

(Im)politeness for Students. A Case Study

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Abstract

Facing continuity and significant transformation through inherent progress, it is essential to critically examine how contemporary society evaluates concepts of “normal” and “adequate”. One of the challenges encountered within the social norm, particularly when navigating issues of right and wrong, is the concept of (im)politeness. This notion has long been a subject of interpretation and critique of strict conceptualisations. Pragmalinguists have generally seen (im)politeness as distinct for each society which also serves as a reflection of its cultural and social capital. Moreover, it functions as a barometer for measuring social acceptance and the maintenance of social distance. For a change in this paradigm, teachers require tools to have a clearer insight of these dynamics and how students can be directed towards a self-evaluation of the sociocultural language barrier that they have. In order to foster a shift in this paradigm, educators need access to tools that provide a clearer understanding of these dynamics. Such tools are essential for guiding students toward a process of self-evaluation, helping them recognise and address the sociocultural language barriers they may face. In this light, this study aims to explore the notion of (im)politeness as described by Brown and Levinson and to offer a model of politeness analysis for secondary-school students. To address the second objective of the paper, I have designed two questionnaires to assess the most commonly employed strategies by students, teachers, and parents. Additionally, the questionnaires include questions encouraging students to reflect on the politeness strategies used by their teachers and parents. While the statistical findings of this study (interpretation for the answers from Questionnaire 1) should not be considered universally applicable to all educational context, they might still contribute to the pragmatic and pedagogical Romanian studies that focus on successful relational work in schools.

Key words: positive politeness, negative politeness, strategies, teaching, face threatening acts, relational work.

Introduction

“Grammatical errors may be irritating and impede communication, but at least, as a rule, they are apparent in the surface structure, so that H [the hearer] is aware that an error has occurred. Once alerted to the fact that S [the speaker] is not fully grammatically competent, native speakers seem to have little difficulty in making allowances for it. Pragmatic failure, on the other hand, is rarely recognized as such by non-linguists. If a non-native speaker appears to speak fluently (i.e., is grammatically competent), a native speaker is likely to attribute his/her apparent impoliteness or unfriendliness, not to any linguistic deficiency, but to boorishness or ill-will. While grammatical errors may reveal a speaker to be a less than proficient language-user, pragmatic failure reflects badly on him/her as a person.” (Thomas J., 1983: 98)

Teaching politeness is not explicitly incorporated into the standard Romanian curriculum and some scholars might argue that teachers implicitly foster these pragmatic language skills through their behavioural models, asserting that it is their responsibility to cultivate an environment conducive to the development of such competencies. From the regular course books, the materials typically devote limited attention—often just one lesson/year—to polite linguistic behaviour which inevitably leads to a deprivation of opportunities to promote etiquette, understand international values, and demonstrate appropriate linguistic behaviour in potentially tense or ambiguous interactions.

I started to question the idea of politeness instructions in the classroom during my MA studies and PhD studies since the theme of my final paper was the concept of politeness. With the aim of putting into practice the theoretical approach about (im)politeness, I aimed to create opportunities for students to produce meaningful language while incorporating polite expressions, and I implemented this strategy consistently throughout the year. At the outset of the academic year, I recognised one major obstacle: the necessity of assessing my students' awareness of politeness strategies in everyday discourse -even in Romanian- due to the conclusion that they do not engage with the topic whenever positive and negative politeness is imposed. To address this gap, I developed two questionnaires (see Questionnaire A and B in the Annexe), designed to yield insights into students' ability to evaluate strategic behaviour in various contexts and their capacity to generate polite requests in the target language. The practical approach offers an interpretation of the first questionnaire.

1.1. What is linguistic politeness?

Defining politeness is a remarkably complex task, therefore, a brief overview of linguistic politeness might be the most effective way to approach the subject. One of the earliest and most influential scholars to address this issue is Lakoff (1975: 64), who defines politeness as a social behaviour “developed by societies to reduce friction in personal interaction.” Lakoff highlights the human ability to avoid conflict through appropriate linguistic behaviour, but his definition lacks clarity regarding the specific strategies people use to achieve this. The same perspective can be seen at Leech (1980: 19), adding “the degree of effort put into the avoidance of a conflict situation”. For the same approach, there might be different stages but still not enough for a clear definition. Brown and Levinson (1978,1987) spoke about a social cognition favourable to mitigation, or “softening face threats”. This reflects certain perceptions and expectations that every participant holds even before starting a conversation.

