The Politeness Strategies of Thai Undergraduates in an Instant Messaging Application

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Abstract

The aim of this study is twofold: to analyze politeness strategies in the online conversations of Thai students, and to suggest how this analysis can be applicable to pedagogical practice. A corpus of a 21-month instant online conversation among students and teachers has been analyzed. Throughout the time of data collection, the teachers continually encouraged students to use English and French to promote the use of foreign languages that they were learning. The result of statistical analysis showed the relation between speech acts and politeness strategies used in the data. It could be claimed that the students' language proficiency governed their politeness strategies. As a result, the authors proposed a modification of Brown & Levinson's (1978) Weightiness formula for non-native speakers of English as: $W_x = LP(S) \times [D(S,H) + P(H,S) + R_x]$. The results also showed that emoticons were used as redressive actions in politeness. Further, interlanguage pragmatics in the data were discussed based on linguistic competency and socio-cultural norms in the participants' L1. The results suggest that teachers and curriculum developers could better understand students' communication behaviors and language competency through computer-mediated communication. Finally, we offer suggestions to promote online communication in the context of active learning.

INTRODUCTION

Never has online conversation, both written and spoken, been so important in daily communication for a large number of people all around the world as it is in the current socio-cultural environments. Online communication systems have been established using different tools and for different purposes, from politics to personal affairs. They can take the form of private one-to-one messages or group conversations. Many people are aware that their online messages are taken to reflect their personalities in a similar way to face-to-face communication. Among various online communication tools, the LINE application is one of the most popular messaging applications, especially in Thailand where this research was conducted. In 2019 alone, approximately 84% of Thai internet users had active LINE application accounts, according to

Hootsuite Analytics, reported by Nguansuk (2019). This Japanese messaging application has been designed for users to instantly exchange text, images, emoticons, video and audio. Users also have the possibility to buy sets of stickers from the 'LINE Store'. In 2021, there were more than 40,000 stickers available to purchase online.

In the field of linguistics, online conversations have received great interest from many researchers. There have already been many studies conducted to analyze online conversations. These works investigated various aspects of online messages, such as language and gender (Fullwood et al., 2013), pragmatics (Vandergriff, 2013), language teaching and learning (Tudini, 2010), communication behaviors (Ho & Swan, 2007), and so forth. Despite many studies having been conducted to understand how language is used in computer-based communication, relatively little research exists on politeness strategies in online instant messages, especially in the Thai context. The current study aims to fill this gap, and hence to increase understanding of how online conversations reflect communication behaviors in terms of politeness, and to what extent educators can promote online conversation as a language practice tool outside of the classroom.

The current study is based on data from a corpus of a 21-month conversation in the LINE application started in August 2017, at the beginning of the academic year 2017/2018. Members of this LINE group consisted of 36 Thai university students, two English teachers of Thai nationality, one French teacher of Thai nationality, and one French teacher from France. The purpose of this group was to ensure an easy way of communication on study-related matters, such as solving timetable problems, informing about upcoming tests, and for language practice between teachers and students in a friendly environment. With the aim of having students practice the two foreign languages that they were learning, students were encouraged to use English and French. Despite there being teachers in the group, the tone of the conversation was less formal than that of regular classroom interactions. Therefore, it was interesting to see how students expressed politeness via online communication. To understand the students' behaviors in terms of politeness, the theory of politeness as defined by Brown & Levinson (1987) has been employed as the main framework for the present study, with the integration of normative politeness (Gu, 1990), politic behaviors (Watt, 2003) and mock impoliteness (Culpeper, 2011). Further, the results are discussed from the perspective of interlanguage pragmatics for pedagogy.

Research results from previous studies suggest that online conversations share similar aspects to face-to-face conversations (Hu & Swan, 2007; Fullwood et al., 2013; Vandergriff, 2013). It is reasonable to hypothesize that politeness strategies in online conversations correspond to the sociocultural norms of the participants. Since all participants of the current study were Thai university students, it could be predicted that politeness strategies and face-saving strategies in the data would conform to the norms of Thai culture, whereby younger people should show respect to older people and face-threatening acts are sensitive.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the present study concerns itself directly with politeness in online conversations, attention has been paid to the theory of politeness and to some relevant studies to understand background knowledge that such works have revealed.

Politeness theory

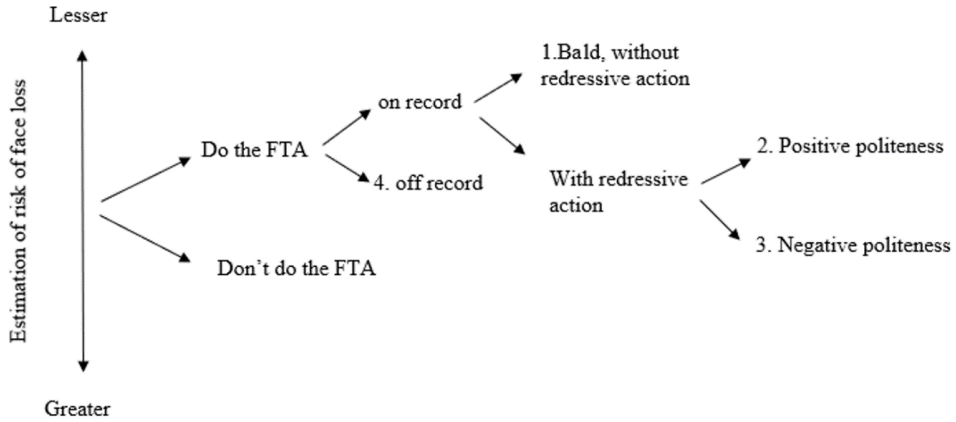
To succeed in communication, one needs to have both language competency and linguistic competency. The former refers to knowledge of the language (vocabulary, grammar, syntax) whereas the latter refers to knowledge of aspects relevant to the language of communication such as culture, social values, background knowledge and audience. In 1975, Grice proposed a key principle for successful communication, namely the Cooperative Principle (CP) which has received wide attention and has been referred to in numerous linguistic studies. The CP consists of four maxims: "Quantity: be informative"; "Quality: be true"; "Relevance: be relevant"; and "Manner: be clear". The violation of any maxim risks a failure in communication.

