The Critical Review of Social Sciences Studies

Online ISSN: 3006-7170
Print ISSN: 3006-7162
Volume 4, Number 1, 2026, Pages 3073 – 3092
Journal Home Page
https://thecrsss.com/index.php/Journal/about

Negotiating Politeness and Agency in AI-Mediated Discourse: A Digital Pragmatics Study of ESL Learners' Speech Acts and Meta-Pragmatic Awareness

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received:	*January*	*12, 2026*
Revised:	*February*	*18, 2026*
Accepted:	*February*	*25, 2026*
Available Online:	*March*	*07, 2026*

Keywords:

AI-Mediated Communication, Speech Acts, Politeness Strategies, Learner Agency, Metapragmatic Awareness, ESL Learners, Digital Pragmatics, ChatGPT.

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ABSTRACT

The fast adoption of the generative Artificial Intelligence (AI), especially ChatGPT, in higher education have altered the way ESL students communicate in the academic sphere. Though most of the past studies have mainly concentrated on writing results, little has been done on the practical processes of learner AI interaction. It is a qualitative research paper that examines how speech acts are built in ESL environment, to identify negotiation of politeness strategies and learner agency in a ChatGPT-mediated discourse by undergraduate ESL (BS English) students. The study is based on an interpretivist paradigm and qualitative case study research design based on the Speech Act Theory, Politeness Theory, and SLA views of pragmatic competence and agency. The information was gathered using AI mediated interaction tasks, qualitative Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) and semi structured interviews utilizing purposive sampling. Three qualitative tools were used in the analysis, which were speech act coding, politeness strategy analysis, and thematic analysis. The results suggest that the learners mostly employ directive speech acts, which are often reduced with modalization and hedging. The politeness was not only habitual but also strategic as it implied relational positioning and AI perceived authority. Recurrent re-prompting, critical evaluation, and responsibility perseverance provided through interview data revealed active agency of the learners and metapragmatic awareness. The paper concludes that communication based on AI transforms pragmatic practice without disfigurement of learner control and reflective participation.

Introduction

The advent of the fast development of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI), and especially the big language models, like ChatGPT, has influenced the second language learning environment greatly. AI systems cease to have grammar correction and vocabulary suggestions, and can serve as interactive discourse partners that can produce context-sensitive and pragmatically structured replies (Hancock et al., 2020). ChatGPT is becoming an interlocutor in drafting, revising, clarifying, and negotiating academic language to undergraduate English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, especially BS English students. The development brings in a new communicative ecology where speech acts, politeness strategies and negotiating agency have been introduced as learners interact with a non-human yet linguistically responsive being.

In the context of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), communicative competence is believed to be pragmatic in nature (Kasper and Rose, 2002). Pragmatic competence is the capacity to aptly execute the speech acts which may include requests, commands, suggestions, apologies, and evaluations as well as the capacity to control politeness and social meaning (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). Conventionally, interlanguage pragmatics studies have identified human-human interaction, which presupposes intention to be mutually intentional, to social norms, and face sensitivity (Brown and Levinson, 1987). But AI-mediated communication disproves these assumptions. ChatGPT lacks the aspect of consciousness, social vulnerability, and face of the human, but learners tend to socially orient it, using mitigation, hedging, and politeness attributes (Reeves and Nass, 1996).

This paradox poses important theoretical and educational issues. So why do students be polite to an AI system? Is politeness a matter of habitual social behaviour, a matter of instrumental strategy, or evidence of metapragmatic awareness in that? What is more important, how do learners mediate their agency in communication with an AI model able to produce authoritative and linguistically sophisticated replies?

These developments can be related in a valuable context through the digital pragmatics. The scholarly research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) has been able to prove that pragmatic norms change in response to technological affordances like less physical cues and asynchronous interaction (Herring et al., 2013; Tagg, 2015). AI-mediated discourse is another developmental step because the system itself turns into an active participant in the discourse instead of being its medium (Hancock et al., 2020). Here, the learners are not merely relaying the language but instead they are constructing prompts in order to produce what they want. This is usually through speech acts that are directive and politeness strategies (Rappa et al., 2025).

The theory of Speech Acts (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) is still considered fundamental in the analysis of such interactions. In ChatGPT-mediated interactions, students often give commands (explain this, rewrite this paragraph, etc.), requests (could you clarify this, can you improve this), and evaluative action (this does not sound clear to me, can you say something better?). Those are not blatant imperatives, they are softened using modal verbs, conditional constructions and hedging devices, which are traditionally linked to face-saving mechanisms (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

However, the suggestion of the classical politeness theory to AI interaction creates the tension of the concept. The model developed by Brown and Levinson (1987) is premised on the safeguarding of positive and negative face. Face to ChatGPT can not be understood as facework because AI does not have a face. The politeness suggested through the discursive approaches implies that it is a socially acquired and reproduced phenomenon across contexts notwithstanding the ontological status of the interlocutor (Watts, 2003). Empirical research proves that human beings are used to

employing interpersonal norms on machines when they get anthropomorphically designed and when they are socially conditioned (Reeves and Nass, 1996). Moreover, the new studies suggest that ChatGPT is able to detect rudeness and change its tone, but there are contextual restrictions (Andersson, 2025).

