



## Thai University Students' Understanding of Mock Politeness in English

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### APA Citation:

Lerdpaisalwong, S., Maiklad, C., & Pratama, H. (2023). Thai university students' understanding of mock politeness in English. *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network*, 16(2), 291-310.

Received  
25/03/2023

Received in  
revised form  
10/05/2023

Accepted  
18/05/2023

### ABSTRACT

Even though linguistic or grammatical competence has been of paramount importance for language development and research in English language teaching and learning, other related competence types (i.e., pragmatic competence and sociolinguistic competence) should not be neglected. The objectives of this paper were to investigate Thai university learners' understanding of mock politeness expressions in English, comparing English major and non-English major students, and to discern the factors influencing their understanding. The data were collected from a stratified purposive sample of bachelor degree English majors and non-English majors enrolled in a public university in Bangkok. A mixed method approach was used; the quantitative data were collected from a mock politeness judgement task while the qualitative data were obtained from individual interviews. The qualitative findings revealed that the majority of both English majors and non-English majors seemed to understand English mock politeness without much difficulty, yet details of each individual's understanding differed in details. As for quantitative findings, an independent sample t-test revealed no significant differences between the accurate answers of majors and non-English majors, while a one-way ANOVA test revealed no significant differences in the accuracy of answers among the four years of study/enrollment of both majors and non-English majors. The participants' understanding of mock politeness in English is shaped by their differences in English proficiency, anxiety levels, and views regarding the importance of understanding English mock politeness, opinions about cultural influence, and strategies used for learning mock politeness. This study sheds some light for language teachers and policymakers, highlighting pragmatic or implicit meaning in English language use in general, and promoting appropriate strategies for teaching and learning different types of politeness and impoliteness in communications, including mock politeness. This enables learners to become more successful in understanding and using the English language accurately.

**Keywords:** English language learning, mock politeness, politeness strategies, pragmatic competence

## Introduction

In former times, to be considered successful in second or foreign language learning, learners were expected to be able to use the language accurately based on grammatical rules. This expectation has nevertheless changed, particularly in recent decades, as research has consistently shown that grammatical or linguistic competence alone does not enable learners to use their target language naturally. Learners also need to have the ability to properly interact with others; in other words, they need to have the functional knowledge regarding appropriate language use, technically known as *pragmatic competence*. This type of competence refers to the knowledge and skills in using language that enable speakers to communicate in a wide variety of situations and contexts, i.e., “knowing how to use language in communication and the associated usage principles” (Grundy, 1995, p. 284). Pragmatic competence is often addressed with *sociolinguistic competence*, which involves “knowing when to speak, when not to, what to talk about with whom, when, where, and in what manner” (Hymes, 1972, p. 277).

Earlier research has shown that high-proficiency learners tended to use the target language more appropriately than their low-proficiency counterparts (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1990, 1991, 1993; Omar, 1991; 1992). Criteria have recently been set to measure and evaluate language users or learners’ levels of pragmatic competence and sociolinguistic competence, for instance, the world-renowned evaluation framework developed by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment—Companion volume (in short, CEFR—Companion) (Council of Europe, 2018, 2020), which is a revision of the 2001 original framework (Council of Europe, 2001).

Drawn from the CEFR framework (2020), three subtypes are encompassed in *pragmatic competence*:

- 1) *discourse competence*—the organization, structure, and arrangement of various types of messages or texts with emphases on turn taking, thematic development (involving development of logical ideas), coherence, and cohesion
- 2) *functional competence*—the use of language to perform communicative functions flexibly (abilities to use the language in new situations)
- 3) *design competence*—abilities to sequence interactions and transactions, by which propositional precision (abilities to precisely pinpoint complex ideas) and fluency are the primary focus (p. 137)

The closely related competence, *sociolinguistic competence*, covers aspects related to appropriate language use based on sociocultural norms and conventions. This is reflected in language users or learners’ understanding and abilities to use linguistic markers to socialize and indicate social relations, choose language forms that suit politeness conventions, express folk wisdom, choose appropriate words and structures for different registers, and recognize linguistic cues that indicate regional and social variations or speakers’ backgrounds.

## Literature Review

### Politeness, Impoliteness and Face

Various scholars have considered politeness conventions, along with different levels of formality, to be pragmatic issues even though the CEFR frameworks (2018, 2020) have categorized them as aspects of sociolinguistic competence. Linguistic politeness and impoliteness, expressed through appropriate levels of language use, thus affect interlocutors’ feelings and communication success (Yule, 2020, p. 156). These levels of language use vary depending on factors such as the relationship between the interlocutors and the speaker’s intention. The speaker may use modalities or indirect forms to express good will or to save the listener’s face (as well as their own face). Alternatively, they may choose not to do so by using direct or bold expressions, or even to interrupt

others, to show their annoyance, disapproval, or even higher social status than the listener. Apart from these language choices, Stockwell (2007) suggested that prosodic features (accents and intonations), along with register, give rise to different degrees of politeness, as evidenced by the following two communications that have the same general meaning: *Customers are reminded that New Street is a no smoking station. Please extinguish all smoking materials* as opposed to *Oi you, stop bloody smoking—get that fag out* (p. 28).

Some scholars consider mock politeness as part of implicational impoliteness; some consider it a concept separated from politeness and impoliteness. CEFR acknowledges both politeness and impoliteness, as well as mock politeness as sociopragmatic issues. Regardless of the demarcations, mock politeness is closely related to the concept of “face”, which originally appeared in western societies, particularly those of English language users, in the 19th century. The concept involves *face-saving acts* (using language and strategies that diminish threats or aggression to the hearer) and *face-threatening acts* (using direct and aggressive forms of language that increased the threat to the hearer’s self-image).

The awareness of saving face and losing face, was presumably influenced somewhat by Asian culture. Brill (2010) maintained that “Saving Face signifies a desire—or defines a strategy—to avoid humiliation or embarrassment, to maintain dignity or preserve reputation” (para 1). Asian cultural conventions typically expect a person to be treated respectfully by people in society. Showing politeness and kindness to others are meant to preserve the faces of speakers and their interlocutor, as “face” represents a person’s “public self-image” or “the emotional and social sense of self that everyone has and expects everyone else to recognize” (Yule, 2020, p. 156).

