



Clarity or Courtesy? Evaluating the Effectiveness of Negative Politeness Strategies in Teacher-Student Interaction in Libyan EFL Contexts

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الوضوح أم المجاملة؟ تقييم فعالية استراتيجيات المجاملة السلبية في التفاعل بين المعلم والطالب في سياقات تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في ليبيا

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المخلص:

استكشفت هذه الدراسة كيفية استخدام استراتيجيات التأدب السلبية في فصول اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL) في ليبيا، وتأثيرها في العلاقة بين المعلمين والطلاب. وقد أظهرت النتائج أن استراتيجيات التأدب تؤدي دوراً محورياً في الحفاظ على تواصل صفي سلس وفعال. كما تبين أن المعلمين يبذلون جهوداً مقصودة لحماية الوجه الاجتماعي للطلاب، لا سيما في المواقف التي تتضمن إعطاء التعليمات، وتقديم الطلبات، والتشجيع، والسعي إلى تأكيد الفهم. كذلك، تأثر استخدام هذه الاستراتيجيات بعوامل سياقية متعددة، من بينها عمر المتعلمين، والجنس، وعدم تكافؤ السلطة، والمسافة الاجتماعية. وأشارت النتائج إلى أن الطلاب كانوا أكثر ارتياحاً واستعداداً للمشاركة عندما استخدم المعلمون لغة داعمة ومحترمة تراعي الحفاظ على الوجه الاجتماعي للطلاب. وقد لوحظ ذلك بصورة أوضح لدى الطالبات وفي الفصول التي اعتمد فيها المعلمون باستمرار على أساليب التخفيف اللغوي (Hedging)، والطلبات غير المباشرة، وعبارات التقدير والثناء. وفي المقابل، أظهر المتعلمون البالغون تفضيلاً أكبر للوضوح والمباشرة، مما يشير إلى أن فاعلية استراتيجيات التأدب ليست متساوية بين جميع فئات المتعلمين.

الكلمات الدالة: التفاعل الصفي، والتهديب، واستراتيجيات التهذيب السلبية، تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، والتعليم الليبي، والتفاعل بين المعلم والطالب.

Abstract

This study investigates how negative politeness strategies are employed by teachers in Libyan EFL classrooms and whether such strategies facilitate rapport or hinder instructional clarity. Using a mixed-methods design that combines classroom observations, audio recordings, and

discourse analysis, data were collected from four preparatory-school classrooms in Tripoli and Bani Walid, Libya. Qualitative data were drawn from recorded transcripts and field notes, while quantitative data were obtained through frequency counts of politeness expressions. Findings indicate that teachers frequently used hedging, indirect requests, modalized directives, and apologetic forms to soften authority. While these strategies reduced learner anxiety and increased willingness to participate, excessive indirectness occasionally caused ambiguity in task instructions. The study argues for a context-sensitive pragmatic pedagogy that balances relational politeness with instructional explicitness. Specific recommendations are offered for teachers on how to apply negative politeness strategies effectively without sacrificing communicative clarity.

Keywords: classroom interaction, politeness, negative politeness strategies, EFL, Libyan education, teacher–student interaction.

1.1 Introduction

People use language differently when communicating with each other, particularly in educational settings such as the classroom. Language plays a pivotal role in the success of both teaching and learning, as it is the primary medium through which knowledge is constructed and exchanged (Peng et al., 2014).

Despite the growing body of research on classroom interaction and politeness strategies, there is a significant gap in studies focusing on the Libyan English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching context. Most current studies address general teaching practices, with limited attention to pragmatic features such as politeness strategies in teacher–student interaction. Furthermore, few studies have examined how negative politeness strategies affect the clarity of instruction and student comprehension in Libyan classrooms. This lack of local research highlights the need for further investigation in this area.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the use of negative politeness strategies in teacher–student interaction in EFL classes in Libya. Using a mixed-methods approach, this study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies in balancing clarity and politeness, as well as their impact on student engagement and comprehension. In EFL classrooms, communication between teachers and students plays an essential role in the success of the learning process. In many Libyan educational institutions, teacher–student interaction is influenced by cultural norms, social distance, and respect for teacher authority. These factors shape the way teachers communicate with students and how students respond during classroom discussions. One important aspect of this communication is the use of politeness strategies, particularly negative politeness strategies, which are employed to show respect, avoid imposing on others, and maintain social harmony.

