

THE ROLE OF NEGATIVE POLITENESS IN POWER RELATIONS AND CHARACTER FORMATION IN ONLINE CLASSROOMS

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Abstract: *This study explores the role of negative politeness in shaping power relations and fostering character development within online classroom interactions at a university in Batam, Indonesia. Drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and a pragmatic approach, the research investigates how students and lecturers use politeness strategies to navigate hierarchical relationships in three English online courses. Data were obtained from transcribed online classroom interactions and semi-structured interviews with ten students, selected through purposive sampling. The findings reveal that negative politeness strategies particularly deference, hedging, and indirectness are frequently employed by students to acknowledge institutional power, maintain respect, and minimize imposition in communication. Lecturers' use of formal and directive expressions further reinforces academic authority and social hierarchy. Over time, students demonstrate adaptive pragmatic awareness by consistently adjusting their linguistic behavior to align with the expectations of formal discourse. These strategies not only sustain harmonious interaction but also reflect the internalization of moral and social values. Interpreted through the lens of the Character Education Framework (Kemdikbud, 2010), the results show that the use of negative politeness promotes core virtues such as respect, integrity, responsibility, and self-control. Overall, this study highlights that politeness in online academic communication functions not only as a linguistic strategy to manage power but also as a means of cultivating ethical and character-based communication competence among students.*

Keywords: *Negative Politeness, Power Relations, Character Education, Online Learning, Pragmatics, Politeness Theory.*

Introduction

In the context of online education, where face-to-face interactions are limited and communication is mediated through digital platforms, understanding how students navigate power relations and demonstrate character through politeness strategies becomes essential. Politeness shapes not only the way students communicate with lecturers but also their moral behavior and self-presentation. This study focuses on negative politeness, a key strategy in Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which mitigates face-threatening acts and preserves the autonomy of others. Specifically, it investigates how negative politeness functions in managing power asymmetry and fostering character formation in online academic discourse.

The shift to online learning, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, creates new dynamics in student-teacher relationships. The absence of non-verbal cues increases the need for linguistic markers of respect, hierarchy, and cooperation (Herring, 2007). For example, when a student says, "Sorry, Miss, I'm not ready yet, may I get back to you later?", such utterance demonstrates negative politeness through indirectness, apology, and deferential tone all of which minimize imposition and maintain the lecturer's negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Understanding these linguistic behaviors helps educators recognize how online communication reflects both social awareness and ethical sensitivity.

In Indonesia, character education is central to national educational goals. The Ministry of Education and Culture (Kemdikbud, 2010) emphasizes core values such as respect, integrity, cooperation, and responsibility, nationalism, aligning closely with the pragmatic principles of politeness. By linking linguistic politeness with character development, this study contributes a pragmatic perspective on how communication practices embody moral education in Indonesian online learning contexts, to a broader understanding of how moral education is enacted through everyday classroom discourse (Lickona, 1991; Fathurrohman, 2019). While previous studies on politeness largely examine face-to-face contexts (Lakoff, 1973; Holmes, 1995), little is known about how such strategies operate in online classrooms spaces where institutional hierarchy and social distance may be more pronounced. This study addresses that gap by analyzing authentic online interactions to reveal how negative politeness shapes both power dynamics and students' moral growth in formal educational discourse.

Literature Review

Politeness Theory and Power Relations

Brown and Levinson's (1987) seminal theory of politeness is grounded in the concept of *face* and the management of face-threatening acts (FTAs). They classify politeness strategies into four types: bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record. Among these, negative politeness is characterized by indirectness, deference, and mitigation, aiming to protect the interlocutor's autonomy and reduce imposition. As Yule (1996) notes, negative politeness often appears through modal constructions such as "*Would you mind...*" or the use of apologetic language, both of which seek to avoid intrusion on the hearer's negative face their desire for freedom from imposition. Mills (2003) similarly emphasizes that politeness functions as a strategic means of minimizing potential threats to either participant's face in social interaction. In hierarchical settings such as university classrooms, power relations between lecturers and students play a decisive role in determining the choice of politeness strategies. Feng, Li, and Wang (2011) demonstrate that the selection of politeness forms is influenced by the interplay of power (P), social distance (D), and rank of imposition (R). Consequently, formal

