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Evaluating perceptions of (im)politeness among Indonesian students in the UK to develop intercultural competence

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ABSTRACT

International students frequently need to interpret unfamiliar forms of politeness in study-abroad contexts. For Indonesian students in the UK, encounters involving address terms, request markers, academic feedback, and expectations of informality may create pragmatic friction that affects confidence, academic engagement, and social integration. This qualitative linguistic ethnographic study examined how five Indonesian PhD students in the UK (four men and one woman) perceived and evaluated (im)politeness during their intercultural adjustment and how these evaluations contributed to their development of intercultural competence. Data were collected through repeated semi-structured interviews and observations over eleven months. The interviews were conducted in Indonesian, translated into English with attention to pragmatic equivalence, and analysed through an evaluative approach informed by interpersonal pragmatics and Spencer-Oatey and Kádár's model of (im)politeness evaluation. The findings show three interrelated patterns: mismatched expectations of moral order and communicative norms, negative evaluations of over-politeness and unfamiliar address practices, and emotion-laden evaluations of verbal and interactional impoliteness. The participants gradually re-evaluated these encounters by learning local pragmatic norms, interpreting formulaic expressions and feedback practices in context, and becoming more open to culturally variable politeness expectations. The study argues that perceptions of (im)politeness are not peripheral to intercultural competence but a key mechanism through which international students learn to manage rapport in multilingual academic and everyday settings.

Keywords: (Im)politeness evaluation; Indonesian international students; intercultural competence; interpersonal pragmatics; study abroad

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INTRODUCTION

International students pursue higher education outside their country of citizenship and, during study abroad, they inevitably engage in everyday interactions with residents, lecturers, administrative staff, and other international students (Migration Data Portal, cited in Yang, 2022; OECD, 2018). The growth of international student mobility has made intercultural communication a central concern for higher education because students must not only succeed academically but also develop the ability to participate appropriately in unfamiliar social and institutional settings.

Intercultural competence is therefore important for international students because it involves the knowledge, attitudes, and skills required to communicate effectively and appropriately across cultural boundaries (Deardorff, 2006; Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009). Recent research has examined intercultural competence among international students and in higher education settings (Hackett et al., 2023; Omar & Shaalan, 2023; Xiaoyan et al., 2024). Much of this work has focused on frameworks, measurement, and the pedagogical development of intercultural competence. Less attention has been given to how students develop this competence through the

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moment-by-moment evaluation of interactional behaviour, particularly when they perceive a communicative act as polite, impolite, over-polite, or inappropriate.

This issue is highly relevant to applied linguistics because (im)politeness is not merely a matter of general culture; it is realised and interpreted through language use, address forms, request markers, feedback practices, terms of endearment, turn-taking, tone, and other verbal and embodied pragmatic cues. Politeness in interpersonal pragmatics is central to rapport management and relationship building (Spencer-Oatey, 2020). However, (im)politeness is also culturally and contextually variable, and what is evaluated as respectful in one setting may be interpreted as distant, excessive, rude, or inappropriate in another (Kádár & Bargiela-Chiappini, 2011; Kádár & Haugh, 2013).

Indonesian students constitute a significant and growing group of outbound international students. Rather than the previously reported figure of "7 million," more recent UNESCO-related data summarised by the British Council indicate that around 59,000 Indonesian students studied abroad in 2023, with the UK remaining an important destination for Indonesian mobility (British Council, 2023; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2024). The Indonesian case is important because many students move from communicative environments in which hierarchy, relational deference, indirectness, friendly non-verbal cues, and respectful address forms are often valued into academic and everyday contexts where informality, first-name address, formulaic request markers such as "please," direct feedback, and casual address terms may operate differently.

These differences may generate specific points of pragmatic friction. For example, Indonesian students may evaluate a lecturer's informality as over-polite or confusing, a shop assistant's insistence on the word "please" as unexpectedly harsh, or a supervisor's direct written feedback as face-threatening. Such evaluations matter because they may shape students' willingness to speak with lecturers, ask for help, participate in class, or form social relationships. In this sense, evaluations of impoliteness are a critical variable in both academic and social integration.