Despite the widespread discussion of politeness strategies in discourse studies and pragmatics, many Libyan EFL classrooms still experience communication barriers such as students' reluctance to participate, limited classroom interaction, misunderstanding, and anxiety when using English to communicate or express ideas. In some cases, teachers may unintentionally use direct or face-threatening language that discourages students from expressing themselves freely. As a result, students may become less motivated and less confident in classroom communication. Therefore, there is a need to evaluate how negative politeness strategies are used in Libyan EFL contexts and whether these strategies help create a respectful and supportive learning environment that enhances interaction between teachers and students.

1.2 Research Gap

Earlier studies on politeness strategies have focused on general communication, intercultural pragmatics, or English-speaking contexts. Some researchers have examined Brown and

Levinson's (1987) politeness theory in classroom interaction; however, limited research has specifically investigated negative politeness strategies in Libyan EFL classrooms.

Furthermore, most existing studies focus on either teacher talk or student behavior individually, without evaluating the effectiveness of these strategies in improving classroom interaction and student participation. There is also a lack of studies connecting negative politeness strategies with learners' psychological comfort, willingness, and motivation to communicate in Libyan educational institutions. Therefore, this study attempts to fill this gap by examining the effectiveness of negative politeness strategies in teacher–student interaction within Libyan EFL contexts.

1.3 Aim of the Study

This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of negative politeness strategies in teacher–student interaction in Libyan EFL contexts. It seeks to investigate how these strategies are used by teachers and students and how they affect classroom communication, student participation, and the overall learning environment.

1.4 Research Hypotheses

Main Hypothesis:

When teachers use negative politeness strategies thoughtfully and consistently, the quality of interaction between them and their students in Libyan EFL classrooms improves noticeably.

Sub-Hypotheses:

- When teachers speak to students in a respectful and indirect way, students feel less nervous and more at ease during classroom interaction.
- Students are more likely to speak up and join discussions when the language used around them feels respectful rather than demanding or direct.
- Teachers who regularly employ negative politeness strategies tend to build warmer, more supportive classrooms where students feel safe enough to engage.

1.5 Significance of the Study

- This study is significant because it highlights the importance of politeness in educational communication, especially in EFL classrooms where language learning depends greatly on interaction. The findings may help Libyan EFL teachers understand how the use of negative politeness strategies can improve communication with students and encourage active participation. Thus, the study may provide useful insights for educators, curriculum designers, and teacher training programs in Libya by emphasizing the role of respectful communication in enhancing language learning. The study may also help improve the classroom atmosphere, reduce students' embarrassment and anxiety about making mistakes, and increase learners' confidence in speaking English.
- Academically, this study enriches the fields of pragmatics and classroom discourse analysis by focusing on an under-researched context, namely Libyan EFL education.

1.6 Contribution of the Study

- This study contributes to the existing literature by providing observational evidence about the effectiveness of negative politeness strategies in Libyan EFL classrooms. It expands the application of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory within the Libyan educational context. The study also contributes practically by offering recommendations for teachers on how to use polite and respectful communication strategies to improve classroom interaction. Additionally, it may serve as a reference for future researchers interested in pragmatics, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, and EFL teaching in Libya and similar contexts.

1.7 Research Questions

- 1. What negative politeness strategies are employed by Libyan EFL teachers during classroom interaction?

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- 2. To what extent do such strategies facilitate or hinder instructional clarity?
 - 3. How do students interpret and respond to teachers' negative politeness strategies?
 - 4. Do these strategies reduce anxiety and increase participation?

