



Politeness Maxims in Teacher’s Requests in EFL Interaction Context: A Classroom-Based Empirical Evidence

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Abstract*

This study aims to explore politeness maxims in teachers’ request in English Foreign Language instructional context. The research method was qualitative which utilized the data from the teachers’ utterances during instructional process at the Eleventh-grade students of high schools in Manggarai region, East Nusa Tenggara Province. A non-participant observation and a field-note taking were the methods of data collection, which utilized audio-video recording and note-taking techniques. The instruments are digital audio-video recorder, field-note, and observation sheet. The data were qualitatively analyzed through three steps; data condensation, data display, and drawing conclusion/verification. The data were further interpreted based on politeness theory and politeness maxims. The results of data analysis show that politeness maxims were applied in teachers’ requests: *tact, generosity, approbation, and modesty*. Tact and approbation were mostly applied in teachers’ requests. The types of politeness maxims were explicitly marked by pragmatic modifiers. They serve to modify and enact polite requests in classroom interaction. Based on the findings, a further investigation is prominent to be conducted in studying other related variables in EFL classroom context.

1. Introduction

Interaction is essentially an integrated part of instructional activities that involves the process of negotiating meaning between teacher and student as the key participants in classroom context. Classroom interaction is very beneficial for teacher and student. Through interaction, a teacher engages in instructing, guiding, and shaping learners’ knowledge and skill. While for learners, interaction provides more valuable inputs and exposures useful for them to enhance understanding and to develop skills. Thus, it plays a prominent role in achieving learning goals and improving the student’s academic achievement. Arguably, it determines success or failure in teaching-learning enterprises. Long revealed that classroom interaction can hinder or facilitate teaching-learning language (Markee, 2015). Therefore, an appropriate use of language is considered more important that affects how a teacher-student interaction is performed in the classroom.

Classroom interaction contains various communicative acts that require the application of politeness. Politeness is a critical language phenomenon in pragmatics that has been widely explored in a wide range of topics. Several recent studies (e.g. Betti, 2020; Darong et al., 2020; Febriansyah et al., 2021; Fitriyani & Andriyanti, 2020; Mahmud, 2019; Megaiab et al., 2019;

Rahayuningsih et al., 2019; Yrisarry et al., 2019) proved the significant finding concerning politeness in English Foreign Language classroom interaction. Based on the findings, it bears that politeness plays a prominent role in facilitating teaching-learning activities and classroom interaction between teacher-student. Interestingly, the previous studies have shown the variety of politeness realization and maxims.

Regarding the previous research findings, politeness should be integrated in EFL teaching-learning context in order to achieve effective classroom interaction. In that sense, teachers and students can fully communicate thoughts and feelings appropriately and politely. By means of politeness, a teacher-student and student-teacher classroom interaction turns out to be comfortable (Hamrakulova, 2020). This idea emphasizes more on the psychological state of the interactants in the classroom. For teachers, politeness is mainly utilized to help the students understand the materials. It is elaborated in various “interactive strategic tasks” (Ariani et al., 2021, p. 197). Meanwhile, learners attempt to apply politeness strategy to foster their achievement and communicative competence, which is termed pragmatic competence. In addition, the learners learn how to interact with teachers and peers in appropriate and polite language.

Several theories have been well recognised and applied in a number of studies regarding politeness phenomenon in diversified contexts of interaction, including in EFL teaching-learning process. Those are related to (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Lakoff & Ide, 2005; Leech, 2014; 1983; Levinson, 1983). The existing theories provide the rationale ground and coverage of politeness, primarily concerning notion, types of strategy, FTAs, maxims, scale, and parameter. Particularly, Brown and Levinson’s theory of politeness has provided the fundamental body of knowledge to the current scholars in exploring multiple problems of politeness in social interaction (Locher & Watts, 2005). Brown & Levinson (1987) define politeness as the speaker's attempt to save and keep face of the hearer. The term face was adopted from the work of Goffman (1967). The concept of face refers to the public self-image of the interacting person (p.61). The physical unit of the interactants is not discussed. Based on the concept, face falls under two types namely positive face and negative face. These two faces are attributed to the wanting (desire) of the participants involved in the interaction. Negative face is the want of every interactant which is not imposed by others, while positive face is the want of every interactant which is to be appreciated or approved by others. Both are considered prominent aspects of applying politeness strategies. In the context of interaction, face can be saved, maintained, or lost, depending primarily on the use of appropriate and accurate language. Consistent with the concept of the face, Lakoff & Ide (2005, p. 4) who argued that politeness involves consideration for others. It means that speakers should show respect to listeners as they have a self-image of being pleased, positively and negatively. Therefore, it is seen as a crucial aspect that influences the success and achievement of communicative goals.

