

# The use of politeness strategies in teacher–student interaction in the Omani EFL classroom

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper examines how politeness strategies are used in Omani schools and professional development classrooms. It is a qualitative study following an interactional sociolinguistic analysis approach. The study adopts Brown and Levinson (1987) model to analyse the use of politeness and the notion of face in two different contexts.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This is a qualitative study because it includes descriptive findings. It will follow an interactional sociolinguistic analysis approach and adopts Brown and Levinson (1987) model to analyse the use of politeness and the notion of face in two different contexts. It aims at studying student–teacher interaction in two different groups: Omani private school and Professional development Academy. Two classes will be attended in the school and two classes in the Academy. A mix of female and male teachers from both groups will be observed. The first age group is young learners of grades 7 and 9 and the age range of the second group is adult learners aged between 25 and 40 years old.

**Findings** – The results are as follows: young learners want to be perceived with their positive face while adult learners with negative face. More face saving acts (FSA) are performed by teachers than face threatening acts (FTAs). More FTAs are performed by young students than adult students. More FSAs are performed than FTAs by female teachers than their counterparts. All teachers agreed that when their face is put into threat, they will save it even if it meant putting the student's face in threat. These results imply that there is a big awareness of politeness and face in the modern day Omani classroom in different contexts and that teachers are actually using it and trying to help students to be aware of it.

**Originality/value** – The findings of this study will reverberate throughout the field of education and pedagogical techniques since before this study, there has not been sufficient investigation exploring politeness strategies or FSAs of adults in this age group in Oman. In fact, there have not been sufficient studies conducted in this area in Oman within all age groups. To this purpose, this paper will contribute to the existing literature in this field by examining how politeness strategies are used and factors that directly affect their use in the classroom in a new context, Oman. Moreover, the analysis that is presented in this study conveys valuable information for future research exploring this topic but within a broader age range and a bigger sample.

**Keywords** Politeness, Face, Face threatening act, Face saving act, Communicative competence

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Martinez-Flor *et al.* (2006) explained that speaking in a second language can be considered quite challenging. This stems from the process interlocutors have to fulfil in order to communicate. They have to know how, when and why they communicate depending on multiple factors like the sociocultural context of the conversation and the people involved in it. They highlighted that communicative competence is the main outcome of using language. This means that the essence of communication transcends from merely being linguistically correct to additionally being pragmatically appropriate.



When the communicative competence approach is put under analysis, five aspects should be considered when uttering: discourse competence, linguistic competence, strategic competence, intercultural competence and pragmatic competence.

Discourse competence refers to speakers' ability to produce unified spoken text suitable for a particular purpose and context. Linguistic competence refers to speakers' knowledge of the linguistic system phonology, grammar and vocabulary. Strategic competence is the ability to use strategies to avoid communication breakdown by making adjustments to the conversation, paraphrasing or asking for clarification. Showing awareness of sociocultural and nonverbal communication during conversing refers to intercultural competence. Finally, pragmatic competence refers to the knowledge of contextual factors that affect the appropriacy of an utterance.

The knowledge of pragmalinguistics (the linguistic resources speakers use to deliver a certain communicative act) and sociopragmatics (how speakers use that bank appropriately within a specific context and using politeness factors) aspects of pragmatic linguistics is very important to avoid unsuccessful communication. This framework is now the basis of modern classroom language teaching. It has become necessary to maintain the interactive nature of the class to meet the goal of second language acquisition, which is successful communication. In order to achieve that, face threatening acts (FTAs) *should* be avoided as much as possible; instead, face saving acts (FSAs) should be performed.

Studies conducted in different social contexts: Iran, Iraq, Poland, Indonesia and Spain (Amaya, 2008; Dronia, 2013; Cahyono, 2016; Darweesh and Mehdi, 2016; Khodashenas, 2017) found that questions, error correction, feedback, disagreement, criticism and comments are the most FTAs performed in the class. However, they also found that FTAs are less frequently used than FSAs. Indirectness using requests, hedges, modal verbs, reformulation, appreciative expressions and particular expressions like (you know, you mean) were highly used in classes as FSAs.

Another significant finding highlighted by Cahyono (2016) and Khodashenas (2017) is that female teachers use less FTAs than male teachers. All of them agree that modern classes in the social contexts mentioned above pay great attention to students' face and the use of politeness strategies in class.

