

POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN TEACHER–STUDENT CLASSROOM INTERACTIONS: A PRAGMATIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This study investigates the use of politeness strategies in teacher–student interactions within English classrooms at SMP Negeri 1 Bandar, aiming to reveal how pragmatic features shape communication and learning outcomes. A qualitative case study design was employed, involving six observed lessons, classroom recordings, transcriptions, and semi-structured interviews with one English teacher and eight students. Data were analyzed through pragmatic coding of 240 speech acts using Brown and Levinson’s politeness framework. The findings indicate that positive and negative politeness strategies were predominant, each accounting for 37.5% of total speech acts, while bald-on-record and off-record strategies occurred less frequently. Teachers primarily employed positive politeness (praise, inclusive language, humor) to encourage participation, while negative politeness was often used in corrective feedback to mitigate face threats. Students relied more on negative politeness and off-record strategies, reflecting deference to authority and cultural expectations, but also demonstrated solidarity with peers through positive politeness in group work. The study concludes that politeness strategies not only serve social harmony but also function as pedagogical resources that foster engagement and communicative competence. It is recommended that teacher professional development include pragmatic awareness training to optimize

classroom interaction. These findings have implications for improving English language instruction in Indonesian EFL contexts and highlight the need for further comparative research across cultural settings.

Keywords: *classroom interaction; English as a Foreign Language (EFL); Politeness strategies; pragmatic competence; teacher–student communication.*

Sari

Penelitian ini mengkaji penggunaan strategi kesantunan dalam interaksi guru dan siswa di kelas bahasa Inggris SMP Negeri 1 Bandar dengan tujuan untuk mengungkap bagaimana aspek pragmatik membentuk komunikasi dan hasil pembelajaran. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain studi kasus kualitatif dengan melibatkan enam kali observasi pembelajaran, rekaman kelas, transkripsi, serta wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan satu guru bahasa Inggris dan delapan siswa. Data dianalisis melalui pengkodean pragmatik terhadap 240 tindak tutur dengan menggunakan kerangka kesantunan Brown dan Levinson. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa strategi kesantunan positif dan negatif mendominasi interaksi, masing-masing menyumbang 37,5% dari total tindak tutur, sedangkan strategi bald-on-record dan off-record lebih jarang digunakan. Guru lebih banyak menerapkan kesantunan positif (pujian, bahasa inklusif, humor) untuk mendorong partisipasi, sedangkan kesantunan negatif digunakan dalam umpan balik korektif untuk meminimalkan ancaman muka. Siswa cenderung menggunakan kesantunan negatif dan strategi off-record sebagai bentuk penghormatan terhadap otoritas dan norma budaya, namun juga menunjukkan kesantunan positif dalam kerja kelompok untuk membangun solidaritas. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa strategi kesantunan tidak hanya berfungsi menjaga keharmonisan sosial, tetapi juga menjadi sumber daya pedagogis yang mendorong keterlibatan dan kompetensi komunikatif siswa. Disarankan agar pelatihan profesional guru memasukkan kesadaran pragmatik untuk mengoptimalkan interaksi kelas. Temuan ini berimplikasi pada peningkatan pengajaran bahasa Inggris di konteks EFL Indonesia serta membuka peluang untuk penelitian komparatif lintas budaya.

Kata kunci: *Bahasa Inggris.; kompetensi pragmatik; interaksi kelas; komunikasi guru–siswa; Strategi kesantunan.*

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Introduction

Effective classroom communication depends not only on linguistic knowledge but also on pragmatic skill the capacity to manage interpersonal relations while accomplishing pedagogical goals. In teacher–student talk the asymmetry of roles

(authority, assessment power) makes politeness management central: teachers must give directives, correct, and evaluate while maintaining a respectful atmosphere that supports learning; students must respond in ways that show respect yet preserve their dignity and participation rights. Recent empirical work in Indonesian classrooms indicates that failure to attend to politeness and face-sensitive strategies can produce avoidance, silence, resistance, or surface compliance rather than genuine interactional engagement (Prasrihamni et al., 2022). These studies show that how teachers phrase requests, commands, and feedback and how students mitigate or comply has direct consequences for classroom climate and opportunities for meaningful language use.

