

The Use of Politeness Strategies in Digital Communication in Algerian Higher Education

L'emploi des stratégies de politesse dans la communication digitale dans l'enseignement supérieur en Algérie

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Abstract: This study examines the politeness strategies employed by Algerian students in virtual contexts at the level of their university online platforms. The research utilizes a mixed method approach, which combines qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis techniques. The data collection includes the analysis of a total of one hundred (100) messages posted by students whom are actively using the e-learning platform, these messages are posted from 2021 to 2022 relying on Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, the study takes place in a virtual context (e-learning platform) of the Department of English at Mouloud Mammeri University of Tizi Ouzou (UMMTO). The findings reveal that Algerian university students do use politeness strategies in the e-learning platform, and they tend to use the four identified strategies introduced by Brown and Levinson in their theory, which are as follow; positive and negative politeness, bald-on-record and off-record politeness strategies.

Keywords: CMC- Online platforms- Politeness theory, Higher Education.

Résumé : Cette étude examine les stratégies de politesse utilisées par les étudiants algériens dans des contextes virtuels au sein de leurs plateformes en ligne universitaires. La recherche adopte une approche mixte, combinant des méthodes de collecte et d'analyse de données qualitatives et quantitatives. La collecte de données comprend l'analyse d'un total de cent (100) messages postés par des étudiants qui utilisent activement la plateforme d'apprentissage en ligne. Ces messages ont été publiés de 2021 à 2022 en s'appuyant sur la théorie de la politesse de Brown et Levinson. L'étude se déroule dans un contexte virtuel (plateforme d'apprentissage en ligne) du département d'anglais de l'Université Mouloud Mammeri de Tizi Ouzou (UMMTO). Les résultats montrent que les étudiants universitaires algériens utilisent des stratégies de politesse sur la plateforme d'apprentissage en ligne, et ils ont tendance à utiliser les quatre stratégies identifiées introduites par Brown et Levinson dans leur théorie, à savoir la politesse positive et négative, les stratégies de politesse explicite et implicite.

Mots- clés : CMC - Plateformes en ligne - Théorie de la politesse – Enseignement Supérieur.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 virus has altered every facet of existence. Since the start of the pandemic in 2020, there has been less face-to-face interaction between people since keeping distance from one another helps stop the pandemic from spreading. Online communication has thus taken on the status of required communication (Khaldi and Aissaoui, 2022). Similarly, higher educational curricula worldwide have undergone significant modifications to accommodate remote, distance, online, and digital modes of delivery (Murphy, 2020). Therefore, the most prevalent method of contact in education nowadays is through online learning platforms. Algerian Higher Educational Institutions intensified the use of a virtual web platform called E-learning Discussion Forum that has been previously introduced to provide students with access to necessary information and facilitate the exchange of ideas in an academic setting allowing them to communicate and engage in conversations with each other.

Numerous studies in the past few years have reported conflicting findings about the efficacy and inefficacy of these E-learning platforms (Oktaria and Rahmayadevi, 2021). Most of studies signaled dissatisfaction among the learning agents due to the tangible obstacles faced throughout the process (Putri *et al.*, 2020; Susanto *et al.*, 2021). A few, however, attributed interest to the “*social nature of learning*” in online platforms (Khaldi and Aissaoui, 2022). The interaction aspect in online learning which appears to be completely different from that of face-to-face interaction seems to showcase a critical limitation in the E-learning discourse because of its not instantaneous. In both cases, fundamental guidelines of appropriate linguistic interaction are essential for effective communication mainly, the use of politeness strategies which compensate for the absence of non-verbal cues such as prosody and gestures in the online environment.

Research on politeness in education has shown that politeness methods play a vital role in establishing a pleasant environment during academic interactions. In a 2020 research, Sapitri discovered that social distance, age, student power, and language skill limitations all affected the choice of politeness strategy. Andi (2018) found that positive politeness is the most commonly employed method to reduce the face threat. There is no Face Threatening Act (FTA) throughout the encounter; therefore, the class maintains a healthy bond. This raises the question of how linguistic politeness strategies might have similar impacts in an online learning environment. This gap on the current online learning interaction’s politeness is what this study intends to fill. Subsequently, this article seeks to explore the existence and different types of politeness strategies employed in the E-learning discussion forum and its significance in the context of language and communication studies which can be summarized in the following questions:

1. Do university students use politeness strategies in their messages in e-learning discussion forum?
2. What type of politeness strategies do university students use in their messages in the e-learning discussion forum?