Nevertheless, in addition to politeness, the problem of learner agency is one of the priority issues. Agency in SLA is the ability of the learners to make strategic decisions, have control, and critically assess the linguistic input (Taguchi, 2015). In the AI context, agency can be in the form of re-prompting, rejection of AI suggestions, reformulation of instructions or even directly limiting the response. On the other hand, agency can be diluted due to excessive reliance on AI because learners blindly follow the content produced by AI (Sahebi et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the vast majority of AI-language researches include mixed or quantitative methods, such as corpus analysis or frequency counts. These strategies open the danger of ignoring the interpretive aspects of pragmatic behaviour. Pragmatic decisions are relative, socially constructive, and influenced by beliefs, intentions and awareness of learners (Kasper and Rose, 2002). Thus, the qualitative design is required in order to reflect the complexity of reasoning and thoughts of learners. In line with this, a qualitative study has been adopted in this study. The sample of undergraduate students using ChatGPT on a regular basis in their studies with a major in ESL (BS English) will be used to gather data. To prevent the over-ambition of analysis and lack of conceptual clarity, the analysis will be limited to only one language model, which is the ChatGPT. There will be no corpus-based or quantitative frequency analysis. Rather, three qualitative data analysis tools will be used:

Classification of directive, expressive, and evaluative acts using Speech Act Coding Framework (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969).

Strategies To analyse mitigation, indirectness and relational positioning using Politeness Strategy Analysis (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Watts, 2003).

Semi-structured interviews to investigate the agency of learners and their metapragmatic awareness Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The qualitative method of eliciting similar pragmatic forms will be through Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) though not quantitatively measured. The interviews will be targeted at the experience of learners working with ChatGPT and not with other AI systems. This paper redefines pragmatic competence as adaptive, technologically mediated and agency-driven by placing AI-mediated discourse in context of interlanguage pragmatics. It is in line with the emerging demands to critically question the epistemic authority of AI and its consequences to the agency of the learner (Sahebi et al., 2025).

Research Questions

1. What kinds of speech acts do undergraduate students of ESL (BS English) conduct when communicating with ChatGPT?
2. What is the negotiation of politeness and the demonstration of learner agency in the interactions of undergraduate ESL (BS English) students with ChatGPT?

Research Objectives

1. To qualitatively determine and analyze the speech acts that undergraduate ESL (BS English) students conduct when communicating with ChatGPT.
2. To investigate the way such learners build politeness strategies, negotiating learner agency in AI-mediated conversation.

Rationale of the Study

In theory, the paper has further generalized interlanguage pragmatics beyond the human-human communication, setting ChatGPT as an interlocutor (Hancock et al., 2020). It combines Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), Politeness Theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987), discursive pragmatics (Watts, 2003), and SLA views of agency (Taguchi, 2015) in order to study the role played by pragmatic competence in AI mediated situations. This answers the gap in the research that has been found in the study abstract. Pedagogically, BS English students use ChatGPT to write academic texts more and more. They may be able to learn about the way they handle politeness, authority, and responsibility in dealing with AI, which can be used to teach AI-pragmatic literacy. Instead of deterring the use of AI, teachers can work to direct students to critical participation, strategic incitement, and long-term agency.

Methodologically, the study is limited in terms of design in the sense that the research design implies a qualitative analysis and three tools of analysis to guarantee depth in the study as opposed to measurement-based research design. At a time when AI is interfering in the practice of language increasingly, the study of speech acts, politeness, and agency in the interaction with ChatGPT is not necessary, but timely, to protect reflective, autonomous, and pragmatically competent language understanding.

Literature Review

The fast adoption of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) especially large language models (LLMs) into teaching and communication practices has offered a new interactional space to second language (L2) learners. In contrast to a classic computer-mediated communication (CMC), AI-mediated discourse relates to communication with a responsive system with and through which language is actively produced instead of being transmitted (Hancock et al., 2020). This change bears serious consequences to interlanguage pragmatics, particularly in the realisation of speech acts, politeness negotiation, and agency by ESL learners in communication contexts where the interlocutor is not humanly conscious but exhibits pragmatically rich behaviour.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Intermediated Communication and Digital Pragmatics.

Digital pragmatics builds on the study of CMC by looking at the adaptations of pragmatic norms within technological affordances, which include asynchronicity, fewer social signals, and algorithmic mediation (Herring et al., 2013; Tagg, 2015). The recent academic discussion holds that AI-mediated communication is another step in the evolution of the system since the system is no longer a neutral conduit but rather a co-producer of discourse (Hancock et al., 2020). This re-conceptualisation provokes classical assumptions in pragmatics, especially the concept of mutual human intentionality of meaning negotiation.

Cross-argumentatively, although researchers argue that AI interaction is merely instrumental, and hence pragmatically impoverished, in new empirical studies, users approach AI systems socially and use politeness signs, hedging, face-saving strategies, just like when talking to human interlocutors (Reeves and Nass, 1996; Rappa et al., 2025). This conflict underscores the necessity to study the real learner behaviour based on empirical evidence instead of basing on theoretical beliefs regarding the non-human nature of AI.

Courtesy, Face, and Human-Artificial Intelligence Interaction.

Politeness theory, with much of its success in pragmatic analysis due to the face-based theory of Brown and Levinson (1987), has been the mainstay of pragmatic analysis. In this sense, politeness reduces acts that can cause face-threatening actions to interlocutors who are socially vulnerable.

