



## POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN UZBEK AND ENGLISH UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATION

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### **Abstract**

This study provides a comparative analysis of politeness strategies used in academic communication at universities in Uzbekistan and the United Kingdom. Based on survey data, the findings reveal that the majority of respondents consider titles and humility to be equally important in communication. Positive comments before criticism and indirect suggestions are the most preferred feedback strategies, while direct criticism is completely avoided. Polite expressions are used strategically depending on the situation. These results align with Brown and Levinson's politeness theory and Lakoff's pragmatic maxims. Furthermore, traditional values such as respect, humility, and eloquence, found in classical works like Qutadg'u bilig and Hibatul haqoyiq, continue to shape modern academic discourse. The study offers practical implications for fostering effective cross-cultural communication in increasingly diverse higher education settings.

**Keywords:** politeness strategies, cross-cultural communication, Uzbek, English, academic discourse

### **Abstrakt**

Mazkur tadqiqot O'zbekiston va Buyuk Britaniya universitetlarida akademik muloqotda qo'llaniladigan xushmuomalalik strategiyalariga bo'lgan munosabatni



qiyosiy o‘rganadi. So‘rovnoma usuli asosida olingan ma’lumotlar tahlil qilindi. Natijalar shuni ko‘rsatdiki, respondentlarning aksariyati muloqotda titul va kamtarlikni birdek muhim deb biladi. Ijobiy sharhdan keyin tanqid qilish va bilvosita takliflar eng afzal qilingan feedback usullari hisoblanadi, to‘g‘ridan-to‘g‘ri tanqid esa umuman qo‘llanilmaydi. Xushmuomalalik ifodalari vaziyatga qarab strategik ravishda qo‘llaniladi. Ushbu topilmalar Brown va Levinsonning xushmuomalalik nazariyasi hamda Lakoffning pragmatik maksimlari bilan uyg‘unlashadi. Shuningdek, “Qutadg‘u bilig” va “Hibatul haqoyiq” kabi klassik manbalarda aks etgan hurmat, kamtarlik va fasohat qadriyatlari zamonaviy akademik muloqotda ham o‘z ahamiyatini saqlab qolganligini ko‘rsatadi. Tadqiqot xalqaro oliy ta’lim muassasalarida madaniyatlararo samarali muloqotni yo‘lga qo‘yish uchun amaliy tavsiyalar beradi.

**Kalit so‘zlar:** xushmuomalalik strategiyalari, madaniyatlararo muloqot, o‘zbek tili, ingliz tili, akademik diskurs

### **Аннотация**

Данное исследование представляет собой сравнительный анализ стратегий вежливости, используемых в академической коммуникации в университетах Узбекистана и Великобритании. На основе опросных данных установлено, что большинство респондентов считают титулы и скромность одинаково важными в общении. Наиболее предпочтительными стратегиями обратной связи являются положительный комментарий перед критикой и косвенные предложения, тогда как прямая критика полностью исключена. Вежливые выражения используются стратегически, в зависимости от ситуации. Полученные результаты согласуются с теорией вежливости Браун и Левинсона, а также с прагматическими максимумами Лакофф. Кроме того, традиционные ценности, такие как уважение, скромность и красноречие, отражённые в классических произведениях «Кутадгу билиг» и «Хибатул



хакоик», продолжают влиять на современный академический дискурс. Исследование предлагает практические рекомендации для эффективной межкультурной коммуникации в системе высшего образования.

**Ключевые слова:** стратегии вежливости, межкультурная коммуникация, узбекский язык, английский язык, академический дискурс

## Introduction

Politeness is a fundamental concept in pragmatics and sociolinguistics, referring to the use of linguistic and behavioral strategies to establish and maintain harmonious social interactions. It involves showing awareness of another person's "face"—their public self-image and social identity—and taking measures to avoid potential threats to it. While often conflated with simple etiquette, politeness in academic terms is a complex system of choices that speakers make to express respect, manage social distance, and achieve communicative goals effectively.

