



# Evaluating (Im)Politeness to Maintain Harmonious InterCultural Interaction between Indonesian Doctoral Students and Their Supervisors in the UK

Erizal Lugman

Applied English, Vocational College, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia  
Erizal.Lugman@ugm.ac.id

**Abstract.** International students will always engage in intercultural interactions in their study destination, both in academic and non-academic environments. These intercultural interactions also occur in the relationship between doctoral students and their PhD supervisors. One of the important elements in building harmonious intercultural interactions is intercultural competence development. In addition, one of the keys to the success of international doctoral students in completing their doctoral studies is to foster harmonious intercultural interactions with their supervisors. An aspect to maintain harmonious intercultural interactions is to understand (im)politeness between cultures. Therefore, this study will discuss what challenges international students face and how to develop intercultural competence when interacting cross-culturally with their supervisors, particularly in (im)politeness evaluation. This study took a sample of 4 PhD students from Indonesia who were doing their doctoral studies in UK universities. This qualitative study uses semi-structured interviews and is analysed using thematic analysis. The results of this study found that Indonesian students encountered various difficulties in establishing harmonious relationships at the beginning of the study period, as they encountered different expectations in terms of politeness. The themes found were over-politeness experienced by the participants. However, by encountering the problem of differences in expectations in politeness, they can develop their intercultural competence, one of which is by starting to think positively by getting to know the local culture better and evaluating the moral order in the relationship between students and supervisors. To conclude, this study found that intercultural competence can be developed to manage intercultural encounters that involve the evaluation of (im)politeness.

**Keywords:** (Im)politeness, intercultural interaction, study abroad, moral order, overpoliteness.

## 1 Introduction

Politeness and intercultural competence play vital roles in the academic experiences of international doctoral students. The necessity for understanding and employing appropriate politeness strategies is exemplified in various cultural contexts, including academia. As these students navigate their educational journey, they encounter different

norms and expectations based on the principles of politeness and effective communication.

Evaluating (im)politeness is crucial for fostering harmonious multicultural encounters. Politeness in interpersonal pragmatics is crucial to research since it is required for interpersonal rapport and relationship management [18]. However, because (im)politeness is inevitably linked to human behaviour, it differs greatly across cultures [9]. Eelen [5] also argues that politeness is open to individual and cultural interpretation, with each culture or culture creating its own standards for what is considered polite or impolite.

Research indicates that evaluating politeness is an essential tool in educational settings, particularly for maintaining cohesion and respect within student-lecturer interactions. Santos et al. studied the politeness strategies employed by Manobo students in the Philippines, detailing how these strategies manifest in interactions with both peers and teachers, highlighting the importance of cultural backgrounds in shaping communication norms [16]. Similarly, Kheovichai pointed out that academic discourse often involves politeness strategies that foster cooperation and mitigate potential conflicts, indicating the pervasive role of politeness in maintaining academic relationships [11]. This framework can benefit international doctoral students who may be unaccustomed to the academic politeness codes prevalent in different cultural contexts.

Additionally, students' cultural competence, their ability to engage effectively with individuals from diverse backgrounds, is influenced by their awareness and application of politeness strategies. Long emphasises that cultural competence entails sensitivity to linguistic and behavioural nuances that differ across cultural contexts [12]. Developing this competence is vital for international doctoral students to form constructive relationships with faculty, peers, and the broader academic community.

The role of intercultural communication is critical, as illustrated by Pikhart and Koblížková, who argue for the purposeful application of evaluating politeness to enhance communication efficiency in various contexts, and this principle holds in academia [14]. Additionally, academic interactions often require dialogue that respects cultural differences, as Schumann's hypotheses on second language acquisition suggest that non-native speakers benefit from environments where their cultural identities are acknowledged [2]. However, there are no studies specifically discussing how doctoral students evaluate (im)politeness during their supervision sessions with their supervisor. As a result, the research question in this paper is stated below:

To what extent do Indonesian doctoral students in the UK evaluate (im)politeness to maintain harmonious intercultural interactions during their study?

## 2 Methodology

The present study used a qualitative methodology to investigate the subjective and individual experiences of the participants when they encountered an unfamiliar cultural and physical setting. Finding connections across the participants' testimonies and obtaining profound insights into these unique narratives were the main goals. A crucial

component of qualitative research, according to Creswell [3], is reflexivity, in which investigators critically examine how their upbringing, cultural background, and life experiences may impact the way they interpret data, recognise themes, and create meaning.

The participants were four students from Indonesia who studied in the UK. Most of them had been living in the UK for 6 months. They were being asked about their experience in evaluating (im)politeness through a semi-structured interview. The semi-structured interview aims to deepen understanding of how international doctoral students perceive, employ, and navigate politeness norms and intercultural communication in their doctoral journeys.

An evaluative approach was used in this study for analysing politeness data. Eelen [5] asserts that assessing politeness is crucial to gaining a better comprehension of how it functions in social situations. However, researchers are urged to give participants' perceptions of politeness more weight than just linguistic forms and speaker techniques [10]. Furthermore, since politeness becomes clearer when viewed throughout lengthy conversational sequences, it should be evaluated in the context of the encounters [10].

