Being polite while fulfilling different discourse functions in online classroom discussions

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ABSTRACT
Using a discourse analytic qualitative approach, we investigated the naturally-occurring discourse that arose as part of two kinds of regular course activities, synchronous and asynchronous computer-mediated discussions. The messages contributed by members of a graduate course were analyzed for the kind of discourse functions and the kind of politeness strategies they displayed. Results indicated that synchronous CMD afforded more information seeking, information providing, and social comments than asynchronous CMD. Asynchronous discussions were slightly more likely to allow for such functions as discussion generating, experience sharing, idea explanation, and self-evaluation functions than synchronous discussions. Proportionately the two modes were similar in how politeness was expressed. Finally, in relating politeness and function, we found more politeness indicators when students were posting messages with such functions as positive evaluation and group conversation management, functions that carried the potential for face threat, and the least politeness associated with messages serving the function of experience sharing.

1. Introduction
1.1. Objective

As Wells (2001) wrote, “knowing is largely carried out through discourse” (p. 184), and individuals create much of the fabric of their intellectual and social lives through the words they use. Our goal in this study was to understand better how students do their discourse work when engaged in computer-mediated discussion (CMD) as part of a course activity. Instead of exploring student intent and their social concerns in CMD through interviews, self-reports, or learning outcomes, we were interested in what we could learn from an analysis of the messages themselves, the discourse produced in classroom discussion carried out online.

Two constructs were particularly relevant to this work: (a) the kinds of discourse moves or functions served by messages, and (b) the ways that messages reflect social concerns that are related to face-saving and face-threat acts, what are often called politeness strategies. We were interested in how graduate students managed politeness concerns as they fulfilled different discourse functions in CMD. In addition, we focused on studying this relationship in online tasks with different parameters, such as represented and asynchronous and synchronous discussions.

This study addressed three research questions. First, we were interested in how the messages posted by members of a graduate-level course in asynchronous and synchronous CMD represented different discourse functions. Second, we wanted to see how students used different politeness moves across the two modes of CMD, asynchronous and synchronous. Finally, we were interested in the relationship between discourse functions and the use of politeness strategies in the two CMD modes.

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1.2. Theoretical framework

Increasingly prevalent in educational settings, computer-mediated discussion (CMD) allows learners to participate in and build a learning community to construct knowledge online collaboratively (Schallert, Reed, & the D-Team, 2003–2004; Wade & Fauske, 2004). Because the discourse produced in fulfillment of course activities by learners participating in CMD is written, transcripts of online discussions can be saved easily, allowing educators and researchers to examine the discourse in order to understand students’ learning processes. As the quote from Wells (2001) above continues, “We should not be looking for learning in the time between the input from the teacher or text and later output in answers to spoken or written questions. Rather, we should expect to find the learning occurring in and through participation in the activities that make up the curriculum” (p. 184). In analyzing CMD discourse, we can examine the learning process itself rather than learning products or outcomes. As Schallert et al. (2004) reported, students give evidence of their learning even as they are involved in online discussions.

For the current study, we investigated how students learned in CMD by focusing on the functions served by different discourse moves. Our starting point was Gee’s (1996) conception of Discourse (with a capital D) as “a socially accepted association among ways of using language, other symbolic expressions, and ‘artifacts,’ of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or ‘social network,’ or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful ‘role’” (p. 131). In this view, Discourse is more than just language and is highly context-related. Discourse includes what happens when people draw on the contextual knowledge they have about language and on situated knowledge based on their memories of things they have said, heard, seen, or written before, in order to do things in the world (e.g., exchanging information, expressing feelings, making things happen, creating beauty, entertaining themselves and others, and so on). Discourse is both the source of this context-related knowledge and the result of it as delineated by Johnstone (2008) in the following six propositions: (1) Discourse shapes and is shaped by the world; (2) it shapes and is shaped by language; (3) the same holds for the mutual influence of Discourse and participants, (4) medium, and (5) purpose; finally, (6) Discourse is shaped by prior discourse and shapes the possibilities for future Discourse. Taking Gee’s definition of Discourse and Johnstone’s six propositions, Cameron (2001) suggested that discourse analysis should not simply focus on the linguistic forms of Discourse but also on their communicative functions. For example, the same linguistic form (e.g., a sentence with interrogative syntax) can have different functions in discourse (e.g., question or request); and the same function (e.g., request) can be realized by different linguistic forms (e.g., interrogative or imperative). Therefore, a discourse analyst should take linguistic form, context, and communicative function into consideration when analyzing Discourse. Inspired by these authors, we sought in our study to examine the discourse functions served by messages students posted in the context of a computer-mediated learning environment.

The term discourse function used here refers to the purpose of an interlocutory move occurring in an interactional event. We were influenced by Zhu’s (1996) categorization of the online asynchronous written messages of the students in a graduate seminar in terms of the following categories: information seeking question, discussing question, answer, information sharing, discussion, comment, reflection, and scaffolding. In addition, we saw the concept of discourse function as similar to the terms discourse strategies (Wade & Fauske, 2004), speech genre (Kress, 1989; Na, 2004), and social and cognitive presence (Rourke & Anderson, 2002; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 1999). Wade and Fauske (2004) defined discourse strategies as the ways interlocutors fulfill different goals when participating in a dialogue. Examples of goals include the desire to bring everyone to a consensus and to examine multiple possibilities and alternative hypothesis. In their analysis of transcripts from classroom CMD, Wade and Fauske identified the following discourse strategies: supporting, perspective taking, inquiring, self-questioning, challenging, nonsupporting (as in mocking or putting another person down), and posturing. Speech genre refers to types of utterances such as narrating memories and experiences, abstracting, interpreting, evaluating, eliciting, testing, etc., which are fused together to develop a speech activity (Kress, 1989). Na (2004) used the construct of genre to describe the asynchronous messages used by students in an online discussion. Finally, social and cognitive presence are two of the three constructs (along with teaching presence) that Rourke and Anderson (2002; see also Rourke et al., 1999) proposed as making up what they called a Community of Inquiry. In their analysis, presence was identified from several indicators found in participants’ contributions to online discussions, with social presence referring to the degree to which participants could be socially and emotionally responsive to one another and cognitive presence referring to the various ways that learners could construct new understanding from communication. In the tradition of these researchers, our own project was an exploration of whether discourse functions (our choice of a label) could offer a framework in which messages in online discussions could be said to express the intellectual (or cognitive) and social work students were accomplishing.

In addition to discourse functions, we were interested in the issue of politeness in CMD. Yang et al. (2006) emphasized the importance of taking politeness into consideration in CMD by stating that “a concern with politeness in discourse is more than simply an additional veneer added to make one’s words ‘nicer’ but instead, seems to be at the core of reflecting how words enact or reflect the relationship between interlocutors in any discourse event” (p. 342). With his construct of online disinhibition, Suler (2004) emphasized that people can behave very differently on the Internet when compared to how they behave in face-to-face interactions with others. The emergence of the word Netiquette indicates the importance of taking courtesy into consideration when interacting in cyberspace. Combining the terms network and etiquette, Netiquette refers to a set of core rules indicating what should or should not be done in online communication to ensure common courtesy (Shea, 1994). Schallert, Cheng, and the D-Team (2008) described netiquette as the use of conventions that indicate proper manners in online communication. These core rules or conventions address the dynamic social relationships among individuals, playing an important role in the success of online learning because they affect not only cognitive but also socio-emotional processes taking place during learning (Schallert et al., 2008; Vinagre, 2008). Both the idea of Netiquette and results showing the online disinhibition effect support the necessity of studying politeness in CMD.