2. Literature Review

• 2.1 Teacher–Student Interaction

- A student is generally defined as a learner enrolled in an educational institution and working under the guidance of a teacher (Brophy, 2017). Within this context, the interaction between teachers and students plays a crucial role in shaping the learning environment. Whitaker (2014) argues that the effectiveness of a classroom depends more on the teacher than on the students, emphasizing that teachers' expectations and strategies significantly influence student motivation and engagement. In line with this view, Noels, Clément, and Pelletier (2016) highlight that teachers can inspire learners by adopting appropriate communicative and instructional strategies.
- The quality of teacher–student relationships is particularly important, as it forms the foundation of effective classroom management. Marzano (2008) describes strong relationships as the “keystone” of successful classroom interaction. Similarly, Burgoon et al. (1995) stress that adapting communication behavior is essential for achieving effective interaction. In classroom settings, this includes practices such as giving feedback and correcting students' errors. Teachers may use various strategies for correction, such as asking for clarification, encouraging peer support, or allowing students time to reflect on their responses. These strategies not only facilitate learning but also shape the social dynamics of the classroom.

• 2.2 Pragmatic Competence in EFL

- The study of pragmatic language development (PLD) appears to have first emerged in the mid-1970s. Halliday was among the pioneers, beginning to analyze early child communication within the framework of Speech Act Theory. Pragmatic language has since been studied across disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, psychology, and linguistics. Pragmatic competence has become an essential component of language ability, referring to the ability to go beyond the literal meaning of words in order to understand the speaker's intended message in a given context. In this sense, communication is not only about what is said, but also about how and why it is said.
- According to Crystal (2008, p. 379), pragmatics is “the study of language from the point of view of users, especially the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in social interaction, and the effects their language use has on others.” This definition highlights the importance of context, social norms, and interaction in interpreting meaning.
- Pragmatic competence can be understood from two main perspectives: knowledge and ability. From the knowledge perspective, it involves understanding the linguistic resources available in a language and how they are used to perform specific communicative acts. Barron (2003, p. 10) defines pragmatic competence as the knowledge of linguistic forms for expressing particular illocutions, the sequential organization of speech acts, and the appropriate use of these forms in different contexts. From the ability perspective, it refers to the skill of applying this knowledge effectively in real communication.

• 2.3 Politeness Theory

- Politeness is a universal phenomenon present in all languages, although it varies across cultures. What is considered polite in one society may be perceived as impolite in another, reflecting differences in social norms and expectations. Politeness is thus a central concept in understanding communicative interactions, as it is closely linked to pragmatic competence. It refers to the ways speakers manage social relationships and reduce potential conflict during communication. According to Mills (2003), politeness involves mitigating face-threatening

acts, while Watts (2003) describes it as the ability to maintain harmonious interpersonal relations. Similarly, Foley (1997) views politeness as a set of social skills that ensure all participants feel respected and valued in interaction.

- The most influential framework for studying politeness is that proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), which is based on the concept of “face.” Yule (2010) defines politeness as showing awareness of another person’s face, which includes both positive face (the desire to be appreciated) and negative face (the desire for autonomy). Brown and Levinson (1987) identify four main politeness strategies: positive politeness, negative politeness, bald-on-record, and off-record strategies. These strategies are used to manage face-threatening acts and maintain social balance in communication.
- Among these, negative politeness is particularly relevant in formal and hierarchical contexts such as classrooms. It refers to strategies that minimize imposition on others and respect their freedom of action (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Niroomand, 2012). This is often achieved through indirect language, such as using questions or polite requests instead of direct commands. For example, a teacher may say, “Will you close the door, please?” instead of issuing a direct order. Such strategies help reduce pressure on students and maintain a respectful classroom atmosphere.

• **2.4 Negative Politeness in Education**

- Negative politeness is defined by Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 129) as a form of “redressive action” aimed at respecting the hearer’s need for autonomy. It focuses on minimizing imposition and avoiding interference with the listener’s freedom of action. This strategy is typically realized through indirect language, hedging, and polite forms such as questions and modal verbs. Brown and Levinson (1987) describe negative politeness as “specific and focused,” as it directly addresses potential threats to the hearer’s negative face. In classroom contexts, this type of politeness is especially important, as it helps maintain respect while allowing teachers to guide and correct students effectively.
- Studies such as Niroomand (2012) and Jeanyfer and Tanto (2018) show that negative politeness is widely used in hierarchical and formal settings, particularly in cultures where respect and social distance are emphasized. This makes it highly relevant for analyzing teacher–student interaction in EFL classrooms.

