

## POWER AND POLITENESS: A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF MANAGERIAL HIERARCHIES IN SCHOOL SETTINGS

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### Abstract

*This study investigates how power relations influence the use of politeness strategies in direct communication within a hierarchical school environment. Grounded in Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and the pragmatic perspective of speech acts, the research aims to identify the types and sub-strategies of politeness used by speakers, examine how hierarchical status affects linguistic choices, and interpret the implied meanings behind politeness in institutional interactions. Using a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected through natural conversations and contextual interviews involving participants at different managerial levels: headmaster, vice principals, teachers, students, and cleaning staff. The findings reveal a strong tendency toward negative politeness (82.70%), expressed through apology, hedging, deference, and indirectness, reflecting a heightened awareness of institutional hierarchy. Positive politeness (9.20%) appears in horizontal interactions emphasizing solidarity, while off-record politeness (8.10%) is used primarily by lower-status participants to minimize social risk. These patterns demonstrate that linguistic politeness functions as a pragmatic tool for negotiating power and maintaining harmony in the school context. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of language use in hierarchical educational environments and highlights the importance of strengthening pragmatic awareness among school personnel. Practically, the results imply the need for communication training programs that help teachers and school leaders develop respectful, effective, and context-sensitive communication practices.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Interactions between individuals with different social statuses are crucial in the educational world and occur daily. As social institutions, schools operate with a defined hierarchy, encompassing everyone from leading administrators such as principals and assistant principals to teachers, students, and support staff. This organizational structure establishes power relationships that influence communication styles, including how individuals express themselves, react to others, and demonstrate respect through language. In such environments, the expression of politeness is closely linked to institutional expectations, cultural norms, and the social positioning of speakers.

Considerable research in pragmatics has focused on politeness, especially after Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed politeness theory, which hinges on three central social elements: power, distance, and the seriousness of the imposition. However, the majority of studies to date have been conducted in contexts like business (Holmes, 2013), cross-cultural interactions (Spencer-Oatey, 2008; Terkourafi, 2011), or communications between coworkers (Haugh & Chang, 2019). They found that show that speakers adjust their politeness strategies to manage interpersonal relationships and negotiate power differences. However, research specifically focusing on politeness within school environments remains limited. Many studies have examined teacher–student interactions (e.g., Cahyani, 2019; Santoso & Yulianti, 2023), while fewer have explored how different managerial levels within schools communicate or how power differences shape pragmatic choices among educators and administrative personnel. Investigation into politeness within educational environments, specifically direct communication between individuals holding different roles and statuses within schools, remains relatively sparse.

Recent research conducted within Indonesian schools (e.g., Kemala, 2021; Susanto & Yahmun, 2022) demonstrates a substantial impact of power dynamics on politeness strategies employed by teachers, especially negative politeness. Nevertheless, this research predominantly examines interactions within the classroom or the teacher-student dynamic, resulting in limited knowledge of how politeness functions across the various levels of authority present in a school environment—for instance, in communications between teachers and school leaders (principals, vice principals) or non-teaching staff. This lack of understanding is important given the critical role of effective communication in maintaining coordination, discipline, and a positive atmosphere throughout the school system.

This study addresses these gaps by examining politeness strategies used in direct communication across different managerial hierarchies in a public junior high school. The novelty of this research lies in its explicit focus on how power relations shape teachers' and staff members' linguistic choices when interacting vertically (with superiors) and horizontally (with colleagues). Unlike earlier studies that concentrate on specific groups or classroom interactions, this study analyzes authentic, naturally occurring conversations in broader institutional contexts, offering a more comprehensive understanding of politeness in school settings. Indeed, an individual's behavior within a school setting mirrors the existing power structures and social etiquette. To illustrate, a teacher's communication will vary depending on the recipient, employing different language with the principal versus students or custodial workers. Likewise, those in less powerful positions, both students and staff, often modify their speech patterns to demonstrate deference to figures of authority. Examining this through a pragmatic lens is crucial, as it reveals how language use constructs social meaning and reinforces hierarchical relationships.

This research aims to determine the different politeness strategies employed in straightforward interactions between individuals within a school setting. Examine how one's role or status affects their choice of politeness strategies. Understand the implied meaning behind using politeness strategies when considering power dynamics in schools. Ultimately, this study seeks to enhance our comprehension of the connection between language, power, and politeness in educational contexts and to foster the development of morally sound communication skills among members of the school community.

Politeness strategies are a form of communication that aims to save the face of the listener as a participant in the communication (Goody, 1980). Face refers to the identity and respect possessed by individuals to protect them from attacks by speakers or other individuals in the communication system. Goffman (2016) defines face as a form of image used for contact in the social sphere and which is shown by each individual to other individuals in

social conditions. Brown and Levinson (1987) classified politeness strategies into four types: positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record, and off-record.

