

The Politeness of Teachers' Imperative Speech Acts in Teacher–Student Interactions in Senior High School: A Sociopragmatic Approach

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This study aims to describe, analyze, and interpret the forms, functions, and politeness strategies of teachers' imperative speech acts in teacher–student interactions at Senior High School 1 Poso Pesisir Utara using a sociopragmatic approach.

Methodology: This study employed a qualitative descriptive method using observation, audio recording, and note-taking techniques. Data were analyzed through Miles and Huberman's interactive analysis model, involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The analysis applied Sudaryanto's formal and informal presentation methods without any statistical or software-based tools.

Main Findings: The study identified 17 forms of polite imperative speech acts, including directive, requestive, persuasive, and advisory types. Teachers applied Leech's six politeness maxims tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, and sympathy to balance authority and respect. Two politeness strategies, direct and indirect, were used depending on context, social distance, and communicative goals. Teachers consistently maintained ethical, polite, and culturally sensitive communication.

Novelty/Originality of this study: This study provides a detailed sociopragmatic analysis of teachers' imperative speech acts within an Indonesian multicultural school context. It highlights how local linguistic features and cultural norms influence the realization of politeness in educational communication, offering new insights into the intersection of language, culture, and pedagogy rarely explored in previous research.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language is not only a means of communication but also a reflection of social relationships, cultural values, and individual intentions [1]. In educational settings, the way teachers use language plays a crucial role in shaping the classroom atmosphere and influencing students' responses, motivation, and attitudes. One of the most frequent linguistic forms used by teachers in instructional discourse is the imperative speech act, which functions to give directions, commands, requests, or advice [2], [3]. Although imperatives inherently express authority, their use in educational contexts requires sensitivity to politeness in order to maintain respect, cooperation, and positive teacher–student relationships [4]. Thus, examining the politeness of teachers'

imperative speech acts is essential to understanding how pedagogical communication reflects both linguistic and social competence [5], [6].

Previous studies on speech acts and politeness have been largely influenced by the works of Azhari et al. [7], who classified speech acts as a fundamental unit of communication, and by Raihany et al. [8], who developed the politeness theory based on the concept of “face” in social interaction. These frameworks have been widely applied to investigate how power relations and social distance affect language use in various domains, including education. For example, research by Syting & Gildore [9] and Pangemanan et al [10] revealed that teachers’ speech often balances between authority and solidarity, showing that polite imperatives can promote both discipline and engagement in classroom discourse. However, most of these studies were conducted in Western educational settings, and only a few have explored how politeness is realized in teacher-student interactions within Indonesian classrooms, where sociocultural norms and linguistic politeness strategies may differ significantly [11]-[12].

Indonesia’s rich linguistic diversity and hierarchical social structure make it a compelling context for sociopragmatic analysis [13]. Teachers, as figures of authority, are expected to command respect while simultaneously fostering an atmosphere of warmth and approachability. The balance between these roles is often reflected in their linguistic strategies when issuing imperatives [14]. In the context of Senior High School 1 Poso Pesisir Utara, a senior high school in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia, teacher-student interactions illustrate not only pedagogical goals but also the cultural values of politeness, respect, and collectivism. Investigating how teachers construct and deliver imperatives in this context provides valuable insights into the dynamic interplay between language, culture, and pedagogy [15]-[16].

Despite the importance of this issue, studies focusing specifically on teachers’ imperative speech acts from a sociopragmatic perspective in Indonesian educational settings remain limited [17]. Most existing research has emphasized general politeness strategies or broader pragmatic features in classroom discourse, without detailing the unique linguistic and social characteristics of imperatives [18]-[19]. This research gap highlights the need for a study that systematically examines the forms, functions, and degrees of politeness in teachers’ imperative speech acts, as well as the contextual factors such as power relations, social distance, and situational urgency that influence their realization [20].