Despite the fact that the CP has been widely accepted, it has been argued that the maxims are not sufficient for successful communication. One important argument was by Brown & Levinson (1987), who stated that the CP alone would not always yield successful communication, but that the combination of the CP with the principle of politeness would. Brown and Levinson supported the claim that politeness is universal by presenting data from three different languages: English, Tzeltal and Indian Tamil. They also proposed a model of politeness strategies that people were expected to use in different situations.

It is not possible to discuss politeness without reviewing the concept of face. People in general want to communicate appropriately by respecting other people's feelings. Face is a component of the self-image of individuals, and can be lost, maintained or enhanced (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Commonly, interactants expect their interlocutors to maintain and respect their face, while, in the meantime, they cooperate in conversation by maintaining the other's face. There are two types of face: positive face and negative face. Positive face is about our own self-image, about the image that we give of ourselves, and about our desire for recognition of this image. In an interaction, people usually try to satisfy the positive face of their interlocutor in a way that flatters this self-image: by showing that we share their values, their views, their desires, that we approve of their actions, and also by showing interest in the conversation. By contrast, negative face is associated with the notion of territory: there are territorial elements to protect and respect in a communication situation in order to keep it smooth. These elements relate to the body, to space, to the speaking time; to personal information. Satisfying this negative face consists of not encroaching on these territories; such as by letting the interlocutors express themselves without interrupting them; of interrupting them with manners by respecting certain conventions; of not being intrusive by asking indiscreet questions; and/or of not getting physically too close to them.

Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) are acts when the speaker is perceived by the hearer as threatening the hearer's face. Here is when politeness comes into play. People respect and maintain each

other's face in communication and so avoid committing FTAs, especially by being polite. Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies are presented in Figure 1.



adapted from Brown & Levinson (1987)

Figure 1 Politeness strategies

As shown in Figure 1, politeness strategies are employed when there is a risk of FTAs. The speaker chooses one of the following four strategies after weighting the FTA:

1) Bald without redressive action refers to speech acts that are clear and direct such as *'I will be late for the meeting. Start without me.'*
2) Positive politeness refers to speech acts in which the speaker tries to show solidarity, intimacy and/or empathy with the hearer such as *'I will be late for the meeting, Mel. Can you start without me? I will treat you for lunch.'*
3) Negative politeness usually corresponds to social situations in which there is distance between the speaker and the interlocutor, which requires formal politeness and respect, such as *'Miss Borthwick, I'm so sorry: I'm afraid I cannot be on time for the meeting. Would you mind starting without me?'*
4) Off-record strategies are speech acts in which the speaker tries not to be imposing by letting their interlocutor draw the necessary conclusion by themselves, such as *'I know the meeting starts at nine, but traffic is heavy on Monday.'*

Further, Brown and Levinson explained that politeness strategies are correlated with the degree of FTA. The higher the risk of face threatening, the more polite the speaker is likely to be. They proposed a formula to determine the level of politeness, called the Weightiness, used by speaker X as follows:

$$W_x = D(S,H) + P(H,S) + R_x$$

From this formula, the Weightiness perceived by speaker X (W_x) increases with the perceived Distance (D) between the speaker (S) and the hearer (H), the perceived social Power of the hearer over the speaker (P), and the Rank of task imposition (R). For example, if an office clerk wants to borrow money from his boss, it can be predicted that he will choose a highly polite

strategy such as an off-record strategy considering that the Weightiness of FTA is high because of the great distance between them. The social power of the boss is higher than that of the clerk. Lastly, borrowing money is considered a high rank of task imposition. On the other hand, if the clerk wants to borrow the same amount of money from a friend, it is likely that he will choose a positive politeness strategy to emphasize solidarity, since distance and social power between the speaker and the hearer are close, despite the fact that the rank of task imposition is similar to the first case.

The concept of politeness, therefore, is applicable for data analysis and has been accepted widely in many sociolinguistic studies. Many researchers have exploited Brown and Levinson's politeness theory in their work. Although the theory has been proven useful, there are some critiques which are relevant to our study, especially on the weightiness formula, and the claimed quality of universality. These are discussed below.

