

Politeness Strategies in Emails Composed by Undergraduate Students at the University of Nizwa and their Implications on ELT

استراتيجيات اللباقة في رسائل البريد الإلكتروني التي يكتبها طلاب المرحلة الجامعية الأولى في جامعة نزوى وتأثيرها على تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

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Abstract:

Objectives: This case study explores email communication sent by undergraduate English I students to their instructors at the University of Nizwa in Oman.

Methods: The study uses a mixed-method approach and attempts to provide an insightful analysis of the politeness strategies used in email communication by undergraduate English I students at the University of Nizwa, Oman.

Results: This study has provided an analysis of the politeness strategies used by a sample of 118 emails written by English I students, highlighting a predominant use of negative politeness strategies. The study's findings and interpretations can be useful for enhancing effective ELT practices, particularly in non-native English-speaking contexts.

Conclusions: This study offers some insights for educators, policymakers, and practitioners in ELT for more effective ELT practices in similar contexts.

Keywords: *politeness strategies; email communication; politeness theory (PT); undergraduate English language students.*

المخلص:

الأهداف: تستكشف هذه الدراسة الحالة التواصل عبر البريد الإلكتروني الذي أرسله طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية (المستوى الأول) في مرحلة البكالوريوس إلى مدرّسهم في جامعة نزوى بسلطنة عُمان.

المنهجية: تستخدم الدراسة منهجاً مختلطاً، وتسعى إلى تقديم تحليل متعمق لاستراتيجيات التأدب اللغوي المستخدمة في التواصل عبر البريد الإلكتروني من قبل طلبة مقرر اللغة الإنجليزية (I) في مرحلة البكالوريوس بجامعة نزوى في سلطنة عُمان.

النتائج: قدّمت هذه الدراسة تحليلاً لاستراتيجيات التأدب اللغوي المستخدمة في عينة مكونة من 118 رسالة بريد إلكتروني كتبها طلبة مقرر اللغة الإنجليزية (1)، مسلطة الضوء على الاستخدام الغالب لاستراتيجيات التأدب السلبي. ويمكن أن تسهم نتائج الدراسة وتفسيراتها في تعزيز ممارسات تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية (ELT) الفعّالة، ولا سيما في السياقات التي تُستخدم فيها اللغة الإنجليزية من قبل غير الناطقين بها.

الخلاصة: تقدم هذه الدراسة بعض الرؤى والإسهامات المفيدة للمعلمين وصانعي السياسات والممارسين في مجال تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية (ELT)، بما يسهم في تعزيز فاعلية ممارسات تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية في سياقات مماثلة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: استراتيجيات التأدب؛ التواصل عبر البريد الإلكتروني؛ نظرية التأدب (PT)؛ طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية في المرحلة الجامعية.

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1 Introduction

What may be considered a perfectly polite strategy in one language may be seen as inappropriate in another language. Undergraduate English I, that is equivalent to intermediate level in Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), students at times use politeness strategies ineffectively within the context of email communication with their instructors, and this may cause potential misunderstandings.

The theoretical framework for this case study is grounded on Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of PT, with particular attention given to positive and negative politeness. This framework is within the broader face-saving view of PT, and it will be applied to analyze the language students use in their emails.

The purpose of this study is to explore the politeness strategies English I students use in their emails to their instructors, intending to provide insights into the dynamics and effectiveness of their correspondences, which may have implications for ELT.

1.1 Research Objectives

The objectives of this case study are as follows:

- To explore the most frequent type of politeness strategies used by English I students in their email interactions with their instructors.
- To explore the implications of students' use of politeness strategies on ELT.

1.2 Research Questions

The research questions for this case study are as follows:

- Which politeness strategies do English I students use more frequently in their email interactions with their instructors?
- What implications does this have for ELT?

1.3 Importance of the Study

The research objectives and questions of this case study can provide an understanding of the most frequently used politeness strategies in student-instructor email communications. It may shed light on and inform the practical application of politeness theory in ELT.

1.4 Scope of the Study

This study focuses on 118 emails sent by English I students to their instructors (see Appendix) and offers an account of which politeness strategies they use most frequently within the context of a university in Oman. The study does not extend to face-to-face communication, digital communication, nor instructors' emails or responses to their students.

