

Politeness Strategies in English Directives: Empirical Evidence of Cross-Cultural Communication Among Indonesian and Malaysian Speakers

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Abstract

Utterances constitute a fundamental form of communication in university settings, where students perform directive speech acts to request, instruct, or negotiate actions with peers, lecturers, and others. Although directives in English are widely used across academic contexts, their linguistic realizations vary across cultures. This study investigates politeness strategies in English directives among Indonesian (Palembangnese) English-speaking students (PSI) and Malaysian English-speaking students (MSM), two culturally related groups with potentially distinct pragmatic orientations. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study integrates Written Discourse Completion Tasks and semi-structured interviews to examine both shared and divergent patterns. The findings indicate that while both groups employ common politeness markers (e.g., “please” and “thank you”) and are sensitive to contextual variables such as age, power, and social distance, they differ in their pragmatic orientations. PSI tend to emphasise expressions such as “excuse me” and respectful address terms, reflecting culturally embedded values of respect and religio-cultural influences, whereas MSM more frequently employ explicit expressions of gratitude, indicating a stronger orientation toward interpersonal management. These results highlight the role of cultural norms in shaping politeness as a reciprocal social practice. Despite its contributions, the study is limited to specific university contexts and age groups. Future research should include more diverse participants and longitudinal designs to capture the dynamic development of politeness strategies. Overall, understanding the cultural and linguistic dimensions of politeness is essential for enhancing cross-cultural communication, reducing misinterpretation, and fostering intercultural awareness in increasingly globalised academic environments.

Keywords: Politeness strategies; Cross-cultural communication; Indonesian (Palembangnese) English speakers; Malaysian English speakers; Cultural norms

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INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia and Indonesia, mastering English as a second language is crucial for students, impacting self-confidence, academic achievement, and global interactions (Hidayat, 2024; Lestari & Wahyudin, 2020; Strickland, 2011). English proficiency fosters personal growth, aiding in film comprehension and international connections. The benefits extend to academic success, problem-solving skills, and higher standardized test scores (Teng & Zhang, 2020). Mastery of English also aids comprehension of complex concepts and broadens lexicon knowledge (Bondarchuk et al., 2025; Diamond et al., 2019). Proficiency in English is pivotal for Malaysians and Indonesians, offering a

competitive edge in the global job market and advancing their academic and career paths (Singh & Shaari, 2019; Zein et al., 2020). Beyond personal development, English fluency contributes to global communications, economic competitiveness, and regional political and security issues.

Efforts to attain English fluency not only empower individual growth but also impact broader educational and career trajectories (Kristiawan et al., 2022; Lou & Noels, 2019). Despite linguistic challenges in learning English as a second language (Baresh, 2022; Shao et al., 2023), English proficiency offers social benefits, enhancing global communications, economic competitiveness, and regional political and security interests (Isadaud et al., 2022; Pajarwati et al., 2021). Proficient English speakers actively engage in worldwide conversations, overcoming obstacles for future success in academics, profession, and societal contributions (Fang & Hu, 2022; Isadaud et al., 2022). Thus, mastering English becomes a transformative experience, transcending language barriers and opening doors to diverse opportunities. This paper contends that for Malaysian and Indonesian students, English mastery should be coupled with awareness of politeness markers in English to enhance effective communication strategies.

Politeness strategies, both linguistic and non-linguistic, are vital for fostering healthy relationships and preventing conflicts (Ernovilinda, 2020; Federici, 2025; Kádár & Zhang, 2019; Sapitri et al., 2020). These include indirect language, hedging, and using titles to convey respect and consideration (Mahmud, 2019). In culturally diverse contexts, understanding and employing these strategies minimize misunderstandings, fostering harmonious cross-cultural relationships (Sifianou & Blitvich, 2017; Xia & Lan, 2019; Yergazy & Denisenko, 2024). In higher education, formal language and honorifics demonstrate respect for authority figures, maintaining harmonious relationships and aligning with cultural norms (Almuhaysh, 2022; Huang & Chen, 2023). Politeness strategies carry historical, cultural, and idealistic significance, influencing communication practices among Malaysians and Indonesians.

While numerous studies underscore the pivotal role of English proficiency in the academic and professional lives of individuals in Malaysia and Indonesia (Lestari & Wahyudin, 2020; Ramasamy & Mei, 2025; Strickland, 2011), there remains a discernible gap in the understanding of how politeness strategies, particularly in directive communication, contribute to effective language use among Malaysian and Indonesian English speakers. While prior research has acknowledged the importance of mastering English as a second language, there is a notable absence of in-depth exploration into the nuanced politeness markers employed by these language learners, especially within the context of directive speech acts.