• **2.5 Studies in Arab and Libyan Contexts**

- Recent studies in Libyan EFL contexts support the importance of politeness strategies in classroom interaction. Orafi and Abdulqadir (2026) found that many students experience fear, shyness, and low confidence, which can limit their participation. To address this, teachers often adopt supportive communication strategies that create a less threatening environment. This aligns with the principles of negative politeness, as reducing pressure helps students feel more comfortable engaging in classroom activities.
- Similarly, Sabr (2025) observed that teachers frequently use clarification and simplification strategies, sometimes through the use of Arabic, to support student understanding. These practices reflect sensitivity to students’ needs and aim to ease communication difficulties, which is consistent with politeness principles in discourse.
- Elmabruk and Etarhuni (2021) further explored teacher power in Libyan classrooms and found that teachers balance authority with maintaining positive relationships. This balance requires careful use of language to avoid threatening students’ autonomy, highlighting the role of politeness strategies in managing classroom discourse.
- In addition, Braiek and Onaiba (2024) emphasized the importance of developing students’ pragmatic competence, including the use of politeness strategies such as requests and

apologies. Their findings suggest that students need greater awareness of how language use varies depending on context, particularly in formal academic settings.

- Overall, these studies demonstrate that politeness, and especially negative politeness, plays a significant role in shaping teacher–student interaction. However, there is still a need for more focused research on how these strategies are specifically used in Libyan EFL classrooms during real-time interaction, particularly in feedback and error correction. This gap highlights the importance of the present study.

3. Methodology

• 3.1 Research Design

- This study adopts a mixed-methods research design that integrates qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of negative politeness strategies in Libyan EFL classrooms. The qualitative component involves discourse analysis of classroom observations and audio recordings, focusing on the types and functions of negative politeness strategies used by teachers and students. The quantitative component involves frequency counts of specific politeness expressions identified in the transcripts, allowing for a systematic account of how often each strategy appears.
- This integration of methods is appropriate because it enables the researchers not only to identify and interpret the nature of politeness strategies (qualitative) but also to measure their occurrence (quantitative), thereby offering a more complete picture of classroom interaction. As Denzin and Lincoln (1994, p. 2) note, qualitative research “involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials — case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts.” The present study incorporates these qualitative strengths alongside quantitative frequency data to triangulate the findings.

• 3.2 Participants

- This study was conducted in both private and public schools in Tripoli and Bani Walid. The participants included approximately 60 students from Grades 4, 5, and 6, ranging in age from approximately 9 to 12 years, as well as four teachers. The students were selected purposively in order to represent different classroom settings. The interactions that occurred during English lessons were observed and recorded to examine how politeness strategies were used in practice.

• 3.3 Data Collection

- Data were collected through classroom observations and audio recordings conducted in both private and public schools. Collection took place during regular class sessions over the course of six lessons. Four teachers were observed and recorded as they interacted with students. Each class consisted of approximately 20 students drawn from Grades 4, 5, and 6, giving a total of approximately 60 student participants.

• 3.4 Data Analysis

- The data were analyzed in three stages. First, utterances containing negative politeness features were identified, particularly those related to requests, questions, and instructions. Second, these utterances were classified according to the types of negative politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). Third, the frequency of each strategy was counted and tabulated to identify patterns of use. Finally, the results were interpreted qualitatively in relation to classroom context, participant roles, and the communicative functions of each strategy.

• 4. Findings

- The following tables summarize the frequency of expressions recorded during classroom observations. Table 1 presents common classroom management phrases, and Table 2 presents negative politeness expressions used by teachers and students.