Although stratification of people based on hierarchical social status or position is commonplace in Asian countries, different Asian cultures have different social expectations and use different tactics to manage their face. Scholars have suggested “[f]ace is a complex phenomenon that needs to be studied from multiple perspectives” (Spencer-Oatey, 2007, p. 654) and “the whole issue of politeness is bound by culture” (Cutting & Fordyce, 2021, p. 39). In Thai culture, the elderly are usually respected and considered to possess valuable life experiences. Younger people are expected to protect the faces of adults, for example, by inviting them to preside or lead social events, or to speak before gatherings of younger people. However, this does not happen so uniformly in Japanese culture, and differs from Thai culture, in that Japan is a “shame-sensitive society” (Tao, 2014, p. 114). Consequently, people in the Japanese society affirmatively preserve or protect their own image and the image or face of their family, as well as the image of organizations in which they hold membership or have an affiliation. Although cultures throughout the world may have differences regarding the concepts mentioned above, listeners or participants are generally expected to help each other maintain a positive image by using appropriate language and strategies.

It is pragmatically believed that each person has two kinds of *face*, also referred to as “public self-image” or an “emotional and social sense of self that everyone has and expects everyone else to recognize” (Yule, 2020, p. 156). *Positive face*, the first kind, is the need to become part of a society and to be accepted or understood by other social members, which can be achieved by a “face-saving act” or the use of language that does not sound threatening or aggressive. The use of a modality, such as *could* or *would* when making a request, such as *Could you turn down the volume please?* and *Would you mind sending me the document?* is considered polite and saves the face of the person we are talking to.

In contrast, the other kind, a *negative face* or “the need to be independent and free from imposition” (Yule, 2020, p. 156), is associated with a speaker’s direct language choices, which may sound impolite and can be taken as threatening the face of the listener. The use of imperatives and/or impolite words to command or threaten someone, as in *Buzz off!* or *Back off!*, are examples of *face-threatening*. Both face-saving and face-threatening acts may appear in the same conversation depending on each interlocutor’s choice:

- Him: I'm going to tell him to stop that awful noise right now!  
 Her: Perhaps you could just ask him if he is going to stop soon because it's getting a bit late, and people need to get to sleep.

(Yule 1996, p. 61)

The situational context of this dialogue is a discussion between a couple regarding how to deal with annoying noise made by their neighbor. The man would opt for direct or face-threatening language, evidenced by choosing words such as *tell*, *awful noise*, and *right now*. His partner, on the other hand, prefers to *ask* the neighbor politely and give a reason why he should stop the noise so as to avoid hard feelings.

## Politeness Strategies

Four strategies associated with linguistic politeness (which nevertheless attend to impoliteness) were put forward by Brown and Levinson (1978), a few decades before other groups of strategies were identified. The *bald on-record strategy* is expressed by direct language, as noted in the statement *if you are unhappy, leave!* In contrast, a speaker may adopt a *positive politeness strategy* to achieve the objective by using direct yet friendly expressions, e.g., *I'm not too keen on your idea. I prefer hers*. The *negative politeness strategy* employs indirect utterances or expressions with implicated meaning to save the face of the person with whom we are interacting, as in *Your idea sounds good, but would it be possible to try hers first?* Sometimes the speaker attempts to save face themselves by using an *off-record-indirect strategy*, as in *Do you need the toilet?*, *Are you hungry?*, and *Would you like to stop for a coffee?*, which actually means "I need a toilet", "I'm hungry", and "I would like to stop for a coffee".

A number of factors, e.g., gender, ethnics, and cultures, influence politeness in language use. The use of the off-record-indirect strategy, for example, is likely to be used by females. Thongtong and Srioutai (2019) observed questions meant to complain and found that Thai female learners of English asked more indirect questions, while their male counterparts tended to ask direct questions. Tongpoon-Patanasorn and Thumngong (2020) examined job application letters and found that applicants from ASEAN countries tended to use positive politeness strategies to promote themselves and negative strategies to request for favorable replies or further contact. Akmal et al. (2022) also found that Indonesian English learners often used interrogative sentences (indirect expressions of politeness) to ask for permission at workplaces, while Australian native English speakers were more direct by using declarative forms.

## Impoliteness Strategies

Apparently, impoliteness strategies were not widely studied prior to 2008, possibly due to general emphases on social harmony rather than confrontation and disharmony (Cutting & Fordyce, 2021, p. 42). The earlier research involving impoliteness tended to be embedded within the politeness frameworks, as observed in the *bald on-record strategy*. Nevertheless, impoliteness is not necessarily expressed in only a bald or direct manner. Culpepper (2011) suggested that linguistic politeness and linguistic impoliteness are two different concepts despite their close connection. The former involves language and behavior that bring about politeness attitudes while the latter is associated with negative language, metalanguage, and behavior. An impoliteness act involves action causing a speech partner to lose face due to the doer or speaker's anger, annoyance, or intention to entertain others. This is to say, linguistic impoliteness is not simply a lack of linguistic and/or behavioral ability to show politeness.

Linguistic impoliteness, thus, possesses its own groups of strategies Culpepper (1996). The *bald on record impoliteness* occurs in the form of a speaker's direct attack on the addressee in a brief and unambiguous manner, e.g. *Put a stop to this, for God's sake*. The *positive impoliteness strategy* is a strategy employed to harm the hearer's positive face, e.g., by ignoring, shaming, or not

acknowledging. A speaker of English may use this strategy to refuse solidarity or to assert independence, not wanting the acceptance by other members of the social group, such as, *No way! I don't agree with this.* The *negative impoliteness strategy* is employed to damage the hearer's freedom of action or using language to frighten or ridicule someone, for example, *Come over here and say that, you little idiot.* *Sarcasm* takes place when the speaker uses polite language in an insincere way, e.g. *Thank you so much for helping me wash all the dishes* (when the addressee actually did not do so). *Withhold politeness* is an impoliteness strategy involving not expressing politeness when necessary, for instance, not expressing thanks or apology when it is socially appropriate to do so. Withholding politeness violates Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle, which instructs speakers to "make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (p. 45).

