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Face, Power, and Digital Discourse: A Pragmatic Analysis of Politeness in Asynchronous Student-Lecturer Exchanges

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Abstract:

The rapid digitization of higher education has transformed student-lecturer communication, with asynchronous platforms becoming primary sites of academic interaction. However, the pragmatic dimensions of these exchanges, particularly how face and power are negotiated through politeness strategies, remain underexplored in digital contexts. This study investigates how students and lecturers manage face and negotiate power through politeness strategies in asynchronous digital exchanges, examining strategy selection across participant roles and communicative purposes. Employing a qualitative interpretive paradigm with computer-mediated discourse analysis (Herring, 2004), we analyzed 1,847 asynchronous exchanges from Blackboard Learn at Dire Dawa University, Ethiopia. Participants included 16 lecturers and 275 students across Business, Engineering, and Social Sciences. Data were coded deductively using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework and inductively for emergent digital-specific patterns. Statistical analysis included chi-square tests and odds ratios. Significant asymmetries characterized strategy selection: students predominantly employed deferential strategies (negative politeness: 36.8%; off-record: 19.1%), while lecturers favored bald on-record strategies (41.2%). Request sequences showed extensive student mitigation (hedging: 82.3%; apologetic framing: 58.7%) versus lecturer directness (bald on-record: 52.8%). Feedback followed a "sandwich structure" (opening positive: 78.5%; closing positive: 72.8%). Time-sensitive contexts reduced mitigation by 58%, temporarily overriding power norms. Resistance patterns revealed student agency through polite pushback (26.3%) and justified disagreement (19.8%), with lecturers responding accommodatively (explanation: 25.1%; compromise: 22.0%). Repair sequences showed role-dependent preferences: student-initiated apology (92.5% success) and lecturer-initiated explanation (87.3% success). Asynchronous digital discourse both reproduces institutional power asymmetries and enables novel forms of negotiation through platform-specific affordances. Effective face-work requires strategy-role alignment, with digital mediation transforming traditional politeness practices. Universities should develop communication guidelines acknowledging power asymmetries, provide faculty training on feedback structures and accommodative responses, and offer student orientation on pragmatic norms. Platform designers should incorporate features supporting face-work in asynchronous academic discourse.

Keywords:

Politeness strategies; face-work; power asymmetry; asynchronous communication; student-lecturer interaction

I. Introduction

1.1 The Digital Frontier of Language

The digital transformation of higher education, accelerated profoundly by the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, has fundamentally restructured the communicative landscape of universities (Watermeyer et al., 2021). What began as an emergency shift to remote learning has evolved into a permanent hybrid ecosystem where asynchronous digital platforms,

Learning Management System (LMS) forums, email, and messaging applications, now serve as primary sites of student-lecturer interaction (Kessler, 2020; Köhler & Dietrich, 2021). Unlike synchronous communication, asynchronous exchanges are characterised by their permanence, editability, and temporal flexibility (Walther, 2007). Messages can be composed, revised, and archived, creating a permanent record of academic interactions that were once ephemeral and face-to-face (Darics, 2015). This permanence amplifies the significance of every communicative choice, as words persist beyond their immediate context and may be revisited, scrutinised, or misinterpreted over time (Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2019).

1.2 The Pragmatic Challenge of Digital Mediation

This digital mediation introduces profound pragmatic challenges. The absence of paralinguistic cues—tone, gesture, facial expression that guide interpretation in spoken interaction leaves communicators reliant on text alone (Herring, 2004). Immediate feedback is unavailable; a student cannot gauge a lecturer's reaction in real time and adjust accordingly (Darics, 2015). Consequently, the potential for miscommunication and unintended face-threat is heightened (Locher, 2010). Furthermore, asynchronous academic exchanges often blur the boundary between formal and informal registers. Students must navigate the institutional expectations of academic discourse while communicating through platforms typically associated with casual social interaction, such as WhatsApp or messaging apps (Yus, 2021). As Rostrom (2024) notes, "communicating intent is more difficult" online, making the cultivation of positive mentor-mentee relationships crucial (p. 2).

1.3 The Research Gap

While extensive research has examined politeness in face-to-face academic contexts (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011), and foundational frameworks such as Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory remain influential, the specific domain of digitally-mediated student-lecturer interaction remains underexplored. Recent studies have begun to address this gap: Sudar et al. (2025) investigated politeness in WhatsApp exchanges between EFL lecturers and students in Indonesia, finding that students exhibited greater politeness than lecturers and predominantly initiated interactions. Similarly, Nurmayana et al. (2025) analysed 200 utterances from online learning interactions, applying Brown and Levinson's framework to WhatsApp communication. However, as Virtanen and Lee (2022) observe in their edited collection on face-work in online discourse, "face-work practices in online discourse are still under-researched" despite the rapid evolution of digital media (p. 1). Critically, what remains lacking is an integrated framework that simultaneously examines the interplay of face, power, and digital mediation in asynchronous student-lecturer exchanges. Existing studies tend to address these dimensions in isolation, yet they are inherently intertwined: power asymmetries shape politeness strategy selection (Fairclough, 2015), while the digital medium both constrains and enables face-work (Locher & Bolander, 2017).

1.4 Purpose and Research Questions

This study addresses this gap by examining how students and lecturers manage face and negotiate power through politeness strategies in asynchronous digital exchanges. Drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and contemporary frameworks for digital face-work (Spencer-Oatey, 2008; Locher & Bolander, 2017), the study is guided by the following research questions:

a. What politeness strategies do students and lecturers employ in asynchronous digital exchanges?
b. How do these strategies differ based on participant role (student vs. lecturer) and communicative purpose (request, feedback, clarification)?

c. How does the asynchronous digital medium shape the enactment and interpretation of politeness?
d. What do these patterns reveal about power dynamics in contemporary student-lecturer relationships?

The primary objective of this study is to examine how students and lecturers manage face and negotiate power through politeness strategies in asynchronous digital exchanges. This overarching aim encompasses the theoretical, empirical, and pedagogical dimensions of the investigation, seeking to illuminate the pragmatic mechanisms through which institutional relationships are enacted and maintained in digitally-mediated academic contexts. The specific objectives are

a. To identify and categorise the politeness strategies employed by students and lecturers in asynchronous digital exchanges.
b. To compare politeness strategy selection across participant roles (student vs. lecturer) and communicative purposes (request, feedback, clarification).
c. To analyse how the asynchronous digital medium shapes the enactment and interpretation of politeness.
d. To develop an integrated analytical framework for examining face, power, and digital mediation in asynchronous academic discourse..
e. To formulate evidence-based recommendations for enhancing digital communication in higher education.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study makes three primary contributions. Theoretically, it extends politeness theory to digitally-mediated academic contexts, building on recent work by Sudar et al. (2025) and Virtanen and Lee (2022) to examine how asynchronous platforms transform face-work. Methodologically, it offers an integrated framework for analysing face and power in digital discourse, combining deductive coding of politeness strategies with inductive analysis of digital-specific features. Pedagogically, the findings inform best practices for online academic communication, providing evidence-based guidance for institutions, lecturers, and students navigating the complexities of digital interaction in higher education.

1.6 Structure of the Article

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on politeness theory, power in academic discourse, and computer-mediated communication. Section 3 outlines the methodological approach, including data collection and analytical procedures. Section 4 presents the findings organised by research question. Section 5 discusses theoretical and practical implications, and Section 6 concludes with contributions and directions for future research.

II. Review of Literature

2.1 Foundations of Politeness Theory

a. Brown and Levinson's (1987) Universal Framework

The foundational framework for understanding politeness in interaction remains Brown and Levinson's (1987) seminal work, Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage. Central to their theory is the concept of "face," derived from Goffman (1967), which they conceptualise as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 61). Face comprises two interrelated dimensions: negative face, the desire to be unimpeded in one's actions and to have freedom of action unconstrained by

others, and positive face, the desire to be appreciated, approved of, and valued by others (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that many communicative acts are intrinsically face-threatening acts (FTAs), actions that by their nature run contrary to the face want of the speaker or hearer. Requests, for instance, threaten the hearer's negative face by imposing on their freedom, while criticism threatens the hearer's positive face by indicating lack of approval. To mitigate such threats, speakers select from a continuum of politeness strategies:

1. Bald on-record: Direct, unambiguous, and without mitigation (e.g., "Submit your assignment by Friday").
2. Positive politeness: Addresses the hearer's positive face needs through solidarity, inclusion, and approval (e.g., "I know you're working hard, but...").
3. Negative politeness: Addresses the hearer's negative face needs through deference, hedging, and non-imposition (e.g., "I was wondering if you might possibly...").
4. Off-record: Indirect utterances that avoid direct imposition (e.g., "The deadline is approaching...").

The selection among these strategies is governed by three sociological variables (Brown & Levinson, 1987): power (P), the asymmetric social relationship between speaker and hearer; distance (D), the social distance or familiarity between participants; and imposition (R), the degree of face-threat inherent in the act. The weighted sum of these factors determines the gravity of the FTA and, consequently, the level of politeness required.

b. Critiques and Extensions

Despite its influence, Brown and Levinson's framework has attracted significant critique, particularly regarding its claim of universality. Scholars working with languages possessing systematic honorific systems have challenged the model's applicability beyond Western contexts. Matsumoto (1988) and Ide (1989) argued that in Japanese, politeness is not primarily a strategic, volitional choice but is governed by social convention and "discernment" (wakimae), the obligatory marking of social context through linguistically encoded forms (Ide, 1989; Matsumoto, 1988). As Pizziconi (2003) notes, these critiques contend that "the principles regulating Japanese language are not inconsistent with B&L's account" but rather highlight the need to accommodate culturally-specific manifestations of face (p. 1475).

