

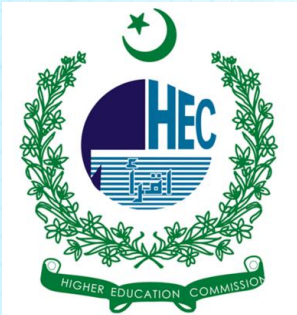
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**Politeness in Pedagogy: Investigating Female Teachers' Use of Politeness Strategies in Classroom Interaction**



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**Abstract**

The study explores politeness strategies used by female teachers in classroom interaction from a socio-linguistic and pragmatic point of view. The research is based upon the concepts of Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage by Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson, which focus on positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record, and off-record strategies in managing communication in the classroom and establishing a good relationship between teacher and student. The study is of a qualitative design, which is a synthesis of the existing classroom discourse studies and previous empirical studies related to teacher interaction. Results show that female teachers mostly employ indirect demands, hedging, inclusive language, compliments, supportive expressions, and so on to reduce the face-threatening acts and establish a cooperative learning atmosphere. These are the ways to create a balance between institutional authority and interpersonal closeness, which fosters student participation, motivation, and rapport in the classroom. The analysis, on the other hand, also indicates that politeness is a relevant pragmatic resource in educational discourse, facilitating interaction and classroom management. In summary, the study underscores the importance of linguistic politeness in the classroom and its role in fostering respectful, interactive, and cooperative learning spaces in educational institutions.

**Keywords:** Politeness, Gender, Pragmatics, Sociolinguistics, Interaction, Classroom discourse, Rapport

**1. Introduction**

Respectful interaction between teachers and students is fundamental to a classroom environment that is respectful, cooperative, and effective, and this is what politeness is about. Patterns of talk are influenced by positions of authority, roles, and social distance in instructional contexts, and teachers are required to constantly negotiate face-threatening acts (FTA) — statements that could offend learners' self-concept or social dignity. Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage (Brown & Levinson, 1987) provides a theoretical basis for understanding such interaction, and classifies

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politeness into four strategies: positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record, and off-record. Teachers often use the above strategies to ensure harmonious interaction, less tension, and greater student engagement in learning (Walsh, 2011).

From a socio-linguistic point of view, classroom discourse is not just a transfer of learning knowledge; it is also a place of social interaction, and relationships are constantly negotiated in the course of language. Teachers' language affects learners' motivation, confidence, and receptivity. Studies on pragmatic competence in the classroom indicate that using polite forms of requests, comments, and instructions can reduce conflict and foster respect between students and between students and teachers, thus creating a better learning climate (Mills, 2003; Holmes, 1995).

Gender is one of the significant variables in the use of politeness strategies. Research on language and gender shows that women tend to use interactional styles that focus on empathy, solidarity, and interpersonal harmony (Lakoff, 1975; Tannen, 1990; Coates, 2015). Classroom teachers are often found to be more sensitive to students' needs, preferences, and face concerns (Ningrum et al., 2018) regarding the use of language by female teachers as compared to their male counterparts. They make use of inclusive language, hedging, indirect requests, and supportive comments in their discourse to establish a safe and non-threatening learning environment.

Furthermore, the use of politeness strategies by female teachers could be interpreted as an attempt to reconcile institutional authority and closeness. They can control classroom behavior while using milder terms in their instructions and corrections, which lessens any resistance or anxiety students may have to classroom controls (Holmes, 1995; Mills, 2003). The key to good classroom management and cooperation is this authority and approachability.

Furthermore, good manners in class communication help to engender rapport, which is an important ingredient in good teaching and learning. Rapport-building language can promote trust and openness and make students feel valued and confident to engage in class activities (Walsh, 2011). Positive politeness strategies, including praise, encouragement, and joint expressions, are frequently used by female teachers, thereby improving interpersonal relationships and the learning atmosphere. Moreover, female teachers' politeness strategies provide insight into the overall understanding of

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the influence of sociocultural norms on communicative behavior in educational institutions. This approach to gender differences does not assume that gender differences are fixed but sees how social roles and interactional goals shape the use of language in context (Coates, 2015). This knowledge is useful in teacher training courses, as an understanding of the pragmatic competence can be used to enhance instructional communication.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Politeness Theory**

The most influential account of linguistic politeness is presented by Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson (1987) in their book *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*, where they assert that the function of language is to contain face-threatening acts (FTAs) that speakers design to reduce. They recognize four general approaches: positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record, and off-record (Brown & Levinson, 1987). It has been extensively used in analyzing institutional talk, particularly the classroom discourse, where the roles and learning objectives are not shared, and therefore, the need for care-taking of the face is heightened.