educational contexts tend to exhibit higher frequencies of negative politeness, as the asymmetry between lecturer and student requires linguistic caution and respect (Harwood, 2017). Supporting this view, Tileagă (2006) and van Dijk (2000) explain that institutional discourse inherently sustains social hierarchies, with language serving as a medium for enacting and legitimizing power. Within academic institutions, this linguistic hierarchy reinforces lecturers' authority while guiding students' verbal behavior, positioning politeness as a mechanism for maintaining institutional order.

Politeness in Online Classrooms

The rise of digital learning platforms has reshaped interactional dynamics, creating new challenges for maintaining politeness and clarity in communication. Harwood (2017) emphasizes that students must develop pragmatic competence in online contexts where exchanges occur through video conferences, chat messages, or discussion boards since the absence of non-verbal cues can amplify misinterpretation risks. Martina (2020) and Modesta et al. (2021) further observe that while positive politeness fosters solidarity and engagement, it often lacks the clarity and directness necessary for instructional discourse, where authority and precision are crucial. Ruhi (2008) argues that both politeness and impoliteness are governed by metapragmatic awareness speakers' understanding of social expectations and roles within communication.

Recent studies by Brocca et al. (2023), Priya et al. (2023), and Jia (2024) demonstrate that politeness strategies are dynamically adapted in digital communication, reflecting cultural norms, technological affordances, and relational power. However, these investigations rarely address how institutional hierarchy mediates politeness choice in online learning. This gap underscores the need to analyze online classroom discourse through a pragmatic lens that captures both linguistic form and social power dynamics, particularly in student-teacher interactions within higher education.

Power Relations and Character Formation in Indonesian Contexts

In Indonesian higher education, the relationship between politeness strategies and character education remains underexamined, despite its relevance to moral and civic development. The Character Education Framework (Kemdikbud, 2010) identifies core values such as respect, integrity, cooperation, and responsibility that can be cultivated through communication practices. Fahmy et al. (2017) and Phillips (2008) argue that character is shaped not only through explicit instruction but also through daily communicative behavior, suggesting that politeness functions as both a linguistic and moral practice.

This study bridges that conceptual gap by examining negative politeness as a reflection of institutional power and as a means of fostering moral values in online academic interactions. In doing so, it integrates Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory with Indonesia's Character Education Framework (Kemdikbud, 2010) to provide a dual lens linguistic and ethical on how deference, mitigation, and apology contribute to students' moral development. Through this integration, the study advances the understanding that politeness is not merely a communicative strategy but a reflection of character in practice, aligning linguistic behavior with the ethical dimensions of Indonesian education.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative design (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2018) with a pragmatic approach to examine how negative politeness shapes power relations and contributes to character formation in online academic interactions. The analysis was grounded in Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, which conceptualizes language as a means of managing face and mitigating social threats, and supported by the pragmatic framework of language in context (Leech, 1983; Yule, 1996). This framework enabled the exploration of both the linguistic strategies (e.g., hedging, honorifics, apologies) and their pragmatic functions in sustaining respect, hierarchy, and cooperation within institutional communication.

The research was conducted across three English-medium online courses Business Presentation, Advanced Grammar, and Pragmatics at a university in Batam, Indonesia, during the 2022–2023 academic year. These courses were purposefully selected to represent formal academic discourse in multilingual digital environments where English serves as the primary medium of interaction.

Data sources

Participants were selected through purposive sampling (Patton, 2015) to ensure the inclusion of information-rich cases relevant to the research objectives. The sample comprised ten undergraduate students representing diverse linguistic and academic backgrounds, reflecting Indonesia's multicultural educational setting.

