



Analysis of Politeness in Bilingual Indonesian-English Language Use in Elementary School Environments

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ABSTRACT

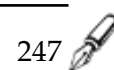
In elementary schools, the use of Indonesian and English not only serves as communication but also reflects the norms of politeness in social interactions. This study aims to describe the practice of politeness principles in Indonesian and English, as well as to analyze the level of politeness based on Brown and Levinson's scale in learning interactions in bilingual elementary schools, an area that has not been previously explored. This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with data in the form of speech acts recorded during observations in the 5th grade of one of the elementary schools in Surabaya. Data were collected through listening, recording, and note-taking techniques. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis through the process of coding, categorization, and identification of language politeness patterns. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation, method triangulation, and member checking. The results showed that bilingual interactions were dominated by the directness and positive politeness strategies. Negative politeness and off-record strategies appear with limited frequency, especially when the level of stress is high or when teachers want to avoid direct criticism. These results suggest that politeness practices in bilingual classrooms are a balance between the need to foster a supportive learning atmosphere and hierarchical demands.



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INTRODUCTION

The use of bilingual languages has become increasingly used in various educational contexts. This usage is included at the elementary school level, particularly in English and Indonesian languages. This issue faced two parallel demands. The need to instill relevant cultural values and to equip young learners with global linguistic skills. Bilingual education at the primary schools also can enhance students' language skills and develop confidence in communication (Alindra et al., 2024). The rapid implementation of bilingual policies has often neglected a critical aspect, language politeness. Language politeness is essential in developing a positive learning environment and fostering harmonious interpersonal relationships. These policies risk producing speakers who are linguistically skilled but pragmatically inappropriate without explicit focus on politeness. This issue is significant at the elementary level, where character formation is most formative. One important aspect of bilingualism is language politeness. It includes how a person uses language while respecting social and cultural norms (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Wijayanti et al., 2026). This is relevant because language politeness has an important role in building harmonious interpersonal relationships and a conducive learning environment (Holmes, 2013; Purnamasari et al., 2022).



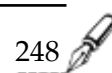
In Indonesia, the development of bilingualism is often driven by educational policies that integrate English as a medium of instruction or as a compulsory subject (Arif et al., 2024; Sagala et al., 2023). There is a striking gap between expectation and reality in bilingual education. Ideally, bilingual education should also promote culturally sensitive communication and language proficiency. Indeed, bilingual practices in Indonesia often face challenges in maintaining linguistic politeness among students and teachers. For example, code-switching and translating from English to Indonesian often lead to impoliteness or pragmatic errors (Panggabean & Arifin, 2022). Teachers may be untrained in applying politeness strategies in bilingual instruction. This condition results in inconsistent polite language use. This gap between the expected outcome and the actual situation highlights the urgent need for systematic investigation. Linguistic politeness is not only about the use of polite words or phrases but also the ability to adapt language to different social and cultural contexts (Darmawati et al., 2026; Thomas, 1995). In this case, it is important to explore how elementary school students use both languages in their daily interactions and how linguistic politeness is applied.

This study is relevant to the development of bilingual education in Indonesia, where multilingual competence is one of the indicators of successful 21st-century education (Freeman, 1998; Tuimebayeva et al., 2024). Brown and Levinson's (1987) classic face-preservation theory remains foundational. But contemporary scholars such as Culpeper et al. (2017) have expanded this framework to explain bilingual and multilingual interactions. Current research over the past five years has shown that bilingual children's politeness strategies are influenced by factors such as language dominance, teacher modeling, and classroom discourse patterns. For example, Daulay et al (2022) found that Indonesian elementary school teachers used code-switching as a politeness strategy in bilingual classrooms. By understanding how linguistic politeness is applied in a bilingual context, teachers and policymakers can design learning strategies that not only improve students' language skills but also shape polite and cultured character.

Research on linguistic politeness in the context of learning in bilingual schools has been conducted by Dewi et al. (2018), which highlights the practices of politeness among teachers and female students in Indonesian language learning at the high school level. This research provides an important contribution to understanding the dynamics of politeness in the field of bilingual education, but the scope of the analysis is limited to secondary education. Meanwhile, research at the elementary school level has been conducted by Wardono (2023), which examines politeness practices with a focus on the use of Indonesian and Javanese, without examining politeness in the context of English.