The view has since been improved by further studies in pragmatics and sociolinguistics that focus on context, power, and relational work. For example, besides being understood as mitigation, politeness is enacted as an ongoing process of negotiation of relations in terms of language use (Holmes, 1995; Mills, 2003). FTAs are common in classrooms, as teachers request, give feedback, instruct, and evaluate, and it is therefore important to be polite to maintain and minimize resistance to cooperation (Walsh, 2011). Empirical research on classroom interaction demonstrates that polite formulations help to understand, motivate learners to participate, and promote a feeling of belongingness (Pang, 2024).

Furthermore, scholars have suggested that the concept of politeness should be taken with reference to certain communities of practice as opposed to a universal system. The term polite is culturally, institutionally, and participatory-dependent (Watts 2003; Locher & Watts 2005). The latter is especially important in contexts where teachers are constantly adjusting their language choices to accommodate their students' age, proficiency, and social backgrounds, such as in education.

## **2.2 Gender and Politeness in Teaching**

Previous studies on language and gender consistently have found that females prefer interactional styles that emphasize empathy, support, and closeness in relationships (Lakoff, 1975; Tannen, 1990; Coates, 2015). These tendencies may manifest in the pedagogical context through the use of softened directives, inclusive expressions, hedging, and supportive feedback. Research that focuses on classroom discourse has revealed that female teachers often use negative politeness in requesting and positive politeness in giving praise or encouragement (Ningrum et al., 2018).

The tendency to be friendlier, approachable, and comfortable with social distance and less anxiety-provoking among learners makes female teachers more likely to be perceived as such (Holmes, 1995). These are strategies that help to balance interpersonal warmth with institutional authority, which is an essential aspect of effective classroom management (Mills, 2003). Through minimizing commands and corrections, female teachers help to establish a less threatening atmosphere, which fosters cooperation and confidence.

Furthermore, Arif et al. (2018) found that the teaching discourse of both male and female lecturers contains politeness strategies, but female lecturers are more prone to employ rapport-building devices and indirect requests. Coates (2015) notes that this does not mean that there are essential differences but rather, 'sociocultural expectations and interactional goals that are informed by gendered identities in school environments'.

The importance of politeness strategies for rapport management is further illustrated by recent developments in classroom pragmatics, which focus on the importance of rapport management in terms of trust, respect, and mutual engagement in interaction (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). This rapport is enhanced when female teachers use a lot of praise, encouragement, and collaborative language, which then has a positive impact on the students' participation and motivation (Walsh, 2011).

Last but not least, modern research highlights the importance of politeness in teaching not as a matter of courtesy but as a pedagogical skill correlated with effective communication in the classroom and classroom success. Such strategies have come to be known as a component of teachers' "pragmatic competence" and professional

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growth (Locher, 2012; Pang, 2024).

### **3. Methodology**

The design of this study is a qualitative research in secondary sources. The data were taken from previously published peer-reviewed studies that were related to classroom interaction, teacher discourse, and politeness strategies. Classroom observations, interviews, and discourse analysis research have been employed to investigate teachers' use of politeness strategies in classroom environments (Walsh, 2011; Locher & Watts, 2005).

Thematic synthesis was undertaken to analyze the literature collected, with particular emphasis on how the literature was concerned with the identification and interpretation of politeness strategies, positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record, and off-record strategies. The data were categorized and analyzed according to the analytical framework of Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage by Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Mills, 2003).

It is frequently employed in socio-linguistic and pragmatic research where classroom data collection is not feasible, and can be used to deepen the analysis of the existing corpus data on politeness in educational discourse (such as Mills, 2003; Holmes, 1995).