Data were collected from two primary sources:

- a. Recorded online classroom interactions, capturing authentic teacher–student and student–student communication on Microsoft Teams; and
- b. Semi-structured interviews, which provided reflective insights into students' perceptions of power, politeness, and moral values such as respect, integrity, and cooperation consistent with the Character Education Framework (Kemdikbud, 2010; Lickona, 1991).

The combination of observational and interview data facilitated triangulation, offering a holistic view of both linguistic practices and underlying character values manifested in digital academic discourse.

Data Analysis

The analytical procedure followed five interrelated stages, guided by the principles of pragmatic discourse analysis and thematic interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Holmes, 1995):

- a. Transcription: All classroom interactions were transcribed verbatim to preserve linguistic nuances, such as hesitations, modality, and tone (Silverman, 2013).
- b. Identification: Instances of negative politeness (e.g., hedging, indirectness, deference) were identified and coded following Brown and Levinson's (1987) taxonomy.
- c. Classification: The coded data were grouped into three strategic functions minimizing imposition, expressing deference, and acknowledging hierarchical power.
- d. Thematic Analysis: Interview transcripts were thematically analyzed (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to reveal how students' awareness of power and politeness relates to character development.
- e. Interpretation: Findings were interpreted through the lens of Character Education (Kemdikbud, 2010; Lickona, 1991), linking linguistic strategies to moral values such as respect, cooperation, and integrity.

This analytic process reflects Miles and Huberman's (1994) interactive model of qualitative analysis, involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The pragmatic lens enabled a contextualized understanding of politeness as both a linguistic phenomenon and a moral practice reinforcing social harmony in academic communication.

Reliability and Ethics

Reliability and trustworthiness were ensured through data triangulation, peer coding validation, and the maintenance of an audit trail (Miles et al., 2014). Inter-coder reliability was established by cross-checking coding results between two researchers, achieving consistency above 80%. Ethical procedures followed Creswell and Poth (2018), ensuring informed consent, participant anonymity, and voluntary participation throughout the research process.

Table 1: Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

No	Phases	Activity	Description and Theoretical Basis	Outcome
1	Participant Selection	Purposive Sampling	Ten students from three English-medium online courses (<i>Business Presentation, Advanced Grammar, Pragmatics</i>) (Patton, 2015; Creswell, 2014).	Diverse linguistic and academic representation.
2	Data Collection	a. Classroom Observation b. Semi-Structured Interviews	a. Six sessions recorded via Microsoft Teams and transcribed verbatim (Silverman, 2013). b. post-observation interviews on perceptions of power, politeness, and character (Kvale, 2008).	Corpus of interactional and reflective data.
3	Data Coding	Pragmatic Marker Identification	Identification of negative politeness strategies (hedging, indirectness, honorifics, apology) following Brown & Levinson (1987).	Organized dataset for pragmatic analysis.
4	Analysis	Thematic and Pragmatic Discourse Analysis	Braun & Clarke (2006); Holmes (1995). Analysis focused on meaning in context and moral values (respect, integrity, cooperation).	Thematic mapping of linguistic and moral dimensions.
5	Validation & Ethics	Triangulation, Peer Validation, Ethical Compliance	Miles et al. (2014); Creswell & Poth (2018).	Reliable and ethically grounded findings.

Source: researcher

Findings and Discussions

This section analyzes student–lecturer interactions in online classrooms, focusing on the role of negative politeness strategies (NPS) in maintaining hierarchical relationships and fostering

character formation. Grounded in Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, the findings show that students consistently employ deference-based strategies to navigate institutional authority, social distance, and rank of imposition. These include the frequent use of honorifics, hedging, indirectness, and apologies, which reflect students' heightened awareness of face-threatening acts (FTAs) and their respect for power dynamics within the academic setting. Drawing on pragmatic discourse analysis, this study interprets how linguistic forms of negative politeness are contextually used to maintain academic decorum while simultaneously embodying moral character traits such as respect, humility, integrity, and self-control. The sustained use of these strategies demonstrates not only linguistic competence but also students' moral awareness in adapting communication to authority and context a reflection of character education values emphasized by the Ministry of Education and Culture (Kemdikbud, 2010).