1. Literature review

1.1. Politeness

The field of politeness is an interdisciplinary field of study, investigated by scholars from linguistics, Sociology, Social psychology and Anthropology perspectives. The first innovative studies on politeness were done by Goffman (1967); Lakoff (1973); Leech (1983). Although many attempts and frameworks were made in order to tackle the concept of politeness. Yet, there still is no unified direction in the field, and there is *"a disconcerting amount of divergence and lack of clarity concerning the meaning of politeness"* (Mazid, 64: 2006). As Roger Sell says *"nothing will ever fix the reference of politeness to human behavior once and for all"* (Watts, XII:2003). However, generally the term of politeness is used to refer to *"good manners and rules of etiquette"* (Robinson, 494: 2013).

In the field of linguistics, the term politeness is much more complex; because, it is recognized that an expression cannot be innately polite or impolite. Thus, its interpretation depends on the context (Chejnová, 10: 2015). In spite of this, many theorists and researchers attempt to define politeness. As an illustration, Robin Lakoff argues that *"politeness is developed by societies in order to reduce friction in personal interaction"* (Watts, 50-52: 2003). Also, Leech (19: 1980) has a common viewpoint with Lakoff and considers politeness as *"a strategic conflict avoidance which can be measured in terms of the degree of effort put into the avoidance of a conflict situation"* (Watts, 50: 2003). In addition, Brown and Levinson (1978) define politeness *"as a complex system for softening face threats"*. Moreover, Kasper (194:1990) argues that *"communication is seen as fundamentally dangerous and antagonistic endeavor"*. Therefore, he highlights the importance of politeness and views it as a *"strategy"* for interlocutors to smooth and reduce the aggression during the communication (Sifiano, 82: 1992).

More precisely, the phenomenon of politesse was and still is in a gradual investigation by researchers to have a reliable politeness theory. Finally, the term polite is historically used to designate *"a polished person with good manners"* (Locher, 89: 2004). Sifiano (1998) as cited in Miriam A. Locher's book provides the etymology of the term "Politeness". *"Polite is derived from the Latin politus, past participle of polire meaning to smooth. Thus, "polite" originally meant "smoothed", "polished", and subsequently "refined", "cultivated", "well bred", and so on, when referring to people, and "courteous", "urban", etc. when referring to manners"* (89: 2004).

1.2. Linguistic Politeness Theories

Over the last 30 years, the field of politeness has appeared to be a new field of linguistic as a subfield of pragmatics (the study of meaning in interaction), specifically a sub-field of socio-pragmatics (Kádár, 9: 2010). Kasper views linguistic politeness as *"the process of ordering linguistic action in a trial to adapt it to a given communicative event"* (4: 1990). In other words, Linguistic politeness is considered as the use of linguistic means by a person in order to think and understand a social context of an interaction (Lounis, 132: 2015). In addition, Peter Robinson argues that *"politeness refers to the interpersonal or rational function of language where meaning is negotiated between interlocutors that are engaged in social interaction"* (493: 2013); because linguistic politeness deals with the *"social dynamics"* of human communication (Kádár, 10: 2010).

1.2.1. Brown and Levinson's Politeness Strategies

Brown and Levinson define politeness as *"a set of strategies that serve to minimize the risks to 'face' or 'self-esteem' whenever a speaker commits a 'face-threatening act'"* (Bouchara, 8: 2009). Thus,

politeness is the effort of a person to save face for another person when FTAs cannot be avoided during a conversation. Additionally, the expression "*politeness strategies*" refers to the conveyed message strategies that satisfy the face of the person addressed. Also, Politeness strategies differ from one language to another, from one society to another (El Hadj, 37:2010). It means that, politeness strategies are culture specific. Speakers engaged in a conversation cannot attain their objectives without doing FTAs (Bouchara, 8: 2009). Hence, a speaker is obliged to decide on how to commit a face-threatening act toward a hearer, in the same time saving their face (Schneider, 14: 2006).

