

Politeness in Practice: Exploring Cultural Norms in Romanian Language Learning

Alexandra-Monica TOMA

“Dunarea de Jos” University of Galați, Romania

Abstract

Politeness shapes interpersonal dynamics and mastering its norms is crucial for engaging in effective and meaningful interactions within a linguistic community. Hence, integrating politeness strategies into language teaching involves navigating cultural differences and contextual subtleties, in a process aimed at reframing linguistic behaviour. Teaching politeness is documented to enhance language proficiency and cultural competence, suggesting the importance of immersive language experiences and authentic communicative exchanges. This study investigates how Romanian language learners at different proficiency levels politeness in their communication, by employing discourse completion tasks, and analyses the results according to Brown and Levinson’s theoretical framework. The results indicate that higher proficiency students exhibit a more nuanced comprehension of politeness and tend to employ negative politeness more often in formal situations and positive politeness in informal ones. Additionally, the study sheds light on two opposing tendencies of non-native speakers of Romanian: the inclination to overuse politeness markers or to skip them entirely, both pointing to the need to enhance pragmalinguistic skills.

Keywords: *politeness, pragmatic skills, foreign language teaching, face-work, authenticity*

1. INTRODUCTION

From simple greetings and honorifics to the intricate meanders of deference and indirectness, politeness refers to a wide range of strategies that aim to protect and enhance interpersonal relationships. The observance of these rules of verbal and nonverbal behaviour seems to make it easier for one to assess, at first glance, their interlocutors' worth, education, and style. Difficult enough to navigate for native language speakers, polite behaviour norms can seriously puzzle and challenge even weathered language learners who attempt to engage in genuine interactions within a linguistic community. Although non-native speakers are usually granted leniency in case of clumsy, inappropriate, or inept use of social norms, for them to become effective communicators in the target language they must acquire basic knowledge of the code of politeness that defines the interactions within a specific linguistic community. While research has amply highlighted the necessity to build pragmatic competencies in language learners, the pedagogical challenges of this endeavour cannot be understated.

This paper seeks to examine the level of acquiring verbal and nonverbal polite behaviour in students learning the Romanian language, highlighting the implications, and the pragmatic difficulties, while also defining the reasonable expectations one might have from foreign language learners. After exploring the theoretical framework and the key studies undertaken in this field, we shall tackle the relationship between politeness strategies and language proficiency, context, and cross-cultural competence.

2. POLITENESS RESEARCH AND ITS INTEGRATION INTO FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Paul Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975) laid the foundation for modern research on politeness, suggesting that speakers collaborate by following maxims. Politeness arises when these maxims are deliberately violated to convey politeness, as seen in Leech's Maxims of Politeness theory (1983) and in Brown and Levinson's universal model (1978, 1987). Brown and Levinson's politeness theory integrates Goffman's concept of face (self-image and social identity), divided into positive (desire for approval) and negative (aversion to imposition), positing that politeness strategies aim to maintain face. Positive politeness enhances the positive face through camaraderie, while negative politeness protects the negative face by mitigating imposition. Face-saving acts, like indirectness or apologies, prevent face-threatening acts, thus preserving harmony. However, these frameworks have faced criticism for their Western-centric views, and overlooking cultural variations in politeness norms.

These first musings on politeness have been challenged in the 2000s, with studies arguing against the universalistic frameworks of the past, and highlighting the need for analysis of naturally occurring data and the co-constructed nature of politeness in interaction. Scholars like Eelen (2001), Watts (2003), and Mills (2011) contested the assumption of predictability in politeness effects based on invented utterances. Instead, they emphasized the idiosyncratic and evaluative nature of politeness, shifting focus from the speaker's intention to the hearer's interpretation. While the second wave of research offered important insights, it often viewed politeness as a punctuated phenomenon, lacking long-term trajectories and constraints. However, scholars argue that this perspective does not negate the possibility of creating models to capture politeness practices on a broader scale. Hence, recent research aims to bridge this gap. Key publications by scholars like Haugh (2007), Culpeper (2011), and Kádár (2017) represent this evolving trend in politeness research.

