

A Study of Javanese Female EFL Learners' Politeness in Request Speech Acts

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ABSTRACT

*This study explores the request strategies of Javanese female English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners and how these reflect their politeness in communication. It examines the influence of Javanese cultural values and gender on their choice of strategies. Using Trosborg's (1994) request categorization and Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, data were collected through role-play and semi-structured interviews. The analysis identifies that the learners mainly use conventionally indirect strategies, particularly hearer-oriented ones, with negative politeness being the most common approach. These strategies emphasize indirect phrasing and respect for the listener's autonomy. Javanese cultural values, such as humility (*andhap asor*) and empathy (*tepa selira*), significantly shape these choices. Gender norms also play a role, encouraging politeness and indirectness to reduce imposition and promote harmony. The findings suggest that integrating cultural awareness and contextually appropriate strategies into English teaching can help learners communicate effectively in formal or professional settings.*

Keywords: Request Strategies; Politeness; Javanese Culture; Gender; EFL Learners; Interlanguage Pragmatics.

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INTRODUCTION

Politeness in request speech acts is a central topic in cross-cultural communication, particularly for second language learners who must navigate the norms of their native language and those of the target language. Brown and Levinson (1987) classify requests as face-threatening acts because they risk imposing on the listener. If a listener is unable or unwilling to fulfill the request, the speaker's social "face" may be at risk, potentially causing embarrassment or discomfort. Therefore, it is crucial for learners to develop the ability to make polite requests in various social contexts, where power dynamics and social distance may vary. This skill fosters positive interactions and helps maintain mutual respect in communication. For foreign language learners, making polite requests goes beyond mastering vocabulary and grammar. It requires an understanding of cultural and situational cues. Sociolinguistic research highlights that language styles adapt to social contexts and the roles speakers assume (Adli & Guy, 2022; Bodó et al., 2022; Ginting et al., 2024). From this perspective, language both shapes and reflects social identity, allowing speakers to position themselves appropriately in different interactions (Allen, 2023; Chaeroni et al., 2024; Forbes et al., 2021). In the context of request speech acts, this approach helps researchers explore how factors such as culture and gender influence politeness strategies.

Javanese female EFL learners encounter specific challenges in adapting their request-making strategies to English. Rooted in a cultural emphasis on social harmony and respect for hierarchy, Javanese norms encourage indirect communication to minimize imposition (Bonvillain, 2003). As a result, Javanese speakers often choose indirect request strategies that match cultural

expectations of respect and politeness. This preference is stronger in formal situations where the request is demanding, the relationship is distant, and power differences are clear. In these cases, it is important to maintain respect and follow social rules. In such contexts, maintaining face and observing social boundaries are essential. Strengthening this idea, Sukarno (2018) noted that Javanese speakers use varying levels of directness, linguistic markers (e.g., sentence moods, speech levels, passive voice), and strategies based on social contexts such as power dynamics, social distance, and imposition. Besides, gender also significantly influences how individuals perform requests. Research indicates that women across various cultures tend to use more polite and indirect communication strategies (Ehrlich, Meyerhoff, & Holmes, 2017). This habit may make Javanese female EFL learners focus more on being polite and indirect, especially in formal situations where politeness is very important. Studying how culture and gender influence these learners' request strategies helps us understand how they handle challenging communication in a second language.

As stated before, politeness in request speech acts has been extensively studied as a critical component of cross-cultural communication, especially for second language learners. Alakrash & Bustan (2020) has explored politeness in various cultural groups. Sukarno (2018) observed that Javanese speakers adjust their level of directness, linguistic features, and strategies according to social factors like power relations, social distance, and the degree of imposition. These studies have highlighted the significance of socio-cultural factors in shaping politeness strategies. However, limited studies have investigated the specific challenges faced by Javanese female EFL learners in formal contexts. Similarly,

Nugroho and Rekha (2023) found that Indonesian EFL learners frequently employ conventionally indirect request strategies due to cultural norms and social distance but did not specifically address the role of gender or the influence of Javanese cultural values. Sari and Suhono (2024) highlighted the use of polite request strategies among Generation Z Javanese speakers but focused primarily on the Javanese language, leaving a gap in understanding how these norms translate into English usage. Furthermore, the role of power dynamics and social distance in shaping learners' requests has not been adequately explored in formal contexts. For example, Syahri (2013) briefly addressed these factors but lacked an in-depth analysis of their interplay with gender and cultural norms in shaping learners' pragmatic competence in English.