The present study adopts a sociopragmatic approach, integrating linguistic form analysis with social contextual interpretation, to explore how teachers employ politeness strategies when performing imperative speech acts [21]-[22]. This approach enables a comprehensive understanding of how politeness is negotiated in authentic classroom interactions, emphasizing both the linguistic realization and social meaning of imperatives. By analyzing real-life teacher student communication, the study seeks to identify linguistic patterns that demonstrate teachers’ awareness of politeness norms and their adaptation to classroom dynamics [23]. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on the intersection of imperative speech acts, politeness theory, and sociocultural context within Indonesian education. Unlike previous studies that primarily describe linguistic forms, this research highlights politeness as a communicative strategy that supports pedagogical effectiveness while maintaining interpersonal harmony. Therefore, the objective of this study is to describe, analyze, and interpret the forms, functions, and levels of politeness in teachers’ imperative speech acts within classroom interactions at Senior High School 1 Poso Pesisir Utara through a sociopragmatic approach.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The research was carried out at Senior High School 1 Poso Pesisir Utara, located on Jalan Trans Sulawesi, Bakti Agung, Poso Pesisir Utara District, Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. This school was purposefully selected because it represents a multicultural educational environment in which teachers and students come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, allowing for a rich observation of pragmatic variation in the use of polite imperative speech acts.

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design. Qualitative research is conducted based on naturally occurring facts or phenomena that exist in the empirical life of speakers, and it seeks to generate findings not obtained through statistical procedures or other forms of quantitative measurement [24]. The qualitative approach was chosen because it aligns with the nature of this study, which explores politeness in teachers’ imperative speech acts as a naturally occurring linguistic and social phenomenon. The research was conducted in a natural setting, where data were collected directly from the real context in which polite imperative utterances occurred. The researcher acted as the primary instrument for data collection and interpretation. This study is descriptive in nature, as the data are presented in the form of words and utterances rather than numerical data, emphasizing the process of meaning construction over final outcomes. Data analysis was performed inductively, allowing linguistic and pragmatic patterns to emerge from the data. Furthermore, meaning was treated as an essential aspect, focusing on how politeness is expressed, negotiated, and interpreted within teacher-student interactions [25].

The data in this study consisted of spoken language data obtained through audio recordings, field notes, and direct observations conducted both inside and outside the classroom. These data consisted of utterances that represented polite imperative forms used by teachers during interactions with students. The primary data sources were teachers at Senior High School 1 Poso Pesisir Utara who were actively involved in daily communication with students.

The data collection techniques included direct observation, recording, and note-taking. Direct observation was used to ensure the accuracy and objectivity of the data by observing and recording linguistic behavior as it naturally occurred in the school environment [5]-[6]. The recording technique was employed to capture complete teacher-student interactions, including intonation, pauses, and emphasis, to preserve the authenticity of communication. Selected twelfth-grade students assisted in recording the conversations using mobile phones, as they were more familiar and comfortable interacting with the teachers. Before collecting data, the researcher obtained ethical clearance and participants' consent to ensure adherence to research ethics and respect for privacy. Meanwhile, the note-taking technique was applied to document utterances that occurred naturally and spontaneously, as well as contextual and non-verbal cues that supported the interpretation of politeness strategies [26].

The data were analyzed using the interactive analysis model developed by Miles and Huberman [17], which involves three concurrent activities: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. In the data reduction stage, the researcher selected utterances containing imperative speech acts and politeness strategies while excluding irrelevant data. During data display, the reduced data were organized into categories based on the form of the imperative, the type of politeness strategy, the speech function, and the influencing social context. The data were presented in both tabular and narrative form to facilitate a clear understanding of linguistic patterns. The process of drawing and verifying conclusions was conducted continuously throughout the analysis to ensure the reliability and validity of interpretations. The conclusions focused on explaining how teachers employed politeness strategies in their imperative speech acts, both in formal (classroom) and informal (non-classroom) settings, and how these strategies contributed to maintaining effective and harmonious communication in a multicultural educational context [26].