Some speakers have certain reasons for choosing certain politeness strategies in communicating with others (Brown and Levinson, 1992) because the particular strategies intrinsically afford certain payoffs or advantages, and the relevant circumstances are those in which one of these payoffs would be more advantageous than any others.

By applying a particular politeness strategy, a speaker can potentially get some advantages. For example, when he/she chooses a bald on record strategy, he/she can enlist public pressure against the addressee or in support of himself. He can be regarded as being honest for indicating that he trusts the addressee. He gets credit for his outspokenness and avoids the danger of being seen as a manipulator. He can avoid the danger of being misunderstood, and he can have the opportunity to pay back in the face of whatever he has potentially taken away by the FTA (Face Threatening Act). By going off record, a speaker can profit in the following ways: he can get credit for being tactful, non-coercive; he can run less risk of his act entering the 'gossip biography' that others keep of him; he can avoid responsibility for the potentially face-damaging interpretation.

Using positive politeness, a speaker can minimize the face-threatening aspects of an act by assuring the addressee that the speaker considers himself to be 'of the same kind,' that he likes him and wants his wants. Furthermore, by using this strategy, a speaker can avoid or minimize the debt implications of FTAs, such as requests and offers, either by referring (indirectly) to the reciprocity and ongoing relationship between the addressee and himself or by including the addressee and himself equally as participants in or as benefactors from the request or offer. Using negative politeness, a speaker can benefit in several ways: he can pay respect, deference to the addressee in return for the FTA, and can thereby avoid incurring a future debt; he can maintain social distance and avoid the threat of advancing familiarity towards the addressee; he can give a real 'out' to the addressee.

Given this background, the present study aims to deepen our understanding of how language reflects and negotiates power within educational organizations. Specifically, this study seeks to: Identify the types and sub-strategies of politeness used in direct school communication; Examine how participants' roles and hierarchical status influence their choice of politeness strategies; and interpret the implied meanings behind the use of politeness strategies in relation to institutional power dynamics. These research questions provide a clear direction for the analysis and highlight the study's contribution to pragmatic research in educational contexts, especially within culturally hierarchical school environments.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

### **Research Design**

This research adopts a qualitative methodology with a descriptive pragmatic analysis design to examine the meaning and communicative function of politeness strategies in actual school settings. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the nuances of communication in natural contexts, offering insights into how politeness is expressed and understood in everyday school interactions. The study specifically applies Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory as the main framework for analysis. Their theory provides a structured approach to understanding politeness through three key concepts: power, distance, and imposition. These concepts help to contextualize how individuals navigate social hierarchies, relationships, and potential conflicts during communication. By focusing on power, the research investigates how authority influences the way politeness is manifested, especially in interactions between students, teachers, and school staff. Distance refers to the degree of closeness or familiarity between communicators, which can shape the level of

politeness used. Finally, imposition examines the degree to which one speaker's actions or requests may inconvenience or burden another, affecting their choice of polite strategies.

### **Research Participants**

The study's participants were drawn from five groups within SMP Negeri 37 Medan, reflecting the school's organizational structure: the principal, assistant principal, teachers, students, and a member of the custodial staff. Individuals were chosen intentionally – through purposive sampling – because of their regular participation in school life and their agreement to provide information for the research. To obtain a diverse range of perspectives from across the school's structure, participants were intentionally chosen. Priority was given to those regularly engaged in communication and the making of decisions. The final sample included the school principal, two assistant principals, six educators, five learners, and two custodial staff, representing both the vertical and horizontal relationships within the school environment.

The participants' demographic backgrounds were also considered. The headmaster had 12 years of administrative experience, while the vice principals had between 8–10 years in their positions. The teachers selected for the study had teaching experience ranging from 5–20 years. The study included students in the eighth and ninth grades who had been enrolled at the school for a minimum of one year, as well as cleaning staff with 3 to 5 years of service. This range of experience levels allowed for a detailed examination of how comfort with established hierarchies affects communication patterns and the use of politeness strategies.

### **Instruments**

Researchers served as the primary data collection tools in this study, utilizing voice recorders and detailed field notes. Data was gathered via direct observation of everyday interactions within the teachers' lounge, the broader school grounds, and areas where students were active, supplemented by semi-structured interviews designed to confirm thorough comprehension of the meanings and perspectives expressed in the recorded conversations. The research employed three methods for data collection: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis.

