



Politeness Strategies in Cross-Cultural Academic Communication between Mandailing Natal Students and Culturally Diverse Lecturers

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Abstract

Although politeness in academic communication has been widely discussed in pragmatic studies, limited research has examined how students from local cultural backgrounds employ politeness strategies when interacting with lecturers from different cultural backgrounds in Indonesian higher education settings. This gap is important to address because differences in cultural norms and communication styles may lead to misunderstandings and affect the effectiveness of lecturer–student interaction. This study aims to investigate the politeness strategies used by Mandailing Natal students when interacting with lecturers from different cultural backgrounds at STAIN Mandailing Natal. This study employed a qualitative pragmatic research design with a sociopragmatic approach. The participants consisted of 15 Mandailing Natal students and 6 lecturers from non-Mandailing cultural backgrounds. The data were collected through classroom observations, audio-recorded lecturer–student interactions, academic consultation recordings, semi-structured interviews, and field notes. The data were analyzed using pragmatic discourse analysis based on Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. The findings reveal that students predominantly employed negative politeness strategies, including indirect expressions, hedging, apologetic forms, and softened statements to show respect and minimize imposition toward lecturers. Students frequently avoided direct disagreement and tended to communicate cautiously due to cultural values emphasizing respect for authority and social harmony. In contrast, lecturers generally used more direct communication styles when giving feedback, instructions, and asking questions. These differences in communication styles sometimes created misunderstandings during classroom discussions and thesis supervision sessions. Students often hesitated to ask for clarification, while lecturers sometimes interpreted students' silence as passiveness or lack of preparation. The study concludes that politeness strategies in lecturer–student interaction are strongly influenced by cultural values, social hierarchy, and academic roles. The findings highlight the importance of pragmatic and intercultural awareness in higher education communication in order to reduce misunderstandings and support more effective academic interaction.

Keywords: Academic Communication, Lecturer–student Interaction, Politeness Strategies, Pragmatics, Sociopragmatics

1. Introduction

Politeness in academic communication functions as a communicative strategy that enables students and lecturers to manage social relationships, negotiate institutional roles, and minimize potential conflict during academic interaction (Locher, 2018; Locher & Watts, 2005). In higher education settings, particularly in cross-cultural lecturer–student interactions, politeness becomes essential because differences in cultural norms and communication styles may influence how messages are expressed and interpreted. However, the fundamental problem of politeness in academic communication is the challenge of balancing the need for critical, direct, and objective academic exchange with the need to maintain respect, cooperation, and positive interpersonal relationships among

participants. In academic settings, communication often involves evaluation, disagreement, and negotiation of knowledge, which may threaten an individual's face or social identity if not expressed appropriately. In higher education, interactions between lecturers and students involve differences in authority and academic roles (Hyland, 2004). These differences may influence the way students communicate, particularly in situations that require sensitivity, such as asking questions, requesting assistance, or expressing disagreement. Maintaining a respectful and harmonious lecturer–student relationship is important to support effective communication and a positive academic environment. Therefore, politeness strategies are important when students ask for clarification, discuss grades, express disagreement, or seek academic support (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

From a pragmatic perspective, politeness is not only related to language forms, but also to social norms, cultural values, and communication contexts (Eelen, 2001; Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Theories of politeness, including Brown and Levinson's face theory, explain that polite behavior can differ across cultures and situations (Locher, 2018). In academic settings, these differences may become more noticeable when lecturers and students come from different cultural backgrounds, because they may have different expectations about respect, participation, and authority (Kádár & Haugh, 2013).

STAIN Mandailing Natal provides an important context for studying politeness in academic communication. Most students at this institution come from the Mandailing Natal cultural background, which emphasizes respect for authority, indirect communication, and avoiding direct confrontation, especially when interacting with lecturers or other authority figures (Zulkarnain et al., 2023). These cultural values influence how students make requests, express opinions, and respond to disagreement in academic interactions. Previous research also shows that students in Mandailing Natal tend to respond more positively to communication styles that reflect local cultural norms than to highly formal communication, which may create social distance between students and lecturers (Marlina, 2022).

On the other hand, many lecturers at STAIN Mandailing Natal come from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds outside the local Mandailing Natal community. As a result, lecturers and students may bring different communication preferences and expectations into academic interactions, particularly regarding classroom participation, directness, and forms of politeness. In some academic contexts, lecturers may encourage more direct participation and explicit discussion as part of critical academic engagement, while students from cultures that emphasize indirectness and deference to authority may prefer more cautious or respectful ways of expressing opinions. These differences do not necessarily indicate impoliteness from either side, but they may create misunderstanding or differences in interpreting appropriate communication behavior in the classroom (Witsel, 2003).

These interactions become more complex because higher education today encourages active learning, classroom discussion, and student participation. In such contexts, students and lecturers may bring different communication styles and expectations into the classroom, particularly regarding directness, participation, and expressions of politeness. For students from the Mandailing Natal cultural background, communication practices that emphasize respect for authority and indirectness may sometimes differ from academic practices that encourage open discussion and active engagement. Therefore, students often negotiate between maintaining local cultural values of politeness and responding to the communicative expectations of academic interaction.