The results of data analysis were presented using both formal and informal method [27]. The formal presentation involved the use of tables, figures, and systematic categorization of data, while the informal presentation utilized descriptive and interpretative explanations. This combination allowed the findings to be both analytically structured and contextually meaningful, ensuring that the linguistic evidence was clearly linked to the sociopragmatic interpretation of teachers' politeness in imperative speech acts [28].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Forms of Politeness in Imperative Speech Acts in Teacher–Student Interaction

Based on the analysis of 64 teacher utterances, it was found that the forms of politeness in imperative speech acts during teacher–student interactions at Senior High School 1 Poso Pesisir Utara included 17 types of pragmatic meanings of imperatives as proposed in pragmatic theory. Each form carries distinct characteristics, purposes, and degrees of politeness depending on the speech context. The following are the classifications and their discussions.

Directive Imperative Speech Acts (Commands)

These utterances are direct and aim to make students perform certain actions immediately.

Examples:

- (20) "Hey, you sitting there, pick up that trash and throw it away at the back."
- (19) "Call all your friends and tell them to come to class."

This form represents a direct command but is conveyed firmly without being harsh. The teacher uses instructive intonation to express responsibility for maintaining discipline. Politeness arises from the natural hierarchical relationship between teacher and students.

Directive Imperative Speech Acts (Instructive)

This type is similar to commands but delivered with lower intensity, often accompanied by softening particles such as *please* or *will you*.

Examples:

- (47) "Wisnu, please call the student council members to raise the flag, okay?"
- (40) "Dea, please get the geography book from the library, okay?"

The word *please* functions as a politeness marker that reduces the coercive power of the command. The teacher positions the student as a trusted collaborator.

Requestive Imperative Speech Acts

This form indicates the teacher's need for student assistance, generally polite and using markers such as *can*, *please*, or *may I ask*.

Examples:

- (10) "Dear, can you please help me?"
- (45) "Desak, please ask Mr. Yogi to come from the security post."

These imperatives are polite and participatory. The teacher lowers their dominant position by using interrogative forms to make students feel respected.

Polite Request Imperative Speech Acts

Used when teachers ask for help in a more cautious and humble manner.

Example:

- (2) "Wisnu, may I ask you to go to Mr. Ida's office?"

The word *may* introduces an element of permission, softening the request to sound more polite and respectful.

Urgent Imperative Speech Acts (Pressing)

These express urgency without threats, commonly used in time-sensitive situations.

Examples:

- (8) "Quickly tell your friends to put their phones in the counseling room!"
- (50) "Tut, go and get MBG quickly, and tell all class XII C students to come in."

Although firm, the context of urgency justifies the tone. Politeness is maintained by avoiding harsh or offensive expressions.

Persuasive Imperative Speech Acts

Aimed at encouraging students to willingly do something.

Example:

- (14) "Join the simulation tomorrow, it's a good chance to learn more."

The teacher employs persuasive strategies by giving reasons and benefits. Such utterances are motivational and friendly.

Appealing Imperative Speech Acts (Advisory)

Used to advise or remind students to act for collective benefit.

Examples:

- (48) "Please finish your meal, don't waste it."
- (36) "Ne mo losa-loса (don't be lazy to attend worship)."

The appeal is expressed in a mild tone, often using local particles such as *ya* or *jo* to create warmth and familiarity.

Inviting Imperative Speech Acts (Offering/Allowing)

Express politeness in granting permission or allowing actions.

Example:

- (53) "Bring it tomorrow, I'll use it for your class."

Although directive, the utterance functions as a polite offer since it conveys approval in a friendly tone.

Inclusive Imperative Speech Acts (Invitation)

These invite students to participate in joint activities.

Examples:

- (41) "Let's watch football at Kalora together with Frau."
- (18) "Let's all eat, don't leave any leftovers."

The use of *let's* fosters solidarity. Such imperatives highlight social bonding and familiarity between teacher and students.

Permissive Imperative Speech Acts (Requesting Permission)

Occurs when teachers model polite behavior while performing certain actions.

Example:

(10) *"Here's the key. Later, press the remote once before turning it to the left, okay?"*

The teacher demonstrates how to make polite requests, fostering linguistic politeness habits among students.

Permissive Imperative Speech Acts (Granting Permission)

Teachers grant students permission to do something.

Example:

(41) *"Okay, that's fine, if you have an event at home, go ahead."*

This shows empathy and leniency. Politeness is expressed through understanding students' personal circumstances.

