Variation of Politeness Strategies Employed by Second Language Learners in Role-Play Tasks

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Abstract: The use of politeness strategies is deemed to be pertinent in enhancing rapport and establishing comfort reciprocally in oral interactions among L2 speakers. Driven by this notion, the study sets out to examine four politeness strategies in oral interaction used by English language learners of ELC 121 subject, via role-play assessment. In order to elicit the strategies, 15 selected pairs were asked to act out role-play tasks on specified topics. The role-play sessions were video-recorded before the oral data were transcribed in verbatim form in order to allow full understanding of the conversations. The collected data were analyzed using content analysis anchored in Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness strategy (1978). The results revealed that negative and positive politeness were the most preferred strategies, whereas off-record strategy was the least favoured among the participants. The participants' linguistic proficiency was also discovered to be a determining factor in the kind of politeness strategies employed since Proficient (A grade) participants used more negative politeness compared to Less Proficient (C grade) who preferred using positive politeness in the role-play. Thus, it provides an insight of instructors' role in addressing students' needs in a mixed-ability classroom at improving their interpersonal skills to hinder communication failure.

Key words: Politeness strategies · Linguistic proficiency · Second language learners · Pragmatic competence · Role-play tasks

INTRODUCTION

Politeness is one fundamental aspect in promoting rapport and sharing mutual comfort among L2 speakers when conversing. Awareness on using politeness strategies in the target language is deemed to be an apposite and pertinent approach to aid L2 learners' in accomplishing effective communication in daily conversations. According to Trân [1], it is necessary for language users to understand social conventions and the concepts of politeness and face to better comprehend the different ways of speaking and to avoid misunderstandings of different functions of speech. The elements such as interlocutors' behaviors and language use are taken into account in each social interaction; thus, ones need to be cautious about the way they behave in any specified situations [2]. In this respect, Prodanovic [3] asserts that communication skills, a major area of soft skills, are essential to every speaker since these skills indicate the approach a speaker gives and receives information as well as to convey his ideas and opinions with those around him. Hence, ample and plenteous pragmatic competence plays a crucial role in achieving a successful human interaction.

Conceding this matter, the English as a Second Language (ESL) courses which are designed for Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) undergraduate students lay an emphasis on developing the learners' speaking skills. Academy of Language Studies of UiTM offers Integrated Language Skills 1 (ELC121) course which is designed to build listening, speaking and reading skills to help students perform effectively and competently in the social and academic contexts. Moreover, the course emphasizes the ability of the students to use conversation strategies and appropriate language functions in social interactions. It is a 60% on-going assessment and 40% final exam based course in which 15% is contributed by the role-play assessment. This role-play presentation is performed in pairs within 10 minutes based on one specified theme.

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It should be noted that role-play is selected as the main subject matter in the current study due to its ubiquity in method to improve communication skills among L2 speakers [4] not in language field per se, but also in medical education such as nursing practice [5, 6]. Also, as stated by Van Hasselt *et al*., cited in Stokoe [4], its traits of being spontaneous, immediate and within the vicinity of real-life interactions validates the researchers' choice. In this regard, Van Hasselt *et al*. view role-play as 'simulations of real-world interpersonal encounters, communications, or events' [4]. Linguistically, such verbal communication brings about the elements of politeness provided that both speakers maintain common ground throughout the course of conversation. Therefore, the researcher seeks to explore the extent to which linguistic proficiency influences the politeness strategies and the relationships of these possibly interrelated constituents.

Statement of the Problem: The main obstacle in having an effective communication among our graduates is related to lack of linguistic proficiency as well as failure to recognize addressees' needs for mutual comfort as in accurate responds to topics discussed. This is especially important to them as they usually need to go through job interviews which require competent interpersonal skills. In Malaysian context, graduates' communication skills, particularly in the English language, have long been an issue. A review on past literature [7-10]. has indicated that many Malaysian graduates lack interpersonal skills, hence, affecting their competency, particularly when communicating in English. On the same premise, interpersonal skill, as part of communicative competence, is relevant to the realm of politeness as it involves interacting with people. This is evident by Milroy's statement given below which relates politeness as one component of communicative competence:

Even if (a person's) knowledge of (syntactic, semantic and phonological rules) is complete, he must also acquire communicative competence-knowledge of when to speak or to be silent; how to speak in each occasion; how to communicate (and interpret) meanings of respect, seriousness, humour, politeness or intimacy [11].

A common scenario seen in job interviews involving Malaysian graduates depicts that they have difficulties in conveying their expressions politely and courteously. This usually results in miscommunication which consequently could further lead to communication breakdown (Willems, as cited in [12]). This is because, ones' background and linguistic proficiency differs to another and hence, would result in different pragmatic performance, including the use of politeness strategies [13; 14]. As evident in many situations, politeness is regarded as a significant strategy to be attended to so as to avoid impolite and aggressive talk which may result in conflicts caused by different impressions on the addressees [2].

