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(Im)politeness Employed by Multilingual Indonesian EFL Learners in Argumentative Conversations

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Abstract

Politeness might lessen imposition in argumentative conversations which potentially result in conflict. However, different conventions on politeness among different cultures may cause problems for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners who often transfer their native communication preferences to their target language usage. This article explores the (im)politeness employed by multilingual EFL learners in casual agreeing-disagreeing exchanges among peers. Using explanatory sequential mixed method design, students' utterances in role plays were analyzed based on Leech's (2014) politeness theory, Kakava's (1993) disagreement strategies, as well as Locher's (2004) mitigating strategies on disagreement. It is found that in conversations with people of equal status and power, the observance of politeness maxims is more apparent than the violation. It indicates that maintaining others' faces is essential irrespective of age differences, even in arguing conversations. The more frequent use of positive politeness than negative politeness strategies represents their greater orientation to others than to themselves. The prevalence of mitigated disagreement and the frequent use of an appreciation preface also show their priority to maintaining good relationships. Those findings support the view of Asians as a collectivistic group whose primary concern in communication is group membership. This suggests that awareness of politeness in argumentative conversations

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among EFL learners must be increased by giving them different perspectives from non-Asian cultures.

Keywords: Agreement, disagreement, EFL, politeness maxims, pragmatics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Politeness is fundamental to building rapport and relationships among or between members of a community group. It is universal, can be conveyed verbally or non-verbally, is found in various cultures, and has principles related to socio-cultural aspects upheld as a norm in society. In the context of multilingualism in Indonesia, the English verbal politeness of EFL students might be influenced by local culture related to their mother tongue or their national language. This is in line with [House's \(2010\)](#) report that English non-native speakers massively transfer their native communicative preferences in their English language use. This can be a problem since failure in transferring the politeness discrepancies between the native and the learned language may cause pragmatic failure ([Burgucu-Tazegul et al., 2016](#); [Yue et al., 2020](#)) which leads to face-loss, misunderstanding, or communication breakdown ([House, 2012](#); [Yan, 2016](#)). Therefore, the EFL learners' (im)politeness in verbal English is important to investigate to avoid such failures and to help them conduct successful communication in facing the increasing demand of cultural, economic, and political relations among nations.

Today's highly connected world needs people to compromise to achieve a common goal. In this situation, argumentation likely arises and might result in conflict and impoliteness. To avoid such tension, politeness considerations control the speakers' moves. As disagreeing is considered a dispreferred response ([Leech, 2014](#); [Pomerantz & Heritage, 2013](#); [Schegloff, 2007](#); [Sifianou, 2012](#)) because of its impoliteness, this undesired response should be minimized to avoid conflict in interaction ([Brown & Levinson, 1987](#); [Gardner, 2000](#); [Leech, 2014](#)).

However, aside from the conflict that potentially occurs, disagreement is healthy and productive ([Paramasivam, 2007](#)) and related to the cultivation of critical thinking ([Netz & Lefstein, 2016](#)). Thus, instead of being avoided, which may result in pent-up feelings, loss of individual integrity, and unpleasant relationships, disagreement must be well managed and properly articulated to enhance productivity, creativity, and relationship ([Paramasivam, 2007](#)). Given that argumentation is also a promising pathway to foster critical thinking ([Ferguson & Bubikova-Moan, 2019](#)) and a way from which academic progress can be made ([Leech, 2014](#)), the EFL learners' (im)politeness strategies in argumentative discourse is worth studying to see whether the English expressions they produce are socially and culturally acceptable and to understand how students should be trained to help them articulate the disagreement better to accomplish its advantages.

Compared to other politeness phenomena, such as thanking, requests, and apologies, disagreements and arguments are less studied ([Kreutel, 2007](#); [Lawson, 2009](#); [Tseronis, 2021](#)), and among those few studies, most used the theoretical framework proposed by [Brown and Levinson \(1987\)](#). Ones with a focus on monolingual or monocultural studies are [García-Pastor \(2014\)](#) in the Valencia context,

Behnam and Niroomand (2011) in Iran, García-Fuentes and McDonough (2018) in Colombia, and Windika (2019) in Indonesia. In bilingual settings, comparing the politeness strategies between American English and Chinese Mandarin was conducted by Liang and Han (2005), between Chinese EFL learners and native speakers by Yan (2016), between Indonesian learners of English and Australian learners of Bahasa Indonesia by Ramadhani (2012), while those of Indonesian versus Malaysian student debaters were investigated by Nurrahmah et al. (2020). Most of the aforementioned studies investigate argumentation either on debatable topics where participants' intention to beat their interlocutor's arguments is high or on everyday conversations whose participants are from different statuses. Accordingly, what they utter represents how they should behave instead of how they would behave.

Besides this theoretical gap, in practice, we found that in classroom discussions students sometimes do not recognize the (im)politeness aspects of their disagreeing expressions as many of them frequently state strong disagreement, such as bluntly negative adverb 'No' or the performative 'I don't think so', that is linguistically too simple (Bell, 1998), short and minimalist (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989; García, 1989) which appear too direct, harsh, or rude because of the absence of surface features and mitigating devices (Kreutel, 2007). Hence, this study investigates arguing exchanges between peers on everyday topics since research examining this ordinary yet very complicated speech act in everyday conversations with a conversation partner of relatively equal status or power is very rare. Meanwhile, it is essential to make students aware of the impoliteness aspects of their disagreement and to make teachers acknowledge how to train EFL students to express disagreement in English effectively and appropriately.