These studies provided a thorough study of politeness strategies in various social contexts; however, studies in the Omani EFL classroom are almost non-existing. Thus, the present study will take this further to examine how politeness strategies and the notion of face are recognized in class interaction in Oman.

### 1.1 Objectives of the study

This paper will examine how the sociopragmatic aspect is applied in the classroom of Omani students, specifically how politeness strategies are used to save the speaker and hearer's face within the classroom interactions. Thus, the objectives are as follows:

- (1) To explore how teachers and students apply politeness strategies in the classroom.
- (2) To identify the politeness strategy more frequently used, FTAs or FSAs.
- (3) To analyse the factors that directly affect the use of politeness strategies in the classroom.

The paper will attempt to answer these research questions:

- (1) How do teachers and students apply politeness strategies in the classroom?
- (2) Which politeness strategy is used more frequently FTAs or FSAs?

- (3) What are the factors that directly affect the use of politeness strategies in the classroom?

### *1.2 Significance of the study*

Through this study, an understanding will be gained of the different politeness strategies that may be employed by EFL teachers to promote and sustain interactive communications within the classroom. Also, the practice of using these strategies will raise awareness of them and how they can be applied in differing contexts in the teaching of EFL in Oman. As it is, awareness of these strategies will be raised about using these strategies effectively in different contexts of teaching EFL in Oman. As a result, more FSAs will be used than FTAs.

The findings of this study will reverberate throughout the field of education and pedagogical techniques since before this study, there has not been sufficient investigation exploring politeness strategies or FSA's of adults in this age group in Oman. In fact, there have not been sufficient studies conducted in this area in Oman within all age groups. To this purpose, this paper will contribute to the existing literature in this field by examining how politeness strategies are used and factors that directly affect their use in the classroom in a new context, Oman.

Moreover, the analysis that is presented in this study conveys valuable information for future research exploring this topic but within a broader age range and a bigger sample.

## **2. Literature review**

As explained earlier, it is not enough to be aware of the linguistic part of the language. Awareness of the sociocultural part of it is necessary to achieve successful communication. Thus, the interaction in the classroom should not fail pragmatically. [Amaya \(2008\)](#) has explained that pragmatic failure leads to misinterpretation of the message and might even lead to communication breakdown. [Khodashenas \(2017\)](#) confirms that it is not enough to be linguistically accurate, but also a speaker should be linguistically appropriate.

Thomas (1983) cited in [Amaya \(2008\)](#) defines pragmatic failure as "the inability to understand what is meant by what is said." This failure might cause inappropriacy which can be interpreted in some social contexts as rude, awkward or threatening. Accordingly, it disrupts the communication. Amaya explains that pragmatic failure can be one of two types: pragmalinguistic or sociopragmatic. According to [Holmes and Brown \(1976\)](#), pragmalinguistic failure happens when a misunderstanding occurs in the intended illocutionary or pragmatic force of an utterance. Sociopragmatic failure arises from the cultural differences on what is considered a linguistically appropriate behaviour ([Amaya, 2008](#)).

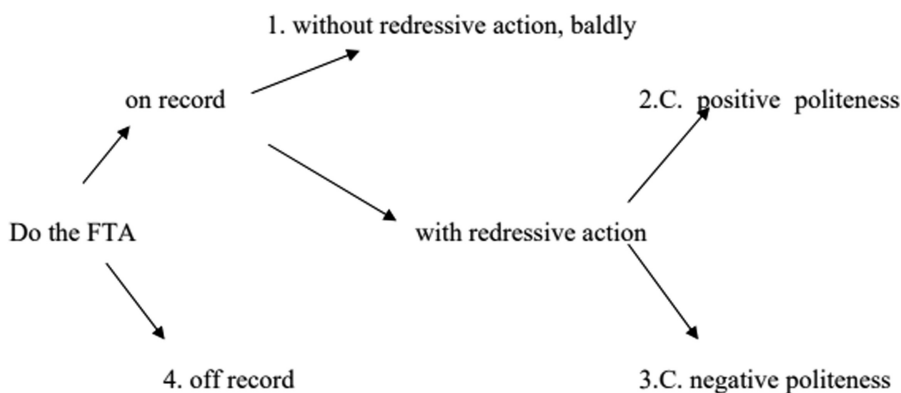
In the classroom, one or both could occur. Since communication is an essential part of the learning process in a language classroom, failure should be avoided. Thus, the teacher's role as a facilitator of the communication gains primacy. To do that, politeness strategies, as an important aspect of pragmatic competence, must be followed by both teachers and students to achieve an efficient interaction.