By integrating politeness into language instruction, students can improve their ability to use language appropriately at all skill levels. Furthermore, getting students acquainted with sociopragmatic norms can help them better comprehend how politeness conventions function in real-life situations (Rose & Kasper, 2001). Research has demonstrated that providing explicit instruction on politeness is vital for enhancing learners' ability to communicate effectively (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). However, implementing such approaches can be difficult, due to cultural differences and contextual subtleties. To address these challenges, educators have adopted various methodological strategies to teach politeness in language classrooms. Commonly used techniques include role-playing, simulations, and authentic materials (Toma, 2022), which offer learners the opportunity to practice politeness strategies in real-world contexts. Additionally, discourse analysis and contrastive pragmatics can provide insights into how politeness is expressed across languages, allowing learners to navigate intercultural communication more efficiently (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996).

The influence of sociocultural factors on language learning also affects the relationship between politeness and language proficiency. Individuals from different cultures often lack shared perspectives when evaluating polite and impolite behaviour (Watts 2003). Linguistic variances, as highlighted by Wierzbicka (1985, p. 145), are deeply rooted in cultural specificities, which influence behaviour more profoundly than mere politeness norms. Thus, comprehending cultural disparities that shape behavioural norms is pivotal for intercultural communicative competence. Success in intercultural communication hinges on grasping interlocutors' communicative intentions and the pragmatic implications of their speech acts, requiring adaptation to culture-specific strategies of verbal and non-verbal behaviour. Despite the universality of politeness as a social norm, its manifestations and criteria differ across cultures due to diverse cultural values and standards. Numerous studies have explored these culture-specific differences in politeness (such as Blum-Kulka, 1989, 1992; Wierzbicka, 1991; Lakoff & Ide, 2005; Leech & Larina, 2014; Culpeper, Haugh, & Kadar, 2017; Locher & Larina, 2019; Mugford 2020). Students who are exposed to the culture of the language they are studying and genuine

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

communication settings may better understand sociopragmatic norms and cultural expectations regarding politeness. Conversely, students who study in monolingual or homogenous environments may struggle to learn authentic politeness patterns and cultural competence (Taguchi & Roever, 2017).

3. METHODOLOGY

To investigate how students employ politeness in Romanian language, we used discourse completion tasks, a pragmatics and sociolinguistics method to generate language samples that mirror how individuals produce language in specific communicative situations. Participants were presented with a set of scenarios that simulated real-life communicative contexts relevant to the learners and were then asked to respond to the situation as they would in a natural conversation. The study focused on three specific contexts: formulating requests, expressing apologies, and seeking clarification. Within each context, interactions were simulated in both formal and informal settings, to test whether the students can intuitively adapt to various contexts.

The selection of these communicative instances was informed by their relevance to the target group, which comprised 5 students at the A2 level and 5 students at the B1 level, all enrolled in the Preparatory Year for Romanian language. These students, of Ukrainian origin, had been attending institutionalized Romanian language classes for 7 months (B1 level) and 5 months (A2 level). The target group was prompted, in very general lines, on the objectives of the study.

Each participant completed six written discourse completion tasks, containing various combinations of the communicative situations above, in diverse settings, resulting in a total of 60 brief conversations. Given that the learners were asked to integrally write the conversations, by assuming all the roles in the dialogues, we could gather data not solely on their ability to address the communicative situations described above as themselves, but also to tackle how they dealt with providing information, accepting apologies, and giving clarification. The analysis of the results was conducted quantitatively and qualitatively, focusing on patterns of polite behaviour as per Brown and Levinson's framework (positive politeness, negative politeness, bald on-record, and off-record).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Politeness pronouns, greetings, and farewells

The simplest form of respect is linguistically coded in the Romanian language, like in other Indo-European languages, through the use of the second-person plural to formally and deferentially address somebody. Romanian language learners are familiarized with this form of addressing people with whom they have a social distance from the early stages of learning. Moreover, the potential challenges of this rule are bridged through the similarity between their native language and the target one, as Ukrainians also show respect by using the plural. However, they do not use a special politeness pronoun for this purpose, so we might count this aspect as an additional difficulty. The scenarios enacted by the participants challenged them to select the plural or the singular depending on the addressee and to intuitively use the strategy the learner found more suited to the exploit. Moreover, it was surveyed whether they used adequate greetings and farewells in the context created.

The initial analysis of the collected dialogues primarily centred on examining whether participants adeptly adjusted their discourse to navigate between formal and informal conversational contexts. Of course, the line between formal and informal is fairly subjective, so the target group had to make inferences about the level of social distance, power relations, and imposition level, as proposed by Brown and Levinson's framework.

