
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring Saudi Female EFL Learners' Use of Politeness Strategies: A Linguistic-Pragmatic Analysis of Student Writing-Based Evidences

Mohammad Shariq

Department of English Language and Literature, College of Languages and Humanities, Qassim University, Saudi Arabia

Corresponding Author: Mohammad Shariq, **E-mail:** m.aslam@qu.edu.sa

| ABSTRACT

The present study is an attempt to analyze Qassim University EFL learners' linguistic-pragmatic competence of "politeness strategies". It explores how EFL learners use "politeness strategies" in lengthy written responses on a variety of topics selected by them. This study uses Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory as the primary framework. A comparative analysis of texts authored by twenty four female students in an EFL setting at Qassim University, Saudi Arabia was employed to accomplish the study's objective. To analyze "politeness strategies", a qualitative content analysis was used. The findings show that while verbal agreement and shows of solidarity are common positive politeness (49%) methods used by students, on-record (10%), off-record (6%), negative politeness (13%), and baldly without redress action (22%) strategies are less common. Underdeveloped sensitivity to formality and moderation is the outcome of pragmatic transfer from Arabic norms, as seen by frequent directness and repetition. The results emphasize the necessity of providing clear education in pragmatic awareness, especially with relation to tone, mitigation, and audience consideration in academic writing. The study argues for more explicit training in pragmatic awareness in university-level curriculum and indicates that pragmatic competence is a crucial but underdeveloped component of EFL writing. Finally, the study concluded with helpful recommendations for further research and pedagogical implications that highlight how these "politeness strategies" might assist students in transitioning from literal accuracy to writing that is pragmatically appropriate.

| KEYWORDS

Academic writing, adult learning, communication, EFL setting, linguistics, politeness, student discourse

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Effective communication relies heavily on linguistic-pragmatics, which includes how meaning is expressed outside of formal language structures. Most of us define communication as the capacity to express oneself orally, in writing, or in conversation with others. It also symbolizes exchanging ideas with friends, family, coworkers, bosses, subordinates, and even strangers (Shariq, 2013). Pragmatic competency is crucial for those learning English as a foreign language (EFL), in both written and oral communication. Students must exhibit awareness of audience, tone, civility, and communicative intent when completing writing assignments. However, EFL students frequently carry over pragmatic standards from their native tongue, which can lead to incorrect speech act usage, inadvertent directness, a lack of coherence, or politeness. In the subject of teaching and learning second and foreign languages, communicative competence has drawn particular attention in recent years (Sadeghoghli and Niroomand; 2016). According to Hymes (1972), second language learners need to develop both correct and acceptable speech in order to meet communicative objectives. In second language acquisition area, acquiring politeness techniques as a component of L2 pragmatics has garnered significant attention (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Politeness strategy is one of the many

aspects of pragmatics that need to be learnt (Balogun and Murana, 2018). Being polite is a way for someone to show kindness to another person. According to Balik and Alinda (2022) and Pardede et al. (2021), being polite is crucial while communicating with others. As is well known, a discourse becomes more polite when civility is used in words. When teaching English, politeness continues to be a top priority. It is seen as one strategy for sustaining productive classroom engagement. Teachers and students must therefore practice civility as one of the key players in the classroom in order to foster productive classroom interaction (Mahmud, 2019). According to Shariq (2020), It is feasible to represent a fair and reasonable idea that politeness competency is typically thought to be necessary for implementation in various domains, at least linguistic, cultural, and domain-specific information.

According to Sapitri, et al. (2019), researchers in linguistics, economics, psychology, and other fields frequently cite Brown and Levinson's politeness theory as a foundational study. In terms of social and linguistic characteristics, the study of politeness tactics has grown dramatically during the past three decades. It is clear from the numerous articles on the subject that are published in international journals and books. The scientific culture of scientific writing can be interpreted using the politeness technique for oral discourse put forward by Brown and Levinson (1987). The idea of politeness and pragmatics are closely related. The most prominent theory of politeness is that of Brown and Levinson (1987), who claim that as politeness is a universal phenomena in language use in social contexts, the problem of politeness is essential to pragmatics. Studies of linguistic-pragmatics in EFL instruction in Saudi Arabia have mostly concentrated on speech acts, praiseworthy responses, requests, or classroom interactions. Written politeness has received far less attention, despite the fact that it is a topic that is becoming more and more significant as academic writing, research literacy, and English-medium scholarship are prioritized in higher education.