Although politeness strategies in academic contexts have been widely studied, a considerable number of studies have focused primarily on Western educational settings, while regional cultural diversity within Indonesian academic contexts has received comparatively less attention (Hyland, 2005; Locher & Watts, 2005). Research on politeness in Indonesian universities has examined lecturer–student interaction and academic communication in various contexts (Anugrawati & Syam, 2024; Basuki, 2015). However, studies that specifically explore the influence of local ethnic cultures on politeness strategies in higher education remain relatively limited. Existing research on intercultural politeness in Indonesia also tends to focus more on international communication, Bahasa Indonesia for foreign learners, or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts (Gusnawaty & Nurwati, 2019). Therefore, cross-cultural academic interaction within the same national higher education setting, particularly among participants from different local cultural backgrounds in Indonesia, still receives comparatively less scholarly attention.

Studies on politeness in Indonesian higher education have examined lecturer–student interaction in classroom communication, online consultation, and technology-mediated academic discourse (Jazeri et al., 2020; Pasaribu et al., 2021; Sudar et al., 2025). Several studies have also explored the relationship between politeness and local cultural backgrounds, such as Banjarese students’ politeness toward lecturers in online communication (Winiharti & Mubarak, 2023). In addition, research at STAIN Mandailing Natal has discussed lecturer–student interpersonal communication and the importance of communication styles that are accepted positively by students within the local context (Marlina, 2022). However, studies that specifically examine how Mandailing Natal students use politeness strategies when interacting with lecturers from different cultural backgrounds in academic settings remain relatively scarce. Previous research has mainly focused on general politeness strategies, EFL contexts, or online communication, while the interaction between local cultural values, institutional norms, and power relations in cross-cultural academic communication within Indonesian universities has not been fully explored. Consequently, there is still limited understanding of how politeness is negotiated and adapted in culturally diverse academic environments within the same national higher education context.

Based on the background above, particularly the cultural differences in communication styles between students and lecturers, the influence of local cultural values on students’ politeness behavior, and the limited discussion of cross-cultural academic interaction within Indonesian higher education, this study aims to investigate the politeness strategies used by students in their interactions with lecturers, many of whom come from different cultural backgrounds outside the Mandailing Natal region. This study is important because it explores cross-cultural communication in higher education, where academic communication practices may interact with students’ local cultural values. By examining how students apply and adapt politeness strategies in intercultural academic interactions, this study contributes to a better understanding of how effective and respectful communication can be maintained in culturally diverse classrooms. In addition, the findings may help lecturers and educational institutions develop more culturally sensitive communication practices that support positive lecturer–student relationships, reduce misunderstanding, and encourage more effective academic participation.

2. Method

2.1. Research Approach and Design

This study uses a qualitative pragmatic research design with a sociopragmatic approach. Although politeness strategies can also be examined quantitatively, this study adopts a qualitative method because it aims to explore how politeness is understood and expressed within specific social, cultural, and academic contexts. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate for examining the contextual and interactional aspects of politeness in lecturer–student communication (Haugh & Chang, 2015; Locher, 2018). This study focuses on understanding how Mandailing Natal students employ, interpret, and negotiate politeness strategies in their interactions with lecturers from different cultural backgrounds within higher education contexts, including classroom communication, academic consultation, and other lecturer–student academic interactions.

More specifically, this research uses a case study approach focusing on STAIN Mandailing Natal as a setting for cross-cultural academic interaction within the Indonesian higher education context. This approach allows the researcher to examine in depth how local cultural norms, particularly Mandailing Natal values emphasizing respect and indirectness, interact with institutional roles characterized by lecturer–student power asymmetry and with academic discourse expectations that encourage active participation and critical discussion. The interaction among these factors may influence how students choose, interpret, and negotiate politeness strategies in their communication with lecturers.

2.2. Research Participants

This study was conducted at STAIN Mandailing Natal, an Islamic higher education institution in North Sumatra, Indonesia. The institution was selected because it represents a culturally diverse academic environment in which students and lecturers may bring different communication styles, cultural expectations, and interpretations of politeness into academic interaction. Many students at STAIN Mandailing Natal come from the Mandailing Natal cultural background, where communication practices commonly emphasize respect toward authority, indirectness, and maintaining social harmony in particular social situations. At the same time, lecturers from different regional and cultural backgrounds may employ different communicative approaches and academic interaction styles shaped by their own educational and sociocultural experiences. These differences do not suggest that one group is more or less polite than another; rather, they may influence how politeness, participation, and appropriate academic behavior are interpreted and negotiated in lecturer–student interaction. According to Kramsch, communication in educational settings is closely related to cultural values and social practices that shape how language is used and interpreted, making this context relevant for intercultural pragmatic research. (Kramsch, 2019).

The participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling because the research specifically required individuals who had direct experience in cross-cultural academic interactions between students and lecturers at STAIN Mandailing Natal. The participants were selected based on several criteria: (1) the students were Mandailing Natal students who frequently interacted with lecturers from different cultural backgrounds in classroom discussions, academic consultations, and thesis supervision; (2) the lecturers came from non-Mandailing cultural backgrounds and had experience teaching Mandailing Natal students; and (3) all participants were actively involved in academic communication situations where politeness strategies were likely to occur. These criteria were considered appropriate because they allowed the researcher to obtain relevant data on how politeness strategies were used and interpreted in cross-cultural lecturer–student interactions.