Among the A2 participants, there were 15 mistakes in the use of the appropriate politeness pronouns and correct plural verb forms, while the B1 students only made 5 such misinterpretations of the context-

adequate politeness norms. Additionally, it was observed that all B1 students consistently employed proper greetings and farewells. Notably, they showcased an impressive use of "Sărut mâna!" on five occasions, particularly when addressing elderly individuals, which indicated a nuanced understanding and application of Romanian politeness conventions, as this type of greeting requires speakers to assess age and gender and decide accordingly upon the use of this fairly specific type of politeness display. However, it is worth mentioning that some instances where participants seemingly utilized an incorrect linguistic marker of politeness were found to be ambiguous. This ambiguity stemmed from the fact that the appropriate manner of addressing could be subject to debate, contingent upon the level of interpersonal closeness within the relationship.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

Positive, negative, and bald on-record politeness

Despite the criticism Brown and Levinson's seminal work received regarding its assumption of universal applicability, overemphasis on face, and limited empirical support (as already pointed out in the literature review), we consider that their politeness framework remains significant and a sound base for analysis. Consequently, we processed the written conversations produced throughout the study through the lens of negative politeness, positive politeness, bald on-record, and off-record strategies. Initially, we conducted a quantitative analysis of the discourse completion tasks and interpreted the data. Subsequently, we identified the most meaningful and insightful conversation examples to explore the integration of Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies.

Negative politeness, the very heart of deference, consisting of the most elaborate and conventionalized set of linguistic strategies, is vividly represented in the conversations created by the students. The ample use of hedging and indirectness as the most prominent strategies suggests good overall intuition on the pragmatics of the contexts.

		Instances in the A2 participants' conversations	Instances in the B1 participants' conversations
Requests	Formal	7	12
	Informal	5	4
Apologies	Formal	11	14
	Informal	4	5
Clarification	Formal	9	19
	Informal	3	4

Table 1: Quantitative analysis of negative politeness instances

The table above, synthesizing the number of occurrences in the conversations created by the students, shows that negative politeness is extensively used. There are some consistent differences when comparing A2 learners with B1 learners, which point out that lower language proficiency leads to a less nuanced approach to communicative situations, a fact confirmed by previous studies. Although most participants adeptly sensed that variable distance in social relationships and power translates into different uses of politeness, the A2 group discriminates less between formal and informal or downright confuses the register, whereas the more proficient group distinctly uses negative politeness strategies mostly on formal occasions. This tendency is clearly displayed by this quantitative analysis, which shows that the gap between formal and informal contexts deepens in more advanced language learners. To anticipate, this gap is filled, when engaging in conversation with peers, by positive politeness.

Positive politeness strategies, commonly observed within social circles where individuals have a more intimate relationship, are aimed at increasing rapport and showing solidarity. Brown and Levinson (1987) propose that positive politeness strategies aim to cater to the interests, desires, and well-being of the listener. The table below lists the number of times positive politeness is used, with emphasis on the degree of formality of the interaction.

		Instances in the A2 participants' conversations	Instances in the B1 participants' conversations
Requests	Formal	1	1
	Informal	2	5
Apologies	Formal	1	0
	Informal	3	6
Clarification	Formal	0	1
	Informal	2	3

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

Table 2: Quantitative analysis of positive politeness

The first key finding revealed by the count of instances where positive politeness is used refers to the low frequency, in comparison to negative politeness. A possible explanation for this aspect resides, in our opinion, in the less conventionalized nature of positive politeness, which implies more sophisticated pragmatic skills and sociocultural intuition. The strategies of hedging and indirectness that pertain to negative politeness are also taught in language classes, whereas the techniques that involve fostering empathy and building rapport are highly dependent on the learner grasping the dynamics of the communicative exchange depending on his/her personality and pragmatic competence, regardless of the language used. Moreover, classroom communicative contexts mostly promote formalized expressions of politeness, while less conventionalized conversations are only simulated and practiced through discourse completion tasks, role-play, and other pedagogical methods.

The data above also show that the context of expressing apologies is mostly associated with such strategies at both levels of proficiency. This sheds light on the intuition that a threat has to be mitigated by face-saving acts connected to empathy, especially in an informal context. The table also reveals a more consistent use of positive politeness in informal contexts by B1 learners, who have a better understanding of context. The strategies are, in the order of their frequency, in-group identity markers, attending to the hearer's interests, needs, and wants, claiming common ground, and including the hearer and speaker in the activity.