Therefore, this study seeks to bridge this gap by delving into the specific politeness strategies employed by Indonesian (Palembangnese) English speakers in Indonesia (PSI) and Malaysian English speakers in Malaysia (MSM) when engaging in directive communication in English. By focusing on this aspect, the research aims to uncover the motivations behind the choice of politeness strategies and, subsequently, explore the cultural similarities and differences that shape these linguistic behaviours. In doing so, this study contributes valuable insights into the cross-cultural communication dynamics, providing a nuanced understanding of politeness strategies among English speakers in these regions.

To investigate this phenomenon, the study involved a mixed-methods approach, including questionnaires, WDCTs, and interviews. The data was analysed using NVivo software to identify patterns and trends. The study also explored pragmatic dimensions of participants' responses, examining how they mirrored cultural norms and societal expectations. Comparative analysis revealed differences in communication styles due to demographic or sociolinguistic factors. By examining politeness strategies in directive

communication among PSI and MSM, the study sheds light on cultural and linguistic dynamics shaping communication styles. Analysing nuances influencing language use unveils specific norms and values underpinning communication in these regions. The results provide practical advice for intercultural interactions, enhancing communication effectiveness and reducing misunderstandings. The research promotes intercultural competence by raising awareness of cultural differences and offers tools for navigating diverse communication scenarios successfully. It contributes to cross-cultural communication by uncovering sociocultural foundations of language preferences, aiding researchers in understanding linguistic behaviour modifications in diverse cultural contexts. Overall, this study provides practical insights for effective intercultural communication, facilitating professionals in complex communication scenarios.

Consequently, this study is guided by the following research questions: What politeness strategies are commonly adopted by PSI when they use and perform the directives speech act in English? What politeness strategies are commonly adopted by MSM when they use and perform politeness strategies in making directives? What are their reasons for choosing those politeness strategies in making directives? And what are the cultural similarities and differences in the use of politeness strategies across the two different groups? The study contributes to the field by contextualizing politeness theory within specific cultural groups. It deepens the academic understanding of how macro-level cultural values manifest in micro-level language choices (pragmatics), while simultaneously offering a practical toolkit for improving real-world communication across those cultural lines.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The study of politeness strategies and directives is crucial for understanding communication dynamics, as they foster successful relationship-building, ensure continuity, and extend across diverse discourse contexts (Ernovilinda, 2020; Kádár & Zhang, 2019; Sapitri et al., 2020; Theunissen, 2019). These strategies are essential for navigating the complexities of interpersonal communication adeptly and fostering understanding and empathy in a diverse world. The exploration of communication mechanisms gains depth by acknowledging the synergy between politeness strategies and directives, as illuminated by the impact of multi-party dynamics and the role of situated social cognition in politeness processing.

The growing diversity within higher education underscores the paramount significance of cross-cultural communication and the deliberate cultivation of intercultural competence (Kayyali, 2025; Saadna, 2024). Central to this endeavour is fostering meaningful relationships within a supportive academic milieu, a vital catalyst for enriching intercultural understanding (Murray, 2016). In transnational higher education, students are empowered to actively shape their identities through reciprocal language socialization (Shi, 2024; Walton et al., 2013), thus establishing the foundation for cross-cultural adaptation among international students.

The examination of directives as speech acts assumes a pivotal role in comprehending their communicative potency and underlying intricacies, aligning seamlessly with the assertion that the findings reveal diverse forms of directive speech acts, such as asking, inviting, pleading, ordering, and prohibiting (Prayitno et al., 2021; Sari & Utomo, 2020). This comprehensive investigation further elucidates the contextual and cultural dimensions intertwined with speech acts and directives, highlighting their dependence on situational dynamics and speaker culture.

Critical pragmatic analysis, which emphasizes justification, qualifications, and compromises, offers insightful study into the dynamics of projects within circumstances (Holden & Scerri, 2014; Leotti et al., 2022). Interlocutors employ a combination of

dictionary-based linguistic knowledge, interpersonal communication abilities, and innovative pragmatic tactics to achieve their communicative objectives (Dey, 2023). The practical aspect is underscored by the contribution of intonation and gesture aspects in early pragmatic development.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design to examine politeness strategies in English directive speech acts among Indonesian (Palembangnese) and Malaysian university students. The design integrates quantitative and qualitative procedures to capture both the frequency of politeness strategies and the cultural reasons behind their use. Quantitatively, demographic questionnaires and Written Discourse Completion Tasks (WDCTs) are administered to 100 participants, consisting of 50 Indonesian English-speaking students from UIN Raden Fatah Palembang and 50 Malaysian English-speaking students from UiTM Shah Alam. The WDCTs contain ten university-based scenarios shaped by power, social distance, and degree of imposition, enabling systematic comparison across groups. Responses are coded according to politeness strategy categories and analysed using SPSS through descriptive statistics and Fisher's Exact Test to identify distributional patterns and group differences. Qualitatively, semi-structured interviews with selected participants from both groups explore motivations, cultural values, and contextual considerations influencing strategy choice. Interview and WDCT data are transcribed, coded, and thematically analysed using NVivo through open and axial coding. By combining statistical comparison with interpretive analysis, this design provides a comprehensive understanding of how shared and culture-specific politeness norms shape directive communication in cross-cultural academic contexts.