Prohibitive Imperative Speech Acts (Prohibition)

Used to warn students against certain actions.

Example:

(4) *"Don't anyone fail to submit their phones, or they'll be taken by the counseling teacher."*

The word *don't* expresses prohibition firmly but with rational reasoning, preserving politeness.

Expressive Imperative Speech Acts (Expectation)

Contain expressions of hope for student behavior or academic achievement.

Example:

(15) *"Great! Keep studying diligently and stay motivated."*

These utterances express optimism and moral support, with politeness emerging through positive tone and appreciation.

Prohibitive/Abusive Imperatives

No harsh or abusive language was found in the data. This indicates teachers maintain ethical speech and avoid negative expressions toward students.

Congratulatory Imperative Speech Acts

Used when teachers give appreciation or positive reinforcement.

Example:

(15) *"Excellent! Keep studying hard."*

Such utterances reinforce motivation and demonstrate polite appreciation.

Advisory Imperative Speech Acts (Suggestions)

Teachers provide guidance-oriented advice.

Examples:

(43) *"Today we'll review advanced math material."*

(14) *"Join the simulation tomorrow, it'll be a good practice."*

The advice functions as guidance without pressure, making the instruction sound nurturing rather than coercive.

Playful Imperative Speech Acts (Joking/Light Tone)

Used in relaxed situations to maintain rapport.

Example:

(18) *"Let me have some of your mangoes! You're really going all out with that salad."*

Such utterances are humorous and non-directive, strengthening emotional bonds between teacher and students.

The findings indicate that the forms of politeness in teachers' imperative speech acts at Senior High School 1 Poso Pesisir Utara are highly diverse, reflecting the teachers' pragmatic awareness and social

sensitivity in communication. Seventeen pragmatic types of imperatives were identified, including directive, requestive, persuasive, prohibitive, advisory, and playful forms [3], [15]. These various forms serve not only to deliver instructions but also to maintain positive interpersonal relationships within the classroom [30]. Among the most dominant were directive and instructive imperatives, which teachers used to control classroom behavior or facilitate learning activities. However, even these were expressed politely, using mitigators such as *please*, *okay*, or *let's*, to soften the tone and reduce the sense of coercion. This finding supports the sociopragmatic view that politeness is context-dependent and serves to balance power and solidarity between interlocutors [18], [19].

Additionally, forms such as *appealing*, *inclusive*, and *expressive* imperatives demonstrate the teachers' attempts to create a cooperative and emotionally supportive atmosphere [9]. Politeness was also manifested through the use of local expressions like *jo* or *ee*, which signal intimacy and cultural alignment between teachers and students. The absence of impolite or abusive imperatives reinforces the notion that teacher authority in this context is exercised through respect rather than domination [3]. These forms indicate that teachers understand the dual nature of their communicative roles: as authority figures and as motivators. Therefore, the variation in imperative forms reflects a balance between maintaining classroom order and promoting an atmosphere of warmth and cooperation. This diversity also emphasizes how politeness functions as an integral component of pedagogical communication, shaping student engagement and fostering a respectful learning environment [23].

3.2. Functions of Politeness in Imperative Speech Acts in Teacher–Student Interaction

The functions of politeness in teachers' imperative speech acts at Senior High School 1 Poso Pesisir Utara can be categorized according to [14] six maxims of politeness. Each maxim illustrates how teachers balance authority and respect in communication with students.

Tact Maxim

This maxim requires speakers to minimize cost and maximize benefit to others. Teachers apply it by giving imperatives that encourage responsibility without imposing pressure.

Examples:

"Please help me arrange the chairs."
"Try checking your work again before submitting it."

Teachers avoid harsh commands like "Arrange the chairs now!" and instead use mitigators such as *please* or *try*, showing wisdom in maintaining social distance without losing authority. This maxim functions to foster respect and voluntary obedience while maintaining a conducive, respectful classroom atmosphere.

Generosity Maxim

Speakers minimize benefits to themselves and maximize benefits to others. Teachers show this by giving opportunities and responsibilities that promote student growth.