Table 2: Mapping of NPS to Power Relations and Character Values

No	Subtheme	Focus	Main Strategy Link (B&L, 1987)	Character Dimension
1	Deference Strategy of Negative Politeness	Use of honorifics (Sir, Pak) to mark power distance	Strategy 6: Give Deference	Respect
2	Power Relation in Negative Politeness	Maintaining formality despite casual cues	Strategy 1: Be Conventionally Indirect Strategy 4: Minimize Imposition	Integrity, Responsibility
3	Power Relation Affects Students' Character	Politeness reflecting internalized discipline and awareness	Strategy 3: Be Pessimistic Strategy 5: Use Passive Voice	Self-control
4	Negative Politeness in Question and Answer	Hedging and indirectness under authority	Strategy 2: Use Hedging or Questions Strategy 4: Minimize Imposition	Humility
5	Negative Politeness through Deference and Apology	Apologetic and deferential mitigation	Strategy 6: Give Deference Strategy 7: Apologize	Integrity, Responsibility

Source: Researcher

To provide a clearer conceptual overview of how each identified strategy corresponds to character dimensions, Figure 1 visualizes the relationship between Brown and Levinson's (1987) negative politeness strategies, the empirical subthemes derived from discourse analysis, and the associated character values as outlined in the Indonesian Character Education Framework (Kemdikbud, 2010).

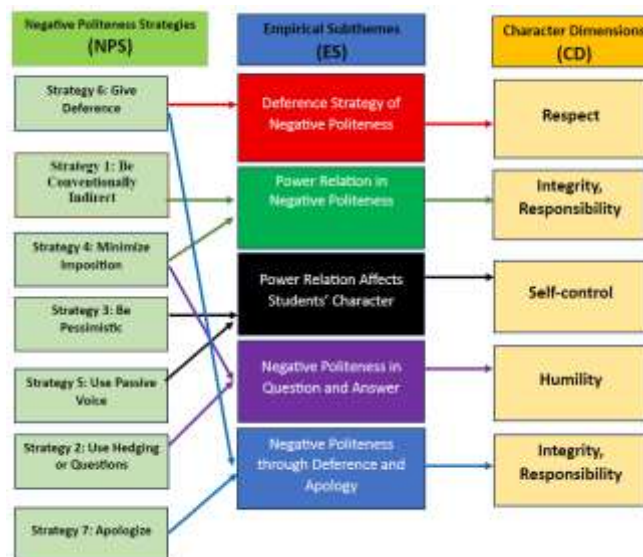


Figure 1: Relationship Between Negative Politeness Strategies, Empirical Subthemes, and Character Dimensions

Figure 1 visualizes the relationship between Brown and Levinson's (1987) negative politeness strategies, empirical subthemes identified in the study, and character dimensions (Kemdikbud, 2010). The model shows that strategies such as deference, hedging, and apology support character traits including respect, integrity, self-control, and responsibility, illustrating how linguistic politeness contributes to moral development in online classrooms.

To highlight the nuanced role of negative politeness in preserving institutional hierarchy and shaping student character within online classrooms, selected excerpts from recorded student-lecturer interactions are analyzed. These excerpts serve as empirical evidence of how formal academic settings, reinforced by power asymmetries, prompt students to use deference-based strategies, particularly when responding to direct instructions or questions. The students' use of honorifics, hedging devices, and indirect responses demonstrates a strong orientation toward maintaining their interlocutor's negative face, a core feature of negative politeness. Each interaction not only exemplifies how power is discursively enacted but also shows how students' pragmatic behavior contributes to their moral development. Below, we present and analyze key excerpts to illustrate these patterns.

