

POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN LECTURERS' WRITTEN CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS IN INDONESIAN EFL HIGHER EDUCATION

Asmida Yanti Siregar¹, Didin Nuruddin Hidayat^{2*}, & Nida Husna³
^{1,2,3} Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University, South Tangerang, Indonesia

*didin.nuruddin@uinjkt.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This study examines the politeness strategies utilized by lecturers when delivering WCF to undergraduate EFL students in Indonesia. Although previous studies have recognized the role of politeness in corrective feedback, limited attention has been paid to how politeness strategies are linguistically realized in authentic written feedback, particularly in higher education EFL contexts. This research adopted a descriptive qualitative research design comprising data from twelve files of WCF collected from the Contrastive Error Analysis course at a public university in Indonesia. Distinct from prior research that has mainly focused on spoken feedback or students' perceptions, this study conducts a discourse-level analysis of naturally occurring written corrective feedback. Discourse-based coding was employed to analyze the data, identifying the four maxims of politeness theory. The findings showed that the lecturer applied all four politeness strategies; furthermore, positive and negative politeness were the most frequently used. Positive politeness was expressed through praise, encouragement, and inclusive language to enhance students' confidence, whereas negative politeness was demonstrated through hedging, indirect suggestions, and question forms that maintained student autonomy. Off-record strategies primarily addressed higher-order issues, including coherence and argumentation, while bald-on-record strategies were limited to surface-level corrections. These findings highlight the importance of face-sensitive written feedback and offer implications for EFL teachers in Indonesian higher education.

Keywords: Politeness Strategy, Written Corrective Feedback, Discourse Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Research on Written Corrective Feedback (WCF) has consistently demonstrated its potential to support EFL students' writing development when learners meaningfully engage with the feedback provided (Lyster et al., 2013). Empirical evidence suggests that WCF facilitates the construction of coherent paragraphs and essays, helps learners identify and correct linguistic errors, and reduces the likelihood of repeating similar mistakes in future writing (Kim et al., 2020; Mahvelati, 2021; Rashad & Bin-Hady, 2025). Compared to leaving errors uncorrected, the application of varied types of WCF has been shown to produce more positive learning outcomes by encouraging accuracy and strategic writing practices (Sarré,

2021). However, these benefits are not inherent to feedback itself; rather, the effectiveness of WCF is strongly influenced by how it is delivered and interpreted by students.

Teachers can employ both macro skills (such as the quality of the content, the development of ideas, and the structure of the material) and micro skills (like grammar, word choice, and mechanics) while giving students detailed corrective feedback (Hyland, 2019). These two types of feedback assist students in developing distinct parts of their writing, which is the major purpose of EFL writing education (Mao et al., 2024). Students can also learn how to spot and analyze the problems that come up in their work when they get feedback on their macro and micro skills. When students get feedback, they need to know exactly what they need to work on. This helps them gain reflective knowledge and slowly learn how to write well (Huisman et al., 2018; Hafidhoh et al., n.d.).

Unlike oral feedback, written feedback is permanent and can be read repeatedly, which may increase its effect on students' emotions and interpretation of correction (Hyland, 2021; Santiago, 2024). In written feedback, lecturers cannot use tone of voice or immediate clarification to soften correction. As a result, politeness must be clearly expressed through linguistic features such as indirectness, hedging, and modal expressions (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Recent corrective feedback research has continued to focus mainly on spoken classroom interaction, particularly examining feedback moves and learner responses in oral communication (Mao et al., 2024; Nassaji, 2015). This focus has limited attention to the interpersonal and pragmatic aspects of written corrective feedback. Therefore, a discourse-based analysis of written corrective feedback is necessary to understand how lecturers manage authority, instructional purposes, and students' face needs through written language, especially in Indonesian EFL higher education.

Adopting the appropriate politeness strategies is essential to enhance the effectiveness of WCF and support students' emotional and cognitive responses to feedback (Shen & Chong, 2023). Peng(2020) argued that there are various types of delivering politeness techniques even for criticism, such as showing empathy, using humor, and employing vague or indirect language. By using these techniques, students are more receptive to feedback. In this sense, teachers' respect not only protects students' reputations but also has a big impact on how motivated and secure they are to learn, especially in online settings. It's interesting to point out that studies show that students' self-efficacy is more positively impacted by polite instructor feedback than by their academic motivation (Rivai et al., 2021), underscoring the importance of this quality in promoting constructive learner engagement.

Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, one of the most widely used frameworks for investigating how politeness can enhance the efficacy of WCF, offers a systematic approach to examining how people manage face-threatening acts (FTAs) in communication through the lens of pragmatics. In the context of teacher feedback, providing corrections, particularly in written form, can threaten a student's positive face (the desire to be appreciated) and negative face (the desire for autonomy). Brown and Levinson (1987) propose a range of politeness strategies that speakers (or writers) can use to mitigate such threats, including positive politeness (e.g., showing solidarity or appreciation), negative politeness (e.g., using indirectness or hedging), and off-record strategies (e.g., hinting rather than stating directly).

Studies in Indonesian educational settings increasingly show that politeness affects learners' motivation, revision behavior, and emotional attachment to learning. Rivai et al. (2021) demonstrated that respectful instructor communication enhanced students' self-esteem and persistence. Afidawati, (2024) found that lecturers who used praise, hedging, and encouragement elicited more extensive revisions than those relying on direct correction. Sudar et al. (2025) reported that positive politeness dominated teacher feedback on EFL writing tasks. Supiani et al. (2023) and Darong et al. (2020) showed that indirect strategies were preferred for maintaining learner autonomy, while Kazemi et al. (2018) found that students perceived polite feedback as respectful rather than discouraging.

Although previous studies have examined the use of politeness strategies in various contexts, such as classroom interaction (Fitriyani & Andriyanti, 2020) and online communication (Pathanasin & Eschstruth, 2022), limited attention has been given to how lecturers employ politeness strategies in written corrective feedback (WCF) at the discourse level, particularly in Indonesian EFL higher education. Existing research has not sufficiently explored authentic WCF texts to investigate how politeness strategies are realized across different feedback focuses or how they function to mitigate face-threatening acts.

To address this gap, the present study investigates the politeness strategies used by lecturers when providing written feedback to undergraduate EFL students in an Indonesian context. Guided by Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, this study seeks to identify the types of politeness strategies commonly employed in lecturers' written feedback and to examine how these strategies are used to soften or mitigate face-threatening acts within written corrective feedback.

Based on the identified gap, this study seeks to examine politeness strategies employed by lecturers in Written Corrective Feedback (WCF) for undergraduate EFL students in the Indonesian context, with specific attention to how such strategies function to mitigate face-threatening acts in written feedback. Accordingly, the objectives of this study are to identify the types of politeness strategies, grounded in Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, that are most frequently used in lecturers' written feedback and to analyze how these strategies are linguistically realized to balance correction with students' affective needs. The novelty of this research lies in its multidimensional focus on politeness in WCF by linking macro- and micro-level writing feedback with pragmatic politeness strategies, an area that remains underexplored in prior studies that largely concentrate on classroom interaction or general feedback practices rather than written corrective discourse in higher EFL education.

METHODS

Research Design

Driven by an interpretative paradigm, this study adopted a descriptive qualitative study to investigate how lecturers utilized politeness strategies in their WCF on undergraduate students' essays. A descriptive qualitative design is appropriate because discourse analysis of WCF focuses on meaning, language use, and interactional intent rather than measurement or numerical comparison (Lodico, 2010; Nassaji, 2015; Yin, 2017). On the other hand, it captures the complexity of naturally occurring feedback without reducing

it to isolated categories. This approach allows the researcher to examine feedback as situated discourse, where linguistic choices reflect pedagogical goals, interpersonal considerations, and social norms within the EFL context. This design enabled an in-depth exploration of how lecturers formulate meaning, manage lecturer–student relationships, and support student learning through specific lexical choices, mitigation devices, and feedback moves.

Within this qualitative design, discourse analysis was operationalized by systematically examining written feedback texts using politeness theory as an analytical lens. Feedback comments were treated as units of discourse and analyzed to identify patterns of directness, mitigation, and relational positioning. This process allowed the researcher to interpret how politeness strategies were embedded in feedback practices and how they functioned pragmatically to balance correction and encouragement.

The researchers acted as a non-participant analyst and was not involved in the teaching and learning process of the observed classes. The researchers approached the data from an outsider perspective, which allowed for a more neutral and reflective interpretation of lecturers' written feedback. To minimize subjective bias, all interpretations were grounded in established theoretical frameworks and supported by direct excerpts from the data.