Examples:

"You lead the prayer today so everyone can hear your voice."
"Please help me write on the board so others can follow your explanation."

Rather than ordering, teachers express trust and empowerment, making students feel appreciated and involved.

Approbation Maxim

Speakers minimize dispraise and maximize praise toward others. Teachers apply this when combining directives with appreciation or positive reinforcement.

Examples:

"Good job, you've been diligent. Now help your friends who are still confused."
"You're quick to understand help explain it to another group."

Such utterances function both as motivation and instruction, boosting students' confidence while guiding their behavior.

Modesty Maxim

Speakers avoid self-praise and do not belittle others. Teachers apply this by positioning themselves as co-learners rather than superiors.

Examples:

"Let's work on this exercise together."
"I'll help calculate this part; you check the other section, okay?"

The use of *we* and *together* reflects humility and fosters equality in the learning process.

Agreement Maxim

Speakers minimize disagreement and maximize agreement. Teachers use this maxim to reinforce classroom cooperation.

Examples:

- “Agreed, we’ll meet tomorrow at eight, right?”
- “Let’s all keep the classroom clean.”

Teachers avoid imposing their will and instead build consensus, turning directives into mutual agreements.

Sympathy Maxim

Speakers minimize antipathy and maximize sympathy. In teacher–student interactions, this occurs when teachers give instructions empathetically.

Examples:

- “You look tired, take a short rest before continuing your task.”
- “It’s okay if your score dropped, the important thing is you keep trying. Let’s stay motivated.”

These imperatives show empathy and support, combining instruction with emotional care.

The analysis of politeness functions in teachers’ imperative speech acts revealed that their communication aligns with [7], [34] six politeness maxims: tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, and sympathy. Each maxim illustrates the teachers’ efforts to exercise authority while upholding respect and empathy toward students. The tact maxim was the most frequently applied, where teachers minimized the imposition of commands and maximized benefit for students [15], [26]. For example, utterances like “Please help me arrange the chairs” demonstrate teachers’ preference for polite directives over coercive orders. This strategy fosters voluntary cooperation, making students more responsive and responsible [30].

The generosity and approbation maxims further highlight the teachers’ role in empowering students through opportunities and appreciation. Expressions such as “You lead the prayer today” or “Good job, now help your friends” show that teachers combine instruction with praise, reinforcing motivation and social responsibility. Similarly, the modesty maxim was evident in utterances that positioned teachers as co-learners, using inclusive forms like *let’s* to reduce hierarchical distance. The agreement and sympathy maxims emerged in contexts where teachers sought consensus and expressed emotional understanding, such as when addressing tired or underperforming students with empathy [4], [28], [31].

Overall, the findings show that politeness functions in the classroom extend beyond linguistic courtesy they contribute to shaping moral, emotional, and social aspects of learning. Teachers’ adherence to these maxims demonstrates a culturally embedded approach to communication where respect, care, and cooperation are prioritized over authority. Consequently, politeness in teachers’ imperatives functions not merely as a linguistic choice but as a pedagogical strategy that enhances classroom harmony, motivation, and students’ positive attitudes toward learning [4; 19].

3.3. Politeness Strategies in Imperative Speech Acts in Teacher–Student Interaction at Senior High School 1 Poso Pesisir Utara

Observation revealed that teachers used two main strategies in expressing imperatives direct and indirect. These strategies reflect the teachers’ adaptation to context, familiarity, and students’ ethnic backgrounds to ensure that directives are both polite and effective.

Direct Strategy

Teachers explicitly express their intent to command, request, or prohibit. Although firm, politeness is maintained through gentle intonation, word choice, and contextual appropriateness.

Examples:

- “Wismu, take the paper from Mr. Ida’s room.”
- “Help me fold those cake boxes.”
- “Those on duty, please throw the trash outside the classroom.”
- “Everyone bring your phone tomorrow, don’t forget.”

Even though structurally direct, these utterances remain polite because: 1) The teacher speaks in a calm tone; 2) The word choice avoids threats or criticism; 3) The directive serves functional purposes for collective

benefit. Mitigating markers such as *please*, *okay*, and *try* often accompany these utterances, softening the imperative force.