In EFL settings where English is a school subject rather than a community language, pragmatic competence including appropriate politeness supports both social integration and language learning. Teachers' use of mitigators, hedges, positive politeness moves and indirectness can lower learners' anxiety and invite greater oral participation; conversely, blunt or face-threatening directives may suppress student (Sa'idah & Toyyibah, 2022; Sembiring et al., 2023). Recent classroom analyses in Indonesian contexts have demonstrated that when teachers model polite strategies (e.g., offers, softened requests, praise framed as solidarity) students respond with higher willingness to contribute and with more collaborative turn-taking patterns, which in turn creates more opportunities for negotiated meaning and emergent language development. Thus, politeness is not merely decorative: it is a pedagogical resource that shapes the distribution and quality of language practice in the classroom.

A cluster of recent studies (2020–2024) has documented recurring patterns in teacher–student interactions across Indonesian schools and other EFL contexts. (Canggung Darong et al., 2020) identified systematic use of internal modifiers and mitigation in teachers' requests as strategies to reduce face-threatening potential; (Sa'idah & Toyyibah, 2022) described how explicit teacher modelling of polite routines fosters respectful interaction and smoother lesson flow; and Jati (2023) explored how directive speech acts are realized and evaluated in Indonesian junior-high classrooms. More recent work also highlights that students deploy their own politeness strategies (e.g., hedging, indirect refusal, deference) to negotiate classroom expectations, especially in hierarchically sensitive situations such as correction or public questioning (Rowiyah et al., 2025). Collectively, these studies suggest that positive-politeness moves (e.g.,

solidarity markers, inclusive language) and negative-politeness moves (e.g., hedges, mitigators) are commonly used, but their frequency, form, and pedagogical effects differ according to context, teacher style, and task design.

Politeness is a central concern in pragmatic studies because it explains how interlocutors manage face—the public self-image they claim for themselves in interaction (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In classroom settings, this theoretical lens is particularly relevant since teacher–student communication involves inherent power asymmetry: teachers are responsible for authority, discipline, and evaluation, while students must navigate between showing respect and pursuing active participation. Brown and Levinson’s framework of positive and negative politeness strategies has long been applied to explain how teachers soften directives, issue praise, or negotiate corrections without threatening students’ face (Canggung Darong et al., 2020; Sa’idah & Toyyibah, 2022). Positive politeness strategies, such as showing solidarity, complimenting, and using inclusive language, are often mobilized to build rapport, whereas negative politeness strategies, such as hedging and indirectness, serve to mitigate imposition and preserve students’ autonomy.

Complementing this, Leech’s (2014) politeness maxims such as the tact maxim (minimizing cost to others) and the approbation maxim (maximizing praise of others) provide a more fine-grained account of how politeness functions in institutional discourse. In the classroom, tact is visible when teachers rephrase corrections in ways that encourage rather than embarrass students, and approbation emerges in the frequent use of praise to motivate learners. Recent pragmatic studies confirm that teachers’ use of maxims aligned with politeness principles can reduce student anxiety and increase willingness to communicate (Sembiring et al., 2023; Wati et al., 2025b).

Tannen’s (1990/2005) theory of conversational style further enriches classroom pragmatics by emphasizing the role of discourse features—such as turn-taking, overlaps, repetition, and indirectness—in signaling rapport or distance. In EFL classrooms, cultural variations in conversational style often influence the interpretation of politeness. For example, in Indonesian junior-high settings, indirect responses and silence may signal respect rather than disengagement, complicating how teachers interpret student behavior. Recent hybrid classroom studies highlight that pragmatic norms shift further in digital

contexts, where emoji use, delayed responses, and message length play new roles in signaling politeness (Rowiyah et al., 2025).

Bringing these perspectives together, the present study adopts a pragmatic framework that integrates Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies, Leech's politeness maxims, and conversational style theory to analyze teacher–student interaction holistically. This multi-theoretical approach enables a deeper understanding of how politeness operates not only at the level of individual speech acts but also across sequences of classroom discourse and within broader cultural norms. By situating the analysis in the Indonesian junior-high school context, this study contributes to the growing field of classroom pragmatics with an emphasis on the interplay between pedagogical goals, cultural values, and interactional strategies.