Critiques

A significant flaw in Brown and Levinson's politeness theory is the Weightiness formula, as discussed in Watts (2003). Brown and Levinson did not explain how to measure the variables D, P and R. Without any way to measure these in mathematic values, the calculation is impossible. Moreover, the rank of task imposition (R) is subjective. For instance, a person might think that the rank of task imposition of borrowing money is lower than asking to stay overnight at someone's house, or vice versa. In addition, a number of sociolinguistic studies on cross-cultural politeness showed discrepancies in politeness strategies of people from different cultures. For example, the concepts of politeness in Japan and America are dissimilar (Ide et al., 2005; Matsumoto, 1988). Politeness strategies between Americans and Koreans are correlated with different perceptions on D, P and R between Eastern and Western cultures (Song, 2012). The results of these studies showed that politeness was not universal but that there were cultural dependencies.

Although some critiques arose, Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness provides useful guidelines for data analysis on politeness topics. Consequently, Brown and Levinson's theory has evolved as a result of linguistic data that revealed different perspectives on the politeness concept. Therefore, it is reasonable to adopt Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness in analysis by integrating with other up-to-date models that are suitable for our data. Thus, our analysis is based on Brown and Levinson's politeness theory as the main framework, with the integration of Normative Politeness (Gu, 1990), Politic Behavior (Watt, 2003) and Mock impoliteness (Culpeper, 2011).

Normative politeness

Gu's (1990) study focused on politeness in Chinese society. He stated that Brown and Levinson's model was not suitable for his data for two reasons. First, the concepts of face in Chinese and Western cultures are different. Second, Brown and Levinson's model of politeness is individual, whereas politeness in Chinese is normative, as he stated: '…Politeness is a phenomenon belonging to the level of society, which endorses its normative constraints on each individual'.

Gu (1990) pointed out that politeness behavior in Chinese is typically thought to reflect one's awareness of one's own status in society. This norm should be taken into account when considering data from collectivist societies, including Thai society. Gu developed his politeness model based on Leech's (1983) Tact Maxim and Generosity Maxim. Gu proposed four Maxims namely: Self-denigration Maxim, Tact Maxim, Generosity Maxim and Address Maxim. The Address Maxim is particularly applicable to our data.

The Address Maxim states that to be polite, it is important to address the hearer appropriately by recognizing the hearer's social status and the social relation between the speaker and the hearer (Gu, 1990). Otherwise, it could be a sign of rudeness. The Address Maxim contributes to social bonds, solidarity and distance between interlocutors. Since politeness is normative rather than individual in a collective society, the Address Maxim shows the polite behavior of a speaker who self-posits appropriately and is aware of the hearer's status or role in the same society.

Politic behavior

Although Watt (2003) did not specifically discuss politeness in a normative aspect, he described Politic Behavior as an expectable behavior in interaction in a specific society, and it can be both linguistic and non-linguistic. For example, Thai people generally expect sellers to thank customers. If a seller goes beyond merely verbal expressions of thanks, for example by helping a customer carry purchases to his car, the act of helping is polite because it is beyond the general expectation. Thus, politic behavior is separated from linguistic politeness, though the separation may be imprecise. By being polite, a speaker moves from politic behavior to linguistic politeness. Knowledge of politic behavior in different societies helps us to understand the behavioral frames in different cultures. Consequently, it contributes to effectiveness in cross-cultural communication. The authors applied Watt's theory of Politic Behavior to explain conventional expressions found in the data.

Mock impoliteness

While politeness is to avoid FTA, impoliteness is to attack Face. Culpeper (1996) modeled impoliteness based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework: bald on-record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, and sarcasm or Mock impoliteness. Particularly on Mock impoliteness, Culpeper offered a sensible explanation which the authors adopted in this analysis. According to Culpeper (1996), Mock impoliteness is a strategy where the speaker sends an impolite message, but it is understood by the interlocutors that the impoliteness is only on the surface and does not mean to cause offence. Further in 2011, Culpeper differentiated genuine and mock impoliteness by pointing out that context is the main factor to help the interlocutors to achieve or cancel the effect of impoliteness. However, there are other devices that the speaker can employ in making use of Mock impoliteness, such as formulaic utterances, singsong voice and facial expressions.

While Brown and Levinson treated jokes as positive politeness, with the aim to emphasize solidarity between the speaker and hearer, Culpeper (2011) described three functions of Mock

impoliteness. First, Mock impoliteness is to emphasize solidarity. This view correlated well with Brown and Levinson's positive politeness strategy. Second, it is to cloak coercion or to convince the hearer to change a behavior or an opinion on a particular issue. This involves a power differential between the interlocutors. The last function is exploitative entertainments involving pain for the target hearer, but entertaining other hearers.

The authors integrated Mock impoliteness in the analysis and included this strategy in the positive politeness category in the quantitative analysis, since Brown and Levinson's is the main framework of our analysis, and Mock impoliteness is achieved by background sharing and intimacy between the speaker and hearer.

Relevant studies on online conversation and politeness

This section reviews online conversation in the scope of politeness research and second-language learners which is the main concern of our study. Several studies have been conducted in the said area. For example, Tudini (2010) highlighted self-repair -when speakers corrected their own language mistakes - in online conversations. In that research, a group of Italian learners were assigned to converse online with native speakers of Italian. The results showed that the learners felt positive when they were corrected by their interlocutors, realizing that corrections could help them to improve. When students were corrected in this online chat, they responded by using words of thanks, thank-you emoticons and self-repair. Tudini claimed that self-repair was not only a language practice, but also a face-saving strategy.