Participants

The main goal of the study was to look into how Indonesian and Malaysian speakers of English used politeness strategies when giving directives. This study involved two participant groups: (1) 50 Indonesian English speakers from Palembang residing in Indonesia (referred to as PSI) and (2) 50 Malaysian English speakers from Malaysia also residing in Malaysia (referred to as MSM) (see Figure 1). All individuals within both groups were university students.

In Palembang as group one, Indonesia, 50 English-speaking Indonesian (Palembangnese) second, third, or final year students at Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Raden Fatah Palembang in Indonesia, were recruited from fields. This study came from UIN Raden Fatah Palembang's nine faculties. These included the faculties of Adab and Humanities, Syariah and Law, Tarbiyah and Teaching, Ushuludin and Islamic Thought, Da'wah and Communication, Social and Politics, Economics and Islamic Business, Science and Technology, and Psychology. The second group in Malaysia comprised 50 Malaysian English-speaking which took Bachelor and Master degree in Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). The students were residing in Shah Alam, Malaysia, and attending UiTM. These participants were recruited from across disciplines and selected through purposive sampling.

Instruments

This research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative elements (see Figure 1). A questionnaire was utilized to gather demographic information, qualitative data were collected from Written Discourse Completion Tasks (WDCTs) and semi-structured interviews with four students from each group.

Written Discourse Completion Tasks (WDCTs)

This study uses Written Discourse Completion Tasks (WDCTs) as a data collection method to study speech acts in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics. WDCTs allow participants to spontaneously demonstrate their speech-act performance without the cognitive demands of face-to-face interactions (Bergman & Kasper, 1993; Huang & Lu, 2023; Lin et al., 2024). The study uses ten scenarios embedded within a university context to examine interpersonal communication dynamics. Participants are tasked with generating unscripted written responses to these scenarios, which mirror situations frequently encountered by students in Indonesia and Malaysia. The study focuses on developing ten scenarios based on three key variables: social power (P), social distance (D), and the rank of impositions (R). The scenarios are recorded and transcribed by the researcher, tested with Indonesian and Malaysian English speakers, and validated through a validity check involving experts from the two speaker groups and respondents. This approach ensures high-quality WDCTs scenarios and provides valuable insights into the contextual intricacies among two unique speaker groups and their corresponding cultural backgrounds within university settings (see Table 1)

Table 1. Ten Written Discourse Completion Tasks (WDCTs) scenarios

1) Students ask to repeat the assignment because they get an E.
2) Students ask for an explanation of the answers to the quiz session from the lecturer.
3) Students ask permission for being late to class/lecture hall.
4) Students request additional classes for the topic of language politeness.
5) Students ask for advice from lecturers regarding balancing time between lectures and breaks, considering the many assignments they have from each subject.
6) Students ask for relief from financial needs for student activities.
7) Students ask for Study equipment assistance for students.
8) Students request a delay in payment of tuition fees.
9) Students ask for an internship opportunity at a reputable place.
10) Students ask for Job opportunities for students.

Semi-structured Interviews

The study utilized semi-structured interviews to investigate the selection of specific politeness strategies for making directives by Indonesian English speakers in Indonesia and Malaysian English speakers in Malaysia. The interviews were conducted with participants who had previously engaged in the WDCTs, allowing for the extraction of information through a combination of open and closed questions. The interviews were structured around ten questions, including opening questions, content-related queries, probes, and final closing inquiries. Open-ended questions were used to prompt comprehensive information and allow for follow-up probing questions by the interviewer. This approach helped the researcher explore the rationales, patterns, and strategies employed in conveying directives in English within university environments in Indonesia and Malaysia. The semi-structured interviews provided valuable insights into the selection of specific politeness strategies.

Data Collection

Ishihara and Cohen (2010) identify five principal data collection methods in pragmatics: intuition and introspection, discourse completion tasks (DCTs), role-plays, recordings of natural conversations, and field observations. Drawing on this framework, the present study employed demographic questionnaires, Written Discourse Completion Tasks (WDCTs), and semi-structured interviews. WDCTs were selected for their efficiency in eliciting comparable language data and their ability to control contextual variables such as power, social distance, and formality, thereby enabling systematic cross-group comparisons (Golato, 2003; Kasper & Rose, 1999; Zhu, 2011). Semi-

structured interviews provided in-depth qualitative insights, with all responses audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data were analysed using NVivo through open and axial coding to classify politeness strategies based on established frameworks, supported by a codebook and matrix queries to identify patterns across groups and contexts. The coded data were subsequently quantified and analysed using SPSS, employing descriptive statistics and Fisher's Exact Test to examine distributions, associations, and differences between Indonesian (PSI) and Malaysian (MSM) students. This mixed-methods approach ensures both analytical depth and statistical rigour in capturing cross-cultural variation in directive politeness strategies.