#### *Semi-Structured Interviews*

The interview guide was constructed drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, with specific attention to the concepts of power (P), distance (D), and the degree of imposition (R). The questions aimed to investigate how participants understood politeness, the communication tactics they utilized with those in higher or lower positions, and their views on the organizational structure of the institution. Examples of guiding questions included: "How do you usually address someone in a higher position at school?" "Do you change your speaking style when talking to students, teachers, or administrators?" "How do you maintain politeness in situations involving disagreement or correction?"

#### *School Observations*

Interviews were conducted in Indonesian to ensure natural responses and were recorded with participants' consent. Classroom, staff room, and communal spaces—locations where spontaneous interactions commonly occur—were the sites of observation. The researcher employed a standardized observation form to document key elements. The setting of each interaction (such as formal meetings, casual talks, teaching moments, or corrections). The roles and status of those participating. The particular politeness techniques used. Both spoken and non-spoken cues that revealed power dynamics. Relevant situational details (time of day, level of urgency, and prevailing emotions). This framework enabled a methodical analysis of interactions between individuals at different organizational levels.

## Data Analysis

Employing the Miles and Huberman (1994) model for data analysis involves three primary phases: Data reduction, focused on identifying information pertinent to politeness strategies; data presentation, achieved by categorizing instances of politeness strategies into four categories: direct (bald on record), positive politeness, negative politeness, and indirect (off record); and conclusion drawing and verification, which entails connecting research findings to politeness theory and accounting for the power dynamics between those interacting. Subsequently, the identified data were analysed through the lens of institutional power dynamics to address the study's research questions.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Research Findings

Table 1  
Politeness Strategies in a Power-Related Context

No	Power Relation Context	Utterances	Politeness Strategies	Penanda Leksikal
1.	Teacher-Headmaster	“Excuse me, Ma’am. I’m sorry to bother you. I would like to inform you that the ceiling of my classroom is leaking.” ( <i>Bu, maaf mengganggu, ijin menginformasikan plafon kelas saya bocor.</i> )	Negative Politeness (Apologize (S6), Be conventionally indirect (S1), Give deference (S5)	Excuse me for interrupting, I would like to inform you, ma'am. maaf <i>mengganggu, ijin menginformasikan, Bu</i>
2.	Teacher-The Vice Headmaster	“Ma'am, the light in our classroom is out. If it's possible, could we have a new light bulb installed?” ( <i>Bu, lampu di kelas kami mati. Kalau boleh dipasang lampu baru, Bu.</i> )	Negative Politeness: Use question/hedge (S2), Apologize (S6), Give deference (S5), Be pessimistic (S3)	if I may, I apologize, ma'am “ <i>kalau boleh, mohon maaf, Bu</i> ”
3.	Teacher-The Vice Headmaster	“Excuse me, Sir, our students insist on having a tug-of-war. What do you think, should we hold it?” ( <i>Permisi Pak, murid kita ingin lomba tarik tambang. Bagaimana ya, Pak?</i> )	Positive politeness: Use in-group identity markers (S4), Include both speaker and hearer in the activity (S12), Seek agreement (S2)	Our student, how about it, sir? Excuse me. <i>murid kita, bagaimana ya Pak, Permisi</i>
4.	Teacher-Curriculum Vice Headmaster	“Excuse me, Sir, there are no ropes in the warehouse. What should we do, Sir?” ( <i>Permisi Pak, tidak ada tali tambang di gudang. Kita harus bagaimana ya, Pak?</i> )	Negative Politeness: Use question/hedge (S2), Be pessimistic (S3), Impersonalize speaker/hearer (S7)	How about it, sir? We <i>bagaimana ya Pak, kita</i>
5	Teacher-The vice headmaster	“Excuse me, Sir. I have a student who’s been giving me a hard time... What should I do, Sir?” ( <i>Permisi Pak, ada siswa bermasalah... Bagaimana ya, Pak?</i> )	Negative Politeness: Apologize (S6), Be pessimistic (S3), Use question/hedge (S2), Self-effacement	Excuse me, I'm having trouble. How do I do it, sir? <i>Permisi, saya kesulitan, Bagaimana ya Pak</i>
6	Vice headmaster → headmaster	Ma'am, we will hold an Independence Day competition. Here is the proposal. Please give	Negative Politeness: Give deference (S5), Be	<i>Please give me some guidance, ma'am.</i>