Indirect Strategy

Teachers express imperatives implicitly through non-imperative forms such as questions, statements, invitations, or suggestions. This strategy highlights politeness, especially when interacting with students from politeness-oriented ethnic backgrounds or in informal contexts.

Examples:

- “Dear, can you please get the paper from my motorcycle trunk?”
- “If possible, please remember to submit your phone tomorrow.”
- “You seem tired, take a short rest before continuing your task.”
- “Let’s clean the classroom together so we finish faster.”
- “May I ask you to buy an ice drink at the canteen?”

These utterances avoid direct commanding tone by using requests (*can you please*, *may I ask*), invitations (*let’s*), or suggestions (*if possible*). The strategy is influenced by: 1) Social distance between teacher and student; 2) Informality of the setting; 3) Ethnic norms valuing soft-spoken communication. Teachers use indirect strategies to preserve students’ feelings and maintain harmonious communication [14], [22].

From 64 observed utterances: 1) Direct strategies appeared more often in formal contexts (classroom, instruction sessions); 2) Indirect strategies were used in informal or relaxed contexts (outside class, during breaks, or school events). Teachers alternate between both strategies to balance firmness and politeness, depending on: 1) Communicative purpose (command, request, advice); 2) Student character (diligent, relaxed, sensitive, or active); 3) Socio-cultural context (ethnic norms and interactional habits) [29].

The study revealed that teachers at Senior High School 1 Poso Pesisir Utara employed both direct and indirect strategies when expressing imperative speech acts, reflecting a pragmatic balance between clarity and politeness. Direct strategies were more common in formal instructional settings where precision and efficiency were necessary, while indirect strategies dominated informal contexts such as outside classroom interactions or during relaxed moments. Direct imperatives such as “Take the paper from Mr. Ida’s room” or “Please bring your phone tomorrow” remained polite due to the use of soft intonation, non-threatening vocabulary, and contextual appropriateness. These forms emphasize functional authority without violating students’ sense of respect [13].

Indirect strategies, on the other hand, appeared through interrogatives, suggestions, or invitations for example, “Can you please get the paper?” or “Let’s clean the classroom together.” Such utterances reduce the authoritative tone and foster a sense of equality and collaboration. This aligns with [4], [24] theory, where indirectness serves as a face-saving strategy to protect the hearer’s negative face. The teachers’ use of indirectness also reflects sensitivity to cultural values in Indonesian society, which highly regard humility and harmony in communication [15].

The choice between direct and indirect strategies was influenced by contextual factors such as social distance, student personality, and situational urgency [16], [24]. In high-pressure situations, teachers preferred direct strategies for clarity, while in casual settings, they shifted to indirect strategies to maintain rapport. This strategic flexibility indicates teachers’ sociopragmatic competence the ability to adjust linguistic form to fit the social and cultural context of interaction [27], [28]. Therefore, politeness strategies in imperative speech acts not only ensure effective communication but also strengthen relational bonds, demonstrating that politeness is both a pedagogical tool and a reflection of cultural intelligence in classroom discourse [32].

4. CONCLUSION

The study on the politeness of imperative speech acts in teacher-student interactions at Senior High School 1 Poso Pesisir Utara reveals that teachers use various pragmatic forms such as commands, requests, invitations, and suggestions delivered in a polite, communicative, and educational manner. Politeness serves to maintain harmonious interactions, discipline, social responsibility, and effective learning. Teachers apply both direct and indirect strategies: direct forms emphasize clarity and authority while remaining polite, whereas indirect forms, expressed through subtle requests or suggestions, help foster positive interpersonal relationships among students from diverse backgrounds.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

MC was responsible for the research design, data collection, data analysis, and manuscript preparation. S, and U, contributed to conceptual development, research methodology guidance, and critical review of the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author(s) declare no conflict of interest.

USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGY

The authors declare that no artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the generation, analysis, or writing of this manuscript. All aspects of the research, including data collection, interpretation, and manuscript preparation, were carried out entirely by the authors without the assistance of AI-based technologies.

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