Undeniably, real-life interactions demand a great deal of spontaneity and the ability to cope with the unexpected [15]. When the second language learners perform in authentic communicative situations, they are expected to deal with problems like incapability in retrieving words, comprehending an idiomatic expression and holding onto a topic. As to compensate their linguistic deficiencies, speakers are required to develop communicative competence in an attempt to enhance their effectiveness in communication and as mentioned earlier, this includes inserting the element of politeness in communication. With regard to this, role-play is indeed the closest simulation of real-life daily conversation as there are a growing number of literatures presented on the effectiveness of implementing role–play in enhancing communicative skills [4; 5; 6].

The kind of discrepancy between the linguistic proficiency and politeness strategies used is the core aspect of the current research. This is parallel to the objective of the study which aims at investigating the use of politeness strategies by a group of UiTM students; the findings are expected to be useful not only to help them communicate more competently but also to incorporate politeness in their speech.

Research Objectives: The objectives of this study are:
- To identify the most preferred politeness strategies employed by ELC121 takers during role-play assessment.
- To investigate the relationship between the use of politeness strategies and students' linguistic proficiency.
- To examine the influence of linguistic proficiency on the use of politeness strategies in the role-play assessments.

Research Questions: This study aims to answer the following research questions:
- What are the most preferred politeness strategies employed by ELC121 takers during role-play assessment?

- Is there a relationship between the use of politeness strategies and students' linguistic proficiency?
- To what extent does students' linguistic proficiency influence their use of politeness strategies in the role-play assessment?

Significance of the Study: This study focuses on politeness strategies used by students of different linguistic proficiency. It seeks to implicate better understandings towards the importance of incorporating politeness when conversing in real-life communications in which this study utilizes role-play as the model. Concurrently, the students will be highly benefited when they are introduced to role-play tasks since they act as training grounds to equip them for the job interviews after their graduation.

While there are many studies conducted on politeness and linguistic proficiency, there seems to be limited literatures that study on politeness application in role-play activities. Thus, the researchers aim to fill the research gap.

Literature Review

The Concept of Politeness: "Politeness", a technical term used in the fields of pragmatics and sociolinguistics, is more often discernible in verbal interactions; the term which plays a crucial role in daily conversations as it signifies whether the utterances expressed and uttered by the interlocutors in any social settings are polite or impolite. The earlier proponents such as Fraser [16] defines politeness as "a property associated with an utterance in which according to the hearer, the speaker has neither exceeded any rights nor failed to fulfill any obligation" (p. 13) while Ferguson (as cited in [17]) sees politeness as formulas in terms of "interpersonal rituals". Lakoff (as cited in [2]) considered politeness as a kind of behavior which has been developed in societies with the purpose of reducing friction in personal interaction.

Additionally, Mills [18] defined politeness as "the expression of the speakers' intention to mitigate face threats carried by certain face threatening acts (FTAs) toward another". Realizing the significance of saving others' face, Seyyed Mohammad Reza *et al.*, [19] recommend the interlocutors employ strategies by which FTAs can be mollified; those which are called politeness strategies. The level of politeness can be assessed by three factors, i.e. the power between the speaker and hearer, social distance between addressor and addressee and the ranking of the imposition [20].

Politeness Theories: The various views on politeness as given above have resulted in two differing views of this notion namely the traditional classical views and the post-modern views.

The traditional views of politeness studies were proposed by Lakoff [21], Brown and Levinson [22] and Leech [23]. Lakoff's theory of politeness put an emphasis on the development of 'generative semantics' with the integration of speech act theory into generative models of language. Lakoff's rules of politeness are seen as part of a system of pragmatic rules and these rules complement syntactic and semantic rules to Grice's Cooperative Principle as cited in [17]. In 1978, Brown and Levinson's politeness theory appeared; the theory which is certainly the most influential since it has observed numerous reactions, applications, critics, modifications and revisions. Meanwhile, Leech's approach to linguistic politeness focuses on how language is used in communication. Nonetheless, it does not aim at accounting for pragmatic competence as opposed to Lakoff's politeness theory. Leech instead is more concerned in creating highly precise formalized rules such as those in the syntactic or semantic components of a grammar [24].

On the contrary, the post-modern views were inspired mostly by Mills [18], Watts [24] and Ellen [25]. These scholars criticized the traditional theories as politeness cannot be achieved by using linguistic devices or particular strategies per se; hence, it is crucial to significantly acknowledge the addressee's interpretations rather than speaker's intentions aiming at being socially polite in any social settings as it is a required and accepted norm [17; 26]. Mills [18] agreed that the central part in post-modern theories is the need for a process-oriented view of a conversation. Also, the search for pragmatic rules would have to be grounded in the notion of pragmatic competence [24]. In other words, post-modernists exemplify politeness concept in the area of 'interactional sociolinguistics'.