Trustworthiness was ensured through several strategies. Credibility was strengthened by prolonged engagement with the data and repeated reading of feedback texts to ensure accurate interpretation. Dependability was addressed by maintaining a clear and systematic analytical procedure, including transparent coding and documentation of analytical decisions. These measures ensured that the findings were consistent and grounded in the data rather than personal assumptions.

This study contextualizes feedback as a social activity rather than simply a mechanical correction by analyzing genuine lecturer-student interactions. In accordance with Indonesian empirical studies (Rashad & Bin-Hady, n.d.; Irfani & O'boyle, 2024; Fitriyani & Andriyanti, 2020; Khodadust, 2024; Supiani et al., 2023), the research proposes that feedback concurrently shapes knowledge, identity, and emotional climate. Therefore, the research approach prioritizes pragmatic meaning-making over mere error frequency.

Research Setting and Participant

The research was carried out at the English Education Department of UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, Indonesia. The goals were to get twelve pieces of written feedback from the 27 students who were taking the Contrastive Error Analysis (CEA) class in the 2021/2022 school year. The students were all between the ages of 20 and 22 years old. Sixth-semester students were selected because they had sufficient experience in academic writing tasks and were familiar with receiving written feedback on group paper presentations.

Twelve samples of written corrective feedback provided by the course lecturer on students' group paper presentations were purposively selected as the primary data. This class was chosen because the lecturer consistently provided detailed written comments and suggestions on each group's work. The lecturer had several years of teaching experience in academic writing-related courses, which likely influenced the systematic and pedagogically oriented style of the feedback.

The written corrective feedback analyzed in this study mainly served a formative assessment function, as it was intended to guide students' revision, improve their understanding, and support learning development rather than merely evaluate final performance. This formative nature allowed the feedback to reflect genuine instructional intent and ongoing lecturer–student interaction.

Although the data were obtained from only one lecturer, this limitation was acknowledged in the study. However, focusing on a single lecturer enabled an in-depth and consistent analysis of politeness strategies within a specific instructional context. The feedback's consistency and authenticity allowed the researcher to identify natural patterns of language use and interactional intent within the written corrective feedback practices.

Data Collection

The main data for this study originated from WCF from undergraduate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students who were taking the Contrastive Error Analysis course in the sixth semester. As part of the course requirements, each group had to turn in a presentation paper. The feedback data were collected over two weeks. This timeframe included obtaining formal research permission from the course lecturer, requesting consent and access from the students, and downloading the feedback files from the shared Google Drive folder. After receiving a research permission letter, the lecturer directed the researcher to contact the relevant students. All feedback files were originally written in English. The files were systematically stored and managed by labeling each document with a code indicating the group number and feedback sequence (e.g., G1_F1) to ensure confidentiality and ease of analysis. The data were stored in a secure digital folder accessible only to the researcher.

A total of thirteen student groups were enrolled in the course; however, only twelve feedback files were available in the shared folder, as one group did not receive written feedback because the lecturer provided oral feedback after the presentation, which was not documented in written form. The feedback analyzed in this study reflected a single round of lecturer comments on the submitted presentation papers, and no revised drafts or multiple feedback cycles were involved.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory as the main analytical framework to examine how face-threatening acts (FTAs) were managed in written corrective feedback. The analysis followed a qualitative coding procedure consisting of several systematic stages.

First, open coding was conducted by closely reading each feedback comment to identify linguistic features related to politeness strategies. At this stage, initial codes were assigned to segments of feedback based on their communicative function. The major politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson were then used as the primary coding categories: positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record strategies, and bald on-record strategies. These categories were theoretically informed but were refined during the analysis when contextual interpretation required more specific distinctions.

Second, each coded segment was examined to determine whether it functioned as a face-threatening act, particularly in relation to students' positive face (the desire for approval) and negative face (the desire for autonomy). When feedback instances appeared ambiguous or could be interpreted in more than one way, the surrounding textual context and instructional purpose of the comment were considered to reach the most plausible interpretation.

Third, a contextual discourse analysis was conducted to interpret how politeness strategies operated within the feedback. This analysis considered tone, lexical choices, mitigation devices, and the placement of feedback within the comment (e.g., at the beginning, middle, or end). All coding and analysis were carried out manually without the use of qualitative analysis software, allowing the researcher to engage closely with the data.