Data Analysis

The study aimed to analyse the use of politeness strategies in various contexts using demographic questionnaires and WDCT records. The data was transcribed verbatim and cross-referenced with participants to ensure precision and mitigate potential misunderstandings. The coded data was analysed to identify patterns, trends, and notable deviations within and across different codes using specialized software NVivo. The research focused on the dynamic relationship between participants' responses and the scenarios presented in the WDCTs, examining how participants skilfully adjusted their language to match the contextual framework. The study also delved into the intricate sociolinguistic and pragmatic dimensions embedded within participants' interview responses, examining how these responses mirrored cultural norms, power dynamics, and societal expectations. A comparative analysis was conducted to uncover discernible variations in communication styles attributed to demographic factors or sociolinguistic and pragmatic dimensions.

Quantitative analysis was used to provide valuable insights into the dataset, using SPSS software, descriptive statistics, and Fisher's exact test to explore the data's characteristics and potential differences between groups. Fisher's exact test was strategically harnessed to conduct a robust comparative analysis of means between two distinct groups: English-speaking Indonesian (PSI) students (PSI) and Malaysian English-speaking students (MSM). This statistical method was widely recognized for its effectiveness in assessing differences in sample means, allowing for the identification of potential significant variations in these strategy measures across the specified participant cohorts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Quantitative Results

Demographic Characteristics

The demographic data reveals two distinct groups of students, Indonesian and Malaysian, each consisting of 50 individuals. Indonesian students are predominantly aged 19-30, with 78% of them belonging to this age group (see Table A1 - Supplementary Tables). They originate from various locations within Indonesia, with the largest concentration in Palembang. Malaysian students are born in different regions of Malaysia, with Selangor being the most common birthplace. Indonesian students are predominantly concentrated in Palembang, while Malaysian students are dispersed across diverse locations, with Selangor being the most prevalent. The duration of residence varies among Indonesian students, with the highest concentration (16%) in the 19-20-year range. Both Indonesian and Malaysian student groups have the most female students, with 76% and 62% respectively. Indonesian students primarily speak Indonesian, while Malaysian students predominantly use the Malaysian language. Lastly, Indonesian students have no overseas experience, while Malaysian students have short-term experiences abroad.

Written Discourse Completion Tasks Scenarios

The questionnaire aimed to assess the communication strategies used by Indonesian and Malaysian students in various university campus situations, focusing on face-threatening acts (FTAs). The results showed a preference for Strategy #3, which involves being "Bald on record without redressive action negative politeness," in addressing assignment-related matters (see Table A2 - Supplementary Tables). This strategy was also prevalent in quiz sessions and lateness and additional classes. However, the choice of communication strategy may be context-dependent, with individuals adjusting their approach based on the specific scenario.

Student assistance was favoured by both Indonesian and Malaysian students, with some Malaysian students also opting for Strategy #5. In discussions related to tuition fees, both groups primarily leaned towards Strategy #3, although minor variations in the use of other strategies were observed. In internship opportunities, Strategy #3 emerged as the dominant choice for both groups, with some Malaysian students also employing Strategy #5.

Contingency Table and Fisher's Exact Test

The study analysed communication strategy choices between Indonesian and Malaysian students in various scenarios. The results showed no significant difference in strategy selection between the two groups, suggesting a shared approach to communication in university campus activities. However, there was a significant difference in the balancing of time scenario, indicating distinct communication strategies for both groups. In financial matters and tuition fees, there were no significant disparities in communication strategy choices between the two groups. Both groups shared similar strategies when discussing financial topics and tuition-related matters. In discussions about internship opportunities and job opportunities, there were no significant differences in communication strategy choices between the two groups.