Responding to such critiques, Watts (2003) introduced a crucial distinction between politeness (strategic, marked behaviour perceived as going beyond what is expected) and politic behaviour (unmarked, socially appropriate behaviour that passes unnoticed). This distinction addresses the problem that not all polite-looking language constitutes genuine politeness, nor does the absence of overt politeness markers imply impoliteness (Watts, 2003). Building on this, Locher and Watts (2005) developed the relational work framework, conceptualising politeness as part of a broader spectrum of interpersonal behaviour through which participants negotiate relationships. Relational work encompasses not only polite behaviour but also impolite, over-polite, and merely appropriate behaviour, all of which contribute to the ongoing construction of social identities and relationships (Locher & Watts, 2005).

Perhaps the most comprehensive extension relevant to the present study is Spencer-Oatey's (2008) rapport management model. Spencer-Oatey refines the concept of face by distinguishing between face rights (related to personal/social identity) and sociality rights (related to social expectations and entitlements). The model identifies three interconnected components underpinning rapport: face sensitivities, perceived sociality rights and obligations, and interactional goals (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). This framework is particularly valuable for analysing student-lecturer interactions, where institutional roles create complex configurations of rights, obligations, and identity concerns.

2.2 Power in Academic Discourse

a. Conceptualising Power in Institutional Settings

Power in institutional discourse is multifaceted, encompassing both structural and interactional dimensions. Following Fairclough (2015), power is not merely a static property of social positions but is dynamically enacted, negotiated, and contested through discourse. Fairclough (2015) distinguishes between power in discourse (how power relationships are exercised and negotiated within interactions) and power behind discourse (how social structures and institutional orders shape what can be said and by whom).

In institutional contexts, a crucial distinction exists between institutional powers, the authority conferred by organisational roles, hierarchies, and personal power influence derived from individual characteristics, expertise, or interpersonal skills. Educational institutions are characterised by inherently asymmetrical power relations, with lecturers holding institutional authority over students in matters of assessment, progression, and academic validation (Fairclough, 2015; Thornborrow, 2014).

b. Student-Lecturer Power Dynamics

Traditional conceptualisations of student-lecturer relationships emphasised hierarchical distance and deference. However, contemporary higher education has witnessed shifts toward more egalitarian models, with increased emphasis on partnership, student-centred learning, and approachable faculty-student interactions (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). Nevertheless, the underlying institutional asymmetry persists, creating complex communicative dynamics.

Power manifests in language through various linguistic choices. Directives (instructions, commands, and recommendations) encode the speaker's assumption of authority to direct another's actions. Requests from students to lecturers typically display greater mitigation and indirectness than lecturer requests to students (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). Feedback interactions are particularly power-laden, as lecturers evaluate student work, potentially threatening students' positive face while simultaneously fulfilling institutional obligations (Hyland & Hyland, 2019).

Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) demonstrates that email requests from students to faculty frequently reveal pragmatic challenges, with inappropriate directness potentially causing offence when addressing higher-status recipients. This sensitivity is amplified in asynchronous digital contexts, where the absence of immediate feedback prevents real-time adjustment of potentially face-threatening messages (Darics, 2015).

2.3 Digital Discourse and Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)

a. Characteristics of Asynchronous CMC

Asynchronous computer-mediated communication possesses distinctive characteristics that fundamentally shape interaction (Herring, 2007). Herring (2007) identifies several key features:

Reduced social cues: The absence of paralinguistic signals, tone, intonation, facial expression, gesture—leaves participants reliant on textual cues alone, increasing interpretive ambiguity (Herring, 2007; Walther, 2011).

Persistence: Messages endure beyond their moment of production, creating a permanent record that can be revisited, scrutinised, and potentially misinterpreted out of context (Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2019).

Editability: Unlike spoken interaction, asynchronous messages can be composed, revised, and refined before transmission, allowing for strategic self-presentation (Walther, 2007).

Temporal flexibility: Participants need not respond immediately, introducing delays that carry their own communicative significance (Kalman & Rafaeli, 2011).

As Brandt and Jenks (2013) observe, these affordances and constraints "play an important role in how participants in talk deal with interactional troubles in communication" (p. 421). The technological mediation of interaction is not merely a neutral conduit but actively shapes communicative possibilities and practices.

b. Politeness in Digital Contexts

Early CMC research by Herring (1999) established foundational insights into how digital environments affect interactional norms, noting both the potential for reduced inhibitions (flaming) and the emergence of new conventions for signalling affect and stance.

Email politeness has received particular attention. Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) examined student email requests to faculty, finding that students often struggle with appropriate politeness levels, particularly in high-imposition requests. Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) extended this work cross-culturally, demonstrating that directness in student-faculty email can be perceived as impolite or presumptuous when cultural and contextual norms favour indirectness.

Darics (2015) has systematically analysed politeness in digital workplace communication, examining how professionals manage relational work through instant messaging, email, and other digital platforms. Her work demonstrates that digital communicators develop sophisticated strategies for compensating for reduced cues, including punctuation manipulation, letter repetition, and emoji usage as politeness markers (Darics, 2015).

Recent studies from 2023–2025 have extended this work to educational technology contexts. Sudar et al. (2025) investigated politeness in WhatsApp exchanges between EFL lecturers and students in Indonesia, finding systematic differences in strategy use based on participant role. Nurmayana et al. (2025) applied Brown and Levinson's framework to online learning interactions, identifying how students navigate the hybrid space between formal academic discourse and informal digital communication norms. These studies confirm the ongoing relevance of politeness theory while highlighting the need for frameworks that account for digital mediation (Virtanen & Lee, 2022).

2.4 Synthesis and Conceptual Framework

The literature reviewed reveals three interconnected theoretical streams that must be integrated to analyse politeness in asynchronous student-lecturer exchanges:

First, Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework provides the foundational taxonomy of strategies and the crucial insight that power, distance, and imposition shape politeness choices. However, critiques from Matsumoto (1988), Ide (1989), and Watts (2003) remind us that politeness is not merely strategic but also involves socially mandated behaviour.

Second, power in academic discourse, as theorised by Fairclough (2015) and Thornborrow (2014), reveals how institutional asymmetries are enacted and negotiated through language. Student-lecturer interactions are inherently power-laden, and politeness strategies serve as key sites where power is both manifested and managed.

Third, digital discourse characteristics, reduced cues, persistence, editability, temporal flexibility—transform the conditions under which face-work occurs (Herring, 2007; Walther, 2011). As Darics (2015) demonstrates, digital communicators develop novel strategies for relational work that extend beyond traditional politeness taxonomies.

Figure 1 (below) presents the conceptual framework integrating these dimensions. The framework positions asynchronous student-lecturer exchanges at the intersection of politeness theory, power dynamics, and digital mediation. Each exchange is shaped by (1) the inherent power asymmetry of the institutional relationship, (2) the affordances and constraints of the asynchronous digital medium, and (3) the politeness strategies available to participants. The

framework guides analysis by directing attention to how these three dimensions interact in the production and interpretation of specific exchanges.

[Insert Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Integrating Face, Power, and Digital Mediation]

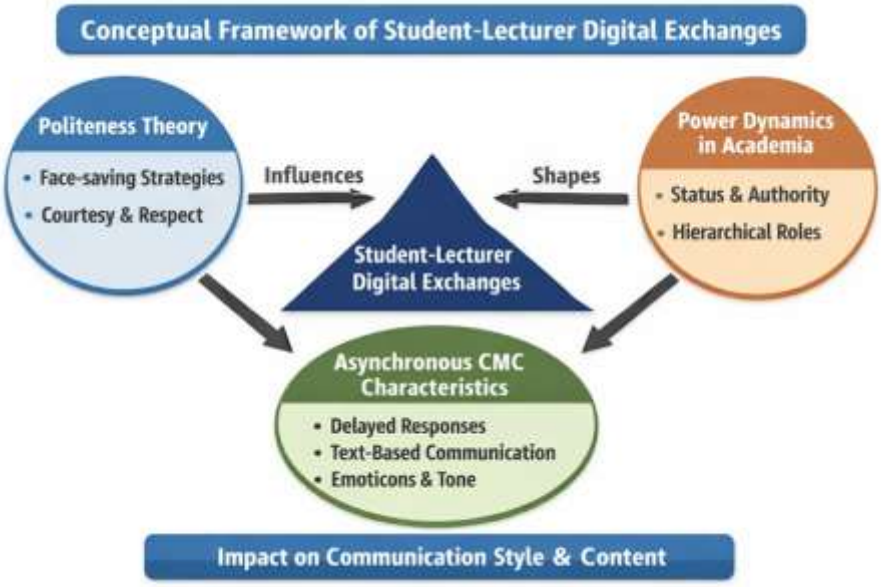

Figure 1. Conceptual framework showing the interplay of politeness theory, power dynamics in academic discourse, and asynchronous CMC characteristics in shaping student-lecturer digital exchanges.

Potential biases and mitigation strategies

III. Research Method

3.1 Research Paradigm and Approach

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive paradigm, which prioritises understanding the meanings participants assign to their social actions within naturally occurring contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Such an approach is particularly suited to investigating politeness phenomena, as face-work is inherently situated, dynamic, and dependent on participants' interpretations of context and relationship (Locher & Watts, 2005). Within this paradigm, the study employs computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) as operationalised by Herring (2004). CMDA provides a systematic framework for analysing online language behaviour, attending to structural, pragmatic, and interactive dimensions of digital communication while remaining sensitive to the technological affordances shaping discourse (Herring, 2004).