This emerges as a seeming contradiction to AI interaction: why are learners using politeness to an actor that does not face the threat of face?

The discursive and post-modern ways of addressing this paradox is through the consideration of politeness not as a strategy but as a behaviour that is learnt socially and is replicated in any given context (Watts, 2003). This is supported by empirical research, which indicates that users think to apply interpersonal rules to machines because of habitually socialised and because of anthropomorphic design of AI systems (Reeves and Nass, 1996). The study by Andersson (2025) also makes the situation more difficult by showing that ChatGPT can identify and react to the signs of impoliteness but is not very sensitive to contextual and registerical variations. This implies that learner politeness can be motivated socially and strategically, to be repaid with superior AI responses, as opposed to social harmony.

An opposing view holds that being too polite towards AI can help to strengthen the absence of critical trust and responsibility especially in the education fields. Sahebi et al. (2025) warn that communication via AI will undermine epistemic responsibility because, in such situations, the user may assign the authority to AI-generated output and dissociate themselves with the outputs.

Speech Actions and Pragmatic Action in AI-mediated Discourse.

A solid framework on which to examine the operation of language as action is the speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). During the AI-mediated interaction, the ESL learners use mainly the directive speech acts (i.e., requests, commands, instructions), which are frequently accompanied by mitigation strategies (Could you please, I would like you to, etc.). With the help of a Gricean lens, Rappa et al. (2025) indicate that the learner-AI interaction often implies the maxims violation (e.g., over-explaining) that counterintuitive to initiate communicative success with the LLM.

But such interactions are subject to a critical viewpoint, whether they enhance true pragmatic competence or only task-focused timely optimisation. Although learners might learn to be good at prompt engineering, this ability might not directly apply to human interaction, where social outcomes are real and bargainable (Taguchi, 2015). Such a concern highlights the significance of examining not only the forms of the speech acts but also the understanding of metapragmatics reasoning on the part of the learners concerning why they select a specific form in the AI situation.

Agency, Pragmatic Competence, and Metapragmatic Awareness.

Pragmatic competence in the context of SLA is dynamic, context-sensitive and holding close ties with metapragmatic awareness, or the capacity to think about the language one uses and its social impact (Kasper and Rose, 2002). Interaction with AI can be the only way to diversify such awareness, since it allows the learner to change prompts repeatedly and view the output being changed instantly. Think aloud and interviews studies show that learners actively deliberate politeness, clarity and control during communication with AI, which implies increased metapragmatic involvement.

However, cross-arguments indicate the danger of reduced learner agency. With AI being seen as an authoritative language expert, there is a risk that learners will excessively follow its recommendations and, therefore, avoid critical assessment and independent decision-making (Sahebi et al., 2025). Other studies, on the other hand, demonstrate the learners claiming agency by denying, revising, or re-prompting AI output, making the interaction between a collaborator and subordinate (Hancock et al., 2020).

Research Contribution Gap and Research Gap

Although the focus on AI-assisted language learning is on the increase, the majority of the research focuses on such outcomes as writing quality or accuracy without considering the interaction processes and perceptions of learners. A gap that is apparent in the SLA-based research that considers AI-mediated exchanges as pragmatic interaction in terms of speech acts, politeness negotiation, and agency construction is evident. The current research question fills this gap by combining discourse analysis and learner reflections and is relevant to digital pragmatics, interlanguage pragmatics, and AI-enhanced pedagogy.

Methodology

The proposed research is founded on the interpretivist research paradigm that presupposes the meaning to be constructed socially and being context-dependent. As the scope of the research is on the way in which undergraduate ESL (BS English) students produce speech acts, perform politeness, and negotiate learner agency when communicating with ChatGPT, the interpretive stance is the most suitable. Pragmatic behaviour is not measurable but it should be interpreted by the intentions of the participants, their reflection and language in a situation (Kasper and Rose, 2002). The interpretivist paradigm will enable the researcher to dwell on the perceptions of learners with regards to AI as an interlocutor and how they ascribe meaning to their own pragmatic decisions in AI-mediated discourse.

In line with this paradigm, the research design taken in the study is qualitative research design. It is not aimed at quantifying the frequency or the effectiveness of speech acts but to comprehend the construction and the rationale of specific forms. As opposed to quantitative or corpus-based studies, the study focuses on detailed study of language use in context. Investigating the speech acts, politeness strategies and learner agency, a qualitative design is most appropriate, since these constructs have interpretive aspects, including intention, relational position and metapragmatic awareness (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Taguchi, 2015). The design focuses on detailed description data rather than generalization using numerical data.

The study has a qualitative case study design, in which only one language model, ChatGPT, is interacted with. By limiting attention to one AI system, the depth of analysis is guaranteed and the context is consistent. Case study method allows analyzing in detail the interaction mediated by AI that occurred in nature and what learners thought about the interaction. Qualitatively, Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) will be used to obtain similar pragmatic situations, but without statistics. Perceptions towards the use of ChatGPT, reasoning, and agentive positioning of the learners will be further examined during semi-structured interviews.