The concept of politeness in interpersonal interactions has a long history in the field of sociolinguistics. With his construct of “face,” sociologist Goffman (1967) foregrounded the influential formulation of politeness that Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed. According to Goffman (1967), the term face is associated with the social-emotional notions of being embarrassed or humiliated. There is always the possibility that face can be lost, maintained, or enhanced when people participate in any interpersonal interaction. Generally speaking, when people interact with others, they not only pay attention to saving their own face, but also attend to helping others not lose face because face is mutually vulnerable. Because Goffman emphasized the universality of face concerns, Brown and Levinson (1987) assumed face as wants that all competent adult members of a society have and know each other to have.
Drawing on Goffman (1967), Brown and Levinson (1987) and Morand and Ocker (2003) defined politeness in CMD as an attempt to “phrase things so as to show respect and esteem for the face of others throughout social interchange” (p. 1). Face can be divided into positive and negative face. Positive face addresses the reader/hearer’s desire to be needed. Negative face addresses an individual’s desire for freedom from impingement. As one interacts in CMD, face can be threatened by acts such as disagreements, criticisms, requests for information or help, and requests for clarification of a prior message. In order to redress face-threatening acts, individuals adopt various politeness moves. Brown and Levinson (1987) categorized politeness moves into positive and negative politeness strategies, depending on which aspect of face the speaker/writer wants to save. Positive politeness strategies refer to moves “showing an appreciation of something that the speaker believes the listener would like to hear,” whereas negative politeness strategies refer to moves “attempting to reduce any imposition on the hearer” (Yang et al., 2006, pp. 341–342). Note that as Yang et al. (2006) highlighted, positive politeness and negative politeness do not refer to opposite ends of a single dimension, like a “good manners” continuum. Instead, these two categories of strategies represent the kinds of face needs they address.

Yang et al. found that the use of politeness strategies in CMD can foster a sense of community among participants by creating a comfort zone in which to exchange ideas as well as motivating students’ participation in the learning process. Yet, these same authors reported that the students in their study who were interacting online as part of a course activity sometimes showed evidence that their concerns about politeness interfered with their learning. In addition to Yang et al., other researchers have examined the politeness issue in online computer-mediated learning environments. Schallert et al. (2008) included graduate students’ self-perceptions of their own and others’ politeness to investigate whether students’ self-perceptions about their politeness concerns would be associated with their use of politeness strategies in terms of amount and kind of actual politeness moves in their online contributions. Schallert et al. used students’ self-reflection papers to understand students’ self-awareness of their politeness concerns and chose two focal students who explicitly stated that they were less concerned with politeness and three focal students who reported that they were highly concerned with issues related to politeness. They conducted a micro-discourse analysis of the written messages composed by these five selected focal students in three synchronous and three asynchronous online discussions. Results showed that the two students who were less concerned with politeness used fewer politeness moves and the politeness strategies they used had less variety; whereas the three students who self-reported as having high concerns about politeness used more politeness moves in their online discussion messages, and a greater variety was found in the kinds of politeness strategies they used.

Believing that social interaction plays an important role in the success of computer-mediated collaborative learning, Vinagre (2008) examined language learners’ use of politeness strategies in e-mail exchanges and reported that politeness influenced the efficiency and effectiveness of social interaction. In the context of e-mail tandem exchanges among college level English learners and Spanish learners, Vinagre hypothesized that students may use more negative politeness strategies than positive politeness strategies. However, findings showed that the language-learning partners used negative politeness strategies infrequently. Instead, they mainly relied on positive politeness strategies, especially those relating to claiming common ground, assuming or asserting reciprocity, and conveying cooperation. This study emphasized the different face desires addressed by positive and negative politeness strategies. Positive politeness strategies focus on closeness, solidarity, and cohesion; whereas negative politeness strategies center on formality and impersonality. Given that the goal of the messages was to allow the partners to introduce themselves to each other, it is perhaps not surprising that students attempted to establish closeness and reduce social distance rather then reflect formality between peers. The social distance between the interlocutors in Vinagre’s sample seemed to influence their preferred type of politeness strategies.

Even though Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory and most of the work on politeness has focused on human-human interaction, a few researchers have made interesting application of politeness theory to guide the sort of built-in messages computer programs would display when human users take different actions. In this use, computer systems are treated as social actors. Studies by Mayer, Johnson, Shaw, and Sandhu (2006) and Wang et al. (2008) showed that Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory need not be limited in its application to human–human interactions, even when these interactions are mediated by the computer as in CMD, but can usefully describe how learners and users respond to and learn from different educational computer software.

Having reviewed some of the literature that has addressed discourse functions and the use of politeness strategies separately, we were interested for our study in seeing whether we could establish a systematic association between different discourse functions and different politeness moves. In this we were guided by Morand and Ocker’s (2003) suggestion that the interlocutory moves serving some discourse functions, such as presenting an alternative perspective, evaluating others’ comments, and managing the conversation, are likely to be charged with face threat. Thus, the first goal of the present study was to examine the relation between discourse functions and the use of politeness strategies in students’ postings.

Our second goal was to explore whether the relationship between discourse function and politeness strategies evident in one mode of online discussion would be represented similarly in another mode. Because the setting to which we had access was a course that incorporated several modes of communication including synchronous and asynchronous discussion tool, we had a natural opportunity to test the extent of the generality of claims about the relationship between discourse function and politeness moves. We were interested in whether the ways of expressing politeness and of fulfilling different discourse functions would be affected by the affordances of these communication modes (Box, 1999). To communicate through an asynchronous mode, as on message boards, participants are not required to be online at the same time. Because messages can be posted, and encountered and responded to by another student coming to the discussion at some later time, students can consider what to say, whether to say it, and how to phrase their messages more carefully than when engaged in the tumultuous exchange characteristic of synchronous discussions. The latter, by contrast, allowing as it does for real-time interaction among participants who are online simultaneously, forces students to choose between posting their contributions quickly with little review or becoming hopelessly behind in reading others’ postings and seeing what others have responded as the discussion unfolds.

In terms of the implied comparison that our study entailed, there have not been many studies directly comparing in strict experimental fashion characteristics and effects of synchronous and asynchronous modes of discussion. Instead, studies typically include only one or the other mode. For example, studies of the discourse of asynchronous CMD have focused on several different aspects including knowledge construction (e.g., Gunawardena, Lowe, & Anderson, 1997; Henri, 1992; Zhu, 1996); social presence (e.g., Rouke et al., 1999); interaction patterns (e.g., Fahy et al., 2000); learning strategies (e.g., Lockhorst, Admiraal, Pilot, & Veen, 2003); and community building (e.g., Butler, Sproull, Kiesler, & Kraut, 2008). Compared to the amount of research conducted on asynchronous CMD,
studies of synchronous CMD are relatively rare (see the following as examples: Abrams, 2001; Kneser, Pilkington, & Treasure-Jones, 2001; Schallert et al., 1996).