No	Power Relation Context	Utterances	Politeness Strategies	Penanda Leksikal
		me some guidance, ma'am so that the activity can run smoothly. ( <i>"Bu, kami akan melaksanakan perlombaan Hari Kemerdekaan. Ini proposalnya, mohon arahan agar kegiatan dapat berjalan."</i> )	conventionally indirect (S1)	<i>Mohon arahan, Bu</i>
7	Vice headmaster → Headmaster	"We have already scheduled the curriculum dissemination... If it has to be postponed again, how will you adjust the schedule?" ( <i>"Kita sudah jadwalkan pengimbasan kurikulum... Kalau harus ditunda lagi, bagaimana ya Bu menyesuaikan waktunya?"</i> )	Be pessimistic (S3), Use question/hedge (S2), Give deference (S5)	How about it, ma'am, if it has to be postponed again? <i>bagaimana ya Bu, kalau harus ditunda lagi</i>
8	Teacher → Headmaster	"But this year's funds are still insufficient by about two million. What should we do, ma'am?" ( <i>"Namun dana tahun ini masih kurang sekitar dua juta. Bagaimana sebaiknya ya Bu?"</i> )	State FTA as a general rule (S9), Use question/hedge (S2)	However, the funds are still insufficient. What should we do, ma'am? <i>namun dana masih kurang, bagaimana sebaiknya ya Bu</i>
9	Vice headmaster (facility) → Headmaster	"Excuse me, ma'am, it's already the new school year. Classroom cleaning supplies need to be provided." ( <i>"Permisi Bu, ini sudah memasuki tahun ajaran baru. Perlengkapan kebersihan kelas sudah perlu disediakan."</i> )	Be conventionally indirect (S1), State FTA as a general rule (S9)	Excuse me, ma'am, it needs to be provided. <i>Permisi Bu, sudah perlu disediakan</i>
10	Vice Headmaster → Headmaster	"Excuse me, ma'am, the fan in the staff room is broken... Please take a look." <i>"Permisi Bu, kipas di ruang TU rusak... Mohon perhatian Ibu."</i>	Impersonalize speaker/hearer (S7), Be conventionally indirect (S1), Give deference (S5)	Excuse me, ma'am, please pay attention. They have tried. <i>Permisi Bu, Mohon perhatian Ibu, mereka sudah berupaya</i>
11	Cleaning service → Teacher	"Ma'am, I'm sorry. The room is often used by the scouts... Please don't tell them it came from me, ma'am." ( <i>"Bu, maaf ya. Ruangan ibu sering dipakai anak-anak pramuka... Tolong jangan bilang ini dari saya ya, Bu."</i> )	Give hints (S1), Be vague (S8), Avoid explicit blame/self-involvement	Sorry, please don't say it came from me, I might get in trouble. <i>maaf ya, tolong jangan bilang dari saya, bisa dimarahi</i>

S: Strategy

### Negative Politeness Strategy

The most frequently employed politeness strategy observed in interactions at SMP Negeri 37 Medan is negative politeness. The analysis indicates that the majority of statements utilize techniques to soften potentially face-threatening acts and demonstrate deference to the listener's position of power. This approach is particularly prevalent in hierarchical

communication scenarios, such as interactions between teachers and principals, teachers and vice principals, and vice principals and principals.

An example can be found in Data Statement 1 (a teacher to the principal): "Excuse me, ma'am. I'm sorry to bother you. I would like to inform you that the ceiling of my classroom is leaking. The data applied a negative politeness strategy. This strategy is characterized by showing respect and effort not to impose on the listener, often through apologies, the use of "permission," and indirect questions. "I'm sorry to bother you." This shows an apology at the beginning, which lessens the burden of the request and respects the time or the feelings of the headmaster. "I would like to inform you". The use of "permission" indicates the respect and the act of asking for permission before providing information, which is also a hallmark of negative politeness. "The water will drop onto some of our students' tables every time it rains, and the students cannot write on the table." Instead of directly asking for a solution, the teacher provides information that the situation needs to be fixed as soon as possible.

In Data 1, the teacher says: "Ma'am, sorry to bother you. I would like to inform you that my classroom ceiling is leaking." ("*Bu, maaf mengganggu. Ijin menginformasikan plafon kelas saya bocor.*") The speaker applies two sub-strategies: (1) Apologize (Strategy 6) through the expression "sorry to bother you", and (2) Be conventionally indirect (Strategy 1) through the clause "I would like to inform you" ("*ijin menginformasikan*"), which is a request for permission, not a command. Both forms serve to reduce social distance and save face for the principal as a superior. The speech act used is informing with an implicit request, where the repair request is conveyed implicitly.

In Data 2, the statement "Ma'am, the lights in our classroom are out. If possible, could you install new lights, Ma'am? I apologize, ma'am" ("*Bu, lampu di kelas kami mati. Kalau boleh dipasang lampu baru, Bu. Mohon maaf ya, Bu.*") demonstrates three key politeness techniques: employing a question/hedge ("if possible"/ "*kalau boleh*"), offering an apology ("I apologize"/ "*mohon maaf*"), and showing respect ("Ma'am,"/ "*Bu*" repeated). These strategies collectively mitigate the directness of the request and help preserve the teacher's and the recipient's face, reflecting an awareness of the power dynamic between them.