In spite of the wave of criticisms to traditional view of politeness theories which have been developed over the past years, the researchers deem that Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness [22] stills holds its ground as relevant and reliable model concerning the current study of politeness strategies utilised by the L2 learners. Additionally, this theory explains the ways politeness is produced by interlocutors and it contemplates politeness in a plausible manner posited by Kuntsi [27]. This theory also pays attention on the various strategies interlocutors used to create politeness.

Therefore, this model is adopted in this study due to the fact that it is universally well-founded in the social study of language, pragmatics in particular. Diagram 1 below illustrates Brown and Levinson 's Politeness Theory [22].

Brown & Levinson's (1978) Politeness Theory: Brown & Levinson [22] introduced politeness theory which gives attention to five strategies which can be employed by interlocutors in any social context in order to redress the severity of the face threatening acts (FTAs). These five strategies which are presented in the diagram below consisting of bald on-record, positive and negative politeness with redressive action, off-record (indirect strategy) and avoidance of FTA.
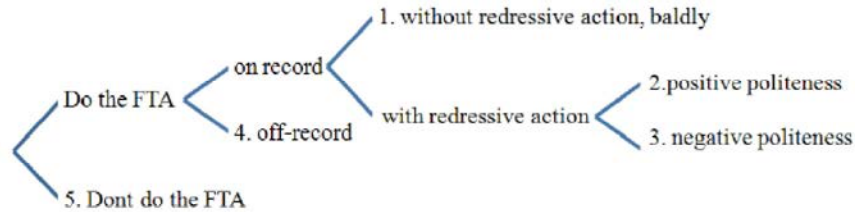

Fig. 1: Brown & Levinson's (1978) Politeness Theory

Since it is indispensable to save the hearer's face when FTAs are desired, Brown & Levinson [22] proposed these five politeness strategies:

- Bald on record: The least polite form of committing FTAs shocks and embarrasses the addressees; thus, it is frequently used when the speaker has a close relationship with the hearer. The speaker's purpose is to convey the message explicitly and unambiguously. Such instances can be seen in situations of urgency, ("Watch out!"), efficiency, ("Hear me out") and imperative manner ("Give your examples"),

- Positive Politeness: The speaker shows an attempt to reduce threat to the hearer's positive face. In other words, the speaker recognizes the friendliness in the relationship with the listener and the desire to be liked and accepted. For example: "Oh, dear, I got very unhappy when I heard that" (giving gift to the hearer in the form of sympathy), "Let's start answering exercises of the book" (including both speaker and hearer in an activity) and "Why don't we answer exercises of the book?" (telling or asking for reasons).

- Negative Politeness: Conversely, this is usually oriented from the hearer's negative face as the aim is to avoid being imposed on others. Negative politeness strategies can be executed through distancing styles like apologies, using questions and hedges and being pessimistic. For instance: "You must forgive me, but I could not understand the meaning of the poem you have written", "Can I ask you some questions?" and "Can't we ask questions about other participants? Can we?"

- Off-record (Indirect Strategy): This strategy uses indirect language to remove the speaker from the potential to be imposed by the other party. The speaker will opt for connotations, hints and implicature instead of direct requests. The example of the utterance "Wow, it is really hot here" implies the listener to turn on the air-conditioner or to switch on the fan, without directly requesting the listener to do so.

- Don't do the FTA: The strategy which is the politest form is employed when a speaker feels uncomfortable making mitigated requests by applying any of the above strategies; therefore, the speaker would rather give hints to satisfy his or her wants ("There is a hammer right behind you") or the speaker simply keeps silent, says nothing.

On the types of politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson [22], one study that relates the use of various politeness strategies was conducted by Zena Moayad *et al*. [17] involving politeness strategies employed by six Arab postgraduate students in writing emails to their supervisors during their period of study at Malaysian universities. The findings indicate that Arab students used various politeness strategies, including positive and negative politeness strategies when communicating with their supervisors via e-mail. However, they tend to use more direct strategies in their requests when communicating in English and appallingly, none of the participants used indirect strategy even though the element of power distance unquestionably exists in the conversation. By doing so, it could lead to

misunderstanding and misinterpretation of their emails thus highlighting the significance of teaching pragmatic awareness to L2 learners.

In relation to this, Seyyed Mohammad Reza *et al*., [19] delved into analyzing politeness strategies, the ones listed in Brown and Levinson's politeness theory [22], in posts written by Iranian EFL learners in a class blog, in view of the fact that information and communication technology (ICT) has become prominent in today's educational system. The participants of the study were 14 Iranian EFL learners selected based on their level of language proficiency. There were 1520 politeness utterances across all posts including 800 politeness utterances used when learners were interacting with their instructor and 720 politeness utterances used when learners were interacting with their peers. The collected data were analyzed using content analysis as well as Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA). Analysis of data showed that learners frequently used positive politeness strategies as signs of psychologically close relationship, reciprocity and friendship in a group.