The bald on-record strategy eschews efforts to mitigate potential threats to the addressee's face and directly expresses thoughts or requests without attempting to soften the imposition. This approach is characterized by its directness, clarity, and conciseness, aiming for unambiguous communication. Bald on-record strategies prioritize urgency, efficiency, and task-oriented communication, often with little consideration for maintaining the addressee's face. The examples were ample in our corpus. Most such bald on-record strategies reside in the A2 participants' dialogues, information quantified in the table below.

		Instances in the A2 participants' conversations	Instances in the B1 participants' conversations
Requests	Formal	7	0
	Informal	4	1
Apologies	Formal	3	0
	Informal	4	2
Clarification	Formal	4	2
	Informal	5	1

Table 3: Quantitative analysis of the bald on-record strategy

The frequency of the bald on-record strategy, as well as the notable difference between the A2 group and the B1 group, are not at all surprising. In many conversations, it mirrors the level of proficiency and the ability of the learners to correctly assess communicative context, thus employing adequate politeness strategies. Sometimes, the context where we identified this approach could be construed as downright impoliteness and might lead, if employed in authentic conversations, to misunderstandings and result in face-threatening acts.

Another notable finding of this analysis is that there were no explicit instances of the off-record politeness strategy. This result is not unexpected, since the participants in the study were of A2 and B1 level, and the mechanisms of giving hints, being vague, or employing irony or humour are rather sophisticated and unnecessary in such simple communicative situations.

In order to investigate the specific ways students choose to display polite conduct and the intertwining of strategies, we selected one conversation for each scenario, considering the variety of strategies used.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

As a case in point, one of the B1 students enacts a scenario that takes place in a clothes store, as exemplified below:

Seller: Bună ziua. Cum aş putea să vă ajut? [Hello. How could I help?]

Student: Bună ziua. Caut un cadou pentru un prieten. Mă puteţi ajuta? [Hello. I am looking for a present for a friend. Could you help me?]

Seller: De ce aţi fi interesat? [What would you be interested in?]

Student: Poate o cămaşă... [Maybe a shirt...]

Seller: Avem multe cămăşi. Ce măsură v-ar interesa? [We have many shirts. What size would you be interested in?]

Student: Ar fi bun un M. [An M would do.]

Seller: Desigur. Ce părere aveţi de asta? [Of course. What do you think about this one?]

Student: Mmm... Poate e prea colorată. Prietenul meu preferă cămăşile simple. [Mmm... maybe it's too colorful. My friend prefers simple shirts]

Seller: Atunci poate aceasta albastră. Doriţi să o împachetăm în hârtie de cadou? [Then maybe this blue one. Would you like it wrapped as a gift?]

Student: Grozav! M-aţi ajutat foarte mult. Mulţumesc. [Great! You've been of great help. Thanks!]

Seller: Cu plăcere! La revedere! [You welcome. Good bye!]

This conversation pertains to the formal register, reflected in the extensive use of the second person plural and negative politeness. Indirectness is an attempt to make the hearer feel they are not coerced into doing something, indicating that the assistance is optional and respecting the recipient's negative face, as well as their desire to have freedom of action and not suffer imposition: *How could I help? Could you help me? What would you be interested in? What size would you be interested in? Would you like it wrapped as a gift?* In Romanian, this is achieved, in the examples above, by the use of the conditional mode of the verb, which is a conventionalized form of indirectness, implying that the speaker is aware of the potential imposition and wants to minimize it. Although the structures would still be polite without using the conditional, the speaker's option serves to soften the request and reduce the pressure on the recipient to comply. The frequent repetition of this structure is rather monotonous, likely due to the limited range of linguistic devices in the student's repertoire. Another strategy is hedging, exemplified by *Mmm... maybe it's too colourful*, which is aimed at softening the rejection of the seller's proposal. The follow-up explanation *My friend prefers simple shirts* is also a way to express that the reasons for not accepting the seller's suggestion rely on the preferences of a third person, thus not hurting the recipient's feelings.