### 3 Findings and Discussion

#### 3.1 Over-politeness

The first finding was that one of the participants experienced over-politeness during the first supervision with her supervisor. The participants may still use their knowledge of 'cultural identities' as a discursive source to evaluate (im)politeness [8]. As a result, she felt uncomfortable as she described in the following excerpt:

“As far as I know, a teacher has a higher position than the student, so we are expected to respect our teachers. However, here, sometimes, it is the opposite way. The teacher appreciates the students more, and maybe sometimes is too polite. She apologises for everything, like being late to see me, carrying my bag, and offering a drink. It was unnecessary to do. At first, I was a bit shocked by the over-politeness here. It makes me uncomfortable, and I do not feel good when I meet her as a student. So, I rarely see my lecturer because she treats me like that. Due to my poor relationship with my teacher, I am so hesitant if I need to ask something about things or lecture material that I do not understand.”

Intercultural supervision often involves power and identity negotiations due to unequal roles between supervisors and supervisees, which shape communication patterns and supervision processes. This aligns with discussions of intercultural supervision in post-colonial and diverse settings, where power relations and identity are central to supervisory relationships [19, 17].

### 3.2 Mismatched expectations of moral order in class

The next finding was that one of the participants expressed her discomfort in the class setting. It happened when one of the students acted impolitely with the lecturer by asking without raising his hand or interrupting the lecturer's talk. Consider the following excerpt:

“I do not know why a student in here cannot be polite with their lecturer in class, you know, how they are interrupting lecturers when giving talks in the class. As an example, they just talk in front of the class when the lecturer is explaining the material without raising their hands. In my culture, it is very rude for such a thing. In my culture, the lecturer will provide time to ask questions and the polite manners students need to raise their hands before asking.”

This finding indicates that there are cultural differences between Indonesians and the British in academic class. Literature on mismatched perceptions and expectations in academic environments demonstrates that if not adequately managed, such mismatches correlate with negative outcomes. While much of this literature focuses on clinical or vocational settings, the general principle mismatch between stakeholders' expectations and the actual requirements of a setting applies to the British university classroom, where students may expect more directive guidance or explicit consensus around acceptable practices, while the UK context often requires self-directed inquiry and contested dialogue [17, 19]. This consonance supports the idea that Indonesian students may experience a misalignment between their moral-educational norms and those of the host institution.

### 3.3 Learning New Knowledge of Over-polite Behaviour

After experiencing an unpleasant moment with the lecturer, the participants started to learn new things to overcome the issues related to over-politeness. The study found that successful and harmonious intercultural communication also depends on the development of intercultural competencies. These results are consistent with recent research showing that in order to sustain organised communication, participants must consider what social behaviours are suitable or inappropriate, good or terrible, polite or impolite, and so forth, in addition to exchanging common knowledge [10].

One of the participants started to evaluate a new perception of over-politeness to maintain harmonious intercultural interactions. Please consider the following excerpt:

“Another thing was, for the first time, I had a problem with the supervisor when I called him using his academic title. He looked very disappointed when I called him that way. Even after that moment, our relationship did not go very well. Then I found that he is happier to be called by his name, which is more polite and respectful in this culture. However, in my culture, calling someone by name, I mean only his or her name,

especially for the teacher, or someone who has an upper hierarchy, or here in my case, my supervisor, is a really bad attitude.”

Learning new knowledge of a new culture in the host country is a part of the students' intercultural competence development. For instance, Byram [1] states intercultural competence as “[k]nowledge of others; knowledge of self; abilities to understand and communicate; skills to explore and/or interact; appreciating others' values, beliefs, and behaviours; and relativising oneself” [4].

In cross-cultural pairs, mismatched expectations about what constitutes “appropriate” support could influence student resilience and progression. In previous studies, the student–supervisor relationship is repeatedly identified as the critical site where misalignment of expectations and communication difficulties arise, often manifesting through perceived politeness that masks underlying tensions or needs [15, 6, 7]. In Denmark, self-reported needs for improved supervision competence highlighted that mismatched expectations and differences in working styles contribute to miscommunication within the supervisory relationship [15].

Furthermore, it seems the participants who were pleased about her changing perception by evaluating (im)politeness to create harmonious intercultural interaction. As a result, by maintaining harmonious interaction between her and the supervisor, the process of completing the study could proceed smoothly. Research on resilience in doctoral completion highlights the importance of appropriate levels of emotional and practical support from supervisors . [13].

## 4 Conclusion

To conclude, this is the first study which evaluated doctoral students in their new perception of (im)politeness in their relationship with their supervisor in intercultural interactions. Using a qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews, this study focused on Indonesian doctoral students who study in UK universities. Using thematic analysis, the major findings were how the students evaluate over-politeness negatively, which made them discomfort in supervision sessions. However, over the period staying in the host country, the students could change their perception by evaluating the moral order; as a result, they could maintain harmonious intercultural interaction, particularly with their supervisors.

The results of this study add to the growing body of knowledge on (im)politeness in cross-cultural settings, especially about the misalignment of moral standards in these kinds of interactions. Additionally, this study builds upon and supports earlier research that emphasises the crucial role that moral order plays in determining (im)politeness. It

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