The sample will include undergraduate ESL students studying a BS English course in a university. Such learners are chosen due to their high level of language proficiency and academic interest in the English language that can impact their metapragmatic awareness. The purposive sampling approach will be used to choose students who tend to use ChatGPT frequently in their academic activities to write essays, revise assignments, or get explanations on a conceptual material. Recruitment of participants will be carried out to have about 15-20 participants, so that qualitative data can be handled (yet be rich enough). The greatest heterogeneity in this group (e.g., gender, academic year, familiarity with AI) will be used to ensure that a wide range of pragmatic orientations is attained.

The collection of data will be done in two stages. To begin with, the participants will take part in AI-mediated interaction exercises, including writing formal emails, asking to rewrite academic paragraphs, or clarify a point with ChatGPT. Such transcripts of interaction (learner prompts and

AI responses) will be gathered as the main discourse data. Second, the participants will be tasked with qualitative DCT scenarios that will provoke both directive and expressive speech acts of the participants towards ChatGPT. Lastly, semi-structured interviews will be one where reasoning is explored by asking the learners their reasoning behind their immediate selections, their feelings of politeness to AI, and how they feel in control or dependent in the interaction. The interviews will be carried out in English to ensure the same factor as the academic background of participants.

The analysis of the data will be conducted using only three qualitative analytical tools, which is also consistent with the study design. The first one is the Speech Act Coding according to Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), which will designate the prompts of the learners into the categories of directives, requests, expressives, and evaluations. Second, they will be identified using Politeness Strategy Analysis based on Brown and Levinson (1987) and discursive approaches (Watts, 2003). The two frameworks will be used in the AI interaction transcripts and DCT responses.

Third, Interpretation of data Interpretations of interview data will be conducted using Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to investigate patterns of learner agency and metapragmatic awareness. Re-prompting behaviour, acceptance or rejection of AI suggestions, perceptions of authority, and tone awareness are some of the themes that will be discovered by means of iterative coding. Coding will be done in a systematic manner to increase the level of trustworthiness as reflective memos will be kept during the analysis process. Credibility in triangulation will be enhanced through interaction data, DCT responses, and interview reflections.

In general, the given methodology makes research paradigm, objectives, and research questions coherent to each other. The study does not lack conceptual clarity or methodological rigor, which is achieved by using a qualitative case study design and a specific analysis approach, namely, speech act coding, politeness analysis, and thematic analysis. The methodology allows exploring the ways in which undergraduate ESL learners pragmatically achieve speech acts, negotiate politeness, and perform agency in AI-mediated communication situations in detail.

Data Analysis

AI-Mediated Interaction Speech Act Realisations

1. The procedure in the analysis of a problem will be introduced.

The given section of the work contains the qualitative analysis of speech acts generated by undergraduate ESL (BS English) students in the process of interaction with ChatGPT. Following the interpretivist paradigm and qualitative case study design, one will not measure frequencies but explain how learners build communicative action in using language in interaction with a non-human but linguistically responsive interlocutor. The discussion is based on the Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962: Searle, 1969) and is dedicated to the analysis of the performance of directives, expressives, representatives, and evaluative acts by the learners in the AI-mediated speech.

Data sources include:

- Transcripts of interaction mediated by AI (learner prompts + ChatGPT responses).
- QDC Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs).

It is also focused on the prompts of learners as they form the main locus of pragmatic action and agentive positioning. The responses of ChatGPT are considered to the extent that they contextualize the decisions of learners.

2. Preponderance of Directive Speech Acts.

In the tasks mediated by AI, directives were the most salient category of speech acts, which aligns with the instrumental character of human-AI interaction. But as the analysis shows, these dictates were hardly formulated as mere imperatives. Rather, students had used layer and pragmatically shaded structures.

Imperative Directives

Other learners made direct imperatives like:

- Write this paragraph again in the academic style.
- Describe the distinction between pragmatics and semantics?
- "Summarize this article."

These imperatives, though structurally commanding, were frequently incorporated into bigger frames of discourse which made them gentler. Even where imperatives came, they were usually accompanied by contextual framing like:

- Write this paragraph again, please,...
- Summarize this article?

The availability of mitigation markers indicates that the ChatGPT is not perceived as a pure tool by the learners. In lieu, they take it as an interactive other replicating norms of human-oriented instructions.

Modalized Requests

In a more striking trend, modal forms were used:

- Will you mind explaining this point?
- Will you mind making this sound more formal?
- Is there any way to enhance the cohesion?

These statements are indirect prescriptions in the form of requests. According to a Speech Act approach, the illocutionary force is still directive, and the locutionary one is traditionally indirect. The learners show responsiveness to pragmatic appropriateness although ChatGPT does not have human face requirements. Interestingly, modalization repeatedly was observed in academic work that needed revision or feedback. It implies that soliciting evaluative activity by ChatGPT makes learners use a more accommodative tone, making the AI a linguistic authority.

Layered Sequences of Directives.

The other important discovery is multi-step directive sequences. Learners often built up chain instructions rather than giving single orders:

- Originally, examine grammatical errors. Then improve coherence. Last but not least, make it more critical.
- Such stratified instructions are indicative of high-order practical skills. Strategic constraining of the output on the AI is a show of control of the interaction by the learners. These sequences also correspond to the realization of the responsiveness of AI to direct command.
- This behaviour is indicative of agency: learners never accept AI output passively; they actively control the scope and the functionality of it.

3. Evaluative and Expressive Speech Acts.

Even though there was an overwhelming presence of directives, expressive and evaluative acts were also witnessed.