Brown and Levinson (1978: 62) came upon people who want to protect themselves from the outside possible aggressions; “the want of every member that his wants to be desirable to at least some others executors” reiterates the self-image that needs appreciation, approval, and optimism. On the other hand, people want “freedom of action and freedom from imposition”. This means that the self-image of each person is influenced by the others ’attitude towards his/her territory; maintaining a certain distance to respect personal rights could be a sort of politeness. As a result of the complexity of each utterance from the humans ’conversation exchanges, Brown and Levinson tried to theorise how politeness is reflected in language. The distinction between the two human needs as defined by Brown and Levinson is represented by positive and negative face.

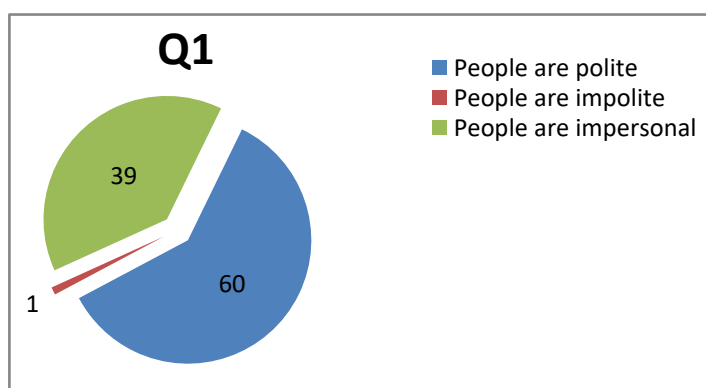
The main individual’s needs are to be accepted by others as a unique personality and to be accepted as a part of a larger group. In other words, every thought or action that a person considers to be adequate (from his/her personal point of view) should be unhindered by others in order to protect his/her negative face or eligible in order to protect his/her positive face. More than just a pragmatic concept, face represents “a battery of social skills whose goal is to ensure everyone feels affirmed in a social interaction” (Mills: 2003). Similarly, Scollon (1995: 38) says that: “there is no faceless communication” and this increases the relevance of the speaker’s intentions. Nevertheless, can meaning be inferred solely through the analysis of utterances, or can we protect our face by adhering to a general principle? The answers may be disheartening, as human beings often struggle to effectively communicate their ideas and needs, ultimately leading to conflict in interpersonal

interactions. With this emerging idea, raising awareness over strategic behaviour should be a necessary lesson for teachers to teach more often.

2.1. Students' perception related to how others assume politeness. Methodology.

Questionnaire A assesses students' perceptions of politeness about others. The first five items consist of closed-ended questions, while the subsequent five are open-ended questions. The survey was administered to students from 5th to 8th grade, with a total of one hundred responses analysed. The results are not intended to be summarised as a simple aggregate; instead, interviewees were asked to detail specific contexts in which they must act politely and to name the most appropriate strategies for each situation.

2.1.1. Question 1



The first statement did not require much deliberation from the students; the majority of respondents expressed the view that most people are generally polite, occasionally impersonal, and rarely impolite. It is worth noticing that students indirectly recognise that impoliteness is discouraged by social

norms within their environment, suggesting that they both appreciate polite behaviour and understand how to act accordingly.