To ensure analytical consistency, the coding scheme was applied repeatedly across all data samples, and earlier coding decisions were reviewed and adjusted when necessary to maintain coherence across the dataset. Non-verbal feedback markers, such as emojis or formatting symbols, were excluded from the analysis because the feedback files were text-based and did not consistently contain such features, making verbal language the most reliable unit of analysis.

The results were analyzed through the lens of Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, which defines ways for eliminating face-threatening acts (FTAs) in conversation. There were a few steps to the analysis:

1. Using the major politeness strategies to code feedback:
 - a. Positive politeness (like saying thank you or complimenting someone)
 - b. Negative politeness (like making indirect suggestions or hedging)
 - c. Off-record strategies (like using hints or questions instead of direct criticism)
 - d. Bald on record (used only when necessary and with little redressive action).
2. Figuring out whether parts of the feedback are face-threatening activities (FTAs), especially those that could hurt students' positive face (wanting to be acknowledged) or negative face (wanting to be independent).
3. A contextual analysis of the use of these strategies, encompassing tone, lexical selections, mitigation techniques, and the placement of feedback (beginning, middle, or end of the comment).

RESULTS

An analysis of twelve written corrective feedback (WCF) files revealed that the lecturer employed all four politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), namely positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record strategies, and bald-on-record comments. However, these strategies were not used equally. Positive politeness and negative politeness were the most dominant categories, appearing in nearly all feedback samples, particularly in the opening and closing sections of comments. Off-record strategies occurred less frequently and were mainly found when the lecturer addressed issues related to organization and argument development. Bald-on-record strategies appeared primarily in the correction of surface-level errors such as grammar, word choice, and citation formatting. This pattern indicates the lecturer's effort to balance pedagogical clarity with interpersonal sensitivity.

Overall, the lecturer tended to use combinations of strategies within a single feedback entry rather than relying on one strategy exclusively. Praise or encouragement typically preceded critical comments, followed by indirect suggestions for improvement, demonstrating a consistent attempt to reduce the potential face-threatening nature of corrective feedback.

Distribution of Politeness Strategies in Written Corrective Feedback

Across the twelve feedback files, positive politeness and negative politeness dominated the data. Positive politeness appeared in most opening and closing comments, while negative politeness frequently occurred in suggestion and revision sections. Off-record strategies were found in fewer cases and were mainly associated with organization and coherence. Bold-on-record strategies appeared sporadically, usually in marginal comments addressing grammar or citation issues. This distribution indicates that the lecturer tended to prioritize face-sensitive strategies, reserving direct strategies for low-risk corrections.

Table 1. The frequency of four maxim politeness strategy

Politeness Strategy	Frequency of Occurrence	Relative Use
Positive Politeness	48 instances	High
Negative Politeness	41 instances	High
Off-record Strategy	19 instances	Moderate
Bald-on-record	12 instances	Low
Total	120 instances	

As shown in Table 1, positive politeness strategies occurred most frequently, accounting for nearly half of all identified instances. Negative politeness also appeared regularly and was only slightly less frequent. In contrast, off-record strategies were used moderately, while bald-on-record strategies appeared least often. Although bald-on-record comments were limited in number, they consistently served specific functions related to surface-level correction, indicating a strategic rather than incidental use.

Positive Politeness Strategies

Positive politeness emerged as the most salient strategy in the dataset, especially in extended feedback and end comments. The lecturer frequently employed praise, encouragement, and expressions of approval to reinforce students' confidence before introducing critical evaluation.

1) Embedding Criticism within Praise

A common pattern in the data is the "praise-critique-suggestion" sequence. This structure enables the lecturer to identify students' strengths before addressing their weaknesses. For example, one feedback comment states:

"Your topic choice is interesting and relevant. However, the explanation in this paragraph still needs clearer development."

This structure suggests that the lecturer intentionally buffered criticism with positive evaluation to prevent discouragement. Rather than presenting feedback as fault-finding, the lecturer framed revision as a normal part of academic growth.

2) Personalizing Feedback and Building Solidarity

The use of inclusive pronouns such as we and let's was frequently observed, indicating an effort to construct feedback as collaborative rather than authoritative. For instance:

"Let's try to reorganize this paragraph so the ideas can flow better."

By positioning the teacher and student as co-participants in revision, the lecturer reduced hierarchical distance and created a supportive instructional tone.

3) Encouraging tone and acknowledgment of effort

The lecturer consistently acknowledged students' effort, even when major revisions were suggested. Typical expressions included:

"Good improvement compared to your previous work."