This can be done through appreciations and positive evaluation which support the idea of positive feedback.

Appreciation and Positive Evaluation

This may be carried out by appreciation and positive evaluation that reinforce the notion of positive feedback.

Other learners employed phrases like:

"Thank you, that was helpful."

"This is much clearer now."

Speech Act wise, they are expressives acts, which express psychological states. Their appearance supports the notion that learners socially orient ChatGPT.

Interestingly, the show of gratitude was common even in cases where there is no mutual obligation. This is an indication of polite reproduction as opposed to practical need.

Discontentment and Corrective Assessment.

More informative were statements of dissatisfaction:

"This is too basic. Can you make it more advanced?"

That is not quite what I meant.

"This sounds repetitive."

These statements are a combination of representative and directive force. The AI output is assessed by the learners who subsequently request alteration. The assessment element is important as it implies seriousness of interaction as opposed to passivity. Critical reflection of the AI output is an indicator of learner agency and metapragmatic consciousness. The students understand that the AI-generated language is not universal and can be transformed.

4. Information-Seeking Acts and Representatives.

More important but with less frequency was the representative act, a statement of belief or clarification.

Examples include:

"I am developing a research proposal on the topic of digital pragmatics."

This paragraph is included in my literature review.

These assertions are grounded in contexts. They are not instructions but influence the generation of AI responses. It is strategic scaffolding such acts: learners build context in order to maximize output.

In this case, pragmatic competence goes further than politeness to task management.

5. Embedded and Hybrid Speech Acts.

One of the main qualitative insights is related to hybrid constructions. There were often several illocutionary forces contained in one prompt by the learners:

"I do not like this explanation, can you explain in more critical ways?"

This contains:

- Expressive dissatisfaction
- Directive request
- Evaluative framing

High pragmatic sophistication is an indication of such hybridity. When learners want to communicate, they put together various speech mechanisms with the aim of obtaining intended communicative results.

6. Comparative Insights in DCT-Based.

The qualitative DCTs asked the students to provide ChatGPT with prompts in a hypothetical academic situation. In comparison with natural transcripts, DCT responses tended to be more detailed and involved and overtly polite.

For example:

Natural interaction:

"Improve this."

DCT response:

Would you mind making the argument more analytical and coherent?

This opposition implies that more overt signs of politeness are written by learners when they are encouraged to think consciously. It shows latent metapragmatic awareness that is more apparent in elicited situations.

7. Expansion of Strategic Re-Prompting as Speech Act.

An important phenomenon was re-prompting. Dissatisfied learners hardly gave up on the task. Instead, they reformulated:

"No, focus only on methodology."

"That's too general. Be more specific."

These statements are prescriptive instructions and these are repetitive negotiation. Speech act wise, they portray active interaction as opposed to commands.

Re-prompting is also an agency: learners take control of AI-generated discourse.

8. Without Face-Threat Anxiety.

There was no sign of fear of offending as is the case with human-human interaction. Outputs were freely criticized by learners:

"This is wrong."

"That doesn't make sense."

This crassness shows that AI is cognizant of the fact that it is not emotionally weak. But students usually still watered down attacks:

“I believe that this may not hold so true.”

This is a pragmatic positioning with duality, direct critique and mitigation, which are used.

9. Construction of the Illocutionary Force and Authority.

Implicit attempts to position ChatGPT as an expert can be seen in some of its prompts:

“As a linguistics specialist, tell me about...”

Play supervisor and criticise this.

In this case, students frame authority by forming prescriptions. This is an example of meta-level speech act design: they give the AI roles in order to control the quality of output.

High agentive control is manifested in such constructions.

10. Patterns in Speech Act and Agency among the Learners.

On the transcripts, there are three patterns that associate speech acts with agency:

- Format, tone, scope directorates (constraint).
- Corrective instructions - objecting or improving the output.
- Evaluative commentary- overtly assessing AI answer.

These patterns demonstrate that speech acts are not just requests but they are also negotiation tools of interaction.

11. Interpretive Synthesis

It is found in the course of the analysis that linguistically poor interaction with ChatGPT does not occur among undergraduate ESL learners. Instead, they demonstrate:

- Complicated directive construction.
- Indirect request framing
- Hybrid speech act embedding
- Iterative negotiation
- Assigning strategic authority.

In terms of qualitative perspective, speech acts of AI-mediated discourse serve as tools of agency and metapragmatic experimentation. The interpersonal norms are replicated by learners and at the same time modified towards a non-human interlocutor.

This helps to conclude that communication mediated by AI is not pragmatically neutral and is socially patterned.

AI-mediated Discourse in Relational Positioning and Politeness Strategies

The analysis is mainly based on the politeness framework developed by Brown and Levinson (positive and negative politeness strategies), and is complemented by discursive approach towards politeness, which perceives politeness as a practice socially constructed and not a strict formula.

Despite the absence of human face, ChatGPT remains an interactional participant that learners always turned to. The main interpretative question that would inform this section is not whether

politeness is required in AI interaction but how learners may reproduce, adapt, or strategically utilize politeness in interaction with a non-human system.

***2. Negative Politeness: Reduction and Fineness*.**

The most noticeable trend in transcripts was in the application of negative politeness strategies, which are mainly mitigation and indirectness. In the case of directives, learners also reduced imposition as much as possible.