Hence, the present study centers on the "politeness strategies" used by the Qassim University female students in written discourse or conversations and seeks to investigate the following research questions:

What types of "politeness strategies" do Saudi female EFL learners employ in their writing?

How frequent are these female EFL learners in using "politeness strategies"?

How the pragmatic competence is reflected by these "politeness strategies"?

What pedagogical implications can be drawn to teaching pragmatic competence in an EFL environment?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Brown and Levinson's politeness theory

The theory of politeness was first published by Brown and Levinson in 1978, and a second edition was released in 1987. Their idea of politeness has seen countless responses, applications, criticisms, changes, and revisions, making it undoubtedly the most influential. Since it is impossible to discuss politeness without mentioning Brown and Levinson, their names have come to be nearly synonymous with the term itself. In the most influential theory of politeness, Brown and Levinson (1987) claim that as politeness is a universal pattern in language use in social contexts, the problem of politeness is essential to pragmatics. Their theory of politeness is based on the idea of "face" taken from Goffman (1967). According to Brown and Levinson (1987, p.61), "face is something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to an interaction". The phrase "face-saving view" is used by these experts on politeness to describe that being courteous is done to save the face of the speaker's and the other person, which may be both good and bad. A positive self-image and a need for acceptance are characteristics of people with positive faces. The negative face alludes to basic human needs for privacy, territory, and the freedom from disturbance. A politeness technique is needed to carry out this face-threatening deed. They discussed the strategies for doing Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) and presented them in the chart below:

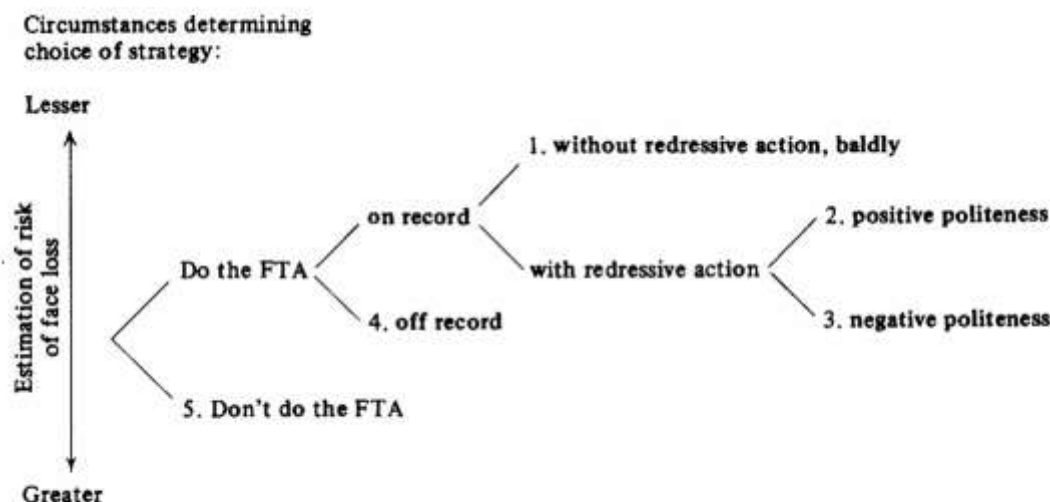


Fig.1. Brown and Levinson's strategies for doing FTA (1987, p. 69)

This Brown and Levinson's (1978) study on "politeness strategies" has been drawing the attention of many scholars (Craig et al., 1986; Coupland et al., 1988; Wilson et al., 1991; Mao, 1994; Kitamura, 2000; Lochar and Watts, 2005; Sadeghoghli and Niroomand, 2016; Isabella et al., 2022; Fathi, 2024) since its appearance. However, there are several other studies Lakoff (1975), Leech (1983), Grice (1975), Tannen (1990) that focus on politeness from different perspectives. Wilson et al., (1991) concentrated on speech acts that have the illocutionary goal of persuading the hearer to carry out a desired action (Searle, 1976). They argued for a strategic explanation of how people employ their implicit knowledge of speech acts to negotiate situations, criticizing Brown and Levinson's interpretation of instructions as being overly conventional. They provided an updated study of instructions and face after going over politeness theory.