Brown and Levinson (1987), accordingly, suggest five different ways for performing a face threatening act, referred to as politeness strategies that are represented in the following diagram (Watts, 87: 2003):

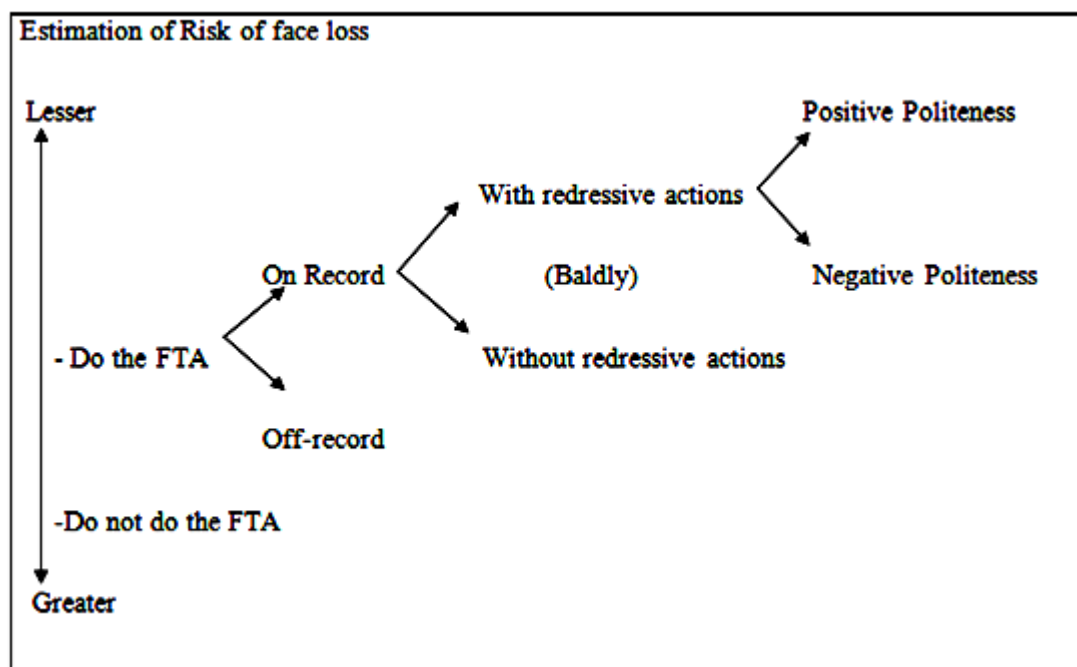


Figure 01 Brown and Levinson (1987) Politeness strategies

In the context of the reciprocal face work, any reasonable agent will seek to avoid these face threatening acts, or will employ certain strategies to reduce the threat. In other words, they will take into consideration one of Brown and Levinson's five strategies which sum up human "politeness" behavior in a hierarchical order: 'Bald on Record', 'Positive Politeness', 'Negative Politeness', and 'Off-Record' (indirect strategy), and the fundamental strategy is "Do not do the FTA" (Brown and Levinson, 315: 1987).

1.4. Politeness in Digital Communication

According to the literature, politeness in online communication differs from that of face-to-face due to the massive ways communicators employ to talk digitally. Most interlocutors have

various ways for communication, especially when using a sophisticated, formal and instant medium like online learning platforms (Khalidi and Boukhentache, 2019). Nonetheless, it is strenuous to hold a firm stance about this as there is few studies on politeness practices in online discourse in general, and learning platforms in particular. The majority of present research looks on how civility influences how successful online learning is. According to Vinagre (2008), successful computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) relies on social interaction among participants, which influences cognitive and socio-emotional processes during learning. Others focused on the students' or teachers' attitudes towards politeness in online learning platforms. Megawati's (2021) study examined linguistic politeness among English undergraduates in Jakarta using an online questionnaire to examine students' perceptions on language politeness. The study indicated that students have a good view of politeness in online learning, without actually examining their interactions. Despite the limitations in the literature, all the studies agree on the fact that Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory for computer-mediated communication (CMC) was found to be beneficial for study due to the prevalence of FTAs in CMC situations by Morand and Ocker (4: 2002). Consequently, this study adopts the same politeness theory seeking a different approach.

2. Research design

The research utilizes a mixed method approach, which combines qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis techniques. The qualitative method enables the collection of descriptive data directly from phenomenon under study, providing insights into variables and the participants' experiences Clarck (2011). Moreover, the mixed method approach offers flexibility and allows for the use of different approaches to address research questions and enhance the credibility in reporting results (Nykiel, 55: 2007).