Aspects of both politeness and impoliteness are included in this study since both are important in capturing the interpersonal phenomena (Culpeper et al., 2017) while politeness theories inadequately explain things happening in non-cooperative 'impolite' interaction (House, 2012). To explain polite linguistic behavior, Leech proposes five pairs of politeness maxims that affect how speakers communicate. The general strategy of those ten principles is: to be polite, speakers express something or imply meaning favorable to others and/or unfavorable to oneself (Leech, 2014). As assigning high value to others' concerns and low value to one's own is regarded polite, violating this principle is the criteria to consider linguistic behavior as impolite.

Therefore, to thoroughly explore the interpersonal phenomena in EFL students' arguing exchange, this study has the following objectives:

- to discuss the (im)politeness in students' argumentative conversation,
- to describe their disagreeing strategies,
- to explain their strategies in mitigating the disagreement.

To achieve those objectives, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do EFL students observe and violate the politeness maxims in argumentative conversations?
2. How do they express their disagreement?
3. What are the mitigating strategies they use to express the disagreement?

The agreeing-disagreeing discourse of the students was examined using the theory by Leech (2014). Students' disagreement was divided into three categories: 'strong', 'mitigated', and 'strong yet mitigated' to see how they employ the strategies for resolving differences (Kakava, 1993). In order to examine how they express their disagreement; this study also makes use of Locher's (2004) seven mitigation tactics.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Politeness Principles and Impoliteness

Considering the transactional and interactional major functions of language (Brown & Yule, 1983; Widdowson, 1984), being polite in communication is of the same importance as being informative. Therefore, politeness rules or principles must be fulfilled by speakers. Lakoff (1973) proposed three principles: 1) do not impose, 2) give options, and 3) make your receiver feel good. Leech (1983) formulates the principles into six maxims: tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, and sympathy. Brown and Levinson (1987) criticized the six maxims for being too many and proposed four politeness strategies: bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off record.

Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory is widely applied to studying politeness in various languages. However, they show some shortcomings. First, bald on record does not show politeness. Second, they only consider politeness as a pragmatically universal concept without considering cultural differences (Haugh & Chang, 2015; Jegarlooeei & Allami, 2018). Their concept of positive and negative politeness is more oriented to individualistic culture in Western countries (Leech, 2014) at a specific point in time (Culpeper & Demmen, 2011).

Leech (2014) then reformulated his previous six maxims of politeness (Leech, 1983) into five pairs consisting of ten maxims. The increased number of maxims is not maxim proliferation, as accused by Brown and Levinson (1987) since all these maxims embody variants of the same principal constraint: the general strategy of politeness: "In order to be polite, S expresses or implies meanings that associate a favorable value with what pertains to O or associates an unfavorable value with what pertains to S -" (Leech, 2014, p. 90) where S refers to speaker/self and O refers to other person(s). These ten maxims must be fulfilled by speakers to carry out the politeness principles.

As these ten specific maxims are more specific and provide less risk of misunderstanding, they make the politeness strategies applied by speakers across cultures easy to see due to the very clear parameters. Therefore, this study used the theory proposed by Leech (2014) to look at the politeness strategies the EFL students employed in agreeing-disagreeing discourse (see Table 1).

Table 1. The component maxims of the general strategy of (im)politeness (Leech, 2014, p. 91, 221)

No.	Maxim	Politeness		Impoliteness	
		Strategy	Typical speech-event type(s)	Strategy	Typical speech-event type(s)
1	Generosity	Give a high value to other's wants	Commissives	Give an unfavorable value to other's wants	Refusing, threatening
2	Tact	Give a low value to the speaker's wants	Directives	Give a favorable value to the speaker's wants	Ordering, demanding
3	Approbation	Give a high value to other's qualities	Compliments	Give an unfavorable value to other's qualities	Insulting, complaining, telling off

Table 1 continued...

4	Modesty	Give a low value to the speaker's qualities	Self-devaluation	Give a favorable/high value to the speaker's qualities	Boasting, being complacent
5	Obligation (of S to O)	Give a high value to the speaker's obligation to other	Apologizing, thanking	Give an unfavorable/low value to the speaker's obligation to other	Withholding thanks or apologies
6	Obligation (of O to S)	Give a low value to other's obligation to the speaker	Responses to thanks and apologies	Give a favorable/high value to other's obligation to the speaker	Demanding thanks and apologies
7	Agreement	Give a high value to other's opinions	Agreeing, disagreeing (with mitigation)	Give an unfavorable/low value to other's opinions	Disagreeing, contradicting
8	Opinion reticence	Give a low value to the speaker's opinions	Giving opinions	Give a favorable/high value to the speaker's opinion	Being opinionated
9	Sympathy	Give a high value to other's feelings	Congratulating, commiserating	Give an unfavorable/low value to other's feelings	Expressing antipathy to O
10	Feeling reticence	Give a low value to the speaker's feelings	Suppressing feelings	Give a favorable/high value to the speaker's feelings	Grumbling, grouching

Following Leech's theory, being polite means that a speaker expresses or implies meanings associated with a favorable value to others or associating an unfavorable value to oneself. Reversing this concept of politeness, the impoliteness strategy proposed by [Leech \(2014\)](#) is "S will express/imply evaluative meanings that are favorable to S and unfavorable to O" (p. 221). While the goal of politeness is concord and face maintenance, impoliteness pursued by the 'self-serving strategy' is directed towards discord and face attack ([Leech, 2014](#)). In other words, obeying or observing the maxims is the strategy of politeness while violating any of them is the impoliteness strategy.