Recently, some researchers have attempted to compare learning occurring in asynchronous and synchronous CMD mode (e.g., Abrams, 2003; Chou, 2001; Johnson & Johnson, 2006; Perez, 2003; Thomas & Macgregor, 2005). For example, Abrams (2003) compared three groups of students learning German in terms of their subsequent oral performance, one group that had participated in synchronous online discussion, one that had participated in asynchronous discussion, and a control group. Only the synchronous group differed from the other two, showing a significant increase in quantity of oral language produced subsequent to online synchronous discussion. Chou (2001) reported that during the online discussion, students were more likely to engage in task-oriented rather than in social and off-task messages whether in the synchronous or asynchronous online activity, although the synchronous mode led to a higher proportion of social and emotional messages than the asynchronous. When contributing to the asynchronous discussion, students seemed more interested in presenting their own opinions whereas they seemed more interactive and interested in the views of their peers in the synchronous discussion mode. Thomas and Macgregor (2005) reported on the online activities of undergraduate students involved in a problem-based assignment, finding that the asynchronous mode was preferable for tasks that required deep reflection whereas the synchronous mode was best for aspects of tasks that needed brainstorming and building group cohesion.

1.3. The current study

In this project, we were interested in the discourse moves of students as they interacted with each other as part of a classroom activity. Our focus was on the kind of face “work” the messages revealed by way of politeness strategies as students attempted to accomplish different moves or functions with their postings. Because of the different affordances made possible in the two modes of discussion (synchronous and asynchronous) that were a part of the course we were studying, we were interested in whether the relation between particular politeness strategies and discourse functions would hold similarly across the two modes of online discussion. Our research addressed the following questions:

1. What discourse functions are evident in the postings of students participating in synchronous and asynchronous discussions?
2. What kinds of politeness strategies do students use as they participate in synchronous and asynchronous classroom discussions?
3. What is the relationship of discourse function to politeness strategy in the two kinds of online discussion, synchronous and asynchronous?

2. Method

Our study followed the well-established tradition of classroom research in which the naturally occurring language and discourse patterns produced by teacher and students are mined for linguistic, social, and cultural insights about how individuals manage their realities through the words they use (e.g., Cazden, 2001; Gee, 2005; Mercer, 1995). Our focus differed from previous studies in this tradition in that we were interested in the written discourse produced by the students enrolled in a course that had online discussion activities already embedded in its syllabus. Thus, our methodological approach to both data gathering and analysis involved what Lincoln and Guba (1985) would call an interpretivist qualitative approach with a focus on naturally-occurring discourse.

2.1. Site and participants

Participants were the teacher and 24 students (19 women, 5 men; 8 international students; 3 bilingual students) enrolled in a graduate course on psycholinguistics in the Spring 2007 offered at a large state-funded university in the southwest. The teacher had offered this course for more than 20 years and had been incorporating online discussion as part of the syllabus for more than 10 years.

In addition to 12 face-to-face meetings, the course included three required asynchronous online discussions (during which the students did not meet on campus) and three synchronous discussions held in a computer lab with a local-area network. For the asynchronous discussions, students were told that their minimum assignment was to make at least three postings to their group over the span of 36 h. On the days of the synchronous discussions, students first met in the regular classroom for 90 min and then moved to a computer lab for discussions that lasted about 45 min. For all six online discussions, the teacher assigned the students to two or three groups, changing membership for each discussion. Spaced regularly across the semester, the discussions were introduced by the teacher as occasions to discuss the three or four assigned readings of the week, which were articles or chapters that represented classic as well as current readings about course topics. The teacher participated in all discussions, encouraging students by her response to their postings, pushing the conversation by bringing in new perspectives, or acting as a resource by drawing on her expertise and thorough understanding of the readings. In asynchronous discussions, she was a frequent poster to every group’s discussion, but as this was not possible in the synchronous discussions, her participation varied from group to group.

2.2. Data sources and analysis

Data sources included the written transcripts of the three asynchronous and three synchronous discussions. Each of the asynchronous discussions had three groups. For the first synchronous discussion, the students were assigned to two groups; thereafter, they were assigned to three groups as in the asynchronous discussion. Thus, there were nine transcripts for the asynchronous discussion mode and eight for the synchronous mode. We changed all names of the teacher and students in the transcripts to pseudonyms before beginning to analyze them. Excerpts from messages used as examples here reproduce the exact spelling and punctuation of the original.

To determine the discourse move or function represented by each message, we adapted the coding scheme presented by Zhu (1996), modifying it slightly to fit our particular data. We present the 12 functions (9 major codes; several that are coded with two subcategories) in Table 1 along with a definition of each function and an example from our data.

1.1. The current study
Next, we used a coding scheme for politeness strategies taken from Brown and Levinson (1987) depicting positive and negative instances of politeness strategies. To the 15 positive strategies described by Brown and Levinson, we added one more (P16) to capture the positive politeness move of making room for others’ contributions to the discussion. These, as well as the 10 negative politeness strategies, are described in Table 2 along with an example from our data.

Messages were first coded for their discourse functions using the function categories listed in Table 1. As a first step, we decided on the basic units of analysis by dividing those messages that had more than one discourse function into functional chunks (all messages were coded with at least one functional chunk). Next, we coded chunks for their politeness strategies, identifying which of 16 positive politeness and 10 negative politeness strategies applied. Functional chunks could receive more than one politeness code. Quality assurance of our coding was addressed by having two coders assigned to each conversation who then coded the transcript individually before comparing their judgments. Where the coders could not come to agreement, the whole research team contributed to the resolution. Table 3 provides an example of our coding.

3. Results

3.1. Discourse functions in synchronous and asynchronous discussions

There were 1475 messages across all the synchronous discussions, which were divided into 1715 functional chunks. The 441 messages of the asynchronous discussions were divided into 1276 functional chunks, reflecting that postings in the asynchronous discussions tended to be longer and to contain more discourse functions than individual postings to the synchronous CMD. Thus, the number of messages in the two modes (1475 vs. 441) differed much more than the number of functional chunks across messages (1715 vs. 1276).

As shown in Table 4, when summed across the two modes (see column 1), the two functions that were most common were idea explanation (function #5a) with 682 chunks and positive evaluation (function #6a) with 556 chunks. Frequencies for the functions of self-evaluation (#7), social (#9), experience sharing (#4), and discussion generating (#2) were fairly high, and the message or conversation management functions (#8a and 8b) as well as negative evaluation (#6b) were rarely used. A chi-square test of significance revealed that the distribution of chunks across the different functions was not random, $\chi^2(11) = 1712.91, p < .05$.