Politeness has been defined by multiple theorists ([Mills, 2003](#); [Goffman, 1967](#); [Arndt and Janney, 1985](#); [Brown and Levinson, 1987](#)) as an act to preserve or mitigate FTAs. The idea is that each individual has self-esteem that has a need of being recognized and respected by others or what is called the notion of face. Linguists ([Cahyono, 2016](#); [Khodashenas, 2017](#)) have categorized speech into two patterns – face offending and face defending. Face as defined by [Brown and Levinson's \(1987\)](#) model is the public self-image that every member in a society wants to project and claim for himself/herself.

There are two types of face, negative and positive. The former, linguists explain, concerns an individual's need of independence, not to be imposed on and to be given freedom of choice. The latter, however, concerns an individual's desire to belong, to be loved, accepted and recognized as part of a group. [Yule \(2010\)](#) confirms that politeness is being conscious of other people's face and being able to approach them accordingly.

If face is not recognized or respected by interlocutors, this could lead to threatening or even losing face which is what (Yule, 2010) cited in (Cahyono, 2016) defined as face threatening act (FTA). As a result, some acts might be applied to mitigate or block the threat or loss, and they are called FSAs. As Brown and Levinson (1987) cited in Darweesh and Mehdi (2016) and Cahyono (2016) argued the choice of strategies of politeness is affected by several factors: power, social distance and ranking. Dronia (2013) calls these factors frame, classification or social distance.

During an interaction, the speaker tries to preserve their face and not damage it. At the same time, they try to also preserve and not damage the hearer's face. However, this is not always possible, as Amaya (2008) argues, because some speech acts might be of direct threat to one's face. In these instances, FSAs are sought to be implemented by practicing politeness strategies. Brown and Levinson (1987) model is depicted below:



##### 5. Don't do the FTA

It is worth noting that a speech act can either be polite or impolite depending on who the interlocutors are and in the situation in which the interaction is happening.

When we talk about the teacher, we immediately recognize the existence of power difference between the interlocutors, the teacher and the students as the teacher in many cultures is superior and a higher authority than students. Agustina and Cahyono (2016) categorizes the power to five types:

- (1) Legitimate power,
- (2) Referent power,
- (3) Expert power,
- (4) Reward power and
- (5) Coercive power.

The teacher can practice one or more of the five categories. However, Cahyono argues that the teacher's power should not be intimidating to the students to an extent that it stops them from communicating and interacting in class. He adds that part of the teacher's power comes from the students themselves.

Five different social contexts have been studied in terms of politeness strategy: Iran, Iraq, Poland, Indonesia and Spain (Amaya, 2008; Dronia, 2013; Cahyono, 2016; Darweesh and Mehdi, 2016; Khodashenas, 2017). They revealed that the FTAs performed most in the

classrooms are questions, error correction, feedback, disagreement criticism and comments. FTAs are less frequently used than FSAs. Indirectness was the strategy used most as an FSA. Another significant finding highlighted by Cahyono and Khodashenas is that female teachers use less FTAs than male teachers.

The present study will take this further to examine how politeness strategies and the notion of face are recognized in class interaction in Oman and the difference between the usage of those strategies in young learners' classes and adult learners' classes.

### 3. Methodology

This is a qualitative study because it includes descriptive findings. It followed an interactional sociolinguistic analysis approach and adopted [Brown and Levinson \(1987\)](#) model, explained in the previous section, to analyse the use of politeness and the notion of face in two different contexts. As discussed in the preceding section, Brown and Levinson's theory is centred on the idea of "Face" and its two accompanying wants, "negative face" and "positive face". Negative face addresses the need for freedom, namely freedom from interference and imposition, concentrating on "personal preserves" and respecting the privacy of others. They investigated speech in light of speech act theory, i.e. they viewed utterances as actions that transmit certain meanings and fulfil specific purposes. Positive face is associated with the concept of acceptance, the urge for one's self-image to be admired and accepted by others.

This study aimed at studying student-teacher interaction in two different groups: Omani private school and Professional development Academy. Two classes were attended in the school and two classes in the Academy. A mix of female and male teachers from both groups was observed aged between 28 and 39. The school teachers' nationalities were Omani females and Serbian males. On the other hand, the trainers at the Academy were Tunisian females and Omani males. The students, however, were of diverse nationalities. The first age group was young learners of grades 7 and 9, and the age range of the second group was adult learners aged between 25 and 40 years old, employees from different sectors.