The findings reveal that negative politeness is the most dominant strategy in online classroom communication, particularly in contexts where power relations are clearly defined between lecturer and student. The use of honorifics such as "Sir" or "Pak" serves as both a linguistic and cultural marker of respect, aligning with Brown and Levinson's Strategy 6 (Give Deference). Students' use of hedging ("maybe," "I think," "I'm not sure") and indirect expressions reflects

an awareness of potential imposition and a desire to maintain the lecturer's negative face, consistent with Strategy 2 and 4. These pragmatic choices are not merely linguistic conventions but also manifestations of character development. Students demonstrate respect by recognizing hierarchical boundaries, integrity through careful language choices, and self-control by managing their tone and speech in formal settings. This supports Yule's (1996) and Leech's (1983) assertion that politeness serves as both a communicative and moral act, signaling cooperation and empathy in interaction. Moreover, the persistence of negative politeness in online classrooms where visual cues are absent shows that students actively regulate social harmony through linguistic politeness. This regulation mirrors the values of character education (Kemdikbud, 2010), where politeness becomes a behavioral expression of moral discipline, humility, and responsibility. The pragmatic alignment between language use and character values reinforces the idea that politeness strategies are not simply about avoiding conflict but about fostering an ethical and respectful academic culture.

Deference Strategy of Negative Politeness

Excerpt 1 (student 1):

Lecturer : mention student's name, can you sing?

Student : I can't, sir, if my father's hobby used to be playing chess, he used to play it often too. I don't recall; it's been a long time since I last played. The rivals no longer exist

In this excerpt, the lecturer addresses the student directly by name with a casual question, can you sing? This represents a bald-on-record utterance, which may function as a face-threatening act (FTA) due to its direct formulation and the visibility of the interaction within the online classroom setting. The student's reply begins with a refusal: I can't, sir, followed by a longer explanation that diverts attention from the question. The use of "sir" is an honorific and functions as a mitigating device, signalling deference and respect toward the lecturer. According to Brown and Levinson, this is consistent with Negative Politeness Strategies 1 and 4, wherein the speaker adopts conventional indirectness and seeks to minimize imposition while remaining on-record. Moreover, the student avoids a blunt "no" and instead provides an elaborate justification about a past hobby, shifting the topic subtly and softening the refusal. This reflects Brown and Levinson's Strategy 8: presenting the FTA as a general norm rather than a personal imposition where the student implies personal limitation rather than rejecting the lecturer's request outright. The narrative about his father and chess serves to depersonalize the refusal, thereby lessening the potential offense.

The student's response shows awareness of power asymmetry and reflects a formal context in which the student avoids challenging or embarrassing the lecturer. The politeness strategy here helps the student maintain social harmony, acknowledge the lecturer's higher status, and preserve the lecturer's negative face their freedom from disagreement or resistance. Thus, this excerpt exemplifies how negative politeness through deference operates in hierarchical, institutional discourse. It demonstrates that the student not only recognizes the potential imposition of saying "no" but also employs language strategies to mitigate it while maintaining respect and social distance.

This finding aligns with Harwood (2017) and Suparno et al. (2023), who found that in hierarchical classroom interactions, students tend to use honorifics to acknowledge the

lecturer's higher social status and maintain respectful boundaries. Similarly, Feng, Li, and Wang (2011) emphasized that power distance is one of the strongest predictors of deference-based politeness, especially in contexts where students are expected to show obedience and linguistic restraint. In this excerpt, the student's utterance "I can't, sir" followed by justification mirrors what House and Kádár (2023) describe as "deferential mitigation" — a strategy that softens refusal through narrative diversion. Such linguistic behavior reflects not only institutional politeness but also moral values of respect and humility, as outlined in the Indonesian Character Education Framework (Kemdikbud, 2010).

Power Relation in Negative Politeness

Excerpt 2 (student 2):

Lecturer : Yeah. OK. Thank you.... I am 57 years old, how old am I? Fifty-seven. What is Fifty-seven in *Bahasa*?