This first step in the analysis of students’ discourse moves suggested that they were engaged in interactive and complex knowledge construction processes. Rather than using the online discussion simply to ask direct questions and to share an answer to these questions, their messages focused on exchanging their reasoning with each other and sharing their evaluations of each other’s opinions. When we grouped together the discourse functions that are concerned with a conceptual consideration of the readings or of each other’s ideas (functions #3, 4, 5a, 5b, 6a, and 6b), the result indicated that 60.7% of the online conversations was devoted to discourse moves that had to do with content (see Table 5). When we then looked at those functions that might be interpreted as representing a strong focus on the self (functions #4, 7, and 8b), we found that almost 20% of the conversations were devoted to such concerns. Note that the function of experience sharing (#4) is being counted in both categories here because sharing a personal example or story from one’s past was most often

Table 1

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<tr>
<th>Discourse Functions</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example from our data</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Information seeking</td>
<td>Whether marked by a question mark, this chunk seeks a specific answer that the writer seems to assume others know</td>
<td>What do you mean by multiplexity? [Renee, 3rd Synch, Grp. 3, #25]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Discussion generating</td>
<td>The writer seems to want to generate from others their interpretations and extensions on a topic</td>
<td>I was wondering about what came first? Feeling outgroup or not participate? [Renee, 2nd Synch, Grp. 2, #15]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Information providing</td>
<td>This function refers to when a writer is providing a relatively contained information chunk, often in response to a chunk that was coded a “1” (information seeking)</td>
<td>Multiplexity means multiple ways [Mehmet, 3rd Synch, Grp. 3, #26, an answer to the above example of function 1]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Experience sharing</td>
<td>The writer gives a personal example of a construct from the readings or of what someone else has said in a previous post. The example should be specific</td>
<td>I can’t help but think of my 3 1/2 yr old son. When I am not as attentive as he feels I should be, he says, “Daddy, I’m talking to you!” in a tone that is a mix of exasperation and adamily. I immediately oblige [Luke, 1st Asynch, Grp. 2, #26]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5a. Elaboration/clarification/explanation</td>
<td>This kind of posting has the general function of discussing an idea. The author is elaborating what he or she thinks about something, explaining what a concept is about, analyzing what someone has said, etc. Use the code 5b when posting seems to offer an alternative view</td>
<td>5b. What is more important and I think unaddressed in this article, is that there are so few chances for students to safely self-assess (which might mean to reveal ignorance) that the process is itself foreign [Luke, 1st Asynch, Grp. 2, #4]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5b. Alternative perspective</td>
<td>Writer is agreeing with or appreciating a previous message. Use 6b when posting a disagreement with a previous post</td>
<td>6a. Ah, that’s a nice way to put it. [Soonja, 3rd Synch., Grp. 3, #24]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6a. Positive evaluation</td>
<td>Writer is agreeing with or appreciating a previous message. Use 6b when posting a disagreement with a previous post</td>
<td>6b. Janice, that might not be necessarily true. [Soonja, 3rd Synch, Grp. 3, #88]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6b. Negative evaluation</td>
<td>Writer says something about what he or she feels about his or her own learning or understanding, or an emotional reaction to a posting or reading</td>
<td>I see a lot of myself in Janet. I don’t think I really view myself as one who can be critical and reject the claim or argument that an author said in the book. [Min-Hua, 3rd Asynch, Grp. 1, #3]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Self-evaluation</td>
<td>For 8a, the writer suggests what others should do in the conversation or asks what others want to do. For 8b, the writer describes what he or she has done or will do in with his or her posting</td>
<td>8a. Is anyone interested in talking about the medical humor article? [Janice, 2nd Synch, Grp. 1, #5]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8a. Managing the group’s conversation</td>
<td>For 8b, the writer suggests what others should do in the conversation or asks what others want to do. For 8b, the writer describes what he or she has done or will do in with his or her posting</td>
<td>8b. Back to my point. [Renee, 3rd Synch, Grp. 3, #73]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8b. Prevewing organization of sender’s message</td>
<td>Messages that show none of the previous functions but that seem to have the function of connecting to the group</td>
<td>Hello, Group #1:~~~!!! [SunYoung, 2nd Synch, Grp. 1, #1]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 2
Positive politeness strategies

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Notice and attend to reader’s wants or needs</td>
<td>Mehmet—I agree with your point that writing is closely linked to reading. [Janice, 3rd Asynch, Grp. 1, #4]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Exaggerate interest in, approval of, or sympathy with a previous message</td>
<td>Great question! [Renée, 3rd Synch, Grp. 3, #96]</td>
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<td>3. Intensify interest in the writer’s own contribution—Using words that make one’s own comment more interesting by exaggerating or overstating facts</td>
<td>I was amazed to find some of my own experiences described in it. [Janice, 3rd Asynch, Grp. 1, #20]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Use in-group identity markers to convey in-group membership</td>
<td>Well actually, this is the problem:. [Ayshugul, 3rd Asynch, Grp. 2, #10]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Seek agreement</td>
<td>Like Doris, I really struggled with thinking about how the literacy practices of “gangsta” adolescents could/should have a place in classrooms. [Andrea, 3rd Asynch, Grp. 2, #25]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Show deference</td>
<td>Mehmet, I think both, I think you can bring emotions with you to a framework based on prior experiences, but those emotions can change and expand during the framework and speech activity. [Doris, 2nd Synch, Grp. 2, #29]</td>
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<td>7. Impersonalize the situation</td>
<td>Hi Connie. So good to see your name in the discussion! Last I saw you, it was for such a brief time in the session at AERA! [Dona, 3rd Asynch, Grp. 2, #14]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Joke</td>
<td>Do we then have nine lives in Cyberspace just like cats have here on earth? [Brittany, 3rd Synch, Grp. 2, #141]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Assert or presuppose the writer’s knowledge of the reader’s wants and is willing to fit his/her wants or needs in with the reader’s</td>
<td>Doris, you would think I could answer your question directly about what the difference between the three pictures but I must admit I cannot. [Pauella, 1st Synch, Grp. 1, #117]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Give/ask for reasons</td>
<td>(Long explanation followed by the key phrase) I hope this helps. [Mehmet, 2nd Asynch, Grp. 2, #14]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Be optimistic</td>
<td>I hope I could make my point clear. [Ayshugul, 3rd Asynch, Grp. 2, #5]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Include the writer and reader in the activity</td>
<td>I think we should define what is feeling good. … before to generate that theory—!!! [Sun Young, 2nd Synch, Grp. 1, #65]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Give (or ask for) reasons</td>
<td>Zelda—when you say it like that, it makes me want to ask, but with some trepidation, what happened. [Donna, 2nd Synch, Grp. 3, #34]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Assume or assert reciprocity</td>
<td>I’m just throwing out some ideas. Hope someone can come up with a better idea. [None in these data; example from Yang et al., 2006]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Give praise and statements of appreciation and gratitude</td>
<td>Thank you, Young Hee. [Ya-Wen, 3rd Synch, Grp. 2, #121]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Make room for others’ discussing</td>
<td>This is both a scary and exciting idea. ... still, I’m not sure how you could practically create opportunities for these practices to become part of a classroom. Any ideas? [Andrea, 3rd Asynch, Grp. 2, #25]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Negative politeness strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Be conventionally indirect</td>
<td>Cathy… When you read these categories could you make connections from your classroom experiences? [Andrea, 2nd Synch, Grp. 3, #46]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Hedge</td>
<td>I would think maybe outgroup. [Doris, 2nd Synch, Grp. 2, #17]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Be pessimistic</td>
<td>Luke, I think I would engage more if I could type a bit faster and speak better… maybe not [Brittany, 2nd Synch, Grp. 3, #53]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Minimize the imposition</td>
<td>I am just wondering why other teachers can adopt the model teacher’s strategies…? [Ya-Wen, 3rd Synch, Grp. 3, #74]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Show deference</td>
<td>I haven’t read much research on tutoring so I don’t know all the facts [Linda, 1st Asynch, Grp. 2, #12]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Apology</td>
<td>Sorry, inappropriate [Zelda, 2nd Synch, Grp. 3, #78]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Impersonalize the situation</td>
<td>Are we ready to discuss the Moje article? [Andrea, 3rd Asynch, Grp. 2, #23]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. State the face threatening act as a general rule</td>
<td>So then there would be the question of culture and discourse and how that affects emotions and humor [Doris, 2nd Synch, Grp. 2, #87]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Nominalize the request or imposition</td>
<td>It’s my feeling that this assessment that they did is sufficient because it has the possibility of being impacted not only by the other factors that are measured (domain knowledge and interest). [Example from Yang et al., 2006]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Go on record as incurring a debt or as not indebting the reader</td>
<td>Last week you said that approximately 95% of your students can’t put two phonemes together (if memory serves me well). Will you please provide an example? [Luke, 2nd Asynch., Grp. 3, #26]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3
Example of coding as applied to a message from Cathy in an online discussion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writer</th>
<th>Message</th>
<th>Functional chunk</th>
<th>Discourse function</th>
<th>Politeness strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cathy</td>
<td>But I think humor blurs a lot of lines. I dunno. I felt funny afterward. Am I making drug use a joke? Will the kids think I don’t think drugs are serious?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Explaining an idea</td>
<td>NegPol-hedging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Experience sharing</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We saw some similarities and some differences in the prevalence of different functions across the synchronous and asynchronous discussions, as shown in Table 4. Columns 3 and 5 in the table give the percentage of chunks from each discourse mode that represent a particular function. For example, the 110 chunks serving an information seeking function in the synchronous discussions represented 6% of the total number of chunks (1715) from all three synchronous discussions. We then tested whether the proportions in the two modes were significantly different using the Z-test for differences in proportions tested at \( p < .05 \) (adjusted to take care of test-wide Type 1 error; see column 6 of Table 4). Results indicated that there was proportionately more information seeking (#1), information providing (#3), and social comments (#9) in the synchronous discussions, and more discussion generating (#2), experience sharing (#4), and idea explanation (#5a) functions in asynchronous discussions. Students’ discourse functions were similar across the two modes in terms of moves having to do with providing alternative views (#5b), positive and negative evaluation (#6a and 6b), self-evaluation (#7), and the message or conversation management functions (#8a and 8b).