While the above studies showed similarities in their findings, a different finding was reported by Shigeru [28] in which negative politeness was often applied by four Japanese graduate students in their conversations when FTAs were committed whereas in some cases, students kept silent without doing any FTA. The participants' silence was justified by the fact that gracefulness is rewarded in the Japanese culture. One other research done by Pariera [29] on politeness strategies used in emails when talking about taboo topics with the participants' closest friends and strangers revealed that negative politeness and off record strategies were more frequently employed towards friends than strangers.

Linguistic Proficiency versus Pragmatic Competence:
The term "linguistic proficiency" used in the present study refers to the L2 proficiency wherein according to Feng [30], it signifies L2 learners' overall competence in the target language which includes organizational knowledge as well as pragmatic knowledge. On these types of knowledge, Feng [30] asserts that "the former refers to the knowledge of organizing utterances or sentences and texts such as lexical and grammatical knowledge, while the latter refers to the knowledge of using sentences and texts appropriately in situations" (p. 558-559).

Previous studies [31; 32; 33] have concluded that levels of L2 proficiency must be determined by standardized test scores as their indicators of proficiency

are considered more reliable and they are usually based on a systematic evaluation. Therefore, English language proficiency in this study is determined by the participants' English grade in Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), a standardized public examination taken at the end of upper form level in Malaysian schools.

Pragmatic competence, alternatively, refers to the L2 learners' ability in using the target language forms or speech acts appropriately in respect of social variables that are present such as social status and familiarity [14]. It is inadequate for an L2 learner to only know the words and phrases since any misinterpretations of them could lead to pragmatic failure and communication breakdown [34]. In short, linguistic proficiency and pragmatic competence are closely related and their roles in achieving accurate and appropriate communication have been found in the results of previous studies on pragmatics.

There are a considerable number of researchers who have been interested in examining the relationship between politeness strategies usage and L2 speakers' linguistic proficiency particularly in the practice of role-play. One study that relates the use of politeness with learners' proficiency level in role-play tasks was conducted by Al-Gahtani, S. & Roever [13] who examined sequential organization of requests among 26 male Saudi learners of Australian English. The participants' proficiency levels are wide-ranging, from beginners up to advanced learners. Three role-play tasks were conducted individually and were audio-taped; each of which required a long conversation that varied in the power relationship between interlocutors. The findings showed higher proficiency learners had better pragmatic competence at discourse level and interestingly the lower proficiency learners performed significantly better with interlocutors of different power relationship.

One other similar study which does not focus on role-play but shared the same findings in which it provides an interesting insight that could best explain the issue on different linguistic proficiency among L2 speakers was conducted by Thitinart, K. & Prachamon [14]. The study involved a multiple-rejoinder discourse completion task comprising 24 scenarios used as an instrument to collect data. 16 high proficiency and 14 low proficiency Thai learners are the subjects to examine the pragmatic competence of in performing speech acts of thanks and apologies. The results of t-tests showed significant differences in the pragmatic competence performed by the two subject groups whereby the high English proficiency learners outperformed the low-level

Table 1: Participants' demographic data

Participants' Demographic Data	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender:		
Male	6	20.00
Female	24	80.00
Age:		
18 years old	26	86.66
19 years old	2	6.67
20 years old	2	6.67
SPM English Results:		
A+, A, A- (Highly Proficient)	10	33.33
B+, B, B- (Proficient)	15	50.00
C+, C, C- (Moderately Proficient)	5	16.67
Faculties:		
Accounting	6	20.00
Computer Science	4	13.33
Information Management	8	26.67
Mathematical Science	4	13.33
Public Administration & Policy Studies	8	26.67

counterparts. The study concludes the existence of positive relationship between linguistic proficiency and pragmatic competence of L2 speakers.

Methodology

Sample: The participants of the study included 30 Part One Diploma students, 24 of whom were female and 6 were male. These participants, aged from 18 to 20, were studying in different majors of Accounting, Computer Science, Information Management, Mathematical Science and Public Administration & Policy Studies faculties at UniversitiTeknologi Mara (UiTM) Kelantan Machang Campus. This study employed the convenience technique of sampling which involves drawing samples that are both easily accessible and willing to participate in a study [35]. According to Latham [36], with this type of sampling, it is relatively an easy choice for researchers. In this present study, the participants can readily be accessible within the period of study since they are the researchers' students and the role-play assessment must be conducted by the researchers themselves.

As the study seeks to apprehend the significant relationship between student's linguistic proficiency and politeness strategies employed during the assessment, the participants' Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) English results were needed to measure the participants' proficiency level of the English language. Hence, the participants' demographic data which includes SPM English results, gender, age and areas of studies were gathered and presented in Table 1:

Procedure: This qualitative study involved observations on a group of ELC121 students who were put in pairs and asked to act out a role-play task as part of ELC121 assessments. To initiate this oral task, the ELC121 takers were given five minutes to prepare the responses on one specified situation randomly selected by the researchers (see Appendix 1) and the other five minutes were given for them to act out the role-play. Each situation varies in terms of theme but all of them revolve around informal setting. Observations made on each role-play allows the researchers to observe how the participants develop their character and respond to the given set of circumstances in accordance to Shaw [37] using different politeness strategies. Being informal, the situations requires interpersonal communication that is more real and immediate, allowing them to think beyond their own perspective [37; 38]. It is therefore equitable to assume that their interactions are spontaneous, hence, reflecting their real communicative competence in using the English language.