Four classes in total were attended from 40 min to 120 min. The number of participants of this study was equally 20 participants for both contexts. The utterances, body language, voice volume and tone were observed. What was said and the manner in which it was said were very important for this study. The observation was for both teachers and students so that the interaction is analysed and FTAs or FSAs patterns were noted. In addition to class observation, interviews with teachers, after observing classes, were conducted to check if they were aware of the notion of face and politeness strategies.

### 4. Findings and discussion

After observing four classes, these are the results that have been witnessed. A class was attended with grade 7 including seven students. The first interaction between the class and the students:

T: Good morning class

Class: Good morning teacher. The boys were (Singing and prolonging it)

T: okay enough!

The phrase "okay enough" was said in a strict manner. Using it, the teacher kind of threatened students' positive face by threatening their image of being funny and belong to a group of the same interests and attitudes. However, this can be explained as the students as well by trying to be funny, they somehow put his negative face in threat making him feel that he is not being taken seriously. This proves [Brown and Levinson \(1987\)](#) theory that the

choices of strategies of politeness are affected by several factors: power, social distance and ranking. The teacher then asks the class: How are you? They answer fine thank you. After a few seconds of silence one student asks and you teacher?

The student here tries to be polite and save the teacher's positive face by making him feel that she cares about him. It was noticed throughout the session that female students were the politest students paying attention to respecting the teacher's face. For example, the situation below:

T: (was explaining something on the board)

S: Teacher can I say something? I know you explained this two times now. But I still don't understand. Sorry for interrupting.

The student uses a lot of politeness strategies, for instance, apology, request and off record with redressive action when she says "I know you explained this two times, but I still can't understand it". The student's interaction with the teacher can also be explained as an off-record politeness of request by flouting the maxim of relation. The meaning behind it is to ask the teacher to repeat the point.

A few minutes later, this conversation happened:

T: Talking

S1: wait wait teacher again! I didn't hear you

T: Sure, I can, but don't you think we can ask in a way better than this?

S1: Can you please repeat teacher?

T: Absolutely I can! (With enthusiasm)

This response was uttered by a male student. This response is an on-record FTA done baldly. Despite the fact that this FTA is done against the teacher, he tried his best to respond with something that does not threaten the student's face baldly. He used an indirect question to notify him that his response was not polite with a nice tone. When the student corrected his utterance, the teacher enthusiastically responded to show the student that using polite questions and respecting others' face is always better and appreciated. This supports Cahyono's argument that the teacher's power should not be intimidating to the students to an extent that it stops them from communicating and interacting in class. For that, the teacher practiced his power but in a friendly manner to help the student's use in a more polite manner saving both interlocutors' faces.

In another interaction in the same class, the teacher divides a reading text among students to read. All the students were good readers; one student, however, was struggling. The teacher supported the student by correcting all the words read incorrectly. At one point, the student stopped and said, "I don't want to read". This can be explained in two ways: One that his positive face was attacked. By over correcting, he felt embarrassed in front of his classmates and felt out of the group since all of them read correctly. The second way is that his negative face was threatened because even before he read, he tried to tell the teacher that he does not want to, but the teacher made him read it anyway. This was a clear threat to his negative face as he was made to do something he did not want to or planned to do.

The teacher replied with "that's for the teacher to decide". This is because the student's response with "I don't want to read" and him actually stopping is also a threat to the teacher's negative face of being respected especially that there is a power distance between the two interlocutors. The teacher usually prefers to be respected rather than loved. Teachers have a high sense of their negative face; thus, they make sure it is perceived.

In another interaction the same day, the teacher made the student read a sentence. The sentence was very simple, and he was able to read it. Also, most of the easy questions about

the same text were directed to the same student. The teacher then used appreciation expressions like excellent, well done and smart thinking. This is a strategy by the teacher to make it up for the student by saving his positive face and correcting his positive image in front of his classmates.

In an interaction with grade 9 class which included only three students, this conversation happened:

T: in these sentences where can you see gerund and where can you see infinitive?

S1: "I told him to close the door. "This is gerund.

S3: No, I will answer teacher

T1: Let's listen to S1 first. Then, everyone will share ideas

Okay. why do you think it is gerund?

S1: Because you have "to"

T: okay! Do you all agree?

Class: No!

S2: Gerund has ing

S3: it's easy!

S1: yes yes ing [...] infinitive starts with "to"

T: yes well done! Maybe S1 is just confused because some verb patterns use both gerund and infinitive.