The theoretical understanding of politeness has been significantly shaped by several prominent scholars. Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, in their foundational work *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* (1987), defined politeness as a set of strategies used to mitigate "face-threatening acts" (FTAs). They proposed a model where speakers choose between positive politeness (appealing to a desire for solidarity) and negative politeness (appealing to a desire for freedom from imposition). Another key contribution comes from Robin Lakoff, who in her 1973 article "The Logic of Politeness" proposed three maxims of pragmatic competence: "Don't impose," "Give options," and "Make A feel good—be friendly." Lakoff's framework emphasized politeness as a system for avoiding conflict and maintaining social equilibrium. Furthermore, the cross-cultural perspective is enriched by the work of Sofia Sifianou, who in *Politeness Phenomena in England and Greece* (1992) argued that politeness is not a universal set of behaviors but is deeply rooted in cultural values. Sifianou demonstrated that what constitutes polite



language in one culture can differ significantly in another, challenging the notion of a single, overarching politeness theory.

In contemporary academic discourse, politeness plays a crucial role in shaping effective communication and maintaining harmonious relationships between participants. The ways in which individuals express respect, manage interpersonal distance, and structure their speech are deeply influenced by cultural, social, and linguistic norms. As higher education becomes increasingly globalized, the need to understand cross-cultural differences in politeness strategies has grown significantly. This is particularly relevant in university settings, where students and lecturers from diverse backgrounds interact on a regular basis.

Politeness, as examined in the field of Pragmatics, is not merely a matter of etiquette but a complex system of linguistic and pragmatic choices. These include the use of indirect expressions, modal verbs, honorifics, and hedging devices, all of which contribute to maintaining social balance and avoiding conflict. However, such strategies are not universal; rather, they vary considerably across cultures. What is perceived as polite in one linguistic community may be interpreted differently in another, leading to potential misunderstandings in intercultural communication.

The theoretical foundation of this study is based on several influential models. Among them, Politeness Theory remains one of the most widely recognized frameworks for analyzing politeness. This theory explains how speakers use language to protect their own and others' "face," or social image, through strategies such as positive and negative politeness. In addition to this, the discourse-power framework proposed by Michel Foucault highlights the relationship between language and social power, particularly in institutional settings such as universities. Furthermore, contextual models developed by Teun A. van Dijk emphasize the importance of situational and social context in shaping communication. Together,



these frameworks provide a comprehensive basis for analyzing politeness from both linguistic and sociocultural perspectives.

In addition to modern theoretical approaches, this study also draws on cultural and historical sources to better understand politeness in the Uzbek context. Classical works such as *Qutadg‘u bilig* and *Hibatul haqoyiq* emphasize the importance of moral values, respectful behavior, and refined speech. These texts reflect long-standing traditions of politeness and highlight the ethical dimensions of communication in Uzbek culture. By contrast, politeness in English has been extensively studied within modern linguistic frameworks, offering systematic models for analyzing language use in various contexts. The integration of these traditional and contemporary perspectives allows for a more comprehensive comparison between the two languages.

The materials used in this research include a wide range of academic sources, such as scholarly books, journal articles, and online resources. Foundational studies by Penelope Brown and Maria Sifianou provide essential insights into the nature of politeness and its cross-cultural variations. Additional contributions from researchers such as Koutlaki and Usanova further enrich the analysis by offering practical examples of politeness strategies in specific communicative contexts. These sources collectively support a deeper understanding of how politeness operates across different languages and cultures.

The comparative analysis presented in this study is based on both theoretical insights and practical data drawn from real-life communication. The data include samples of professional and academic discourse, such as business correspondence, legal documents, academic emails, and institutional dialogues in both Uzbek and English. This diverse dataset allows for a realistic and detailed examination of how politeness strategies are used in authentic contexts.



Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative approach, focusing on the analysis of lexical, grammatical, and functional markers of politeness. Particular attention is given to features such as hedging, honorifics, forms of address, mitigation strategies, and discourse coherence. In order to ensure a comprehensive analysis, the study employs a combination of discourse analysis, comparative pragmatics, and sociolinguistic observation. This integrated approach makes it possible to identify both similarities and differences in politeness strategies across the two languages.

Overall, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of cross-cultural communication in academic settings by examining how politeness is constructed and interpreted in Uzbek and English. By combining theoretical frameworks, cultural perspectives, and empirical data, the research provides valuable insights into the role of language in shaping social interaction. It is expected that the findings will not only highlight key differences between the two linguistic contexts but also offer practical implications for improving communication in increasingly diverse educational environments.