Based on these conditions, there is a research gap related to the analysis of Indonesian and English politeness practices at the elementary school level that implements a bilingual learning system. Therefore, this study offers something new by analyzing Indonesian and English politeness practices in a bilingual elementary school environment. Therefore, this study provides new insights by: (a) simultaneously analyzing politeness strategies in Indonesian and English, (b) focusing specifically on elementary school students and teachers as bilingual speakers, and (c) identifying factors that influence the successful transfer of politeness between the two languages. No previous research has integrated these three elements in the context of bilingual elementary schools in Indonesia. This study will examine how students and teachers use both languages politely in various communication contexts, as well as the factors that influence the application of bilingual politeness.

Specifically, this study aims to: (1) describe the linguistic politeness patterns used by students and teachers in Indonesian and English in a bilingual elementary school setting; and (2) analyze the factors that influence the implementation of bilingual politeness across various communication contexts. The results of this study are expected to contribute to enriching the study of cross-linguistic politeness in the context of primary education. Besides that, it is also filling the existing gap in the literature.



RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a descriptive qualitative approach. The use of a qualitative approach is appropriate for exploring naturalistic classroom interactions and for interpreting politeness strategies within their contextual settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2018). The data collected were recorded during the field observation process and were obtained through verbal interactions between teachers and students in the context of learning activities. The subjects of this study involved teachers as key informants and 18 students from 5th grade at one of the elementary schools in Surabaya. The sample consisted of 10 male students and 8 female students, aged between 10 and 11 years old. 5th Grade was selected based on its characteristics as a bilingual class, which were specifically relevant to the focus of analysing interactions in two languages. The data collection technique applied was observation, followed by recording and note-taking procedures. In this context, the researcher functioned as a non-participant observer, so that researcher was not directly involved in the speech events that were the object of the study.

The qualitative data collected was then processed and analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. The themes used in this analysis were based on Brown & Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. It consists of four main politeness strategies: (1) bald-on-record, (2) positive politeness, (3) negative politeness, and (4) off-record. Additional indicators included the sociological variables that influence strategy choice: social distance (D), relative power (P), and rank of imposition (R). This analysis process was carried out systematically, beginning with data coding for the marking and categorization of relevant speech acts. After that, it was followed by the identification of main themes to determine the dominant categories and patterns of speech. The final stage of analysis was in-depth data interpretation, referring to the theoretical framework of politeness theory developed by Brown & Levinson (1987) as further elaborated in recent pragmatics research (Culpeper et al., 2017). In addition, to ensure the validity and credibility of the research data, a series of validation procedures were carried out, including source triangulation (comparison of data from different subjects), method triangulation (use of various data collection methods), and member checking to validate the researcher's interpretation with the research subjects.

The research procedure was carried out through four main stages. The first stage was preparation. It included the development and validation of research instruments and processing of formal permission letters with the schools. The second stage is data collection in the field. Data collected through in-depth interviews and documentation. The third stage focuses on data analysis, which includes data organization, thematic analysis, and drawing conclusions. The final stage is reporting. The results that have been tested for credibility are compiled into a final research report.



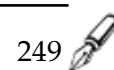
Figure 1. Flowchart

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

This research began with preparation in January 2025. This phase focused on intensive coordination with school. The coordination aims to discuss the technical aspects of data collection. A permit application was officially submitted to the Head of the Partner School to conduct this study. Based on the results of this coordination, it was agreed that data collection activities would begin on August 1, 2025, coinciding with the start of the academic year 2025/2026. The entire coordination process with the school and research subjects was carried out comprehensively, both through offline and online communication.

After the licensing and preparation phases were completed, empirical data collection was carried out during the specified period, coinciding with learning activities in Class 5A of Labschool Elementary School. Data collection focused on the context of bilingual learning,



particularly during English and mathematics lessons. The data collected consisted of a corpus of speech acts reflecting verbal interactions between the teacher and 18 students in the class. Next, the collected verbal data was analyzed in depth using the theoretical framework of Politeness in Language by Brown & Levinson. This analysis aimed to identify and classify utterances based on their four main politeness strategies, as will be explained in detail in the following subsection.

Bald-on Record Politeness

The bald-on-record strategy is a strategy chosen by speakers to convey messages directly and explicitly. Speakers prioritize clarity (efficiency) over politeness (Fitriyani & Andriyanti, 2020). This strategy is often used when the risk of face threat is considered low, for example, in urgent situations or between parties with clear differences in status/power.