Student : *Lima puluh tujuh, Pak.* (Fifty-seven, Sir).

In this interaction, the lecturer initiates a light, somewhat rhetorical question " , how old am I?... what is fifty-seven in bahasa?" despite already providing the answer himself. On the surface, this may appear to be a form of positive politeness, designed to lower the social distance and foster a sense of inclusion or shared understanding. However, due to the unequal power relation inherent in the lecturer-student dynamic and the formal classroom setting, the student's response reflects a negative politeness strategy, rather than engagement in camaraderie.

The student replies directly: "*Lima puluh tujuh, Pak*" (Fifty-seven, Sir). The inclusion of "Pak" (Sir) functions as a mitigating device and a marker of deference, which aligns with Negative Politeness Strategy 2: Question, hedge, and Strategy 4: Minimize imposition. The use of this honorific shows that the student recognizes and respects the asymmetric power relation (Brown & Levinson, 1987), and is cautious not to appear too informal or presumptuous. Importantly, although the question posed by the lecturer could suggest a relaxed tone, the institutional context transforms the student's reply into a face-saving act. The student chooses not to engage casually or humorously, but instead maintains a formal, respectful tone, demonstrating their awareness of the lecturer's negative face his desire not to be imposed upon or challenged.

The situation illustrates how contextual factors (i.e., institutional hierarchy and formality) override linguistic cues that might otherwise signal solidarity. It affirms Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that politeness strategy choice is contingent upon three core socio-pragmatic factors: relative power between interlocutors (P), their social distance (D), and the degree of imposition (R) inherent in the act. Here, the high P (lecturer's authority), moderate D (formal but familiar), and low R (simple factual response) nevertheless, the constraints of formality and predefined role expectations within the online academic context continue to necessitate the use of negative politeness strategies. In short, while the lecturer may aim to create a less formal moment, the student's reply reflects a strategic, respectful orientation rooted in institutional power dynamics, emphasizing the persistence of negative politeness in online classroom communication.

The interaction shows how institutional hierarchy shapes the pragmatic behavior of students. While the lecturer's tone appears casual, the student's choice to maintain formality through "Pak" indicates awareness of the power differential. This supports Brocca et al. (2023), who

argue that students in formal learning contexts use indirect linguistic cues to maintain “symbolic distance” from authority figures. Similarly, Karlberg (2005) noted that institutional discourse maintains power asymmetry even when speakers attempt to establish solidarity. The consistent use of deference despite an informal cue exemplifies what Jucker and Landert (2023) call contextual politeness preservation where formal norms override casual intent. These findings reaffirm Brown and Levinson’s (1987) claim that politeness strategy choice depends on three sociopragmatic variables power (P), distance (D), and rank of imposition (R). The student’s strategic linguistic control reflects both pragmatic competence and the internalization of integrity and responsibility as moral character traits.

Power Relation Affects Students’ Character

Excerpt 3 (student 3):

Lecturer : Ok (mention student’s name). Playing music? Music. Ok, (mentions student's name). Do you play music? Music, yeah?

Student : Yes, Sir.

In this brief exchange, the lecturer directly addresses the student by name and asks a yes–no question about their hobby “playing music? Music.” in a casual tone that, at face value, resembles positive politeness. However, the student’s response Yes, Sir reflects a negative politeness strategy, rooted in the formal institutional setting and the asymmetric power dynamic between student and lecturer. Following Brown and Levinson’s framework, this interaction reflects Strategy 1: Be conventionally indirect and Strategy 4: Minimize the imposition under negative politeness. The honorific “Sir” serves as a deference marker, signifying that the student is attending to the lecturer’s negative face wants the desire to be respected, not interrupted, and to maintain authority. Even though the question is seemingly harmless and low in imposition (R), the dynamics of institutional power (P) and relational distance (D) compels the student to choose a cautious and respectful linguistic form. The utterance “Yes sir” is brief yet deliberate, reinforcing the student's compliance with institutional norms of respect, hierarchy, and formality.