The statement *Great! You've been of great help!* primarily employs positive politeness. The use of *Great!* expresses enthusiasm and appreciation, which aligns with positive politeness strategies aimed at building rapport and showing gratitude. By starting with *Great!* the speaker acknowledges and praises the recipient's contribution, reinforcing their positive face and affirming the value of their assistance. Additionally, the statement *You've been of great help* further emphasizes the appreciation for the recipient's assistance, reinforcing positive politeness by demonstrating recognition and gratitude for their supportive actions. Exaggeration is instrumental in this politeness strategy.

To exemplify the apologies scenario, we selected a dialogue created by an A2 level participant, who was asked to produce a written conversation occasioned by an accidental clash with an elderly person during rush hour.

Student: Aoleu! Mă scuzaţi, nu am fost atent. V-am lovit întâmplător şi aş vrea să-mi cer scuze, n-am vrut să fac asta şi înţeleg că sunt vinovat. [Oh, no! Excuse me, I wasn't paying attention. I hit you by accident and I would like to apologise, I didn't mean to do that and I understand I am guilty.]

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

Elderly person: Nu e nimic. Totul e bine. Stai liniștit, dar trebuie să fii mai atent. [It's nothing. All good. Don't worry, but you should be more careful.]

Student: Da, da, știu. Mă grăbesc la muncă. Sunt vinovat, îmi cer scuze din nou. [Yes, yes, I know. I am in a hurry to get to my job. I am guilty, I apologise again.]

Elderly person: Când am fost tânăr și eu m-am grăbit mereu. Înțeleg. Nu face nimic. [When I was young I was also always in a hurry. I understand. All good!]

Pragmatically, the interaction between the student and the elderly person demonstrates mutual respect and understanding. The student takes responsibility for their actions and emphatically expresses remorse, while the elderly person responds with kindness, minimizes the offence, and offers advice in a supportive manner. Despite the initial mistake, the conversation remains amicable and ends on a positive note, with both parties showing empathy towards each other's perspectives. The elderly person's advice (*Don't worry, but you should be more careful*) incorporates negative politeness by suggesting that the student should exercise more caution in the future. By framing the advice in a non-confrontational manner, the elderly person respects the student's negative face and autonomy.

Both the student and the elderly person use positive politeness to maintain a friendly and supportive interaction. The student's initial apology including an appropriate interjection (*Oh, no! Excuse me, I wasn't paying attention.*) and subsequent acknowledgment of guilt and apology (*I hit you by accident and I would like to apologise, I didn't mean to do that and I understand I am guilty*) are interpreted by the hearer as demonstrating a desire to show respect and build rapport with the elderly person. The student's initial apology might be construed as an example of a bald on-record speech act. They directly acknowledge their mistake and express remorse without any attempt to mitigate or soften the impact of their words, even exaggerating guilt to perform redressive actions. This overuse of apology might have been perceived, without the leniency usually granted to language learners or the body language to match the words, as offensive and sarcastic. However, luckily, the hearer does not interpret it as a threat, but as an elaborate display of remorse. The term *vinovat* (*guilty*) seems overly severe in this situation when viewed from a linguistic standpoint, as an unintended collision on a bustling street is hardly a serious offence. Nonetheless, given the level of language proficiency, this error is entirely comprehensible. The elderly person's response (*It's nothing. All good.*) reflects positive politeness by downplaying the incident and reassuring the student, especially in the final reply, which is an outstanding example of empathy (*When I was young, I was also always in a hurry.*)

For the last scenario, simulating a request for clarification, we chose to analyse the conversation of a B1 language learner who discusses with a fellow student the assignment due the next day.

Student: Ai înțeles ce temă avem pentru mâine? [Did you understand what the homework is for tomorrow?]

Colleague: Trebuie să facem toate exercițiile de la pagina 5. [We have to solve all exercises on page 5.]

Student 1: Toate? [All?]

Student 2: Toate toate. [All of them.]

Student 1: Ce mult avem! Scuze, nu am fost prea atent. Nu cred că reușesc. O să-mi explodeze creierul. [That's a lot! Excuse me, I didn't pay attention. I don't think I can do it. My brain is going to explode.]

Student 2: Nu-ți face griji, frate! Hai să le rezolvăm împreună diseară. [Don't worry, bro! Let's solve them together tonight.]

Student: Mulțumesc, frate. Ești adevărat. [Thanks, bro! You are the real thing.]