Data 1:

Teacher : *"I want you to prepare your homework."*

Students : *"Alright, sir!"*

Data 2:

Teacher : *"Do we have to submit it today?"*

Students : *"Yes, please, you have to submit it as soon as possible"*

Positive Politeness

This strategy focuses on fulfilling the positive impression of the interlocutor (the desire to be liked, accepted, and considered a member of the group). Recent studies confirm that positive politeness strategies function to reinforce the hearer's positive face by expressing solidarity, agreement, and interpersonal closeness, particularly through inclusive language, encouragement, and acknowledgement of shared goals (Gunaningtyas & Wuli Fitriati, 2021).

Data 3

Teacher : *"Anyone please help me to put the LCD back to its place"*

Students : *"Alright, I will bring this, and you'll bring that" (One of student asks his friend to helping him)*

Data 4:

Teacher : *"I'll give you chance to solve this problem"*

Students : *"The writing is wrong" (The teacher helps)*

Data 5:

Student saw her friend cheating

Student 1 : *"You can't do that, it's cheating" (everyone bullies)*

Student 2 : *"No, you can't do that guys, be kind"*

Student 1 : *"That was ChatGPT"*

Negative Politeness

This strategy focuses on fulfilling the negative face of the interlocutor (desire for autonomy and freedom of action) (Arsita et al., 2025). This strategy involves minimizing coercion, often through the use of indirect speech, acknowledgment of disruption, apologies, or the use of formal forms of address (Wiranty & Ramaniyar, 2023).

Data 6:

Teacher : *"Anyone, can you help me?"*

Student 2 : *"What?"*

Teacher : *"Help me to turn on the LCD."*

Data 7:

Student : *"The LCD can't be turned on"*

Teacher : *"There is no signal?"*

Student : *"Noooo"*

Teacher : *"No signal?"*

Student : *(helping teacher to fix the LCD)*



Off-Record

This strategy is carried out by conveying the Face-Threatening Act (FTA) ambiguously or implicitly (allowing for multiple interpretations). This allows the speaker to relinquish responsibility for the threat to face, because the interlocutor must interpret the speaker's own intentions. This strategy is chosen when the risk of facing a threat is considered very high. In the off-the-record strategy, the speaker conveys their meaning indirectly through various techniques, such as giving clues, associations, and presuppositions; reducing or exaggerating information; irony; metaphors; rhetorical questions; and the use of vague, overly general, contradictory, or incomplete statements (Girsang et al., 2024).

Data 8:

Student : "Sir, the LCD is used"

Teacher : "Oh okay thank you" (Then he looks for LCD by himself)

Data 9:

Teacher (drawing angle) "What is the name of this angle?"

Student : "Three lines angle"

Teacher : "Not the kind of angle, but the name of angle"

Discussions

The findings above reveal distinct patterns of politeness strategy use in bilingual elementary school classrooms. This discussion interprets these patterns in relation to three research objectives: (1) describing linguistic politeness patterns in Indonesian and English, (2) analyzing factors influencing bilingual politeness implementation, and (3) identifying the most common pragmatic challenges faced by young bilingual learners.

Patterns of Politeness Strategies

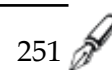
Bald-on-Record

The use of bald-on-record strategies is primarily used when teachers are giving instructions or commands in Data 1 and Data 2. This reflects the teacher's institutional authority. Efficiency and clarity are prioritized over minimizing threats to students' self-esteem. The teacher used straightforward speech ("I want...") that indicated a clear power relationship. Hierarchical status in the class allows teachers to prioritize efficiency and clarity over the need to acknowledge student autonomy (Sembiring et al., 2023). Student compliance ("Alright, sir!") reflects their acceptance of this speech. It showed the teacher's right to command is acknowledged in the interaction.

The teacher's response, "Yes, please, you have to submit it as soon as possible," is Bald-on Record. It confirms the obligation (*you have to*) and demands immediately to complete the task (*as soon as possible*). The use of the word "please" here emphasizes the immediate compliance. This command is delivered explicitly and on-record. It is indicating that in terms of academic task compliance, the hierarchy of authority and clarity of instructions are prioritized.