2.2 Politeness in EFL context

When teaching English, politeness continues to be a top priority. It is seen as one strategy for sustaining productive classroom engagement. According to Mahmud (2019, p. 597) English students employed a variety of terms to convey their politeness in the classroom. These expressions included "greetings," "thanking," "addressing terms," "apologizing," and "fillers." Additionally, a few expressions that came from the students' mother tongue were employed to soften their presentation. The concept of face is strongly acknowledged and revered in Omani EFL classroom situations, according to Latrech and Alazzawie (2023). Instructors make every effort to avoid endangering learners' faces, and face saving acts are carried out right away. They also attempt to increase learners' awareness of this so they can practice it in class. In a study, Fiani et al., (2023) discovered that students employed Positive Politeness more frequently than other methods, indicating that Positive Politeness is one of the most common types of "politeness strategies". According to Behzadpoor's (2023, p. 74) findings, the participants' choice of politeness tactics was influenced by the three aspects: "power relations", "social distance", and "rank of imposition". The results confirmed that politeness was a very context-bound and dynamic concept for the participants in this study.

The ideas of Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory have been successfully applied to written communication in this study, despite the fact that it was initially created for spoken interaction between a speaker and a hearer. By using linguistic choices to negotiate meaning and face, the researcher assumes the position of the speaker in written speech. Because politeness and impoliteness are expressed in tone, modality, and audience concern in EFL students' written writings, the concept is still applicable. Thus, this study is significant because very few studies (Pratiwi & Anindyarini, 2021; Alharbi, 2024) have focused on the "politeness strategies" in written communication.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

To learn more about the "politeness strategies" used by Saudi female English as a foreign language students while having conversation with their classmates, a mix-method approach was used to gather quantitative and qualitative data. To see the quantitative results, frequency count analysis was conducted for the occurrences of "politeness strategies". Using this method, the researcher looks at and emphasizes theme based topics (Menter et al. 2011). On the other hand, by classifying the politeness techniques that the participants employed in their interactions with their peers, the qualitative analysis examined their interactions at the politeness level.

3.2 Participants

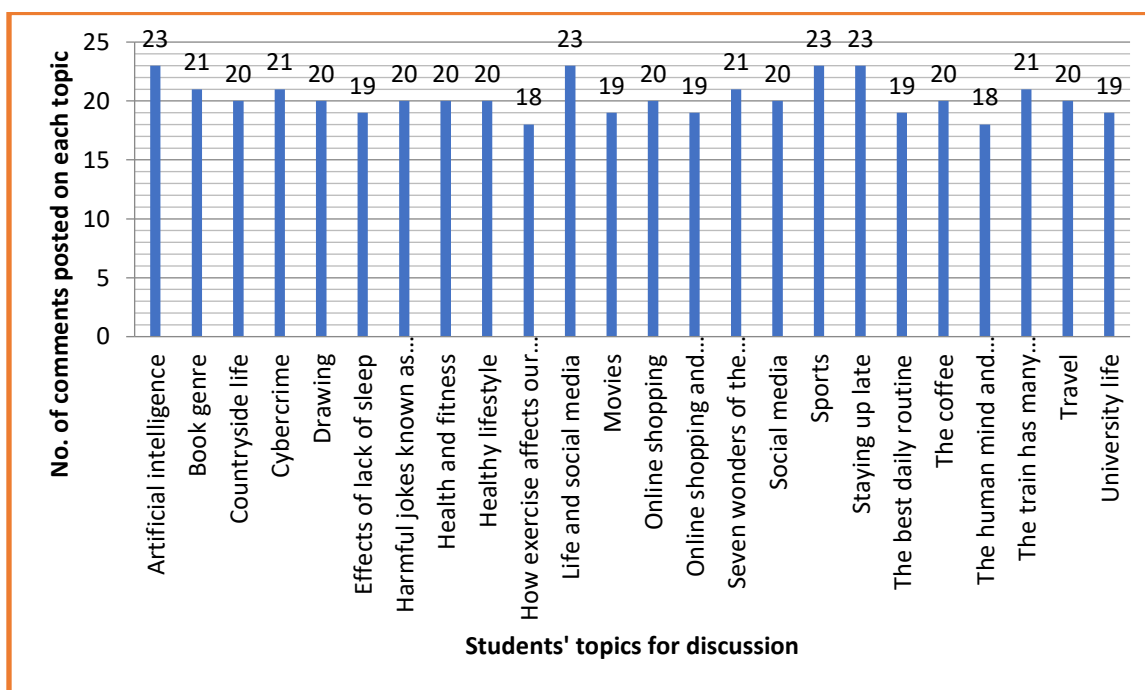
The present study explored the "politeness strategies" of twenty four Saudi female Undergraduate students of English as a foreign language at Qassim University, Saudi Arabia. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 30 years old.