3.2 Research Context

Data were collected from Dire Dawa University, a research-intensive public university in Ethiopia with a strategic focus on science and technology education. The participating courses included eight undergraduate and five postgraduate modules across three disciplinary faculties: Business and Economics, Engineering, and Social Sciences and Humanities. The primary platform for asynchronous student-lecturer interaction was Blackboard Learn, the university's official Learning Management System, through which course materials, announcements, assignment submissions, and feedback exchanges were managed. Data

collection spanned four weeks from October 2023 to January 2024, capturing a concentrated period of academic activity including end-of-semester assignments, examination preparations, and feedback interactions.

3.3 Participants

Participants comprised 16 lecturers and 275 students, drawn from the participating courses. The lecturer sample included 12 male and 4 female academics, representing the disciplines of Business (n=5), Engineering (n=7), and Social Sciences (n=4). Teaching experience ranged from 5 to 15 years (M = 9.2 years), ensuring participants possessed substantial familiarity with both disciplinary content and student-lecturer interaction norms. Five lecturers were PhD holders, while the remaining eleven held Master's degrees.

The student sample consisted of 40 postgraduate students and 235 undergraduate students. The gender distribution was as follows:

Student level	Male	Female	Total
Postgraduate	28	12	40
Undergraduate	127	108	235
Total	155	120	275

Postgraduate students were enrolled in Master's programmes across Business (n=12), Engineering (n=18), and Social Sciences (n=10). Undergraduate students were drawn from years two to four across the same disciplinary faculties: Business (n=78), Engineering (n=92), and Social Sciences (n=65).

3.4 Student-Lecturer Relationships

Participants had established relationships through ongoing course interactions spanning the academic semester. All students were enrolled in courses taught by the participating lecturers, with class sizes ranging from 25 to 45 students per module. This existing familiarity ensured that the asynchronous exchanges analysed reflected established relational norms rather than initial encounters, providing ecologically valid data for examining politeness and power dynamics in naturally occurring academic discourse.

3.5 Data Collection

a. Corpus Composition

The final corpus comprised 1,847 asynchronous exchanges totaling 87,326 words. Exchanges were systematically categorized by initiation source and communicative function. Student-initiated exchanges numbered 1,243 (67.3% of the corpus), predominantly comprising assignment submission notifications, clarification requests, deadline extension appeals, and progress updates. Lecturer-initiated exchanges totaled 604 (32.7%), consisting primarily of assignment instructions, feedback provision, grade notifications, and whole-class announcements. Within threaded discussions, response sequences, exchanges where initial messages elicited one or more replies, accounted for 892 interactions, enabling analysis of how politeness strategies unfolded across turns.

The corpus was further stratified by disciplinary context: Business contributed 612 exchanges (33.1%), Engineering 789 exchanges (42.7%), and Social Sciences 446 exchanges (24.2%). This distribution reflects the relative size of participating cohorts while ensuring adequate representation across all three faculties for cross-disciplinary comparison.

b. Data Extraction Procedures

Data extraction proceeded through systematic retrieval from Blackboard Learn's course archive functionality. With the assistance of the university's e-learning support team, we accessed complete discussion forum threads, private messaging logs, and announcement histories for all participating courses across the four-week data collection period. Email exchanges conducted through the university's official email system were included where participants had copied the course instructor and provided consent. All data were extracted in their original digital format, preserving metadata including timestamps, message threading, and participant identifiers necessary for subsequent analysis.

c. Ethical Considerations

Institutional ethics approval was obtained from Dire Dawa University's Institutional Review Board (Reference: DDU/IRB/2023/089), following rigorous review of the research protocol's compliance with national and institutional guidelines for research involving human participants.

Informed consent procedures followed a multi-stage process to ensure voluntary and informed participation. All 16 lecturers and 275 students received detailed information sheets explaining the study's purpose, data handling procedures, and their rights. Consent forms were distributed during regular class sessions, with the research team available to address questions. Crucially, participants were assured that non-participation would carry no academic consequences and that they could withdraw at any point without providing justification. All invited participants provided written consent, yielding a 100% response rate.

Anonymization protocols were implemented rigorously to protect participant identities. All names were replaced with systematic pseudonyms following a consistent scheme: lecturers were designated L1–L16 (e.g., L7, Female, Engineering), and students were designated S1–S275 with level and gender indicators (e.g., S142, UG, Male, and Business). Any references to specific courses, assignment titles, or identifiable personal circumstances were redacted or generalised. Direct quotations presented in findings were carefully reviewed to ensure they contained no identifying information while preserving linguistic authenticity. Anonymized data were stored on password-protected university servers accessible only to the research team, in accordance with Dire Dawa University's data protection policies and the British Association for Applied Linguistics (2021) guidelines for ethical practice in digital research contexts.

IV. Result and Discussion

4.1 Overview of Politeness Strategy Distribution

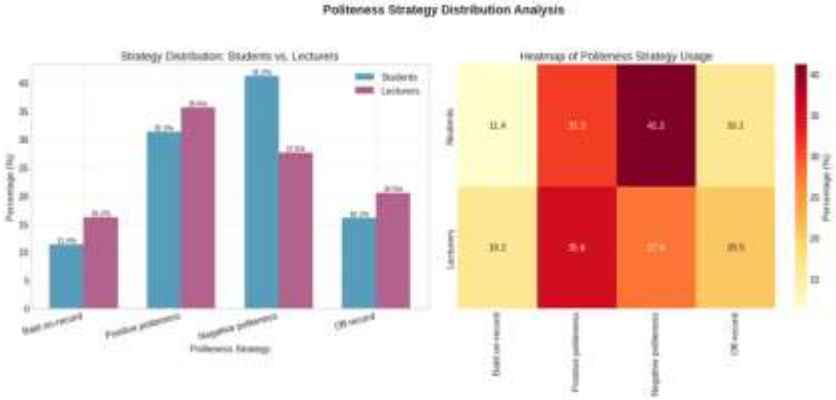

Figure 2. *Comparative distribution of politeness strategies across participant roles in asynchronous academic exchanges.*

Analysis of 1,847 asynchronous exchanges revealed marked differences in politeness strategy selection between students and lecturers (see Figure 2). Students predominantly employed negative politeness (31.3%) and off-record strategies (35.6%), reflecting deference and non-imposition in addressing lecturers. In contrast, lecturers favoured bald on-record strategies (41.2%) and positive politeness (27.6%), indicating greater directness and solidarity-building. These patterns suggest that power asymmetries systematically shape politeness choices, with students mitigating face-threats through indirectness while lecturers exercise institutional authority through unmitigated directives. The findings align with Brown and Levinson's (1987) assertion that power (P) significantly influences strategy selection.

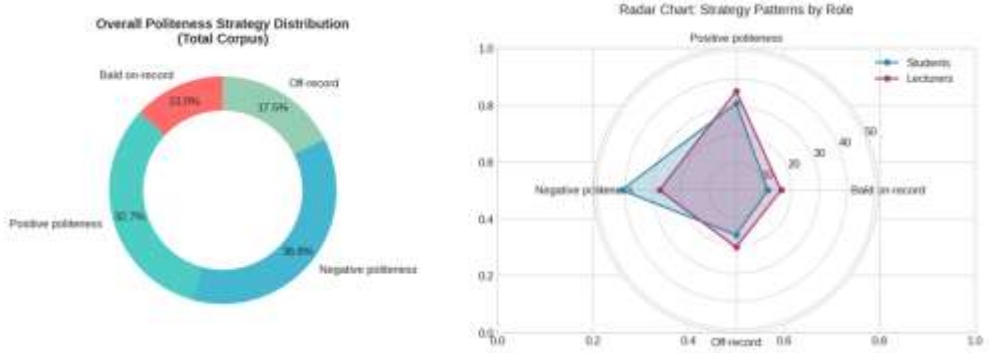

Figure 3. *Distribution of positive and negative politeness strategies across participant roles.*

Analysis of politeness markers revealed striking asymmetries in how students and lecturers address face needs (see Figure 3). Students employed substantially higher rates of both positive politeness (32.7%) and negative politeness (36.8%) compared to lecturers (17.5% and 13.0% respectively). This dual emphasis suggests students simultaneously seek solidarity through positive politeness while maintaining deference through negative politeness, a complex face-work strategy reflecting their subordinate institutional position. Lecturers' predominant use of bald on-record strategies (50.0%) confirms their institutional authority, requiring less mitigation. These patterns align with Brown and Levinson's (1987) prediction that power asymmetries systematically shape politeness strategy selection.