Positive Politeness

Positive politeness frequently appears in teachers' and students' speech. Data 3 illustrates how the teacher uses inclusive language, "Anyone, please help me," to present requests as opportunities for collaboration and reinforce students' positive face. The teacher uses markers of solidarity and cooperation (Anyone/help me), which aim to involve students as colleagues or part of a team. This strategy takes advantage of students' desire to be liked and recognized (Positive Face). Instead of commanding one specific student (Bald-on Record), the teacher offers the request as a collaborative opportunity, which makes other students feel valued and turns the situation into a shared desire (Mulatsih, 2014; Utama, 2019). This is evident from the students' response, who immediately took the initiative and involved other students in the task.



Data 4 shows that the teacher is offering a chance to a student. The teacher's statement, *"I'll give you a chance,"* is a form of positive politeness that aims to reinforce the student's positive face (desire to be accepted and recognized). By offering a "chance," the teacher shows optimism and appreciation for the student's efforts, even though the student then makes a mistake. As explained by Brown and Levinson (1987, as cited in Fathi, 2024), positive politeness involves claiming common ground, conveying cooperation between speaker and hearer, and fulfilling the hearer's underlying wants (Adhari et al., 2022), such as the desire to be valued and trusted in interaction. In this context, the teacher's expression of giving a "chance" functions to claim common ground by showing empathy toward the student's learning process and to convey cooperation, positioning the teacher and the student as partners in achieving a shared instructional goal. Furthermore, by allowing the student to attempt the task, the teacher fulfills the hearer's underlying want to participate and to be trusted, which reinforces the student's positive face despite the occurrence of a mistake. This aims to maintain the student's self-esteem in public and encourage future participation. The teacher's subsequent helping actions further reinforce this strategy by showing support, optimism, and cooperation (Kendek et al., 2024).



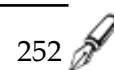
Figure 2. Teacher guiding students

In Data 5, when Student 2 says, *"No, you can't do that, guys; be kind,"* this is positive politeness directed at the group. He is trying to create an atmosphere of cooperation and solidarity – "be kind" – to maintain the positive face of his friend who is at fault. The goal is to build positive common ground among fellow students. This common ground helps maintain a supportive learning atmosphere while affirming students' social identity within the group (Febriyani et al., 2023; Unaina et al., 2021). Moreover, positive politeness has been found to mitigate face-threatening acts during instructional feedback by framing correction within expressions of approval and solidarity, which strengthens students' confidence and sense of belonging (Rastafathya & Mulatsih, 2022).

Negative Politeness

Negative politeness is observed when the teacher aims to minimize the burden or stress on the listener. In Data 6, the teacher's initial request, *"Anyone, can you help me?"* is an example of negative politeness. The teacher uses an indirect question (*Can you?*) instead of a direct command (*Turn on the LCD!*), which is an attempt to minimize the burden (rank of imposition) on the interlocutor. The teacher did not coerce the students to perform an action, as the directive was softened through the use of hedges and an indirect question (Rahayuningsih et al., 2020). The word *"anyone"* also functions as a generalization strategy, which does not target any individual, thereby respecting the autonomy of each student to refuse without losing face. This is a strategy that aims to respect the negative face of students, even though in the end the teacher must explain their intention further.

In Data 7, the teacher's response *"There is no signal?"* and repetition of the question *"No signal?"* are interrogative speech acts classified as negative politeness. The teacher responds to the students with a diagnostic question, rather than giving direct instructions. This strategy allows the teacher to minimize pressure on the student and avoid giving the impression that they



doubt the student's ability to solve the problem by using indirect speech (Manurung et al., 2026; Saputry, 2016). The question aims to request confirmation while respecting the student's cognitive abilities.



Figure 3. Students help turn on the LCD

Off-Record

The “Off-Record” strategy is rare. It appears in situations where direct rejection might result in a loss of face. The student's statement in Data 8, *"Sir, the LCD is being used,"* is an interesting example of the Off-Record strategy. It is used to refuse a request that has consequences. The student does not say, *"I can't turn on the LCD,"* or *"Don't ask me, the LCD is being used"*. Those responses would be negative towards the Teacher's Face. Instead, the student gives an implicit reason *"the LCD is in use"*. The teacher must interpret that the condition of the LCD's use prevents the teacher's next request. For example, asking the student to look for it. This allows the student to avoid responsibility for explicit refusal. It maintains the teacher's face (positive and negative face). In pragmatic terms, off-record strategies function softens potential face-threatening acts and maintains harmonious interaction (Ngo et al., 2025).