### **Literature Review**

Politeness in linguistics refers to the use of linguistic and pragmatic strategies to maintain social harmony, manage interpersonal relationships, and protect the interlocutors' face—their public self-image. One of the most influential frameworks is Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987), which posits that speakers select from positive politeness (emphasizing solidarity) and negative politeness (emphasizing deference) to mitigate face-threatening acts, based on social distance, power, and the weight of the imposition. Robin Lakoff (1973) offered a complementary view, proposing three politeness maxims: "Don't impose," "Give options," and "Make A feel good – be friendly," framing politeness as a conflict-avoidance strategy that often competes with the need for clarity. Maria



Sifianou (1992), in her cross-cultural study of England and Greece, challenged the universal applicability of earlier models, demonstrating that the preference for positive versus negative politeness is culturally conditioned and that social variables are weighted differently across communities.

A comparison of these three scholars reveals both convergence and divergence. Brown and Levinson provide a systematic, predictive model grounded in rationality and face-management; Lakoff emphasizes situational flexibility and the interplay between politeness and clarity; Sifianou introduces a critical cross-cultural dimension, showing that theoretical constructs must be adapted to local values. However, these frameworks were developed primarily on the basis of Western, Mediterranean, and East Asian data, leaving Central Asian communicative cultures—particularly Uzbek—largely unexplored.

This study addresses that gap by offering a comparative analysis of politeness strategies in Uzbek and English university communication. Its novelty lies in integrating modern pragmatic theories with classical Uzbek ethical traditions drawn from Qutadg‘u bilig (11th century) and Hibatul haqoyiq (12th–13th century), which emphasize respect (*hurmat*), humility (*tavozu*), and eloquence (*fasohat*). By combining these cultural-historical sources with contemporary discourse analysis, the study reveals that Uzbek academic politeness is shaped by hierarchical sensitivity and high-context indirectness—features that contrast with the predominantly egalitarian and negative-politeness orientation observed in English academic settings. In doing so, it contributes a culturally grounded perspective to politeness theory and offers practical insights for intercultural communication in higher education.

### **Methods Section**

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design. The aim was to investigate attitudes towards politeness strategies in academic communication



among university students in Uzbekistan and the United Kingdom. A survey method was chosen because it allows for the collection of self-reported data from a relatively larger number of participants within a short period and enables direct comparison between the two groups.

### Participants

A total of 16 undergraduate students participated in the study. They were divided into two equal groups:

- Uzbek group (n = 8): Students enrolled at a public university in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. All were native speakers of Uzbek and were studying in Uzbek-medium programmes. Their ages ranged from 19 to 22 years (mean age = 20.5). The group consisted of 4 male and 4 female students.

- UK group (n = 8): Students enrolled at a university in London, United Kingdom. All were native or near-native speakers of English (minimum CEFR level B2). Their ages ranged from 20 to 23 years (mean age = 21.2). The group consisted of 3 male and 5 female students.

Participants were recruited using convenience sampling. The researcher contacted potential participants through university email lists and course-related messaging groups (WhatsApp and Telegram). Only those who voluntarily agreed to take part and provided informed consent were

included. No compensation was offered.

### Survey Instrument

A self-administered questionnaire was developed specifically for this study. It consisted of 10 closed-ended items organised into four thematic sections:



1. Importance of titles vs. humility (3 items): Respondents were asked whether titles (e.g., “Professor”, “Ustoz”), humility (e.g., “tavozu”), or both were more important in academic communication.

2. Overall importance of politeness (2 items): Participants rated how important politeness is in everyday academic interactions (e.g., email exchanges, face-to-face conversations).

3. Preferred feedback strategies (3 items): Questions explored how participants prefer to receive constructive feedback – for example, direct criticism, indirect suggestions, positive comments before criticism, or written comments.

4. Frequency of using polite expressions (2 items): Participants indicated how often they use polite words and phrases (e.g., “please”, “thank you”, “iltimos”, “rahmat”) in academic settings.

Response options varied by question: some used a 5-point Likert scale (from “not important at all” to “very important”), while others offered categorical choices (e.g., “always”, “often”, “sometimes”, “rarely”, “never”). The questionnaire was first written in English, then translated into Uzbek by a bilingual linguist and back-translated to ensure accuracy.