The student participants in this study were 15 undergraduate students from a Mandailing Natal cultural background who were enrolled in the fifth and seventh semesters at STAIN Mandailing Natal. These students were selected because they had already experienced several years of academic interaction with lecturers and were considered familiar with classroom communication practices in higher education. The participants came from classes in the English Education Study Program and were actively involved in classroom discussions, presentations, group discussions, and academic consultations with lecturers. The study focused on naturally occurring lecturer–student interactions in both classroom and informal academic settings, including face-to-face discussions after class and consultation sessions related to assignments and academic matters. These contexts were selected because they provided rich data on how students used politeness strategies in interactions with lecturers from different cultural backgrounds. Their active participation was important to help the researcher observe natural communication in academic settings, as suggested by Dörnyei (Dörnyei, 2007).

The lecturer participants in this study consisted of six lecturers (three male and three female) from non-Mandailing cultural backgrounds who had been teaching at STAIN Mandailing Natal for at least one year. The lecturers were selected purposively based on several criteria: (1) they regularly taught classes attended by Mandailing Natal students, (2) they were actively involved in lecturer–student communication both inside and outside the classroom, and (3) they had experience interacting with students from the local cultural background in various academic situations. The study focused on lecturer–student interactions during classroom discussions, presentations, question-and-answer sessions, and academic consultation activities. In this study, academic consultations refer to formal and informal interactions between lecturers and students related to assignments, academic guidance, course difficulties, grades, or other academic matters outside regular classroom instruction. These interaction contexts were considered relevant for observing how politeness strategies were used and negotiated in cross-cultural academic communication.

2.3. Data Collection Techniques

The data in this study were collected from both natural interactions and participant responses in order to understand authentic language use and participants' views about politeness in academic communication. Using different sources of data is important in qualitative research because it helps increase the depth and credibility of the study through data triangulation (Creswell, 2017; Dörnyei, 2007). First, classroom interactions were audio-recorded to capture communication between students and lecturers during academic activities. The recordings focused on important interactional situations such as asking and answering questions, requesting clarification, expressing disagreement, and giving feedback. This type of natural data is important in pragmatics research because it shows how language is used in real communication contexts (Kasper & Dahl, 1991).

Second, academic consultation interactions, such as thesis supervision, grade discussions, and academic advising sessions, were also recorded. These interactions provide important information about more personal and sensitive communication situations, where politeness strategies are often used more carefully. Silverman explains that recording natural interactions in institutional settings helps researchers understand how participants communicate and manage relationships in real-life contexts (Silverman, D, 2011).

In addition to observational data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with both students and lecturers to understand their views on politeness and communication. The interviews discussed participants' perceptions of politeness strategies, their understanding of certain interactional situations, and the challenges they experienced in

cross-cultural communication. Semi-structured interviews are useful in qualitative research because they allow flexibility while still providing organized data collection (Creswell, 2017). This method also helps researchers understand participants' opinions and attitudes that may not be clearly seen in recorded interactions.

Finally, field notes were written during the data collection process to record contextual and non-verbal aspects of communication, such as body language, tone of voice, classroom atmosphere, and other relevant institutional conditions. These notes support the recorded data by providing additional context and helping the researcher understand interactional details that may not be fully captured through audio recordings. Patton explains that field notes are an important part of qualitative research because they help researchers record observations and reflections that support data interpretation (Patton, 2002).

Overall, the use of classroom recordings, consultation interactions, interviews, and field notes allow this study to examine politeness strategies in a more comprehensive way. These different sources of data help the researcher understand both participants' communication behavior and their interpretations of politeness, while also supporting the validity and depth of the study.

2.4. Procedure of Data Analysis

The data collection procedure in this study was conducted systematically to ensure ethical considerations and reliable data collection. First, the researcher received permission from STAIN Mandailing Natal and obtained informed consent from all participants before the data collection process began. This step is important in qualitative research to ensure that participants understand the purpose of the study and their rights, including confidentiality and voluntary participation (Creswell, 2017).

After obtaining consent, the researcher audio-recorded naturally occurring interactions between students and lecturers throughout one academic semester. The prolonged observation period allowed the researcher to collect communication data from various academic contexts, including classroom interactions and academic consultation sessions. Collecting data across multiple situations and over an extended period enhanced the credibility and richness of the interactional data (Dörnyei, 2007).

Next, the researcher selected 15 interactional episodes that contained potential face-threatening acts (FTAs), such as asking for clarification, discussing grades, and expressing disagreement. These episodes were selected purposively because such situations tend to reveal the use of politeness strategies more explicitly in academic communication. Brown and Levinson (1987) explain that FTAs are central to politeness research because they demonstrate how speakers manage social relationships and interpersonal sensitivity through language use. (Brown & Levinson, 1987)

Finally, the researcher conducted follow-up interviews using a stimulated recall technique, where participants were asked to reflect on selected recorded interactions. This method helped participants explain their intentions, perceptions, and interpretations of specific communication events. According to Susan M. Gass and Alison Mackey, stimulated recall is useful in qualitative research because it enables researchers to explore participants' cognitive and pragmatic processes that may not be directly observable in interactional data (Gass et al., 2013).

