student Environment

No.	Level of Linguistic Politeness	Description	Character Behavior Example	Percentage (%)
1	High	Students use polite language and respect others in every interaction. They are responsive and attentive to polite behavior.	Always greet, use polite words, and listen well.	50
2	Medium	Students are generally polite in communication, but sometimes they may be less responsive or too blunt in expressing opinions.	Speak politely but occasionally neglect politeness.	30
3	Low	Students tend to pay less attention to politeness in communication. They may use rude language or fail to respect others' opinions.	Use rude words, interrupt conversations, and are less responsive.	20

The findings of this study identified three levels of linguistic politeness among students—high, moderate, and low—demonstrating a diverse range of communication behaviors that reflect varying degrees of awareness and application of polite language. Students with high levels of linguistic

politeness (50%) consistently demonstrated respectful language use, such as initiating greetings, using polite requests, and being responsive. These behaviors reflect strong character traits, such as empathy and consideration for others, reinforcing the argument that linguistic politeness is integral to character development in academic contexts. Conversely, students at the moderate level (30%) generally communicated respectfully but occasionally demonstrated lapses in responsiveness or exhibited overly direct expressions, especially in less formal contexts. Students in the low category (20%) tended to use harsh or inattentive language, indicating a need for deeper engagement with the principles of respectful communication.

A closer examination of specific linguistic behaviors revealed that polite requests showed slightly lower adherence compared to greetings or general responsiveness. This gap may stem from students' limited understanding of the nuanced strategies required to make polite requests, particularly in hierarchical academic settings. According to Brown and Levinson's theory, polite requests require speakers to balance imposition with deference, which may be cognitively or pragmatically demanding for students lacking in sociolinguistic competence (Ezzaouya & Ohashi, 2023; Mohamad et al., 2021). This is especially evident in digital contexts, where informal or abrupt language is more common. Future studies should consider surveying students' perceptions regarding polite requests and their understanding of appropriateness in different settings (Brown, 2022). Cultural variables and uncertainty in interpreting social hierarchy may also affect request formulation, as supported by Matsumoto (Shen et al., 2024).

Politeness is crucial in maintaining constructive interpersonal relationships, as supported by Goffman, who argued that politeness helps maintain social harmony by minimizing conflict (Sifianou, 2019). In higher education, linguistic politeness is closely related to character development. The findings show that most students frequently exhibit polite greetings and appropriate language use. This is consistent with research by Milroy, which found that politeness in greetings reflects respect and a positive attitude toward others, which is essential in multicultural interactions (Neddar, 2023; Schneider & Placencia, 2017). Greetings like "Good morning, Sir/Madam" demonstrate high levels of respect and etiquette. In a multicultural context such as the Riau Islands, this form of communication is important for addressing potential cultural tensions.

The discussion of linguistic politeness in digital communication revealed that while many students used appropriate greetings and respectful phrases, challenges remain. For example, some students used overly casual language when emailing lecturers, such as omitting salutations or signing off with informal terms like "Thanks ya," which may undermine the perceived professionalism of the message. Similarly, social media platforms encouraged brief, clipped messages that often lacked markers of politeness, such as softening devices or indirect requests. These findings are consistent with research by Westbrook and Herring, who noted that the lack of visual and contextual cues in digital communication increases the risk of impolite expression. To address these challenges, institutions should consider implementing digital etiquette training or embedding digital politeness modules in language curricula.

In terms of instructional methods, role play and group discussions were well-received by students and proved effective in encouraging polite language use in simulated and real-life situations (Edy & Arifin, 2024). However, methods such as case studies and text analysis could be enhanced by integrating more interactive elements. For instance, case studies could be followed by role-play reenactments, allowing students to practice resolving real-world communication dilemmas. In addition, collaborative digital tools such as Google Docs, Padlet, or Flipgrid can be incorporated into text analysis exercises to foster active engagement, peer feedback, and reflection on politeness strategies.

While the study primarily used descriptive statistics to analyze politeness levels, future research should incorporate advanced statistical measures to deepen insight. For example, using ANOVA or chi-square tests could reveal whether differences in politeness behaviors across student groups are statistically significant. Additionally, correlation analyses could assess the relationship between

preferred learning methods and observed levels of politeness. This would strengthen the evidence base for designing targeted instructional interventions.

To prepare students for communication challenges in the digital age, digital learning innovations should be introduced into the curriculum (Heinonen & Sthapit, 2024). Gamified applications that simulate communication scenarios can provide real-time feedback on politeness performance, fostering self-awareness and motivation (Kotarputh, 2020). Virtual reality (VR) environments may offer immersive language experiences where students interact with diverse interlocutors and receive instant feedback on linguistic choices. These platforms align with Vygotsky's constructivist theory and Byram's intercultural competence framework, allowing learners to develop linguistic sensitivity in dynamic, culturally varied settings (Moroz & Demianenko, 2022). Therefore, it is essential to introduce and integrate methods like simulations, case studies, and role play into university curricula to develop character-based communication skills that are responsive and polite (Roekhan et al., 2024; Sulistiyo et al., 2020).

Ultimately, this study supports the assertion that linguistic politeness is not only a marker of language proficiency but also a reflection of internalized values and social awareness. The frequent use of polite greetings and expressions observed among the majority of participants illustrates their orientation toward respectful interaction, which is foundational to inclusive and harmonious academic communities. In multicultural contexts such as the Riau Islands, the role of politeness in preventing miscommunication and fostering mutual respect is especially critical (Kawangung, 2019).

In Indonesian language learning, the intersection of politeness and character education provides a pedagogical foundation for producing graduates who are not only linguistically competent but also ethically grounded (Jdetawy & Hamzah, 2020). As Leech (Ejebli, 2024) emphasized, politeness serves as a stabilizing force in socially diverse environments. Therefore, embedding politeness instruction into the language curriculum especially in relation to digital etiquette, cross-cultural awareness, and interpersonal ethics offers a strategic pathway to shaping students into respectful and responsible communicators.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight linguistic politeness as a crucial aspect of student character formation, particularly in an era where digital communication dominates academic and social interactions. Most student participants exhibited high levels of politeness, demonstrated through respectful greetings, courteous requests, appropriate language, and responsiveness across both face-to-face and digital contexts. These behaviors correlate strongly with positive character traits such as empathy, integrity, and social awareness. However, a subset of students displayed lower levels of politeness, indicating the need for targeted interventions like structured mentorship, peer feedback, and personalized pragmatic instruction to enhance their communicative competence. Despite these valuable insights, the study's limitations include its small sample size and limited demographic diversity, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Future research should consider larger, more diverse populations and explore the long-term impact of politeness-focused pedagogies. Additionally, cross-cultural studies could shed light on how linguistic politeness manifests in varying digital and cultural contexts. Overall, integrating linguistic politeness and digital communication ethics into higher education curricula can foster more respectful, inclusive, and socially responsible communicators, equipping students for success in both academic and professional environments.

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