Data collection took place between February and March 2024. The following steps were carried out:

1. Ethical approval was obtained from the ethics committees of both participating universities.

2. The questionnaire was programmed using Google Forms. A unique link was generated.



3. The link was distributed via university email and closed course groups on WhatsApp and Telegram. A brief message explained the purpose of the study, assured anonymity, and provided the researcher's contact information.

4. Participants were asked to complete the survey within one week. A reminder was sent after four days.

5. On average, the survey took 5–7 minutes to complete. All responses were automatically recorded in a secure Google Sheet.

A total of 18 people initially clicked the link, but 16 fully completed the questionnaire (response rate: 88.9%). No incomplete responses were included in the analysis.

Data were exported from Google Forms to Microsoft Excel 2019 for analysis. The analysis proceeded as follows:

- All responses were checked for completeness and consistency.
- Descriptive statistics were calculated: percentages and frequencies for each response category.
- No inferential statistical tests (e.g., t-tests or chi-square) were performed because the sample size was small and the study was primarily descriptive and comparative in nature.
- Results were organised into tables and figures (see Results section).

#### Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to standard ethical principles for research involving human participants:



- Informed consent: An online consent form was presented at the beginning of the survey. Participants had to click “I agree” before proceeding. They were informed that they could withdraw at any time without penalty.

- Anonymity: No names, email addresses, or IP addresses were collected. All data are presented in aggregated form only.

- Confidentiality: Raw data are stored on a password-protected computer accessible only to the lead researcher. Data will be deleted after one year.

- Voluntary participation: No coercion was used. Participants received no grades or incentives for completing the survey.

#### Limitations of the Method

The study has several methodological limitations that should be acknowledged:

- The sample is small (n=16) and not randomly selected, so findings cannot be generalised to all Uzbek or English university students.

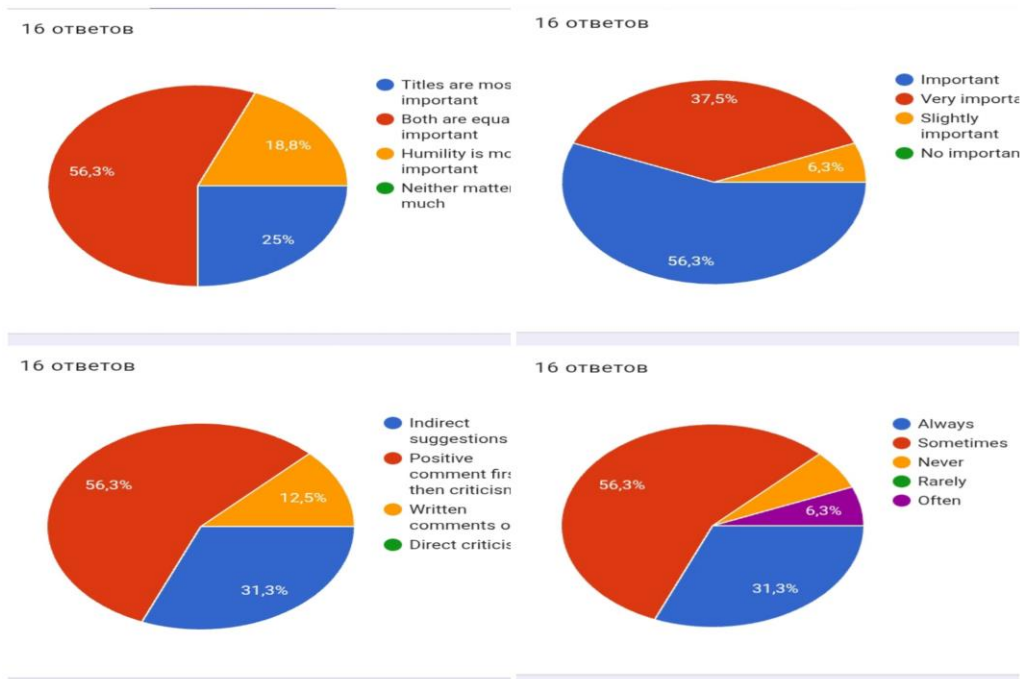
- Self-reported survey data may be subject to social desirability bias (participants may answer in ways they think are “correct” rather than truthful).