2.5. Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study used a pragmatic discourse analysis approach, combining detailed language analysis with sociocultural interpretation. The analysis was carried out through several related stages to provide a comprehensive understanding of politeness strategies in academic interactions.

The first stage of analysis involved transcribing all recorded interactions using a modified conversation analysis (CA) format. The transcription included not only spoken words but also interactional features such as pauses, overlapping speech, and intonation when relevant. This detailed transcription is important in discourse analysis because meaning in communication is often expressed through both verbal and non-verbal language features. (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008).

The second stage focused on identifying and coding politeness strategies. Each relevant utterance was analyzed and classified using Brown and Levinson's framework, which includes four main strategies: bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies. This classification helped the researcher examine how speakers maintain social relationships and manage face in different interactional situations. Using an established theoretical framework also supports the reliability and consistency of the analysis (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

The final stage involved sociopragmatic interpretation, which focused on understanding the meanings and functions of politeness strategies beyond their formal categories. This stage examined how cultural values, such as respect for hierarchy, indirect communication, and deference, influenced the use of politeness strategies. It also explored how the power relationship between students and lecturers affected the use of polite language and how these strategies were understood by the participants. This analysis was based on the view that politeness is dynamic and depends on social and cultural context, rather than being a fixed set of rules (Locher & Watts, 2005).

3. Results

3.1. Finding

This study found several patterns in how Mandailing Natal students used politeness strategies when interacting with lecturers in academic settings, particularly during classroom discussions, presentations, and thesis supervision sessions.

1. Students' Use of Negative Politeneness Strategies

The findings of this study demonstrate that students frequently applied negative politeness strategies when interacting with lecturers in classroom settings. Negative politeness strategies are commonly used to show respect, minimize imposition, and maintain social distance between speakers and hearers. In the context of lecturer–student interaction, students tended to choose indirect expressions, hedging, apologetic forms, and softened statements to avoid sounding rude or disrespectful. These strategies appeared consistently during classroom discussions, question-and-answer sessions, and individual conversations with lecturers.

Based on classroom observations, students often used indirect expressions before asking questions or expressing opinions. Instead of speaking directly, they preferred to begin their utterances with polite introductory phrases. Several examples frequently found during observation include:

"Maaf mengganggu, Pak, saya ingin bertanya sedikit."

"Kalau boleh saya bertanya, Pak..."

"Mungkin saya yang kurang paham..."

The use of expressions such as *"maaf mengganggu"* and *"kalau boleh"* indicates that students attempted to reduce the burden of their requests. By apologizing first or asking permission before speaking, students showed awareness of the lecturer's higher social status and authority in the classroom. These forms also reflected students' efforts to avoid interrupting the lecturer directly. In many classroom situations, students appeared hesitant before asking questions, especially when the lecturer was explaining important material.

The observations further revealed that students rarely delivered opinions in a direct or assertive way. During discussions, students preferred to soften their statements by using words such as *“mungkin,” “sepertinya,”* or *“kurang tepat.”* For instance, during one classroom discussion, a student stated:

“Mungkin jawabannya kurang tepat, Pak.”

instead of directly saying that the answer was wrong or incorrect. This example illustrates how students attempted to protect both their own face and the lecturer’s or classmates’ face by avoiding direct disagreement. Rather than openly rejecting an answer, students preferred to express uncertainty and caution. Such language choices created a more respectful atmosphere and reduced the possibility of conflict or embarrassment.

In several classroom interactions, students also used pauses, lowered intonation, and hesitant expressions when responding to lecturers’ questions. For example, some students responded with statements such as:

“Saya kurang yakin, tapi menurut saya...”

“Mungkin pendapat saya masih kurang tepat...”

These utterances demonstrate the students’ tendency to minimize confidence in their responses, even when they actually understood the material. This behavior may indicate that students were concerned about making mistakes in front of lecturers and classmates. The use of hedging expressions functioned as a strategy to avoid negative evaluation and maintain politeness.

The observation data also showed that students often used negative politeness strategies when asking for clarification or additional explanations. Instead of directly saying that they did not understand the material, students generally chose softer expressions, such as:

“Maaf Pak, boleh dijelaskan lagi sedikit?”

“Saya masih agak bingung di bagian ini, Pak.”

These expressions reveal that students attempted to avoid appearing demanding or challenging toward the lecturer. The phrase *“boleh dijelaskan lagi”* indirectly asks the lecturer to repeat the explanation while still showing respect. Similarly, the expression *“masih agak bingung”* softens the statement of misunderstanding.

Another important finding from classroom observations was that students frequently avoided direct disagreement with lecturers. Even when students had different opinions, they often introduced their arguments carefully. For example, one student said:

“Kalau menurut saya mungkin ada pendapat lain, Pak.”

rather than directly stating disagreement. This pattern suggests that students perceived disagreement with lecturers as a sensitive act that required careful language choices. Students appeared to prioritize maintaining harmonious relationships and respecting the lecturer’s authority.