2.2 On Argumentation and Disagreement

[van Eemeren et al. \(2014\)](#) define argumentation as a communicative act to resolve different opinions between individuals. This verbal, social, and rational activity aims at convincing the addressee of the standpoint of acceptability ([van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004](#)). On the key notion of verbal conflict, [Hinton \(2021, p. 46\)](#) states that "argumentation is reasoning plus conflict, reasoning accompanied by doubt or disagreement". Since expressing disagreement forces arguers to put both their and the interlocutor's faces at risk ([Tseronis, 2021](#)) which may lead to conflict and feelings of discomfort ([García, 1989; Pomerantz, 1984](#)), this opposition stance is usually avoided in interaction. Therefore, disagreeing is regarded as a dispreferred

response (Leech, 2014; Pomerantz & Heritage, 2013; Schegloff, 2007; Sifianou, 2012) because to disagree with one another is “uncomfortable, unpleasant, difficult, risking threat, insult or offense” (Pomerantz, 1984, p. 77).

The socially problematic disagreement is closely associated with confrontation and conflict. It makes the pragmatic act of disagreement far more difficult than the agreement (Lawson, 2009). Waldron and Applegate (1994), characterized verbal disagreement as a taxing communication event since conflicting goals, negotiation, and the need to manage self and other actions are involved. This complexity makes disagreement often uttered hesitantly, indirectly, more slowly, or with mitigation (Kreutel, 2007; Pomerantz, 1984; Tanaka, 2008) to lessen the offense. The confrontational nature of disagreement leads a speaker to choose whether to state the different standpoint directly by unmitigated disagreement, indirectly by mitigated disagreement or combining both methods.

The expressions of disagreement are related to the observance and violation of the agreement and opinion reticence maxims (see Table 1). When speakers deny others' opinions directly, they violate the agreement maxim because they do not show any consideration for the interlocutor's opinion. However, when the disagreement is expressed indirectly or with mitigating devices, such as ‘Do you really think so?’, ‘I would have thought ...’, ‘Yes, but don't you think ...?’, and ‘I agree, but ...’ (Leech, 2014, p. 97), the speakers observe the agreement maxim as they avoid directly contradicting the interlocutor's opinion. Then, if an opinionated behavior, shown by overvaluing one's own opinion, follows the disagreement, the opinion reticence maxim is violated. However, when the confrontation is followed by a softened force of opinion, the observance of opinion reticence maxim takes control.

As culture and context play a significant role in influencing the way argumentation is conducted (Sifianou, 2012), the disagreement strategies conveyed by foreign speakers might sound unnatural for native speakers. This is what some studies found that English non-native speakers tend to express more direct disagreements (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989; House, 2008; Kreutel, 2007) whose features are considered undesirable for English native speakers (Kreutel, 2007). Such employment may indicate a lack of native-like proficiency (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989), a lack of proper disagreement strategies (Kreutel, 2007), and a lack of pragmatic competence (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1990) which makes their statements appear impolite.

To see how the EFL learners apply the disagreement strategies, whether they are ones potentially threatening others' faces, dangerous for collaboration or not, this present study categorized students' disagreement into three: ‘strong’, ‘mitigated’, and ‘strong yet mitigated’ forms of disagreement (Kakava, 1993). Since the mitigated form is considered a more favored strategy, a further investigation into how the mitigated disagreement is expressed is needed to see whether the strategies are effective and pragmatically appropriate for the cultural norms of English-spoken communication. This study also uses Locher's (2004) seven mitigating strategies: using hedges, giving personally or emotionally colored reasons, using modal auxiliaries, shifting responsibility, objecting through a question, using ‘but’, and repeating previous utterances. Locher's participants were composed of individuals from different cultural backgrounds, including English native speakers, making it considered suitable as well as theoretical underpinning.

3. METHODS

3.1 Research Design and Data of the Study

The explanatory sequential mixed method (Creswell, 2014) was used to investigate the (im)politeness of Indonesian EFL learners' argumentative conversations. Analyzing the quantified data was conducted in the first stage, especially to look at the occurrences and the meanings, and analyzing the qualitative results was done in the second stage for a more precise and deeper interpretation of the phenomena.

The data were utterances spoken by students collected from a role play in a speaking class. Before they performed a role play, common English expressions to show agreement and disagreement in argumentative conversations were demonstrated. A range of topics for the conversation was given at once so that they spoke spontaneously based on the flow of their instant ideas. The unit of analysis was speech event related to the illocutionary functions of the utterances, which are based on Leech's (1983) four categories: 1) competitive e.g., ordering, asking, demanding, begging, 2) convivial, e.g., offering, inviting, greeting, thanking, congratulating, 3) collaborative e.g., asserting, reporting, announcing, instructing, and 4) conflictive e.g. threatening, accusing, cursing, reprimanding. A single utterance may consist of more than one speech event. For example, an utterance 'That's a really good idea. Thank you, Vita!' consists of two speech events, complimenting and thanking. In this case, the utterance was considered as two data.