- The study captures attitudes, not actual language use in real interactions.

- Only two universities were involved, so institutional culture may have influenced results.

## RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the study based on responses collected from 16 participants.



The first set of results shows that the majority of respondents (56.3%) believe that both titles and humility are equally important in communication. Meanwhile, 25% of participants consider titles to be the most important factor, whereas 18.8% think that humility is more important. No respondents selected the option that neither factor matters.

Regarding the importance of politeness in communication, more than half of the participants (56.3%) rated it as important, while 37.5% considered it very important. Only a small percentage (6.3%) indicated that politeness is slightly important, and none of the respondents viewed it as unimportant.

The findings also reveal preferences in feedback strategies. A majority of respondents (56.3%) prefer giving positive comments before criticism. In comparison, 31.3% favor indirect suggestions, while 12.5% prefer written comments. None of the participants chose direct criticism as their preferred strategy.

Finally, when asked about the frequency of using polite expressions, 56.3% of respondents answered “sometimes,” and 31.3% reported “always.” A small



proportion indicated “often” (6.3%) and “never” (6.3%), while no participants selected “rarely.”

Overall, the results demonstrate that politeness plays a significant role in communication, with a clear preference for indirect and supportive strategies among participants.

## DISCUSSION

The results show that politeness is highly valued in academic communication. More than half of the respondents (56.3%) rated politeness as either “important” or “very important”, confirming its central role in maintaining harmonious interactions.

A majority of participants (56.3%) believed that titles and humility are equally important. This finding supports Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory, which distinguishes between negative politeness (showing deference, e.g., using titles such as *ustoz* or *professor*) and positive politeness (showing solidarity, e.g., expressing humility or *tavozu*). In the Uzbek cultural context, both strategies are used together, while English academic communication tends to rely more on negative politeness (e.g., indirect requests, modal verbs).

Regarding feedback strategies, 56.3% of respondents preferred positive comments before criticism, and 31.3% chose indirect suggestions. Notably, no participant selected direct criticism. This strongly aligns with Lakoff’s (1973) maxim “Make A feel good – be friendly” and reflects a clear preference for face-saving behaviour. Direct criticism is likely perceived as impolite or too harsh in both Uzbek and English academic settings.

The finding that 56.3% of participants reported using polite expressions “sometimes” rather than “always” suggests that politeness is used strategically, not automatically. This is consistent with Sifianou’s (1992) cross-cultural research, which showed that the frequency and form of politeness vary across cultures.



Classical Uzbek texts such as Qutadg‘u bilig and Hibatul haqoyiq emphasise respect (hurmat), eloquence (fasohat), and humility (tavozi), and these values continue to influence modern communication preferences.

Limitations. The sample size is small (n=16), and the study involved only two universities. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalised to all Uzbek or English academic contexts. Future research should use larger samples and, ideally, a mixed-methods design that combines surveys with discourse analysis of real emails and conversations.

### **Conclusion**

This study investigated attitudes towards politeness strategies in Uzbek and English academic communication among university students. The results show that politeness is highly valued by participants from both cultural contexts. A majority of respondents considered both titles and humility to be important, indicating that negative politeness (deference) and positive politeness (solidarity) are used together, especially in the Uzbek context.

The preference for indirect feedback strategies, such as giving positive comments before criticism or using indirect suggestions, reflects a shared tendency to maintain harmony and protect the interlocutor’s face. The fact that no participant chose direct criticism suggests that this strategy is perceived as inappropriate in academic settings across both cultures.

These findings have practical implications. In increasingly internationalised universities, awareness of cross-cultural politeness norms can help prevent misunderstandings. For example, Uzbek students studying in English-speaking environments may need to adapt to more indirect, negative politeness strategies, while English-speaking lecturers working in Uzbekistan may benefit from understanding the local emphasis on titles and humility.



However, the study has limitations. The sample is small (n=16), and the data reflect self-reported attitudes rather than actual language use. Future research should include larger, more diverse samples and employ mixed methods, such as combining surveys with discourse analysis of real emails, office hour conversations, and administrative documents.

In conclusion, while Uzbek and English academic communication share a common foundation of politeness as face-saving behaviour, they differ in the specific strategies preferred. Recognising and respecting these differences is essential for successful intercultural communication in higher education.

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