Schallert et al. (2009) analyzed politeness among 24 students who were studying psycholinguistics at graduate level in the United States. In an experiment conducted in a computer laboratory, these students were asked to discuss with their classmates on some assigned readings using either online asynchronous discussions or synchronous discussions. The results indicated that discourse functions influenced politeness strategies more strongly than the type of computer-mediated discussion (synchronous or asynchronous). The researchers reported that the participants employed fewer politeness strategies when they posted messages relating to themselves, such as experience sharing. In contrast, more politeness strategies were found in messages expressing contrasting views.

Hence, attention turns to research work on computer-based conversations and politeness analysis in Thailand, where the present study has been conducted. Kongkerd (2015) surveyed English-Thai code mixing in Facebook conversations among Thai users. The researcher suggested that Thai users employed English-Thai code mixing such as "Maybe I am a *kanthong* haha" (idiomatic translation: "Maybe I am an old maid") for three reasons. Firstly, it promotes group identity and membership. Secondly, it conveys the exact meanings of Thai words and phrases when the speaker did not know an exactly equivalent English term. Lastly, code mixing is sometimes a politeness strategy to conform to the norms of Thai culture, where seniority is strong. For example, the final particles *'krab'* for males and *'ka'* for females express politeness in Thai language. Kongkerd's view on these final particles corresponds to Kanchina's (2018) findings on his analysis of Thai politeness, which was conducted to investigate politeness strategies in 99 short messages written by Thai university students. The purpose of all these

messages was to ask for an appointment with their professors. The analysis revealed two main points. Firstly, even though there were variations in the level of formality related to the rank of imposition, the bald on-record strategy was the most frequent strategy used by the students. They tended to communicate directly since the notes were relatively informal, and the rank of imposition was considered low since students saw that meeting with them was part of the teachers' responsibilities. Often, students expressed politeness by using the polite address form *'Ajarn'* ('teacher') and the final particles *'krab'* and *'ka'*. The second main finding was that no significant difference could be observed in terms of politeness strategies between male and female students.

Interlanguage pragmatics

According to Jaszczolt (2002), interlanguage pragmatics is useful for language teaching because it helps teachers understand the stage and process of L2 learners in acquiring a foreign language. Most interlanguage pragmatics studies focus on how L2 learners perform language in speech acts to investigate pragmatic transfer between L1 and L2. This pragmatic transfer is positive when some L1 elements support the process of L2 acquisition. In contrast, when elements in L1 impede L2 acquisition, the pragmatic transfer is negative. Negative transfer in pronunciation is more obvious than in syntax (Parker & Riley, 2005).

Since interlanguage pragmatics is a challenge in the process of language acquisition, there are attempts to overcome this difficulty. This section presents examples of interlanguage pragmatics research in Thai learners who study English as a second language.

Wongwarangkul (2000) investigated how age affected politeness strategies in Thai learners who were studying English as a foreign language. She found that the participants created forms by borrowing L1 rules or elements to perform utterances in L2. The result showed that age was correlated with significant differences in address terms and politeness strategies. When participants made requests to an older addressee, they used more politeness markers and some different address terms (e.g., Sir), more formal forms and longer utterances than when the addressees were younger. The result showed pragmatic transfer from a collectivist society, since age is an important factor in Thai culture.

Kong-in & Damnet (2018) proposed an innovative teaching method to improve politeness competence in students' intercultural communication. The researchers created a model named ISSECI from two theories: Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Knowledge Management (KM). In the study, students learned politeness language suitable for a number of scenarios by means of SLA. On the part of KM, students learnt from other sources such as peer experience and group discussions. Next, students were assigned a task to choose language forms appropriate for communication with foreigners in a number of scenarios. Their performance was rated by native speakers. The researchers claimed that the ISSECI model could enhance learners' intercultural pragmatic competence.

As can be seen, previous works have focused on different aspects of online conversation. However, politeness strategies in authentic online conversations have not been studied in Thai

subjects. The present study aims to fill this gap by analyzing politeness strategies in the online communication of Thai learners based on Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. The results will help us understand the norms of politeness strategies in Thai online chat users in an educational context, with a view to considering potential pedagogical applications in this computer-assisted language learning era.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants in the present study were 43 Thai students. Most of them (36) had enrolled in academic year 2017 in the 'European Studies: English-French' program, at a university in southern of Thailand. They had joined the 'ESEF 2017' LINE group conversation in July 2017. Seven students from the academic year 2016 who had previously failed a course also joined this group along the way. Among other subjects, the participants had registered for four compulsory subjects in four consecutive semesters which were: French I, French II, French III and French Conversation. The 36 main participants were in their second year at the end of the data collection. They had studied English for approximately twelve years and could communicate fairly well in English. Almost all participants had begun studying French language at university, and their French competencies were still at the beginning level of A1-A2 by the end of academic year 2018.