## Mock Politeness

Leech (1983) considered *mock politeness* to be distinctive from politeness and impoliteness and defined mock politeness as "an apparently friendly way of being offensive" (p. 144). Cutting and Fordyce (2021) similarly labeled it as *off-record impoliteness* (p. 43). This strategy involves using mockery or jokes which may threaten the hearer's face but not in an aggressive manner. Thus, it can be considered to be a variation of politeness or impoliteness, that is "a subset of implicational impoliteness" (Taylor, 2018, p. 463). Other scholars, such as Haugh and Bousfield (2012) maintained that the concept should be differently evaluated. Aijmer (2019) noted that although the implied meaning of mock politeness utterances are inclined towards impoliteness, the speaker's deeper intention is instead to maintain solidarity; indeed, the more considerate analysis is to distinguish the intention of the utterance from an impoliteness strategy. Focusing on this intention, especially when the utterance is delivered with a friendlier tone of voice, accurately differentiates mock politeness from *conversational irony* and *sarcasm*. The former is "more complex, creative, witty, and entertaining" and requires nuanced degrees of "delicacies and seriousness" (Danielyan, 2021, p. 60).

Beer (2013) compared the reactions to the use of mock politeness strategy in a conversation between university students from eastern and western backgrounds. In this scenario a Japanese student was talking in the telephone so loudly that two western dormitory mates interrupted him by saying *Hey, Rick and I are in the middle of a game here! Could you talk quieter?*, employing the bald on-record strategy. The Japanese student abruptly ended his phone call and apologized to the other two students by saying, *I'm very, very sorry; I'll try to be a better roommate*, to which the dormitory mates did not react positively (Scenario 2 College Roommates). The Japanese student's utterance may appear polite, yet it may reflect the speaker's strategy to express anger or discontentment in a nonaggressive manner. In this scenario, none of the parties compromised or tried to save the other's face. In other words, some utterances that sound polite, i.e. *I'm very, very sorry; I'll try to be a better roommate*, may embed the speaker's intention to be impolite.

It should be noted that interpreting behavioral and linguistic politeness, impoliteness, and mock politeness is inevitably influenced by culture; that is to say, a polite communication in one culture may be impolite in another or vice versa. Understanding the true meaning of utterances among interlocutors from different backgrounds may sometimes not be easy. The statement *You speak like an American*, for example, may be interpreted either positively or negatively: The comment may be a sincere, polite compliment if directed to a foreign person in the US or a non-native speaker of English. Yet the same comment is likely a *mock politeness* utterance, an indirect (thus impolite) indicator of otherness and flawed English when said by a native British English speaker. In fact, distinguishing politeness and impoliteness often requires proficiency in interpreting the literal and hidden meaning intended by the speaker.

## Previous Research

In recent years impoliteness has gained more attention than politeness; investigations into impoliteness are currently “well-established as a productive and a wide-ranging area of study” (Grainger & O’Driscoll, 2022, p. 2), and have “overtaken (specifically) politeness as the dominant of attention” (p. 4), possibly because language users tend to make more comments about what they feel is impolite than what they think is polite.

A variety of topics related to English language users or learners’ impoliteness have been increasingly studied across the world. Haugh and Schneider (2012), for example, observed that politeness and impoliteness vary depending on varieties influenced by social and pragmatic factors, resulting in different perceptions of appropriate ways of English use, both inside and outside the British Isles. Many studies have made comparisons between users of English from different cultures. Caldero and Sun (2021) observed that when Chinese learners employed positive politeness strategies, such as, *John, I sent you an email. Check it*, their lecturers were mildly irritated due to a lack of pragmatic competence in academic writing communication. Yet they demonstrated their progress in using more negative politeness strategies. In a study focusing on Thai contexts, Kasa (2021) found that some Thai greetings meant to show friendliness in small talk may be misunderstood by persons not familiar with Thai culture, causing the greetings to even be interpreted as personally intrusive or impolite. *Have you eaten yet?*, *Are you gaining some weight?*/*Have you gained weight?*, and *Where have you been?* are examples of common Thai greetings that some might consider intrusive or even rude.

In a recent study focusing on the use and understanding of mock politeness across cultures, Mugford (2018) examined how bilingual call center agents (Spanish-English) in Mexico employed language play and mock politeness when reacting to rejections or to racist and/or insulting messages. Similarly, Taylor (2018) conducted a comparative study that examined mock politeness in British English and Italian online forums, and found the influence of cultural variations on the participants’ perceptions and mock politeness practices. Aijmer (2019) also examined mock politeness in apologies used by different groups of English language users; her findings revealed that younger speakers often stated *sorry* and its related expressions (*I am sorry* or *I’m sorry*) with tones of voice reflecting rudeness or aggression, followed by *excuse me* and *pardon*, whereas adult language users rarely did.

A review of prior studies revealed that studies of English mock politeness have been conducted rarely, particularly studies focusing on the extent to which Asian English language learners or users, including Thais, understand this concept.

In this study, therefore, both English major students and non-English major students at a Thai university were included with expectations that the findings would provide useful pedagogical implications for both groups. Consequently, four research questions were investigated:

1. Are there any significant differences regarding the capacity to understand English mock politeness between English major students and non-English major students?
2. How well do English major students understand English mock politeness?
3. How well do non-English major students understand English mock politeness?
4. What factors influence the capacity of these two subject groups to comprehend mock politeness expressed in English?

## Research Methods

### Research Design and Sample

This is a mixed-method study, combining quantitative data (students’ answers to a mock politeness judgement task, compiled from twelve English-language mock politeness scenarios) and qualitative data (collected from individual student interviews). The mixed-method study was used to elicit both quantitative and qualitative data, thereby providing objectively comprehensible

findings that would be the subject of statistical analysis, supported by insightful, follow-up individual interviews. The study was based on a stratified purposive sampling of participants. This means that samples in this study were purposively selected according to specific criteria and purposes that met the objectives of the study—in this case, the participants' majors and duration of enrollment (years one to four of academic study).