The study takes place at the Department of English at Mouloud Mammeri University of Tizi-Ouzou (MMUTO), with a focus on the e-learning platform. The participants under investigation are Master two language and communication students, whom are actively engaged in the e-learning discussion platform. The data collection includes the analysis of a corpus which includes a total of one hundred (100) messages posted in the e-learning discussion platform by its users from 2021 to 2022 relying on Brown and Levinson's politeness theory.

3. Findings

The first part presents the corpus findings. Clearly, it demonstrates the existence and frequency of Politeness Strategies (Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory 1987) in the one hundred (100) messages collected from the E-learning discussion platform (See appendix A), as well as the corresponding proportion for each frequency. Aside from the percentage of times, the strategies are identified in students' communications. Finally, the numbers obtained are going to be displayed in a table, pie chart, and a graph.

Message 2

Hello miss, I've reformulate the first example in order to sound like a Law; Swiss tennis players have won the Davis Cup.

I don't think that "always" is appropriate because the example I gave is a fact, it really happens.

Message 3

Hello sir,

Take good care of you too.

See you after the holidays!

Message 4

Hello everyone! How did you find today's exam? Was it easy? Your critics please? If possible how did you answer the question?

Message 5

Hello everyone! How did you find today's exam? Was it easy? Your critics please? If possible how did you answer the question?

3.1. Identification of the Use of Politeness Strategies

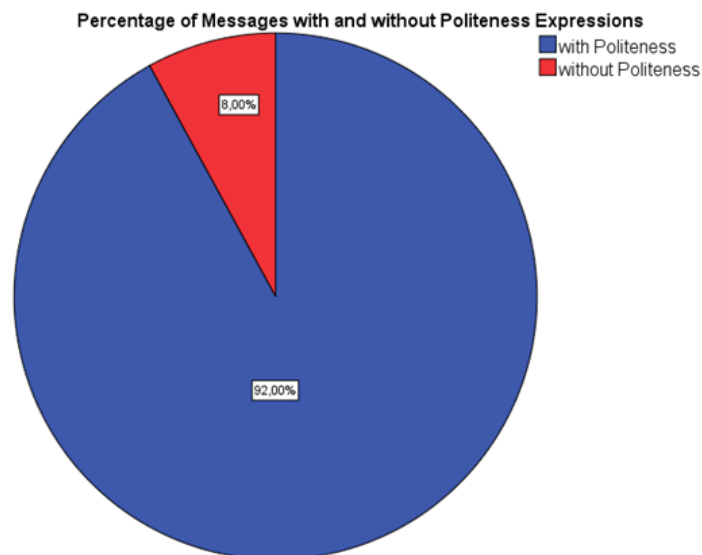


Figure 02 Percentage of messages with and without politeness expression

The results from the figure 2 show that, the majority 92% of the messages we analyzed using Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory contain politeness strategies. Yet, only a small percentage (8% of the messages) does not contain any politeness strategies.