This simple exchange also illustrates how linguistic behavior becomes a reflection of character development. The student’s response, while short, embodies self-control, emotional regulation, and respect for authority traits emphasized in character education, especially in the Indonesian educational context (Kemdikbud, 2010). Through this lens, the use of negative politeness is not just a pragmatic necessity, but also a sign of internalized moral and social values. In summary, although the lecturer's question appears casual, the formal context and power imbalance reframe it as requiring a deferential response. The student’s strategic use of negative politeness reflects their ability to navigate this power structure respectfully, thereby reinforcing the role of language as a tool for character formation in educational settings.

This finding emphasizes that students’ consistent use of negative politeness not only demonstrates linguistic awareness but also moral discipline. As observed by Martina (2020) and Fathurrohman (2019), politeness in educational settings is an implicit form of character training where students learn restraint, empathy, and respect through linguistic behavior. The brief but deliberate response “Yes, Sir” echoes what Feng et al. (2011) describe as face-maintaining minimalism, where minimal speech reflects awareness of power and avoids potential imposition. Furthermore, this aligns with Susanto (2021), who found that

communication etiquette in Indonesian higher education supports the development of self-control and emotional intelligence as integral parts of character education. Hence, the use of negative politeness functions not only as a pragmatic response but also as evidence of students' internalization of institutional and moral order.

Negative Politeness in Question and Answer

Excerpt 4 (student 4):

Lecturer : *Kamu* (student's name) *biasanya main apa klo* play music? (What do you (student's name) usually play when you play music?)

Student : ohhh *paling cuma main gitar aja pak yaa mungkin sama alat music tiup pak*. (Oh, at most I just play the guitar, sir, maybe with a wind instrument, sir.)

In this excerpt, the lecturer asks a content-seeking question in a casual tone: "*Kamu biasanya main apa klo* play music?" ("What do you usually play when you play music?"). Despite the informality of the wording, the institutional power held by the lecturer and the formal academic setting shape the student's linguistic response strategy. The student replies: "Ohhh *paling cuma main gitar aja pak yaa mungkin sama alat music tiup pak*." ("Oh, at most I just play the guitar, sir, maybe with a wind instrument, sir."). This response demonstrates negative politeness more specifically, a deference strategy through the repeated use of the honorific "*pak*" (sir), which indexes respect and acknowledges the hierarchical gap. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), This demonstrates the application of Strategy 2, which involves the use of hedging or questioning to convey indirectness, and Strategy 4, which aims to reduce the perceived imposition on the hearer. Phrases like "*paling cuma*" (at most, just) and "*yaa mungkin*" (maybe) function as hedging devices, softening the certainty and imposition of the answer. These hedges show the student's effort to avoid asserting knowledge or making bold claims in the presence of an authority figure, thereby preserving the lecturer's negative face the desire to maintain autonomy and avoid imposition. Furthermore, this cautious response suggests the student's pragmatic awareness of power dynamics. The formality of "*pak*" and the hedging tone reflect an attempt to mitigate potential face-threatening acts (FTAs) by showing humility and limiting self-assertion. This aligns with the student's understanding of their lower power position in the academic hierarchy. From a character education perspective, the student's response demonstrates values such as humility, respect, and self-awareness, which are core to Indonesian character education principles (Kemdikbud, 2010). The ability to modulate speech in line with social expectations signals social maturity and emotional intelligence, both important traits for learners in formal academic and professional contexts.

The student's utterance exemplifies a clear case of negative politeness marked by hedging, honorifics, and indirectness. This linguistic behavior reveals not only sensitivity to power and formality but also the internalization of respectful character values through pragmatic competence.