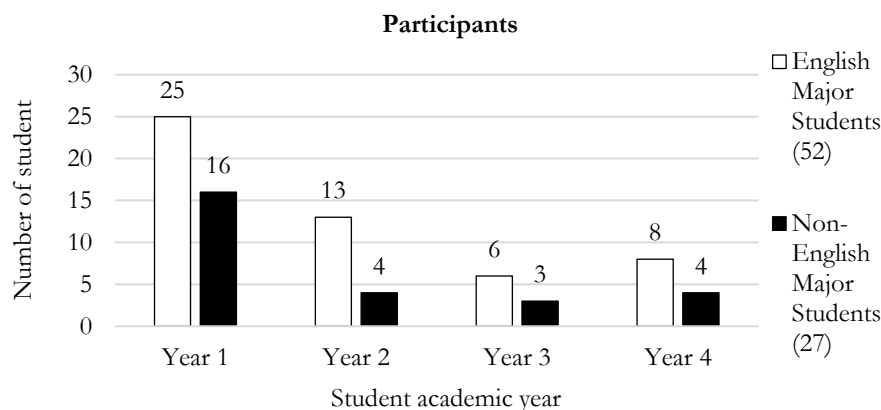
## Participants

English major and non-English major students, enrolled in years one to four of their bachelor degree studies, were purposively recruited. The participants were 79 bachelor degree students (52 English majors, 27 non-English majors) who were enrolled in a well-established university in Bangkok, Thailand. The academic profile of the 52 English major students included: 23 (first year), 13 (second year), 6 (third year), and 8 (fourth year). The academic profile of the 27 non-English majors included: 16 (first year), 4 (second year), 3 (third year), and 4 (fourth year).

English major students take many English courses throughout their four years of studies (e.g., English Sound System, English Language System, and English to Thai and Thai to English Translation) whereas non-English major students are only required to take up to four Foundation English courses. The number of English courses that non-English majors are required to complete depends on the student's English-language proficiency test scores at the time the student applies for admission. To illustrate, an admitted student with high English scores is likely exempt from the otherwise required Foundation English I and II courses, and is required to complete only Foundation English III and IV.

**Figure 1**

*Participant Profiles*



In Figure 1, Y-axis indicates number of students; x-axis indicates the participants academic year of enrollment. The unfilled bars represent the number of English major students per year of enrollment and the filled bars represent the number of non-English major students per year of enrollment.

Of these 79 students, five English major students and seven non-English major students voluntarily participated in an individual interview. For English major students, one was a first-year student, three were second-year students, and one was a third-year student. For non-English major students, there were one first-year student, three second-year students, one third-year student, and two fourth-year students. None of the five English major students had ever visited English-speaking countries. One of them once visited Korea and another once visited Laos. Both of them reported that they did not use English in those trips. On the other hand, three non-English major

students reported that they had communicated in English quite a bit during trips to Hong Kong, Singapore, and New Zealand, respectively.

## **Data Collection Instruments and Procedures**

Two research instruments were used in this study. During the first stage, each participant's understanding of English mock politeness was assessed—participants were tasked to read twelve English-language scenarios and to assess which of the scenarios involved English mock politeness. The second stage involved individual in-depth interviews, using a carefully constructed questionnaire. The details and procedures for both stages follow.

### ***Stage one / Research Instrument one***

The first stage involved a mock politeness assessment task, based on twelve English-language scenarios which was administered to the respondents as a Google form questionnaire. The questionnaire was created by a team of lecturers from Universitas Negeri Semarang (Indonesia) and Kasetsart University (Thailand) who were collaborating in a funded research project: UNNES-KU Matching Grant Research Collaboration Project (2021), Topic 1, English Politeness Awareness and Comprehension of Indonesia and Thailand University Students.

The twelve English-language scenarios were adopted from Togame (2016 as cited in Pratama, et al., 2022), whose works focused on second language learners' capacity to understand irony. Although irony is not the same as impoliteness, Culpeper (1996) classified verbal irony and mock politeness as types of impoliteness. The scenarios were constructed and validated by experienced pragmatists. The written language and situations described were intentionally simple so that a bachelor-level degree student would easily comprehend the statements and the context. Moreover, the scenarios described concrete situations such that the participants could express readily their opinion regarding the conversations and interactions described, relative to the issues being investigated.

The Indonesian team includes Dr. Hendi Pratama, S.Pd., M.A., Imas Setiani, S.S., M.A., and Thohiriyah, S.S., M. Hum. The Thai members included the two researchers who conducted the study and authored this article. The entire questionnaire can be accessed through the link: <https://forms.gle/vy8Vr1x8RY9GMarC8>.

The first section of the questionnaire included a recruitment message (including an explanation of the goals and expected benefits of the study) and data-collection instructions. It asked for each participant's information (name, gender, contact information, major, and years of bachelor study). Ethical standards were ensured by advising participants of potential risks they might encounter when completing the questionnaire and providing an assurance of confidentiality; each participant was asked to indicate their informed voluntary consent to participate.

The second section consisted of twelve English-language scenarios involving spoken communications between various parties—six fillers and six English mock politeness situations.

Each scenario included two questions: the main question assessed the participant's ability to understand the events in the situation and the implications of the communications (participants were asked to indicate if the speakers in the scenarios were authentically expressing politeness—answering “Yes” or “No”). The second, follow-up question, required the participant to elaborate and explain the reasoning for their first answer.

The questionnaire was intentionally constructed so that a respondent could comfortably complete it within 10 to 15 minutes. Respondents were able to complete the questionnaire individually online using their own electronic devices equipped with internet interface (smartphone, tablet, or computer) at any location convenient to the them.

Followings are the twelve scenarios. The six situations set forth on the left column (situations 2, 6, 8, 9, 10, and 11) are English mock politeness situations; the six situations in the right column (situations 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, and 13) are fillers.



***English mock politeness situations***

Situation 2. Being Late – Jack had a reputation for being late. When Samantha and Jack arranged to meet up one evening, he said to her, “I’ll come at five. You won’t have to wait.” That evening, Jack did not show up on time. It was nearly 5:45

pm when he finally arrived. Samantha said to him, “I’m so glad I didn’t have to wait.” (Main question: Do you think Samantha is truly glad with the situation? Yes or No?)

Situation 6. One of Those Days – Mark had one of those days when everything went wrong. He poured coffee into his cereal instead of his mug, put on different colored socks, and missed his train to work. When he finally arrived at his office 45 minutes late, he fell over and hurt himself quite badly. He said to himself, “I’m having a good day.” (Main question: Do you think Mark is truly having a good day? Yes or No?)