3.2. Identification of the Number of Politeness Strategies Used

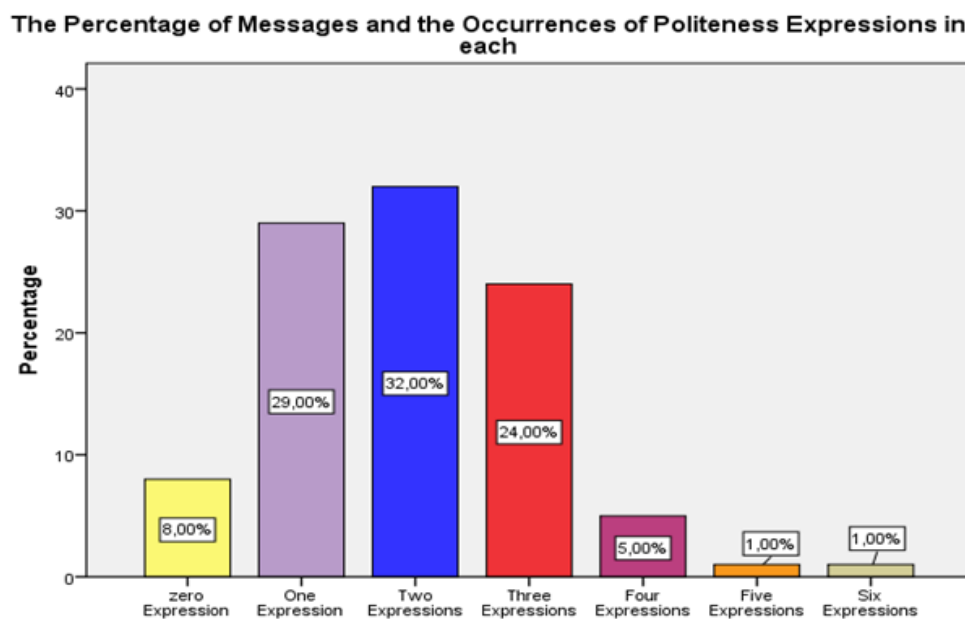


Figure 03 Percentage of messages of politeness expression

The figure above shows the percentage of messages and the occurrences of politeness strategies in each. It indicates clearly that 29% messages contain one (1) politeness strategy. 32% of the messages contain two (2) politeness strategies. 24% of the messages contain three (3) politeness strategies. 5% of the messages contain four (4) expressions, and 1% of the messages contain five

(5) politeness strategies, while 1% of the messages contain six (6) politeness strategies. From the results it is also identified that 8% of the messages posted in the forum do not include any politeness expressions.

3.3. Identification of the Types of Politeness Strategies in the Messages

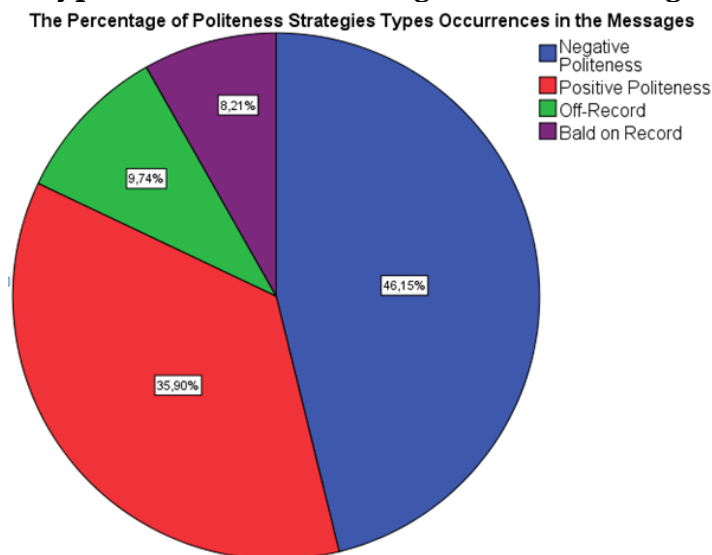


Figure 04 The percentage of politeness strategies types in the messages

As underscored in figure 4, the politeness strategy that is most frequent in the messages analyzed and the one that has got the highest percentage is the 'Negative Politeness strategy' making of 46.15%. Then, the strategy that comes next with a remarkable percentage of frequency is 'Positive Politeness strategy' with the total of 35.90%. Finally, the recorded results depict that 'On Record strategy' 9.64%, and 'Off Record strategy' 8.20% are less used by students in the one hundred (100) messages posted in the discussion forum.

4. Discussion

4.1. Politeness Strategies Use in the E-learning Discussion Forum

The investigation demonstrates that the analyzed corpus according to Brown and Levinson's theory (1987) the students use politeness strategies in their messages in the online platform For instance, we illustrate with the expressions: *"sorry I couldn't answer you earlier for I was busy"*, *"Thank you so much I really appreciate your help"*, *"I hope that my answer is clear. if you want another thing you ask me"*...etc. Additionally, a total of 92% of the posted messages contain 195 politeness strategies occurrences, whereas 8% of the posted messages do not include politeness strategies (Figure 01).

Also, almost each posted message contains at least one politeness strategy as shown in (Figure 02). (29%) of the messages posted in the forum contain one (1) politeness strategy. (32%) of the messages contain two (2) politeness strategies. (24%) of the messages have three (3) politeness strategies, while, (5%) of the messages contain four (4) politeness strategies, and (1%) of the messages have six (5) politeness strategies, and (1%) of the messages contain five (6) politeness strategies. Whereas, (8%) of the messages contain zero (0) politeness strategies. These messages

are considered to be more informative than expressive; because the students have used definitions and explanations to answer the other students' questions.

