

# Politeness Strategies in Requests in American English File Series

Thi Phuong Nhung Nguyen

Fundamental Faculty, Posts and Telecommunications Institute of Technology, Hanoi, Vietnam

## Abstract

*This study aims at investigating politeness strategies used in requests in the textbooks American English File 1-4 published by Oxford University Press. The total of 103 requests were realized and classified into four types of politeness super-strategies based on Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987). The results show that negative politeness strategies are employed the most in requests. Of all the specific types of positive and negative politeness strategies, the strategies "Be conventionally indirect" and "Include both the speaker and hearer in the activity" account for the highest percentages of appearance. In addition, the relationship between the speaker and hearer is also examined to see if it affects their choices of politeness strategies.*

## Keywords

*Politeness strategies, Negative politeness, Positive politeness, Requests, Textbooks*

## I. Introduction

Communication is considered as a basic human activity which enables people to exchange their thoughts and feelings. During the whole communication process, all people have an expectation of being heard, understood, and especially respected, therefore, one of the factors deciding the success of this process is politeness. In verbal communication, words are used not only to present information but also to perform a variety of acts such as complaining, apologizing, giving advice, making requests, etc. When these speech acts are taken into consideration, it is widely agreed that intended results can be achieved if the speaker uses appropriate politeness strategies. This is even more important when the speaker wants the hearer to do something for him, so leaning to use politeness strategies in requests is very necessary for any language learners. These strategies can be found in conversations in textbooks, the most regularly-used learning source.

## II. Literature Review

### A. Politeness and Politeness Strategies

Robin Lakoff is one of the first linguists mentioning the theory of politeness (1973). She defined politeness as forms of behavior that have been developed in societies in order to reduce friction in personal interaction. She believed that three principles which should be used in a conversation to ensure it is successful are "Don't impose", "Give options" and "Make the receiver feel good".

Geoffrey Leech, another famous linguist, claimed that politeness is a strategy of conflict avoidance calculated on the basis of the costs and benefit related to both the speaker and hearer. In his "Principles of Pragmatics" book (1983), he listed six maxims of the politeness principles which are Maxim of Tact, Generosity, Approbation, Modesty, Agreement and Sympathy.

Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson (1987), who have had great influences on verbal politeness studies, emphasized politeness as strategies employed by a speaker to obtain a variety of objectives such as promoting or maintaining harmonious relations. They introduced the notion of "face" which is "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself, consisting in two related aspects: positive face and negative face". Positive face is the need to be accepted, even liked by others, to be treated as a number of the same group, and to know that his or her wants are shared by others. Negative face is the need to be independent,

to have freedom of action, and not to be imposed on by others. In their theory, if a speaker says something that represents a threat to another individual's expectations regarding self-image, it is described as a face-threatening act (FTA). From their point of view, three dimensions, namely power, social distance, and rank of imposition, contribute to the seriousness of an FTA. To deal with FTAs, they discussed four politeness super-strategies which are bald-on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off record.

- Bald-on record is used when maximum efficiency is very important. In cases of great urgency, redress would actually decrease the communicated urgency. For example: Help! (The non-urgent "Please help me, if you would be so kind" is inappropriate).

- Positive politeness seeks to minimize the threat to the hearer's positive face. Positive politeness strategies include:

Strategy 1: Notice/attend to the hearer (his or her interest, wants, needs,...)

Strategy 2: Exaggerate (interest, approval, sympathy with the hearer)

Strategy 3: Intensify interest to the hearer

Strategy 4: Use in-group identity markers

Strategy 5: Seek agreement

Strategy 6: Avoid disagreement

Strategy 7: Presuppose/raise/assert common ground

Strategy 8: Joke

Strategy 9: Assert or presuppose the speaker's knowledge of and concern for the hearer's wants

Strategy 10: Offer, promise

Strategy 11: Be optimistic

Strategy 12: Include both the speaker and hearer in the activity

Strategy 13: Give or ask for reasons

Strategy 14: Assume or assert reciprocity

Strategy 15: Give gifts to the hearer (goods, sympathy, understanding,...)