Situation 8. New Film – Steve asked Kate to go to see a new film. Kate was not interested in the movie but Steve said that “Some critics said it should have won an Oscar.” Kate agreed to see the film. The film was terrible. Kate and Steve both thought it was a complete waste of money. Kate said, “It really should have won an Oscar.” (Main question: Do you think Kate truly thinks that the movie should have won an Oscar? Yes or No?)

Situation 9. Mobile Phone – Peter heard someone’s mobile phone ringing while he was studying in the library. A girl sitting new to him answered and started chatting loudly. Peter shushed her, but she kept talking. Five minutes later, she was still chatting. Unable to put up with her, Peter screamed piercingly and went quiet. He turned to her and said, “I am so sorry. I do hope I didn’t disturb you.” (Main question: Do you think Peter is truly sorry with the situation?)

***Fillers***

Situation 1. Pizza – Fiona and Anna ordered pizza for dinner. It was delicious. When they finished, their flat mate Joe came back. He came into the kitchen saying that he was hungry. Fiona and Anna hadn’t ordered extra pizza for Joe, but they offered him the last two pieces. Joe said to them, “That’s very kind of you guys.” (Main question: Do you think Joe truly thinks that Fiona and Anna are very kind? Yes or No?)

Situation 3. Breaking the News – Daniel, Tracy and Diana were flat mates who had lived together for long time and they had become good friends. Unknown to Diana, Daniel and Tracy had fallen in love and decided to move out. When they broke the news, Diana was furious. She screamed at them to just get out. Tracy said to them, “I’m sorry this so upsetting for you.” (Main question: Do you think Tracy is truly sorry with the situation? Yes or No?)

Situation 4. Job Interview – Mary had a job interview. As usual, she prepared very thoroughly for it. She was very nervous during the interview and felt it didn’t go very well. When she came home, her husband John asked how it went. Mary said that she didn’t think she would get the job. John said, “These things often go better than you think.” (Main question: Do you think John truly thinks that things will go better? Yes or No?)

Situation 5. Dinner Table – Helen invited Andrew to her dinner party. When he arrived at her house, he found a lot of familiar faces there. When Andrew was called to the dinner table, however, Helen introduced the girl he had never met before and asked him if he minded sitting next to her. He said to Helen, “I’d be happy to.” (Main question: Do you think Andrew is truly happy with the situation? Yes or No?)

Situation 10. Tennis Match – James and his friend Patricia went to watch Scott in a tennis match. Before the match, Scott was confident he would win. But he played terribly and lost in straight sets. At the end of the match, Scott came up to James and Patricia and said, “I almost won.” Patricia turned to James and said, “He almost won.” (Main question: Do you think Patricia truly thinks that Scott has played so well in his tennis match?)

Situation 7. Promotion – David called home and said to his wife Cathy that he had been promoted to executive manager and offered a better salary. Cathy knew how hard he had been working for this. She prepared a lavish meal with a bottle of champagne and decorated a room with flowers and candles. When he saw everything. David said, “I really appreciate you going to this trouble.” (Main question: Do you think David truly appreciate the situation? Yes or No?)

Situation 11. Cold Night – One night, Harry and Emma went to the cinema. When they came out, they found the temperature had dropped dramatically. It was freezing cold and snowing heavily. On the way to the tube station, Harry and Emma felt their limbs becoming stiff with cold. When they finally arrived at the station after a long walk, Harry said, “It’s a bit chilly tonight.” (Main question: Do you think Harry truly thinks that the temperature is a bit cold?)

Situation 12. French Lesson – Mathew had an audition for a play in which he had to speak French. He asked his French friend Isabelle to help him with his accent. Isabelle found the script quite simple and thought it wouldn’t take long to help him. When Mathew started to read, however, Isabelle saw him struggling. She said “It’s going to take longer than I thought.” (Main question: Do you think Isabelle truly thinks she has miscalculated the duration of the study?)

### ***Stage two / Research instrument two***

After all 79 of the respondents had completed the stage one mock politeness judgement, three English majors who answered all the questions accurately and two English majors who answers only some of the questions accurately were asked to voluntarily participate in an individual interview. Similarly, five non-English major students who answered all questions accurately and two non-English majors who answered only some questions accurately were contacted and consented to voluntarily participate in the interview.

During this second stage, an individual in-depth interview was used to elicit data on factors influencing the student’s understanding of English mock politeness. All students (100% accurate as well as students who have partially accurate responses) were included in the individual in-depth interview stage to determine if the percentage of accurateness was in fact related to their level of understanding of the English mock politeness in the scenarios. The interviews were conducted online using Zoom program. Each interview took 15 to 20 minutes.

The interview consisted of five questions designed to discern: the participants’ efficacy/English proficiency level, their anxiety level when learning English, their opinion regarding the importance of understanding mock politeness in English, their opinion about the influence of cultural differences on the use of mock politeness, and their strategies for learning English mock politeness.

### **Data Analysis**

The quantitative data (i.e., the percentage of accurate answers from the questionnaire) was analyzed using Social Science Statistical Package (SPSS). The analyses included an independent t-test, one-way ANOVA. The statistical analyses were rechecked by an expert in the field of English language assessment for trustworthiness. The findings were presented in percentage in charts followed by description.

The interview data were qualitatively analyzed and themes were displayed in a table with description. To ensure the validity of the qualitative analysis, the findings were cross-checked by the two researchers.

## Findings

The findings related directly to the four key research questions: Are there any significant differences regarding the capacity to understand English mock politeness between English major students and non-English major students? How well do English major students understand English mock politeness? How well do non-English major students understand English mock politeness? What factors influence the capacity of these two subject groups to comprehend mock politeness expressed in English?

In this part, the quantitative findings (Research Questions 1 to 3) and qualitative findings (Research Question 4) are presented. The findings are aligned with each research question in the literature review and an overview is provided in the discussion with insights derived.

### Research Question 1: The Overall Findings of English Major and Non-English Major Students

The overall findings revealed that English major and non-English major students had comparable abilities in understanding English communications that involved mock politeness situations, will only minor differences with regard to some deeper details. Questionnaire responses were collected from the 52 English major students who correctly identified 258 (83%) of the 312 English mock politeness situations. The 27 non-English major students correctly identified 144 (89%) of the 162 English mock politeness situations (Table 1).