Data collection

At the time of the data collection, all participants had been active members of the 'ESEF 2017' LINE group for 21 months. There were four steps in this data collection. First, in August 2017, participants were invited to join the LINE group by the researchers who were their teachers. In this LINE group, students always used English and French in communication as required by their teachers. Occasionally when students sent messages in Thai, the teachers would send them a notice message such as 'Please use English or French', but there was no punishment as a consequence of their language choices. However, some Thai elements, such as polite address form (*Ajarn*) and final particles (*Krab/Ka*) were commonly used. Also, a good number of emoticons were used in the data by both teachers and students. Second, the researchers asked students' permission to use their conversation as data for the present study. Students were informed that their real names and identities would be concealed for their privacy and this research project would not affect their grades or academic records. No specific questions were raised by the students, who all signed the consent form. Then, data was collected at the end of May 2019 by continuous screenshot captures of all conversations since day one. These captures allowed the researchers to analyze all conversations. The following is an example of collected data.

[Yes.]

[No, tomorrow, I'm not free.]

[Where are you?]

[I'm in the computer room.]

[OK.]

Figure 2 Screenshot data

Lastly, the researchers conducted an unstructured interview to elicit the reasons for the language and emoticon choices that the students had made. Although the unstructured interview may have been regarded as unsystematic, this method was suitable for a longitudinal research project since students' memories of the conversations might not otherwise be fully retrieved. The unstructured approach made it possible to ask for overall opinions on their uses of foreign languages in the LINE group. The interview took place in a classroom and lasted approximately 30 minutes. Ten students with the highest participation records in the LINE group conversation were chosen for the group interview which consisted of three questions: 1) Do you think that the use of foreign languages in the LINE group can help you improve your languages skill (English and French)?, 2) Since your English is better than your French, when were you likely to send messages in French rather than in English?, and 3) What is your opinion about sending emoticons?

Data analysis

A mixed method, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative analysis, was employed in the investigation of politeness strategies in the target group. Firstly, students' conversations were divided by their speech acts; for example, questions and complaints. Chi square test was used to test the difference between categorical variables. Then, the politeness strategies that students employed in their conversations were analyzed, based on Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. Lastly, the results of the unstructured interview helped the authors to understand students' perspectives on language choices, and also confirmed the qualitative results.

FINDINGS

Quantitative result

The quantitative analysis showed that students performed four speech acts, namely: questions, complaints, requests and apologies. Politeness strategies appearing in each speech act were recorded as presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Politeness strategies divided by speech acts

Politeness strategies by Speech Acts	Total	Strategies			
		Bald on-record	Positive Politeness	Negative Politeness	Off record
- Questions	73	70 (95.8%)	1 (0.7%)	2 (2.7%)	0 (0.0%)
- Complaints	8	2 (25.0%)	5 (62.5%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (12.5%)
- Requests	5	0 (0.0%)	2 (40.0%)	3 (60.0%)	0 (0.0%)
- Apologies	2	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Total	88	72 (81.8%)	8 (9.1%)	7 (7.9%)	1 (1.1%)

As can be seen in Table 1, of all 88 speech acts, the act of asking questions was found at the highest frequency at 73 conversations, and the bald on-record was the major strategy in this speech act, appearing in 95.8% of all questions. Complaints were the second most frequent act (8 conversations), and students employed positive politeness as the major strategy (62.5%) of all complaints. Requests and apologies were found in small numbers, at five and two times respectively.

Since the bald on-record strategy was commonly used in the conversations in this analysis (72/88, 81.8%), the authors compared the bald on-record with other strategies in order to identify the norm of politeness strategies and speech acts. The result of this comparison is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Comparison of the bald on-record and other strategies by characteristics

Variables	Politeness Strategies		*p-value*
	Bald on-record (n=72)	Other strategies (n=16)	
Speech Acts			<0.01
• Questions	70 (97.2%)	3 (2.8%)	
• Complaints	2 (25.0%)	6 (75.0%)	
• Requests	0 (0.0%)	3 (100.0%)	
• Apologies	0 (0.0%)	2 (100.0%)	
Emoticons			<0.01
• With emoticons	18 (66.7%)	9 (33.3%)	
• Without emoticons	54 (88.5%)	7 (11.5%)	
Languages			0.13
• English	32 (78.0%)	9 (22.0%)	
• French	15 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	
• Code mixing	25 (78.1%)	7 (21.9%)	

The analysis showed that the bald on-record strategy tended to be selected when students performed the speech act of questions (97.2% vs 2.8%, *p-value* <0.01) and it was less likely to be accompanied by emoticons when compared with other strategies (88.5% vs 11.5%, *p-value* <0.01). These statistical significance findings are likely to be real, reliable, and not due to chance. When considering language uses, it was found that the bald on-record strategy was commonly used regardless of the languages under study (English, French, and code mixing). In this study, the bald on-record strategy was used in all (100%) of the French conversations, but it was used only 78.0% in English, and 78.0% in code mixing conversations; no statistically significant difference was found for the use of the bald on-record strategy in the languages under the study (*p-value* = 0.13) (Table 2).

In summary, statistical analysis revealed a relation between speech acts and politeness strategies in our analyzed corpus. The bald on-record strategy was found most often and that it was associated with the speech act of questions; it was less likely to occur with emoticons and there was no variation for this strategy by language.

Qualitative results

This section presents politeness strategies commonly found in the acts of asking questions, making requests and making complaints. Since the speech act of making apologies was found so rarely, it cannot be taken as a statistically representative language use in our study, and therefore shall not be discussed further here. The authors elaborate each of the three remaining speech acts by presenting examples and analysis regarding politeness strategies followed by conventional expressions.