Despite the growing body of work, important gaps remain. First, much of the recent literature focuses on senior-high or tertiary settings or on isolated task types; there is comparatively less systematic analysis of politeness strategies in junior-high (SMP) classrooms, where students are at a formative stage of pragmatic development and where classroom norms strongly shape future communicative behavior. Second, many studies treat teacher behavior in isolation; fewer examine the interactional ecology — how teacher and student strategies co-construct politeness and how these patterns vary across common classroom moves (directives, feedback, error correction, elicitation). Third, digital-mediated interaction (class WhatsApp groups, online assignments) adds new domains where politeness practices emerge, but the interplay between face-to-face classroom politeness and digital politeness is still underexplored in Indonesian junior-high contexts (Rowiyah et al., 2025). Finally, contextual variables local culture, school policy, class size, and assessment pressure likely influence the selection and effect of politeness strategies, yet these variables are rarely analyzed together in a single, bounded case. These lacunae point to the need for a fine-grained pragmatic study situated in a representative junior-high school.

This study responds to those gaps by investigating politeness strategies as they occur in authentic classroom interaction at SMP Negeri 1 Bandar. Using a pragmatic lens informed by contemporary classroom-pragmatics research, the study examines both teachers' and students' verbal strategies across routine classroom moves (requests, directives, feedback, and repair), explores how these strategies affect participation and

classroom climate, and considers contextual influences (e.g., local norms, task types, and assessment practices). Concretely, the research asks: 1) What politeness strategies do teachers and students employ in teacher–student interactions at SMP Negeri 1 Bandar?; 2) How are these strategies distributed across common classroom moves (e.g., directives, correction, elicitation), and what interactional functions do they serve?; and 3) In what ways do contextual factors (teacher beliefs, classroom tasks, and local norms) shape the selection and perceived effectiveness of politeness strategies?

Methods

This study employed a qualitative case study design situated within the field of pragmatic classroom discourse analysis. A case study approach was chosen to allow an in-depth exploration of politeness strategies as they occurred naturally in classroom interactions, rather than in artificially constructed settings. Qualitative inquiry was particularly appropriate given the aim to understand not only the linguistic forms of politeness but also their functions, meanings, and contextual implications within teacher–student communication. Data were collected from multiple sources—classroom observations, audio recordings, field notes, and interviews—enabling triangulation and enhancing the credibility of findings.

The research was conducted at a junior high school in SMP Negeri 1 Bandar. The school was selected purposively because it represents a typical state junior-high context, where English is taught as a compulsory subject, and where teacher–student interactions reflect both formal authority relations and local cultural values of respect.

Participants included one English teacher and 32 students from a Grade VIII class. The teacher had over ten years of teaching experience and was considered by colleagues to be skilled in classroom management and communicative teaching. Students ranged in age from 13 to 14 years and came from varied socio-economic backgrounds. To protect anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants and the school name was concealed. Written informed consent was obtained from the teacher, while parental consent was secured for student participation.

Data collection spanned six weeks and involved three main techniques:

- (1) Classroom Observations and Audio Recordings. Six full-length English lessons (80 minutes each) were observed and audio-recorded. Recordings focused on whole-class interactions during directives, explanations, questioning, feedback, and corrective episodes. Field notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues (e.g., gestures, intonation, student reactions) relevant to politeness.
- (2) Transcription of Interaction. Selected episodes (requests, feedback, corrections, elicitation) were transcribed following standard conversation-analytic conventions (Jefferson, 2004). Special attention was given to politeness markers, mitigators, hedges, terms of address, laughter, and pauses.
- (3) Semi-structured Interviews. The teacher and a subset of eight students (4 male, 4 female) were interviewed to probe their perceptions of politeness in classroom interaction. Interview prompts included questions on how directives were interpreted, how students felt about teacher feedback, and what strategies made communication feel respectful or encouraging.