In addition to observing students' role-play activities, the 15 different role-play sessions based on five informal situations, performed by 15 selected pairs, were video-recorded to facilitate the researchers in the data analysis later. These oral data were then transcribed in a verbatim form (the oral data were transcribed without amending the real utterances expressed by the participants) based on complete interactions in an attempt to allow full understanding of the conversations.

Data Analysis: The collected data were analyzed using content analysis anchored in Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness strategy (1978). As contended by Nartey [39], this method is applied to enable the researchers to comprehend the process and character of social life as well as to arrive at the interlocutors' meanings. He further declared that content analysis assists the researchers in understanding the types, characteristics and organizational aspects of social products and what they claim. The content analysis used in the present study followed deductive approach and the collected data were analyzed based on some predetermined categorical schemes. The focus of analysis was the politeness strategies and data analysis commenced with the classification of types of politeness strategies including bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness and off record strategies identified by Brown and Levinson [22].

In this study, the chi-square test (x^2) was used to determine whether there is a significant relationship between students' linguistic proficiency and the politeness strategies employed in the role-play assessment. The purpose of this statistical test is to test the hypothesis of no association between these two categorical variables in which the observed counts are compared to the expected counts. Here, the observed counts are referred to as the collected data to find the degree of independence of both variables mentioned while the expected counts are referred to as an assumption of frequencies derived from the collected data in order to find the degree of independence of both variables mentioned. Both counts are taken into consideration in the calculation of chi-square value sought in this study.

The relationship between students' linguistic proficiency and politeness strategies is presented in the hypothesis below:

H0: There is no relationship between politeness strategies used and linguistic proficiency
H1: There is a relationship between politeness strategies used and linguistic proficiency.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

There were 368 politeness utterances identified according to Brown & Levinson framework [22]. The utterances were derived from five different role-play assessment topics performed by 15 pairs of participants.

Table 2: The frequency of politeness strategies used by each pair in the role-play assessments.

Politeness Strategies/pairs	Bald-on record	Positive	Negative	Off-record	Total
Pair 1	5	7	11	0	23
Pair 2	1	4	6	0	11
Pair 3	5	11	15	0	31
Pair 4	1	7	9	1	18
Pair 5	6	14	10	1	31
Pair 6	17	12	10	0	39
Pair 7	10	13	10	0	33
Pair 8	5	10	7	1	23
Pair 9	5	8	9	0	22
Pair 10	2	10	4	1	17
Pair 11	6	11	6	0	23
Pair 12	8	6	9	0	23
Pair 13	5	10	11	0	26
Pair 14	2	3	18	2	25
Pair 15	5	9	7	2	23
TOTAL	83	135	142	8	368

Table 3: Frequency of the type of politeness strategies used by the participants in the role-play assessment

Types of Politeness Strategies	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Bald on record	84	22.83
Positive Politeness	134	36.41
Negative Politeness	143	38.86
Off-record	7	1.90
TOTAL	368	100.00

Table 2 illustrates the detailed frequency of politeness strategies used by each pair in the role-play assessment as to provide clearer view in explaining the discussions of findings below based on Brown & Levinson framework [22].

The results in Table 3 below address the first research question. It shows the frequency counts of the most preferred strategies employed by the participants. Note that the types of these strategies presented in Table 3 are ordered according to their appearance in Brown and Levinson [22].

Based on Table 3, it can be concluded that the most preferred strategy was "Negative Politeness" which recorded 38.86% (see Table 2). This strategy is employed to mitigate the face threatening acts (FTA) that consequently save the face of the hearer. This is followed by "Positive Politeness", which has relatively minimal discrepancy with negative politeness strategies (2.45%). The participants used 36.41% "Positive Politeness" in their role-play assessment such as "*Indoor game? What kind of indoor game are you playing?*" in order to reduce the threat towards the hearer's positive face. Then, 22.83% "Bald on Record" is used as the third most selected strategies in the role-play. This strategy does not

Table 4: Chi- square (x^2) test across different proficiency levels based on participants' SPM English grades

TYPES/GRADES	A (Highly proficient)	B (Proficient)	C (Moderately proficient)	Total
Bald on record	15 (22.78)	43 (45.56)	25 (14.66)	83
Positive politeness	33 (37.05)	83 (74.10)	19 (23.85)	135
Negative politeness	50 (38.97)	71 (77.95)	21 (25.08)	142
Bald off-record	3 (2.20)	5 (4.39)	0 (1.41)	8
Total	101	202	65	368
Chi- Square value (x^2)				18.784
Alpha value (α)				0.05
degree of freedom (d.f)				6
critical value				12.59
N				368