S1: yes teacher that's why.

T: So again, can someone explain the difference between gerund and infinitive?

S1: explained

Looking at this interaction, we can notice that this class is driven by communication, and students are motivated to participate. The teacher did not tell the student that he was mistaken immediately. In fact, she gave him the opportunity to think about it and explain his answer. Then, she allowed his classmates to participate in the process of producing the language. It is noticeable that the student was not affected by doing a mistake and his friends answering instead. This is a clear proof that the teacher is careful about the notion of face with students, making sure that the class is communicative and does not fail pragmatically.

For example, we can see the teacher is trying to justify the student's mistake to the rest of the class so that the student's positive face is not threatened and feels embarrassed.

The teacher also makes sure that any interruption coming from the rest of the class does not demotivate the student making him feel that he knows less. At the same time, she makes sure not to threaten their faces by absorbing that interruption and giving them opportunity to equally participate later on. [Khodashenas \(2017\)](#) points out that error correction is the hardest process in an EFL classroom as it is the fastest way to put a student down because of the high risk of FTA. The teacher in this interaction did a great job despite the long time it took to proceed with the class.

The confidence and motivation noticed in this class clarifies more than what is happening on the surface. It indicates that the teacher pays great attention to saving the students' faces and creates a safe environment in the class for the students to participate.

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In another interaction with the same teacher, this is how it went:

T: Did you bring your projects?

S1: yes teacher

S2: Teacher I finished my project, but I didn't bring it. I swear teacher I brought it. I can show you tomorrow the last time it was edited.

T: There is no need to do that I trust you and I know you are responsible enough to finish it on time. You can send it to me via email and I will print it for you

Looking at the teacher's response, she did not want to threaten the student's positive face of being believed and appreciated by asking to see the date in which it was edited. So, she used reassurance to save her face. At the same time, she saved her competence face as this girl is well known for being the smartest student in the class and always submits tasks on time.

The rest of the conversation went this way:

S3: project? What project?

T: Well [...] I would be surprised if you brought your project!

Here the teacher clearly performed an on-record threatening act with redressive action by flouting the quality maxim using sarcasm. She threatened his positive face by making him look ridiculous and making him feel embarrassed. However, when interviewing the teacher, she mentioned that he never submits his projects which make her feel that he does not respect her or takes her seriously. So, what she did was to save her own negative face which was threatened by the student.

After interviewing the teachers, the teachers made it clear that all of them are aware of the students' notion of face and they try their best to respect it. However, they commented, it is difficult due to lack of time in the class or due to the fact that students threaten the teacher's face. In such incidents, all the teachers agreed that, due to the power distance, they will save their face even if it means this will threaten the students' face. This, as [Agustina and Cahyono \(2016\)](#) mentioned, is due to the power difference between students and teachers. The power difference defines the face the interlocutor would like to project. Here, teachers would like their negative face to be respected regardless of the student's face.

The following is a slightly different context: professional development classes which include adult learners aged between 25 and 40 years.

T: which pronoun do we use to replace Shadi in this sentence? S1 can you answer?

S1: They

T: is Shadi a group of people or one?

S1: one [...]

T: Great! So can we use they when we have one person?

S2 No [...] teacher this is very easy. We study this in school.

T: yeah but I am sure many of you forgot it by now. It's okay that's why we are taking this course to remind ourselves with what we forgot. So S1 can we use they when we have one person?

S1: I?

T: you? Are you Shadi?

S1: No [...] She?



T: is Shadi a girl? [. . .] excellent you are getting closer.

S1: He

T: Very Good! He. So, what is the difference between He and She.

We can see in the conversation, the teacher elicits the answer, does not interrupt the student and does not correct him. She uses questions instead of correcting and gives the student the opportunity to reach the answer by himself feeling that he builds up towards something and this is an FSA so that the student does not feel embarrassed that he knows less. In fact, he feels productive and that he is the one building the answer and making it clearer to the rest of his classmates.

Even when one student tried to unintentionally undermine the student's answer, the teacher tried to mitigate that FTA by explaining that it is normal not to know the answer, emphasizing that they are here to learn. Using the pronoun "we" is an FSA, which makes them feel that they belong to one group.

T: (after assigning a mini speaking task) okay who wants to start?

S1: me (presents)

After all students present the teacher displays mistakes on board and asks them to correct them.

S1: teacher why didn't you correct us immediately. It is better.