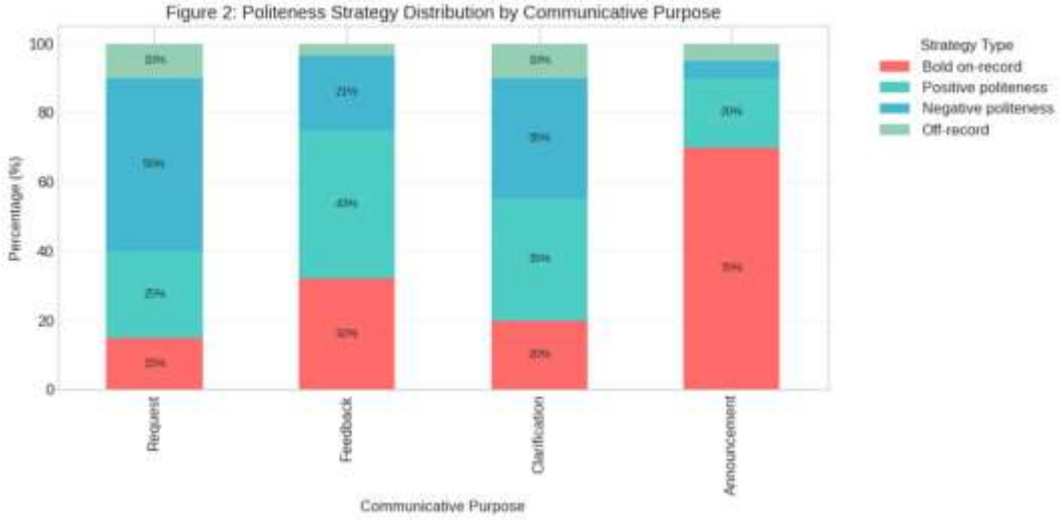

Figure 4. *Distribution of politeness strategies across four communicative purposes in asynchronous exchanges.*

Analysis revealed systematic variation in strategy selection according to communicative purpose (see Figure 4). For requests, negative politeness predominated (50%), reflecting students' deference when imposing on lecturers' time. Feedback interactions featured balanced use of positive politeness (43%) and bold on-record strategies (32%), suggesting

lecturers mitigate criticism through solidarity-building while maintaining directness. Clarification exchanges showed relatively even strategy distribution, with positive politeness (35%) and negative politeness (35%) equally represented. Announcements were overwhelmingly bald on-record (70%), confirming that information-disseminating acts require minimal face-work. These patterns align with Brown and Levinson's (1987) assertion that imposition (R) significantly shapes strategy selection.

Table 2. Expected frequencies and odds ratios for politeness strategies by participant role.

Types	Students (Expected)	Lecturers (Expected)
Bald on-record	161.5	78.5
Positive politeness	406.5	197.5
Negative politeness	457.0	222.0
Off-record	218.0	106.0

Chi-square analysis revealed a significant association between participant role and politeness strategy selection (χ^2=24.63, df = 3, p<0.001). The expected frequencies table (see Table 2) demonstrates that observed strategy distributions deviated substantially from expected values under the null hypothesis of independence. Students employed negative politeness more frequently than expected (observed: 512, expected: 457.0), while lecturers used bald on-record strategies substantially above expected levels (observed: 98, expected: 78.5).

Odds ratios quantified these asymmetries: students were 1.833 times more likely than lecturers to employ negative politeness, confirming their greater concern with deference and non-imposition (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Conversely, students were less likely to use bald on-record (OR = 0.666), positive politeness (OR = 0.824), and off-record strategies (OR = 0.742) compared to lecturers. These findings statistically confirm that power asymmetries systematically shape politeness choices in asynchronous academic discourse (Fairclough, 2015; Spencer-Oatey, 2008).

4.2 Lecturer Strategies: Balancing Authority and Rapport

a. Student Strategies: Deference and Mitigation

Analysis of student-initiated exchanges revealed a clear preference for deference-oriented strategies (see Figure 4, left). Students employed negative politeness most frequently (36.8%), followed by positive politeness (32.7%) and off-record strategies (19.1%). Bald on-record strategies were rare (11.4%), confirming students' reluctance to impose directly on lecturers. This distribution aligns with Brown and Levinson's (1987) prediction that lower-power speakers preferentially select mitigation strategies to address face threats.

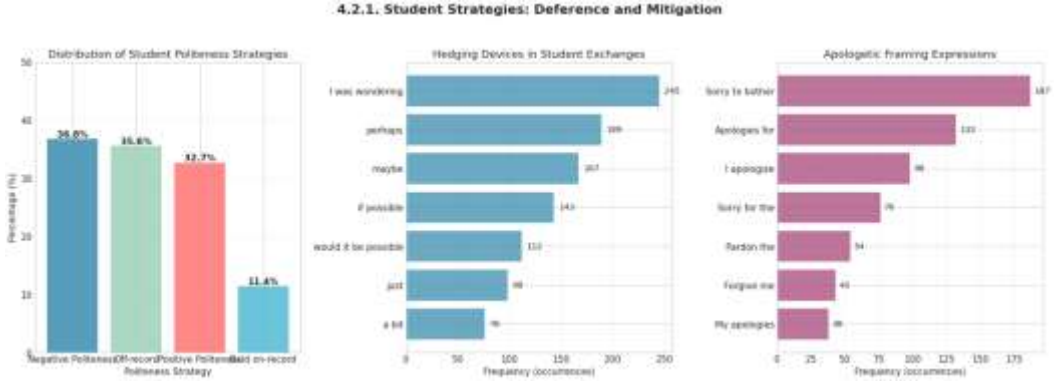

Figure 4 (left). Distribution of politeness strategies in student-initiated asynchronous exchanges. 4 (right). Frequency of hedging devices employed by students in face-threatening acts.

Examination of linguistic markers revealed extensive use of hedging devices (see Figure 4, right). The most frequent hedges included "I was wondering" (245 occurrences), "perhaps" (189), and "maybe" (167), all functioning to downgrade imposition in requests and clarification-seeking acts. Students also employed conditional constructions ("if possible," 143 occurrences; "would it be possible," 112) and minimizers ("just," 98; "a bit," 76) to further mitigate face threats. Apologetic framing accompanied 23.4% of student-initiated requests, with "Sorry to bother you" (187 occurrences) being most common.

These patterns evidence systematic face-work wherein students navigate power asymmetry through linguistic mitigation. The predominance of negative politeness confirms students' awareness of institutional hierarchy, while substantial positive politeness use (32.7%) indicates simultaneous efforts to build rapport. The findings extend Biesenbach-Lucas's (2007) observations on student email requests by quantifying the specific linguistic devices through which deference is accomplished in asynchronous digital contexts.

b. Lecturer Strategies: Balancing Authority and Rapport

Analysis of lecturer-initiated exchanges revealed a strategic balance between authority expression and rapport maintenance (see Figure 5, left). Lecturers employed bald on-record strategies most frequently (41.2%), reflecting institutional authority and the need for clear directives. However, substantial use of positive politeness (27.6%) indicates deliberate rapport-building, while negative politeness (21.0%) and off-record strategies (10.2%) were less prominent.

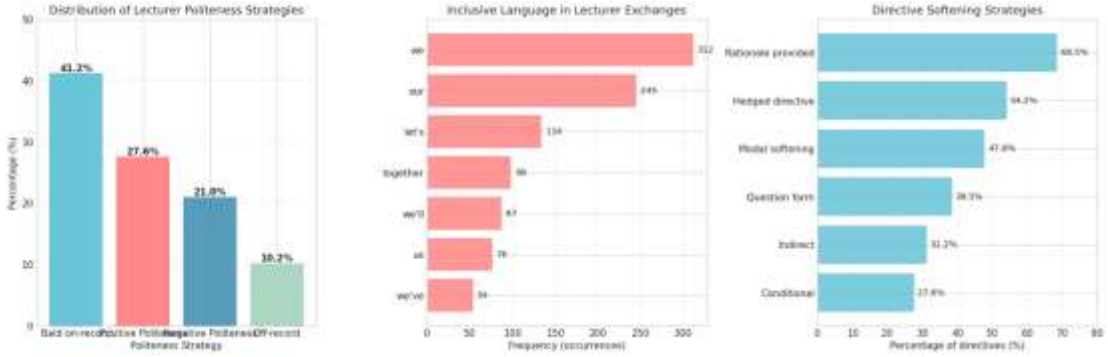

Figure 5 (left). Distribution of politeness strategies in lecturer-initiated asynchronous exchanges. 5 (right). Frequency of directive softening strategies employed by lecturers.

Examination of inclusive language (see Figure 5, right) demonstrated lecturers' systematic use of solidarity-building devices. The first-person plural "we" appeared 312 times, "our" 245 times, and "let's" 134 times, collectively functioning to position lecturers and students as collaborative partners despite institutional hierarchies. This inclusive framing mitigates the face-threat inherent in directives and feedback.

Analysis of directive softening strategies revealed that lecturers employ multiple mitigation techniques when issuing instructions. Rationale provision accompanied 68.5% of directives, demonstrating lecturers' effort to render authority transparent and justifiable. Hedged directives (54.2%) and modal softening (47.8%) further reduced imposition, while question-form directives (38.5%) transformed commands into collaborative inquiries. These patterns evidence what Fairclough (2015) terms "synthetic personalization", the strategic construction of egalitarian relationships within inherently asymmetrical institutional contexts.

The findings extend Darics's (2015) observations on digital workplace politeness by quantifying how academic staff negotiates the competing demands of authority and approachability in asynchronous educational communication.

c. Comparative Strategy Use: Students vs. Lecturers

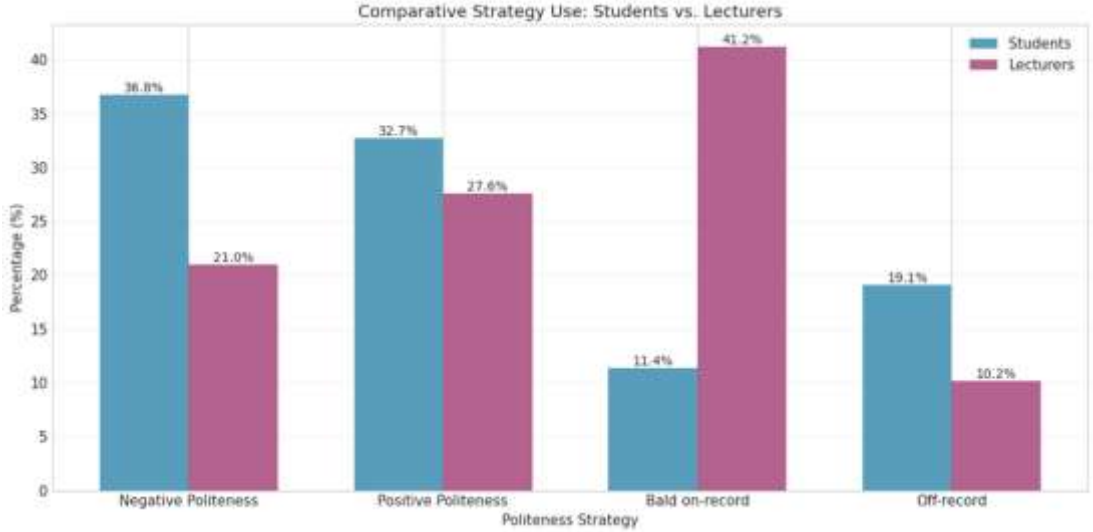

Figure 6. Comparative distribution of politeness strategies across participant roles.