Table 1. Frequency of Classroom Management Phrases

Phrase	Frequency
Raise your hand	5
Listen	2
Yes	10
Okay	8

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Table 2. Frequency of Negative Politeness Expressions

Expression	Frequency
Please	11
Could you	4
Would you mind	2
Sorry	4
Excuse me	2
Thank / Thank you	3
Of course	2
No problem	2

5. Discussion

- After observing four classes, a range of politeness behaviors was recorded across Grades 4, 5, and 6, each class consisting of approximately 20 students. The first observed interaction opened with a greeting sequence:
 - T: Good morning.
 - Class: Good morning, teacher. [Students sing and prolong the greeting]
 - T: OK, enough now!
- The phrase “OK, enough now!” was delivered in a firm tone. In doing so, the teacher implicitly threatened the students’ positive face by interrupting their group behavior. However, the students’ prolonged singing could itself be interpreted as a threat to the teacher’s negative face, since it made it difficult for the lesson to begin. This exchange supports Brown and Levinson’s (1987) argument that politeness choices are shaped by factors such as power, social distance, and the relative weight of face-threatening acts. Shortly afterwards, the teacher asked: “How are you?” and the students replied, “Fine, thank you.” After a brief pause, one student added, “And you, teacher?” This shows that even young learners are sensitive to positive face-saving behavior, wishing to demonstrate care for the teacher.
- It was observed throughout the session that female students were generally more attentive to face-saving behavior. A notable exchange was the following:

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- T: [Was explaining something on the board]
 - S: Teacher, can I say something? I know you explained this twice already, but I still did not understand. Sorry for interrupting you.
 - This student simultaneously employed an apology, a polite request, and an off-record strategy by prefacing her question with an acknowledgment of the teacher's repeated effort. The function of this utterance was to request repetition while protecting the teacher's face. A contrasting example of a more direct student request occurred shortly after:
 - S1: Wait, wait, teacher — again! I didn't hear you.
 - T: Sure I can, but don't you think we could ask in a better way than this?
 - S1: May you please repeat, teacher?
 - T: Absolutely! [With enthusiasm]
 - Rather than responding with a direct reprimand, the teacher used an indirect question to gently signal that the student's manner was inappropriate. This supports Cahyono's (2016) argument that teacher authority need not be intimidating; rather, it can be exercised through polite redirection that simultaneously preserves students' dignity.
 - In another interaction during the same session, a student who was struggling with reading aloud eventually said, "I don't want to read." This can be interpreted in two ways. First, the student's positive face had been threatened through repeated public correction, causing embarrassment. Second, the student's negative face was also under threat, as the teacher had compelled him to read despite his reluctance. The teacher's response — "That's for the teacher to decide" — was a direct assertion of authority, motivated by the need to defend the teacher's own negative face. As Agustina and Cahyono (2016) note, power asymmetry tends to favour the face concerns of the more powerful interlocutor.
 - In a subsequent interaction, the same student was given easier sentences to read and received public praise ("Excellent," "Well done," "Smart thinking"). This deliberate repair strategy allowed the teacher to restore the student's positive face after the earlier uncomfortable episode.
 - In a Grade 7 class of eleven students, the following exchange illustrated a communicative classroom effectively managed through negative politeness:
 - T: In these sentences, where can you see an infinitive and where can you see a gerund?
 - S1: "I told him to erase the board." This is a gerund.
 - S3: No, I will answer, teacher.
 - T: Let's listen to S1 first, and then everyone will share their ideas. OK? Why do you think it is a gerund?
 - S1: Because you "have to."
 - T: OK! Do you all agree?
 - Class: No!
 - S2: A gerund has '-ing.'
 - S1: Yes, yes, '-ing' ... infinitive starts with 'to.'
 - T: Yes, well done! Maybe S1 was just confused because some verbs can take both infinitive and gerund forms.
 - Rather than correcting the student immediately, the teacher invited the class to evaluate the response collectively, which reduced the stigma of being wrong. The teacher then attributed the student's error to a reasonable source of confusion, thereby protecting the student's positive face. This finding aligns with Khodashenas (2017), who notes that error correction is the most face-threatening activity in EFL classrooms.
 - Another observed exchange demonstrated how teachers balance trust and accountability:
 - T: Did you bring your homework?