In Data 4 and Data 5 (a teacher to Vice Headmaster for Curriculum), the sub-strategies of expressing pessimism (Strategy 3) and employing questions or hedges (Strategy 2) are evident in utterances like "What should we do, sir?" and "What should I do, sir, I'm having trouble dealing with..." ("*Kita harus bagaimana ya, Pak?*" dan "*Bagaimana ya, Pak, saya kesulitan mengatasi...*"). The speaker utilizes phrases such as "what should I do" ("*bagaimana ya*") to diminish directness and mitigate the perception of being demanding. Furthermore, the teacher utilizes the sub-strategy of impersonalizing both speaker and hearer (Strategy 7) by framing the problem as a mutual concern through the use of the pronoun "we"/ "*kita*".

### **Positive Politeness Strategy**

Positive politeness strategies are commonly used in cooperative conversations between people with similar levels of power. These strategies aim to establish a sense of community, closeness, and mutual support. For example, in Data 3, the teacher's statement to the vice principal – "Excuse me, sir, our students want to hold a tug-of-war competition. What do you think, sir, should we hold it?"/ "*Permisi Pak, murid kita ingin mengadakan lomba tarik tambang. Bagaimana ya, Pak, apakah kita adakan?*" – demonstrates several of these sub-strategies. Specifically, it utilizes markers of shared identity (Strategy 4) with the use of "we,"/ "*kita*" involves both parties in the proposed action (Strategy 12) by jointly seeking a decision, and actively requests the vice principal's approval (Strategy 2) with the question, "What do you think, sir?"/ "*Bagaimana ya, Pak?*"

Employing respectful address terms like "Sir" ("*Pak*") and inclusive language such as "our students" ("*murid kita*") demonstrates that teachers acknowledge the vice principal's

authority while simultaneously attempting to establish a positive professional relationship. These linguistic features – including terms like “our students” (“*murid kita*”) and consultative phrases like “how about it, Sir” (“*bagaimana ya, Pak*”) – indicate an effort to foster professional unity. Even with the vice principal’s inherent power, the teacher opts for a collaborative and friendly approach to achieve a mutual understanding, illustrating the strategic use of positive politeness when the aim is participation and strengthening working connections. From a pragmatic perspective, this approach temporarily diminishes hierarchical distinctions and delicately renegotiates power dynamics to facilitate cooperation.

### **Off-Record Politeness Strategy**

The strategy of off-the-record politeness is found in situations with the highest social risk, namely when the speaker is in the lowest social position and wants to avoid direct responsibility for their statements. This is clearly seen in Data 11, when the cleaning lady says: “Ma'am, I'm sorry. Your room is often used by the scouts... Tomorrow your students might get scolded by Mrs. Udur. Please don't say this came from me, ma'am.” (“*Bu, maaf ya. Ruangan ibu sering dipakai anak-anak pramuka... Besok murid ibu bisa dimarahi Bu Udur. Tolong jangan bilang ini dari saya ya, Bu.*”)

This utterance demonstrates the application of two off-record sub-strategies: (1) Give hints (Strategy 1) — the main message is conveyed implicitly, and (2) Be vague (Strategy 8) — the speaker does not directly blame a particular party, but rather conveys a possibility (“could be scolded”/“*bisa dimarahi*”). In addition, the phrase “Please don't say this is from me” (“*Tolong jangan bilang ini dari saya*”) shows avoidance of self-involvement, which serves to save face.

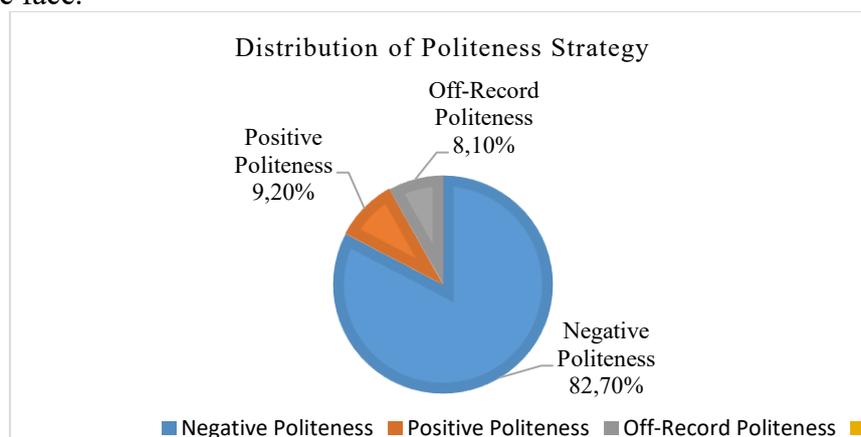


Figure 1. Distribution of Politeness Strategy  
(Source: Research Data Collection)