"You have clearly spent time developing this idea."

Such expressions indicate that the lecturer valued the writing process in addition to the final product, thereby enhancing students' sense of competence.

4) Use of Hedging and Softening Devices

Positive politeness was further realized through lexical hedges such as a bit, perhaps, slightly, and you might consider. These elements softened the impact of criticism, as illustrated below:

"This part is a bit unclear; perhaps you could rephrase it more precisely."

Hedges allowed the lecturer to offer critique without projecting absolute authority, thus reducing emotional pressure on students.

As indicated in Table 1, positive politeness strategies were the most frequently identified in the lecturer's written corrective feedback, with 48 instances across the twelve feedback files. This high frequency shows that the lecturer consistently prioritized supportive and encouraging language when responding to students' writing. Positive politeness was mainly realized through praise, acknowledgment of effort, and inclusive expressions, and it appeared most often in opening and closing comments. These patterns suggest that positive politeness functioned as a framing strategy to create a supportive tone before and after corrective remarks.

Negative Politeness Strategies

Negative politeness strategies were widely employed to respect students' autonomy and minimize imposition. These strategies were particularly noticeable in suggestions for content development and organization.

1) Modal verbs and indirect directives

Rather than issuing commands, the lecturer relied heavily on modal verbs such as *may*, *might*, and *could*. Examples include:

"You may want to provide more evidence here."

"It might be helpful to clarify the main claim in this paragraph."

Such language gives students agency over revision decisions and acknowledges their ownership of the text.

2) Question forms as a softened evaluation

Questions were frequently used to express criticism indirectly:

"What is the main point you want the reader to understand here?"

This strategy shifts responsibility to students as active problem-solvers rather than passive recipients of correction.

3) Minimizing perceived burden

The lecturer also reduced the weight of revision by presenting it as manageable:

"Only a small revision is needed here."

Such phrasing encourages students to view feedback as attainable rather than overwhelming.

4) Apologizing for the imposition

In a few instances, the lecturer used apologies when pointing out recurring errors:

"Sorry, this part still needs revision."

This demonstrates sensitivity toward the emotional impact of repeated correction.

Negative politeness strategies were also widely used, with 41 identified instances, making them the second most frequent strategy in the dataset. These strategies were commonly found in sections where the lecturer provided suggestions for revision, particularly related to content development and organization. The frequent use of modal verbs, indirect phrasing, and question forms indicates that the lecturer consistently attempted to reduce imposition and respect students' autonomy. The relatively high frequency of negative politeness highlights its importance in managing instructional authority while allowing students control over their writing decisions.

Off-Record Strategies

Off-record strategies were used primarily in addressing coherence, argumentation, and organization. Rather than pointing out errors explicitly, the lecturer hinted at issues indirectly. Off-record strategies were mainly used for sensitive, higher-level writing issues and allowed critique without direct confrontation.

1) Hinting and implicature

Instead of stating problems explicitly, the lecturer sometimes used hints, such as:

"Some readers may find this section difficult to follow."

This comment implied a problem without directly stating it, allowing students to infer the issue themselves.

2) *Stating general academic norms*

The lecturer also used general statements to avoid personal criticism:

"In academic writing, topic sentences should be clear and specific."

This universal framing distances the critique from the individual student. Negative politeness strategies were also widely used, with 41 identified instances, making them the second most frequent strategy in the dataset. These strategies were commonly found in sections where the lecturer provided suggestions for revision, particularly related to content development and organization. The frequent use of modal verbs, indirect phrasing, and question forms indicates that the lecturer consistently attempted to reduce imposition and respect students' autonomy. The relatively high frequency of negative politeness highlights its importance in managing instructional authority while allowing students control over their writing decisions.

Bald-on-Record Strategies

Bald-on-record comments were infrequent and appeared mainly in the correction of surface-level errors such as grammar and citation format. Although infrequent, bald-on-record strategies took an important role in ensuring clarity and accuracy in technical corrections. Common examples include:

"Incorrect verb tense."

"Citation needed."

These comments were brief, direct, and unmitigated. However, they carried minimal interpersonal risk because they targeted technical issues rather than cognitive ability. Such comments were often located in the margins, while more polite discourse appeared in the end commentary.