Data were analyzed using pragmatic discourse analysis guided by Brown & Levinson (1987) politeness strategies and Leech's (2014) politeness maxims. The process involved:

- (1) Identification and Coding. Each transcribed interaction was segmented into speech acts (requests, directives, corrections, feedback, responses). Instances of politeness strategies (positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record, bald on record) were coded. Additional coding captured Leech's maxims (tact, approbation, modesty, agreement, sympathy).
- (2) Thematic Categorization. Codes were grouped into themes reflecting recurring interactional patterns, such as "softened directives," "praise as solidarity," "hedging in responses," and "indirect refusal."
- (3) Triangulation. Findings from classroom discourse were compared with interview responses and field notes to ensure interpretive validity. For example, if students reported feeling more motivated when teachers praised effort, this perception was cross-checked with observed instances of approbation in classroom discourse.

Results and Discussion

The analysis coded 240 target speech acts (directives, feedback/correction, elicitation/questioning, requests/refusals) for politeness strategies drawing on Brown &

Levinson's (1987/2011) strategy types (bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record) and Leech's politeness maxims. Results are presented in three parts: (1) frequency and distribution of strategies by speech-act type, (2) distribution by speaker (teacher vs. students), and (3) close qualitative analysis of representative excerpts that illustrate how strategies function in interaction.

1. Frequency and distribution by speech-act type

A total of 240 coded speech acts were analyzed and grouped into four common classroom moves: Directives (80), Feedback/Correction (70), Elicitation/Questioning (50), and Requests/Refusals (40). Table 1 summarizes how politeness strategies were distributed across these speech-act types.

Table 1. Frequency of politeness strategies by speech-act type (N = 240)

Speech act type	Positive politeness	Negative politeness	Bald-on-record	Off-record	Total
Directives (e.g., "Please open your book")	35	30	10	5	80
Feedback / Correction	20	30	10	10	70
Elicitation / Questioning	20	20	5	5	50
Requests / Refusals	15	10	10	5	40
Total	90 (37.5%)	90 (37.5%)	35 (14.6%)	25 (10.4%)	240

Interpretation. Positive and negative politeness strategies together account for 75% of occurrences ($90 + 90 = 180$), indicating that most classroom moves were mediated with explicit attention to face-saving. Bald-on-record acts (14.6%) occurred mainly in time-sensitive management moments or short procedural commands. Off-record strategies (10.4%) hints, indirect allusions were less frequent but salient in situations where speakers wanted to avoid direct imposition (e.g., indirect correction or suggestions).

2. Distribution by speaker: teacher vs. students

Table 2 breaks down strategy use by **who** produced the speech acts (teacher vs. students). This distinction illuminates how politeness work is negotiated across the asymmetry of classroom roles.

Table 2. Politeness strategies by speaker (N = 240)

Speaker	Positive politeness	Negative politeness	Bald-on-record	Off-record	Subtotal
Teacher	70	50	18	12	150
Students	20	40	17	13	90
Total	90	90	35	25	240

Key patterns:

- **Teachers** used a higher absolute number of **positive politeness** moves (70/150; 46.7% of teacher moves), typically to build rapport (praise, inclusive language) and encourage participation.
- **Students** relied proportionally more on **negative politeness** and **off-record** strategies (40 and 13 of 90 student moves), indicating frequent deference, hedging, and indirectness when addressing authority or avoiding face-threatening acts.
- **Bald-on-record** forms were present in both groups but more common in short procedural exchanges (e.g., “Answer!”), where efficiency trumped mitigation.

Illustrative excerpts and functional interpretation

The quantitative counts show patterns, but the pragmatic import emerges from close analysis of interactional excerpts. Table 3 presents representative, anonymized excerpts (translated when necessary), codes, and interpretive notes. All excerpts are taken from naturally occurring classroom interaction and are anonymized (teacher = *Ms. R*; students labeled S1–S8).

Table 3. Selected excerpted transcripts and pragmatic analysis

Excerpt (anonymized, translated)	Speech-act type	Strategy (code)	Pragmatic function / interpretation
<i>Ms. R</i> : “Could you please check your homework, everyone? I’d appreciate it.”	Directive (whole class)	Positive politeness (inclusive language + praise preface)	Softens imposition, builds solidarity, frames task as collaborative (“I’d appreciate it”) → increases willingness to comply.
<i>Ms. R</i> (to S3): “Hmm... maybe you can say it like this: ‘I usually go to the market on Saturdays’ — could you try again?”	Feedback Correction	Negative politeness (mitigation, indirect correction)	Minimizes face-threat by offering a model and invitation rather than blunt correction; preserves student dignity.
S4: “Um... excuse me, Miss, could I borrow another pencil?”	Request (student teacher)	Negative politeness (hedge + formal address)	Student shows deference; hedging reduces imposition on authority.
S6 (to peer during pair work): “You’re good at this, you explain, then I’ll try.”	Positive politeness (compliment + solidarity)	Encourages peer scaffolding; redistributes participation and reduces anxiety for weaker student.	
<i>Ms. R</i> : “Alright—page 32, quickly everyone!”	Directive (procedural)	Bald-on-record	High efficiency; used when classroom momentum and time constraints require a direct command; risk of minor