In terms of how students were spending their time, we can characterize the asynchronous discussions as more serious than the synchronous discussions with nearly 65% of the moves focused on content (functions #3, 4, 5a, 5b, 6a, and 6b), and 24% of the chunks on self-focused talk (functions #4, 7, and 8b). Given that the chunks were also likely to be much longer, the asynchronous discussions may be described as venues for the intellectual work of the students as they considered the ideas they were learning. This is not to say that the synchronous discussions did not themselves involve the students, more often than not, in talk focused on content (57.9%) or in self-reflective moves (16.9%). By virtue of the fact that more of the message chunks were devoted to straight information seeking (6.4%) of the chunks when compared to 1.4% in the asynchronous mode) and social comments (nearly 14% when compared to 5.3% in asynchronous mode), the synchronous discussions had a more casual, breezy, straightforward feel. Compare the first two examples below with the third one:

**Example (1) – SoonJa (3rd Syn, Group 3, Message 6):**

*So glad to see everybody in our group, selective smart people! HaHa.*

**Example (2) – Andrea (1st Syn, Group 1, Message 85):**

*What article/articles are you referring to, Linda?*

**Example (3) – Janice (1st Asyn, Group 2, Message 8):**

*I agree that a teacher can model “expected and accepted communications” (nice phrasing, Luke) while communicating with the students. (Chunk 1: #6A)*

*I noticed this in the article about Gayle [the teacher in one of the course readings], in which transcripts revealed that she was able to find a balance between an authoritative, credible voice, and an interaction that made her seem to be a member of the groups of students. She frequently asked questions and showed that she did not always have an answer, but also demonstrated that she had the problem-solving skills used by students as a way to illustrate their understanding of course content even as it could not help but represent a self focus. Of the discussion comments, 10.2% were coded as representing social functions (#9).*

Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse function</th>
<th>Asynchronous (%)</th>
<th>Synchronous (%)</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content-focused functions</strong> (#3 + 4 + 5a + 5b + 6a + 6b)</td>
<td>64.6</td>
<td>57.9</td>
<td>60.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-focused functions</strong> (# 4 + 7 + 8b)</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>19.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social function (#9)</strong></td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These numbers reflect the percentages of all function chunks (see Table 4) represented by these functions. Note that the percentages for function 4 are counted in both first and second categories.

Table 4

Discourse functions in different communication modes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse function</th>
<th>Both modes</th>
<th>Synchronous</th>
<th>Asynchronous</th>
<th>Z</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Information seeking</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>6.69*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Discussion generating</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>−3.24*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Information providing</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>3.66*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Experience sharing</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>−3.41*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5a. Idea explaining</td>
<td>682</td>
<td>336</td>
<td>346</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>−4.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5b. Giving alternative view</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>−0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6a. Positive evaluation</td>
<td>556</td>
<td>322</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6b. Negative evaluation</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>1.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Self-evaluating learning</td>
<td>318</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>−2.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8a. Managing the group’s talk</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8b. Previewing own message</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>−1.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Social comment</td>
<td>304</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>7.55*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>2991</td>
<td>1715</td>
<td>1276</td>
<td><strong>---</strong></td>
<td><strong>---</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05 indicating a significant difference between synchronous and asynchronous discussions.
necessary to find the answer. In this way, she could model the idea that it’s normal to have questions, as well as some effective ways of answering them through group discussion. (Chunk 2: #5A)

3.2. Politeness strategies in synchronous and asynchronous discussions

Our second step in our analysis was to code each functional chunk for the politeness strategies exhibited using as many politeness codes as we saw represented in any one functional chunk. Of the 1715 functional chunks of the synchronous discussion, 751 (44%) chunks received no politeness strategy coding. The remaining 964 chunks were coded with 1049 politeness moves. As for the asynchronous discussions, 552 of the 1276 functional chunks received no politeness strategy coding, and the remaining 724 chunks were coded with 901 politeness moves. A chi-square test of significance revealed that the use of politeness strategies was independent of discussion modes, $\chi^2 (df = 1$ with Yates’ correction) $= .06$, not significant. In Table 6, we display how positive and negative politeness strategies were distributed in the two discussion modes. A second chi-square test also revealed that mode of discussion did not influence the distribution of positive and negative politeness strategies, $\chi^2 (df = 1$ with Yates' correction) $= 3.70$, n.s. Notably, although raw frequencies indicated that students used more politeness strategies in synchronous than asynchronous discussion mode and more positive than negative strategies overall, the two modes became much more similar when we calculated proportions of the different kinds of strategies in different modes. Most likely, this was because of the fact that there were more chunks in the synchronous discussion and that there were more positive politeness codes (16 vs. 10 negative strategies) that could get coded.

3.3. Relationship of discourse function to politeness strategy across modes

Finally, our analysis turned to connecting together the politeness strategies that students were displaying and the discourse moves or functions they exhibited. Recall that there were about 44% of the discourse function chunks in both modes that had no politeness moves at all. Of the remaining 56% of the function chunks, the question we were addressing here is how students were deploying their various politeness strategy moves as they fulfilled different functions in their online messages. We approached the research questions through four steps of data analysis, the first three using frequencies and the last presenting a microanalysis of the interchange between two students to illustrate how functions and politeness worked together.

