

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the research

Politeness is essential for facilitating successful interpersonal communication, maintaining societal harmony, avoiding misunderstandings, and developing meaningful connections. People express politeness in a variety of ways, depending on age, social standing, professional position, relationship type, gender, and cultural conventions. According to Lakoff (1977), politeness is a socially formed behavior aimed at reducing interpersonal conflict, but Leech (1983) defines it as a strategic communication act that promotes effective interaction. Similarly, Revita (2009) highlights the significance of matching expressions to the nature of the interaction between interlocutors.

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how individuals manage "face", the public self-image one seeks to preserve. They propose four types of politeness strategies: **bald on-record**, **positive politeness**, **negative politeness**, and **off-record** strategies. In written communication, these strategies help clarify messages, convey respect, and maintain a constructive tone despite the absence of non-verbal cues (Sparks et al., 2014).

In academic contexts, especially in the era of online learning, e-mail has become the primary medium for communication between students and lecturers (Ewald, 2016; Alafnan & Cruz-Rudio, 2023). While e-mail is valued for its efficiency and formality, it can also lead to misunderstandings if politeness is not carefully observed. This is particularly relevant when students submit assignments, request feedback, or make apologies. Research shows that inappropriate tone, informal language, or neglect of formalities in academic e-mails can negatively affect professional rapport (De Gagne et

al., 2020; Dumbravă & Koronka, 2006).

For instance, consider the following student e-mail when submitting a late assignment:

*Assalamu'alaikum, Sir. My name is Disty Syanur with registration number 2110732035. I am from Introduction to Australian Culture Class C. I would like to send my UAS assignment, Sir, and the file is attached below. I apologize for being so late, Sir. Thank you for your time, Sir.*

This example illustrates the combined use of positive politeness (“Assalamu’alaikum, Sir”), bald on-record strategies (directly stating identity and purpose), and negative politeness (apologizing and showing deference). Such language choices reflect cultural norms, awareness of power dynamics, and the need to mitigate imposition.

This study is significant for three main reasons:

1. **Practical value** - By analyzing the politeness strategies in students’ e-mails to lecturers, the findings can guide students in crafting more respectful and effective academic communication.
2. **Pedagogical contribution** - The insights can inform lecturers and academic staff in providing explicit guidance on e-mail etiquette, thus improving overall academic correspondence.
3. **Theoretical enrichment** - The research contributes to the understanding of politeness in written academic discourse, particularly in the Indonesian higher education context, adding to cross-cultural pragmatics studies.

Therefore, this study will examine the types and influencing factors of politeness strategies in students' e-mails to lecturers, focusing on English Department students at Andalas University, class of 2021.

## **1.2 Research Questions**

This study examines politeness strategies in students' e-mails to lecturers. Accordingly, the research questions are:

1. What types of politeness strategies do English Department students at Andalas University (class of 2021) use when e-mailing their lecturers?
2. What factors influence the choice of politeness strategies used by these students?

## **1.3 Objectives of the Research**

In line with the research questions, this study aims to:

1. Identify the types of politeness strategies used by English Department students at Andalas University (class of 2021) when e-mailing their lecturers.
2. Describe the factors influencing the choice of politeness strategies used by these students.

## **1.4 Focus of the Research**

This research focuses on the four politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987): positive politeness, negative politeness, bald on-record, and off-record. While politeness strategies can occur in both oral and written communication, this study limits its scope to written e-mails sent by English Department students (class of 2021) at Andalas University to their lecturers.

The data consist of e-mails from 25 students, selected through an observation

method. Only e-mails containing identifiable politeness strategies are included, ensuring that the analysis directly addresses the research objectives. By focusing on authentic student–lecturer e-mail exchanges, this study not only deepens the theoretical understanding of politeness in written academic discourse but also offers practical insights that can guide students in composing respectful and effective academic correspondence. This targeted scope strengthens the study’s contribution to improving e-mail etiquette in higher education and fostering better academic relationships.

## **1.5 Methods of the Research**

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach to examine politeness strategies in students’ academic e-mails.

### **1.5.1. Research Design**

A qualitative approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the linguistic and pragmatic features of e-mails. The study applies purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) to select information-rich cases, specifically e-mails containing identifiable politeness strategies.

### **1.5.2 Data and Source of Data**

- **Data:** Sentences and phrases from students’ e-mails that demonstrate politeness strategies.
- **Source:** Fifty e-mails from 25 English Department students (class of 2021) at Andalas University, with two e-mails per student to capture variation in contexts such as assignment submission, feedback requests, and apologies.

### 1.5.3 Data Collection Procedures

1. Contacted selected students and obtained their consent to share past e-mails sent to lecturers.
2. Collected and compiled the e-mails into a single corpus.
3. Reviewed each e-mail to ensure completeness of structure (greeting, introduction, body, and closing).
4. Filtered the corpus to retain only those containing politeness strategies as per Brown and Levinson's framework.

### 1.5.4 Data Analysis Procedures

1. Classified instances of politeness according to Brown and Levinson's (1987) four strategies: bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record.
2. Identified factors influencing strategy selection (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.71), such as social distance, power, and imposition.
3. Presented results in a table mapping politeness strategy types to influencing factors.
4. Interpreted findings in relation to cultural and academic norms in Indonesian higher education.

This methodological approach ensures that the study produces not only descriptive but also contextually grounded insights into politeness in academic e-mail communication.

### 1.6 Definition of Key Terms

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| a) Pragmatic | : Pragmatics examines how speakers and writers convey meaning, as well as how listeners and readers interpret that meaning within a specific |
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- context.
- b) Politeness Strategies : Using language in a way considered right or ethical based on the culture
  - c) Face : Significantly influenced how we understand politeness in social interaction.
  - d) Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs) : Acts that threaten an individual's self-esteem or respect from others.
  - e) Speech Acts : Language serves not only to convey information but also to perform actions through speech or writing.