Off-record strategies appeared less frequently than positive and negative politeness, with a total of 19 instances identified in the data. These strategies were mainly used when addressing higher-order writing concerns, such as coherence, clarity, and argument structure. Rather than stating problems directly, the lecturer often relied on hints or general statements about academic writing conventions. The moderate frequency of off-record strategies suggests that the lecturer reserved this approach for more sensitive or complex issues that could pose a higher risk to students' face.

Mitigating Face-Threatening Acts

The results show that the lecturer systematically combined politeness strategies to balance clarity and sensitivity. Positive and negative politeness dominated interpersonal feedback, off-record strategies softened critique of higher-order issues, and bald-on-record strategies ensured efficient technical correction.

Protecting Positive Face

The lecturer consistently avoided criticizing students directly. Instead, problems were attributed to the text rather than the writer:

"This section is unclear" rather than "You are unclear."

Reframing critique as text-focused preserved students' self-image.

Respecting Negative Face

Students' independence was maintained through optional phrasing:

"You could consider adding counterarguments."

The use of conditional forms minimized perceived obligation.

End Comments as Affective Support

End comments provided the richest use of politeness strategies. The lecturer often expressed empathy and encouragement:

"Writing academic texts in English is challenging, but you are doing well."

The lecturer also emphasized future improvement:

"For your next draft, try focusing on strengthening paragraph unity."

These forward-looking comments encouraged growth rather than judgment.

Across all feedback files, the lecturer consistently employed politeness strategies to mitigate potential Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs) arising from written correction. FTAs mainly occurred when the lecturer pointed out weaknesses, requested revisions, or evaluated students' writing quality. To reduce these threats, criticism was frequently redirected from the student to the text, using expressions such as *"this section is unclear"* rather than direct references to the writer. In addition, optional language, hedging, and indirect phrasing were used to soften the force of correction. These strategies functioned to protect students' positive face by avoiding personal judgment and to respect students' negative face by minimizing imposition. As a result, feedback maintained its corrective purpose while remaining effectively supportive.

In conclusion, the frequency patterns and qualitative functions reveal a systematic use of politeness strategies in the lecturer's written corrective feedback. Positive politeness and negative politeness appeared most frequently and served as the main strategies for managing interpersonal relations, encouraging students, and maintaining autonomy during revision. Off-record strategies, although less frequent, were selectively used for higher-order and potentially sensitive issues, such as coherence and argumentation. Bald-on-record strategies occurred least often and were limited to technical corrections where the face-threatening risk was minimal. This distribution shows that frequency did not indicate importance alone, but rather reflected functional differentiation, with each strategy serving a specific role in balancing instructional clarity and face protection.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how a lecturer employed politeness strategies in Written Corrective Feedback (WCF) for undergraduate EFL students using Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory as an analytical framework. The findings indicate that all four politeness strategies were used; however, their distribution was not uniform. Positive politeness and negative politeness dominated the feedback, while off-record and bald-on-record strategies appeared less frequently. Rather than reflecting random preference, this pattern suggests deliberate pragmatic choices by the lecturer to manage face-threatening acts while maintaining instructional effectiveness.

This discussion addresses the two research questions by first explaining the types of politeness strategies identified in the lecturer's written corrective feedback and then examining how these strategies function to mitigate face-threatening acts. In response to the first research question, the findings show that positive and negative politeness strategies were used most frequently, while off-record and bald-on-record strategies appeared less often and served more specific functions. Addressing the second research question, the discussion further explains how these strategies were strategically employed to protect students' positive face through encouragement and recognition, and their negative face through indirectness and respect for autonomy. By linking the distribution of politeness strategies with their pragmatic functions, this section demonstrates that the lecturer's feedback practices were not only instructional but also face-sensitive and contextually grounded.

Positive Politeness

The lecturer's frequent use of positive politeness shows that they saw feedback as more than just correcting mistakes; they saw it to communicate with people. There was a clear pattern of praise followed by evaluation and recommendation, with compliments and encouragement coming before criticism most of the time. This sequence suggests an understanding that students are more open to learning when their efforts are recognized. These findings correspond with Indonesian research demonstrating that politeness in academic conversation fosters emotional engagement and academic confidence (Rivai et al., 2021).

The dominance of positive politeness indicates that the lecturer treated written feedback not only as an instructional tool but also as an interpersonal act. From the perspective of Brown and Levinson (1987), positive politeness directly addresses students' positive face, namely the desire to be appreciated and valued. By consistently embedding criticism within praise and acknowledgment of effort, the lecturer reduced the potential threat to students' self-image caused by written correction. This strategy is particularly important in written feedback, where the absence of intonation and immediate clarification may amplify perceived criticism.