3.3 Procedure

The Blackboard learning management system's collaborate-ultra feature was used to instruct these participants virtually. The researcher encouraged them to choose a topic of their own interest so they could discuss it with other students in the discussion forum of Blackboard learning management system. In the Blackboard LMS discussion forum, one of the students was requested to start the conversation with her topic. After that, every other student was urged to leave one comment at least. Though, they were allowed to write as many comments as they desired.

The topics chosen by the students and the number of comments they made on each topic are displayed in Figure 1 above. There were 24 topics because there were 24 students enrolled in the class. Topics like "artificial intelligence," "life and social media," "sports," and "staying up late" received the most comments (23). The subjects "how exercise affects our life" and "the human mind and the development we have reached" received the fewest comments (18). The students posted 487 comments in all.

Figure 1 Students' topics and the number of comments posted by them



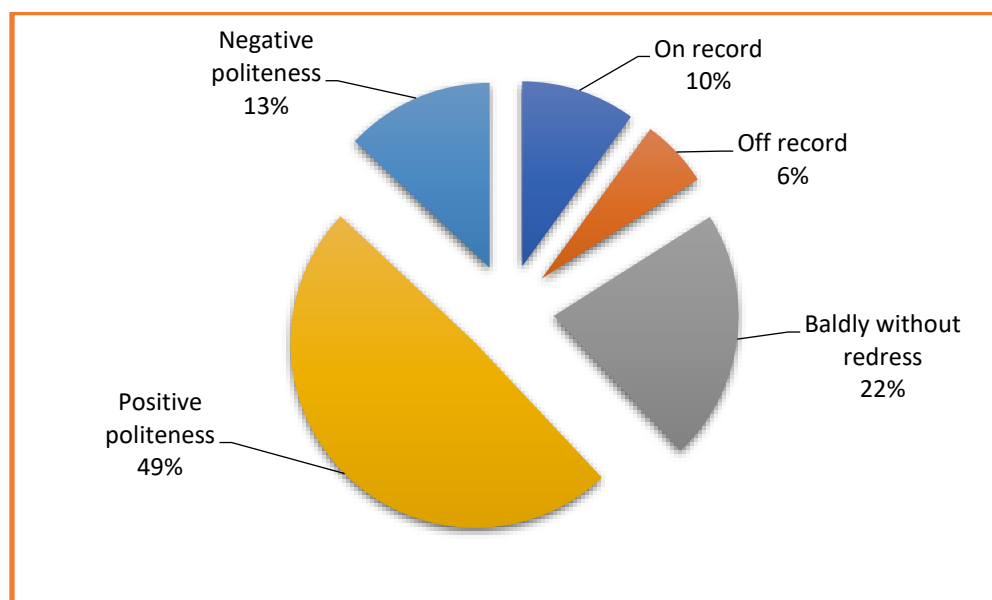
4. Results and discussion

Based on the framework developed by Brown and Levinson (1987), the study's aim is to investigate the "politeness strategies" reflected in the writings of Saudi female undergraduate students of English as a foreign language. The results of this study, which examined the comments made by EFL students, demonstrate that students employ nearly all of the politeness techniques suggested by Brown and Levinson while expressing their thoughts. EFL learners showed a readiness to voice their thoughts and a generally favorable engagement with the topics for discussion. However, there were pragmatic discrepancies in a number of areas. The types of "politeness strategies", their instances and some examples are summarized in Table 1 below:

Table 1 Types of "politeness strategies", their instances and examples

Politeness strategy		Usual instances	Some examples
On record		Urgency, efficiency is necessary, task oriented, welcomes, offers, promising statements, commands	<i>Watch....</i> <i>Listen carefully...</i> <i>Pass me the salt....</i> <i>I promise....</i>
Off record		hints, implicit suggestions, context or situation based	<i>It's very hot here. (speaker)</i> <i>I'll turn on the fan. (hearer)</i>
Baldly without redress		direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way possible	<i>Do this work.</i> <i>Bring that table here.</i>
With redress	Positive politeness	solidarity, intensifiers, agreement, compliments, friendship	<i>Don't worry! You have done a great job.</i> <i>It seems something is not right with you. Can I help?</i>
	Negative politeness	Self-effacement, formality, restrain, hedges, apologies for interfering, personal instance markers, use hedges or questions, be direct, pessimistic	<i>I am sorry to ask again! But can you lend me 100 dollars?</i> <i>I regret to tell you....</i>

Figure 2 the percentage of "politeness strategies" used by female EFL learners



4.1 On record: according to Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 68), “an actor goes on record in doing an act A if it is clear to participants what communicative intention led the actor to do A.” They explained this strategy by giving an example of a promising sentence. If I say “I (hereby) promise to come tomorrow”. Here, the speaker unambiguously obliges himself to the future act. This is what they called ‘on record’ strategy. Here are some examples of this politeness strategy as reflected by the students’ writing in the discussion forum:

- (i) *“Exercise is good and everyone must do it...” (Student)*
- (ii) *“Cybercrime is a serious problem. People must stop it.” (Student)*
- (iii) *“One day I will visit the great wall of China and TajMahal in India...” (Student)*

The students use the *on record* politeness strategy in examples (i) and (ii) above, where the phrases “everyone must do it” and “people must stop it” reflect the urgency of performing an act. Moreover, the act in the future demonstrates the promising politeness method in (iii). Furthermore, Table 2 indicates that 10% of female students employ this politeness strategy. Bald-on-record strategies like these are effective but ignore face-to-face issues. These requirements may come seen as autocratic in academic English settings. The pragmatic transfer from Arabic, where declarative or imperative patterns frequently convey sincerity or emphasis rather than rudeness, is reflected in students’ directness.

4.2 Off record: Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 69) defined it as “there is more than one unambiguously attributable intention so that the actor cannot be held to have committed himself to one particular intent.” They gave the example “Damm, I’m out of cash, I forgot to go to the bank today”. Here, the intention of the speaker might be asking for some money. They further said that these off-record strategies may have “metaphor and irony, rhetorical questions, understatement, tautologies, and all kinds of hints as to what a speaker wants or means to communicate.” In the students’ writing, there were very few instances of off-record strategy. These included insufficient or ambiguous recommendations:

- (iv) *“AI is amazing, but we should think twice before using it.” (Student)*
- (v) *“We all know that online shopping has many disadvantages. Maybe it is not always safe” (Student)*

In the examples (iv) and (v), the students are giving the hints towards the misuse or the disadvantages of AI tools and online shopping. These constructions conform to English norms of polite suggestion by subtly implying criticism. Students tend to favor explicit expression over implication, as seen by their rarity. The instances of this strategy are the lowest (6%) of all the strategies use by the students. The use of this strategy goes in line with Supriatna et al., (2022) who also reported the least utterances of this strategy in students’ conversations.

4.3 Baldly without redress: according to Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 69), this act means “doing it in the most direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way possible”. For instance, “for a request”, someone says “Do X!”. In other words, the writer or speaker expresses exactly what they intend in an honest and courteous manner.

- (vi) *“Exercise is good, it boosts mood so do it every day”. (Student)*
- (vii) *“Social media is a good tool to communicate. So keep using it.” (Student)*

Many direct comments without hedging or stance cues can be seen in the text samples written by female students. These can be categorized as: excessively direct claims directed at the hypothetical reader; lack of politeness mitigation. Students’ pragmatic awareness of how academic writers usually soften claims to preserve reader face makes this method pertinent. The occurrences of this politeness strategy are 22% of the total instances.