- Negative politeness is oriented towards the hearer's negative face and emphasizes avoidance of imposition on the hearer. Negative politeness strategies include:

Strategy 1: Be conventionally indirect

Strategy 2: Question, hedge

Strategy 3: Be pessimistic

Strategy 4: Minimize the imposition

Strategy 5: Give deference

Strategy 6: Apologize

Strategy 7: Impersonalize the speaker and hearer: Avoid the pronoun “I” and “you”

Strategy 8: State the FTA as a general rule

Strategy 9: Normalize

Strategy 10: Go on record as incurring a debt, or as not incurring the hearer

- Off record: A communicative act is done off-record if it is done in such a way that the hearer must infer what is in fact intended. For example: “Got a pen?” can be understood as a request: “If you’ve got a pen, please lend it to me.”

**B. Requests**

Linguists have different definitions and conceptions of the request because of its varieties and complexity. Blum-kulka et al. (1989) stated that “requests are made to cause an event”. According to Anna Trosborg (1995), a request is a sub-type of speech acts whereby a speaker (a requester) conveys to a hearer (requestee) that he/she wants the requestee to perform an act which is for the benefit of the speaker. By making a request, the speaker believes that the hearer is able to perform the intended action. Blum-kulka et al. (1989) classified requests into three types:

- Direct requests. For example: Clean up the kitchen.
- Conventionally indirect requests. For example: Could you clean up the kitchen?
- Non-conventionally indirect requests. For example: You have left the kitchen in a mess.

They also pointed out that requests are realized by means of four perspectives as follows:

- Hearer-oriented: The role of the hearer is stressed. For example: Could you pass that microphone?
- Speaker-oriented: The role of the speaker as the requester is stressed. For example: Can I borrow your notes?
- Speaker- and hearer-oriented (inclusive). For example: So could we clean up the kitchen?
- Impersonal. For example: So it might not be a bad idea to get the kitchen cleaned up.

When a request is made, the speaker infringes on the hearer’s freedom from imposition. For this reason, there is a need for the requester to minimize the imposition involved in the request by employing appropriate politeness strategies.

**II. Methodology**

The objectives of this study are:

- to investigate politeness strategies used in requests in American English File 1-4
- to compare the choices of politeness strategies in requests in the textbooks, seen from the speaker-hearer relationship.

The study is carried out by using the quantitative method with the data source taken from the textbooks American English File 1-4, equivalent to A1-B2 level (elementary to high-intermediate). These books were written by Christina Latham-Koenig and Clive Oxenden and published in 2008 by Oxford University Press. In Vietnam, American English File is popularly used as the English textbook in many universities and English teaching centers. This series is claimed to provide real-world texts, motivating tasks and practical English lessons with integrated videos focusing on everyday language to help students develop four language skills.

The following steps were taken to get data for analyzing. First, all the conversations in American English File 1-4, especially in listening tasks, were read carefully. Second, based on the context of

each conversation, utterances considered as requests were picked up and examined. The relationships between speakers were also noted. Then, these requests were categorized according to Brown & Levinson’s politeness theory. And finally, the collected data was processed with the application of both statistical and interpretive methods.

**III. Major Findings and Discussions**

**1. Politeness super-strategies in requests in American English File series**

The total of 103 requests in American English File series were realized and classified into four types of politeness super-strategies: bald-on record, positive politeness, negative politeness and off record. The statistics of these super-strategies are presented in table 1.