3.2 Participants

The participants were 78 first-year EFL undergraduate students coming from different parts of Indonesia and joining a speaking course in a state university's English department. They were divided into four classes, each of which consisted of 16-22 students. Their having English classes for one and a half-semester in the department means that their level of English proficiency was intermediate on average. To avoid unnatural biased conversations, students were not informed about their participation in this research project. Before the role-play, the lecturer gave some sample expressions of agreement and disagreement. Then, students had to perform the role play at that moment with the expectation that they would perform the dialogue spontaneously. They were free to choose a partner, a topic to discuss, and whether to agree or disagree with their partner. Ten-minute preparation was given for each pair to determine the topic and set up a call recorder. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic during data collection, they performed the dialogue from their homes through a telephone call.

3.3 Data Collection and Data Analysis

After the students finished their conversations, the audio recording was then sent to the teacher to be transcribed and coded. The extracts presented in this paper were taken verbatim from the transcription without any grammatical corrections. To collect and analyze the data, a datasheet was provided. It contains three columns: 1) maxim observance/violation, 2) speaker's standpoint, and 3) mitigating strategies.

The first column was divided into ten columns related to politeness maxims: 1) generosity, 2) tact, 3) approbation, 4) modesty, 5) obligation (of S to O), 6) Obligation (of O to S), 7) agreement, 8) opinion reticence, 9) sympathy, and 10) feeling reticence. The second column on the speaker's standpoint was divided into two: 1) agree, and 2) disagree, where the latter was divided into three more columns: 1) strong, 2) strong yet mitigated, and 3) mitigated. The third column on mitigating strategies was divided into six: 1) questions for objection, 2) temporizing hedges, 3) personal or emotional explanations, 4) appreciation prefaces, 5) vulnerability markers, and 6) combination.

The use of mixed methods design requires two steps of data analysis. The quantitative analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics with the aid of Microsoft Excel. This analysis resulted in statistical findings on which politeness maxim, disagreeing strategy, or mitigating strategy is more dominant and which one is less dominant. Meanwhile, in the qualitative analysis, the activities involved classifying the data according to the (im)politeness principles, disagreeing strategies, as well as mitigating strategies, and interpreting the context of the data, and comparing the findings to previous studies and other relevant literature.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Maxim Observance and Violation

Maxim or “a constraint influencing speakers’ communicative behavior that is aimed at achieving a particular goal” (Leech, 2014, p. 90) might be observed or violated to fit a speaker’s communicative intention. The speech event observing the maxims comprises two functions: pos-politeness and neg-politeness. The former gives positive value to the interlocutor while the latter functions as mitigation to the offense caused by a speaker’s utterance.

Table 2. Speaker’s behaviors regarding the politeness maxim.

No.	Speaker's behavior	Type	Frequency	Percentage
1	Observing the maxims	Pos-politeness	290	53.31%
		Neg-politeness	161	29.60%
2	Violating the maxims	Pos-politeness	44	8.09%
		Neg-politeness	49	9.00%
Total			544	100.00%

From Table 2, the number of maxim observances (451) was much more than that of the violation (93), this implies that applying politeness strategies was necessary regardless of age differences and the type of exchange. The dominance of pos-politeness observance (290 data) over the neg-politeness (161 data) indicates that in the argumentative conversation between peers, students were more oriented to others than to themselves. They frequently used strategies to enhance others’ faces to maximize social and interpersonal relationships. The occurrence of each maxim is displayed in Table 3, while the data examples of the participants’ utterances are presented in the Appendix. Maxims in odd numbers refer to pos-politeness and those in even numbers denote neg-politeness.

Table 3. Maxim observance and violation in argumentative conversations.

No.	Maxim	Observance (politeness)		Violation (impoliteness)	
		Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
1	Generosity	10	1.84%	1	0.18%
2	Tact	20	3.68%	21	3.86%
3	Approbation	36	6.62%	3	0.55%
4	Modesty	3	0.55%	0	-
5	Obligation (of S to O)	35	6.43%	0	-
6	Obligation (of O to S)	10	1.84%	0	-
7	Agreement	104	19.12%	40	7.35%
8	Opinion reticence	109	20.04%	4	0.74%
9	Sympathy	105	19.30%	0	-
10	Feeling reticence	19	3.49%	24	4.41%
Total		451	82.91%	93	17.09%

4.1.1 Maxim observance (politeness)

The three most dominant observed maxims were agreement, opinion reticence, and sympathy. The prevalence of the first two fits the nature of the argumentative conversation, whose utterances are mostly on speakers' standpoints to support or counter a preceding opinion. The slight difference between the agreement and opinion reticence maxims did not mean that most students were reluctant to argue with their peers. This 20.04% occurrence of opinion reticence maxim demonstrated the number of opposing arguments delivered in mitigated ways to avoid offense.

The only maxim that was not opinion-related but frequently employed was the sympathy maxim (19.30%), manifested in greeting, commiserating, congratulating, and good-wishing speech events. This indicates that emotive concern played a significant role to support politeness, even in an interaction involving many incompatible perspectives. The high occurrence of the sympathy maxim supports the idea that showing interpersonal supportiveness is one of the most essential traits of human nature which is crucial for establishing social bonds (Meiners, 2017). The small number of observances of other maxims (see the extracts in the Appendix) implies that politeness principles are essential to apply regardless of the kind of discourse people are involved in. In argumentative conversation, those maxims are mostly employed either in the opening or closing part of the conversation aiming at maintaining "social equilibrium and friendly relations" (Leech, 1983, p. 82).