The frequent use of inclusive expressions such as *we* and *let's* further reflects an effort to minimize power distance between lecturer and students. In the Indonesian educational context, where hierarchical relationships between teachers and students are traditionally

strong, such linguistic choices function to soften authority while maintaining respect. This finding aligns with Indonesian EFL studies (Fitriyani & Andriyanti, 2020) and (Afidawati, 2024), which report that lecturers often use solidarity-building language to foster a supportive learning atmosphere without undermining their institutional role.

Negative Politeness

Negative politeness was also quite important, especially when giving suggestions for changes to arguments and content development. The instructor usually didn't use instructions; instead, they used modal phrases like "may," "could," and "might." These formats showed that students had control over their own writing. For example, instead of telling students what to do, the speaker made suggestions optional. This shows a teaching philosophy that values the independence of students.

Negative politeness emerged as a dominant strategy because it effectively protects students' negative face, defined as the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition. The lecturer's consistent use of modal verbs, indirect suggestions, and question forms allowed students to retain ownership of their texts while still receiving guidance. In relation to the second research question, this demonstrates how politeness strategies were employed to mitigate face-threatening acts by transforming directives into optional choices rather than obligations.

Question-based feedback functioned as both a politeness strategy and a pedagogical device. From a face perspective, questions reduce the force of evaluation by shifting responsibility to the student, thereby lowering the threat to both positive and negative face. Pedagogically, this strategy encourages reflection and problem-solving, supporting previous Indonesian research that links indirect feedback with higher learner engagement and autonomy (Putri & Rozimela, 2024). Mitigation also showed up in phrases that made the workload seem less. The speaker made rewriting seem easier by labeling revisions "minor" or "simple." This kind of framing can make students more likely to want to revise and keep them from getting emotionally drained. Rivai et al. (2021) also found that being polite boosts self-efficacy, which means that feeling safe emotionally encourages students to take intellectual risks.

Off-record Strategies

Off-record strategies were primarily utilized to deal with discourse-level concerns. Instead of saying that several paragraphs were weak, the teacher commented, "Some readers may find this unclear." This method kept the lecturer from directly judging the work and blamed the problem on the inferred readers. This kind of indirectness made it possible to criticize without being direct. The lecturer also talked about general academic standards, like what "academic writing typically requires," instead of immediately pointing out what the students were doing wrong. This technique characterized constraints as departures from convention rather than personal shortcomings. Darong et al. (2020) (Widiastuti et al., 2023) noted a comparable trend: Indonesian lecturers favor indirectness for complex issues and precision for minor faults. The current data corroborate that pragmatic distinction.

The selective use of off-record strategies suggests that the lecturer perceived higher-order concerns, such as coherence and argumentation, as more face-threatening than surface-level errors. In Indonesian sociocultural norms, indirectness is commonly used to maintain harmony and avoid confrontation, particularly when addressing sensitive issues. By framing critique through hints or general academic norms, the lecturer minimized personal judgment while still signaling the need for revision.

Bald-on-record Strategies

Bald-on-record interaction was only allowed for factual changes such as grammar, punctuation, and reference. Most of the time, comments were simple and to the point, such as "Wrong tense" or "Citation needed." These statements were truthful, but they didn't pose much of a risk to the people involved. The lecturer's selective use of bald-on-record supports Brown and Levinson's assertion that directness is socially acceptable when the action poses a small emotional risk.

Although bald-on-record strategies appeared least frequently, their use was purposeful rather than marginal. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), bald-on-record strategies are appropriate when the face threat is minimal. In this study, direct comments were limited to technical errors such as grammar and citation, which target the text rather than the writer's competence. This controlled use explains their low frequency while highlighting their functional importance in ensuring clarity and accuracy.

Implication and Recommendation

The findings demonstrate that politeness strategies function most effectively when combined rather than used in isolation. This layered approach allows lecturers to balance instructional clarity with emotional sensitivity. From a pedagogical perspective, the results highlight the importance of developing teachers' pragmatic awareness in written feedback practices. Teacher education programs should therefore address not only what errors to correct, but also how correction can be linguistically framed to support both learning and emotional well-being.