2 Literature Review

In this section, an exploration of Politeness Theory (PT), its origin, and various viewpoints are discussed. This segment is structured to start with a definition of terminologies pertaining to PT. Subsequently, a systematic review of the literature will be presented, encapsulating a range of theories interconnected with PT. This will pave the way for a focused discourse on email communications, examining the application of politeness strategies within a spectrum that ranges from global to local contexts. This approach aims to provide a holistic understanding of PT within the realms of both theoretical and practical applications.

2.1 Review of Theories

2.1.1 Pragmatics: Application of Linguistic Principles in Communication

As a distinct subfield of linguistics, pragmatics emerged as a response to the structuralist approach, which focuses on analyzing language as a system of structurally related elements, such as the underlying edifices that govern language like grammar rules and phonetics. Structuralism, as advocated by Saussure (1916), prioritizes the concept of 'langue' – the abstract and systematic rules and conventions of a language – over 'parole', which pertains to specific, individual instances of language in use. Deviating from the structuralist paradigm, pragmatics expands upon this framework by scrutinizing 'parole' and the significance of context in language. Yule (1996) advocates for a paradigm shift to recognize the importance of a speaker's intent and the situational context in language analysis. Pragmatics, as a field, emphasizes the speaker and the context, exploring "how more gets communicated than is said" (Yule, 1996, p. 3).

2.1.2 The Conversational Maxim View and the Social Norm View

Grice (1975) formulated the Cooperative Principle (CP) in conversation, which revolves around the notion that participants adhere to Conversational Maxims (CM) to ensure effective and cooperative communication. Grice outlined four main maxims: the maxim of quantity, the maxim of quality, the maxim of relation, and the maxim of manner. Grice (1975) defines them as making “conversational contribution such as required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of talk exchange in which you are engaged” (p. 45) and labeled them the CP.

In this context of PT, the CM view suggests that politeness is achieved by adhering to or strategically flouting these maxims. By being unclear and ambiguous for example, the maxim of manner, that is usually summarized as being clear, orderly and unambiguous, is being flouted, but this may be for the sake of being more polite, which is a politeness strategy in this scenario. In essence, the CM view emphasizes that understanding and adhering (or even flouting) to quantity, quality, relation, and manner is crucial for successful communication between participants, and politeness often involves managing these maxims which respect the social and interpersonal dynamics of the conversation.

Lakoff (1977) adopted Grice's (1975) construct of CP in an effort to account for politeness and refers to politeness as “a device used in order to reduce friction in personal interaction” (Lakoff, 1977, p. 79). She went on to introduce the idea of politeness in language which is part of a social norm; emphasizing the role of societal norms in shaping what is considered as polite or impolite behavior in language use (Lakoff, 1977). She argues that “the pillars of our linguistic as well as non-linguistic interactions with each other are to make one clear and be polite” (Lakoff, 1977, p. 82). The emphasis in this view is placed on social norms, and understanding how politeness functions in different cultural contexts, and cultural expectations rather than on the desires to maintain face. This view contrasts with the face-saving view which will be discussed next.

2.1.3 The Face-Saving View

Goffman (1967) introduced the concept of *face*, which he defines as “the positive social value of a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (Goffman, 1976, p. 5). In essence, *face* refers to a person's public self-image in social interaction, where people are constantly engaged in practices to avoid embarrassing themselves and others. This involves maintaining both their own face and the faces of others through tact, courtesy, diplomacy, and strategic interaction.

2.1.4 Positive Face and Negative Face

Expanding on Goffman's work on managing a person's positive social self-image (face), Brown and Levinson (1987) elaborated on the concept of *face*, arguing that individuals have two kinds of *face*: ‘positive face’ and ‘negative face’. Positive face refers to “the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others” (p. 312) – i.e., the desire to obtain approval from others, while negative face is “the want of every ‘competent adult member’ that his actions be unimpeded by others” (p. 312), i.e., the need to have autonomy from others (Harwood, 2017). These are referred to as *face wants*. Yule (1996) describes politeness in interaction as “the means employed to show awareness of another person's face” (p. 60) – i.e., positive face or negative face, and he further explains that *face wants* are “a person's expectations that their public self-image will be respected” (Yule, 1996, p. 130).

2.1.5 Face-Threatening Acts

Further to this, Brown and Levinson (1987) also introduce the concept of face-threatening acts (FTAs). They propose that “in human interaction, some communicative acts threaten the hearer's positive face, negative face, or both. These communicative acts are referred to as face-threatening acts” (Harwood, 2017, p. 36). These acts are often subconsciously navigated by people through their language and behavior adjustments to the social context, their relationship with the listener, and the cultural norms that govern politeness.