To report the findings, the authors provided examples to illustrate the analysis. Data in each example is coded for readability. All translations were in (…), emojis in […] and LINE stickers in <<…>>. Note that all emojis and LINE stickers are presented with descriptions.

Questions

Most messages sent out by students were to ask questions about their studies, such as asking about tests and lessons. The results showed that students commonly employed the bald on-record strategy.

Example 1

SS: There is a class on tomorrow?
TT: *Oui.* (*Yes.*)

Example 2

TT: I suppose everyone is ready to test... Everyone will have to test tomorrow.
SS1: Test what?
SS2: Speaking?
TT: Still lesson 13. / *Toujours la leçon 13.*
SS2: Speaking or writing?
TT: *Une interrogation orale.* (*A speaking test.*)

As can be seen in examples 1 and 2, students asked questions to the teacher in a very direct manner. Despite the distance and power between the speaker and the hearer, which predicts that students would employ negative politeness with redressive action, it was found in our data that the bald on-record strategy without redressive actions was most common. This finding is similar to Kanchina's (2018) findings. It can be claimed that online communication influences politeness strategies in the sense that it is a less official and more informal communication tool, especially in second-language learners who have learnt, but do not have much opportunity to use redressive formulas such as indirect forms and modal verbs (e.g., "Could you please…?", "Would you mind …?") in daily conversation outside classrooms. In addition, students considered the rank of imposition to be relatively low, because they saw that it was part of the teachers' responsibilities to answer students' questions about their studies. However, in asking questions, some of the students showed negative politeness to the teachers by using conventional expressions such as *'sorry'*, *'thank you'* and formal address terms *'Ajarn'*, *'monsieur'* as a sign of respect and to conform to the social norms of Thai culture, as can be seen in example 3.

Example 3

SS: Sorry, what day is the big test? Ajarn I.?
TT: *Demain.* (*Tomorrow.*) The links are in your textbooks.
SS: The test on computer right?
TT: *Oui.* (*Yes.*)
SS: *Merci* (*Thank you.*), Ajarn I.

Complaints

According to Brown & Levinson (1987), certain kinds of acts such as complaints intrinsically threaten face. However, the participants in this study had no intention to threaten their teachers' face since it violates the social norm of Thai culture as stated in the introduction part above. The authors found that there were a few occasions that students complained about their lessons and their tests. For example, they felt that the tests were too difficult, or that they had received low scores. Complaints are considered to carry a high risk of face-threatening to their teachers, who hold higher social power (P) while the distance (D) between students and teachers needs to be maintained to show respect in Thai culture. Taking the D, P and rank of task imposition (R), plus social norm into consideration, it is not surprising to see a relatively low frequency of complaints in our data (19%). It was found that students employed the Mock impoliteness strategy in complaining messages, as shown in example 4.

Example 4

SS1, who is doing an online exercise on her computer, sends a picture of her screen saying that her answer is wrong, and asks:
SS1: What going on? Doesn't = *n'aime pas?* (*doesn't like*)
SS2: <<*confused sticker*>>
SS1: Am I wrong?
SS3: <<*sad sticker*>>
TT: You are wrong because you used the old link…

SS1: oh my Buddha !!!
TT: * Oh mon bouddha !
SS4: โครตยากเลย (*Damn difficult!*) [cry emoji]
SS2: 555555 (*laugh out loud*) I want to die. <<*embarrassment sticker*>>
SS6: *Moi aussi.* (*Me too.*)
TT: *Tu veux de l'aide?* (*Do you need help?*)
SS5: *Vous êtes vol de mort dans le monde.* (*You are Voldemort in the world.*)

In example 4, students employed Mock impoliteness when complaining about their lessons. To establish a humorous atmosphere and reduce face threat in their complaints, students employed two redressive actions, namely emoticons and code mixing. In terms of power between the interlocutors, redressive actions are predictable when the speaker with lower status employed Mock impoliteness to a hearer with higher status power (Culpeper, 2011). As can be seen in example 4, the conversation consists of a combination of English ("Am I wrong?"), French ("Moi aussi") and Thai ("โครตยากเลย"), accompanied by several emoticons. This point also corresponds to previous studies showing that code mixing is expected to be seen as a politeness strategy in bilingual and multi-lingual communities to promote group identity (Kongkerd, 2015; Brown & Levinson, 1987) here, a group of Thai students learning both English and French.

In terms of function, cloaked coercion was the main function of Mock impoliteness in students' complaints in our data. The expected perlocutionary effects was that the teacher would make tasks easier for them.

Requests

Although requests were found at a frequency of only five conversations, they are still worth discussing. It was found that students employed negative politeness strategies with redressive actions in these speech acts.

Example 5
SS: Ajarn I., today I cannot retest because there is an activity. How about next day maybe?

As shown in example 5, the student requested to postpone his appointment with the teacher by sending a request message using negative politeness with redressive actions. In this case, the redressive actions are: giving a reason for his request ("there is an activity"), then offering an option to the teacher ("How about next day?"). This strategy was found in other requests where the rank of task imposition was considered high, such as requesting to reschedule a test. In requests where the rank of imposition was considered low, such as requesting to know their scores or receiving a link to do their online exercises, students usually just added the final politeness marker *'please'*.

Example 6
SS: You send me my scores, please.