In general, respondents acknowledge that politeness is essential in everyday interactions and when it comes to preferences, students tend to favour both positive¹ and negative politeness strategies², or direct approaches, over off-record strategies³. Most respondents indicated that communication is often aimed at shaping or maintaining relationships and negotiating meaning. However, there are also instances where politeness serves to maintain social distance in more formal context like teacher-students relationship. For early secondary school students, this perspective on interpersonal relationships is predictable due to family members, friends, and

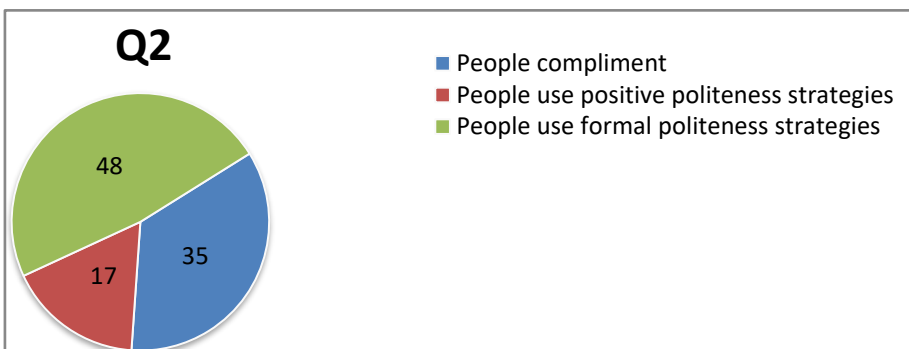
¹ Positive politeness strategies are used to build rapport, make the listener feel appreciated, and establish solidarity.

² Negative politeness focuses on showing respect for the listener's space and not forcing them into an obligation.

³ Off-record strategies involve indirectness and subtlety, allowing the speaker to convey a message without taking full responsibility for it.

teachers' fostering of a constructive and supportive educational environment based on clear values. Relationships perceived as distant may contribute to introversion, as the lack of empathetic engagement from speakers could hinder the development of social and communicative skills.

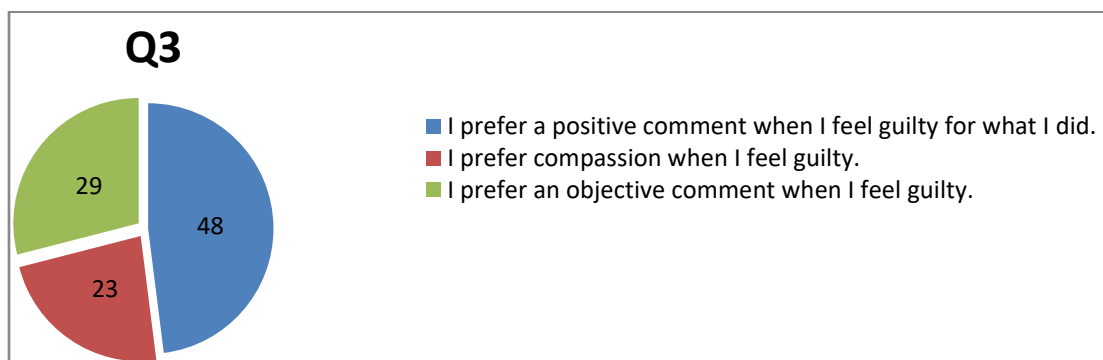
2.1.2. Question 2



When individuals work in a team and even though it is beneficial to collaborate with the team members, they tend to maintain a certain

degree of social distance rather than expressing overt appreciation. Students perceive indirectness as an effective means of persuasion, although they report using impersonal strategies less frequently; one possible explanation for this is that they associate longer sentences, sometimes more sophisticated, with greater persuasiveness. However, educational materials tend to prioritise formal politeness (e.g. *Could you/ Can I have....., please?*) in all forms of negotiation. This suggests that students may not fully grasp the underlying intent of the language they use, instead favouring the most conventional or formulaic constructions. Also, it could be considered as a reflection of a belief instilled in early childhood—namely, the importance of maintaining social distance, and not a deep understanding of social skills. This type of mindset could be deeply rooted in the cultural experiences of their parents and grandparents, shaped by the austere socio-political climate of the communist era, which emphasised respect as a central value.