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- S1: Yes, teacher.
 - S2: Teacher, I finished my homework, but I did not bring it. I promise I did it. I can show you tomorrow when it was last edited.
 - T: There is no need for that. I trust you, and I know you are responsible enough to finish on time. You can send it to me by email and I will print it for you.
 - The teacher here used reassurance to protect the student's positive face. Conversely, the same teacher responded to a student who had not done his homework with a sarcastic remark, which constituted a deliberate face-threatening act. In the post-observation interview, the teacher explained that this student consistently failed to submit work, which the teacher interpreted as a lack of respect. This illustrates that face-threatening behavior by teachers is not always accidental; it can be a strategic response to repeated face threats from students.
 - In the adult learner context (participants aged 30–45), students demonstrated a markedly different orientation. They preferred their negative face — autonomy and directness — over positive face concerns. They wanted errors corrected immediately, preferred straightforward answers, and were comfortable asking to be picked voluntarily. The following exchange is illustrative:
 - T: So you need to make sure that you speak in full sentences.
 - S1: But sometimes not coming, teacher. Is this sentence correct?
 - T: Let's see if it is a full sentence. Where is the subject?
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 - Rather than correcting the student outright, the teacher used a series of guided questions that led the student to self-correct, ultimately producing: “does not come.” The teacher's use of “we” throughout this interaction functioned as a face-saving act (FSA), reinforcing group membership and reducing the sense of individual failure.
 - Regarding the comprehensibility of polite indirect language, the findings indicate that most students, across all age groups, understood indirect requests and responded appropriately. For example:
 - T: Could you please open your books on pages 66 and 67?
 - T: Would you mind closing the door, please?
 - Students followed these instructions without confusion, and some began to adopt similar polite forms in their own speech, such as “Excuse me, teacher, could you please repeat that?” This transfer of polite register from teacher to student suggests that modeled language use can support the development of pragmatic competence in learners.
 - Overall, female teachers performed more face-saving acts than male teachers, and female students showed greater use of polite forms than male students. Young learners performed more face-threatening acts toward teachers than adult learners did. These findings are consistent with Cahyono (2016) and Khodashenas (2017). The most common face-threatening acts observed were questions, error correction, feedback, disagreement, and criticism, in line with Amaya (2008), Dronia (2013), Cahyono (2016), Darweesh and Mehdi (2016), and Khodashenas (2017). Face-saving acts included hedging, appreciation expressions, metalinguistic elicitation, revoicing, and reformulation.

6. Conclusion

- This study explored how negative politeness strategies are used in Libyan EFL classrooms and how they affect the relationship between teachers and students. The findings demonstrate that politeness strategies play a key role in maintaining smooth and effective classroom communication. Teachers generally made deliberate efforts to protect students' face, particularly in situations involving instructions, requests, encouragement, and confirmation-

seeking. The use of these strategies was also shaped by contextual factors such as learner age, gender, power asymmetry, and social distance.

- Students felt more comfortable and more willing to participate when teachers used supportive, respectful language that protected their face. This was most clearly observed among female students and in classrooms where teachers consistently employed hedging, indirect requests, and appreciation expressions. At the same time, adult learners demonstrated a preference for clarity and directness, suggesting that the effectiveness of politeness strategies is not uniform across all learner groups.

• 6.1 Recommendations for Teachers

- Based on the findings, the following recommendations are offered for EFL teachers in Libyan educational contexts:
 - 1. Balance politeness with clarity. While indirect language protects students' face, excessive indirectness can obscure task instructions. Teachers should use hedges and modal forms while ensuring that the communicative intent remains transparent. For example, "Could you please open your books to page 66?" is both polite and clear.
 - 2. Adapt politeness strategies to learner age. Young learners respond positively to face-saving acts that protect their positive face, such as praise, encouragement, and collaborative error correction. Adult learners, on the other hand, prefer strategies that respect their negative face, such as voluntary participation, immediate error correction, and straightforward feedback. Teachers should calibrate their strategies accordingly.
 - 3. Avoid retaliatory face threats. When students behave in ways that threaten the teacher's face, teachers should resist the impulse to respond with public humiliation or sarcasm, as these can damage trust and reduce student willingness to communicate. Instead, teachers can use indirect strategies to redirect inappropriate behaviour while preserving both parties' face.
- A limitation of this study is that it was conducted in a small number of classrooms with a limited number of participants, which means the results may not fully represent all Libyan EFL settings. Future studies could include a larger number of classrooms, student interviews, and extended observation periods to provide a more comprehensive picture. Researchers may also consider examining the relationship between teacher training in pragmatic awareness and the quality of classroom interaction.

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