• Values in parenthesis refer to expected counts

Table 5: The percentage of frequency of the politeness strategies used across different proficiency levels based on participants' SPM English grades

TYPES/GRADES (%)	A (Highly proficient)	B (Proficient)	C (Moderately proficient)
Bald on record	14.85	21.29	38.46
Positive Politeness	32.67	41.09	29.23
Negative Politeness	49.50	35.15	32.31
Off-record	2.97	2.48	0.00

seek to mitigate the threat to the hearer's face. For example, one student uttered "*why suddenly you tell me you want to travel independently?*" Lastly, the least preferred politeness strategy is "Off-Record (1.9%) that is employed to indirectly give responses as to minimize conflict. For example, "*you know…nowadays it's very hot in Malaysia*". This type of strategy requires both speaker and hearer to have mutual understanding of the topic in order to grasp the hints and hidden meaning of the utterances.

While Table 3 shows the overall results, Tables 4 and 5 show the results across different proficiency levels based on students' SPM grades. They provide answers for research questions 2 and 3, respectively.

In order to check if there is a significant relationship between the frequency of politeness strategies used and linguistic proficiency, chi square test (x^2) was used. Meanwhile, the linguistic proficiency was determined via their Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) English grades whereby the students were regarded as Highly Proficient, Proficient and Moderately Proficient when they obtained an A, B and C respectively for their English subject in SPM.

The results of the chi-square test based on the observed and expected data for the frequency of politeness strategies that occurred among Highly Proficient (A), Proficient (B) and Moderately Proficient (C) participants are shown in Table 4.

As indicated in Table 4, the value of chi-square (x^2) is 18.784. In this regard, the relationship between politeness

strategies used and linguistic proficiency is considered insignificant if the x^2 value is less than the provided critical value that is 12.59 (d.f = 6, α = 0.05). This would lead to H0 being accepted. However, from the analysis of this study, it is proven that there is a significant relationship between politeness strategies used and linguistic proficiency as the data recorded x^2 value of 18.784 which is greater than the critical value of 12.59 (d.f = 6, α = 0.05). Therefore, the H0 is rejected, hence indicating that there exists a significant relationship between politeness strategies used and linguistic proficiency.

When the frequency of the politeness strategies is classified according to students' SPM grades, the results are shown in Table 5.

Referring to Table 5, it can be concluded that Highly Proficient (A) participants employed more "Negative Politeness" strategy than other groups. On contrary, Proficient participants who obtained grade B in their SPM English results preferred to use more "Positive Politeness" strategy while "Bald on record" is the most utilized politeness strategy among Moderately Proficient (C) participants. In addition, "Off-record" is the least used politeness strategy among all participants of different L2 proficiency levels.

Bald on Record: This type of strategy is used frequently among Moderately Proficient participants who obtained grade "C" in their SPM (see Table 5). 38.46 % bald on record is used as it is mostly used in imperative manner such as in Excerpt 1 below.

Excerpt 1:

B: *...I had read in an article in the Internet about we have to...we...we...must take a breakfast in the morning because it will avoid from sleepy in class. Is it right for you?*

A: *Yes Yan. You...you take attention for me right now. Like I say just now, if you take breakfast, you will not feel sleepy in class. You will more focus and you will give more attention.*

(Pair 8)

As shown in Excerpt 1, the utterance "*you take attention for me right now*" is one of the instances that signify maximum efficiency and clarity while Speaker A wants the hearer to pay attention to her points.

Furthermore, bald on record is also utilized when the threat to the hearer's face is very minimal, thus the direct utterances are utilized such as in Excerpt 2;

Excerpt 2:

A: *Do you have any time to talk about our leisure time?*

B: *Yes, I always have time for you Aiman. Just came...Just come in.*

(Pair 9)

Expression such as "*just come in*" indicates that Speaker B saw less threat imposing Speaker A which usually signals solidarity between the speakers. This could be explained through their roles as roommates in situation provided (see Appendix 1, Situation 1) whereby they need to act close to each other. Moreover, from the excerpts above, it can be seen that Speaker B who is Moderately Proficient (C) utilized direct utterances when talking to Speaker A who is Proficient (B). Speaker A employed negative politeness strategy by incorporating indirect message such as "*do you have any time...?*" in order to lessen the threat towards Speaker B's face and to appear more polite in the conversation.

Positive Politeness: As seen in Table 5, positive politeness is the most preferred politeness strategy employed in the role-play assessment among the Proficient (B) participants. Positive politeness is termed as one of the strategies that "attempts to reduce the threat to the hearer's positive face and to ensure that the hearer is comfortable" [17]. The use of such strategies in the current study was evident when the speakers tried to avoid disagreement by giving justifications. Such occurrences can be identified in excerpt below in which

the participants were given the role as classmates to discuss the venue to celebrate Teacher's Day (see Appendix 1, Situation 5). The two (2) options were either a famous restaurant or a classroom.