2.1.6 Politeness Strategies

Brown and Levinson (1987) propose a framework of four main politeness strategies for understanding how participants in discourse manage the positive face (the desire to be liked, appreciated, and approved) and the negative face (the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition). They include bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record.

2.1.7 Bald-on-Record and Off-Record

Bald-on-record “usually does not attempt to minimize the threat to the hearer’s face [...]. The speaker may do an act badly, without redress, involving, doing in the most direct, clear, unambiguous, and concise way possible” (Nugrahanto, & Hartono, 2020, p. 728). An example of this is someone saying, “Close the door!”.

On the other hand, Bald off-record is an indirect strategy which “uses indirect language and removes the speaker from the potential to be imposing” (Nugrahanto, & Hartono, 2020, p. 728). An example of this is someone suggesting rather than explicitly requesting, i.e., “It’s cold here”, where the implication is for someone to close a window rather than directly asking.

2.1.8 Positive Politeness

In simple terms, a positive politeness strategy could be “defined as an involvement-based approach made by the speaker for understanding, approving of, and admiring the positive image of the hearer” (Nurmawati, Haryanto, & Weda, 2019, p. 172). In other words, the person performing an utterance is appealing to the receiver’s positive face. Brown and Levinson (1987) go on to classify 15 sub-strategies within positive politeness.

- 1) noticing and attending to the hearer, 2) exaggerating (interest, approval, sympathy with the hearer), 3) intensifying interest to the hearer, 4) using in-group identity markers, 5) seeking agreement, 6) avoiding disagreement, 7) showing common ground, 8) joking, 9) assert or presuppose speaker’s knowledge of and concern for hearer’s wants, 10) using offer and promise, 11) being optimistic, 12) including both the speaker and the hearer in the activity, 13) giving or asking the reason, 14) assuming reciprocity, and 15) giving a gift to the hearer (good, sympathy, understanding, and cooperation). (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 101).

2.1.9 Negative Politeness

Brown and Levinson (1987) define this strategy as a “redressive action” that is oriented to the receiver’s negative face (p. 129). In this strategy, the aim is to reduce the interference with the hearer’s freedom of action, and “the speaker can perform this strategy by being indirect, using hedges, conveying pessimism in the utterance to express doubt, reduction imposition, or giving respect to the hearer” (Fitriyani, & Andriyanti, 2020, p. 263). Brown and Levinson (1987) classify 10 sub-strategies within negative politeness.

- 1) Being conventionally indirect, 2) using questions or hedges, 3) being pessimistic, 4) minimizing imposition, 5) giving deference, 6) apologizing, 7) impersonalizing speaker and hearer, 8) stating the FTA as a general rule, 9) nominalizing, 10) going on record as incurring debt, or as not indebteding the hearer. (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 101 in Santoso et al. 2022)

2.2 Email and Politeness Strategies: From Global to Local

Communicating in a second language is a multifaceted task. Acquiring adequate proficiency in a second language is a process that demands commitment and extensive preparation for understanding and applying language nuances, and how different mediums of communication and communicative contexts encountered by learners are diverse. With the advent and progression of technology, traditional methods of discourse have also changed, particularly in writing. Carillo and Cortés (2021) posit that “since the 80’s, a new medium of written communication has appeared, which is email communication” (p. 6). According to Lan (2000) “the speed, efficiency, privacy, and relaxation have made email a dialogue device: people ‘talk’ by email” (p. 23). Baron (2003) agrees with this view, noting that “writing in general has become more speech-like” in email communication (p. 92).

In formal settings of email exchanges, particularly between students and instructors, Lewin-Jones and Masons’ (2014) provide insight through their study, which focuses on the perspectives of academic staff and students regarding email style and etiquette. They use PT as one tool to analyze their data, and they offer that “a student’s hastily written email containing features of text language may not constitute a lack of respect” (p. 87). They present an argument in which they propose that this may be due to students not understanding “netiquette” and provide recommendations to teachers on how they can guide students.

Kedri and Alsout (2019) explore politeness in postgraduate, Libyan students’ email requests to their teachers. Their findings reveal that Libyan students mostly apply negative politeness strategies, which could potentially lead to “a higher chance of pragmatic failure” (p. 69).