In applying politeness, interactants should also consider a set of maxims or principles. Leech (2014, p. 90) has clearly defined the term maxim as “a constraint of communicative behavior with the aim of achieving a particular goal”. Maxim encapsulates cost-benefit on the side of speaker to hearer; minimize cost to hearer, while maximize benefit to hearer (Leech, 1983). Based on the classification, politeness maxims are subsumed under six types: *tact*, *generosity*, *approbation*, *modesty*, *agreement*, and *sympathy*. These politeness maxims have been adopted in numerous studies of politeness in classroom interaction context. Several studies were cited to shed light on the importance of politeness maxims (e.g. Anjarani, 2022; Gultom, 2022; Mohammed, 2020; Zohragebi & Rashed, 2023). The findings of the previous research proved that politeness applied in classroom interaction comply with a set of maxims. Leech (2014) has

revisited the category of politeness maxims according to general strategy of politeness (GSP), of which one maxim is related to another in pair as well as an additional category such as obligation, opinion, and feeling. The pairs of maxims include generosity-tact and approbation- modesty. Such a modification is made based on the dynamic relation between politeness maxims.

Politeness maxims evidently an interesting phenomenon to be explored in English as Foreign Language context. Several recent studies have not explored politeness maxims in relation to other aspects like pragmatic modifiers. The research findings are limited to uncover the phenomenon. Therefore, further studies are still prominent to fill the gap. The current research primarily aims to address two research questions; (1) what are politeness maxims applied in teacher's requests? and (2) how are politeness maxims used with pragmatic modifiers in teacher's request in classroom interaction?

2. Research Method

The research applied qualitative design to explore politeness maxims in teachers' requests in EFL classroom context. The main data are the utterances obtained from the teachers' utterances during EFL classroom in. The supporting data are descriptive quantitative to illustrate the occurrences of politeness maxims. The data were then obtained through a non-participant observation and a field-note taking, while audio-video recording and note-taking were the techniques used for data collection. The data were qualitatively analyzed through three steps; data condensation, data display, and drawing conclusion/verification (Miles et al., 2014). Data condensation is the procedure of identifying, simplifying, and classifying the data. Data display is related to the data presentation based on the results of analysis. Drawing conclusion is the procedure of addressing the focal points of the analysis. The verification was conducted with reference to theories and the previous studies. The instruments are digital audio-video recorder, field-note, and observation sheet. The data were further interpreted based on politeness theory proposed by (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and politeness maxims adopted from (Leech, 1983). The results of data analysis were displayed in table and discussed inductively.

3. Results and Discussions

This section presents the results and discussions concerning politeness maxims in teacher-student interaction in EFL classroom context. The results of the data analysis showcase the application of six politeness maxims in most utterances spoken during interaction. Those include *the maxims of tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, and sympathy*. Tabel 3.1 below displays distribution and occurrence of politeness maxims employed by EFL teachers in classroom interaction.

Table 3.1

Distribution and Occurrence Politeness Maxims in Teachers' Utterances

No	Types	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7	T8	T9	T10	N	%
1.	Tact	10	12	15	11	15	17	19	13	13	10	125	39

2.	Generosity	5	3	8	7	6	8	9	3	3	7	52	16
3.	Approbation	12	8	10	10	14	8	10	11	13	10	91	30
4.	Modesty	4	5	3	7	6	9	8	6	3	8	51	16

T: teacher

As the data shown in table 3.1, from the total amount of the EFL teachers' utterances (324), four types of politeness maxims were applied in enacting politeness during classroom interaction in EFL teaching context. The data indicate that the use of politeness maxims occurred in a different number which respectively. Tact maxim is 125 data (39%), generosity is 52 data (16%), approbation is 91 data (30%), and modesty is 51 data (16%). Of the four politeness maxims, tact and approbation were mostly employed in EFL teachers' polite requests. Moreover, all the politeness maxims were not flouted in expressing polite request during classroom interaction. It is arguably stated that the speakers considered the importance of politeness maxims to create polite utterances in classroom interaction and to achieve instructional goals. Nevertheless, the findings reveal a varied distribution of politeness maxims for ten EFL teachers. In such case, the EFL classroom circumstance affects the realization of politeness maxims by teachers during classroom interaction.