Based on the explanation above, this study addresses the identified gaps by focusing on Javanese female EFL learners and examining how their cultural background and gender influence politeness strategies in making requests. Specifically, this study aims to 1) explore the request strategies used by Javanese female EFL learners, 2) identify how these strategies reflect their approach to politeness in communication and 3) find out the effect of gender and Javanese cultural values on students' politeness strategies in making requests. Specifically, it investigates the politeness strategies described by Brown and Levinson (1987), such as bald-on-record, positive politeness, and negative politeness, to understand which are most commonly applied. Additionally, it examines how gender and Javanese cultural values influence the learners' choices when making requests. By addressing these aspects, the research provides insights into how Javanese learners manage politeness in English, offering useful guidance for language educators in helping learners develop sociolinguistic competence.

It also sheds light on how gender and cultural expectations influence their pragmatic choices, offering implications for teaching English as a foreign language in culturally sensitive ways.

Requests are categorized as impositive speech acts because they aim to influence the hearer's actions for the benefit of the speaker, often requiring effort or imposing a cost on the hearer (Trosborg, 1995). Such acts are inherently face-threatening as they infringe on the hearer's negative face, which represents their desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition (Morioka, 2016). The success of a request is closely tied to the social context and the relationship between the speaker and the hearer, necessitating careful consideration of power dynamics, social distance, and the rank of imposition. Cultural norms also play a significant role in shaping request strategies. For example, in the Ambonese community, social hierarchies and cultural expectations prioritize politeness and indirectness to avoid threatening the hearer's face (Talaohu, 2018). Speakers employ a range of strategies, from direct (bald-on-record) to highly indirect approaches, to align with these norms and foster cooperation. In this case, effective request strategies that can build rapport and facilitate positive interactions are needed in daily life communication. This idea also highlights the importance of maintaining a delicate balance in interpersonal communication to achieve the desired outcome without compromising relationships.

Moreover, specifically, Brown and Levinson (1987) explain that face-threatening acts (FTAs), such as requests, pose a challenge to interpersonal harmony. The degree of face threat depends on three factors: power (P), social distance (D), and imposition (R). To address these challenges, speakers employ politeness strategies to

reduce the potential negative impact on the hearer's face as the following:

1. **Bald-On-Record Strategy**

This is the most direct strategy, where the speaker issues the request plainly, without softening its impact. It is typically used in situations of urgency, familiarity, or where social norms allow directness.

2. **Positive Politeness Strategy**

This strategy appeals to the hearer's desire to feel valued and appreciated. By emphasizing solidarity and goodwill, the speaker minimizes the face threat. Positive politeness is often seen in casual or cooperative settings.

3. **Negative Politeness Strategy**

Negative politeness focuses on showing respect for the hearer's freedom and autonomy. It uses hedging, apologies, or indirect phrasing to reduce the imposition. This method is often used in formal or hierarchical settings where the speaker wants to avoid being intrusive.

4. **Off-Record Strategy**

This is the most indirect strategy, relying on hints or implications to make the request. By avoiding explicit demands, the speaker allows the hearer to interpret the request and respond at their discretion. Off-record strategies are often used when the speaker wants to avoid direct confrontation.

5. **Choosing Not to Do the FTA**

In some situations, the speaker may decide not to make the request at all, especially when the social risks are too high or the relationship is fragile. This option ensures no face threat occurs but leaves the speaker's need unaddressed.

Based on the theories of request and politeness strategies above, in particular, the choice of strategy reflects the speaker's assessment of power, distance, and imposition, as well as their intent to maintain

harmony and respect in communication. Supporting this idea, Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory provides a framework for understanding why speakers choose certain request strategies. According to this theory, politeness helps speakers balance their communicative goals with the risk of threatening the hearer's face. Depending on the level of face threat perceived, speakers adjust their language to align with the situational demands and the interpersonal dynamics involved.