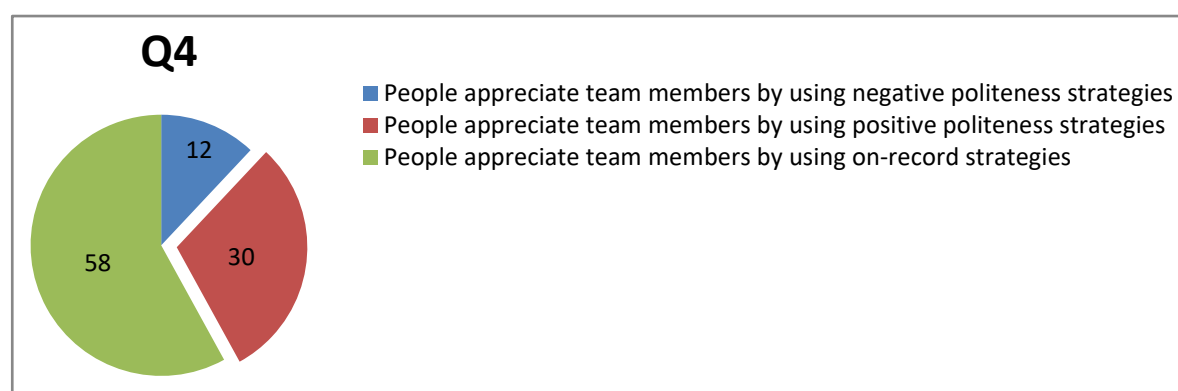
2.1.3. Question 3



Close relationships are primarily characterised by the use of positive politeness strategies (e.g. *Give me..., please!*), as students express a preference for interacting with optimistic and socially approachable individuals rather than seeking attention for themselves. Indirectness and negative politeness strategies are rarely chosen as responses in challenging situations. When reflecting on the first two questions of the survey, it is likely to consider that students were thinking specifically about their friends and family, rather than considering a broader social context. Based on my observations, students require significant practice to collaborate effectively in groups, as nearly every class or group includes members who resist cooperation. In such cases, I often find it necessary to adopt a more assertive approach to emphasise the benefits of teamwork.

Teamwork and friendship are very often misunderstood since students expect having an almost utopian collaboration without different perspectives and debates, possibly because students may not fully understand what constitutes effective collaboration, or they may only feel part of a team when given the autonomy to choose their group members. Nonetheless, in any team setting, providing feedback and shifting perspectives is essential for improving collaboration as a way of enabling students to better understand their strengths and areas for improvement, and ultimately fostering greater ownership over their learning process.

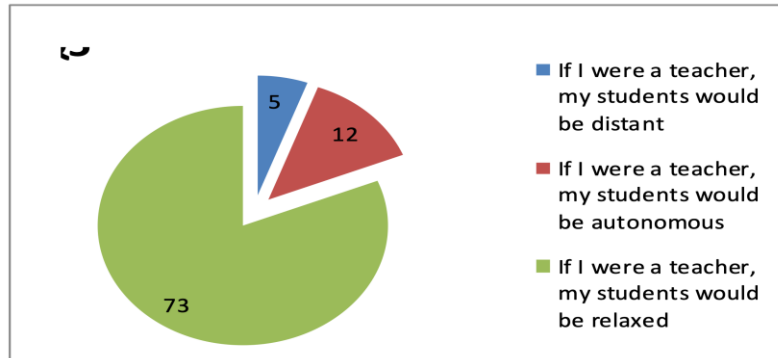
2.1.4. Question 4



Many of my students exhibit a tendency to provide feedback in a brief and direct manner, often overlooking the concept of *negative face*—the individual's inherent need to be valued and respected. While some students adopt an optimistic perspective and perceive cooperative behaviour as appropriate in these contexts, they generally interpret feedback as overly critical or abrasive. This reaction can be attributed to the predominance of *on-record* strategies, particularly direct requests, in their feedback. Being efficient is not a problem in everyday conversations, but

a predominantly direct style may hinder the delivery of constructive feedback, as it fails to account for the nuanced social dynamics that facilitate a more supportive and appreciative exchange.