The data analysis reveals that communication at SMP Negeri 37 Medan is significantly shaped by its hierarchical power dynamics. Negative politeness is the most prevalent strategy employed (82.70%), primarily through apologies, indirectness, deference, and the use of questions or hedges. Teachers, students, and support staff commonly used these strategies when communicating with school leaders, indicating a high awareness of institutional power differences. Positive politeness strategies are observed in interactions between peers (9.20%), manifesting as expressions of shared identity and inclusion and were primarily used in horizontal communication among colleagues, for example, among teachers or between vice principals and teachers, where social distance was perceived to be lower. These strategies appeared in expressions of solidarity, shared jokes, approval, and personal inquiries that reinforced group affiliation. Off-record politeness strategies (8.10%) are utilized in potentially sensitive situations, employing hints and vagueness. In conclusion, this research reinforces the notion that politeness strategies reflect an awareness of power relationships and

societal structures. Language used in this educational context functions not just to communicate information, but also to manage social hierarchies, protect individuals' sense of worth, and promote a positive atmosphere.

## Discussion

### *The Influence of Hierarchy on the Selection of Politeness Strategies*

The findings demonstrate a strong correlation between power dynamics within schools and the politeness strategies employed. The utterances' communication analysis revealed that negative politeness was by far the most common strategy, used in 82.70% of interactions, compared to positive politeness at 9.20% and off-record strategies at 8.10%. These findings indicate that greater power imbalances between speakers correlate with increased use of language designed to soften potential face-threatening acts, such as asking for permission, apologizing, and employing indirect communication.

The results align with Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, positing that negative politeness emerges when individuals try to minimize potential threats to another's public image and preserve their autonomy. This is observable in schools, where teachers and subordinates employ careful language when addressing principals or vice principals. Furthermore, these findings corroborate Susanto & Yahmun's (2022) research, which identified relative power dynamics and social distance as key influences on politeness strategy selection within Indonesian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning environments. The research showed that both educators and learners adjust their speech to show respect for those in positions of power. Therefore, the use of negative politeness seen in this study may be a reflection of established, hierarchical cultural values prevalent in Indonesian schooling.

The image depicts how power dynamics influence politeness strategies within a school setting. It shows a hierarchical structure, ranging from the principal at the highest level, then the vice principal, teachers, students, and finally, janitors at the lowest level. Therefore, the diagram illustrates a direct correlation between politeness strategies and the speaker and listener's relative positions within the school's hierarchy. Language functions not simply to convey information, but also to navigate power dynamics and maintain social cohesion within the school setting.

### *Negative Politeness Strategy as a Reflection of Hierarchical Structure*

This research demonstrates a strong correlation between negative politeness strategies and the school's power structure, such that the disparity in power between individuals influences the extent to which language is softened. In line with Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory, speakers use negative politeness to lessen potential intrusion and show deference to the listener's autonomy, particularly when communicating with superiors. This tendency is observable in conversations between teachers and administrators (the headmaster or vice principals) and also between vice principals and the headmaster.

Negative politeness strategies function not merely to prevent conflict, but also to demonstrate and reinforce cultural norms of hierarchical communication. Analysis indicates that this is achieved through sub-strategies including apologizing (Strategy 6), employing conventional indirectness (Strategy 1), utilizing questions and hedges (Strategy 2), showing deference (Strategy 5), and expressing pessimism (Strategy 3).

To illustrate, the statement "Ma'am, sorry to bother you. I would like to inform you that my classroom ceiling is leaking" ("*Bu, maaf mengganggu. Ijin menginformasikan plafon kelas saya bocor*") employs two softening phrases that transform a direct request into a more subtle form of communication. This pragmatic approach demonstrates the speaker's awareness of social hierarchies and their attempt to avoid causing discomfort or challenging the authority of the listener.

The results align with Santoso & Yulianti's (2023) study, demonstrating that over 40% of Indonesian teachers of English as a Foreign Language employ negative politeness strategies in workplace communication, especially when delivering feedback, updates, or requests to those in positions of power. Furthermore, Haugh & Chang (2019) observed in a cross-cultural investigation that strategies for softening communication – including hedging, indirect requests, and apologies – are utilized in professional settings to show deference and foster positive working relationships. This pattern also finds cultural explanation in Hofstede's (2001) theory of collectivism, which emphasizes societal structures based on hierarchy and harmonious relationships. Consequently, the use of negative politeness in Indonesian schools represents more than just a linguistic habit; it reflects cultural values that prioritize respect and carefulness as fundamental aspects of social engagement.