Interview data also strongly support these findings. Most participants admitted that they consciously used polite and indirect language when speaking to lecturers. One participant explained:

“Saya takut kalau bicara terlalu langsung nanti dianggap tidak sopan sama dosen.”

This statement indicates that students associated direct communication with impoliteness. Students believed that speaking too directly could negatively affect the lecturer’s perception of them. Therefore, they intentionally modified their language to sound more respectful.

Another participant stated:

“Biasanya saya pilih kata yang lebih halus supaya dosen tidak tersinggung.”

This response demonstrates that students were highly aware of the importance of maintaining the lecturer's feelings and dignity during interaction. The phrase "kata yang lebih halus" reflects students' preference for softened and indirect expressions as a form of respect.

In addition, several participants mentioned that cultural background influenced the way they communicated with lecturers. One student explained:

"Dari kecil diajarkan kalau bicara dengan orang yang lebih tua harus sopan dan tidak boleh terlalu langsung."

This finding suggests that students' use of negative politeness strategies was not only influenced by classroom situations but also by broader cultural values emphasizing respect toward older people and authority figures. Indonesian cultural norms generally encourage indirectness and politeness, particularly in formal educational contexts.

Another participant mentioned:

"Kalau berbicara dengan teman mungkin bisa langsung, tapi kalau dengan dosen saya lebih hati-hati."

This statement highlights the difference between peer interaction and lecturer–student interaction. Students tended to communicate more directly with classmates because they considered them equal in status. However, when speaking to lecturers, students became more cautious and formal due to the unequal power relationship.

The findings also reveal that students' use of negative politeness strategies was influenced by feelings of anxiety and fear of making mistakes. Some students admitted that they felt nervous when speaking in front of lecturers. One participant stated:

"Kadang saya takut salah bicara, jadi lebih baik pakai kata-kata yang aman."

This response indicates that politeness strategies were also used as a protective mechanism to avoid criticism or negative reactions. By using indirect expressions and hedging, students attempted to reduce the risk of offending lecturers or appearing disrespectful.

Furthermore, classroom observations showed that lecturers' communication styles also affected students' language choices. In classes where lecturers appeared strict or formal, students tended to use more cautious and indirect expressions. Conversely, in classes where lecturers were more relaxed and approachable, students sometimes communicated more openly, although they still maintained polite forms. This suggests that politeness strategies are dynamic and influenced by the social context of interaction.

Overall, the findings indicate that students strongly preferred indirect communication and careful word choices when interacting with lecturers. The frequent use of apologies, hedging expressions, permission requests, and softened opinions reflects students' efforts to maintain politeness, show respect, and avoid threatening the lecturer's face. These strategies also demonstrate the influence of cultural values, social hierarchy, and classroom power relations on students' communication behavior.

In conclusion, the use of negative politeness strategies played an important role in lecturer–student interaction. Students consistently employed indirect and respectful language to minimize imposition and maintain harmonious communication. Both observation and interview data confirm that students perceived politeness as essential when speaking to lecturers. Therefore, negative politeness strategies became a common and significant feature of classroom communication in this study.

2. Lecturers' Direct Communication Style

The findings of this study also reveal that lecturers frequently used direct expressions during classroom interaction, discussion sessions, and academic supervision. Compared to

students, who tended to communicate indirectly and carefully, lecturers generally preferred more straightforward and explicit language when giving instructions, feedback, or asking questions. This communication style appeared consistently during presentations, classroom discussions, and consultation sessions.

Based on classroom observations, lecturers often delivered feedback in a direct and concise manner. Several expressions commonly used by lecturers include:

“Perbaiki bagian ini.”

“Argumen kamu belum jelas.”

“Jelaskan lebih rinci.”

These expressions indicate that lecturers focused on efficiency and clarity in academic communication. Instead of softening their comments, lecturers tended to state problems or weaknesses directly so that students could immediately understand what needed improvement. In many cases, lecturers provided corrective feedback without additional hedging expressions or indirect language.

During classroom presentations, lecturers also frequently asked direct questions to evaluate students’ understanding of the material. Some examples observed during presentations include:

“Apa maksud dari argumen ini?”

“Kenapa kamu memilih metode ini?”

“Apa bukti yang mendukung pendapat kamu?”

“Bagian ini sumbernya dari mana?”

The use of these direct questions demonstrates the lecturers’ role as evaluators and facilitators in the learning process. Lecturers often expected students to provide clear, logical, and academically supported answers. Therefore, direct questioning was used to encourage critical thinking and deeper explanation.

Classroom observations also showed that lecturers frequently used imperative forms when giving instructions. For example, lecturers said:

“Coba baca ulang teorinya.”

“Tambahkan referensi terbaru.”

“Fokus pada inti pembahasannya.”

These instructions were usually delivered in a firm tone, especially during thesis supervision or academic discussions. The lecturers appeared to prioritize effectiveness and academic accuracy rather than indirect politeness strategies.

In several situations, lecturers immediately corrected students’ mistakes during discussions. For example, when a student gave an unclear explanation, one lecturer responded:

“Jawaban itu belum tepat.”

Another lecturer stated:

“Penjelasannya masih terlalu umum.”