2.1.5. Question 5

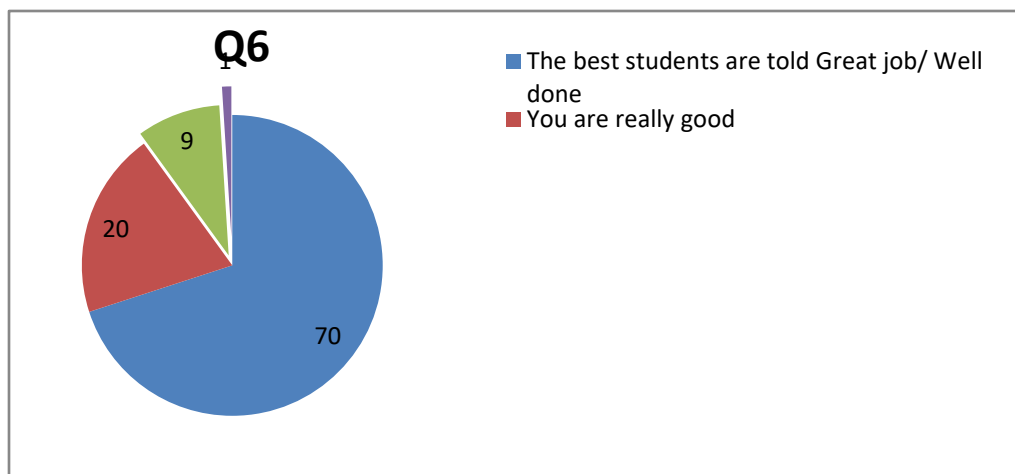


About the teacher-student dynamic, this phenomenon appears to be a common pattern. Students often express a preference for a close, supportive relationship with their instructors, anticipating that teachers will modify their strategies to incorporate more positive and on-record forms of communication. One way of interpreting this tendency is as a reflection of their reluctance to assume full autonomy in their learning processes that primarily comes from objectifying the feedback. As a result, they tend to resist constructive feedback, favouring instead feedback that is predominantly affirmative and appreciative.

The subsequent questions are designed to assess my students' understanding of polite expressions and their ability to apply them appropriately. As will be evident, significant difficulties arise in their recognition and formulation of polite constructions. Some responses contain incoherent or illegible language; therefore, I have selectively included only the relevant answers for further analysis.

2.1.6. Question 6

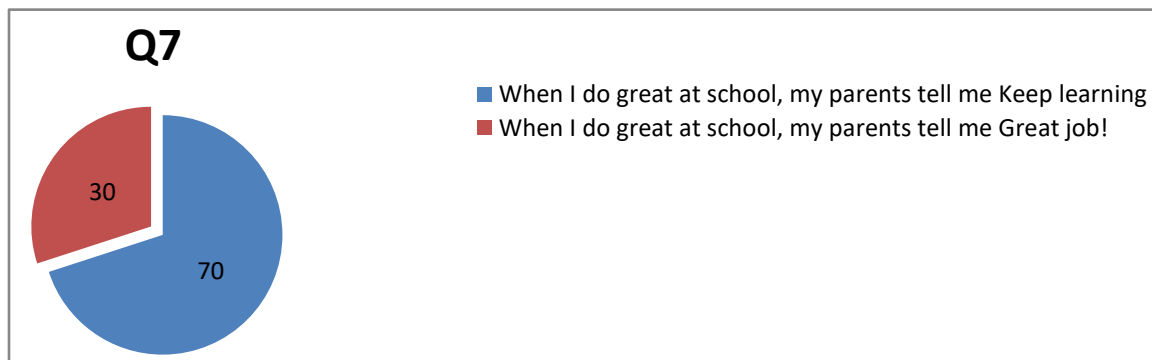
The most exemplary students are consistently rewarded, particularly through the provision of positive feedback. My students are perceptive of this practice, as evidenced by their responses



to question number 6, which include expressions such as: *Great job*, *Well done*, *You are really good*,

Felicitari/Bravo, and *This class wouldn't be the same without you*. Notably, the phrase *Great job* is also employed by students when offering praise to their peers. This observation suggests that students may not have had sufficient opportunities to cultivate a more nuanced understanding of how to promote learning through constructive feedback, or alternatively, they may not fully grasp the value of explicit, formative feedback in enhancing their academic development.