In contrast, Ferchichi’s (2021) study through corpus analysis finds that Algerian EFL students use more positive politeness strategies. The study reveals that students are unaware of the appropriate deployment of

politeness strategies, and that they use “direct language that expresses a high level of imposition” (Ferchichi, 2021, p. iii).

3 Methodology

The paper design of this case study follows a descriptive qualitative approach to investigate the applications of the politeness theory in the context of writing emails. The approach will be incorporated to ensure a comprehensive understanding of individuals' use of PT strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) in their communication with their course instructors via emails. This section will address, the sampling, instrument, procedure, data collection, and data analysis.

Which Politeness Strategies Do undergraduate Students Use in Their Email Interactions with Their Instructors?

The researchers used a computer-assisted quantitative methodology (the software MAXQDA) for the systematic categorization of data. This software is a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software that is used to organize, code, categorize, and interpret qualitative data. This approach involved the establishment of a two-level coding scheme within the software to precisely track the frequency and types of positive and negative politeness strategies utilized by students in their email communications.

3.1 Sampling

The samples include 118 emails written by English I students to their course instructors. Students of this course have already completed the English Language courses of the Foundation Program and are expected to show a good command of English, as they should have reached the upper intermediate level (CEFR B2). The sample was chosen based on two criteria, (1) willingness of students and instructors to share their emails, and (2) enrollment in the English I course, a course offered at the preparatory year at the University of Nizwa, Sultanate of Oman equivalent to intermediate level in CEFR

3.2 Instruments

In this case study, a coding scheme acts as an instrument to categorize the types of politeness strategies students use in their emails to their instructors, drawing on the principles from Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory. This scheme encompasses 15 sub-strategies of positive politeness and 10 sub-strategies of negative politeness, as detailed in sections 2.3.8 and 2.3.9 of the frameworks.

The data for this case study was systematically compiled from four instructors responsible for teaching the English I course at the undergraduate level at the University of Nizwa. Subsequent to securing informed consent from the participating students, a corpus consisting of 118 student-authored emails, accumulated over the duration of an academic semester, was meticulously collected for analysis.

In this case study, a structured two-level coding scheme has been developed, drawing from the theoretical underpinnings of Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory (PT). The primary level of this coding scheme (L1) delineates a dichotomy between positive and negative politeness strategies, consistent with the foundational concepts of PT. The secondary level (L2) further refines this classification by categorizing an array of sub-strategies under each principal strategy outlined in L1. This hierarchical organization facilitates a comprehensive and detailed analysis of politeness strategies and their sub-strategies.

The data underwent a rigorous thematic analysis, which is instrumental in yielding a nuanced understanding of the application and dynamics of politeness within the context of this case study. This process involved systematic steps for the display of statistical data, ensuring visual clarity of the findings. Subsequently, these data were interpreted, with a particular focus on discerning the patterns and frequencies of the various politeness strategies used in the sampled emails.

4 Results and Findings

This section presents the outcomes derived from the quantitative data collection in this case study. It will qualitatively detail the findings drawn from the data, which address the two central research questions. Additionally, an overview of the quality assurance protocols implemented in this study will be discussed.

Figure 1 demonstrates all the sub-strategies English I students used in their emails, and their frequency across the 118 email samples:

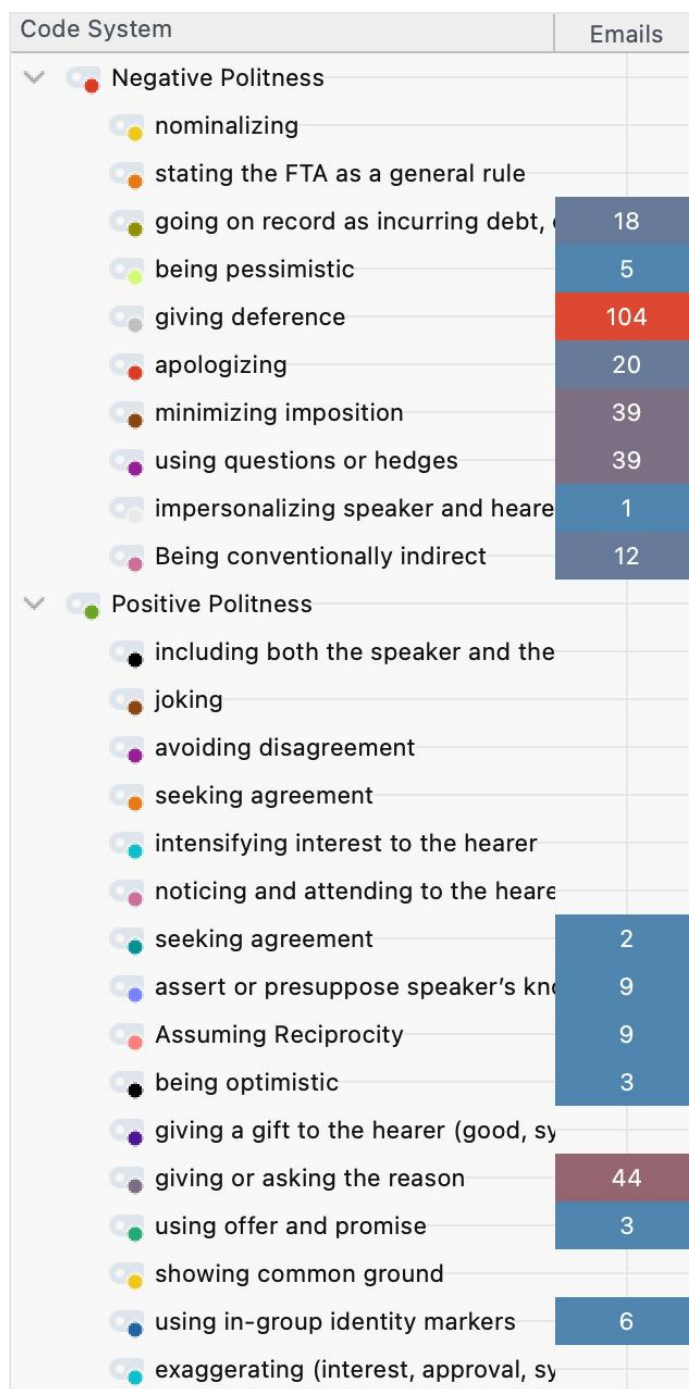
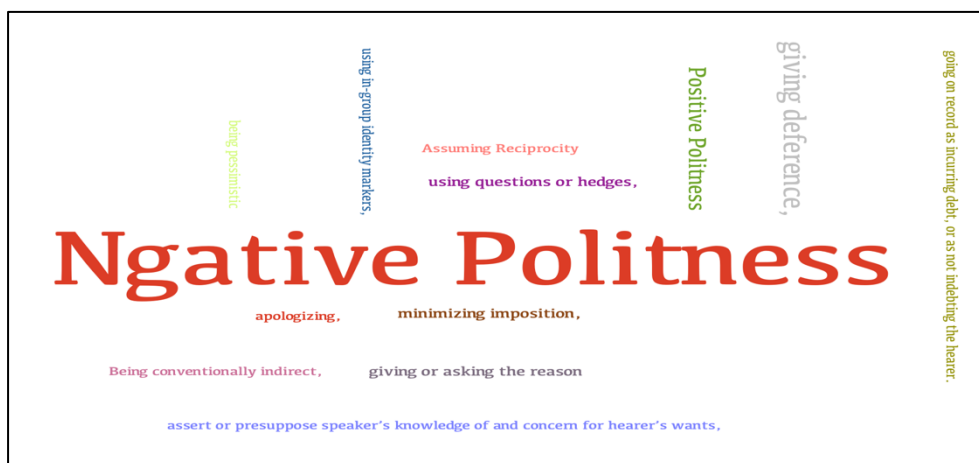


Figure 1: Frequency and Types of Politeness Strategies Used in English I Students in Email Communications, as Categorized by a Two-Level Coding Scheme in MAXDA Across 118 Samples

The findings are quite telling, indicating a predominant reliance on negative politeness strategies by the students, surpassing the use of positive politeness strategies. Illustrated in Figure 1, the data analysis reveals that the most prevalent negative politeness strategy was “giving deference”, which was identified in most emails, registering 104 instances. This is followed by strategies such as “minimizing imposition” and “using of questions or hedges”, each recorded 39 times. The use of other sub-strategies shows a range of frequency, oscillating between 12 and 20 instances, with strategies like expressing pessimism and impersonalizing the speaker or hearer being least used, noted only 1 to 5 times.

In contrast, the application of positive politeness strategies is notably less frequent. An exception to this trend is the strategy “giving or asking for reasons”, which is employed considerably more often, recorded 44 times, in stark contrast to other positive strategies that showed a usage range of only 0-9 times.