Such direct feedback was intended to help students improve their academic performance. However, some students appeared nervous or hesitant after receiving this kind of response. Observation data showed that several students lowered their voices, paused before answering, or avoided eye contact after being corrected directly.

Interview data also support these findings. Several students admitted that they sometimes felt uncomfortable or nervous when lecturers communicated too directly. One participant explained:

“Kadang dosen berbicara langsung sekali, jadi saya takut salah jawab.”

This statement suggests that direct communication from lecturers could create pressure for students, especially when they were unsure about their answers. Students often interpreted direct feedback as a sign of strictness or dissatisfaction.

Another participant stated:

“Saya sebenarnya ingin bertanya lagi, tapi takut karena dosennya terlalu tegas.”

This response indicates that lecturers’ communication style could influence students’ willingness to participate in classroom interaction. When lecturers were perceived as too firm or direct, some students became less confident in asking questions or expressing opinions.

In addition, several students mentioned that they understood the lecturers’ intentions were academic rather than personal. One participant explained:

“Sebenarnya dosen ingin membantu supaya tugas kami lebih baik, cuma cara bicaranya memang langsung.”

This finding suggests that students generally recognized that lecturers’ direct communication style aimed to improve students’ academic quality. Nevertheless, differences in communication style between lecturers and students sometimes created feelings of anxiety or hesitation.

Another student stated:

“Kalau dosennya santai biasanya saya lebih berani bertanya, tapi kalau dosennya tegas saya jadi lebih diam.”

This statement highlights the influence of lecturers’ interpersonal approach on classroom participation. Lecturers who used a more relaxed tone tended to create a more comfortable learning atmosphere, while highly direct communication sometimes reduced students’ confidence.

The findings also reveal differences in power relations between lecturers and students. Lecturers, as authority figures in academic settings, appeared to have greater freedom to communicate directly without worrying about being considered impolite. In contrast, students tended to use more indirect and cautious expressions because they were aware of their lower position in the academic hierarchy.

Overall, these findings show a clear contrast between students’ indirect communication style and lecturers’ more direct communication style. Students generally preferred softened expressions and careful word choices, while lecturers emphasized clarity, efficiency, and direct feedback. This difference reflects unequal social roles and power relations in classroom interaction. Although direct communication from lecturers was intended to support students’ academic development, it sometimes caused nervousness and hesitation among students during interaction.

3. Misunderstandings in Classroom Interaction

The findings further reveal that misunderstandings frequently occurred during classroom discussions and thesis supervision sessions. These misunderstandings were mainly caused by differences in communication styles between students and lecturers. While lecturers generally used direct and explicit language when giving feedback or instructions, students tended to communicate indirectly and hesitated to ask for clarification when they did not fully understand the explanation.

Based on classroom observations, students often remained silent after lecturers asked questions or gave comments about their assignments. In many situations, students only provided short responses such as:

"Iya, Pak."

"Baik, nanti saya perbaiki."

"Siap, Pak."

Although these responses appeared to indicate understanding and agreement, follow-up observations showed that several students still misunderstood the lecturers' feedback. As a result, some students revised their work incorrectly or repeated the same mistakes in later assignments. This finding suggests that students' brief responses were not always a sign of full comprehension, but rather a form of politeness and respect toward lecturers.

During thesis supervision sessions, misunderstandings became more visible. Lecturers often explained revisions directly and expected students to understand the instructions immediately. However, many students only nodded or took notes without asking further questions. In the following meetings, lecturers sometimes found that the revisions did not match their expectations. For example, one lecturer stated:

"Ini belum sesuai yang saya maksud."

Another lecturer said:

"Bagian yang saya minta revisi masih salah."

These situations indicate that communication problems often occurred because students were reluctant to confirm their understanding during supervision sessions.

Interview data also support these findings. Several students admitted that they avoided asking for clarification even when they did not completely understand the lecturer's explanation. One participant stated:

"Kalau di kelas saya jarang bertanya lagi karena takut mengganggu."

This statement shows that students were concerned about interrupting or disturbing the lecturer. As a result, they preferred to remain silent rather than ask additional questions. Another student explained:

"Biasanya saya tanya teman setelah kelas selesai."

This finding suggests that students often felt more comfortable discussing unclear explanations with classmates rather than directly asking lecturers. Students considered communication with peers less intimidating because classmates had equal social status.

Some participants also admitted that they were afraid of being judged negatively if they asked too many questions. One student said:

"Saya takut kalau terlalu banyak bertanya nanti dikira tidak memahami materi."

Another participant explained:

"Kadang sebenarnya masih bingung, tapi malu bertanya lagi."

These responses reveal that feelings of anxiety, lack of confidence, and fear of negative evaluation influenced students' communication behavior in academic settings.

Meanwhile, lecturers sometimes interpreted students' silence differently. During classroom observations, lecturers occasionally assumed that students were unprepared, passive, or not paying attention when they did not respond actively. For example, one lecturer responded to students' silence by saying:

"Kenapa diam?"

"Kamu belum belajar?"

Another lecturer stated:

"Kalau diam terus berarti belum paham materinya."