2.1.7. Question 7

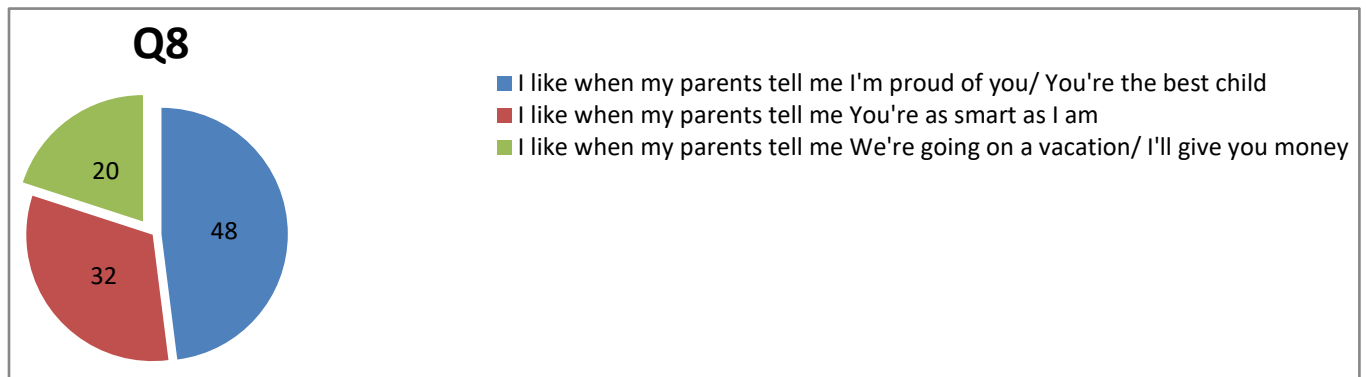


Parents prefer praise phrases like *Keep learning* to promote lifelong learning over direct praise such as *Great job*. For many students, motivators take the form of material rewards, including vacations and money, while for others, the motivation is more personal. From the simple answers provided by students, we can easily conclude that my students come from a patriarchal community with a worldview based on moral values such as discipline and perseverance. Intrinsic motivation is of great value, but I sometimes question students' ability to build inner values only by being told what to do and think and rarely having tangible rewards. All in all, progress is the

key to future success and accomplishment. This suggests a perspective wherein for most students, progress is inherently tied in with long-term results and success rather than immediate, intrinsic satisfaction -or at least this is what they confess-.

2.1.8. Question 8

The findings of this research suggest that individuals do not always fully comprehend the preferred *language of love* of others. This insight prompted me to explore how students perceive



reinforcement from their parents. Specifically, the students expressed a desire to hear affirmations such as: *You're great, You're as smart as I am, Stay the same, I'm proud of you, Take some free time, You're the best child, or I knew you could do it.* It is intrinsic to children's nature to seek recognition and affirmation of their qualities, still, there might be other psychological interpretations, which are not part the present paper and merit further exploration.

2.1.9. Question A.9.



Friends pay attention to the hearers' negative and positive face: *You're my special one, You're my best friend, You're all that I need, You're my queen, You're beautiful.* Students expect their friends to always compliment them, validating their importance and desirability. In contrast, parents tend to focus more on recognising their children's intrinsic qualities, like kindness,

intelligence, or emotional depth. Friends, on the other hand, are more likely to emphasise outward characteristics, such as appearance or social persona. This shift in focus from the inner self to the outer image can create a paradox. People may feel more appreciated for their individuality by their friends, even though parents may value them more deeply for their inner qualities. This dynamic suggests that while friends offer affirmation through social and public validation, parents often show appreciation in more personal, internal terms. It's an interesting contrast in how social relationships contribute to a person's sense of self.

2.1.10. Question A.10.

When it comes to defining politeness, students often narrow it down to just the concept of respect. Common examples they mention include phrases like *Thank you, Good morning, Good night, Please, Sorry, Could you please, Would you like, and I agree*. Given that they've had at least one lesson on politeness this year, it is surprising to me that they focus mainly on greetings and basic expressions of gratitude. Personally, I use phrases like *Would you like* or *Could you please...?* frequently throughout the day, so I expected students to mention those more often.