3.1 Tact and Generosity Maxims

As far as the data analysis was concerned, the EFL teachers performed various instructional activities. The act of directing is the most crucial teacher's task. It primarily functions to guide the students to do some projects or exercises. Based on the data analysis, most teachers' utterances were conveyed in directives such as commands, orders, and requests. In case of giving commands and requests, the EFL teachers used direct and indirect utterances in which they applied Tact maxim. The samples of data shown in extract one below is the instances of Tact maxim application in forming polite utterances.

Extract 1 :

1. Repeat the expression of invitation *please*.
2. *Please* write an invitation of birthday party.
3. Read the invitation in front of the class *please*.
4. Raise your hand *please*, and write the answer.
5. *Please* check the materials on Google Classroom.
6. *Please* sit in a group, and prepare your own presentation.
7. Tell a movie to the class in turn *please*.
8. Pay attention and listen to the group *please*.
9. *Please* use the tools that you have, and then ask and give an opinion about them.
10. *Please* make sure that your task is correct.

The utterances (1-10) occurred in EFL classroom interaction context in which the EFL teachers directed the students to accomplish the tasks related to the designed classroom activities, including *repeating, writing, reading, raising a hand for turn-taking, checking, sitting, telling, getting attention, listening, using the tools (resource), and showing certainty*. For these communicative ends, the speakers applied Tact maxim to enhance a polite command and downgrade the mood of imperative force. In line with Leech's concept of politeness maxim, Tact maxim was used to provide a high value (benefit) to the students as "the other participant", while lowering the value to the speaker's want. As such, the degree of imposition was relevated in Tact

maxim. It was explicitly indicated by politeness marker “please”, which conveys the nuance of softened imperatives (Zohrabi & Rashed, 2023). This result is consistent with the concept emphasized by Leech (2014, p. 162), that the use of polite marker prompts "the status of the utterance as that of a request". Additionally, it enhances the degree of politeness in directive utterances. The instances revealed that the teachers intended to reduce the effect of imperative utterances that put less pressure on the students and enhance a positive atmosphere during classroom interaction. The speakers also endeavour to avoid the threat on the students' face in carrying out the teachers' commands.

In addition to directive acts, Tact maxim was employed by the teachers to make a polite request to hearers. It was indicated in the use of downtoner. The requests with downtoner are typically constructed in a question form and added by modality (could, may, maybe). In EFL classroom interaction, the teachers employed downtoner to deliver a polite request to the students. The instances are shown in extract two below concern the use of downtoner in the male teachers' polite requests and the function in instructional activities.

Extract 2

1. *Could you* speak up?
2. *Could you* tell us your favorite story?
3. *Could you* speak a bit louder?
4. *Could you* repeat the answer?
5. *Could you* repeat saying the expressions?
6. *Could you* give me an example of invitation?
7. *May I* have your opinion about our school curriculum?
8. *Could you* do me *a favor* taking an eraser and a boardmarker at the office?

In utterances (1-8), the teachers used modality (could, may) as downtoner. The function is to soften and diminish the direct force of a command. Utterances (1) and (3) requested that some students raise their voices so the whole class could hear them speaking. Utterance (2) was conveyed to the students to take turns telling a story. By such a request, the teachers indirectly instructed the students to perform the intended action. Meanwhile, utterances (4) and (5) addressed a different speaker's intention. In utterance (4), the teacher asked the student to repeat the answer to get the point and give oral corrective feedback. In contrast, in utterance (5), the teacher asked the student to practice pronouncing the expressions fluently and accurately. Further, utterance (6) was purposed to request the student to provide an example as an elaboration of the topic *invitation*. In utterance (7), the teacher asked the student to give an opinion. It was related to *asking and giving an opinion*, and in utterance (8), the teacher begged the student to help her get an eraser and a board marker. Adding the word "a favour" makes a request more polite. Concerning downtoner, the female teachers employed more questions in conveying requests than the male teachers. The communicative goal is to avoid much pressure and direct attack on the negative face of the students in completing the tasks. Moreover, the students' emotional state grows more positively. The application of generosity maxim is indicated in hedged performative opening for delivering requests. The instances of hedged performative opening are seen in extract four below.

Extract 3:

1. *I would like to ask* you about topic of invitation.
2. *I must ask* the students to resubmit the last project.