Ultimately, the use of negative politeness in these exchanges demonstrates how language reflects power dynamics within the institution. More significant differences in status lead to a more extensive use of mitigating language, such as apologies, hedging, respectful language, and indirect requests. However, when the power gap decreases—for instance, in communication between an assistant principal and a principal—politeness continues to be evident but is shown more through discussion and cooperation. These observations support the argument by Brown and Levinson (1987) that politeness reveals social power and distance, and they correspond with Susanto and Yahmun's (2022) discovery that Indonesian EFL teachers utilize indirectness and respect when communicating with those in positions of authority. Therefore, negative politeness functions as both a way to soften communication and a socially required behavior within the school's hierarchical system, allowing individuals to uphold respect, maintain positive relationships, and adhere to proper institutional etiquette while handling everyday matters.

### ***Strategies for Positive Politeness and Social Solidarity***

Unlike negative politeness strategies, positive politeness strategies in this research were observed in interactions between teachers and vice principals, characterized by a smaller power imbalance. These strategies functioned to establish rapport and mutual connection, demonstrated through methods like employing shared identity cues and involving both parties in the interaction. In the statement “Excuse me, sir, our students want to hold a tug-of-war competition. What do you think, sir, should we hold it?” (“*Permisi Pak, murid kita ingin mengadakan lomba tarik tambang. Bagaimana ya, Pak, apakah kita adakan?*”), The speaker uses the inclusive pronoun “we” (“*kita*”) as a sign of solidarity. This shows that the teacher not only respects his superior but also invites the listener to be involved in the decision-making process.

The current results align with Kemala's (2021) study, which demonstrated a frequent use of positive politeness strategies in conversations among school colleagues, particularly during discussions about shared tasks or group choices. Furthermore, Leech (2014) highlights that positive politeness reinforces relationships and promotes solidarity while still acknowledging established social norms. Consequently, the use of positive politeness here indicates a flexible power structure—one where individuals can navigate hierarchies through cooperative language. Within a school's organizational environment, this approach is crucial for developing effective communication and facilitating collaboration between staff.

### ***Off-the-Record Strategies and Self-Protection in Vertical Communication***

The cleaning staff's comment to the teacher – “Ma'am, I'm sorry. Your room is often used by the scouts. Please don't say this came from me, ma'am” (“*Bu, maaf ya. Ruangan ibu sering dipakai anak-anak pramuka... Tolong jangan bilang ini dari saya ya, Bu.*”) – exemplifies off-record politeness. According to Brown & Levinson (1987), this utilizes

indirectness through hinting and vagueness, delivering a message subtly while avoiding direct accountability for its content.

Choosing this strategy suggests that those holding fewer social privileges use indirect communication as a defense mechanism to avoid possible adverse outcomes, thus protecting their own sense of self-worth. This enables individuals to express opposition or criticism without disrupting established hierarchies and minimizing potential social repercussions. This is consistent with research conducted by Hamsah et al. (2023) at Makassar State University, demonstrating that organizations with high power distance are more likely to employ indirect communication strategies. Consequently, this approach provides a valuable way to navigate disagreements when interacting with those in positions of authority.

Considering rapport management theory (Spencer-Oatey, 2008), indirect communication can be seen as a way people navigate social situations, striving to both share information and preserve their relationships. This comparison of different studies addresses the research questions of how someone's position or authority impacts their communication choices and what those choices suggest. Analysis of data collected from SMP Negeri 37 Medan indicates a strong connection between formal hierarchical roles (principal, vice principal, teacher, student/cleaning staff) and a preference for negative politeness when communicating problems, requesting permission, or asking for advice from those higher in status. Conversely, positive politeness is more common when individuals are working together, such as teachers, including the vice principal, in planning student events. These findings align with Haugh & Chang's (2019) argument, published in the *Journal of Pragmatics*, that politeness strategies depend not only on power dynamics, but also on the degree of familiarity and the goal of the conversation.