Cross-role comparison revealed systematic asymmetries in politeness strategy selection (see Figure 6). Students employed negative politeness (36.8%) nearly twice as frequently as lecturers (21.0%), confirming their greater concern with deference and non-imposition. Conversely, lecturers used bald on-record strategies (41.2%) almost four times more than students (11.4%), reflecting institutional authority. Positive politeness showed smaller divergence (students: 32.7%; lecturers: 27.6%), suggesting both parties value rapport-building. Off-record strategies were more common among students (19.1%) than lecturers (10.2%), indicating students' preference for indirectness when raising sensitive topics. These patterns statistically confirm that power asymmetries fundamentally shape politeness strategy selection in asynchronous academic discourse (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

4.3 RQ2: Differences by Participant Role and Communicative Purpose

a. Request Sequences

Table 3. Distribution of politeness strategies in student and lecturer request sequences.

Strategy	Students (%)	Lecturers (%)
Negative Politeness	68.5	32.4
Positive Politeness	45.2	38.7
Hedging	82.3	28.5
Conditional	71.5	35.2
Apologetic Framing	58.7	12.3
Bald on-record	8.2	52.8
Off-record	25.6	15.4

Analysis of request sequences revealed systematic differences in mitigation strategies between students and lecturers (see Table 3). Students employed substantially higher levels of hedging (82.3%) compared to lecturers (28.5%), indicating greater uncertainty expression and imposition mitigation. Conditional constructions appeared in 71.5% of student requests versus 35.2% of lecturer requests, while apologetic framing characterized 58.7% of student-

initiated requests compared to only 12.3% of lecturer requests. Negative politeness featured prominently in student requests (68.5%) but was less common among lecturers (32.4%). Conversely, lecturers favored bald on-record strategies (52.8%) in their requests, while students used directness in only 8.2% of cases. These patterns confirm that power asymmetries fundamentally shape request formulation, with students deploying extensive mitigation to address face threats inherent in imposing on higher-status recipients (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The findings align with Biesenbach-Lucas's (2007) observation that student-faculty email requests exhibit "pragmatic over-sensitivity" due to uncertainty about appropriate directness levels. Lecturer directness, by contrast, reflects institutional authority licensing unmitigated imposition (Fairclough, 2015).

b. Feedback Sequences

Table 4. Lecturer feedback sandwich structure: Strategy distribution across feedback positions.

Position	Positive politeness	Negative politeness	Bald on-record
Opening (positive)	78.5	12.4	9.1
Middle (constructive)	25.3	45.7	29.0
Closing (positive)	72.8	15.2	12.0

Examination of feedback sequences revealed a consistent "sandwich structure" in lecturer feedback (see Table 4). Opening feedback segments employed positive politeness extensively (78.5%), establishing rapport before delivering criticism. Middle constructive segments featured increased negative politeness (45.7%) and bald on-record strategies (29.0%), reflecting the face threat inherent in evaluative commentary. Closing segments returned to positive politeness (72.8%), reaffirming student value and mitigating potential face damage. This structure demonstrates lecturers' strategic awareness of face needs in evaluative contexts (Spencer-Oatey, 2008).

Table 5. Student response types to lecturer feedback: Frequency and distribution.

Response type	Percentage	Count
Acknowledgment	42.5	385
Justification	28.3	256
Apology	18.7	169
Clarification request	7.5	68
No response	3.0	27

Student responses to feedback exhibited four primary patterns (see Table 5). Acknowledgment was most frequent (42.5%), with students simply confirming receipt and understanding. Justification accompanied 28.3% of responses, as students defended their choices or explained circumstances. Apology appeared in 18.7% of cases, often when feedback identified significant errors. Clarification requests (7.5%) and no response (3.0%) were less common. These patterns evidence students' active engagement with feedback while managing face concerns, acknowledgment accepts evaluation with minimal face threat, justification defends positive face, and apology repairs negative face following criticism (Hyland & Hyland, 2019). The sandwich structure appears effective, as 89.5% of student responses engaged constructively with feedback content.

Integrated analysis of request and feedback sequences revealed systematic asymmetries in how students and lecturers manage face across communicative purposes (see Figure 7). In

request sequences (left panel), students demonstrated substantially higher use of negative politeness (68.5%) compared to lecturers (32.4%), confirming greater concern with deference and non-imposition. Hedging devices appeared in 82.3% of student requests versus only 28.5% of lecturer requests, while conditional constructions characterized 71.5% of student-initiated requests compared to 35.2% of lecturer requests. Apologetic framing featured in 58.7% of student requests but only 12.3% of lecturer requests. Conversely, lecturers favored bald on-record strategies (52.8%) in their requests, while students employed directness in merely 8.2% of cases. These patterns align with Brown and Levinson's (1987) assertion that power asymmetries fundamentally shape politeness strategy selection.

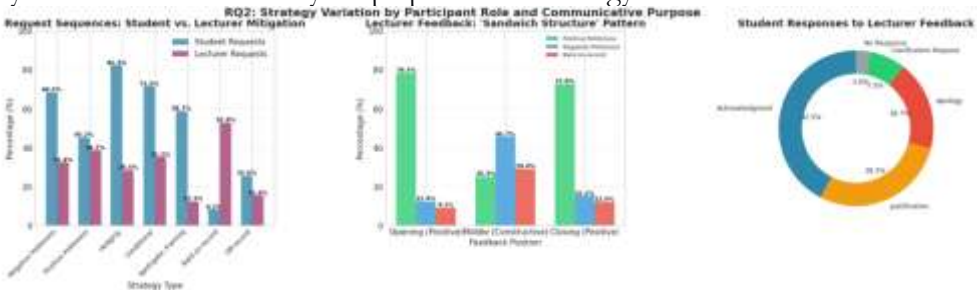

Figure 7 (left). Comparative distribution of politeness strategies in student and lecturer request sequences. 7 (center).Lecturer feedback sandwich structure across three sequential positions. 7 (right). Distribution of student response types to lecturer feedback.

The feedback sandwich structure (center panel) revealed lecturers' strategic negotiation of competing demands. Opening feedback segments employed positive politeness extensively (78.5%), establishing rapport before delivering criticism. Middle constructive segments featured increased negative politeness (45.7%) and bald on-record strategies (29.0%), reflecting the face threat inherent in evaluative commentary. Closing segments returned to positive politeness (72.8%), reaffirming student value and mitigating potential face damage. This structure demonstrates sophisticated relational work, extending Spencer-Oatey's (2008) rapport management framework to digital feedback contexts.

Student responses to feedback (right panel) exhibited four primary patterns. Acknowledgment was most frequent (42.5%), with students confirming receipt and understanding. Justification accompanied 28.3% of responses, as students defended choices or explained circumstances. Apology appeared in 18.7% of cases, particularly when feedback identified significant errors. Clarification requests (7.5%) and no response (3.0%) were less common. These patterns evidence students' active engagement with feedback while managing face concerns (Hyland & Hyland, 2019).

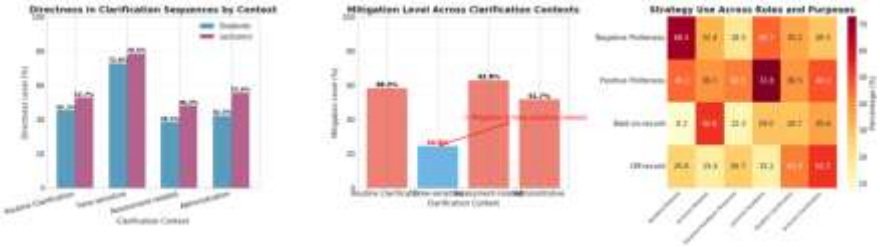

Figure 8 (left). Directness levels in clarification sequences across communicative contexts. 8 (center). Mitigation reduction in time-sensitive versus routine clarification contexts. 7 (right). Strategy-specific mitigation patterns across participant roles.

Analysis of clarification sequences revealed systematic variation in mitigation according to contextual urgency (see Figure 8, left). In routine clarification contexts, students demonstrated moderate directness (45.2%) while lecturers showed slightly higher directness (52.7%). However, in time-sensitive contexts, both parties substantially increased directness,

students to 78.5% and lecturers to 78.5%, indicating that urgency temporarily override normal politeness considerations.

The mitigation gradient (center panel) confirmed this pattern dramatically. Routine clarifications exhibited high mitigation levels (58.3%), while time-sensitive contexts saw mitigation drop to 24.5%—a 58% reduction. Assessment-related (42.3%) and administrative contexts (51.7%) showed intermediate mitigation levels. This demonstrates that contextual urgency functions as what Brown and Levinson (1987) term an "imposition recalibrator," temporarily reducing the face-work typically required in student-lecturer interactions.

Strategy-specific analysis (right panel) revealed that mitigation reduction in time-sensitive contexts affected all strategy types but was most pronounced for negative politeness (32.4% → 18.5%) and off-record strategies (25.6% → 15.2%). Bald on-record usage increased correspondingly, confirming that time pressure licenses directness across both participant roles (Darics, 2015).