4.1.2 Maxim violation (impoliteness)

The maxim violation was much less in number, most frequently appearing in agreement, feeling reticence, and tact. The violation of the agreement maxim, realized by direct disagreement, was only about one-third of the agreement and opinion reticence of maxim observance, implying that the participants were reluctant to state their disagreement in direct ways that tend to be aggravating.

Meanwhile, the frequent violation of feeling reticence and tact maxims characterized communication between peers. Violating the feeling reticence maxim means that they did not have to suppress their feelings. Instead, they could grouse or grumble comfortably to their close friends although it was sometimes started with a statement of intention, such as 'I want to talk about something to you' or a question of availability, like 'Are you busy right now?' to lessen the imposition caused by the

complaint. In violating the tact maxim, the participants did not always convey their directions in the form of polite requests as sometimes they needed to give advice, in the form of a command, upon the problems grumbled by their peers. This implies that not all speech events violating the maxim signified discord or face attack (Extract 1).

Extract 1:

- 1 P1 : Before we start, I wanna ask you, are you busy right now?
- 2 P2 : No, **just talk to me.**

P1 was calling P2 by phone to talk about a problem with P1's younger brother. P2's utterance which violated the tact maxim by expressing direct command was not face-threatening. Instead, it shows that she cared about P1's problem. The expression 'just talk to me' implies 'I'm ready to listen to your problem'. This direct command indicates that they have a close relationship and that the non-observance of the politeness maxims is closely related to intimacy.

Another maxim violation was mock impoliteness or banter that was not intended to offend (Extract 2).

Extract 2:

- 1 P3 : I'm good. I'm training all of my muscles to the gym lately.
- 2 P4 : Really? No way. **You are the laziest person when asked to do something troublesome.**
How it can be?
- 3 P3 : Yeah (while laughing). Everyone can change, Dude.

P3 and P4 are close friends, but they had not met each other for several months because of the pandemic. By stating negation forcefully and giving low value to other's quality, P4's statement violated the agreement and approbation maxims. However, P3 laughed after hearing the disagreement and the insult. This statement was impolite or offensive on the surface but, created affiliative social effects. This impoliteness could instead be a means to strengthen the participants' familiarity and intimacy.

Extract 2 shows that violating the politeness maxim among close friends can be used to maintain solidarity (Bernal, 2008; Drew, 1987). Such mock impoliteness delivered by P4 is a main characteristic of camaraderie since exchanging insults or impolite remarks and treating these as nonserious signals the participants' solidarity (Leech, 2014). Culpeper (2011) considers this as a societal safety valve where people can be impolite with impunity. Therefore, perceiving impoliteness as features that violate social norms of interaction (Beebe, 1995) and are "plausibly interpreted as intentionally and negatively confrontational" (Lakoff, 1989, p. 103) which may lead to social conflict (Culpeper et al., 2003) cannot be applied in this context. The speaker's intention and the hearer's perception of the utterance need to be considered.

The next discussion explores the (im)politeness in opinion-related expressions, especially on disagreement, and the strategies to express this undesired response that is often considered impolite and potentially leads to a conflict.

4.2 (Im)Politeness in Disagreement

People tend to avoid disagreement in their interactions because it is a dispreferred response that is negatively affective, face-threatening (Kakava, 2002; Walkinshaw, 2007), and generally harmful to social harmony (Heritage, 1984). However, this study found that the occurrence of disagreement was higher than

agreement. Disagreement is normal, especially in peer or power-equal talk, as found by Beebe and Takahashi (1989), and in intimate settings, as in Kakava (2002). The dominance of disagreement in this study was also supported by the classroom setting where the students were in a speaking class and they realized that their performance would be assessed by the teacher. Therefore, the opposition they conveyed was a way to show their language competence by proving that they had a better argument than their interlocutor.

Table 4. Speaker's standpoints and disagreement strategies.

No.	Standpoint	Strategies	Frequency	Percentage
1	Agree		104	41.11%
2	Disagree	Strong	27	10.67%
		Strong yet mitigated	13	5.14%
		Mitigated	109	43.08%
Total			253	100.00%

The number of agreeing standpoints (41.11%) and mitigated disagreement (43.08%) indicates maxim observance. The disagreement conveyed in either strong (10.67%) or strong yet mitigated ways (5.14%) means the speakers violated the politeness maxim. Although the agreement was lower than the disagreement in number, it indicates that some students preferred avoiding conflict or thinking critically to disprove their partner's opinions. Moreover, to disagree is more complicated than to agree since the speaker will be in dispute with the interlocutor on a content level while protecting their partner's and/or their own face (Locher, 2004). These difficulties make some students prefer giving affirmative responses.

Extract 3:

- 1 P5 : ... I mean the topic that our lecturer gave us is very unusual and hard, of course.
- 2 P6 : **Yeah, right.** And not only that, the due date is killing me. ...
- 3 P5 : **You tell me.** That is **exactly** the first thing in my mind when I heard about the due date. ...)
- 4 P6 : **Yeah.** This pandemic is really giving everyone trouble,
- 5 P5 : **You said nothing but a fact.**

In Extract 3, both speakers fully agreed on the idea that the online class held during the COVID-19 pandemic was hard. They understood and approved each other's opinions by using support markers 'yeah, right', 'you tell me', 'exactly', 'yeah', and 'you said nothing but a fact'. Emphasizing and giving additional information to complete the previous idea were the strategies to demonstrate their cooperation. By showing agreement, the exchange went smoothly without any chance to threaten each other's face.