3.3.1. Is discourse function associated with use or non-use of politeness?

Our first step was to test the null hypothesis that the number of chunks either with or without at least one politeness move would be independent of discourse function. Results of a chi-square test indicated that the null hypothesis should be rejected: The use of politeness strategies differed across the different functions, $\chi^2 (df = 11) = 298.23$, $p < .05$. In particular, more politeness strategies were displayed when students were posting messages with such functions as positive evaluation (#6a) and group conversation management (#8a). Somewhat fewer politeness strategies were used in message chunks serving social (#9), discussion generation (#2), and negative evaluation (#6b) functions. The discourse function least associated with any politeness was experience sharing (#4): once a student had launched into recounting a personal example, politeness seemed not to be an issue. Thus, messages with functions more related to the writer, such as experience sharing (#4), previewing one’s own message (#8b), and self-evaluation (#7), tended to have fewer politeness strategies than messages serving functions that seemed to be more directed to others. Students seemed to worry more about possible face threats when evaluating another’s message (#6a and 6b), presenting a contrasting view (#5b), attempting to generate discussion (#2), or managing the conversation (#8a). Finally, the last discourse function (#9 – social comments) was often accompanied by politeness indicators, including the politeness strategies of making a joke (P8) or small talk (P7) as a way of building in-group feelings.

3.3.2. Do different discourse functions show a different preponderance of the use of positive and negative politeness strategies?

In the second step in addressing the third research question, we tested the null hypothesis that positive and negative politeness strategies would be displayed equally across different discourse functions. Using a chi-square test, we constructed two categories of politeness strategies. It may not be surprising that such functions, which occur frequently in an intellectual discussion, might be perceived as face-threatening because they imply a request that the hearer/reader accept what the speaker/writer has stated. As negative politeness is related to reducing demands on the hearer/reader, students seemed to try to reduce the burden of their claim on their fellow group mem-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Asynchronous</th>
<th>Synchronous</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total # of chunks</td>
<td>1276 (100%)</td>
<td>1715 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total # of chunks without any polite move</td>
<td>552 (43%)</td>
<td>751 (44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total # of chunks with politeness moves</td>
<td>724 (57%)</td>
<td>964 (56%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive strategies</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>683</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative strategies</td>
<td>361</td>
<td>366</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>901</td>
<td>1049</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
bers by using negative politeness moves such as hedging their opinion. We display the results of our analysis in Fig. 1. Each bar represents the number of positive (solid) and negative (checked) politeness strategies associated with each discourse function. Note that the graph uses as a unit of analysis the number of politeness strategies per functional chunk in order to allow a comparison of preponderance of positive and negative politeness strategies corrected for the number of message chunks serving a particular function.

3.3.3. Does mode of discussion matter in terms of the relationship of politeness strategies to discourse function?

As a third step in addressing the research question, we looked to see whether the relationship between politeness strategies and functions would hold across the two modes of discussion, and saw that generally the same pattern occurred across synchronous and asynchronous modes. The different discourse functions were associated with different politeness strategies generally at the same rate in the two modes of discussions. However, there were a few interesting differences across the modes. For example, when writing a message chunk that involved sharing one’s experience or providing a personal example (#4), students were more likely to lace their words with hedging moves (N2) in their asynchronous than synchronous discussions. By contrast, students were more likely to add hedges to their messages when disagreeing with another person’s message in the synchronous than in the asynchronous mode. Although it may seem surprising that there would be fewer polite hedgings to accompany disagreeing statements in the asynchronous discussion, this pattern may have come about as a result of the fact that disagreements rarely occurred as a single message in a posting in the asynchronous discussions. The more typical pattern was to have a message with two (or more) chunks, with the first chunk stating some form of approval or agreement with another posting and a subsequent chunk coded as reflecting some form of disagreement (#5b and #6b). In such postings, politeness moves were often associated with the first chunk and less likely to be needed for the disagreeing follow-on. This contrast is shown in Example 4 taken from a synchronous discussion and in Examples 5 and 6 taken from asynchronous discussions.

Example (4) – Fred (2nd Syn, Group 1, Message 44):

Cathy, there may be two Discourses being created in the classroom with humor – one to establish a safe and fun atmosphere, and two to focus on content. Some humor is good to get the group to connect, but maybe would be limited if it distracts from the lesson. That’s just an idea. I have the same issue with my students. (Disc. function: #5b; politeness: N2)

Example (5) – Ya-Wen (1st Asyn, Group 2, Message 42):

Chunk 1: Linda, I agree that observing some experienced and successful teachers in action with the students or watching related videos will help to solve this problem. (Disc. function: #6A; politeness: P6)

Chunk 2: But what I’m more concerned is the teachers who have several years of teaching experience but haven’t realized what or where they were wrong in the teaching process. (Disc. function: #5b; no politeness move)

Example (6) – SoonJa (3rd Asyn, group 1, Message 14):

Chunk 1: Rebecca, I think it’s a wonderful observation! The difference between authority and “expert.” (Disc. function: #6A; politeness: P1, P2)

Chunk 2: However, in this case, I think authority means more than the confidence he/she has as a participant in an argument. In fact, Penrose and Geisler noted that they saw the concept of authority as something that focuses on the right to speak as established by the community’s expressed values. (Disc. function: #5B; no politeness move)

As a final example of a contrasting pattern across the two modes, we note that positive politeness strategy P8, telling a joke in order to put the reader at ease or to build connections to the reader, was more evident in the synchronous than in the asynchronous discussion, especially when the discourse function of the message chunk was social (#9), self-evaluative (#7), and managing the conversation (#8a). Below we provide four examples.

Example (7) – Brittany (3rd Syn, Group 2, Message 141):

Do we then have 9 lives in cyber space just like cats have here on earth? (Disc. function: #9; politeness: P8)

Example (8) – Andrea (3rd Syn, Group1, Message 12):

Hi Luke… I noticed I was NOT on your hello list. (Disc. function: #9; politeness: P8)

Example (9) – Doris (1st Syn, Group1, Message 30):

so we need to collaborate right now! (Disc. Function: #8A; politeness: P4, P8)

Example (10) – Sun Young (1st Syn, Group1, #184):
3.3.4. Microanalysis of one exchange between two students showing the coincidence of discourse functions and politeness moves

We want to close this presentation of results relative to the use of politeness to serve different discourse functions by presenting a microanalysis of one particularly interesting exchange between two of the students. We include this microanalysis because we see it as adding to our central point about how discourse functions co-occur with politeness moves. It is one thing to code language samples and then to count how often particular codes occur and co-occur, and it is something qualitatively richer and more compelling to see how two categories of codes coincide in an actual language sample. In the third and last asynchronous discussion, SunYoung posted the following message:

Last Friday... It was the most challenging day for me after living in USA. My English is not good as you all know, and as I know. However, I did not have any problem with this. Except helplessness blushing when I speak up in front of the entire class. HOWEVER, Last Friday, I really had a hard time with my college[sic – she meant colleague] in my seminar course. After this, I had to spend one hour in the adoration room.

In my seminar course, we had an activity to review the literature review work. Three are in a team to help each other to have a good literature review for the research. Most of us had to start with choosing a research question and finding the related literature for this activity. We had one more chance to revise or edit this to have a final version of the literature review after having the feedback from team members. Recently, I finalized with my research question. So, I was concentrating on having a structure of my literature review and finding the related literature. After, I almost copied and pasted the previous literature in my structure. Even though, I mentioned that I would rewrite and paraphrase my literature review after having a structure, one of my team members said that “this is a COPY. Why should I review this???” I explained about my purpose, and my writing process. However, she did not stop to make harsh words for my literature review. I was so upset, first, because of her attitude, but more than that the worst thing was I had to feel embarrassing in front of her. She was so right and I was so wrong. “It is just a COPY.” so that everything I said was an excuse. I will not say that this was because of my language or my ethnic background. (no all international students from Korea write a literature review like me) However, this was because of my writing style of literature review to collect the related articles or sentences which I want to use in my writing first and rewrite later. (Chunk 1: Disc. function: #4; no politeness move).