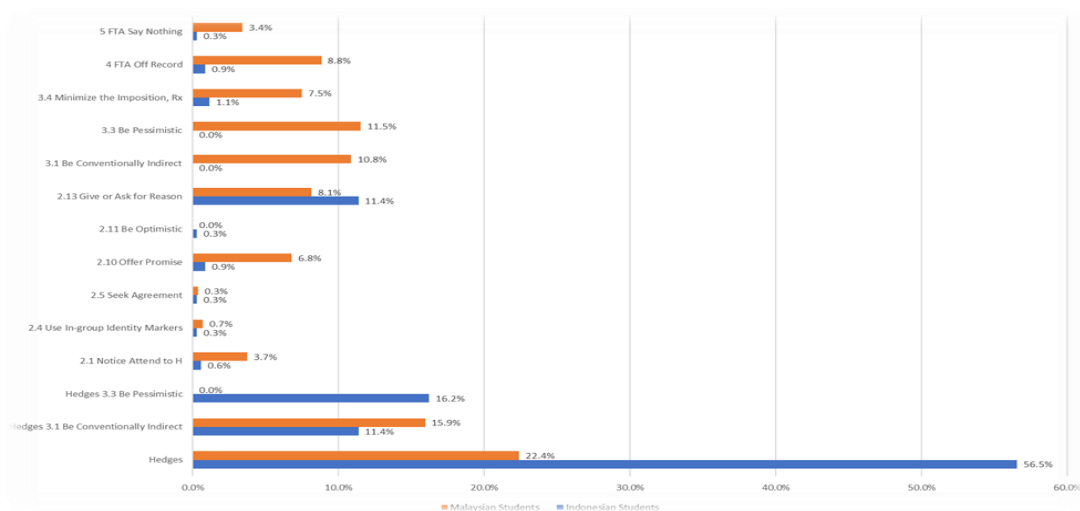


Figure 1. The summary of different communication strategies between Indonesian and Malaysian students

The data showed that some statistically significant differences in communication strategy choices between Indonesian and Malaysian students, in most scenarios, there were no significant distinctions. Both groups tend to utilize similar communication strategies when responding to given scenarios, indicating a shared approach to communication in the context of university campus activities. Any observed differences

may be context-specific and warrant further investigation. The data indicate both Indonesian and Malaysian students adapt their communication strategies based on the specific scenarios and questions presented to them. The differences in their strategies may stem from cultural variances in communication styles and norms.

Qualitative Results

Written Discourse Completion Tasks Analysis

The study examines the politeness strategies of Indonesian and Malaysian students in response to ten scenarios or questions. The researchers found that Indonesian students primarily use hedges, conventionally indirect language, pessimism, giving or asking for reasons, being off-record, and saying nothing. In the context of assignment, Indonesian students use them 41 times, while Malaysian students lean towards hedges (17 times), conventionally indirect language, pessimism, and being off-record (4 FTA Off Record). This discrepancy may reflect distinct cultural communication norms.

In the context of financial times, Indonesian students emphasize conventionally indirect language and pessimism, while Malaysian students use pessimism, conventionally indirect language, and being off-record most frequently. In the scenario of study equipment assistance, Indonesian students favour conventionally indirect language, pessimism, and being off-record, while Malaysian students prioritize conventionally indirect language, pessimism, and hedges. Figure 2 summarises both Indonesian and Malaysian students adapt their communication strategies based on the specific scenarios and questions presented to them. The differences in their strategies may stem from cultural variances in communication styles and norms.

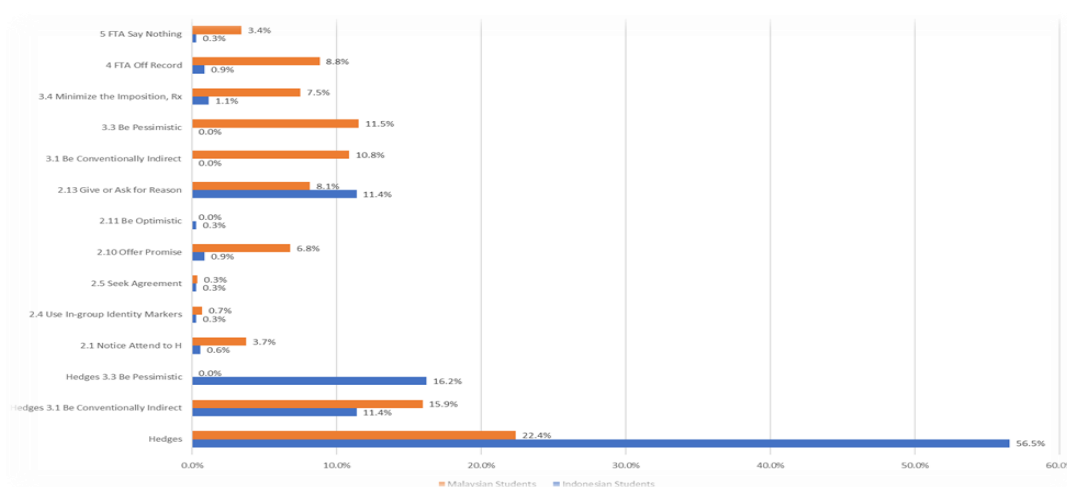


Figure 2. The summary of different communication strategies between Indonesian and Malaysian students

Analysis of Indonesian Students Interview

The interviews with Indonesian students reveal a shared understanding of politeness strategies, primarily involving phrases like "please" and "excuse me," which are rooted in their cultural values of respect and reciprocity. The primary motivation for using politeness is to show respect, especially towards older individuals or those in positions of authority. This respect is deeply ingrained in their cultural fabric and personal values. The students believe that being polite will elicit kindness and respect from others, highlighting the perceived reciprocity of politeness in their social interactions. Factors influencing their politeness strategies include age, power dynamics,

social distance, and the sensitivity of the conversation topic. The cultural context, encompassing Indonesian, Palembangnese, and Islamic cultures, and family values also contribute to their politeness learning. In conclusion, the interviews reveal a shared use of politeness strategies, rooted in the cultural values of respect and reciprocity.