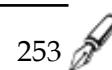
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Figure 4. The teacher invites students to recognize angles

Factors Influencing Bilingual Politeness Application

The level of language politeness at bilingual elementary schools was analyzed through the lens of Brown and Levinson's Politeness Scale. It is determined by a combination of three sociological variables. There are Social Distance (D), Relative Power (P), and Level of Burden (R) (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Staszkievicz, 2025). In the classroom, the relative power (P) factor between



teachers and students is the most dominant and asymmetrical variable (teachers have much higher P). This asymmetry legitimizes the use of low levels of politeness (i.e., directness). For example, when teachers give routine commands or instructions. Therefore, the highest levels of politeness are less frequently employed in favor of communication efficiency, where direct student compliance is accepted as part of institutional norms.

However, the dominance of the Bald-on-Record strategy is balanced by a strong tendency toward positive politeness. Teachers often use this strategy to reinforce students' positive face. The aim is to make their desire be accepted, appreciated, and considered. By using inclusive language, "*Anyone, please help me,*" teachers seek to reduce social distance (D). It also builds a friendly and supportive classroom atmosphere. The level of politeness created through positive politeness serves as an effective mitigation of harsh direct commands. It is ensuring that student motivation is maintained despite power differences.

The difference between Indonesian (L1) and English (L2) also influences the level of politeness chosen. English as the language of instruction is often used with a direct strategy for reasons of clarity and efficiency. In this situation, speakers prioritize the transactional function of language. Conversely, when teachers switch to Indonesian, the potential for using negative politeness may arise. This negative politeness strategy is used to respect students' negative face. These negative faces are indirect questions or expressions of regret. It is reflecting Indonesian cultural norms that tend to value hierarchy and formality (Komilovna et al., 2025).

The level of politeness in bilingual elementary schools is a functional compromise between hierarchical compliance and social solidarity. The most polite strategies used are the bald-on-record and positive-politeness strategies. The off-record and negative politeness strategies are found at a much lower frequency. They only appear when the burden level (R) is very high or when teachers consciously try to avoid direct criticism of students. This pattern ensures that instructions are conveyed effectively. While maintaining the interpersonal relationships is important for the teaching and learning process in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

This study results in the fact that politeness strategies in bilingual classroom interactions are not applied randomly. It is applied systematically by institutional roles, communicative goals, and language choice. The findings reveal that direct strategies and positive politeness dominate classroom discourse. Those strategies particularly occur when English is used for instructional directives that prioritize clarity and efficiency. This dominance reflects the strong asymmetry of relative power (P) between teachers and students, where directness is institutionally legitimized. Positive politeness used for encouragement, inclusive language, and expressions of appreciation. The frequent use of positive politeness indicates that teachers actively mitigate this power imbalance to maintain students' motivation, emotional comfort, and sense of acceptance. On the other hand, Indonesian is more commonly employed in social exchanges, clarification sequences, and relational moments. It allows a wider range of politeness strategies, including negative politeness and off-record strategies. They emerge when the rank of imposition (R) is perceived as higher or when direct criticism is avoided.

The result showed the importance of viewing bilingual classroom interaction as a pragmatic negotiation between pedagogical efficiency and interpersonal harmony, rather than as a simple alternation of languages. This suggests that teachers' awareness of politeness strategies can contribute to more inclusive and emotionally supportive learning environments without sacrificing instructional control. Particularly, how language choice interacts with power and face needs. This study also reinforces the applicability of Brown and Levinson's politeness framework in elementary bilingual education contexts. While also showing how institutional norms reshape the realization of politeness strategies in practice.

Future research may involve multiple grade levels or different types of bilingual schools. It can explore whether similar politeness patterns persist across age groups and institutional settings. It would deepen understanding of how pragmatic competence is socially constructed within formal educational environments and across languages.

This study has several limitations. First, the research was conducted in only one bilingual elementary school. It is focusing on a single class with one teacher. As a result, the findings may not be generalizable to other bilingual elementary schools with different linguistic backgrounds, teaching methods, or regional context. Second, the analysis was cross-sectional rather than longitudinal. It is preventing observation of developmental changes in politeness strategy use over time. Future research should involve multiple schools and adopt a longitudinal design to overcome this limitation.

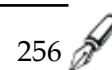
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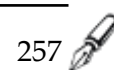
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