These expressions demonstrate that lecturers tended to associate silence with lack of preparation or low participation. In contrast, students often viewed silence as a form of politeness and respect toward authority figures.

Classroom observations also showed that misunderstandings occurred more frequently during formal academic interactions, especially presentations and thesis supervision. In these situations, students tended to feel nervous and became less confident in expressing opinions or asking questions. Several students avoided eye contact, spoke softly, or waited for their classmates to respond first. Such behaviors reflected hesitation and fear of making mistakes in front of lecturers.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that unequal power relations between lecturers and students contributed to communication barriers. Lecturers, as authority figures, generally expected students to participate actively and respond directly. However, students often prioritized politeness and avoidance of conflict. Consequently, they sometimes hid their confusion instead of openly expressing misunderstanding.

Overall, these findings suggest that differences in communication styles between students and lecturers sometimes created misunderstandings in academic interaction. Students' indirect communication style and reluctance to seek clarification often resulted in incomplete understanding of lecturers' feedback. At the same time, lecturers sometimes interpreted students' silence as lack of participation rather than hesitation or politeness. Therefore, more open and supportive communication is needed to reduce misunderstandings in classroom interaction.

3.2. Discussion

1. Students' Use of Negative Politeness Strategies

The findings show that Mandailing Natal students predominantly employed negative politeness strategies when interacting with lecturers in academic settings. Students frequently used indirect expressions, apologies, hedging, permission requests, and softened statements to minimize imposition and maintain respectful communication. This finding strongly supports Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, particularly the concept of negative politeness, which refers to strategies used to respect the hearer's freedom of action and reduce potential face-threatening acts (FTAs) (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In this study, lecturers occupied a higher institutional position, causing students to communicate more cautiously in order to avoid threatening the lecturers' negative face.

The students' tendency to avoid direct expressions also reflects the influence of cultural values emphasizing respect toward older people and authority figures. According to Leech's politeness principle, speakers often attempt to minimize expressions that may sound impolite and maximize respectful expressions to maintain harmonious social relationships (Leech, 2014). Expressions such as "*maaf mengganggu*," "*kalau boleh*," and "*mungkin saya kurang paham*" demonstrate that students attempted to reduce the possibility of appearing rude or disrespectful. These findings are also consistent with Hofstede's (2010) concept of high-power distance cultures, in which individuals tend to show strong respect toward authority figures and avoid direct confrontation (Hofstede, 2011).

The use of hedging expressions such as "*mungkin*," "*sepertinya*," and "*kurang tepat*" indicates students' efforts to protect both their own face and the lecturer's face during interaction. Brown and Levinson explain that hedging is one of the common negative politeness strategies used to soften disagreement and reduce interpersonal tension (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Rather than openly disagreeing or expressing strong opinions, students preferred cautious and softened language. This behavior suggests that maintaining

interpersonal harmony was considered more important than expressing disagreement directly. Such communication patterns also reflect the sociopragmatic perspective proposed by Thomas, which emphasizes that politeness is shaped by social norms and cultural expectations within a particular community (Thomas, 1983).

In addition, the findings reveal that students' politeness strategies were influenced not only by cultural norms but also by feelings of anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. Several students admitted that they intentionally used "safe" expressions because they were afraid of making mistakes when speaking to lecturers. This finding can be related to Goffman's concept of face, which explains that individuals attempt to maintain a positive social image during interaction (Goffman, 1967). Students' use of indirect language functioned as a protective mechanism to avoid embarrassment, criticism, or negative judgment from lecturers.

The findings also indicate that politeness strategies are dynamic and context-dependent. Students tended to communicate more cautiously when lecturers appeared strict or formal, while more approachable lecturers encouraged relatively more open interaction. This supports Watts' view that politeness is negotiated continuously during interaction and influenced by the interpersonal relationship between participants (Watts, 2003). Overall, the findings confirm that negative politeness strategies played a central role in lecturer–student interaction because students perceived politeness as essential for maintaining respect and harmonious communication.

4.2. Lecturers' Direct Communication Style

The findings reveal a clear contrast between students' indirect communication style and lecturers' more direct communication style. Lecturers frequently used explicit feedback, direct questions, and imperative forms when giving instructions or evaluating students' academic performance. Expressions such as "*Perbaiki bagian ini*" and "*Argumen kamu belum jelas*" show that lecturers prioritized clarity, efficiency, and academic accuracy in classroom interaction.

This communication style reflects the lecturers' institutional role as evaluators, supervisors, and facilitators of learning. According to Hyland, academic communication often involves evaluation, criticism, and negotiation of knowledge, which require direct and explicit feedback to support students' academic development (Hyland, 2004). Therefore, lecturers' direct communication may be understood as part of professional academic practice rather than intentional impoliteness.

The lecturers' direct questioning strategies also functioned to stimulate analytical thinking and encourage students to justify their arguments academically. This finding is consistent with classroom discourse theory proposed by Walsh, which explains that teacher questioning is an important pedagogical strategy for promoting critical thinking and classroom participation (Walsh, 2011). Through direct questioning, lecturers attempted to encourage students to elaborate their reasoning and strengthen their academic arguments.