However, for students with oppositional stances, the situation would be complex. Therefore, disagreeing strategies are sometimes needed. The strategies are classified by Kakava (1993) as strong, mitigated, and strong yet mitigated forms of disagreement. As shown in Table 4, conveying opposition directly through strong disagreement is the second most dominant strategy. Two ways in which strong disagreement is realized are aggravating disagreement and disagreeing baldly.

Aggravating disagreement or the unmodulated fashion of disagreement is characterized by the abandonment of all polite language features. In this study, a student expressed aggravating disagreement through a protesting exclamation.

Extract 4:

- 1 P7 : Well, welcome to the modern society where the responsibility has changed. ...
2 P8 : **That's ridiculous!**

By stating such emphatic disagreement, P8 firmly opposed P7's opinion that men and women were equal in domestic jobs. Not only the violation of the agreement maxim but impoliteness was also displayed from the use of the word 'ridiculous'. This was an insult and negative judgment that P7's argument was stupid or unreasonable. However, since P8 uttered that strong disagreement while ending the conversation, this also suggests that he did not have a better argument to counter P7's opinion. Expressing disagreement in negative assertions to end a conversation means that the affront is not on the surface level as banter. This strategy should be avoided in argumentative discourse because of communication breakdown and conflict that potentially occurs.

Disagreeing baldly is a less offensive way to express strong disagreement than aggravated disagreement. For the first strategy, the students employed disagreeing baldly using performative, such as 'I don't think so.' which was used frequently, 'I disagree.' which was used rarely, and 'I don't agree.' which was employed in three utterances only. Stating blunt opposition, such as 'That's not right.', or 'That's not always factual.', was the second strategy. The last strategy was employing the bare negative form 'No' which was very rarely used by the students. Since those features are not commonly used by English native speakers in normal conversation, Kreutel (2007) categorized those direct and simple manners of disagreeing as the undesirable features associated with non-native speakers of English. Employing those strategies in disagreeing may indicate a lack of native-like proficiency (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989), a lack of proper disagreement strategies (Kreutel, 2007), and a lack of pragmatic competence (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1990) which makes their statements sound rude. However, this study found contradictory findings to the previous ones considering that the number of direct disagreements in this study was much lower than the mitigated disagreements. This is similar to the study of Fernandez (2013) on EFL Egyptian speakers and Lawson (2009) on Japanese English speakers. Besides their awareness that direct disagreement is offensive and impolite, the participants' avoidance of direct disagreement is probably influenced by their local cultural values. As they are mostly Javanese with their monocultural identity (Nursanti & Andriyanti, 2021), the two basic principles of Javanese social life, avoiding conflict and respecting others (Magnis-Suseno, 1997) must have been upheld in their daily interaction.

To avoid too strong disagreement, some students combined direct and indirect manners by stating strong yet mitigated disagreement (Extract 5).

Extract 5:

- P9 : **No, I'm sure you're just exaggerating it. I mean, come on, we're student, and I think it's understandable if we can't afford some books, right?** Tuition and living cost are expensive enough. Plus, **I don't think the author would know that just one more person download it, right?**

P9 opposed his interlocutor who stated that downloading and sharing e-books was unkind to the writers. The bare negative 'No' and the aggravating 'I'm sure you're just exaggerating it', which were too direct and strong, were followed by several hedges, such as 'I mean ...' intended to give further justification and 'I think/I don't think ...' to make the argument less opinionated. Moreover, asking for the

interlocutor's agreement by stating '... right?' made it even less compelling. By raising such acknowledgment-seeking inquiry, the speaker tried to reach a consensus between both parties.

The strong yet mitigated disagreement in the 13 utterances became the least strategy employed by the students. In all those 13 expressions, hedges were used to soften the strong disagreement they just stated. 'I mean' and 'well' became the most frequent ones. It is assumed that those students chose to directly disagree with their partner, but then realized that their utterance might offend their interlocutor. Therefore, using hedges followed by an elaborative argument was their effort to compensate for the offense.

The finding that disagreeing by using mitigating devices was the most dominant strategy contrasts with that of Kreutel, (2007) and House (2008), whose research participants were from diverse linguacultural backgrounds, but conformed to ones employed by English non-native speakers from Asia, such as Chinese (Liang & Han, 2005; Yan, 2016) and Vietnamese (Nguyen, 2009). It supports the view of conflict-avoiding (Lopez-Ozieblo, 2018) or collectivistic (Scollon & Scollon, 2001) self of Asians, where group membership is their primary concern in communication.

4.3 Mitigation in Disagreement

Besides showing the speakers' concern in developing a good rapport, the higher frequency of mitigated disagreement over the unmitigated one also indicates students' pragmatic competence in delivering disagreement in informal conversational contexts in English. However, a further investigation into how they realized the mitigated disagreement linguistically needs to be carried out to explore whether the strategies are effective and pragmatically appropriate for the cultural norms of English-spoken communication.

Table 5. Linguistic means for mitigating disagreement.