4.4 Redressive action: This includes the following:

4.4.1 Positive politeness: It is focused on the hearer’s favorable self-image and positive face. It is accomplished by treating the hearer as a friend, a member of a group, or someone whose desires are well-known and liked. The imposition between the speaker and the hearer can be lessened by positive politeness and make communication more relaxed and comfortable (Purba et al., 2023). Student writing was dominated by positive politeness (49%). Similar findings were reported by Fiani et al., (2023). By using inclusive pronouns, express agreement, and shared ideals, students tried to align themselves with the opinions of their peers. These included:

- (viii) *“I agree with you.” (Student)*

- (ix) *"We all think the same." (Student)*
- (x) *"That's right; exercise is good for everyone." (Student)*
- (xi) *"I totally agree with you." (Student)*

Even though their writing lacks variation, these constructions convey friendship. Informal digital discourse transfer is reflected in the excessive use of intensifiers (such as "completely," "totally," and "very") and the use of emoji (such as "thumbs up", "heart", smiley and "rose" etc.).

- (xii) *"I totally agree 🍷 with you, sports are very very important for all people." (Student)*

While this sentence conveys strong solidarity, its exaggerated tone may appear overly informal in academic writing.

4.4.2 Negative politeness: Its primary goal is to partially fulfill (redress) the negative expression on the hearer's face and his basic desire to uphold territorial and self-determination claims. In essence, it is "avoidance based." Apologies for interfering or violating hedges on the illocutionary force of the act and other softening techniques are used to rectify these acts. In this strategy, politeness is when you think about the other person's desire to perform and get attention without being bothered (Mohammad, 2017). In student writing, negative politeness was less dominant (13%). It usually manifested as stance markers like "I think," "I personally believe," or "maybe."

- (xiii) *"I personally think that the use of AI can be dangerous sometimes." (Student)*
- (xiv) *"Maybe AI is dangerous for us." (Student)*

This respects reader sovereignty and lessens the impact of assertion. Few students, however, employed hedges like "perhaps", "it seems", or "it might be", indicating a lack of knowledge about academic indirectness rules. Hyland (2005) found that EFL authors are reluctant to hedges, which is consistent with the general preference for certainty over tentativeness.

5. Conclusion

This study looked at the Brown and Levinson's (1987) "politeness strategies" used in written conversation by female undergraduate EFL learners at Qassim University, Saudi Arabia. It may be concluded that the Saudi female EFL learners employed a number of "politeness strategies" during their discussion. This result demonstrates the applicability of the concept of "politeness strategies" in Saudi EFL classrooms. According to the data, while agreement and displays of solidarity are popular positive politeness approaches (49%) used by students, on-record (10%), off-record (6%), negative politeness (13%), and baldly without redress action (22%), are less common. The results confirmed that politeness was a very context-bound and dynamic concept for the participants in this study. Based on this, it can be speculated that the differences in people's choices of politeness tactics can be better explained by a systematic model of politeness. Moreover, the results highlight how crucial these tactics are for fostering academic harmony and improving intellectual collaborations. This thorough analysis of "politeness strategies" offers insightful viewpoints on maximizing academic communication, which promotes a more effective and unified academic community.

The types and utilization of "politeness strategies" by Saudi female EFL learners were the only topics covered in this article. Considering the narrow focus of this article, the data came from students' discussions on their selected topics in the Blackboard discussion forum. However, with a bigger and more varied sample, future studies could expand on this one. Moreover, it might focus on questionnaire items which are not covered in this study, use a wider range of questionnaire items, or gather data using different techniques. Additionally it is recommended that future studies concentrate on how male and female EFL learners incorporate "politeness strategies" in some other contexts and cultures. Finally, further studies could compare the usage of written and spoken politeness among Saudi EFL learners or look at developmental improvement following pragmatic-focused training.

6. Pedagogical implications

Students can go from literal accuracy to writing that is pragmatically suitable by focusing on some of these abilities:

- ✓ Include awareness-raising exercises that contrast Arabic and English "politeness strategies".

- ✓ Give authentic academic sample texts that demonstrate reader involvement, modality, and hedging.
- ✓ Promote audience and tone-focused peer review.
- ✓ Include reflection exercises that ask students to point out the use of polite and impolite expressions in their own writings.
- ✓ Give writing tasks on these strategies for more and more practice
- ✓ Give feedback targeting “politeness strategies”.

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