Excerpt 3:

B: *Are you sure with that?*

A: *Yes, I'm very sure because I have been there so many time. It was one of the famous restaurant and ya...I've seen a lot of good feedback and stuff...well I know these from my relatives and I...I have a friend he said they have celebrate their reunion as well.*

(Pair 13)

In the above excerpt, the two (2) speakers were using positive politeness to justify their choice about the venue without damaging the hearer's positive face. This is clearly seen in Speaker A's response to justify his preferred venue while at the same time, to avoid disagreement. Also, it should be noted that both speakers are Proficient (B) English users of English.

Another instance of avoiding disagreement by using Brown and Levinson [22] positive politeness theory, is evident in Excerpt 4 in which speaker A was trying to persuade Speaker B to take breakfast everyday (see Appendix 1, Situation 2).

Excerpt 4:

A: *...If you don't eat your breakfast, you will surely eat a lot of food during your lunch and it is not good because it is not proper.*

B: *I know. When I eat breakfast, it also part of proper diet. When we take a breakfast we can avoid from gastritis and also we can get a healthy life.*

A: *Yes, that's right. Now you know why it is important for us to have breakfast everyday right?*

(Pair 15)

Prior to the above excerpt, Speaker A (Highly Proficient) was trying earnestly to convince Speaker B on the importance of having breakfast every morning. This includes telling Speaker B that she already suffered from gastritis and could be hospitalized if her gastritis worsened. Speaker A also added that not taking breakfast could cause tiredness, making Speaker B not to be able to focus in class.

However, Speaker B (Proficient) responded by repeating the same reason that she usually did not take breakfast because she was always late for class. Upon hearing this, Speaker A suggested Speaker B to have a

proper time schedule and wake up early every morning. She continued saying that without breakfast, Speaker B would be starving during daytime and she would surely eat a lot of food during lunch which was not good for her. After much persuasion by Speaker A, Speaker B eventually decided to agree with Speaker A in order to avoid conflicts. Notice that Speaker B's response Excerpt 4 was a list of benefits for taking breakfast gathered by her based on input given by Speaker A.

Negative Politeness: This is the most common politeness strategy employed by Highly Proficient (A) participants in the current study. This type of strategy can be considered as a desire to be autonomous and also avoidance of imposition of the hearer's negative face. This can be achieved through distancing style such as using modal verbs, hedges and asking permission to ask questions. As indicated by the results of the current study, negative politeness is associated with proficient L2 learners and this supports the findings of Thitinart, K. & Prachamon [14] study which indicated that high English proficiency learners showed high pragmatic ability and vice versa. The instances of such manifestation are evident in the following two (2) excerpts. Excerpt 5 took place when Speaker A highlighted the importance of taking breakfast everyday (Appendix 1, Situation 2) while Excerpt 6 occurred when two (2) cousins were discussing a wedding preparation (Appendix 1, Situation 3).

Excerpt 5:

B: *Can you give me a example of food that I can eat …to eat…to boost my energy during my exam….during every day?*
A: *Sure, you can eat bread, so it can give you a lot of carbohydrate right?*

(Pair 1)

Excerpt 6:

B: *Emm…I'm thinking about the grand, luxurious with gold black theme…did you agree with that…I think it's look nice*
A: *I agree with that but emm… I'm sorry because I think it is…I think for you…you was the eldest child in the family right? So I think my recommendation is you should think about the other siblings first*

(Pair 4)

In the above excerpts, both speakers attempted to mitigate threat towards each other's face by asking questions and hedging. In Excerpt 5, Speaker B used question form with modal auxiliaries such as "Can you...?" This subsequently allows Speaker A to feel less threaten and responded accordingly as Irina Janina [40] stated that modal verb is a perfect component to be used as a hedging device since it reflects the speaker's attitude while allowing them to express their views indirectly.

As for Excerpt 6, Speaker A displayed the use of hedges by apologizing to her counterpart as to show her disagreement with the latter's idea to have a grand wedding without damaging her face. The use of hedges also indicates the speaker's reluctance to resort for a mutual understanding or agreement in the conversation.

Off-Record: The final type of politeness strategy used by the participants is off-record that is to be indirect and ambiguous in their speech. This indirect and the most polite strategy is the least preferred among the participants as 2.97% Highly Proficient (A) participants and 2.48% Proficient (B) participants employed it in their speeches. Moderately Proficient (C) participants chose not to use Off-record, as it requires them to give hints and association certain choice of words. This relates to research finding Mohammad Aliakbari & Rezvan Moalemi [2] in which only a minor portion of the 177 Iranian students opted for this strategy in their interactions.

Additionally, Zhao & Gao [41] assert that this strategy has a probability of not being responded by the addressee. Here, it is reasonable to believe that the addressee may not respond the way the speaker expected to as the hints or association of meanings conveyed is unsuccessful. As seen in Excerpt 7, when asked about other benefits of playing indoor games by Speaker A (Proficient), Speaker B (Moderately Proficient) ambiguously stated on the climate of Malaysia and the response by his counterpart was minimal as the latter merely answered "yes" in the end.