Javanese culture, with its emphasis on *andhap asor* (humility) and *tepa selira* (empathy), shapes how individuals communicate by encouraging indirectness to maintain harmony and avoid imposing on others. For women, these cultural values intersect with gendered expectations that align femininity with politeness, empathy, and careful attention to social relationships (Ehrlich, Meyerhoff, & Holmes, 2017). This cultural and gendered background often leads Javanese women to prefer indirect and polite strategies when making requests. However, as Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) highlight, transferring these culturally influenced strategies into English can create challenges, particularly when differences in politeness norms between Javanese and English lead to misunderstandings or pragmatic failures. This study is important in sociolinguistics because it explores how Javanese cultural norms and gender roles influence language use, particularly in the context of English as a foreign language. By examining these influences, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how sociocultural factors shape linguistic choices in cross-cultural communication. In other words, this study adopts a sociolinguistic framework, which examines how language use varies across social contexts and communities (Adli & Guy, 2022; Bodó et al., 2022; Ginting et al., 2024). Language, from a sociolinguistic

perspective, is seen as a vital tool in defining and maintaining social identities (Allen, 2023; Chaeroni et al., 2024; Forbes et al., 2021).

METHODS

This study investigates how female EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners navigate their requests and maintain politeness. To explore this topic in depth, a descriptive qualitative design was employed, enabling a detailed examination of participants' request strategies in specific social contexts. The analysis utilized Trosborg's (1994) classification of requests, which categorizes them based on their level of directness that softens the impact of requests. Additionally, Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory was applied to identify strategies that reduce face-threatening acts (FTAs) and preserve the listener's autonomy and dignity. This study also examines how gender and Javanese cultural values influence the learners' choices in request-making.

There are 6 participants who were selected using purposive sampling targeting female university students with a Javanese cultural background and significant exposure to English as a foreign language. The participants had undergone approximately seven years of English instruction, starting from elementary school (SD) and continuing through junior high (SMP) and high school (SMA). They ranged in age from 17 to 19 years. This specific demographic allowed for an in-depth focus on request strategies and politeness in formal communication scenarios.

Moreover, data were collected through two primary instruments: role-play

scenarios and semi-structured interviews. both role-play and interview data were instrumental in addressing the research question examining how gender and cultural values shape participants' request-making strategies.

1. Role-Play

Role-play was an important method used to collect data in this study. It was designed to create realistic communication situations where participants made requests in formal contexts. Participants received speaking cards that explained the scenario, their roles, and the social relationships between the people involved.

2. Role-Play Scenarios

Speaking cards were designed to present formal situations where the speaker had higher power than the hearer, there was a social distance between them, and the request carried a significant level of imposition. Participants were tasked to perform role-plays in 3 formal contexts, adjusting their language to align with these situational demands. This activity aimed to elicit naturally occurring request and politeness strategies reflective of real-life interactions.

3. Semi-Structured Interviews

After the role-play, interviews were conducted to gather insights into participants' reasoning behind their linguistic choices, especially regarding politeness and clarity. The interviews also explored participants' perceptions of the influence of gender and Javanese cultural values on their strategies.

Table 1
Situation in the Speaking cards (Role- Play Scenario)

No	Situation in the WDCT	Note
1	<p>Situation 1</p> <p>You are a police officer (police woman) and you see a car parked in front of the post office. There is a man inside the car. You need to ask him to move his car.</p> <p>Context:</p> <p>1) Power: The police officer has authority over the man.</p> <p>2) Distance: The participants are not familiar with each other.</p> <p>3) Imposition: The request is urgent and important due to the need to keep the area clear.</p>	All scenarios involved high degree of social distance (S) and high degrees of imposition (R).
2	<p>Situation 2</p> <p>You are a Javanese student with higher authority who need to request a report submission from a colleague who holds a lower power position and who is new in your class.</p> <p>Context:</p> <p>1) Power: The Javanese student has authority over the colleague.</p> <p>2) Distance: The participants are not familiar with each other.</p> <p>3) Imposition: The request is urgent and important due to the high stakes of the report.</p>	
3	<p>Situation 3</p> <p>You are Javanese Senior Lecturer who need to request overtime work from a junior lecturer who is new in your department.</p> <p>a. Context:</p> <p>1) Power: The senior lecturer has significant authority over the subordinate.</p> <p>2) Distance: The participants are not well-acquainted.</p> <p>3) Imposition: The request has a high imposition as it requires the subordinate to change his/her personal plans.</p>	

The analysis of the data followed the framework proposed by Miles and Huberman (2014), consisting of three main stages.