Analysis of Malaysian Students Interview

The interviews with Malaysian students reveal a common set of politeness strategies, including the use of polite language and expressions like "please" and "thank you". These strategies are primarily driven by the desire to establish positive impressions, show respect, and acknowledge others' assistance. The primary motivation for employing politeness is to create a favourable atmosphere during initial interactions, especially when interacting with strangers or individuals they have limited familiarity with. Expressing gratitude is another prominent reason for using politeness, as it serves to acknowledge and appreciate the assistance provided by others. Politeness is closely linked to respect and courtesy, aligning with cultural values. Age and social distance are significant determinants of politeness, with participants being more polite when addressing seniors or individuals they are less familiar with. Formality is another factor influenced by age, social distance, and familiarity, with participants being more formal when interacting with seniors or unfamiliar individuals. Some participants demonstrate adaptability to different cultural contexts, demonstrating their cultural sensitivity and ability to maintain harmonious interactions. For more detail, see Table A6 in Supplementary Tables.

Cross-Comparison

Politeness strategies are prevalent among Indonesian and Malaysian students, with Indonesian students emphasizing the use of phrases like "excuse me" and polite address terms, while Malaysian students use prefixes like "Can I" and "May I" and express gratitude. Both groups value greetings and salutations as markers of respect. The reasons for using politeness reflect cultural values and societal influences. Social distance and age and power dynamics also influence politeness. Cultural context influences politeness, with Indonesian students emphasizing respect and virtuousness, while Malaysian students emphasize harmony and harmonious social interactions. Both groups' cultural contexts play a significant role in shaping their communication styles. Table 2 summarises comparisons between Indonesian students and Malaysian students.

Table 2. Cross-Comparison Between Indonesian Students and Malaysian Students

Aspect	Indonesian Students	Malaysian Students
Politeness Strategies	<i>Use of "Please":</i> All interviewees consistently use "please" when making requests or orders.	<i>Use of "Please":</i> Many interviewees consistently use "please" when making requests or orders, reflecting a common politeness marker.
	<i>Excuse Me:</i> "Excuse me" is another polite phrase used by all interviewees to make requests or gain someone's attention politely.	<i>Polite Language:</i> Polite language, including suitable prefixes and phrases like "Can I" and "May I," is used by several interviewees when making requests or expressing needs.
	<i>Polite Address Terms:</i> Some interviewees mention using polite address terms like "Ma'am" or "Sir" when speaking to someone in a higher position or someone older.	<i>Acknowledging Help:</i> Some interviewees emphasize the importance of thanking or expressing gratitude ("thank you") after someone has helped them, demonstrating politeness in response to assistance.
	<i>Apologies:</i> Apologizing or acknowledging the potential inconvenience is a	<i>Greetings:</i> Greetings and salutations, such as "salam," "hello," or "hi," are used by