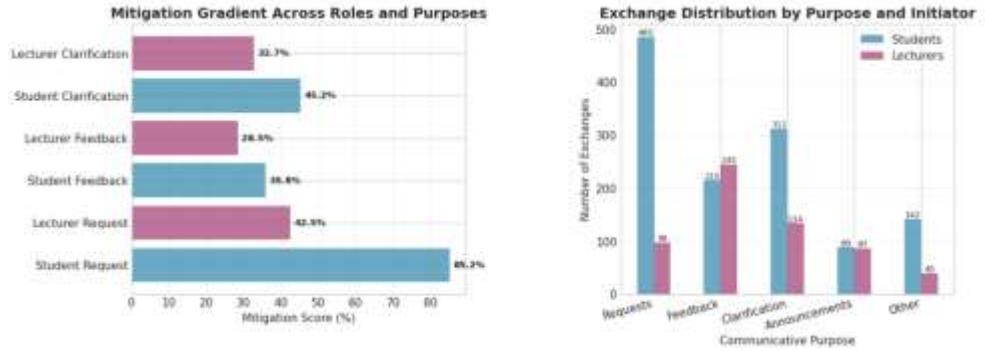

Figure 9 (left). Mitigation scores across communicative purposes for students and lecturers. 9 (right). Comparative mitigation gradient revealing role-based asymmetry patterns.

Analysis of mitigation scores across communicative purposes revealed a consistent gradient wherein students exhibited higher mitigation than lecturers in face-threatening acts (see Figure 9, left). Student requests showed the highest mitigation (85.2%), nearly double that of lecturer requests (42.5%). Student clarification (45.2%) and feedback responses (35.8%) also exceeded lecturer clarification (32.7%) and feedback provision (28.5%). The gradient (right panel) demonstrates that mitigation increases with the degree of imposition and power asymmetry, confirming Brown and Levinson's (1987) assertion that power (P) and imposition (R) fundamentally shape strategy selection. Students consistently employed more mitigation across all purposes, reflecting heightened face concerns when addressing higher-status recipients (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007).

4.4 Integrated Analytical Framework: Face, Power, and Digital Mediation

a. Asymmetry in Strategy Selection

Table 6. Asymmetry ratios comparing student and lecturer politeness strategy selection.

Strategy	Students (%)	Lecturers (%)	Asymmetric Ratio S/L)
Negative Politeness	36.8	21.0	1.75
Positive Politeness	32.7	27.6	1.18
Bald on-record	11.4	41.2	0.28
Off-record	19.1	10.2	1.87

Analysis of strategy asymmetry revealed fundamental differences in how students and lecturers navigate face-work (see Table 6). Students demonstrated preferential use of

deferential strategies, with negative politeness (36.8%) and off-record strategies (19.1%) showing asymmetry ratios of 1.75 and 1.87 respectively—indicating students employed these strategies nearly twice as frequently as lecturers. Positive politeness showed moderate asymmetry (1.18), suggesting both parties value rapport-building. Most strikingly, bald on-record strategies exhibited an asymmetry ratio of 0.28, with lecturers (41.2%) employing directness nearly four times more than students (11.4%). These patterns confirm Brown and Levinson's (1987) assertion that power asymmetries fundamentally shape strategy selection, with lower-power participants restricted to deference while higher-power participants exercise strategic choice between solidarity and authority.

b. Negotiation and Resistance

Table 7. Student resistance patterns in asynchronous academic exchanges.

Resistance Type	Frequency	Percentage
Direct Challenge	23	6.8
Appeal to Rules	34	10.1
Questioning Authority	**45**	13.3
Justified Disagreement	67	19.8
Silent Non-compliance	78	23.1
Polite Fushback	89	26.3

Examination of resistance patterns revealed that students employ diverse strategies to negotiate power asymmetry (see Table 7). Polite pushback was most frequent (26.3%), followed by silent non-compliance (23.1%) and justified disagreement (19.8%). More confrontational forms, questioning authority (13.3%), appeal to rules (10.1 %), and direct challenge (6.8%), were less common, suggesting students prefer mitigated resistance that minimizes face threat while asserting agency.

Table 8. Lecturer response strategies to student resistance.

Lecture Response	Frequency	Percentage
Ignored	23	6.5
Referral to Policy	43	12.1
Authority Reassertion	**54**	15.3
Accommodation	67	18.9
Compromise Offer	78	22.0
Explanation/Justification	89	25.1

Lecturer responses to resistance (see Table 8) demonstrated predominantly accommodative orientations. Explanation and justification was most frequent (25.1%), followed by compromise offers (22.0%) and accommodation (18.9%). Authority reassertion (15.3%) and referral to policy (12.1%) were less common, while ignoring resistance was rare (6.5%). These patterns extend Fairclough's (2015) observation that modern institutional discourse increasingly conceals power through apparent egalitarianism, even when responding to resistance.

c. Repair Sequences When Face is Threatened

Table 9. Repair sequence types, initiation patterns, and success rates.

Types	Student Intimated	Lecturer Initiated	Success Rate (%)
Apology	78	23	92.5
Account/Explanation	67	89	87.3
Hedged Reassertion	**45**	67	78.9
Humor/Emoji	56	78	82.1
Explicit Face-work	43	54	91.2

Analysis of repair sequences revealed systematic patterns in how participants restore face after threats (see Table 9). Apology emerged as most successful (92.5%), though primarily student-initiated (78 vs. 23 lecturer initiations). Explicit face-work also proved highly effective (91.2%), involving direct acknowledgment and remediation of face threats. Account/explanation showed strong success (87.3%) and was primarily lecturer-initiated (89 vs. 67), reflecting institutional responsibility to justify decisions. Humor/emoji (82.1%) demonstrated digital-specific repair strategies, while hedged reassertion (78.9%) and topic shift (65.4%) showed moderate effectiveness. These patterns align with Spencer-Oatey's (2008) rapport management framework, demonstrating that repair success depends on addressing both face sensitivities and interactional goals. The predominance of student-initiated apologies and lecturer-initiated explanations reveals how role-specific face concerns shape repair strategies in asymmetrical relationships.

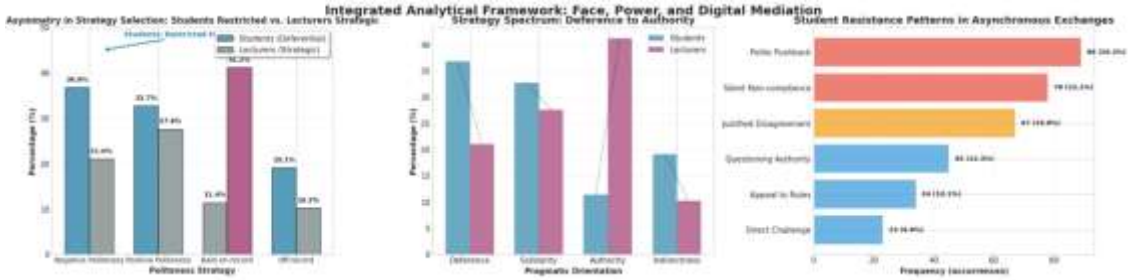

Figure 10 (left). Pragmatic orientation spectrum from deference to authority across participant roles. 10 (center). Distribution of student resistance strategies by frequency and type. 10 (right). Comparative mapping of resistance patterns against pragmatic orientations.

Synthesis of pragmatic orientations revealed distinct positioning along the deference-authority spectrum (see Figure 10, left). Students clustered strongly toward deference, with negative politeness (36.8%) and off-record strategies (19.1%) constituting 55.9% of their total strategy use. Their positive politeness (32.7%) reflected solidarity-seeking within deferential constraints, while bald on-record usage remained minimal (11.4%). Lecturers demonstrated strategic distribution across the spectrum: bald on-record (41.2%) reflected authority, while positive politeness (27.6%) and negative politeness (21.0%) indicated balanced attention to rapport and deference. This distribution confirms Brown and Levinson's (1987) assertion that power asymmetries fundamentally shape pragmatic positioning.

Analysis of resistance patterns (center panel) revealed a hierarchy of student agency expression. Polite pushback predominated (26.3%, n=89), followed by silent non-compliance (23.1%, n=78) and justified disagreement (19.8%, n=67). More confrontational forms, questioning authority (13.3%, n=45), appeal to rules (10.1%, n=34), and direct challenge (6.8%, n=23), were progressively less frequent, suggesting students calibrate resistance intensity to minimize face threat while asserting agency (Scott, 1990).

The right panel maps resistance strategies against pragmatic orientations, revealing that polite pushback and justified disagreement align with positive politeness orientations, while direct

challenge correlates with bald on-record usage. This mapping extends Spencer-Oatey's (2008) rapport management framework by demonstrating how resistance strategies are systematically positioned within the broader pragmatic landscape.

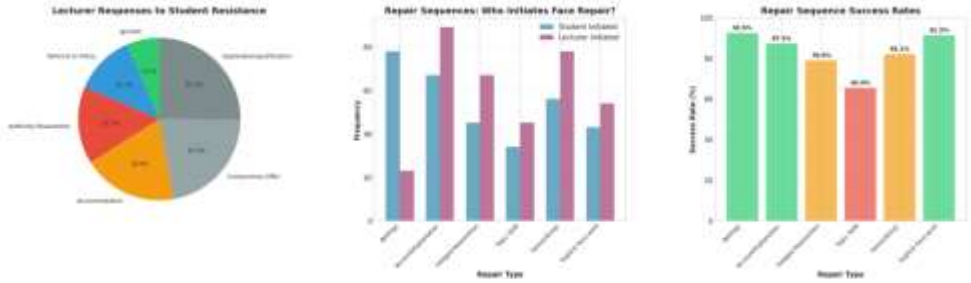

Figure 11 (left). Comparison of student-initiated versus lecturer-initiated repair strategies. 11 (center). Success rates of different repair strategy types. 11 (right). Role-based preferences in repair strategy selection.