3. Before explaining the topic of invitation further, *I would like to ask* some examples of invitation.
4. *May I ask* some students to perform a short conversation about oral invitation?
5. *May I ask* some students to prepare English Wall Magazine?
6. *May I ask* your attention, please?
7. *Could I ask* your ideas about group presentation for next meeting?

Generosity maxim conveyed in hedged performative opening can be fulfilled by minimizing cost to others and maximizing benefit to other. It emphasizes cost-benefit between speaker (Self) and hearer (Other). The focus capitalizes the presence of other that speaker attempts to give. In terms of hedged performative construction, interrogation and declarative are used with modality. It opens the performative acts that aims to soften the illocutionary force of the request. The performative verb *ask* is used with modality (may, would (like), must) (Leech, 2014). The results of the data analysis have revealed that the female teachers employed hedged performative opening in interrogative construction, while the male teachers considered declarative form.

In extract 3, the teachers modified their polite utterances with hedged performative opening. Utterances (1-3) were expressed by the male teachers; they were constructed in declarative form with modality (*would like, must*) and the performative verb (*ask*). By the utterances, the male teachers requested the students in a mild way to perform the activities such as *citing the topic, resubmitting the task, mentioning some examples of invitation*. Utterances (4-7) were particularly conveyed by the female teachers; they were formed in interrogative with modality (*may, could*). The female teachers made a request to the students more politely in such a way that they approached the students to act the required tasks this context, the speakers (EFL teachers) avoided instructing to the hearers directly. However, they opted for the request to give an indirect command. In this case, the teachers upgraded the benefit to the students in such a way that imperative force was reduced by the request. The benefits is that the students were not underpressure in performing the requested acts.

3.2 Approbation and Modesty Maxim

Approbation is conducted by minimizing dispraise of other and maximizing dispraise of self. The speakers suppress compliment to themselves while upgrading admiration of other. Modesty is enacted by granting low values to speakers and providing high values to others. This means that speakers do not promote their qualities, but uplift values to hearers' qualities were found in the teachers' request. In the case of appreciative opening, the teachers applied it as one of the pragmatic modifiers in performing a polite indirect request. It is to sweeten and cover the bitter flavour of directive command. Typically, the construction is declarative with modality (*would*) and if clause (Leech, 2014)—the instances of the utterances containing appreciative opening illustrated in the following extract.

Extract 4:

1. *I would be happy if* you can use the expression of accepting an invitation.
2. *It would be better if* you write the pattern at first.
3. *I would appreciate if* all students try to speak English during the lesson.
4. *It would be great if* the group uses power point for the presentation.
5. *It would be better if* you write the sentences on the board.
6. *I would be happy if* many students practice English in a group discussion.

Concerning politeness maxims, the utterances (1-6) designate approbation and modesty. Both were applied to express polite indirect requests. Utterances (3,4) demonstrated approbation maxim, and utterances (1,2,5,6) were modesty maxim. The marker is appreciative opening. By approbation maxim, the teachers attempted to show their praise to the expected students' works, whereas modesty maxim was realised to deliver understatement. In such a context, the teachers had explicitly minimized their role as the expert power and dominance over the students (Mohammed, 2020; Zohrabi & Rashed, 2023). Overall, these politeness maxims bring a positive attitude and value to the students when performing the actions as being requested. Indirectly, they were instructed to do some tasks. The formulation consists of two patterns; the uncovered speakers as the agent using the first personal pronoun (e.g. I would be...) and the covered speakers with an impersonal pronoun.

4. Conclusions

Politeness does not exist on its own naturally. It is a language behaviour that speakers attempt to maintain for an effective communicative act. Therefore, it requires a conscious effort to apply a set of politeness maxims. In classroom interaction, teachers and students should carefully consider the application of politeness maxims to achieve instructional goals. Based on the findings of politeness maxims in teachers' request, it can be concluded in some points. First, four types of politeness maxims were employed by the EFL teachers in making a polite request, namely *tact*, *generosity*, *approbation*, and *modesty*. Second, tact maxim was highly opted for performing polite requests. Third, the occurrence and distribution of politeness maxims differ among ten EFL teachers during classroom interaction. Fourth, politeness maxims were shaped by pragmatic modifiers in the teachers' requests. By complying to the politeness maxims, the teachers managed to anticipate and downgrade the effect of imposition as well as the threat on the students' face. However, the results of the study are still insufficient to account for the determinant factors of the distribution variation in realizing politeness maxims during classroom interaction. Further research is necessary to explore other variables of politeness maxims in EFL classroom context.

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