### **4. Findings and Discussion**

#### **4.1 Types of Politeness Strategies**

The evidence in the classroom across the studies indicates that female teachers use all the degrees of politeness described in Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage (Brown & Levinson, 1987) that best serve teaching objectives and respect the students' face requirements. They have a common interest in establishing rapport, clarity, and emotional safety, critical features of discourse for sustained participation (Walsh, 2011; Holmes, 1995).

Positive politeness can be seen in inclusive language, praise, shared goals, and personal interest in learners' contributions. The support phrases "Let's solve this together" or "That's a very thoughtful answer" help to decrease social distance and foster social interaction (Holmes, 1995; Spencer-Oatey, 2008).

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Negative politeness is demonstrated by hedges, modals, softeners, and short apologies by teachers (e.g., “Could you try this question, please?”, “I’m sorry to interrupt”). These types are useful because they treat the students' autonomy with respect and reduce the chance of embarrassment when they're being corrected or directed (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Mills, 2003).

Off-record strategies are when teachers give a clue or make rhetorical questions without imposing them on the learners, for instance, “Is there another way we could look at this?” This is indirect, which enables students to self-correct without the loss of dignity (Watts, 2003; Locher & Watts, 2005).

When clarity and/or urgency are needed (safety, time control, discipline, etc.), then less common strategies are implemented (bald-on-record). When this happens, direct imperatives are pedagogically efficient, not as part of relational work (Walsh, 2011). In all these types, the same principle is found: in politeness, there is no ornament, but a service. It allows for instruction, feedback, and control without compromising the self-image of the learner and, therefore, helps maintain a cooperative classroom environment (Holmes, 1995; Walsh, 2011).

## **4.2 Gender differences in politeness of classroom communication**

There is some indication that there might be minor, but significant, gendered differences in the way politeness resources are used in comparative studies. In terms of politeness, female teachers are reported to be more negative polite in making requests and positive polite in giving praise and encouragement (Ningrum et al., 2018). Although the same strategies are used by male and female teachers, differences may pertain to frequency, tone, and interactional purposes rather than to the categories themselves.

Linguistic features are also widely believed to make female teachers more approachable and supportive, consistent with other socio-linguistic studies that indicate that women's discourse is more concerned with interpersonal harmony and empathy (Lakoff, 1975; Tannen, 1990; Coates, 2015). This perception will have an impact on how the student reacts: When the learner feels respected and emotionally safe, he or she will likely participate more readily (Holmes, 1995).

Classroom studies also show that female teachers resort to hedging and

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encouraging learners to minimize learner anxiety and resistance in making corrections and directions (Mills, 2003; Arif et al., 2018). This can help to retain control and maintain proximity—an important balance in good teaching.

In addition to individual styles, these patterns might be understood in terms of rapport management, which involves establishing trust and respect between the teacher and students in the process of learning (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). This rapport is enhanced by the way that female teachers often use collaborative expressions, praise, and softeners to support continued interaction (Walsh, 2011).

Lastly, these results confirm the concept of politeness in teaching as one of the dimensions of pragmatic competence. Gendered communication styles in classrooms can be a point of reference for teacher education and professional development, to support teachers in adopting interactional communication styles that enhance inclusion, confidence, and participation (Locher, 2012; Watts, 2003).

## **5. Conclusion**

From the results of this study, it can be concluded that politeness strategies play an important role in classroom interaction, especially in the discourse of female teachers who tend to use multiple forms of politeness, especially positive and negative politeness, in order to create a supportive and inclusive learning atmosphere by fostering learner-centered learning. In teaching, female teachers use expressions of mitigation, indirectness, encouragement, and relationship-building to maintain a balance between their teaching authority and interpersonal sensitivity and to build cooperative, respectful classroom relationships. The results also suggest that politeness is not just linguistic etiquette but a key pedagogical and pragmatic tool that helps overcome learner anxiety, increase students' involvement, and improve rapport between teacher and student. Thus, a better understanding of these interactional patterns can make a substantial contribution to more successful teacher training, towards more effective classroom management, and towards the development of more communicative and dynamic educational approaches.

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