Excerpt 7:

A: *So, what our…what the another advantage that can support your idea?*
B: *You know, nowadays it's very hot in Malaysia.*
A: *Yes*

(Pair 8)

Another example of Off-record strategy is seen in Excerpt 8 whereby two (2) travel mates were discussing whether or not they should use the service of a travel agency for their next vacation in Indonesia.

Excerpt 8:

B: Actually Murshidee, I have search in the Internet about this travel agency that guide us, the tourist

A: So, you want to go to Indonesia with hiring the service of travel agency?

(Pair 14)

In Example 8, the indirectness of speech is demonstrated by Speaker B (Highly Proficient) as he attempted to minimize FTA towards Speaker A (Proficient) by giving association and clues with the hope that his partner will understand his desire to travel with travel agency. Speaker A managed to get the clue and responded accordingly to the Speaker B's statement. Hence, further conflict is avoided in the discussion to decide on the best way to travel in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

The present study investigated the use of politeness strategies in role-play assessments. The results of the study revealed that negative and positive politeness strategies were the most selected politeness strategies to redress face threatening acts (FTAs) to the interlocutors in the selected five situations. Bald on record was found to be the third most selected strategy employed by the participants. Even though off-record and "don't do the FTA" are the most polite forms declared by Brown and Levinson [22] theory of politeness, they were the least preferred strategies as only 1.9% participants employed them during oral interactions.

The other finding of this study is that there exists a significant relationship between the participants' linguistic proficiency and the types of politeness strategies the participants adopted in their interactions. Highly Proficient (those who scored A in SPM English) participants employed more negative politeness strategies than other groups. For Proficient participants (those who obtained B), they preferred to use more positive politeness strategies whereas the least proficient participants (those who obtained C) opted for the least polite forms of committing FTAs, bald on record.

While the findings of this study help to provide greater understanding of participants' L2 competency and soft skills, they also make valuable input for curriculum designers to gauge the appropriate competency level in language assessments so that the students can function well in real oral communication. Gradually, they are expected to become more competent speakers of English.

Here, it is imperative for teachers to acknowledge students with mix abilities in classrooms as they opt different ways of communication; one of these is seen in their adoption of politeness strategies. In relation to this, as evident in the findings of the study, the most polite strategy i.e. negative politeness emerged among the proficient students while the least polite strategy i.e. bald on-record is adopted by the least proficient learners. Although in some situations being over polite using super polite expressions such as *"kindly please advise me", "with due respect I beg to inform"* and *"thanking you in anticipation"* according to Parasher (as cited in [42]) is unacceptable to native English speakers, in general, being polite would be most preferred by interlocutors. It is worthwhile to train the learners especially the less proficient to be more polite. Considering this idea, it is suggested that a classroom is made as a platform for proficient students to help their less proficient classmates to communicate more politely by exposing them to various politeness strategies.

Despite this valuable research finding, it should be noted that this study involves UiTM students at Kelantan campus only who could not be used to represent the whole population of Part One students taking ELC121 at UiTM. The results therefore, could not be generalized to the whole population of UiTM students taking ELC121.

Similarly, it should be noted that the absence of power distance factor in the chosen situations fairly affects the types politeness strategies used. These unavoidably limit the conclusions that can be made from the study. Hence, it is recommended that the situations of role-play tasks should include both formal and informal contexts so that the elements of language use, social distance and power relationship between interlocutors can be further investigated. Besides, in-depth analysis concerning negative and politeness sub-strategies is needed to examine the purposes and reasons for employing such politeness strategies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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Appendix 1:
The five situations performed by the participants of the role-play assessment:

Situation 1: Two roommates are planning for activities to do during their leisure time. One of them suggests playing an outdoor game while the other thinks that they should play an indoor game. Act out the conversation that takes place at their hostel.

Situation 2: You noticed that your best friend always skips his/her breakfast. He/She suffers from gastritis which makes him/her feels a burning pain in the stomach. This poor health condition distracts his/her attention in class. As a friend, advise him/her on the importance of having breakfast every day. Act out the scene that takes place in the classroom.

Situation 3: You are discussing a wedding preparation with your cousin. He/She plans to have a grand, luxurious wedding ceremony as he/she is the eldest child in the family. Advise him/her to be moderate or reasonable in the preparation. Act out the scene that takes place at a one-stop wedding exhibition.

Situation 4: Two travel mates are planning for a vacation in Indonesia. One of them suggests hiring the service of a travel agency to get the best offer while the other prefers to travel independently to save money. Act out the conversation that takes place at the office.

Situation 5: A class representative is discussing with is/her assistant on a plan to celebrate Teacher's Day for their teachers. One of them suggests organizing an appreciation party at a famous restaurant and the other plans to have a potluck party and celebrate it in a classroom. Act out the conversation that takes place in the classroom.