This dialogue, unlike the previous examples, displays an informal interaction between two colleagues. The student's initial question (*Did you understand what the homework is for tomorrow?*) and the colleague's response (*We have to solve all exercises on page 5.*) might be construed as instances of bald-

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

on-record speech acts. However, there might be a different interpretation of the student's seemingly direct question, which might point to a hedged request. The ambiguity would be cleared if this were a dialogue where more context would be provided, which would help discriminate the actual level of indirectness.

As expected, the politeness strategy of choice in this conversation is a positive one, reflected by the use of in-group identity markers (*frate = bro*) and by showing optimism and empathy. Student 2 reassures student 1, strengthening camaraderie and showing empathy, whereas student 1 compliments the interlocutor after receiving the offer (*You are the real thing.*), attempting to boost the other student's positive face. It is also notable that, to get support for the school assignment, student 1 uses a set of self-deprecating sentences ending in a hyperbole (*My brain is gonna explode.*), expressing pessimism regarding his ability to rise to the challenge of the homework. The use of the informal popular form of future is adequate in the context of this remark. We believe that this is a veiled request, made indirectly, so as not to impose on the hearer.

Being apologetic (*Scuze, nu am fost prea atent*) is also a display of negative politeness, but the choice of words is pragmatically inappropriate in this context, given that the addressee is not the teacher for whom the homework is due, but another student. It would have been more appropriate for the student to use "imi pare rău" (*I am sorry*) instead of "scuze" (*excuse me*), expressing regret instead of apologies. However, this linguistic option is justified by the level of linguistic skills, which is not sufficient to understand the more subtle differences in meaning.

By analysing the 60 brief conversations as a whole, some tendencies stand out as being specific for foreign language learners, as well as some surprising and refreshing choices of strategies, albeit some might, unfortunately, result in impoliteness.

One of the key findings, which is consistently reflected in the corpus, refers to the exaggerated use of *thank you*, *sorry*, and *please* in contexts that do not necessarily require it or that require less such politeness linguistic strategies. Thanking several times in a brief conversation, adding *please* after each request of varying indirectness degrees, or extensively using *sorry* in the apology scenario relates, in our opinion, to the extent learners master the Romanian language and the subtleties of pragmatic context. If these had been conversations carried by native speakers, the exaggeration of gratitude, deference, or apologetic behaviour might have been construed as bordering irony and sarcasm. However, in the context of Romanian language learning, we believe it is indicative of the narrower array of linguistic means to show politeness. When in doubt about the proper linguistic conduct, participants in the study chose to use the simplest words expressing politeness. Not surprisingly, overuse was mostly noticed in the tasks performed by the A2 level participants approaching the scenarios in a formal manner.

Furthermore, we would like to single out some surprising replies identified in the corpus, which might offer us interesting insights into the strategies of non-native speakers of Romanian. The first one, a seeking clarification scenario, includes a farewell that might strike a Romanian as bizarre and unusual. The conversation we are referring to, produced by an A2 student, takes place in a shopping mall and features two friends, thus an informal communication instance. At departure, one of them responds to *Pe curând!* [*See you soon!*] by saying *Cu Dumnezeu!* [*God be with you!*] Given that in Romanian, this farewell is fairly uncommon outside religious communities, where it would be probably phrased as *Doamne ajută!* [*God help us!*], we believe that this is an attempt to replicate a genuine interaction between native speakers the student might have witnessed, without properly considering the exact wording. The participant recreated the farewell but did not grasp that the connotation of this message befits, from a sociocultural point of view, a communicative exchange of a different nature (probably a discussion between two religious adults or elderly people). Nevertheless, we find it very interesting that, instead of going for the conventionalized forms of goodbye thoroughly taught in the Romanian

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

language classes, the respondent to the discourse completion task chose to deviate, although the result was not fully compliant with the norm.