Aspect	Indonesian Students	Malaysian Students
	politeness strategy mentioned by some interviewees, especially in sensitive or formal situations.	some interviewees as a sign of respect and politeness in their interactions. <i>Apologies:</i> Apologizing or acknowledging the potential inconvenience is a politeness strategy mentioned by some interviewees, especially when requesting something.
Reasons for Politeness	<i>Respect:</i> Respect for others is a common reason cited by all interviewees for using politeness. They use polite language and phrases to show respect to people, especially those who are older or in positions of authority. <i>Cultural and Family Values:</i> Cultural values, family upbringing, and religious beliefs play a significant role in shaping the interviewees' politeness strategies. They mention that politeness is part of both Palembang and Indonesian cultures, as well as Islamic values. <i>Reciprocity:</i> Some interviewees believe that being polite to others will lead to reciprocation with kindness and respect. It's seen as a way to build positive relationships.	<i>First Impression:</i> Creating a positive first impression is a reason cited by some interviewees for using politeness, especially when interacting with strangers. <i>Comfort:</i> Making the other person feel comfortable and lessening the directive nature of the request is another reason mentioned by an interviewee for using politeness. <i>Gratitude:</i> Expressing gratitude is seen as an important aspect of politeness, showing appreciation for others' assistance. <i>Politeness and Courtesy:</i> Politeness is used as a way to be courteous and prevent rudeness in interactions.
Factors Influencing Politeness	<i>Age and Power Dynamics:</i> The age and authority of the person being addressed influence the level of politeness. <i>Social Distance:</i> The level of familiarity or social distance with the person also affects politeness. <i>Weight of Conversation:</i> The sensitivity or importance of the conversation topic can influence the use of politeness.	<i>Social Distance:</i> Social distance plays a significant role in influencing politeness strategies. strange or awkward. <i>Age and Power Dynamics:</i> Age and relative authority are considered when deciding how polite to be. Interviewees tend to be more polite when addressing someone older or in a position of authority.
Cultural Context	<i>Cultural Norms:</i> Politeness is deeply ingrained in the cultural norms of Palembang and Indonesian society. <i>Religious Influence:</i> Islamic values also contribute to the importance of politeness in the cultural context, as mentioned by some interviewees. <i>Preference for Direct Communication:</i> While politeness is a common practice, there is also a preference for more direct communication with close friends or family members.	<i>Cultural Norms:</i> The cultural context strongly influences politeness strategies. <i>Islamic Cultural Norms:</i> Islamic cultural norms are mentioned by some interviewees as influencing their politeness strategies. <i>Adaptation to Cultural Nuances:</i> Some interviewees, like Musa, demonstrate an ability to adapt to different cultural contexts while maintaining core values of respect and courtesy in communication.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that Indonesian (Palembangnese) English-speaking students (PSI) and Malaysian English-speaking students (MSM) share several politeness resources when performing English directive speech acts, yet they assign different pragmatic meanings to those resources. Quantitatively, both groups tended to select similar strategies across most WDCT scenarios, especially in academic situations involving assignments, quiz clarification, lateness, financial assistance, tuition delay, internships, and job opportunities. This suggests that PSI and MSM possess a shared repertoire of university-based directive strategies, particularly when speaking to lecturers or institutional authorities. However, the qualitative findings reveal that similarity in form does not necessarily mean similarity in function. While both groups used common markers such as “please,” “thank you,” apologies, indirect requests, hedges, and conventionally polite expressions, PSI tended to associate politeness with respect, hierarchy, family values, and religiously informed norms, whereas MSM more strongly associated politeness with comfort, gratitude, first impressions, and smooth interpersonal relations. These findings extend the article’s central argument that politeness in English directives is not merely a linguistic choice but also a culturally grounded pragmatic practice.

The shared use of polite forms confirms Brown and Levinson’s (1987) theory that speakers select politeness strategies by considering social power, social distance, and the weight of imposition. In the present study, both PSI and MSM adjusted their language when addressing older people, lecturers, strangers, or people in positions of authority. This supports previous studies which argue that politeness strategies are especially important in academic contexts because classroom and university interactions often involve unequal power relations (Mahmud, 2019; Kayyali, 2025; Santos et al., 2023). The participants’ preference for indirectness, hedging, and respectful address terms also supports Mahmud’s (2019) observation that students use politeness strategies to maintain harmonious classroom relationships. However, the present study extends Brown and Levinson’s model by showing that the same social variables may be interpreted differently across culturally related groups. For PSI, age and authority appear to activate a stronger obligation to show deference, while for MSM, social distance and unfamiliarity appear to trigger a stronger need to create comfort and avoid negative impressions.

The Indonesian findings confirm earlier research on the cultural embeddedness of politeness. PSI participants frequently used “excuse me,” “please,” apologies, and address terms such as “Sir” or “Ma’am,” especially when interacting with lecturers or older interlocutors. This pattern supports studies emphasizing that formal language and honorifics function as signs of respect in higher education (Almuhaysh, 2022; Huang & Chen, 2023). It also aligns with research showing that politeness strategies help prevent conflict and maintain interpersonal relationships (Ernovilinda, 2020; Kádár & Zhang, 2019; Sapitri et al., 2020). The PSI data further suggest that politeness is not only a communicative strategy but also a moral and cultural practice. Their explanations linked polite directives to respect, reciprocity, family upbringing, Palembang values, Indonesian norms, and Islamic cultural influence. This extends previous studies by showing how local and religious values shape English pragmatic performance even when students are using a second or foreign language.

The Malaysian findings also confirm previous studies on the role of politeness in maintaining harmony in multicultural interactions. MSM participants frequently used “Can I,” “May I,” “please,” “thank you,” greetings, and expressions of appreciation. This finding is consistent with Sifianou and Blitvich (2017), Xia and Lan (2019), and Yergazy and Denisenko (2024), who argue that politeness is central to reducing

misunderstandings in culturally diverse communication. MSM participants' emphasis on gratitude and positive impressions also resonates with Hieda et al. (2021) and Izadi (2022), who highlight the importance of cultural background in shaping how speakers evaluate politeness and adapt to intercultural expectations. Compared with PSI, MSM appeared more interactionally flexible, particularly in their attention to the hearer's comfort and the need to preserve smooth interaction with strangers or less familiar interlocutors. This extends previous studies by showing that Malaysian English directives may be guided less by hierarchical obligation alone and more by interpersonal management.