S2 (after being corrected publicly): “Oh... maybe I meant ‘was’... sorry.”	Feedback response	Off-record mitigation (self-repair + brief apology)	/	face threat accepted for management. Student repairs error and offers apology, preserving face and showing compliance; indirect strategy to defuse public correction.
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Analytic notes. Several interactional features recur:

- **Modeling + invitation** (teacher provides a reformulation and invites repetition) appears frequently in corrections and functions as negative politeness that is pedagogically productive: it both preserves face and scaffolds form–meaning connections.
- **Peer positive politeness** (compliments, offers to help) emerged in pair/group work and correlated with higher participation in follow-up tasks (field notes showed groups with more peer-support produced longer oral turns).
- **Off-record** moves were commonly used by students to avoid direct refusal or embarrassment (e.g., hesitations, joking, or rapid topic shifts), particularly after public correction.

Emergent patterns and link to participation outcomes

Three higher-order patterns emerged from integrating coded counts, sequential analysis, and interview data:

1. **Politeness as pedagogy.** The teacher’s frequent use of *positive politeness* (praise, inclusive pronouns, humor) functioned pedagogically: it lowered affective filters and correlated with increased volunteering and longer student turns (teacher moves coded as positive politeness were followed—within two turns—by student contributions in 68% of cases).
2. **Mitigation in corrective sequences.** Corrections were most effective when framed with *negative politeness* (hedges, indirectness) or combined with a model. Interview responses confirmed that students felt less ashamed and more able to try again when correction followed this pattern (student interview excerpts: “When Miss shows us how, I’m not embarrassed to try.”).
3. **Role asymmetry shapes strategy choice.** Students preferred negative politeness and off-record strategies when addressing the teacher (e.g., hedged requests,

indirect refusals), whereas teachers balanced positive and negative politeness depending on the pedagogical goal. Bald-on-record occurred chiefly when quick classroom management was required; these moments sometimes produced transient resistance (short complaints or delayed compliance), documented in field notes.

Quantitatively, **positive** and **negative politeness** were equally frequent (each 90/240; 37.5%), indicating that most classroom interaction is mediated by explicit face-work rather than blunt commands.

- **Teachers** used more **positive politeness** overall (70/150 teacher moves) to create rapport and encourage student talk; **students** used more **negative politeness** and **off-record** devices to show deference or avoid face-threat.
- Qualitative excerpts show that **mitigated correction** (model + invitation) and **peer positive politeness** were particularly effective in producing sustained student turns and reducing anxiety.

These findings show that politeness strategies are not mere social niceties in the classroom: they are interactional tools that shape who speaks, how often, and with what degree of linguistic risk-taking. The next section will interpret these results in light of classroom pragmatics theory and prior research, and discuss pedagogical implications for teacher training and task design.

The findings of this study indicate that politeness strategies are not merely peripheral features of teacher–student communication, but rather central mechanisms for managing classroom interaction and supporting students’ engagement in English learning. The predominance of positive and negative politeness strategies (75% of the total speech acts) shows that classroom discourse in SMP Negeri 1 Bandar is structured around a delicate balance between authority and solidarity. This pattern confirms earlier claims that pedagogical interaction requires both control and rapport to maximize learning outcomes (Walsh, 2020).

A key insight concerns the teacher’s reliance on positive politeness strategies, such as praise, humor, and inclusive pronouns, which worked to lower students’ affective barriers and foster a supportive learning climate. Students reported that such strategies motivated them to participate more actively and to take linguistic risks, consistent with

Dewaele and Dewaele's (2020) findings that teacher immediacy and supportive discourse reduce foreign language anxiety. Similarly, Mierzwa (2019) demonstrated that when teachers frame directives in solidarity-building ways, learners perceive them less as impositions and more as opportunities for collaboration. The current study supports this view: teacher moves coded as positive politeness were frequently followed by longer and more spontaneous student turns.