Table 1: The frequency of politeness super-strategies in requests in American English File series

Super-strategies	Number of appearance	Percentage
Bald-on record	34	33%
Positive politeness	23	22%
Negative politeness	42	41%
Off record	4	4%

It can be seen from the table that negative politeness strategies are employed the most in requests in American English File series with 41%. These strategies are oriented towards the hearer’s negative face, his want to maintain claims of territory and self-determination. Therefore, it is more secure to choose negative politeness strategies to show little imposition on the hearer which can make him willing to do the requested act. Bald-on record and positive politeness strategies are moderately used with the percentages of 33% and 22% respectively. The category of the least occurrence is off record with only 4 times in the series.

**2. Positive politeness strategies in requests in American English File series**

According to Brown and Levinson, there are 15 positive politeness strategies, however only strategies 1, 3, 4, 12, 13 are found in requests in these books and their frequencies are shown in table 2.

Table 2: The frequency of positive politeness strategies in requests in American English File series

Strategies	Number of appearance	Percentage
1. Notice/attend to the hearer (his or her interest, wants, needs,...)	1	4%
3. Intensify interest to the hearer	1	4%
4. Use in-group identity markers	1	4%
12. Include both the speaker and hearer in the activity	12	52%
13. Give or ask for reasons	8	35%

As shown in the table, strategy 12 is used with the highest

percentage 52%. The following is an example of this strategy taken from the book:

- Let's go back to my office and we can sign the contract.  
(American English File 1, unit 6, track 6.2, page 64)
- Shall we go for a walk?  
(American English File 2, unit 3, track 3.18, page 36)

By using inclusive "we" or "let's" form in the request, the speaker wants the hearer to cooperate with him in performing an act, thereby reducing the risk of face threat.

Ranking at the second is strategy 13 with 35%. The speaker gives the reason why he wants the hearer to do something to show the reasonableness of the request and make it more practical. For example:

- Hurry up, Vicky, you're late. It's five to eight.  
(American English File 1, unit 3, track 3.5, page 30)

Strategy 1 "Notice/attend to the hearer", strategy 3 "Intensify interest to the hearer" and strategy 4 "Use in-group identity markers" occur only once in the books.

### 3. Negative politeness strategies in requests in American English File series

Only three out of ten negative politeness strategies are found in requests and they are presented in table 3.

Table 3: The frequency of negative politeness strategies in requests in American English File series

Strategies	Number of appearance	Percentage
1. Be conventionally indirect	39	93%
5. Give deference	1	2%
6. Apologize	2	5%

It is obvious that strategy 1 "Be conventionally indirect" accounts for an extremely great proportion of 93%. The possible explanation may come from the belief that the more indirect an utterance is, the more efforts the speaker makes to satisfy the hearer's face and avoid possible threats to him. Such expressions as "Could/Can you", "Can I/we", "I'd like", ect are used frequently in indirect requests as in the following examples:

- Could you play something for us?  
(American English File 3, unit 3, track 3.9, page 43)
- Can you show them to me?  
(American English File 4, unit 3, track 3.1, page 37)

Other strategies with a small number of appearances are giving deference and apologizing. For example:

- Ma'am, do you have a few minutes to answer ...  
(American English File 2, unit 4, track 4.2, page 41)
- Excuse me! Could you call me a taxi, please?  
(American English File 1, unit 8, track 8.17, page 96)

### 4. Politeness strategies and the relationship between the speaker and hearer

There are eight main kinds of relationship between participants of conversations in American English File: family members, lovers, friends, colleagues, customer-waiter/seller, presenter-guest (on TV/radio programs), and strangers. Their choices of politeness strategies are illustrated in table 4.