At the same time, the findings partially challenge the assumption that culturally close groups necessarily perform politeness in similar ways. Indonesia and Malaysia share several regional, linguistic, religious, and sociocultural affinities, and the quantitative results show broad similarities in strategy selection. Nevertheless, the qualitative evidence indicates meaningful differences in pragmatic orientation. PSI participants tended to foreground respect, obligation, and reciprocity, whereas MSM participants foregrounded gratitude, comfort, impression management, and harmonious interaction. This finding supports Larina and Ponton's (2020) argument that politeness varies across cultural contexts, but it also extends it by showing that variation can occur even among neighbouring Southeast Asian groups using English in similar university contexts. Thus, the study contributes to intercultural pragmatics by demonstrating that cross-cultural differences should not be measured only through the frequency of linguistic forms; they should also be examined through speakers' explanations, motivations, and culturally situated interpretations.

The results also strengthen previous research on directive speech acts. Directives are potentially face-threatening because they require the hearer to do something, explain something, provide assistance, grant permission, or accept a request. This supports Austin's (1976) and Searle's (1976) view that speech acts are actions performed through language. It also confirms studies by Prayitno et al. (2021) and Sari and Utomo (2020), which show that directives can appear in various forms, including requests, advice-seeking, asking permission, and asking for assistance. The present study extends those works by examining directives in cross-cultural English use rather than in a single-language or single-national context. The WDCT scenarios show that students' directives are sensitive to institutional context: requesting a repeat assignment, asking for tuition delay, or seeking internship opportunities all require careful balancing between need, deference, and face-saving.

Another important interpretation concerns the limited statistical differences between PSI and MSM. The lack of significant differences in most scenarios does not mean culture has no effect. Rather, it suggests that both groups recognize similar academic norms when using English in institutional settings. The significant difference in the time-balancing scenario indicates that some contexts may activate culture-specific preferences more strongly than others. This supports the argument that politeness is context-dependent and negotiated rather than fixed (Kádár & Zhang, 2019; Theunissen, 2019). It also suggests that English-medium academic discourse may create shared pragmatic expectations, while local cultures continue to influence how speakers justify and personalize their choices.

This study confirms previous research that politeness strategies are essential for effective communication, relationship maintenance, and conflict avoidance in academic and intercultural contexts (Mahmud, 2019; Kayyali, 2025; Sifianou & Blitvich, 2017). It contradicts any overly universal view of politeness by showing that similar expressions such as "please," "thank you," and "excuse me" may serve different cultural functions across groups. Most importantly, it extends existing knowledge by demonstrating that

Indonesian and Malaysian English-speaking students share a common academic politeness repertoire but differ in the values that motivate their directive choices. These findings imply that English language education should include intercultural pragmatics, helping learners understand not only which expressions are polite but also why those expressions may be interpreted differently across cultural communities.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Indonesian (Palembangnese) English-speaking students and Malaysian English-speaking students employ broadly similar politeness strategies when performing directive speech acts in English, particularly in university-related situations involving lecturers, institutional authority, academic needs, financial matters, internships, and job opportunities. Both groups commonly use polite expressions such as “please,” “thank you,” apologies, greetings, hedges, and indirect forms to reduce the force of their directives and maintain respectful interaction. The findings show that students from both cultural groups are highly sensitive to contextual factors such as age, power relations, social distance, and the seriousness of the request. This indicates that politeness in English directives is not only a matter of linguistic form but also a pragmatic response to social expectations within academic communication. Although statistical differences between the two groups were limited in most scenarios, the data suggest that both Indonesian and Malaysian students share a common awareness of the need to soften directives and preserve harmonious relationships when communicating in English.

At the same time, the study reveals important culturally grounded differences in the motivations and preferred forms of politeness used by the two groups. Indonesian students tend to emphasize respect, hierarchy, reciprocity, family upbringing, local Palembang values, Indonesian cultural norms, and Islamic principles. Their use of expressions such as “excuse me” and respectful address terms reflects a stronger orientation toward deference and moral respect, especially when addressing older people or those in authority. In contrast, Malaysian students more frequently highlight gratitude, comfort, positive first impressions, and smooth interpersonal management. Their use of modalized requests such as “Can I” and “May I,” together with explicit expressions of thanks, suggests a stronger concern with maintaining social harmony and avoiding discomfort in interaction. These findings contribute to intercultural pragmatics by showing that similar English politeness forms may perform different cultural functions. Therefore, English language teaching in Indonesia and Malaysia should integrate intercultural pragmatic awareness so that learners understand not only how to produce polite expressions, but also how such expressions are interpreted across cultural contexts.

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Declaration of AI Tool Use

The authors declare that AI-based writing assistance tools were used to support the drafting, language refinement, and organization of parts of this manuscript. The authors carefully reviewed, revised, and verified all AI-assisted content to ensure accuracy,

originality, academic integrity, and consistency with the study's data, findings, and scholarly objectives.

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