1. Data Condensation

In this stage, the role-play recordings and interview transcripts were transcribed word for word. These transcripts were then coded using Trosborg's (1995) framework for directness and Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies. Emerging themes related to gender and cultural values were identified and

categorized to align with the study's objectives.

2. Data Display

The findings were presented using tables to show patterns in request and politeness strategies. Comparisons were made between participants' linguistic choices across different role-play scenarios. The focus was on how factors like directness, politeness, and cultural values interacted to shape their strategies.

3. Conclusion Drawing and Verification

Conclusions were based on common patterns found in the data. For example, the participants' preference for indirectness and certain politeness strategies showed the influence of Javanese cultural values like *andhap asor* (humility) and *tepa selira* (empathy). The findings also highlighted how gender expectations, combined with these cultural norms, shaped the participants' request-making strategies. Female participants often focused on being polite and indirect, matching general sociolinguistic trends in women's communication styles. To ensure accuracy, data from the role-play recordings were compared with information gathered from semi-structured interviews. Participants' explanations during the interviews supported the observed patterns, confirming that they chose indirectness intentionally to follow cultural and gender norms. Participants' explanations during the interviews supported the coded patterns, confirming their intentional use of indirectness to align with cultural and gendered expectations. This process of triangulation ensured that the conclusions were reliable and reflected the connection between culture, gender, and politeness in their requests.

As stated in conclusion drawing and verification above, triangulation was utilized in this study to enhance the validity of the findings and ensure a comprehensive understanding of the data. Data triangulation was conducted by cross-checking the role-play data with the interview responses. This process helped verify the consistency between participants' observed behaviors

during the role-plays and their reflections on those behaviors during the interviews. In other words, methodological triangulation in this research was applied by combining qualitative methods, namely role-play and semi-structured interviews. This approach allowed the study to gain a deeper insight into both the strategies participants used in making requests and the underlying motivations driving their choices. Together, these triangulation techniques strengthened the reliability and depth of the analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study, along with an in-depth discussion of the data in relation to the research objectives and theoretical frameworks. The analysis explores three key aspects: first, the request strategies employed by female students with a Javanese cultural background in an EFL context; second, the politeness strategies utilized by these learners in expressing requests; and third, the influence of gender and Javanese cultural values on their politeness strategies in making requests. The findings are interpreted using Trosborg's (1995) categorization of request strategies and Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory to uncover patterns in the learners' pragmatic choices and the cultural underpinnings shaping their behavior. This integrated approach highlights the intersection of linguistic strategies, sociocultural norms, and gendered communication in the learners' interlanguage pragmatics.

1. Request strategies used by female students with a Javanese background in an EFL context

The following table illustrates the descriptive data of the participants' responses about the speech acts of request. The findings, summarized in the table below,

show a preference for conventionally indirect (hearer-oriented) strategies, followed by indirect strategies, with minimal use of direct strategies. The tabulation and analysis of request speech act strategies based on Trosborg's (1994) classification

Table 2
Overall Request Strategy Used by Participants (Trosborg; 1994)

<i>Request Strategy</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Example</i>
Direct	2 (11.1%)	"Excuse me, I need like you to move your car to the proper parking place." "Excuse me, I need you to submit your final project today, please."
Conventionally Indirect (Hearer-Oriented)	10 (55.5%)	"Excuse me, Sir. Can you please move your car to another place?" "Excuse me, could you please submit your report to me today?"
Conventionally Indirect (Speaker-Oriented)	1 (5.6%)	"Excuse me, I'd like to ask you to submit your report today, as it's due and quite important."
Indirect	5 (27,8%)	"Sorry sir, how about move your car to right there?" "Excuse me, it would be great if you could submit your report today."