Figure 2 presents a code cloud that visually represents the frequency of use of both positive and negative politeness strategies, including their various sub-strategies. The relative size of each strategy within the figure correlates with its frequency of usage.



Additionally, Figure 3 displays a word cloud that shows the frequency of specific words used in the email samples. This visualization suggests an attempt by students to sustain amicable relationships with their instructors through the use of polite language, evidenced by the frequent use of terms such as 'Ms.', 'Mr.', 'dear', 'hello', 'please', 'thank', and 'hope'.

However, the analysis through the word cloud as illustrated in Figure 3 also indicates a lack of effectiveness in the application of these strategies, marked by deficiencies in maintaining proper email format, grammatical structure, and tone. This observation underscores a potential gap between the intention of exhibiting politeness and the effective implementation of such politeness in written communication.

What Implications Does This Have for ELT?

As detailed previously, Brown and Levinson's (1987) theoretical framework defines negative politeness as a "redressive action" (p. 129) intended to mitigate interference with the hearer's freedom of action. This notion is particularly relevant in the context of this study, given the power differential between the student (speaker) and the instructor (hearer). In such written interactions, where the student typically presents a request, employing negative politeness is a logical strategy to respectfully acknowledge the instructor's higher social status, thereby facilitating the attainment of the request's objective. Conversely, positive politeness is characterized as an engagement-oriented approach by the speaker to recognize and appreciate the hearer's positive self-image, as discussed by Nurmawati, Haryanto, and Weda (2019, p. 172). Within this study's framework, while the use of positive politeness could significantly help students achieve their communicative

objectives, its application is markedly less frequent. Ferchichi (2021) suggests that an overuse of positive politeness might result in excessive imposition.

We postulate that this misapplication of politeness strategies by students stems from their relative inexperience with the formalities of official email communication. This inexperience is potentially attributed to their initial theoretical exposure to email etiquette in pre-university education, which only transitions to practical application during university education. This transition likely contributed to the observed technical challenges in email usage. Furthermore, the students' limited exposure to native English-speaking cultures may impede their understanding of appropriate norms in English written (and spoken) communication. This discrepancy between intention and successful use of politeness strategies is highlighted by Lewin-Jones and Mason (2014) as discussed in Chapter 2, who argue that a hastily written email by a student does not necessarily reflect a lack of respect, but rather a deficit in 'netiquette' understanding. These observations align with the findings of Khedri and Alsout (2019), who report a predominant use of negative politeness strategies among Libyan students, potentially leading to a higher likelihood of pragmatic failure.

These findings underscore the necessity for earlier educational intervention to bridge the gap between the intention and effective execution of politeness strategies. At the graduate level, where proficient language skills are expected, instructors might misconstrue this ineffective communication as a lack of language competence, thereby potentially disadvantaging the students. However, we observe a silver lining: the shift towards online learning during the pandemic has provided students with institutional email accounts and technical devices, facilitating a more practical engagement with email communication. This shift presents an opportunity to teach students not only the mechanics of writing proper emails but also the integration of appropriate politeness strategies, potentially mitigating previous issues related to miscommunication.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

This study has provided an analysis of the politeness strategies used by a sample of 118 emails written by English I students, highlighting a predominant use of negative politeness strategies. The study's findings and interpretations can be useful for enhancing effective ELT practices, particularly in non-native English-speaking contexts.

The transferability of this case study's findings may be limited due to its specific focus on the University of Nizwa, within the context of Oman. While the insights might be relevant and of interest to similar educational settings, it might not be the case in applying these findings to different cultural and linguistic contexts. Politeness strategies can be highly context-dependent and influenced by cultural norms. The generalizability of the findings might be limited.

Within the context of higher education institutions in Oman however, the findings of this study may have significant implications for ELT, suggesting a need for curriculum changes to include more practical training in email communication. For future research, exploring the effectiveness of different teaching approaches in improving email etiquette and politeness strategies would be beneficial. Policymakers might consider integrating email communication skills into language education policies, and practitioners could use these insights to tailor their teaching methods.

The findings of this small-scale case study underscore the need for an understanding of politeness in different cultural contexts. It also highlights the importance of teaching effective communication skills in an increasingly globalized and digitized era. This study, despite its limitations, provides some aspects that could be considered foundational stones for further research in this area and for the development of more effective ELT practices.

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