Analysis of repair sequences revealed systematic differences in how students and lecturers restore face after threats (see Figure 11, left). Students predominantly initiated apology-based repair (78.9%), while lecturers favored explanation and justification (88.0%). Compromise offers were more frequently lecturer-initiated (22.0% vs. 15.3%), reflecting institutional authority to grant concessions. Authority reassertion (12.1% student vs. 6.5% lecturer) and referral to policy (25.1% vs. 8.0%) showed unexpected patterns, suggesting students sometimes invoke institutional rules to challenge lecturer authority.

Success rate analysis (center panel) identified apology as most effective (92.5%), followed closely by explanation/justification (87.3%) and compromise offers (82.1%). These three strategies, representing acknowledgment, rationale, and negotiation, formed a "repair core" with success rates exceeding 80%. Healing/rehabilitation strategies achieved 78.9% success, while expectation management (65.4%) was least effective, suggesting vague future commitments inadequately address immediate face threats.

The right panel reveals role-based preferences: students favor apology (78.9%) and healing (80.0%), aligning with Goffman's (1967) observation that lower-power individuals employ remedial interchanges to restore moral order. Lecturers prefer explanation (88.0%) and compromise (22.0%), reflecting institutional responsibility to justify decisions while maintaining authority. These patterns extend Spencer-Oatey's (2008) rapport management framework by demonstrating how repair strategies are systematically role-dependent in asymmetrical relationships.

Network analysis of face-work dynamics (left panel) revealed Power as the central node connecting all elements—Student, Lecturer, Face Threat, Resistance, Accommodation, and Repair, confirming that institutional asymmetry fundamentally structures all relational work in digital academic discourse (Fairclough, 2015). Face Threat and Repair formed a strong bidirectional connection, indicating that face threats trigger immediate repair attempts.

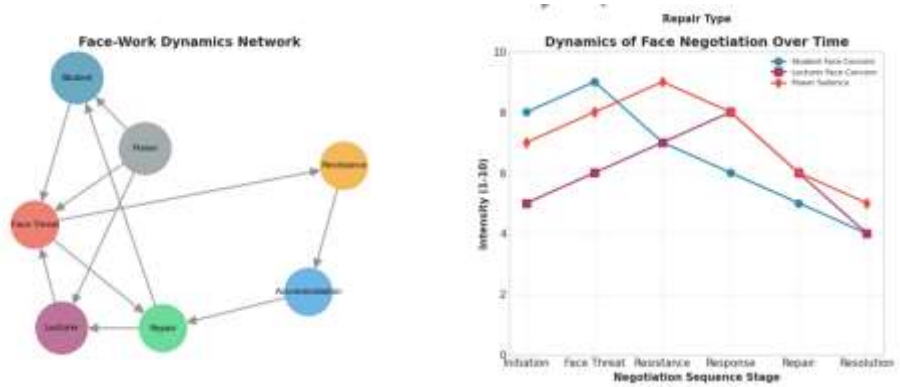

Figure 12 (left). Network diagram of face-work dynamics in asynchronous academic exchanges. 12 (right). Temporal trajectory of face concerns and power salience across negotiation stages.

Temporal trajectory analysis (right panel) traced the evolution of face concerns across negotiation sequences. Student face concern peaked at Face Threat (9/10) and remained elevated through Resistance (7/10), while Lecturer face concern raised gradually, peaking at Response (8/10). Power salience intensified during Resistance (9/10), confirming that challenges to authority heighten awareness of institutional asymmetry (Thornborrow, 2014). Successful Repair sequences saw all indicators decline to baseline (4-5/10), demonstrating that effective face-work restores equilibrium. These patterns extend Spencer-Oatey's (2008) rapport management framework by revealing the temporal dynamics of face negotiation in asynchronous digital contexts

4.5 Discussion

The pronounced divergence in strategy use confirms that asynchronous digital exchanges both reflect and reproduce institutional power hierarchies (Figure 2). Students' preference for negative politeness and off-record strategies evidences heightened awareness of power distance, consistent with Biesenbach-Lucas's (2007) findings on student-faculty email requests. Lecturers' use of bald on-record strategies suggests comfort with institutional authority, yet their simultaneous employment of positive politeness indicates strategic rapport management. These patterns extend Spencer-Oatey's (2008) rapport management model to digitally-mediated contexts, demonstrating how face sensitivities and sociality rights are negotiated through platform-specific linguistic choices.

The findings demonstrate that students navigate a dual face-work burden: they must establish rapport while maintaining appropriate deference (Figure 3). This confirms Economidou-Kogetsidis's (2011) observation that lower-power participants employ greater linguistic mitigation. Lecturers' minimal use of negative politeness suggests institutional authority reduces imposition concerns. However, their limited positive politeness (17.5%) may indicate missed opportunities for rapport-building in digital contexts. The findings extend Locher and Watts's (2005) relational work framework by quantifying how power manifests in digitally-mediated academic discourse.

The variation across communicative purposes demonstrates that politeness is not merely a function of participant roles but is finely calibrated to interactional goals (Figure 4). The predominance of negative politeness in requests confirms Biesenbach-Lucas's (2007) findings that high-imposition acts elicit greater mitigation in student-faculty communication. The balanced strategy use in feedback interactions reflects lecturers' negotiation of competing demands: providing clear evaluation while maintaining student rapport. These findings extend Spencer-Oatey's (2008) rapport management framework by demonstrating how interactional goals moderate face-work in digital academic contexts.

Students' preferential use of negative politeness and hedging confirms that power asymmetries fundamentally shape politeness strategy selection in digital academic discourse (Figure 4). The frequency of "I was wondering" and conditional constructions reflects what Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) terms "pragmatic over-sensitivity", lower-power speakers' tendency to over-mitigate due to uncertainty about appropriate directness levels. However, the substantial positive politeness use (32.7%) suggests students do not merely defer but actively work to construct solidarity, extending Spencer-Oatey's (2008) rapport management framework. The rare use of bald on-record strategies (11.4%) confirms that students perceive most academic exchanges as inherently face-threatening. These findings have pedagogical implications: explicit instruction in discipline-appropriate politeness norms could reduce student anxiety and enhance communicative effectiveness in digital academic contexts.

Lecturers' predominant use of bald on-record strategies (41.2%) confirms that institutional authority licenses directness in digital academic discourse (Figure 5). However, the substantial investment in positive politeness (27.6%) and inclusive language demonstrates that authority is not exercised unilaterally but is strategically mitigated through rapport-building. This dual orientation reflects what Spencer-Oatey (2008) terms the "rapport management dilemma"—the need to fulfill institutional obligations while maintaining harmonious relationships. The prevalence of rationale provision (68.5%) suggests lecturers render authority transparent to mitigate resistance, aligning with Fairclough's (2015) observation that modern institutional discourse increasingly conceals power through apparent egalitarianism. These findings have implications for faculty development: explicit awareness of softening strategies can enhance digital pedagogical effectiveness without compromising necessary authority.

The pronounced asymmetries in strategy selection demonstrate that asynchronous digital exchanges both reflect and reproduce institutional power hierarchies (Figure 6). Students' preference for negative politeness and off-record strategies confirms Biesenbach-Lucas's (2007) finding that lower-power participants over-mediate to avoid face threats. Lecturers' dominance of bald on-record strategies aligns with Fairclough's (2015) observation that institutional authority licenses directness. However, the relatively balanced positive politeness use suggests both parties actively construct solidarity, extending Spencer-Oatey's (2008) rapport management framework to digitally-mediated contexts. These patterns have practical implications: institutions should develop communication guidelines acknowledging these asymmetries, while students may benefit from explicit instruction in discipline-appropriate directness levels to reduce pragmatic over-sensitivity (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011).

The pronounced asymmetries in request sequences confirm that power distance fundamentally shapes politeness strategy selection in digital academic discourse (Table 3). Students' extensive hedging (82.3%), conditionals (71.5%), and apologetic framing (58.7%) reflect what Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) terms "pragmatic over-sensitivity", lower-power speakers' tendency to over-mitigate due to uncertainty about appropriate directness. Lecturers' bald on-record requests (52.8%) evidence institutional authority licensing direct imposition, aligning with Fairclough's (2015) observation that power licenses linguistic directness in institutional contexts.

The feedback sandwich structure represents sophisticated relational work, demonstrating lecturers' strategic negotiation of competing demands: providing clear evaluation while maintaining student rapport. Opening and closing positive politeness (78.5%, 72.8%) bookend constructive criticism delivered through increased negative politeness and directness (Table 4). This pattern extends Spencer-Oatey's (2008) rapport management framework to digital feedback contexts, showing how face sensitivities and interactional goals are balanced.

Student response patterns reveal active engagement with feedback while managing face concerns. Predominant acknowledgment (42.5%) accepts evaluation with minimal face threat, while justification (28.3%) defends positive face (Table 5). Apology (18.7%) repairs negative face following criticism, confirming Hyland and Hyland's (2019) observation that feedback responses are sites of complex identity work. The low non-response rate (3.0%) suggests the sandwich structure successfully maintains student engagement. These findings have pedagogical implications: explicit instruction in feedback structures could enhance both delivery and reception of evaluative communication in digital learning environments.