Based on Trosborg's (1994) classification, the data show that 11.1% of the strategies were direct, 55.5% were conventionally indirect (hearer-oriented), 5.6% were conventionally indirect (speaker-oriented), and 27.8% were indirect. The findings reveal that female students with a Javanese background in an EFL context prefer conventionally indirect strategies, especially those that are hearer-oriented. Participants often used phrases like "Can you please..." or "Could you please..." These forms highlight the listener's ability or willingness to act, giving the listener some degree of freedom in deciding their response. Besides, indirect strategies were the second most frequently used. They were often employed in situations that participants

perceived as potentially face-threatening. Examples include phrases like "How about moving your car to..." or "It would be great if you could submit your report today." These strategies reflect an effort to minimize imposition while still conveying the request. In another hand, direct strategies were rarely observed. When participants used expressions like "I need you to..." they were typically in urgent or high-priority situations, such as meeting a deadline. Even then, participants often softened the directness with polite markers like "Excuse me" or "please," indicating their cultural tendency to avoid being overly imposing.

2. Realization of Politeness Strategies in Request Speech Acts by Javanese Female EFL Learners

This part presents politeness strategies applied by Javanese female EFL learners in making requests, categorized according to Brown and Levinson's (1987)

politeness strategies framework. As shown in the data, the participants predominantly employ negative politeness strategies (55.5%), followed by positive politeness (27,8%), with minimal instances of direct (bald-on-record) strategies (11.1%) or off-record strategies (5.6%).

Table 3

Overall Politeness Strategy Used by Participants

<i>Politeness Strategy</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Example</i>
Negative Politeness	10 (55.5%)	<i>"I'm sorry to bother you, but could you submit the report today?"</i>
Positive Politeness	5 (27,8%)	<i>"You're always so helpful, could you send the report when you get the chance?"</i>
Bald On-Record	2 (11.1%)	<i>"I need you to submit your report today, please."</i>
Off-Record	1 (5.6%)	<i>"It would be great if the report was submitted today."</i>

The most frequently observed strategy is negative politeness, which is characterized by indirect phrasing and apologetic language. Negative politeness aims to minimize imposition and respect the listener's autonomy, making it particularly suited to formal or hierarchical contexts. Participants often expressed their requests using phrases like, "Sorry to bother you, but could you..." or "I hope it's not too much trouble..." Such expressions demonstrate an effort to mitigate the impact of the request and acknowledge the listener's freedom to respond. In addition to negative politeness, positive politeness strategies were also evident, though to a lesser extent. Positive politeness focuses on appealing to the hearer's positive face by fostering solidarity and mutual rapport. For example, phrases such as "You're always so helpful, could you..." or "It would be great if you could..."

reveal the speaker's attempt to build a connection and express appreciation for the hearer's potential efforts. These strategies highlight a desire to create a collaborative atmosphere while making requests, reflecting the participants' sensitivity to maintaining interpersonal relationships.

Meanwhile, direct (bald-on-record) strategies were rarely used by the participants, appearing only in situations where the request was perceived as urgent or essential. These strategies involve issuing a request without mitigating its impact on the listener's face. For instance, participants used direct phrases like "I need you to..." in situations requiring immediate action. However, even in these cases, polite markers such as "please" were frequently added, reflecting a residual concern for the listener's feelings and a cultural reluctance to impose directly. Besides, off-record strategies, which

involve hinting or indirectly suggesting a request without explicitly stating it, were the least commonly used, appearing only once in the dataset. An example is “It would be great if the report was submitted today,” where the speaker implies the request without directly articulating it. The limited use of off-record strategies suggests that while the participants are attuned to indirect forms of communication, they prioritize clarity in formal or time-sensitive contexts to avoid misunderstandings.