Conventional expressions

Conventional expressions such as '*good morning*' and '*thank you*' are used to engage in conversation. According to Watts (2003), in some situations, conventional expressions can be interpreted as politeness strategies. The authors found that students often used stickers that include text as conventional expressions. For example:

Example 7

TT: *N'oubliez pas de préparer la dictée.* [*Don't forget to prepare for the dictation.*]
SS: <<*Okay sticker*>>

French conventional expressions such as '*merci*' ('*thank you*') and '*d'accord*' ('*OK*') were used significantly more often than English ones. The authors interpret this finding as a positive politeness strategy in which students attempted to express solidarity with their French teacher (who was the most active chat user in the group), to show him respect and to engage in conversation, in the meantime, to conform to Thai social norms. Also, the use of conversational expressions was influenced by the foreign language learning process since these expressions were taught early on and with frequent repetition during learning. Learners practice expressions that native speakers normally used in particular social occasions and situations.

INTERVIEW RESULTS

The authors conducted an unstructured interview as described in the methodology section above. The questions elicited students' perspectives in the LINE group conversation of the study.

The first question was 'Do you think that the use of foreign languages in the LINE group can improve your language skills (English and French)?'. Students in the interview all agreed that conversing in foreign languages was a useful way to practice foreign languages. For instance, when the teachers shared idioms and quotes in the group, the students learned new vocabulary from the posts. Sometimes the teacher asked students to translate French expressions into English. If students did not understand, the teacher would give them some clues. Also, they said that when they sent messages in English and French, they could practice spelling and sentence structures.

For the second question, 'Since your English is better than your French, when were you likely to send messages in French rather than in English?', it was confirmed by students that they liked to send French messages when they were confident that their messages were correct, and that using French increased their self-esteem. 'I want to use what I have learnt.' was frequently mentioned.

The last question asked students' opinions on sending emoticons. Students replied that emoticons were like pictures that express their feelings, which could not be seen in text alone. Thus, emoticons functioned to communicate emotion in the online conversations.

In sum, the results of the interview indicated that students had a positive attitude towards foreign language conversations in the LINE group of the study. They took them as opportunities to practice and improve their language skills. When they could choose between French and English, they opted to send messages in French, since it was their new knowledge. French messages by students were also associated with their confidence and self-esteem. Lastly, students employed emoticons mainly to represent emotion in online conversation.

DISCUSSION

As presented above, the authors found in our data that students used the bald on-record strategy most often when they asked questions. They employed Mock impoliteness to complain, whereas negative politeness with redressive actions was found in requests. Code mixing is another positive politeness strategy to promote a group identity and express solidarity. To show their engagement in conversation, students often used conventional expressions. These findings help us to understand politeness in Thai learners' online conversations. There are three major points that are worth discussing here:

Students' language proficiency and politeness strategies

The participants in our study were language learners with an intermediate level of English and a beginner level of French. Our findings confirm previous studies showing that the high-frequency use of the bald on-record strategy partly results from the students' relatively low proficiency in English (Song, 2012). Negative politeness and off-record strategies with more complex grammatical structures, which require more pragmatic knowledge to encode, rarely appeared in our data. At this point, the authors offer a diagram of politeness tendency that is predictable in online conversation where the speakers are non-native (Figure 3).

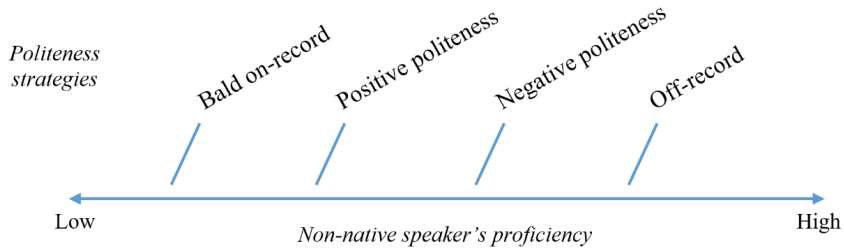


Figure 3 Tendency of politeness strategy among non-native speakers

As can be seen in Figure 3, language proficiency and politeness strategies have an inverse relationship. That is to say, more direct and simple strategies can be expected from chat users with less language proficiency. More complex and varied strategies tend to be seen in chat users with higher proficiency. Consequently, the authors propose a modification of Brown and Levinson's formula for politeness strategy for less proficient speakers whose language proficiency is a factor in performing politeness as follows:

$$W_x = LP(S) \times [D(S,H) + P(H,S) + R_x]$$

where W_x is the Weightiness, D is the distance between the speaker (S) and the hearer (H), P is the social power that the hearer has over the speaker, R is the rank of task imposition, and LP(S) is the speaker's language proficiency. In order for the formula to work, the authors suggest that the value of LP ranges between 0 and 1, where 1 corresponds to the language proficiency of a high proficiency speaker. Lower LP values represent lower language proficiencies in speakers.

If the formula may be calculated, the additional LP would prove that the lower the language proficiency is, the more limitations on politeness are expected, despite cultural knowledge of other components: distance, social power and level of task imposition. Thus, the analysis indicates that the language proficiency of the speaker governs politeness strategies.

Concerning the number of participants in our study, it is recommended that a study could be conducted with a larger number of participants with various language proficiencies to confirm the reliability of our formula.