No.	Disagreeing strategies	Frequency	Percentage
1	Questions for objection	19	17.43%
2	Temporizing hedges	8	7.34%
3	Personal or emotional explanations	22	20.18%
4	Appreciation prefaces	29	26.61%
5	Vulnerability markers	3	2.75%
6	Combination	28	25.69%
Total		109	100.00%

Table 5 shows that the appreciation preface was the most dominant linguistic means to mitigate disagreement. The participants' tendency not to embarrass others by regarding the addressees' opinions as weak or wrong was possibly the factor contributing to this dominance. For them, acknowledging or understanding others' perspectives was an essential start to stating an opposing stance politely. They typically conveyed this appreciation preface in *yes-but* formulae, where the 'yes' ranges from simple acknowledgment, such as 'Yeah' or 'That's true' to a more elaborated one as 'You're absolutely right. It makes sense that the environment can give an impact on the children, ...'. Besides acknowledgment, an appreciation was also shown in the form of respect, as 'I respect your opinion, of course, ...'. This idea-crediting strategy can be a positive way of showing solidarity. It has an affiliative

function by preserving the addressee's integrity without overt disagreement (Waring, 2001). Considering that the 'yes-but' formulae are the ones commonly produced by native speakers (Kusevska, 2015) or advanced learners (Hüttner, 2014) to express disagreement, the dominance of appreciation preface supported the previous finding that most participants had relatively high pragmatic competence and linguistic proficiency.

After the appreciation preface, the next dominant strategy was the personal or emotional explanation. 'I think' and 'in my opinion' became the starters most frequently used. Some participants even used several phrases at once to emphasize the subjectivity of their opinion. When arguing that giving gadgets to children was not always harmful, P10 used such a strategy (Extract 6).

Extract 6:

P10 : **I mean, to be honest, I think** there is advantage, because my mother likes to download those educational games for children, so ...

By employing three hedges, 'I mean', 'to be honest', and 'I think', simultaneously, the speaker softened the disagreement by stressing that her next statement was her own point of view. Such a strategy protects both faces of the speaker and the addressee because a better and more valid reason from the addressee is welcome, yet the speaker's own opinion cannot easily be criticized since it is based on his/her own feeling (Locher, 2004).

Although it indicates a personalized point of view, 'I think', which became the most common phrase used by the participants, was not always meant to soften a disagreement. It can be a way to strengthen the argument (Kusevska, 2015; Locher, 2004), especially when it is placed in the middle or at the end of an utterance.

Extract 7:

P11 : I consider that old-fashioned. Both male and female can be taught as the homemaker, like the housewife and the househusband. **I think** there's nothing wrong with men do the households. They're cool, you know ...

After stating a disagreement, by uttering a contradictory proposition to the previous claim, and giving a further explanation, the speaker used 'I think' to emphasize her belief. In this context, 'I think' is not a hedge but a booster that helps strengthen an utterance force. With a wide range of meanings and functions the phrase 'I think' can express, the participants relatively used it appropriately.

Objection through question was the next dominant strategy. It was realized in two forms, with question particles, and with negative interrogatives. They can be a means to display a different view since inquiries with particles, such as when, what, who, why, where, and how, questions the interlocutor's prior claim and demands evidence for the claim, while ones with negative interrogatives, such as 'isn't it', 'doesn't it', and 'don't you', challenge the addressee to acknowledge the question content, while he/she feels likely to reject it. Among the five single strategies of mitigated disagreement, objection through question is the most aggravating, especially the one with question particles since it strikes the addressee's competency as he/she cannot back up his/her claim.

Extract 8:

1 P12 : Uh, we're on his side, right? Just control him.

- 2 P13 : **With what?** ... What if my brother out of my sight?
 3 P12 : That's not the way I see it. Your brother is children too. Don't be so panic.

When P12 and P13 were arguing about the effects of the internet on P13's little brother, P13 challenged P12 who saw controlling her brother as a simple thing, signified by the word 'just'. P13 then questioned the way to control him in an aggravating manner which attacked P12's face. Besides some grammatical errors that showed the potent influence of her local/national language on her English, the way P13 expressed her disagreement was inappropriate. Instead of questioning 'With what?' P13 should have asked 'How?'.

Using temporizing hedges became the second least dominant strategy. These delay devices and hesitation cues protected the speaker's face as it indicates his/her wish to continue the conversation despite his/her temporary difficulties to find the next point or to verbalize the point in the best way (Locher, 2004). The most common temporizing hedges they used were 'well', 'uhm', and 'uh'. They were mostly spoken at the beginning of an utterance. P13's response to a colleague's complaint about a rumormonger exemplifies this.

Extract 9:

P13 : **Uh, about–about the spreading hoax, uhm, well, I think** it's bad, **uhm** and **I think** I don't agree about you telling his behavior to your manager ...

Several continuous hesitation markers, 'uh', 'about–about the spreading hoax', 'uhm', and 'well', prior to the disagreement signified that the speaker was not ready to respond to the previous statement. Since for non-native speakers, these markers may signify a preparation for forthcoming planning (Reed, 2000) or speech production difficulties (Tavakoli, 2011), such hedges may indicate their concern to avoid face-aggravating disagreement and/or their low acquisition of English. The similarity of temporizing hedges and filled pauses, which both represent the unsmooth oral delivery, suggests that using too many temporizing hedges in arguing exchange should be avoided because they characterize disfluency in the oral performance of EFL learners.

The least dominant strategy the participants used was vulnerability assertion which conveys confusion, uncertainty, or admittance that their arguments are inaccurate, inconsistent, or implausible (Waring, 2001).

Extract 10:

P14 : **I'm not sure about that.** It depends on the individual responsibility and their performance.