3. The Influence of Gender and Javanese Cultural Values on Politeness Strategies in Making Requests

Javanese cultural values and gender norms strongly shape how female EFL students make requests in English. These students prefer indirect and hearer-oriented strategies to follow societal expectations. Javanese culture emphasizes minimizing imposition and maintaining harmony in communication (Bonvillain, 2003). The participants mostly used conventionally indirect, hearer-oriented strategies. This approach aligns with Javanese values such as *tepa selira* (empathy) and *andhap asor* (humility), which discourage direct impositions (Sukarno, 2018). Phrases like “Can you please...” or “Could you please...” were commonly used to reduce pressure on the listener. One participant explained: “In Javanese culture, it’s better not to ask directly. I usually say, ‘Could you please help me?’ or ‘Would it be okay if...?’ because it sounds more polite.” This shows their effort to respect the listener’s autonomy while maintaining politeness. The participants also used expressions like “How about moving your car to...” or “It would be great if you could...” to reduce imposition. Another participant said: “Even in English, I try to soften my words. Being too direct might

sound impolite, and I want to maintain good relationships.” These statements reflect their awareness of Javanese values, especially in formal situations where power distance and imposition are high.

Direct strategies are rarely used by the participants. When they need to be direct, they soften their requests with polite words like “please.” One participant said, “In Javanese culture, being direct can sound harsh. Even if it’s urgent, I prefer to say something like ‘could you please.’” This shows their effort to follow Javanese norms while adapting to English politeness. In some cases, the participants prioritize clarity, especially in time-sensitive situations. One participant explained, “I don’t usually give hints because it might confuse the listener. I prefer to say something clear but polite, like ‘It would be great if you could....’” This approach reflects their ability to balance indirectness and clarity based on the situation.

Furthermore, the interplay of cultural values and gender expectations shapes the participants’ linguistic choices. This is particularly evident in the participants’ preference for conventionally indirect requests, which balance clarity and politeness by avoiding direct demands. In this case, the data shows the frequent use of negative politeness strategies, characterized by apologetic and deferential language, such as “Sorry to bother you, but could you...” or “I hope it’s not too much trouble....” These strategies are particularly effective in formal contexts, where maintaining respect and minimizing face-threatening acts are crucial. One participant stated: “As a woman, I feel it’s important to use polite phrases like ‘Sorry to bother you’ or ‘I hope it’s not too much trouble.’” This reflects societal expectations for women to communicate softly. Another participant reflected on societal expectations: “*I try to*

avoid sounding demanding by adding phrases like 'please' or 'I hope.'" This finding is in line with some other references studying women across cultures and finding tendency to prioritize politeness and indirectness in their communication, often to foster cooperation and reduce potential confrontation (Ehrlich, Meyerhoff, & Holmes, 2017). Meanwhile, some participants, though less frequent, used positive politeness strategies, like "You're always so helpful, could you...," to create a friendly atmosphere. This approach reflects both Javanese cultural values and gendered communication patterns (Coates, 2015).

The data from interviews and role-plays show that the participants adjust their strategies in formal contexts. They follow Javanese values such as *tepa selira* (empathy) and *andhap asor* (humility) while respecting the rules of English communication. These findings show how Javanese female EFL students use both cultural and gendered expectations to make polite and effective requests in English. In other words, the explanation above illustrates how gender plays a significant role in shaping the politeness strategies of the participants.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Javanese female EFL learners often use conventionally indirect and hearer-oriented strategies when making requests. They prefer negative politeness strategies, such as using indirect phrases and apologetic language, to avoid imposing on others. Positive politeness strategies, like showing appreciation and building rapport, are used less often. Direct strategies are rare and are usually softened with polite markers like "please." These patterns reflect Javanese cultural values, such as *tepa selira* (empathy) and *andhap asor* (humility). Gender also influences their communication style, as the participants tend

to use polite and non-confrontational language to meet social expectations.

Based on the conclusion above, In English language teaching, it is important for educators to incorporate cultural awareness into lessons about request strategies and politeness. By discussing how cultural values shape communication, teachers can help students understand the subtle ways in which politeness varies across cultures. This strategy fosters a deeper understanding of how culture influences the pragmatic use of language. Additionally, teaching politeness strategies for real-life situations is crucial for helping students navigate formal and professional communication. Teachers should focus on strategies such as negative politeness, which helps mitigate imposition on the listener, and positive politeness, which aims to build rapport and cooperation. By integrating these elements into the curriculum, teachers can better equip students to use English in a culturally sensitive and socially appropriate way.

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