The presence of hedging ("*paling cuma*," "*yaa mungkin*") and repeated honorifics marks this as a strong example of indirect deference. According to Mills (2003) and Oliver (2022), hedging is a central feature of negative politeness, serving both to reduce speaker dominance and to maintain the interlocutor's autonomy. In online academic contexts, such as those analyzed by Jucker and Landert (2023), hedging also mitigates the absence of non-verbal cues, which could otherwise make direct statements appear impolite. This pattern is consistent with House and

Kádár (2023), who found that students in multicultural learning environments employ hedging to balance confidence with deference. Pragmatically, the student's cautious tone demonstrates humility, while morally, it aligns with the self-awareness dimension of character formation (Lickona, 1991).

Negative Politeness through Deference and Apology

Excerpt 5 (student 5):

Lecturer : Oh Ainul Ok, *main nya hari apa dan dimana?* (Oh Ok, Ainul, what day and where are you playing?)

Student : sorry sir, *lagi gk sempat main lagi pak soalnya lagi ada kesibukan.* (I don't have time to play anymore, sir, because I'm busy).

In this excerpt, the lecturer's question appears casual and friendly but occurs within a formal online class where power asymmetry remains salient. Despite the informal tone, the student's response exhibits negative politeness, particularly Strategy 6 (Apologize) and Strategy 2 (Use Hedging or Questions) from Brown and Levinson (1987). The use of "*pak*" (sir) functions as a deference marker, acknowledging the lecturer's authority, while the expressions "*lagi gak sempat*" ("don't have time") and "*soalnya lagi ada kesibukan*" ("because I'm busy") convey an apologetic tone, softening the refusal and justifying non-engagement.

According to Yule (1996), negative politeness often emerges in deferential or apologetic forms when speakers are aware of unequal social footing. Here, the student displays pragmatic competence through indirectness, politeness, and respect. From a character formation perspective, this utterance embodies: Integrity: honest expression of inability; Respect: use of honorifics acknowledging authority; Responsibility: awareness of personal commitments. These align with the Character Education Framework (Kemdikbud, 2010), particularly values of integrity and independence. The exchange demonstrates how even light, non-academic talk reflects hierarchical awareness and moral reasoning. Thus, negative politeness here functions both linguistically (as a face-saving act) and ethically (as a moral reflection of the student's awareness of social norms).

The inclusion of explicit apology markers ("sorry sir") combined with honorifics represents what Yule (1996) and D'Ambrosio (1989) identified as compound politeness a linguistic blend of deference and mitigation. Apologies in hierarchical contexts, as Karlberg (2005) and Van Dijk (2000) observe, function as acts of moral repair that reinforce the legitimacy of authority and social order. The student's utterance exemplifies both Brown and Levinson's (1987) Strategy 6 (Apologize) and Strategy 2 (Use Hedging), balancing face-saving with acknowledgment of responsibility. This aligns with findings by Harwood (2017), who found that students' apologetic tone in online classrooms often signals accountability and self-regulation. Character-wise, the utterance reflects integrity and responsibility, confirming that negative politeness operates not only as a linguistic safeguard but also as a moral practice contributing to ethical awareness and social harmony.

Conclusion

This study explored how negative politeness operates within online academic interactions, focusing on its dual role in regulating power relations and fostering character development. The findings reveal that students frequently employ linguistic strategies such as hedging, mitigation,

and honorifics to navigate hierarchical relationships with lecturers while preserving mutual respect. These strategies demonstrate students' pragmatic competence in recognizing power distance and minimizing face-threatening acts (FTAs). Beyond linguistic function, these politeness behaviors signify moral awareness and self-discipline. Students' consistent use of deferential and indirect language reflects values of respect, integrity, humility, and responsibility virtues central to Indonesia's Character Education Framework (Kemdikbud, 2010). Hence, negative politeness is not merely a communicative strategy but a pragmatic vehicle for moral cultivation in educational discourse. From a pedagogical standpoint, the findings suggest that educators can leverage politeness awareness as part of character education pedagogy, encouraging students to communicate ethically, manage authority relations thoughtfully, and build mutual respect in digital classrooms. This reinforces the notion that language use in academic contexts is inseparable from ethical and cultural learning where communication serves as both an academic and moral practice.

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