This points to a broader issue: many of the lessons that should be learned inductively-through exposure and practice-often remain passive until a teacher explicitly explains and underscores their importance. It is as though students don't internalise these subtler forms of politeness until they are directly pointed out. That said, exposure over time will still provide them with the chance to acquire this more nuanced language naturally. Even if they don't immediately grasp it, they will encounter it in various contexts, and this exposure increases the likelihood that they will integrate it into their own speech.

Conclusion

Communication in the classroom is essential, but it should extend beyond redundant and superficial small talk (the Romanian concept called "limba de lemn"). Without a doubt, teachers have to be redundant, but what if the desired direction is teaching how to negotiate roles and elicit contemporary social norms from students? For teachers, receiving constructive feedback from students is especially important. They aspire for positive interactions that drive engagement and enhance the learning experience. To fully seize these growth opportunities, it is vital to teach strategies of politeness and respect alongside curriculum content. With these valuable ideas in mind, I planned to encourage educators to reconsider how the concepts of face and politeness shape

the dynamics between teachers and students. This study should help teachers rethink how face and politeness influence relationships in general and how these concepts can be used to enhance students' self-esteem and promote more social awareness practices. I was inspired by a rather idealistic principle that I believe teachers should keep in mind: "You don't correct students, you guide them." This raises an important question—how can we effectively teach students without undermining their values, norms, or traditions unless we first ask them what (im)politeness strategies align best with their personalities?

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Annex no. 1

A. Questionnaire

This is a questionnaire meant to see how you see the others relating to politeness. You don't have to write your name on the paper.



We'd love to hear your thoughts! Please take a moment to answer the following questions:

1. In general, how do people tend to behave around you?
 - a. Polite
 - b. Impolite
 - c. Impersonal
2. When someone asks you for a favour (like borrowing your homework), how do they typically phrase it?
 - a. *Oh, you look amazing today! Are you kind enough to lend me your homework?*
 - b. *Hey, our class really needs you! You wouldn't want the teacher to get upset, right?*
 - c. *Could you please help me? I promise this is the last time I'll ask!*
3. When you're going through a tough time, how would you prefer your friend to react?
 - a. With a positive, encouraging comment
 - b. With compassion and empathy
 - c. With a practical, objective, distant observation
4. When working in a team, how do you like people to acknowledge your contributions?
 - a. *You're a vital part of our team! You're really showing us what teamwork is about!*
 - b. *You're amazing! We have so much to learn from you!*
 - c. *Great job! Thanks for your effort!*
5. If you were a teacher, what kind of relationship would you want to have with your students?
 - a. Distant and formal
 - b. Independent, yet respectful

- c. Close and friendly
6. What do your teachers usually say to their top-performing students?
7. When you excel at school, what do your parents typically say?
8. What's something you like hearing from your parents?
9. What would you love to hear from your best friend?
10. In your opinion, what does *politeness* mean to others? Could you share two examples of how politeness looks in action?



B. Questionnaire

This is a questionnaire meant to see how you see how you relate yourself to politeness. You don't have to write your name on the paper.

Please, answer these questions:

1. How would you describe yourself?
 - a. Polite
 - b. Impolite
 - c. Impersonal
2. When you request a favour, how do you typically phrase it?
 - a. *Oh, you look great today!*
 - b. *Our team needs you!*
 - c. *Could you please help me? Your presence is really important for this project!*
3. When your friend is going through a tough time, how do you offer support?
 - a. With a positive, encouraging comment
 - b. With compassion and empathy
 - c. With an objective, distant comment
4. When working as part of a team, how do you acknowledge your teammates' contributions?
 - a. *Oh, you look great today! Are you really that kind to share your homework with me?*
 - b. *Our class really needs you! You wouldn't want the teacher to get upset, would you?*
 - c. *Could you please help me? This will be the last time I ask you for this!*
5. If you were a teacher, how would you approach your students?
 - a. Distant
 - b. Subjective
 - c. Objective
6. What would you like your teacher to say to you?
7. What would you like your parents to say to you?
8. What does politeness mean to you? Could you provide two examples of how politeness manifests in everyday interactions?