Modal Mitigation

Softening requests was based on modal forms:

"Could you please revise this?"

"Is it possible to make this more critical?"

"Can I know what you mean by this?"

These prompts make the request optional as opposed to mandatory though they are structurally obligatory. This will reduce the burden on the negative face (purported desire of autonomy in addressee) of the addressee as seen through the lens of Brown and Levinson. Nevertheless, ChatGPT lacks the autonomy of a human being, so modal mitigation is determined by internalised sociolinguistic norms of learners and not by practical need. The politeness is seeming habitual and socially conditioned.

Hedging and Downtoning

Hedging devices were commonly used by learners:

Perhaps you might increase this section.

"I believe that this could use further elaboration."

"It seems slightly unclear."

Hedging decreases the intensity of assessment and critique. It is important to note that hedges were the most prevalent when it came to corrective re-prompts after unsatisfactory AI output. Many students would say such softened versions instead of saying this is wrong.

This implies that learners uphold the rules of politeness even in situations where no significant emotional damage is expected. The continuation of hedging is an indicator of pragmatic transfer of the norm of human interaction.

Apologetic Framing

In some transcripts, the learners prefixed instructions with apologetic signs:

- Say oh I am sorry, will you write this one more time?
- This is not specific enough I am sorry.

The interaction of AI in terms of apology is especially unveiling. As ChatGPT cannot be offended, these apologies reflect the implanted political courtesy patterns. They can also show the orientation of the learners to authority- putting themselves in a subordinate position to a perceived linguistic expert.

This interaction foreshadows some subtle power negotiation: politeness is bound up in epistemic perceived superiority.

3. Good Politeness: Good and Bad Faith.

Though negative politeness prevailed, there were also cases of positive politeness strategies. These are to establish cohesion or acceptance.

Appreciation comes in various forms, and it is the management's duty to select the most effective from options such as verbal, monetary, promotion, and recognition (Ahmed, 2005).

Appreciations.

Students usually rejoiced to satisfactory outputs by:

“Thanks, this will be of good help.”

“That’s great, thanks!”

“Ah, that is just what I wanted.”

These words are expressive and at the same time strengthen of positive relational tone. They make imitation of conversational norms.

Surprisingly, some thanksgiving remarks were made in advance of other instructions:

“Thanks for that explanation. Please also include references?

In this case, gratitude cushions the imposition that follows, which is similar to human conversational sequence.

Complimenting the Output

There were also learners who specifically commended AI performance:

“This is a strong argument.”

That makes a very clear explanation.

These praises do not necessarily need to be utilized in interacting with machines but allude to the anthropomorphic orientation. Students seem to think of ChatGPT as a participant and not a resource.

This further supports the conclusion that politeness is not only a relational process, but also in a situation where the interlocutor does not necessarily have a social consciousness.

4. Rudeness: Pragmatic Adaptation.

Despite the abundance of politeness, a number of transcripts entailed some instances of unbridled directness, especially in case of repeated re-prompts.

Examples include:

“No. Focus only on methodology.”

“That’s incorrect.”

“Remove this section.”

Such utterances are not hedged or modally mitigated. Worth mentioning, this directness was frequently used in successive repetitions, indicating that there was more urgency or frustration in the task. Such change represents a sign of practical adjustment. When efficiency comes into play as the first thing, the learners temporarily involve the politeness rules. The lack of face risk permits

less indirect language. Nevertheless, this crudity was not the order of the day. Majority of the learners were direct and mitigating at the same time depending on the context.

5. Relational Positioning and Authorities Building.

Patterns of relational positioning (how learners implicitly build power relations between themselves and ChatGPT) could also be found in the politeness analysis.

Deferential Positioning

Learners in certain prompts ranked ChatGPT higher:

- Could you analyze this, as a specialist in the field of linguistics?
- Be my professor, and criticise this.

This framing raises the epistemic powers of the AI. The deference is supported by the politeness markers. This positioning can pose a risk to the agency of the learner in the situation where the AI is seen as an unquestionable authority. This hierarchy however, however, was frequently overridden with later re-prompts, and this showed dynamic negotiation.

Agentive Positioning

Other prompts showed assertive self-positioning:

- I want you to abide by these very instructions.
- Only correct grammar, not content.

In this case, the learners take charge. Politeness signs might not disappear though the directive power is powerful. This is an indication that politeness does not always mean submission. The students are able to integrate mitigation and authority.

6. Discursive Perspective: Politeness as Practice.

Discursively, politeness is not a strategy but a practice in a location. The statistics indicate that politeness varies as per:

- Type of task (drafting or correcting)
- Satisfaction level
- Iteration stage
- Perceived AI authority

Students reproduce interpersonal norms not due to the demands of ChatGPT, but because they have politeness as a part of their communicative self. It is incorporated into their way of doing interaction. This is in line with the interpretivist paradigm: meaning is created in practice and not by rigid rules.

7. Courtesy and New Agency.

The relationship between politeness and agency is a critical finding. Three patterns emerged:

- Polite Constraint - Minimized but specific instructions (Can you mind revising grammar only?).
- Civil Dissatisfaction -Toned down dissatisfaction (I feel that this should be more analytical.).
- Direct Override - Unqualified assertion having been repeated (“No, delete the conclusion.).