**Table 1**

*The Percentage of Accurate Answers of Fourth Year Bachelor Degree English Major and Non-English Major Students*

Situation Number	2	6	8	9	10	11	Total
<b>English major students</b>							
1 <sup>st</sup> Year Major (N = 25)	24 (96%)	22 (88%)	24 (96%)	18 (72%)	20 (80%)	12 (48%)	120 of 150 (80%)
2 <sup>nd</sup> Year Major (N = 13)	11 (85%)	13 (100%)	10 (77%)	12 (92%)	10 (77%)	10 (77%)	66 of 78 (85%)
3 <sup>rd</sup> Year Major (N = 6)	5 (83%)	6 (100%)	5 (83%)	5 (83%)	6 (100%)	5 (83%)	32 of 36 (89%)
4 <sup>th</sup> Year Major (N = 8)	8 (100%)	7 (88%)	7 (88%)	6 (75%)	7 (88%)	5 (63%)	40 of 48 (83%)
Total Numbers Majors (N = 52)	48 (92%)	48 (92%)	46 (88%)	41 (79%)	43 (83%)	32 (62%)	258 of 312 (83%)

Situation Number	2	6	8	9	10	11	Total
Non-English major students							
1st Year Non-major (N = 16)	15 (94%)	15 (94%)	13 (81%)	14 (88%)	15 (94%)	15 (94%)	87 of 96 (91%)
2nd Year Non-major (N = 4)	4 (100%)	4 (100%)	3 (75%)	3 (75%)	3 (75%)	3 (75%)	20 of 24 (83%)
3rd Year Non-major (N = 3)	3 (100%)	2 (67%)	2 (67%)	3 (100%)	3 (100%)	2 (67%)	15 of 18 (83%)
4th Year Non-major (N = 4)	4 (100%)	4 (100%)	4 (100%)	4 (100%)	4 (100%)	2 (50%)	22 of 24 (92%)
Total Number Non-majors (N=27)	21 (95%)	20 (91%)	18 (82%)	20 (91%)	21 (95%)	20 (91%)	120 of 132 (91%)

As indicated in Table 1, the non-English major students correctly identified the tested mock politeness situations slightly better than their English major counterparts. An independent t-test was performed to determine if the comparative number of correct responses was statistically significantly different (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*The Percentage of English Mock Politeness Accurate Answers of English Major and Non-English Major Students*

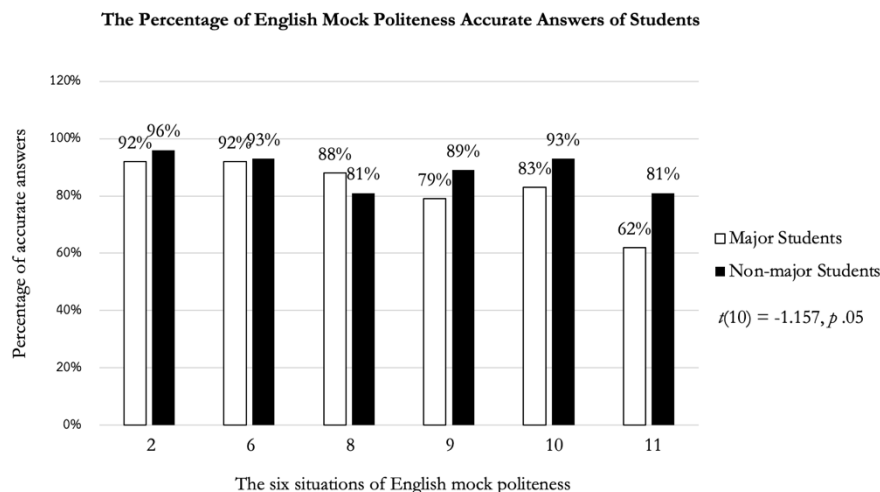


Figure 2 presents the percentage of English major and non-English major students who correctly identified the six tested mock politeness situations: X-axis presents each of the six English mock politeness situations; Y-axis presents the percentage of accurate answer. The bars compare the number of English major students (unfilled bars) and non-English major students (filled bars) who correctly identified the mock politeness in each of the six situations. The independent t-test calculation indicates no statistically significant difference  $t(10) = -1.157, p .05$ .

## Research Question 2: English Major Students' Understanding of English Mock Politeness

Table 1 shows that the percentage of accurate answers given by English major students for the six English mock politeness situations was quite high (none less than 80%). This implies that the English major students could assess and understand English mock politeness communications without much difficulty.

**Figure 3**

*The Percentage of Accurate English Mock Politeness Answers by English Major Students, by Year of Bachelor Degree Studies*

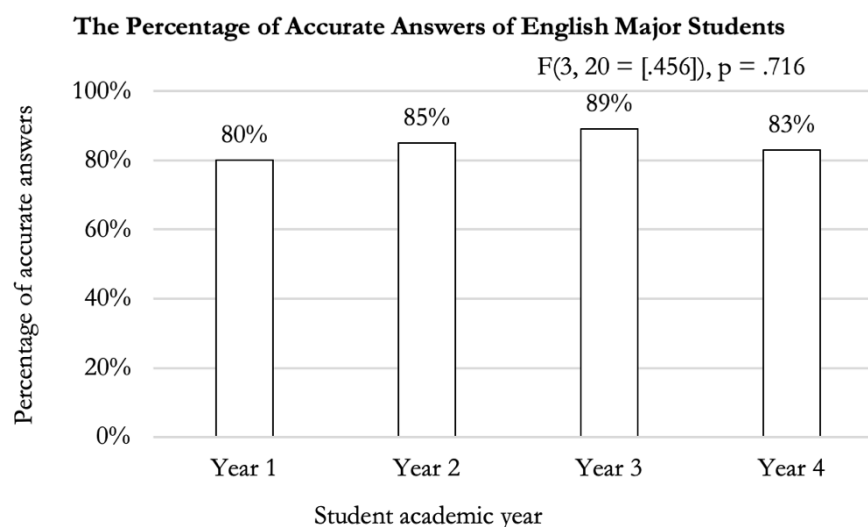


Figure 3 presents the percentage of English major students who correctly identified the six tested mock politeness situations, comparing percent of accurate answers by academic year (first year to fourth year of bachelor degree enrollment): Y-axis presents the percentage of accurate answers given by English major students to the six situations of English mock politeness; X-axis presents the percentage of accurate answers for each of the four years of bachelor degree studies.