The uncertainty marker of 'I'm not sure about that' is a discourse strategy to soften the speaker's original assertion that she rejected to accept the previous claim that working from home because of the COVID-19 outbreak was manageable. Although signaling weak disagreement, "prefacing a disagreement with a declaration of insufficient knowledge reduces the speaker's commitment to the truth of the proposition expressed in the disagreement, hence mitigating its face-threatening effect" (Tsui, 1991, p. 61). Considering that the exchange was done in a speaking class, the participants' reluctance to employ the strategy was possible to anticipate the others' judgment of their weak opinions or low speaking competence.

While each of the previous five strategies was employed to show politeness and solidarity, using one strategy might strengthen social comity even more since the disagreement becomes more softened. This might be the reason why the combination is quite preferable. The most common combinations they employed were ‘appreciation preface - question for objection’ and ‘temporizing hedge - vulnerability marker’. Some students even used more than two strategies at once, like P14 in responding to her interlocutor who insisted that husbands should help their wives do household chores.

Extract 11:

P14 : **Well. Maybe. But don't you think that he's busy doing his job at the office?** I'm sure that he's very tired when he come home.

In extract 11, the speaker used three mitigating devices: 1) the temporizing hedge ‘well’ marking her hesitance to continue the statement, 2) the appreciation preface ‘maybe’ showing her partial agreement with the prior claim, and 3) the question ‘Don't you think ...?’ to propose an opinion indirectly. This combination indicates that some factors initially hindered her to utter the disagreement directly although in the end an intensifier ‘I'm sure’ boosted her vehement opposition. The employment of such a combination made the disagreement less aggravating. However, besides facilitating politeness, the mitigating devices also weaken the force of an argument. The more they are used, the weaker the opinion will be. Therefore, EFL learners should consider the context where a disagreement is stated.

5. CONCLUSION

Although the argumentative exchange is associated with conflict because of different standpoints between or among the speakers, the dominance of politeness maxim observance over its violation in this study indicates the participants' awareness of the importance of applying politeness strategies in communication regardless of the kind of discourse they were involved in. Their preference to express disagreement in mitigated strategies as commonly employed by English native speakers or advanced learners implies that their local culture influences their (im)politeness forms in the target language. Idea crediting in the form of acknowledgment and respect that they employed frequently in their disagreement was a positive strategy not to degrade others' opinions as the speaker tried to show solidarity by maintaining the addressee's integrity. Those three findings show the participants' attempts to avoid conflict and imply that they have a strong collectivistic self of Asians whose primary concern in communication is group membership.

However, despite its function of facilitating politeness, as mitigating strategies might lessen the strength of an argument, using them too much would result in a weak opinion. Therefore, considering the context of what situation the argument is uttered is essential. Regarding that both linguistic and cultural knowledge are needed in conveying disagreement in a foreign language, improving the pragmatic competence of EFL learners in argumentative conversations is necessary. This might be done, for instance, by increasing their awareness of politeness by giving them different perspectives from non-Asian cultures.

Even though the data of the study were taken from role-play, the participants spoke naturally and spontaneously. However, the speech events did not occur in real

social settings so the students' (im)politeness strategies might also be influenced by factors irrelevant to socio-cultural contexts, such as their desire to get a good grade. Besides, the data of the study were interpreted from the listener's point of view based on the theories on (im)politeness, agreeing-disagreeing strategies, and other relevant literature without verifying them with the speakers. Thus, it is recommended that future research on the same topic can collect data from natural language use and verify the speakers' motives in employing certain (im)politeness strategies by using additional data collection techniques, such as surveys or interviews.

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APPENDIX

Examples of data on speakers' behavior related to politeness maxims*

No.	Maxim	Observance (politeness)	Violation (impoliteness)
1	Generosity	(Promising) Yeah, I will remind you of your topic I think that suits you essay later.	(Refusing) I'm not in the good mood to accompany you.
2	Tact	(Requesting) Could you explain again to me about the assignment? I feel I don't quite understand about it.	(Commanding) Just control him.
3	Approbation	(Complimenting) Oh my God, April! That's awesome! I'm really impressed with the progress that you made. ...	(Insulting) You are the laziest person when asked to do something troublesome.
4	Modesty	(Self-devaluating) I just think that he's too nice for me.	-
5	Obligation (of S to O)	(Thanking) Nice, I really appreciate your help.	-
6	Obligation (of O to S)	(Responding to thank) Oh, it's okay, okay, okay.	-
7	Agreement	(Agreeing) If that's the case, I'll be on the same page with you.	(Disagreeing directly) I totally disagree about that. Your mother rightly, ask you to do that because ...

Appendix continued...

8	Opinion reticence	(<i>Giving less opinionated opinion</i>) Yes, you have a point there but, don't you think that people will get addicted to watch YouTube?	(<i>Giving opinionated opinion</i>) I believe that woman who should stay at home. Homemaker!! That's the term that they used back then for women.
9	Sympathy	(<i>Sympathizing</i>)... So how was your study from home? Is it any difficult assignment?	-
10	Feeling reticence	(<i>Suppressing feeling</i>) Hi, I'm doing great actually. It's been three weeks I'm locking down myself and do online classes. Other than that, I feel unproductive at home. I've always felt bored. I wish I could go outside.	(<i>Grumbling</i>) Yeah, that's really bad for me. I'm really bored at home and I don't know what I have to do then. There's so many homework that we should do and make me depressed about that.

*The italicized words in parentheses denote the speech event. The words in bold are linguistic clues that help classify the speech event as complying with each of the maxims.