Another interesting example is occasioned by one of the apologies scenarios, where one of the B1 students is supposed to express excuses to an elderly person, following a rude interaction. The student apologizes in a proper manner, by saying *Îmi cer scuze, sunteți în regulă? [I apologise, are you alright?]*. This apology is met with hostility and the reply is impolite, as well as funny *A fost mai bine când a fost Ceaușescu**. [*It was better during Ceaușescu**.] As a side note, Ceaușescu is spelt wrong, which hints that the study participant might have only heard the name, without ever seeing it on paper. This reply is an example of successful impoliteness, as Derek Bousfield calls it (2008), that occurs when the speaker's purposeful delivery of a face-threatening act is understood by the hearer. According to Bousfield's framework, who delimitates on-record impoliteness (which involves strategies explicitly designed to constitute an attack) and off-record impoliteness (where the face damage is performed indirectly and might be cancelled given the context) (Bousfield, 2008, p. 95), we believe that the elderly lady's reply can be construed to belong to the later. The anger generated by the offence is expressed indirectly, by associating the student with the young disrespectful generation and suggesting that, in the past, the world was better. However, getting past the context of the dialogue *per se*, the intention of the creator of this dialogue might be connected to either an attempt at humour or a replication of a type of verbal interaction he witnessed on several occasions (even both). In the context of our study, it strikes us that the student chose this type of response, which involves a rather complex historical and sociocultural reference. This suggests that, besides the pragmatic implications, there is a cultural awareness of Romanian societal oppositions (generation gap, communism vs. capitalism) which is surprising and hints at a high exposure to genuine communicative contexts in Romanian language.

Exploring further the expression of impoliteness, exemplified by the intentional off-record reply quoted above, the corpus also offers several examples of accidental impoliteness, which can be explained by insufficient pragmatic skills in the target language. The deviations from polite conduct norms are mostly cases where participants use the bald on-record strategy, issuing direct requests instead of appealing to indirectness or hedging in the case of formal conversations. The use of short and abrupt sentences in similar authentic communication contexts might be deemed rude by Romanian natives if attenuating circumstances are not granted for being non-proficient speakers.

There were also instances of the opposing approach, where the overly long and clustered politeness formulas in being apologetic (as also highlighted in the examples offered for each scenario), might be interpreted as impolite because the exaggeration might point to sarcasm instead of a sincere desire to express excuses. These conclusions related to impoliteness are aligned with other research in the field. Mohammadi & Tamimi Sa'd (2014), in a study that investigated the sociolinguistic development of Iranian ESL students, had also concluded that "elements that caused impoliteness were found to be verbosity or shortness of semantic formulas and total absence of politeness markers and mitigators and pre-requests." (Mohammadi & Tamimi Sa'd, 2014, p. 37).

Notwithstanding its contribution, this study also has some limitations that we need to acknowledge. The first and most important would be that the data gathered from the participants is overly reliant on scenarios constructed as part of a classroom task, which might affect the reliability of the conclusions. To mitigate such setbacks, genuine oral interactions with native speakers would ensure a better base for drawing sound conclusions about polite conduct in real-life settings. Moreover, the target group could be enhanced, in order to include participants from various source cultures, which might lead to interesting findings related to how learners transfer their native language politeness norms into Romanian language communication.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the relationship between language proficiency and polite behaviour among Romanian language learners across diverse communicative contexts. Additionally, the study aimed to investigate cross-cultural awareness and identify the challenges encountered by students in achieving their communicative goals. Through an exploration of positive and negative politeness, as well as bald on-record and off-record speech acts, this article has explored the complex nature of politeness and its pragmatic implications in various conversational contexts. Moreover, it navigates the linguistic nuances involved in addressing social distance, power relations, and imposition, drawing from Brown and Levinson's politeness framework. Findings indicate that while both A2 and B1 learners use politeness strategies to some extent, the latter exhibit a more nuanced understanding. A quantitative analysis reveals a greater use of negative politeness by B1 learners in formal contexts, emphasizing deference and indirectness. Positive politeness is used more consistently by B1 learners in informal settings. Bald on-record strategies, characterized by directness, are more frequent among A2 participants, indicating a less refined approach. The study also highlights learners' tendencies to overuse politeness markers, such as excessive gratitude and apologies, possibly due to a limited range of linguistic resources. Surprising instances, like unconventional farewells or impolite responses, shed light upon both cultural awareness and pragmatic challenges faced by learners.

Overall, the research highlights the complexity of employing politeness in a second language. While learners demonstrate varying degrees of proficiency, their linguistic choices reflect not only their grasp of the language but also their cultural awareness and pragmatic competences. These findings could be used to improve language teaching methods and better prepare learners for genuine communication contexts.