S2: yes, we need to know where exactly we make a mistake.

In this conversation, it is clear that adult learners value their negative face more than their positive face. They want things to be clear and straight forward. This was evident in another interaction as well:

T: so you have to make sure that you speak in full sentences.

S1: but sometime not coming teacher

S1: teacher is this sentence correct?

T: well! Let's see if it is a full sentence.

Where is the subject?

S1: sometimes?

S2: No the subject noun person or object.

T: very good so?

S1: ahaaa there is no subject. Okay I?

T: so, were you asking about yourself?

S1: no, the sentence

T: good so what is the subject?

S1: the sentence not coming sometimes.

T: not coming?

S2: not come.

T: not come?

S1: do not come [...] oh wait does not come.

T: Excellent!!! yes

This interaction shows that these students are not afraid of making mistakes. They prefer being told their mistakes immediately than later on. Immediate correction might be an FTA with young learner. But with adult learners it is an FSA.

When the teachers were interviewed, they made it clear that adult learners especially those taking professional development courses with old ages have a high sense of negative face. They prefer to answer when they want to be picked, be corrected immediately and respected. Similarly, they rarely threaten the teacher's face. They are very polite, and they make sure they put that in practice. For example, one day a student had to leave 30 min before the ending time of the class. He made sure to inform the teacher before the class starts that he might leave. He did not even leave the class until the teacher assigned a task for everyone so he would not interrupt her while speaking. This is an obvious FSA for the teacher's positive face as maybe he did not want her to think that she is boring. Also, it is an FSA to her negative face as he did not want to interrupt her and make her feel disrespected.

Going back to the research question on how interlocutors in the Omani EFL classroom apply politeness strategies, young learners prefer to be perceived with their positive face, and, indeed, teachers made sure to do that. However, there are still some incidents of FTAs. [Amaya \(2008\)](#) argues sometimes it is impossible not to perform an FTA. Adult learners, on the other hand, prefer to be perceived with their negative face. They prefer to be respected than loved and prefer things to be straight forward, especially error correction. When it comes to comparing whether FTAs are performed more than FSAs, young learners perform more FTAs towards the teacher than adult learners. In fact, throughout the observation, no FTA was witnessed between the interlocutors in adult learners' class. Young male learners, in particular, perform more FTAs than young female learners. The same goes with male teachers. They perform more FTAs than FSAs while female teachers showed the opposite. This finding is in line with [Cahyono \(2016\)](#) and [Khodashenas \(2017\)](#) who highlighted that female teachers tend to perform less FTAs than male teachers. Different FSAs were used in class throughout the communication.

Hedges, pragmatic markers and appreciation expressions. Reformulation, metalinguistic, elicitation and revoicing were used to mitigate not to threaten students' faces while doing error correction. Teachers are aware of the notion of face, and they do apply it and teach students to also understand and respect it. The results of this study agree with ([Amaya, 2008](#); [Dronia, 2013](#); [Cahyono, 2016](#); [Darweesh and Mehdi, 2016](#); [Khodashenas, 2017](#)) that the most FTAs performed in the classrooms are questions, error correction, feedback, disagreement, criticism and comments. However, in addition to indirectness, expressions of appreciation and reformulations were highly used as FSAs in the contexts in which this study was conducted.

It was noticed throughout the observation of all classes in both contexts that interlocutors were trying to avoid pragmatic failure as much as possible to keep the class communicative. This was emphasized by Thomas (1983) cited in [Amaya \(2008\)](#) who explained that this failure might cause inappropriacy which can be interpreted in some social contexts as rude, awkward or threatening. Accordingly, it disrupts the communication.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, politeness strategies are very important to keep the classroom from failing pragmatically. In modern day, Omani classes whether at schools, colleges or professional development centres, the notion of face is highly recognized and respected. Teachers try their best not to threaten students' face, and when done or said, FSAs are immediately performed. At the same time, they try to make students more aware of this to practice it in class. Teachers are aware that the class should remain communicative, and politeness is one important way to keep it interactive and keep students motivated to participate.

A limitation of this study is that it was applied only on one school and one professional development centre with a small number of classes observed due to the lack of time. Thus, a further study could be conducted on a larger scale, more schools or more classes could be observed and perhaps involving a variety of classes from government and international schools. Also, studies regarding the professional development training centres are almost nonexistent; thus, there are no previous studies to compare with. For that, a larger scale could be examined with multiple English language trainers and different training institutes.

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