A one-way ANOVA was run to determine if there was any significant differences based on years of bachelor degree studies (first year to fourth year). The results shows that the number of accurate answers among the four years English major students was not significantly different  $F(3, 20 = [.456]), p = .716$ .

A Tukey HSD post-hoc test was run to see the percentage of accurate answers of which year of students is significantly different from other years. The Tukey HSD post-hoc test showed no significant differences by English majors based on their duration of enrollment (one to four years).

## Research Question 3: Non-English Major Students' Understanding of English Mock Politeness

Table 1 also shows that the percentage of accurate answers given by non-English major students for the six English mock politeness situations was quite high (none less than 83%). This implies that all students (English majors and non-English majors) could comparably discern and understand English mock politeness communications without much difficulty.

A one-way ANOVA was run to test if there was any significance difference in the number of correct answers to the English mock politeness situations given by non-English majors,

comparing each of the four years of bachelor degree studies (first year to fourth year) as presented in Figure 4.

**Figure 4**

*The Percentage of Accurate English Mock Politeness Answers by Non-English Major Students, by Year of Bachelor Degree Studies*

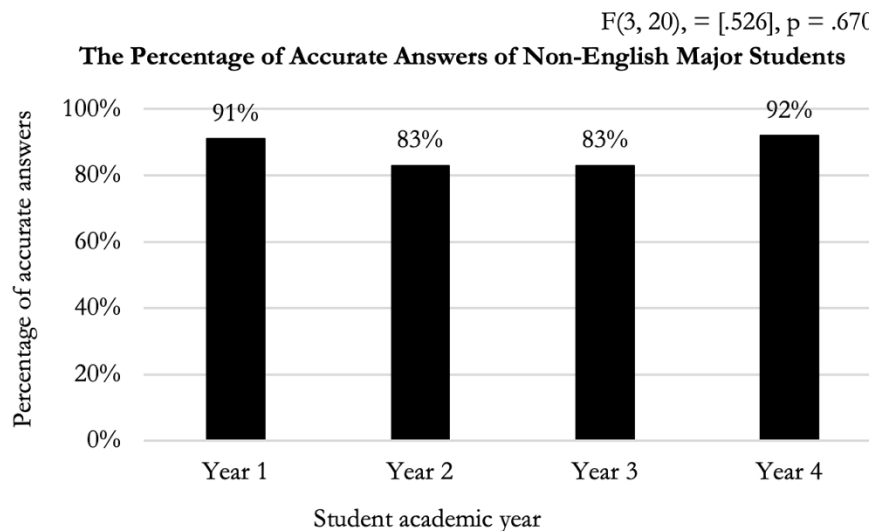


Figure 4 presents the percentage of non-English major students who correctly identified the six tested mock politeness situations, comparing the percent of accurate answers by academic year (first year to fourth year of bachelor degree enrollment): Y-axis presents the percentage of accurate answers given by non-English major students to the six situations of English mock politeness; X-axis presents the percentage of accurate answers given by the students, comparing the students' academic profile (year one to year four of their bachelor degree studies).

A one-way ANOVA was run to determine if there were any significant differences based on years of bachelor degree studies (first year to fourth year). The results shows that the number of accurate answers among the four years enrollment by the non-English majors was not significantly different  $F(3, 20) = [.526], p = .670$ .

A Tukey HSD post-hoc test was run to see the percentage of accurate answers of which year of students is significantly different from other years. The Tukey HSD post-hoc test showed no significant differences based on their duration of enrollment (one to four years) among the among the non-English majors.

#### **Research Question 4: Factors Influencing the Participants' Understanding of English Mock Politeness**

Table 2 presents the findings from the individual interviews conducted to discern the key factors that could have influenced the eight interview participants' understanding of English mock politeness.

**Table 2**

*Factors Influencing the Participants' Understanding of English Mock Politeness*

Factor	Efficiency of English proficiency level	Anxiety level	Importance of understanding mock politeness in English	Influence of cultural differences on the use of mock politeness	Strategies for learning use of mock politeness
English Major Students					
1 (Year 2)	Upper intermediate	Low	Influence on correct interpretation	No influence (due to a wide variety of media)	Reading between the lines Analyzing contexts
2 (Year 3)	Lower intermediate	Low	Reflection of the speaker's feeling	No influence (Manners have more influence)	Relating situation to meaning
3 (Year 1)	Intermediate	Low	Benefits for international communication	Yes (especially in international/multicultural communication)	Watching movies/series Relating situation to meaning
4 (Year 2)	Intermediate	Moderate	Facilitation of communication and mutual understanding	Yes (especially communication between L1 users)	Watching movies/series Playing games
5 (Year 2)	Intermediate	Low	Benefits for international communication	Yes (but they can be learned)	Focusing on main ideas Double thinking
Non-English Major Students					
6 (Year 1)	Intermediate	Low	Facilitation of communication and mutual understanding	Yes (as they can help us to understand mock politeness)	Watching movies/series
7 (Year 2)	Lower intermediate	Low	Influence on correct interpretation Reflection of the speaker's feeling	Yes (as they influence the speaker's mindset)	Observing the speaker's tone of voice, facial expressions, nonverbal language Analyzing contexts Observing word choices in different cultures
8 (Year 2)	Upper intermediate	Low	Influence on correct interpretation	Yes (as they influence the speaker's mindset)	Watching movies/series Observing

					a real-life language used among friends
9 (Year 2)	Intermediate	Low	Influence on correct interpretation Reflection of the speaker's feeling	No influence (no connection between languages and cultures)	Asking a speaker for clarification
10 (Year 3)	Intermediate	Low	Influence on correct interpretation	No influence (Experience has more influence)	Watching movies/series Outside class learning
11 (Year 4)	Intermediate	Low	Influence on correct interpretation	No (as they can be learned)	Watching movies/ social media such as Facebook
12 (Year 4)	Beginner	Low	Influence on correct interpretation	No (no connection between languages and cultures)	Communicating with native speakers of English Watching movies