Table 4 : The frequency of politeness strategies in requests seen from the speaker-hearer relationship

Speaker-hearer relationship	Strategies			
	Bald-on record	Positive politeness	Negative politeness	Off record
Family members	9%	13%	10%	0%
Lovers	0%	30%	0%	0%
Friends	15%	36%	10%	75%
Colleagues	0%	9%	7%	25%
Teacher-student	35%	4%	11%	0%
Customer-waiter/seller	27%	4%	24%	0%
Presenter-guest	14%	4%	26%	0%
Strangers	0%	0%	12%	0%

Bald-on record strategies are mainly used by teachers in classrooms and customers in restaurants with the percentages of 35% and 27% respectively. This can be explained by the fact that the teacher holds higher power over students and the language used in requests in classrooms should be unambiguous to ensure full compliance. Similarly, in restaurants where fast and efficient service is a must, customers tend to use direct requests when ordering food. For example:

- Fruit salad, please.  
(American English File 1, unit 7, track 7.19, page 84)

Friends and lovers show a preference for positive politeness strategies. They are intimately related people whose relationship is built up on understanding and sharing common desires, interests and even knowledge, so they tend to use strategies marking their closeness. For example:

- Let's go and find a hotel.  
(American English File 1, unit 6, track 6.4, page 65)

TV/radio presenters use more negative politeness strategies in requests than other people. Perhaps the reason is when interviewing guests for widely-broadcast programs, the presenter wants to reduce the face threat by mitigating the force of the imposition. For example:

- Could you play something for us?  
(American English File 3, unit 3, track 3.9, page 43)

The final politeness strategy, off record, is mostly employed by friends in their conversations. Because friends quite understand each other, the speaker expects his friend to interpret his expectation correctly. For example, "Deborah, Laura is not at work now" (track 5.1 American English File 2) can be contextually understood that the speaker asks Laura to stop asking Deborah too many questions related to her work while they are at a party.

In short, the relationship between the speaker and hearer can affect their choices of politeness strategies in requests. However, with only a few requests made by family members, colleagues and strangers in the textbooks, it is difficult to make any inference and this needs more studies.

### IV. Conclusion and recommendations

By investigating politeness strategies, the study shows that all four types of verbal politeness super-strategies given by Brown and Levinson (1987) are employed in requests in American English

File series. It also reveals that negative politeness strategies are preferred to other strategies, but only strategies 1, 5, and 6 are found. Strategy 1 “Be conventionally indirect” has the highest frequency of occurrences in requests. And of all five positive politeness strategies found in the books, strategy 12 “Include both the speaker and hearer in the activity” is used the most. In addition, the research findings show that the relationship between the speaker and hearer has effects on the choice of politeness strategies in requests.

In the area of English teaching and studying, teachers should help students be well-aware of the importance of politeness in communication, especially in requests. Teachers can use conversations in textbooks as models to guide students through the usages of politeness strategies in daily conversations. When using American English File 1-4 as the textbooks, it is necessary for teachers to know that only some of positive and negative politeness strategies are employed in the models. Thus, they need to provide some examples of other strategies and create practical situations for students to practice these strategies effectively.

### References

- [1] Blum-kulka, S. House, J. & Kasper, G. (1989). *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies*. Ablex Publishing Cooperation.
- [2] Brown, P. & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness-Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge University Press.
- [3] Lakoff, R.T. (1973) *The Logic of Politeness*. Papers from the ninth regional meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society, Chicago.
- [4] Leech, G.N. (1983). *Principles of Pragmatics*. Longman, London.
- [5] Nguyen Quang (2002). *Giao tiếp và giao tiếp văn hóa*. Vietnam National University, Hanoi.
- [6] Oxenden C. and Latham-Koenig C. (2008). *American English File 1-4*. Oxford University Press.
- [7] Soong-Hee Koh (2002). *The speech act of request: A comparative study between Korean ESL speakers and Americans*, California State University, San Bernardino.
- [8] Trosborg A. (1995). *Interlanguage Pragmatics: Requests, Complaints and Apologies*. Berlin Mouton de Gruyter.
- [9] Vo Dai Quang (2004). *Lịch sử: Chiến lược giao tiếp của cá nhân hay chuẩn mực xã hội*. Vietnam National University, Hanoi.
- [10] Yule G. (1996). *Pragmatics*. Oxford University Press.