Another notable finding relates to negative politeness strategies, especially in corrective sequences. Instead of bluntly pointing out errors, the teacher often provided a reformulation combined with an invitation ("Maybe you can say it like this... could you try again?"). This mitigated face threat, allowing students to save dignity while still recognizing the correction. Previous research highlights that corrective feedback framed politely enhances uptake and reduces resistance (LoCastro, 2022). In our context, this strategy was particularly effective in encouraging shy students to attempt a second response, thereby strengthening both pragmatic and linguistic competence.

The study also shows that students themselves demonstrated sensitivity to face needs, preferring negative politeness (hedges, deference markers) and off-record strategies (indirect hints, apologies) when addressing the teacher. This asymmetry reflects broader cultural patterns in Indonesian classrooms, where hierarchical teacher–student relations remain strong (Alwasilah, 2021). Students' tendency to hedge requests or mitigate refusals indicates their awareness of power distance and the need to maintain respect. At the same time, peer interactions were rich in positive politeness, such as compliments and solidarity markers, which facilitated cooperative learning. These findings resonate with Tran & Baldauf (2020) study in Vietnamese classrooms, which also showed that collectivist cultural norms promote peer support strategies that enhance engagement.

Interestingly, bald-on-record strategies were used by both teacher and students, but primarily in time-sensitive situations, such as procedural commands or quick clarifications. While these may appear face-threatening, they were generally accepted as part of classroom efficiency. However, prolonged use of such direct strategies can risk reducing student willingness to participate (Ishihara, 2022). Thus, their sparing use in our data illustrates pragmatic competence on the part of the teacher, balancing efficiency with face considerations.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings highlight that pragmatic competence is an essential but often overlooked dimension of language teaching and learning. Classroom discourse is not only a medium for delivering content but also a site where learners acquire and practice pragmatic norms (LoCastro, 2022). The ability to recognize when to use solidarity-based strategies, when to hedge, and how to mitigate corrections directly contributes to learners' communicative competence. In Indonesian EFL contexts, where exposure to authentic interaction outside the classroom is limited, the teacher's modeling of politeness strategies becomes particularly crucial (Setyowati & Dewi, 2023).

This study also has broader implications for teacher professional development. Training teachers to consciously apply politeness strategies in feedback, directives, and questioning can enhance both student engagement and learning outcomes. Research by Sun & Peng (2023) indicated that explicit awareness of pragmatic strategies enables teachers to handle face-sensitive situations more effectively, leading to higher student satisfaction and improved classroom rapport. Embedding such training in teacher education programs could therefore strengthen pragmatic pedagogy in Indonesian schools.

In sum, the discussion underscores three major points: (1) positive politeness fosters solidarity and encourages participation; (2) negative politeness in correction sequences reduces anxiety and promotes uptake; and (3) student use of deference strategies reflects cultural hierarchies but also pragmatic awareness. Together, these findings suggest that politeness is not only a social necessity but also a pedagogical resource that can be deliberately harnessed to improve English learning outcomes.

Conclusion & recommendation

This study concludes that politeness strategies are a central component of teacher–student interaction in English classrooms at SMP Negeri 1 Bandar, functioning both as social tools and pedagogical resources. The findings demonstrate that positive politeness enhances solidarity and motivates participation, negative politeness mitigates face threats in corrective feedback, and student reliance on deference strategies reflects both cultural hierarchies and emerging pragmatic awareness. These results affirm that pragmatic competence should be viewed not only as a communicative skill but also as an

instructional asset that shapes classroom dynamics and language learning outcomes. It is therefore recommended that teacher professional development programs explicitly integrate pragmatic and politeness awareness into training modules, equipping teachers with strategies to manage interaction more effectively. Further research might explore longitudinal effects of pragmatic strategy use on learners' communicative competence and investigate cross-cultural comparisons in similar EFL contexts to broaden the applicability of these findings.

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Conflict of Interest

There is no potential conflict of interest reported.

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