Five factors or themes were derived from the individual interviews with eight students (five English majors and three non-English majors): Notably, most of the students estimated that their English level was intermediate—one student from each group rated themselves as lower-intermediate while one English major evaluated themselves as upper-intermediate level. The second factor focused on students' self-assessment of anxiety, which was overall evaluated as low (one first year English major admitted to be moderately anxious). The third aspect addressed students' opinion regarding the importance of understanding mock politeness in English. All interviewees indicated this competence was important for several reasons—primarily to correctly understand and interpret English messages and to properly determine the speaker's feelings or emotions (which leads to desirable outcomes such as achieving mutual understanding and facilitating accurate international communication). Fourth, interviewees were asked to consider whether cultural differences influence the use of mock politeness. Half of the students (six out of twelve) stated they were aware that cultural differences influence the use mock politeness, and could potentially affect mindsets or cause misunderstanding between/among interlocutors from different cultures. Interestingly, some students commented that widespread use of social media in the current digital era likely serves to provide greater awareness of multicultural perspectives. Therefore, the use of mock politeness could most accurately reflect the speaker's true manner (as mentioned by one of the English major students). Indeed, two of the non-English major students pointed out that abilities to interpret mock politeness are built upon by experience and learning.

Finally, the interviewees were asked their opinions about possible strategies to gain stronger abilities to interpret mock politeness, such as by watching English-language films and TV series, analyzing contexts and situations, and by thinking twice or observing verbal and nonverbal language used by people from different cultures.



## Discussion and Conclusion

The independent t-test performed revealed that the difference in the percent of accurate answers between English major and non-English major students was not significantly different (see Figure 1).

However, interviews with the two groups of students revealed interesting findings—only the English major students expressed a deeper understanding of the English mock politeness scenarios that corresponded with native English speakers' level of understanding. That is, the English majors correctly determined the situations (specifically, situations 2, 6, 8, 9, 10, and 11) that the speakers used mock politeness, and they were able to point out that in those situations how the speakers disguised irony and sarcasm in the mock polite speech. In contrast, the non-English major students correctly selected the situations that had mock polite speech, but the non-English majors tended to interpret the speakers' expressions as saving face not mock politeness.

These findings are in line with the CEFR framework (2020) in that the language learners with sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence tend to have an understanding and ability to use language appropriately when they are engaged in social interaction. This could be the result of the number of English linguistics-related subjects and the classroom environment or culture in which English major students had received instruction (i.e., semantics, pragmatics, and sociocultural contexts of English). This could be the case precisely because these subjects play important roles in helping English major students to understand the pragmatic concepts of English mock politeness (as revealed in the interview conducted in of this study) to such a degree that the English major students comprehended the English mock politeness communications as accurately as native speakers.

Another piece of relevant information gathered from the interview pertained to differences in practical experience between the English majors and the non-English majors ... none of the English major students had communicated in English while traveling abroad, but their non-English major counterparts had traveled and communicated in English abroad (Hong Kong, Singapore, and New Zealand). The data suggests that exposure to the culture of English-speaking countries did not boost these students' understanding of English mock politeness and supports the conclusion that taking advanced English courses related to linguistics did help the English major students to understand mock politeness.

The non-English major students focused on face saving communications. Spencer-Oatey (2007, p. 654) stated that, "Face is a complex phenomenon that needs to be studied from multiple perspectives". Similarly, Cutting and Fordyce (2021, p. 39) noted that, "the whole issue of politeness is bound by culture". Thus, it could be that the reason the non-English major students misinterpreted the mock politeness as face saving is not because their English language proficiency is lower than the English major students—there was neither quantitative evidence (correctly discerning mock polite speech from the 12 situations) nor qualitative data (the interviews). Instead, it is possible that their interest in studying English language, inside and outside the classroom, combined with their beliefs shaped by Thai culture, caused them interpreted the mock polite situations as face saving.

Compared to other students who got the answers for those situations wrong, their interest in English language learning could be even higher. It is just that they did not have a chance to take English-linguistics-related courses (e.g., semantics, pragmatics and sociolinguistics) like the English major students. As a result, they did not recognize those situations as mock politeness whereas their English major counterparts did.

As mentioned previously, the English major and non-English major students interpreted the mock politeness context differently. Notably, the English majors interpreted the situations to involve mock politeness while the non-English majors interpreted them as face saving. The students in neither group considered the mock politeness as impoliteness or sarcasm, as discussed above in previously published literature (discussed in the introduction).

The findings from this study, therefore, suggest that it is worth promoting teaching semantics and pragmatics for both English major and non-English major students.

That percentage of accurate answers of each year of English major students was not significantly different possibly because they have had a chance to take courses related to English language and cultures since they were first year students. Also, English major students are typically keenly interested in English language and culture before entering the university. That is one of the reasons they chose to major in English during the college.

As for the non-English major group, the percentage of accurate answers did not significantly differ based on year of enrollment. This may be because they are motivated English learners ... although perhaps not as motivated as their English major counterparts. The students who were interviewed reported that they have been exposed to English language in their daily life through movies, social media, songs, and textbooks.

The findings also revealed that both English major students and non-English major students believed that watching movies with English soundtracks, learning about English-language cultures, and observing people's body language could enhance the understanding of English mock politeness.

It is hoped that the major findings can convey the importance of understanding and teaching meanings influenced by pragmatic and sociolinguistic aspects of the English language, with regard to politeness and impoliteness in particular. Greater awareness of the use of mock politeness will increase the accuracy in using the English language appropriately.

Future research focused on younger learners and their level of understanding of English mock may be instructive. It could be that levels of understanding and correctly using this nuanced mode of communication is more wide-spread in younger learners, who may be better connected at even younger years via electronic channels (e.g., online games or social media), that tend to use English as the main language for communications.

### Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge and express deep appreciation to Kasetsart University for the research grant and to Universitas Negeri Semarang for its collaborative support. The research was conducted as part of a funded project between Kasetsart University and Universitas Negeri Semarang: UNES-KU Matching Grant Research Collaboration (2021), Topic 1, English Politeness Awareness and Comprehension of Indonesia and Thailand University Students.

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