REFERENCES

1. Blum-Kulka, S., & House, J. (1989). Cross-cultural pragmatics: Requests and apologies. In S. Blum-Kulka, J. House, & G. Kasper (Eds.), *Cross-Cultural and Situational Variation in Requesting Behaviour* (pp. 123-154). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
2. Blum-Kulka, S. (1992). The metapragmatics of politeness in Israeli society. In R. J. Watts, S. Ide, & K. Ehlich (Eds.), *Politeness in Language: Studies in its History, Theory and Practice* (pp. 255-280). Berlin, New York, Germany, USA: Mouton de Gruyter.
3. Bousfield, D. (2008). *Impoliteness in Interaction*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins
4. Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1978). Universals in language usage: Politeness phenomena. In E. N. Goody (Ed.), *Questions and politeness: Strategies in social interaction* (pp. 56-311). Cambridge University Press.
5. Brown, P. & Levinson, S. (1987). *Some Universal in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
6. Culpeper, J. (2011). Politeness and impoliteness. In K. Aijmer & G. Andersen (Eds.), *Sociopragmatics. Handbooks of pragmatics* (Vol. 5, pp. 391-436). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
7. Culpeper, J., & Hardaker, C. (2017). Impoliteness. In J. Culpeper, M. Haugh, & D. Z. Kádár (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Linguistic (Im)Politeness* (pp. 199-220). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan. doi:10.1057/978-1-137-37508-7
8. Economidou-Kogetsidis, M. (2011). 'Please answer me as soon as possible': Pragmatic failure in non-native speakers' email requests to faculty. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 43(13), 3193-3215.
9. Eelen, G. (2001). *A critique of politeness theories*. Manchester: St Jerome.
10. Grice, P. (1975). Logic and conversation, in P. Cole & J. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics, Vol. 3. Speech acts*, pp. 41-58.
11. Haugh, M. (2007). The discursive challenge to politeness theory: An interactional alternative. *Journal of Politeness Research*, 3, 295-317. <https://doi.org/10.1515/PR.2007.013>.
12. Holmes, J. (1995). *Women, men and politeness*. London: Longman.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0. International License

13. Kádár, D. (2017). *Politeness, impoliteness, and ritual. Maintaining the moral order in interpersonal interaction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
14. Kasper, G., & Schmidt, R. (1996). Developmental issues in interlanguage pragmatics. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 18(2), 149-169.
15. Lakoff, R., & Ide, S. (Eds.). (2005). *Broadening the Horizon of Linguistic Politeness* (Vol. 139). Amsterdam/ Philadelphia, Holland/ USA: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
16. Leech, G. (1983). *Principles of pragmatics*. London: Longman.
17. Leech, G., & Larina, T. V. (2014). Politeness: West and East. *Russian Journal of Linguistics*, 4, 9-34.
18. Locher, M. A., & Larina, T. V. (2019). Introduction to politeness and impoliteness research in global contexts. *Russian Journal of Linguistics*, 23(4), 873-903. doi:10.22363/2312-9182-2019-23-4-873-903
19. Mills, S. (2011). Discursive approaches to politeness and impoliteness. In Linguistic Politeness Research Group (Ed.), *Discursive approaches to politeness* (pp. 19–56). Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton
20. Mohammadi, M. & Tamimi Sa'd, S.H. (2014). Native speakers' assessment of (im)politeness of non-native speakers' requests. In *International Journal of Research Studies in Language Learning*, 3(4), 23 – 40, doi: 10.5861/ijrsl.2013.591.
21. Mugford, G. (2020). Mexican politeness: An empirical study on the reasons underlying/motivating practices to construct local interpersonal relationships. *Russian Journal of Linguistics*, 24(1), 31-55. doi:10.22363/2687-0088-2020-24-1-31-55
22. Rose, K. R., & Kasper, G. (2001). *Pragmatics in Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press.
23. Taguchi, N., & Roever, C. (2017). *Second Language Pragmatics*. Oxford University Press.
24. Toma, A.M. (2022). How to Get Real in the Classroom: Using Authentic Materials in Language Teaching. *Edulearn22 Proceedings*, 10222 – 10228.
25. Watts, R. (2003). *Politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
26. Wierzbicka, A. (1985). Different cultures, different languages, different speech acts: Polish vs English. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 9(2-3), 145-178. doi:10.1016/0378-2166(85)90023-2
27. Wierzbicka, A. (1991). *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: The Semantics of Human Interaction*. Berlin, Germany: Mouton de Gruyter.