An important point to consider is that politeness strategies don't usually work on their own. The lecturer usually used more than one strategy in each feedback submission. After praise, there can be a hedged critique and then optional advice. This layering is an example of advanced practical intelligence. Supiani et al. (2023; Peng, 2020) also noticed that good teachers use a mix of strategies instead of sticking to one. When it came to protecting the face, the teacher always focused on the text instead of the student. Some people said that the parts were "unclear" instead of the students themselves. This choice of grammar kept performance and identity distinct and kept students' self-esteem safe. Kazemi et al. (2018) discovered that Indonesian EFL learners exhibit emotional susceptibility to face-threatening criticism. This study verifies that polite reframing serves as a form of psychological protection.

End comments were especially full of words that made people want to do better. The speaker frequently acknowledged progress and focused on future performance instead of past mistakes. This kind of closure made writing more about advancement than about

judging. Afidawati (2024) said that summative correction by itself does not accomplish much to help people develop unless it's paired with encouragement and advice on how to do things better. This corresponds with recent findings indicating that effective Written Corrective Feedback (WCF) must be clear, controllable, and helpful to facilitate learners' writing progress (Sudar et al., 2025). The results of this study support that perspective.

In general, WCF is not only about information; it is also about relationships. The instructor safeguarded emotional integrity by making intentional linguistic choices while addressing intellectual shortcomings. Recent studies have shown that corrective feedback has a significant impact on both the quality of writing and emotional engagement in Indonesian EFL settings (Supiani et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2020; Sudar et al., 2025). The study empirically advances politeness theory by applying it to Indonesian higher education writing environments, an area where research has predominantly concentrated on spoken classroom interactions rather than written academic discourse. Although the study focused on only one teacher and one set of data, the results can be applied to learn more about how feedback works in similar contexts.

Based on a pedagogical perspective, the study underscores the necessity for teacher training programs to incorporate the pragmatic dimensions of feedback language. Courses on teaching academic writing should include both ways to address mistakes and ways to deal with people. This aligns with research indicating that teacher motivational strategies profoundly influence students' writing confidence and engagement (Kim et al., 2020; Lyster et al., 2013). In short, teachers' written feedback works on both the mental and emotional levels. Positive politeness builds confidence, negative politeness protects autonomy, off-record strategies handle sensitivity, and bald-on-record makes sure that factual correction is quick and easy. These parts work together to produce a feedback system that protects dignity while helping people learn. Future studies may investigate student reactions to these strategies or analyze practices across institutions.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the use of politeness strategies in lecturers' written corrective feedback and how these strategies function to mitigate face-threatening acts in undergraduate EFL writing contexts. Drawing on Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, the findings demonstrate that politeness in written feedback is not incidental but systematically embedded in instructional discourse, addressing a gap in prior research that has largely focused on spoken interaction or learner perceptions rather than authentic written feedback practices.

The findings show that all four politeness strategies were employed, with positive and negative politeness appearing most frequently. Positive politeness functioned to support students' confidence and emotional engagement, while negative politeness protected learner autonomy through indirect and optional feedback. Off-record strategies were selectively used for higher-order writing concerns, whereas bald-on-record strategies were limited to surface-level corrections. This distribution reflects a strategic differentiation of politeness functions rather than unequal importance among strategies.

The main theoretical contribution of this study lies in its application of Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory to written corrective feedback in higher education. By demonstrating how lecturers strategically manage students' positive and negative face through written language, this study extends politeness theory beyond spoken interaction and shows its relevance for understanding written instructional discourse in EFL contexts.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the importance of developing lecturers' pragmatic awareness in written feedback practices. Teacher education and academic writing courses should address not only what errors to correct but also how feedback can be linguistically framed to maintain students' dignity, motivation, and autonomy. Incorporating politeness strategies into feedback training may help lecturers deliver corrections that are both effective and affectively supportive.

Despite its contributions, this study is limited by its focus on a single lecturer within a specific institutional context, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Future research may examine politeness strategies across different institutions, disciplines, and proficiency levels, as well as explore students' responses to various feedback strategies. Such studies would further clarify how politeness in written feedback shapes learning experiences in diverse EFL contexts.

In conclusion, effective WCF requires more than technical accuracy; it demands interpersonal sensitivity and pragmatic awareness. Politeness strategies enable teachers to correct, guide, and motivate simultaneously. By integrating such strategies into feedback practice, lecturers can enhance student engagement, promote autonomy, and support sustainable academic development in EFL writing classrooms.

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