These results endorse Brown and Levinson's statement "*each speech act is considered as a face threatening act*" (Ogierman, 11: 2009). More precisely, when the students participate in the online platform and post their messages that may contain a piece of advice, a question, an order, a request, and a critic...etc, this communicates a possible threat of the other students' face. Therefore, the students try to soften their speech act and most of the times they tend to use more than one politeness strategy in one speech act. The use of politeness strategies is meant to reduce the severity of the FTA posted in the messages as it is shown in the results 63% of the messages contain more than one strategy. For example, the students make use of the following expressions: "*I would like of you, if you don't mind*", "*Thanks again for your efforts you make*", "*Really sorry! Just forget about it*" and the like. Brown and Levinson claim that in order to avoid threatening each other's face, it is better to include "politeness strategies" in our speech act in order to satisfy the face of the person being addressed.

4.2. Types of Politeness Strategies Used by Students in the Online Platform

The typification has been done in accordance with Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies which sum up human "politeness" behavior in a hierarchical order as follows: '*Bald on Record*', '*Positive Politeness*', '*Negative Politeness*', '*Off Record*'. (Watts, 87: 2003). The only strategy that wasn't identified in the corpus is "*Do not do the FTA*", because it doesn't relate to CMC, thus it occurs only in face-to-face communication. From the results obtained, we conclude that communicating and exchanging information in a virtual environment affect the content of the message and the choice of politeness strategies to be used. The content of the message is perceived as a speech-act that threatens the addressees' face. Therefore, the students resort to the use of politeness strategies, sometimes it can be described as 'excessive use' in order to avoid threatening each other's face or in an attempt to minimize and soften the threat's degree and compensate the lack of the face-to-face communication notion.

The results show that **Positive Politeness** strategy is the most used by the students. Such as; "*Take care of you*", "*I hope you are doing well*", "*Good luck*", (table 01) these positive politeness expressions orderly fall under characterization of Positive Politeness strategy according to the fifteen (15) criteria suggested by Brown and Levinson (1987) of which we find: "*exaggeration of showing of interest, being optimistic, seek agreement, avoid disagreement, the use in-group identity markers*", and the use of the inclusive forms (Mu, 106: 2015). In second position, the **Negative Politeness** strategies, such as : "*would you like to help me*", "*thanks in advance*", "*hello sir*", "*Good morning Miss/Sir*", and "*I'm sorry for bothering you*". These expressions correspond to the ten (10) negative politeness criteria proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) to identify negative politeness strategies. Then, the **Off-Record strategy** is used in such expressions: "*if someone could explain I will be grateful*", "*Hello everyone*" (table 01) these expressions are general and not addressed to a specific person; they are indirect and include everyone. Brown and Levinson illustrate off-record (indirect) strategy in that "*this strategy means that the speaker can act in an unclear and indirect way, in an attempt to produce the minimum face threat*" (211-227: 1987). Finally, the last ranked strategy being used by the students in their messages in the discussion forum, is the **Bald on Record strategy**. The corpus show that students use expressions such as "*what do*

you mean by that?", "what are the critics of the model", "see you", etc. The precedent expressions are characterized by the use of imperatives, and direct language, because the students do not make any effort to reduce the severity of the FTA to save the other students' face which confirms with Brown and Levinson's (1987) statement which says "participants perform bald on record acts when they do not fear retribution from the addressee" (Chiad, 6: 2015).

Conclusion

This research is carried out to analyze the use of politeness strategies in the e-learning discussion forum used by Master II, language and communication students in the English department at Mouloud Mammeri University of Tizi Ouzou. It intends to figure out whether the students (platform users) use politeness strategies while interacting in the e-learning discussion forum. It also aimed at identifying the types of the politeness strategies used by the students, relying on Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987). Results show that the students use politeness strategies with its different types in their interaction with each other in the online platform, however only one strategy which is do not do the FTA, because it doesn't conform with the nature of the virtual context where the communication event takes place. The students use politeness strategies in order to minimize the threat to each other's face, and maintain a smooth and respectful communication in the online platform. Hopefully this study will shed light and give insights upon more research and investigations in the same field of research, for instance an investigation on impoliteness in virtual spaces could be done.

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