Moreover, the employment of indirect communication methods by the lowest-ranking individuals (the cleaning staff) highlights a particular pattern in communication within hierarchies. When the potential for social repercussions from direct messaging is substantial, subtle techniques—such as implying confidentiality (“please don't attribute this to me”)—serve as a practical way to circumvent direct conflict. The results align with research conducted by Hamsah et al. (2023), demonstrating that disparities in social standing and authority significantly influence levels of politeness, with greater power differences correlating to more indirect language use. Consistent with other Asian studies, this work verifies the prevalence of negative politeness strategies in formal contexts like educational institutions, workplaces, and governmental organizations (Rahardi, 2018; Gunawan, 2021). These prior studies also highlight the importance of harmonizing negative politeness (which is showing deference) and positive politeness (which is fostering rapport) to facilitate effective and considerate communication. Consequently, this study contributes to the ongoing conversation regarding the interconnectedness of language, power dynamics, and ethical communication within educational settings.

### ***Implication for Power Dynamics in Schools***

Analyzing politeness strategies used at SMP Negeri 37 Medan reveals that language operates beyond simple communication, functioning also to manage power dynamics and uphold societal values. Specifically, (1) negative politeness is employed to respect individuality and maintain distance, (2) positive politeness fosters rapport and group cohesion, and (3) indirect communication allows individuals with less authority to express themselves cautiously. This result aligns with the idea of linguistic politeness as a moral undertaking (Eelen, 2001), highlighting that politeness goes beyond being a communication technique; it also demonstrates a person's adopted moral principles and societal norms. Essentially, demonstrating politeness in a school setting indicates how individuals within the community understand concepts like power dynamics, obligation, and consideration for others.

This research carries both theoretical and practical significance. This study's findings both support the enduring usefulness of Brown & Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and indicate potential avenues for combining it with Spencer-Oatey's (2008) rapport management framework, which focuses on building positive connections in the workplace. In terms of practical application, the research implies that communication training in educational settings – for teachers, students, and administrators – ought to progress beyond simply learning polite expressions and instead focus on comprehending the social forces and power structures that influence interactions. This practical knowledge is critical for cultivating respectful and professional exchanges in schools and will ultimately enhance awareness of how language, power, politeness, and ethical communication interconnect within the field of education. Understanding these patterns helps explain why miscommunication or misunderstanding often occurs in schools—particularly when lower-status individuals hesitate to express disagreement or raise concerns directly. Schools that overlook these subtle linguistic dynamics may unintentionally create communication gaps that hinder collaboration and transparency.

## CONCLUSION

This research explored the influence of power dynamics on the implementation of politeness strategies in straightforward interactions between individuals holding different hierarchical positions at SMP Negeri 37 Medan. Utilizing Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory as its foundation and a pragmatic analysis of speech acts, the study characterized and examined the various politeness types and sub-strategies used by school personnel – including the principal, assistant principals, educators, students, and support staff. The results indicated a prevalence of negative politeness strategies (82.70%) in communication, with positive politeness accounting for 9.20% and off-record politeness representing 8.10%. Positive politeness strategies were used primarily in horizontal interactions, while off-record strategies were applied by participants in lower-status positions to minimize potential face threats. These findings support Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and highlight how power relations influence pragmatic choices in daily school communication.

Negative politeness, manifested in strategies like apologies, hedging, deference, pessimism, and indirect requests, was primarily observed when individuals with lower status (teachers, cleaning personnel) communicated with those of higher status (vice principals, headmaster). This use of these strategies demonstrates the speakers' understanding of hierarchical structures within the institution and their intention to respect the listener's independence and public image. The imbalance of power encourages more indirect and formal language, supporting the idea that politeness in these situations serves to maintain social order and protect individuals' social standing.

In contrast, positive politeness was mainly observed in conversations among individuals with comparable positions, like those between teachers and assistant principals, highlighting unity and collaboration. This illustrates how politeness can connect individuals across different levels of power, encouraging collaboration and positive relationships. Indirect politeness, often employed by those with less authority—such as support staff speaking to educators—acted as a way to cautiously raise issues or express worries, thereby decreasing potential conflict and ensuring secure interactions. From a pragmatics standpoint, these results demonstrate how power significantly influences language use – specifically, a larger power gap correlates with increased use of indirectness and politeness strategies. Ultimately, this study enhances our comprehension of how language, authority, and politeness are connected within interactions in educational settings. This study expands our knowledge of language in institutional settings by demonstrating the strong connection between school communication and its hierarchical structure. The findings emphasize the need for communication approaches

that recognize power imbalances while fostering clear, respectful, and cooperative interactions.

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### **INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT**

Before data collection, all study participants of this research were given an informed overview of the study's aims, methods, and potential advantages. Participation was free from any pressure without penalty. Researchers made sure that participants were confident and were protected their privacy was protected, adhering to established ethical guidelines.

### **DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT**

The data utilized in this study cannot be made publicly available due to strict adherence to privacy concerns and ethical obligations that safeguard participant confidentiality. This ensures compliance with ethical research standards and data protection regulations.

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