Living in USA, I really learn a lot, and have a lot more chances to think about cultural differences, individual differences. However, I also can experience and learn (?) how the dominant value or discipline easily makes the other “wrong” rather than “different.” (Chunk 2: Disc. function: #5A; no politeness move)

As with many message chunks that serve the discourse function of sharing a personal experience, SunYoung’s message had no politeness moves associated with the first longer portion of the message that recounted her personal experience. With the second chunk of the message, which had been indicated not only by a shift in discourse function but also by two spaces between the new paragraph and the previous paragraph, SunYoung then introduced a more general idea about how a dominant discourse can impose a feeling of being wrong on a newcomer.

One hour later, Cathy responded to SunYoung with a message that was remarkable in the complexity of functions it served and in the number and kind of politeness moves it displayed. Made up of 13 chunks, the message began by Cathy exaggerating her horror at what SunYoung had been through and by expressing her appreciation for what she had learned by reading the post (P2) in a chunk that served the function of providing a positive evaluation of a previous message (Disc. function: #6A):

Oh my. I’m so sorry this happened to you. Thank you for sharing such a tough experience. I learned a lot.

She then went on to report on a self-evaluation (Disc. function: #7) using words that exaggerated her feelings:

I’ll be brave like you and admit something – I could see myself spouting off something harsh like that, without thinking about the person’s feelings or background. But now I see a totally different side to the story. (Chunk 2)

Next, she expressed her agreement and appreciation of what SunYoung had posted (Disc. function: #6A), using politeness moves indicating that she was attending to SunYoung’s needs to be understood (P1), exaggerating her commitment to the position she was expressing (P2), and directly expressing her gratefulness for the new insight she had gained (P15)

Thanks for giving me some insight and empathy. In the competitive world of grad school, I think we need to always preserve our empathy. And I can totally see your line of thinking with the lit review!! It makes perfect sense to me!! (Chunk 3)

In her next chunk, Cathy again self-reflect on what she would have done (Disc. function: #7) using language such as “lit review” and the well-known Spanish expression “dios mio!” to establish a sense of in-group with SunYoung. Possibly, at this point, Cathy wanted to show that she did have some knowledge of a second language even if it was not Korean, SunYoung’s native language:

If I had to do a lit review in Spanish (ay, Dios mío!), I think I would adopt your methodology. (Chunk 4)

With the very short phrase in the next chunk,

it makes a lot of sense, (Chunk 5)

Cathy was again fulfilling the function of positively evaluating a message (Disc. function: #6A), this time with no politeness move. The very short chunk was then followed by a different discourse function chunk, Chunk 6, that represented her attempt at explicating why SunYoung might have chosen to copy the parts of her paper (Disc. function: #5A).

as I’m sure simply READING the text is a huge obstacle, something that you have to take one step at a time, right? Writing about it would come much later, after you’ve digested and fully understood the text, yes? So simply cutting and pasting key parts of the text seems like an excellent strategy to me. (Chunk 6)
This study aimed at investigating the relation between students’ use of politeness moves and the discourse functions their messages served when they engaged in online classroom discussion activities, both synchronous or asynchronous. We approached this objective in three steps. We first identified the discourse functions students’ messages served in the two kinds of computer-mediated discussion modes used in this course, and found some similarities and some differences in the prevalence of different functions. The functions of information seeking, information providing, and social comments appeared more frequently in the synchronous discussions; whereas the functions of discussion generating, experience sharing, and idea explanation occurred more frequently in asynchronous discussions. As to the functions of providing alternative views, positive and negative evaluation, self-evaluation, and message or conversation management, they

I applaud your organizational skills. (Chunk 7: Disc. function: #6A; politeness: P15)

Next, her message moved to considering what had stopped the offending group member from understanding why SunYoung had used her cut-and-paste strategy:

I wonder if perhaps the person in your review group didn’t understand the tremendous amount of work you have to put into papers – I would almost say double the work of a native speaker. I hope one day her worldview is expanded. (Chunk 8)

As she explained (Disc. function: #5A) that the group member must simply not have understood the amount of work SunYoung had to do, she again realized the face threat inherent in claiming that SunYoung would have to do twice the work and so found herself needing to see whether SunYoung would agree with her (P11), hedging her claim (N2), and showing deference for the hard work that SunYoung had to put in (N5):

A very interesting turn then occurs in Cathy’s message. Chunk 9 shows her asking direct questions of SunYoung (Disc. function: #1) but introducing these requests by the negative politeness strategy of expressing some pessimism that SunYoung would want to answer her questions (N3):

I have to ask – did your professor say anything?? Did anyone come to your defense?? And did you cry? (Chunk 9)

To soften the request, Cathy then self-evaluated herself as worrying about whether she would have cried in a similar situation (Disc. function: #7), using the politeness strategy of aligning herself with the reader (SunYoung) (P12) and of showing deference to her (N5):

That’s always my biggest fear – that I will break down and cry in those situations. I’ve done it before, and it ain’t pretty. Nothing like wiping tears in a graduate seminar. (Chunk 9)

Cathy, then, added a chunk that served a purely social function (Disc. function: #9) and used the positive politeness strategy of noticing and attending to the needs of her reader (P1):

Anyway, I hope you’re okay. Hang in there. (Chunk 11)

Now Cathy was very close to the end of her message. In the next chunk, she imagined the offending group member in a situation similar to SunYoung’s. This chunk serves the function of adding another explanation or point (Disc. function: #5A) to Cathy’s many explanations in response to SunYoung with a small hedge at the beginning to soften the whole story (N2). What is interesting is that Cathy is perhaps revealing that she has mistakenly taken SunYoung to be from Thailand rather than from Korea, a mistake that could have offended SunYoung as the two had now been in class together for more than three months and it had been quite often mentioned in examples and exchanges in face-to-face discussions that SunYoung was from Korea.

Maybe one day this person will end up stranded in Thailand somewhere, and she will not know how to find the bus station, and just as she is about to cry because she knows she will miss her plane to head back to Texas… your face flashes in her mind and she realizes how mean she was to you. (Chunk 10)

In the very last chunk of the message, the function changes to generating a response (Disc. function: #2) with a short politeness move to make room for a response (P16):

That would be a good ending, huh? (Chunk 13)

In sum, in the space of 29 lines of text, Cathy had 13 functional chunks as her message shifted in what she seemed to be attempting to do. As functions changed, so did her use of different politeness strategies reflecting a sophisticated level of skill in managing an extremely complex social and cognitive message. As she was in an asynchronous discussion, it is remarkable that she chose to respond to SunYoung’s message at all given the amount of effort and complex display it required. That she was successful in conveying to SunYoung her appreciation for what SunYoung had posted and her understanding of the situation is evidenced by SunYoung’s response 45 min later:

Love that ending…

BTW, I did not cry – ^^^ (I was already so tired because of my baby at that time since my baby did not sleep and wanted to play with me during the night) And one other team member actually said he liked my literature review and gave me helpful feedback. Also, I can concentrate more on my literature review by this experience.