However, the findings demonstrate that students sometimes interpreted lecturers' direct communication as intimidating or overly strict. Several students admitted feeling nervous, hesitant, or afraid of making mistakes when lecturers communicated too directly. This finding may be explained through Brown and Levinson's theory of face-threatening acts, in which direct criticism and correction potentially threaten the hearer's positive face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). While lecturers viewed directness as an effective academic strategy, students often perceived it through the lens of politeness and social hierarchy.

The findings further highlight the role of power relations in shaping communication behavior. According to Fairclough, institutional discourse is strongly influenced by unequal

power relationships between participants (Fairclough, 1989). As authority figures, lecturers appeared to have greater freedom to communicate directly without concern about being perceived as impolite. In contrast, students occupied a lower institutional position and therefore tended to communicate more indirectly and cautiously.

Nevertheless, students generally understood that lecturers' direct feedback was intended to improve academic quality rather than criticize them personally. This indicates that students were able to distinguish between academic evaluation and interpersonal intention, although direct communication still sometimes reduced their confidence in participating actively. Overall, the contrast between lecturers' direct communication style and students' indirect communication style demonstrates the complexity of cross-cultural academic interaction. The findings emphasize the importance of balancing academic directness with supportive interpersonal communication in order to create a more comfortable and participatory learning environment.

4.3. Misunderstandings in Classroom Interaction

The findings show that misunderstandings frequently occurred during classroom discussions and thesis supervision sessions because students and lecturers interpreted communication differently. Students often responded with short expressions such as "*Iya, Pak*" or "*Baik, nanti saya perbaiki*" even when they did not fully understand the lecturers' explanations. This suggests that students sometimes used agreement expressions as a politeness strategy rather than as evidence of complete comprehension.

This finding reflects the influence of indirect communication norms in lecturer–student interaction. According to Brown and Levinson, speakers may avoid direct clarification requests in order to minimize imposition and maintain social harmony (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Students tended to avoid asking repeated questions because they were afraid of interrupting lecturers, appearing disrespectful, or being negatively evaluated. As a result, students frequently chose silence or delayed clarification until after class by discussing the material with peers.

In contrast, lecturers often interpreted students' silence differently. Lecturers tended to associate silence with passiveness, lack of preparation, or low participation. This difference in interpretation created communication gaps during academic interaction. This finding can be explained using Thomas's concept of sociopragmatic failure, which occurs when speakers from different social or cultural expectations interpret communication differently (Thomas, 1983). While students viewed silence as a form of respect and politeness, lecturers frequently expected active participation and direct responses from students.

The findings also indicate that misunderstandings occurred more frequently in formal academic situations such as presentations and thesis supervision sessions. In these contexts, students appeared more nervous and hesitant due to the high level of academic evaluation involved. According to Goffman's face theory, individuals attempt to avoid situations that may threaten their social image (Goffman, 1967). Therefore, students preferred silence or indirect responses rather than risking embarrassment by asking questions publicly.

Unequal power relations between lecturers and students further intensified communication barriers because students felt less confident expressing disagreement or requesting clarification directly. This finding is consistent with Hofstede's theory of power distance, which explains that individuals in hierarchical cultures tend to avoid challenging authority figures openly (Hofstede, 2011). Consequently, students often prioritized politeness and avoidance of conflict over direct communication.

Overall, the findings suggest that misunderstandings in classroom interaction were largely caused by differences in communication styles and interpretations of politeness. The study therefore highlights the importance of pragmatic and intercultural awareness in higher education settings. Lecturers and students need to develop mutual understanding regarding communication expectations in order to reduce misunderstanding and support more effective academic interaction.

4. Conclusion

This study investigated the politeness strategies used by Mandailing Natal students when interacting with lecturers in academic settings at STAIN Mandailing Natal. The findings revealed that students predominantly employed negative politeness strategies, including indirect expressions, hedging, apologetic forms, and softened statements. These strategies were used to show respect, maintain social harmony, and avoid threatening the lecturers' face. Students tended to communicate carefully because they perceived lecturers as authority figures with higher social status in the academic environment.

The study also found that lecturers generally used more direct and explicit communication styles, particularly when giving feedback, asking questions, and providing academic instructions. Lecturers emphasized clarity, efficiency, and academic accuracy, while students preferred indirectness and cautious language. This difference in communication style sometimes created misunderstandings during classroom discussions and thesis supervision sessions. Students often hesitated to ask for clarification even when they did not fully understand the lecturers' explanations, whereas lecturers sometimes interpreted students' silence as passiveness or lack of preparation.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that students' politeness strategies were strongly influenced by cultural values emphasizing respect toward older people and authority figures. The study confirms that politeness in academic interaction is closely related to social hierarchy, cultural norms, and power relations between lecturers and students. These sociocultural factors shaped students' preference for indirect communication and their reluctance to express disagreement openly.

Overall, this study highlights the importance of pragmatic and intercultural awareness in academic communication. Both lecturers and students need to develop more supportive and open communication practices in order to reduce misunderstandings and improve classroom interaction. Lecturers may benefit from using more supportive feedback strategies, while students may need encouragement to express opinions and seek clarification more confidently. Therefore, improving awareness of politeness strategies and communication styles can contribute to more effective and constructive academic interaction in higher education contexts.

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