These trends indicate politeness does not deter agency. Learners instead combination of relational and control is done in a strategic way.

Agency can be seen through the choices made by learners on whether to be soft or direct.

8. Comparison of Natural Interaction and DCT Responses.

Politeness also became more elaborate and formulaic in DCT situations:

I should be very grateful to have you be good enough to make the sense of it a little more coherent...

DCT responses contain a greater number of overt politeness markers than spontaneous transcripts. This implies that the learners exaggerate the rules of politeness when they consciously consider language.

This contrast means that the learners are metapragmatic in awareness- they are aware of what would be considered polite language, although they may not apply it in practice in real-time communication.

The qualitative analysis shows that the undergraduate ESL learners:

- Always use mitigation and indirectness.
- Build interaction by use of gratitude and compliments.
- Switch between courtesy and forthrightness.
- Create a new system of authority with ChatGPT.
- Even though AI is not a human being, uphold the norms of people.

Politeness in the AI-mediated discourse does not seem to be either habitual or instrumental. It is an amalgamation phenomenon that occurs under social conditioning, task requirements as well as emergent agency.

Notably, politeness does not do away with learner control. Rather, it is accompanied by strategic constraint and re-prompting of a corrective nature.

Thematic Analysis of Learner Agency and Metapragmatic Awareness

Thematic analysis was done based on inductive but theoretically informed process. Transcripts of the interviews were read over in loop, coded into recurring patterns and then grouped into themes. The discussion will focus on the perceptions of learners regarding their pragmatic decisions, perceptions of the authority of ChatGPT, and the negotiation of responsibility in the discourse generated by AI.

Four major themes emerged:

- Perceived Epistemic Authority ChatGPT.
- Iterative Control and Strategic Re-Prompting.
- Rudeness as Habit vs. Companies.
- Reflexive Consciousness of Being a Responsible/Dependent Being.
- The themes are discussed below.

Theme 1: Perceived Epistemic Authority of ChatGPT.

One of the most evident themes in the interviews was the fact that learners view ChatGPT as a knowledgeable and even expert-like entity. Most of the participants characterized ChatGPT as:

- The person is more advanced in academic writing than I am.
- As a boss who provides feedback.
- “A tool, but a smart one.”

This impression affected their practical action. Some students stated that they employ polite forms since they believe they are requesting a smart system to help them. One participant stated:

- Although it is not a person, it seems to me that I am asking advice and, that is why I use polite words.
- It means that being polite is partially dependent on perceived epistemic subordination. Deferential tone is adopted when the learners place ChatGPT as more knowledgeable.

The perception of authority was not absolute however. Although the students also recognized the power of ChatGPT, they also admitted its weaknesses:

- What can sometimes sound so confident and yet be found to be wrong.
- Checking on the material information.
- Therefore, the attribution of authority is not unquestionable. Students are aware of the ability of ChatGPT but are skeptical.

Theme 2: Re-Prompting and Strategic Prompting.

The second important topic is that of iterative control, which an expression of agency through the learner is. Almost all of the participants explained re-prompting as a premeditated approach:

- When it will not deliver to me what I desire, I narrow down my instruction.
- You must be specific or it will be general answers.

Poor and unsatisfying output was not seen as final by the students. They instead proposed interaction in the form of collaborative refinement. One participant explained:

"It's like training it. The more I teach, the more it is responsive.

This is a very strong agentive positioning statement. Learners do not think of themselves as passive receivers but they manage the interaction. Notably, re-prompting was not technical only but practical. Students said that they tonally, specifically and constrained on a conscious basis. For example:

- Replacing the explanation of this by Explain this in 150 words in academic tone.
- Role framing: Adding role framing: Depending on being a linguistics professor.

Such adaptations engage metapragmatic consciousness over the form of language and its output. The learners learn that the directive precision and contextual framing determine the quality of the response.

So, there is agency which can be in the form of:

- Reformulation
- Constraint imposition
- Role assignment
- Selective acceptance

This confirms that the interaction by AI does not always reduce the autonomy of learners. Rather, it is capable of triggering strategic communicative management.

Theme 3: Being polite as a habit, versus being polite as a strategy.

The answers provided in the interviews showed that the motivation behind use of politeness was different. Two sub-patterns emerged.

Politeness: This is a habitual social norm and is expressed by individuals through politeness, politeness, and politeness.

Some of them stated that politeness was automatic:

"I do say please and thank you without even thinking."

"It just feels natural."

These reactions imply that politeness to ChatGPT is based on habitual act of communication and not a planned action. The learners replicate the interpersonal norms even when the learner is interacting with a non-human system.

Politeness as Strategic Optimization.

Other respondents defined politeness using an instrumental meaning:

- At times I think polite prompts are more effective.
- When I put it in a respectful way it appears to be more understandable.

In this case, politeness will be functional. Students want to think that tone influences the quality of AI output. Although empirically doubtful, this impression does affect behaviour.

Funny enough, other participants said they had the habit of using polite and direct words based on urgency:

- In case I am in a hurry, I simply provide direct instructions.
- This is a sign of conscious modulation. Courtesy is not absolute but relative.

In general, politeness during AI interaction, according to interviews, is a habit and a choice. It portrays internalized standards in addition to perceived communicative effectiveness.

Theme 4: Reflexive Consciousness of Responsiveness and Dependence.