Interlanguage pragmatics in Thai learners of foreign languages

The results of the study help us to understand students' state of language acquisition and their attempts at foreign language communication. Although participants achieved perlocutionary speech acts, the results reveal pragmatic transfer on two levels: language competency and politeness strategy.

In term of language competency, the participants employed the bald on-record as the main strategy in our data. Interestingly, we found pragmatic transfer in question and request acts. To achieve their perlocutionary effect, many participants borrowed language forms from L1 when performing L2 sentences. In Thai, question and request forms have similar structures which are: statement + a question marker or a polite marker. For instance, *'พรุ่งนี้เรามีสอบ ใช่ไหม?' (Tomorrow we have test, right?)* is a common form for questions whereas *'คุณส่งของให้ผมหน่อยนะครับ' (You send me the things, please.)* is a common form for requests.

We found negative pragmatic transfer in the data showing that participants often employed this L1 form in making yes/no questions in English; for instance: *There is a class on tomorrow?, Speaking or writing?* (example 1), *The test on the computer right?* (example 3) instead of using L2 structure such as: *Will we have a class tomorrow? Will the test be on computer?* Also, this L1 structure was borrowed into English requests; for example: *You send me my scores, please.* (example 6) instead of forming a proper request structure in L2, e.g., *Could you please send me my score? or Can I see my score, please?*

On the other hand, we found that this L1 form became a positive pragmatic transfer when the L2 was French because it shared the same structure with informal questions in French. For example, *C'est l'hôpital ? (This is the hospital?), Je peux faire, monsieur ? (I can do, sir?).*

The results show pragmatic transfer in the participants, in that they tended to express politeness in foreign languages via politeness markers rather than sentence structures.

In terms of politeness strategy, the participants maintained their social role as students and maintained appropriate distance/solidarity when talking to teachers. However, they had limitations in politeness strategies due to their foreign language competency as discussed above. They adhered to Thai social norms throughout the data. For instance, they always addressed teachers appropriately in L1, i.e., *Ajarn, Ajarn* + first name (examples 3 and 5). This phenomenon shows pragmatic transfer in foreign language learners who obey the cultural norms from participants' L1.

Pedagogical applications

The results revealed students' online communication behaviors which could be beneficial for pedagogical applications. Based on the findings, suggestions for teaching and learning a foreign language can be offered. First, there are advantages of online communication for language practice as elaborated in the literature review above. In addition, the result of our interview showed that students had positive attitudes towards using foreign languages in LINE group conversations. They agreed that this conversation practice could help them improve their foreign languages (English and French) since it was a channel of communication where they could use language that they had learnt in class. In addition, they could even learn from peers in a friendly environment. The LINE group conversation could build students' confidence in foreign language communication. Thus, a pedagogical environment incorporating chat rooms, blogs, forums, and other forms of online communication among learners and teachers could be created by language teachers. This would have the specific purposes of allowing teachers to facilitate and monitor foreign language conversations, scaffold students' development, and encourage students to perform politeness in the target language(s). Therefore, online communication is an excellent medium for active learning pedagogies in which students are learning by doing.

Second, the authors recommend that teachers of foreign languages pay attention to students' online communication behaviors in order to understand students' pragmatic proficiency and how well they can perform different speech acts. Although students had learnt conventional forms in different situations — for example, to ask questions or to request politely — it was found in the data that the participants did not always use proper forms that they have learnt when they communicated outside the classroom. Therefore, it is suggested that it be emphasized to students that achieving the goal of communication is not only about making themselves understood, but also about having linguistic competence. Awareness of using L2 structures to express politeness should be raised in students, so that they can communicate in a way that is more closely aligned to native speakers, even if being native-like is not their ultimate goal in learning foreign languages. Also, when students make errors in communication, such errors should be corrected simultaneously while the interlocutors are still engaged in the conversation. This would help learners become aware of their errors promptly and enable them to perform self-correction.

Thirdly, cultural understanding of different language expressions should be taught to enable students to become aware that their L1 transfer could cause misunderstanding in L2. Also, this should allow students to communicate more efficiently and avoid misunderstandings. The

most important point is that language and culture are inseparable in acquiring a foreign language effectively.

CONCLUSION

The corpus data of a 21-month online group conversation in the LINE application was analyzed to see the politeness strategies of 43 Thai university students who were studying English as a second language and French as a third language. The results confirmed that the factors for choosing politeness strategies were the distance between students and teachers, the social power that teachers held over students, and the rank of task imposition, as well as social norms. Statistical analysis of relationships between speech acts and politeness strategies showed that bald on-record was the main strategy of participants and corresponded with the highest frequency in the speech act of questions. Since there were other possible strategies that the participants might have used, the choice of the bald on-record strategy indicated that language proficiency governed many students by limiting them to perform more sophisticated politeness strategies. This explains why bald on-record was the major strategy found in the data.

The data revealed interlanguage pragmatics in the participants. They employed linguistic forms from L1 while communicating in L2, especially in the speech act of questions. Social norms governed participants in a similar way to their communication with teachers in offline conversation.

Lastly, it was found that learners saw that foreign language communication in the form of an online chat group could benefit their language study. By engaging in online conversation, students could practice the target language because online conversation is a convivial and entertaining means of communications and is quite similar to face-to-face communication.

These results could benefit sociolinguistic studies regarding online communication behaviors in Thai learners, and could be utilized in language teaching and learning.

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