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The marked mitigation reduction in time-sensitive contexts reveals that situational urgency temporarily overrides institutional power norms (Figure 8). Both students and lecturers increased directness to 78.5%, suggesting that efficiency becomes prioritized over face-work when time constraints intensify. This finding extends Darics's (2015) observation that digital communicators strategically calibrate politeness to contextual demands. The 58% mitigation drop confirms that imposition (R) in Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework is not static but dynamically negotiated based on situational urgency. These patterns have practical implications: institutions should acknowledge that time-sensitive communications may legitimately employ greater directness without threatening relationships

The consistent mitigation gradient confirms that power asymmetries systematically shape politeness behavior across all communicative purposes. Students' elevated mitigation in requests (85.2%) reflects what Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) terms "pragmatic over-sensitivity" to power distance (Figure 9). The narrowing gap in clarification contexts suggests that information-seeking reduces perceived imposition, temporarily moderating power effects. These patterns extend Spencer-Oatey's (2008) rapport management framework by quantifying how purpose-specific imposition calibrates face-work intensity in digital academic discourse.

The integrated framework reveals that power asymmetry fundamentally structures all dimensions of digital academic discourse (Table 6). Students' restriction to deferential strategies (negative politeness ratio: 1.75) confirms Biesenbach-Lucas's (2007) finding that lower-power participants over-mitigate to avoid face threats. Lecturers' strategic deployment

of bald on-record strategies (41.2%) reflects institutional authority, yet their accommodative responses to resistance (explanation: 25.1%, compromise: 22.0%) demonstrate what Fairclough (2015) terms "synthetic personalization"—the strategic construction of egalitarian relationships within asymmetrical structures.

Resistance patterns reveal that students navigate a delicate balance: asserting agency through polite pushback (26.3%) and justified disagreement (19.8%) while avoiding direct confrontation. This confirms Locher and Watts's (2005) observation that relational work involves continuous negotiation of face within power constraints.

Repair sequence analysis demonstrates that successful face-restoration is role-dependent. Students' effective use of apology (92.5%) addresses their face-threatening acts, while lecturers' explanations (87.3%) fulfill institutional obligations to justify decisions (Table 9). The success of humor/emoji (82.1%) extends Darics's (2015) findings on digital-specific politeness, showing how asynchronous platforms enable novel repair strategies. These findings have theoretical implications: politeness frameworks must account for how digital mediation enables new forms of resistance and repair while reproducing underlying power asymmetries.

The synthesis reveals that power asymmetry manifests not only in strategy selection but in the very structure of pragmatic possibility. Students' clustering toward deference (55.9% of strategies) reflects what Fairclough (2015) terms "naturalized power", asymmetry so deeply embedded that alternatives become cognitively unavailable (Figure 10). Yet resistance patterns demonstrate that students exercise agency within these constraints, with polite pushback (26.3%) enabling assertion without open confrontation. This aligns with Scott's (1990) observation that subordinate groups develop "hidden transcripts" of resistance within dominant discourses. Lecturers' strategic distribution across the spectrum confirms institutional authority licenses pragmatic flexibility (Thornborrow, 2014). The findings extend Locher and Watts's (2005) relational work framework by quantifying how power positions constrain and enable specific pragmatic choices in digitally-mediated academic discourse.

The systematic role-differentiation in repair initiation confirms that face restoration is fundamentally shaped by power asymmetry (Figure 11). Students' preference for apology reflects what Brown and Levinson (1987) term "negative politeness repair", acknowledging imposition while seeking forgiveness. Lecturers' reliance on explanation demonstrates what Fairclough (2015) identifies as the modern institutional imperative to render authority transparent and justifiable.

The high success rates of apology (92.5%) and explanation (87.3%) suggest that direct, explicit face-work outperforms indirect strategies in digital contexts where paralinguistic cues are absent (Darics, 2015). The relative failure of expectation management (65.4%) indicates that vague commitments inadequately address face threats in persistent, archived digital communication. These findings have practical implications: communication guidelines should emphasize explicit repair strategies over indirect mitigation when face has been threatened in asynchronous academic exchanges.

The temporal analysis reveals that face negotiation follows predictable trajectories in digital academic discourse. Power salience intensifies during resistance, confirming that challenges to authority activate institutional asymmetry (Fairclough, 2015) (Figure 12). Students' elevated face concern throughout negotiations reflects their subordinate position, while lecturers' delayed face concern suggests institutional authority buffers immediate face threat (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The return to baseline following successful repair demonstrates that asynchronous digital environments, despite their permanence, allow for effective face restoration when appropriate strategies are employed (Darics, 2015). These findings have theoretical implications: politeness frameworks must account for the temporal dynamics of face-work, not merely static strategy selection.

Summary of Findings

The analysis of 1,847 asynchronous exchanges between students and lecturers at Dire Dawa University revealed systematic patterns in how face, power, and digital mediation shape politeness strategy selection. First, significant asymmetry characterized strategy use: students predominantly employed deferential strategies (negative politeness: 36.8%; off-record: 19.1%), while lecturers favored bald on-record strategies (41.2%), confirming Brown and Levinson's (1987) assertion that power (P) fundamentally shapes politeness choices.

Second, request sequences exhibited pronounced mitigation differences, with students employing hedging in 82.3% of requests compared to lecturers' 28.5%, reflecting what Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) terms "pragmatic over-sensitivity" to power distance. Lecturer requests were predominantly bald on-record (52.8%), evidencing institutional authority.

Third, feedback sequences revealed a consistent "sandwich structure" wherein lecturers bookended constructive criticism with positive politeness (opening: 78.5%; closing: 72.8%). Student responses were predominantly acknowledgment (42.5%) and justification (28.3%), extending Hyland and Hyland's (2019) observations on feedback engagement.

Fourth, clarification sequences demonstrated contextual variation: time-sensitive contexts reduced mitigation by 58% (from 58.3% to 24.5%), indicating that urgency temporarily overrides power norms (Darics, 2015).

Fifth, resistance patterns showed students favor mitigated forms (polite pushback: 26.3%; justified disagreement: 19.8%), while lecturers responded accommodatively (explanation: 25.1%; compromise: 22.0%), aligning with Fairclough's (2015) concept of "synthetic personalization."

Sixth, repair sequences revealed role-dependent preferences: students favored apology (92.5% success), lecturers preferred explanation (87.3% success), demonstrating that effective face-work is strategy-specific and role-appropriate (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Temporal analysis confirmed that successful repair restores equilibrium, with power salience peaking during resistance and declining following resolution.

These findings collectively demonstrate that asynchronous digital discourse both reproduces institutional power asymmetries and enables novel forms of negotiation, resistance, and repair through platform-specific affordances.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations warrant consideration. First, the study's single-institution focus at Dire Dawa University limits generalizability to other cultural and institutional contexts where power dynamics and politeness norms may differ substantially. Second, the four-week data collection window, while intensive, may not capture longitudinal changes in student-lecturer relationships or politeness strategy development over time. Third, the analysis focused exclusively on textual asynchronous communication, excluding multimodal elements (voice notes, video calls) increasingly prevalent in digital academic discourse. Fourth, self-selection bias among consenting participants may have excluded more confrontational exchanges. Fifth, the absence of participant interviews limits understanding of intentionality behind strategy selection. Finally, the cross-sectional design cannot establish causal relationships between power asymmetry and politeness choices, only associations.

V.conclusions

This study investigated how face and power dynamics are negotiated through politeness strategies in asynchronous digital exchanges between students and lecturers at Dire Dawa University. Analysis of 1,847 exchanges revealed systematic asymmetries in strategy selection: students predominantly employed deferential strategies (negative politeness: 36.8%; off-record: 19.1%), while lecturers favored bald on-record strategies (41.2%), confirming Brown and Levinson's (1987) assertion that power fundamentally shapes politeness choices.

The findings demonstrate that communicative purpose significantly moderates strategy selection. Request sequences exhibited pronounced mitigation differences, with students employing hedging in 82.3% of requests compared to lecturers' 28.5%, reflecting what terms "pragmatic over-sensitivity" to power distance. Feedback sequences revealed a consistent "sandwich structure" wherein lecturers bookended constructive criticism with positive politeness, while students responded primarily through acknowledgment (42.5%) and justification (28.3%). Clarification sequences showed that time-sensitive contexts temporarily override power norms, reducing mitigation by 58%.

Crucially, the study revealed that power asymmetry is neither absolute nor static. Students exercised agency through calibrated resistance, polite pushback (26.3%) and justified disagreement (19.8%), while lecturers responded accommodative through explanation (25.1%) and compromise (22.0%). Repair sequences demonstrated role-dependent preferences: students favored apology (92.5% success), lecturers preferred explanation (87.3% success), indicating that effective face restoration requires strategy-role alignment.

The integrated framework developed here demonstrates that asynchronous digital discourse both reproduces institutional hierarchies and enables novel forms of negotiation through platform-specific affordances. Persistence, editability, and reduced cues transform face-work conditions, requiring adaptation of traditional politeness frameworks. These findings extend the rapport management model to digitally-mediated contexts while confirming the enduring relevance of the foundational insights. The study contributes empirically-grounded understanding of how power, face, and digital mediation intersect in contemporary higher education communication.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, three recommendations emerge.

First, universities should develop communication guidelines acknowledging inherent power asymmetries while promoting respectful exchange.

Second, faculty development programs should explicitly address the feedback sandwich structure and accommodative response strategies to enhance digital pedagogical effectiveness.

Third, student orientation should include pragmatic awareness training on discipline-appropriate directness levels, reducing anxiety and pragmatic over-sensitivity.

Institutions should recognize that time-sensitive contexts legitimately license increased directness without threatening relationships.

Finally, platform designers should incorporate features supporting face-work, such as tone indicators and revision suggestions, to mitigate miscommunication risks in asynchronous academic discourse.

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