The most important theme is probably the reflection of learners on the issue of responsibility and dependence.

Most of the respondents were aware of their possible overdependence:

- There is the temptation to direct copying.
- At times I believe too readily.

But the majority of them said they were aware of the necessity of critical appraisal:

- "I always edit what it gives me."
- It is a beginning and not the end.

This self-reflective position implies the new AI-pragmatic literacy. Students are aware of the advantages and disadvantages of AI-assistance.

This balance was clearly stated by one of the participants:

It serves to enhance my writing, and yet I am expected to be accountable of whatever I turn in.

This assertion is an epitome of agency. Even in a situation where AI assists in the drafting, it is still the responsibility of the learner.

It is worth noting that, a change with time was reported by some students. First, they have placed a lot of trust in ChatGPT. Experience rendered them more critical:

Initially I believed that everything was always right. Now I verify everything."

This development path suggests a progressive metapragmatic sensitization, not just to the form of the language, but to the trustworthiness of 3-epistemology, as well.

Metapragmatic Awareness Thematic.

In all themes, learners were found to be aware of:

- The effect of tone on interaction.
- The way a clarity of instruction influences output.
- The way AI authority needs to be assessed.
- How manly is the duty of responsibility.

Such consciousness stretches beyond the ability to communicate into thoughtfulity of communication processes. Students have not characterized ChatGPT to take over their role. Instead, they framed it as:

"A collaborator."

"A tool I manage."

"An assistant, not the author."

These descriptions support the interpretivist perception that agency is constructed in a co-constructive manner. Autonomy does not necessarily reduce with the absence of AI but it is on how learners position themselves.

Conclusion

This paper has aimed to quantitatively explore the speech act construction, negotiate politeness, and learner agency in the interactions between undergraduate ESL (BS English) students and ChatGPT. Based on an interpretivist paradigm and guided by the Speech Act Theory, Politeness Theory, and SLA approaches to pragmatic competence, the study did not focus on outcome-based analyses of the AI-assisted language learning but considered the interactional mechanisms involved in the communication between a learner and AI. The results reveal that AI-mediated discourse has no pragmatic neutrality and mechanically instrumental nature through speech act coding and thematic analysis of interviews. Rather, it is a communication space that is patterned and strategically controlled through which learners influence communicative production actively. The findings prove that undergraduate ESL students involve ChatGPT as an interactive partner, build up layered instructions, use mitigation and relational framing, and refine prompts through repetitions as a communicative goal accomplishment strategy.

Directives were found to be the prevalent form of illocutionary force in the interaction mediated by AI, which demonstrates the task-focused character of the ChatGPT use. But these directives were usually not bare imperatives, but instead were structured in modalized, hedged, and multi-layered constructions. Students were able to fix, refreeze, and generalize instructions which was a sign of high levels of pragmatic competence. Hybrid speech acts with evaluation and request also demonstrated dynamism of interaction by learners. Notably, re-prompting behaviour was one of the major indicators of agency, which revealed that students did not receive AI-generated answers passively, but rather negotiated output with corrective and constraint-dependent instructions. These observations indicate that the speech act actualization in the context of AI is not only a duty to

complete a task but also a way of controlling agents and communicative experimentation. The interaction of AI therefore can be viewed as a place where students put pragmatic knowledge into practice.

In the politeness analysis, it was established that the mitigation, hedging, modalization, and gratitude expressions were always evident in the prompts of the learners. Although ChatGPT does not require human face, students replicated negative and positive politeness strategies which are usually related with interpersonal interaction. This means that politeness is entrenched in communicative identity but not just a matter of emotional susceptibility of the interlocutor. Simultaneously, politeness was not fixed. The learners used mitigated and direct language according to the urgency of tasks and the satisfaction with the answers, as well as the perceived relations of authority. Interviews also showed that politeness was habitual and strategic in other cases with some individuals in the interviews viewing that respectful phrasing gave better productions. Politeness in AI-mediated discourse, therefore, serves the functions of social reproduction and pragmatic optimization. The active process of politeness and authority formation also showed that the learners were placing ChatGPT as an authoritative figure at one time and keeping the right to criticize, improve, or even disregard its feedback.

Thematic analysis of interviews supported the key role of learner agency and metapragmatic awareness. The respondents referred to ChatGPT as an assistive yet inaccurate tool, which requires verification, editing, and responsible work submission. Instead of ceding authorship, students presented AI as a partner that was controlled by humans. The refinement of prompts via iterative prompts and critical analysis of results, as well as conscious control of tone, all indicated the increased awareness of the impact of language form on AI responses. These results dispute the fears that the use of AI inevitably results in reduced autonomy; rather, agency is seen to be conditional on whether learners reflectively engage or not. ChatGPT engagement could be viewed as a pragmatic experimentation area, a strategic control area, and an awareness-development area in the case of undergraduate ESL (BS English) students. In general, the paper concludes that AI-mediated communication transforms (but does not eliminate) pragmatic competence. The role of speech acts, politeness strategies, and learner agency is still the focus but transformed to be technologically mediated. This study will add to the knowledge in the field of the intersection of AI integration into interlanguage pragmatics and its role in teaching learners to be critical, reflective, and agentive users of language by foregrounding the qualitative research and focusing on the ways to make it possible in modern academic settings.

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