Thank you Cathy~~~!!! Your comment encourage me a lot~~~!!! ^^^

4. Discussion

4.1. Summary of findings

This study aimed at investigating the relation between students’ use of politeness moves and the discourse functions their messages served when they engaged in online classroom discussion activities, both synchronous or asynchronous. We approached this objective in three steps. We first identified the discourse functions students’ messages served in the two kinds of computer-mediated discussion modes used in this course, and found some similarities and some differences in the prevalence of different functions. The functions of information seeking, information providing, and social comments appeared more frequently in the synchronous discussions; whereas the functions of discussion generating, experience sharing, and idea explanation occurred more frequently in asynchronous discussions. As to the functions of providing alternative views, positive and negative evaluation, self-evaluation, and message or conversation management, they
were used equally frequently across the two discussion modes. Thus, by looking into the frequency of the discourse functions across the
two discussion modes, we found that the tone of the asynchronous discussions seemed more serious than the more casual feel of the syn-
chronous discussions.

These differences may be due to the different affordances of these two modes of communication. Asynchronous discussions allow stu-
dents more time to compose and ponder their messages, so that they can engage in a more thoughtful discussion by explaining their ideas and
sharing their personal experience, or by inviting more discussion of an idea from others. On the other hand, participating in a synchro-
nous online discussion is often experienced as fraught with time pressure, either to keep up with reading messages that fly by quickly or to
submit their messages promptly so as to be current in one’s posting. In such discussions, there is not much time to write and polish a mes-
sage. This constraint of synchronous discussions may contribute to our finding that students posted shorter messages serving functions that
could be addressed in fewer words, as when posting social messages, asking direct information seeking questions, or answering such
questions.

Second, when we looked at students’ use of politeness strategies across the two discussion modes, we found that the frequency and the
types of politeness strategies did not differ. Whether a discussion was synchronous or asynchronous did not influence the distribution of
positive and negative politeness strategies. Originally, we had expected that the same pressure of time that may have influenced the dif-
ference in discourse functions in synchronous discussions might have led students to post messages that had fewer politeness indicators.

With less time, politeness might become a luxury that would need to be deemphasized. However, our findings do not support this expec-
tation. The synchronous discussions were remarkably polite, no less so than the asynchronous discussions, perhaps because our partici-
pants were graduate students who knew each other from face-to-face class meetings, mature and experienced enough with online CMD
to realize the need to be polite in their postings. In such an academic context, politeness may have been important enough a concern that
no difference across the two discussion modes resulted.

Third, we examined how students deployed their various politeness strategy moves as they fulfilled different functions in their online
messages. We found that the use of politeness strategies differed across the different functions. When composing messages with functions
more related to the writer, such as experience sharing, previewing one’s own message, and self-evaluation, students used fewer politeness
strategies. When writing messages with functions that were more directed to others, such as evaluating another’s message, presenting a
contrasting view, attempting to generate discussion, or managing the conversation, students seemed to worry more about possible face
threats and used more politeness strategies to mitigate the imposition. Although such a finding may seem commonsensical on the surface,
its significance is that it points to the underlying purpose of politeness as posited by Goffman (1967), that is, to address concerns about
threats and used more politeness strategies to mitigate the imposition. This phenomenon was particularly evident for function #6, positively
evaluating another’s message. However, for the functions of experi-
ence sharing, idea explaining, giving alternative views, negative evaluating, and previewing one’s own message, the number of negative
politeness strategies became close to the number of positive politeness strategies. This finding supports the idea that different discourse
functions pose different degrees of face threat to the hearer/reader. Our findings also suggest that students engaged in CMD preferred to
use positive politeness moves to reduce the social distance and to establish a sense of community with other class members rather than
using negative politeness moves to demonstrate proper distance and circumspection (Morand & Ocker, 2003).

Last, when we explored the relationship between politeness strategies and functions, we saw that generally the same patterns occurred
across the synchronous and asynchronous modes. However, a few interesting differences across the modes were discussed in our results
with supporting qualitative data. For example, students tended to add hedges to their messages when disagreeing with another person’s
message in the synchronous discussion. In the asynchronous mode, fewer hedges were associated with disagreeing messages because dis-
agreements rarely occurred as a single chunk in a posting. As asynchronous messages were usually longer, a typical pattern developed with
students first expressing approval or agreement with a previous message and then expressing their disagreement. Politeness moves would
be associated, typically, with the first chunk, thereby indicating that the writer was predicting the need to redress the face threat neces-
sitated by the disagreement that was coming in the next chunk of the message. In addition, in the detailed analysis of the Cathy–SunYoung
exchange, we could see that Cathy needed to use many more politeness moves than usual exactly because she was revealing that she might
have been guilty of the same behavior toward SunYoung as the person who had hurt SunYoung. The careful politeness work required by
such a touchy message might have been too much to manage under the time pressure of synchronous CMD.

4.2. Conclusion

The purpose of our study was not to determine which CMD mode, asynchronous or synchronous, was better than the other. Rather, by
examining how students’ uses of politeness strategies were related to different discussion functions in the two kinds of online discussion,
we hoped to identify how students’ social concerns (as reflected by politeness strategies) and their intellectual concerns (as reflected by
different discourse functions) were captured in the words they were using as they interacted online. Results indicated that as characteristic
of learning communities (Rovai & Jordan, 2004), students were devoted to elaborating their ideas, expressing their opinion of others’ ideas,
and self-reflecting.

Our findings indicated that politeness strategies seemed to be influenced more by the discourse function a message was serving than by
the mode of discussion, whether synchronous or asynchronous. According to Cameron (2001), three factors can influence politeness work:
(a) the degree of face-threat carried by the words making up an utterance; (b) social distance between interlocutors; and (c) how power
differences are perceived. As students engaged in exchanges that allowed them to explain their ideas or to bring in an alternative view-
point, to ask for information or to suggest a topic that the group might want to discuss, different politeness moves were required to mit-
gate potential face-threat that transcended the differences inherent in discussing synchronously or asynchronously.

In terms of Cameron’s second factor, social distance, it is interesting to consider whether online communication reduces or increases
social distance. On the one hand, online interactions have often been described as impersonal and as removing the cues of typical conver-
sation that lead an individual to feel he or she understands the other. On the other hand, online interactions may reduce social distance exactly because many cues to social distance such as accent and manner are less evident. When students have been members of a class that includes many face-to-face meetings, the experience of social distance may change as the semester progresses. Although we did not look for differences across the discussions over time, future analysis might reveal different patterns of politeness moves as students come to know one another and recognize by name to whom they are responding in the online environment. Although we did not make the analysis systematic, our impression is that the later discussions seemed to become less stiff and to include positive rather than negative politeness moves.

Finally, in considering Cameron’s third factor as influencing politeness moves, we want to point out that power in any CMD activity in a class has interesting ways of being enacted when compared to in face-to-face situations. As we have seen in our own work and as has been frequently reported (Faigley, 1992; Wade & Fauske, 2004), the teacher has much less dominance in the online discourse when compared to her role in the face-to-face discussions of the class. However, again as suggestion for future work, it would be interesting to examine how the teacher enacted politeness in her messages when compared to the students, and how students used politeness when responding to her messages as opposed to each other’s postings.

References