This study adopts an applied linguistic perspective, particularly interpersonal pragmatics and linguistic ethnography. Linguistic ethnography examines language use in situated social contexts and connects fine-grained interactional evidence with participants' interpretations of meaning (Maybin & Tusting, 2011; Shaw et al., 2015). From this perspective, intercultural competence is understood as the ability to communicate verbally and non-verbally and behave effectively and appropriately with members of different cultural groups while managing the psychological demands and dynamic outcomes of such interactions (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009).

The study therefore draws on an evaluative view of (im)politeness. In this view, politeness and impoliteness are not treated as fixed properties of particular words or formulae. They are analysed as participants' situated judgements of contextualised behaviour. The baseline for evaluation in this article is operationalised through three interrelated criteria: (1) participants' subjective behavioural expectations, (2) the perceived situational norms and relational rights/obligations that apply in a given academic, service, or everyday encounter, and (3) the socio-moral order through which participants judge what is right, appropriate, respectful, excessive, rude, or offensive (Culpeper, 2011; Kádár & Haugh, 2013; Kádár, 2020; Parvaresh, 2019; Parvaresh & Tayebi, 2018; Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021). These criteria provide the analytical basis for examining why the same cue, such as "please," first-name address, "love," "rubbish," smiling, or apologising, may be evaluated differently across encounters.

Accordingly, this article does not attempt to compare national cultures or to decide objectively whether a particular British or Indonesian practice is polite or impolite. Its core focus is participants' subjective perceptions and evaluations of (im)politeness during intercultural encounters in the UK, and how these evaluations contributed to their development of intercultural competence. By focusing on participants' perceptions rather than assuming a fixed definition of polite behaviour, this study contributes to applied linguistics by showing how pragmatic evaluation functions as a mechanism of intercultural learning.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative linguistic ethnographic design to explore how Indonesian students interpreted and evaluated (im)politeness during their early intercultural adjustment in the UK. This design was selected because the study focuses on participants' lived experiences, their metapragmatic reflections on interactional events, and the situated meanings attached to language use in academic and everyday encounters. Reflexivity was also important because the researcher shared a national and linguistic background with the participants, which helped build rapport while requiring careful attention to interpretation during data analysis (Creswell, 2013).

This article reports on five focal Indonesian PhD students who were selected from the wider doctoral study because their interview and observational data contained detailed accounts of (im)politeness-related encounters. The participants were recruited through purposive sampling, which was appropriate because the study required

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participants with direct experience studying in the UK who could provide rich accounts of intercultural encounters (Tongco, 2007). The five participants comprised four men and one woman and were given pseudonyms: MT, DB, SS, FB, and AR. Four were studying at the University of Nottingham and one at Imperial College London. All participants were Indonesian doctoral students who were experiencing their initial period of intercultural adjustment in the UK. Ethical approval for the doctoral project was granted by Anglia Ruskin University's Faculty Research Ethics Panel/Departmental Research Ethics Panel (FREP/DREP) under the University's Research Ethics Policy, with approval dated 28 November 2018. The approval letter did not specify a separate numerical protocol/reference number. All participants provided informed consent, were informed of their right to withdraw, and were assigned pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

In-depth interviews explored participants' experiences of intercultural communication and (im)politeness during their period of cultural adjustment. The interviews focused on academic and everyday social interactions, including conversations with lecturers, shop assistants, café staff, health-service staff, neighbours, and other students. This method was chosen because it enabled participants to explain the meanings they attached to specific interactional events in their own words (Taylor et al., 2016).

Data were gathered over eleven months, from January to November 2019, in several UK locations. The extended duration was necessary because the study aimed to capture change over time, from participants' initial evaluations of unfamiliar behaviour to their later re-evaluations after further exposure to local pragmatic norms. Each participant was interviewed at least once per month, while additional meetings occurred when participants themselves reported significant events, such as orientation activities, student union gatherings, academic meetings, or everyday encounters that involved intercultural communication. This participant-led variation did not determine the final themes: all cases were first analysed individually and then compared across cases so that frequently interviewed participants did not dominate the findings. Analytic saturation was reached when later interviews repeated the same core patterns of evaluation, namely mismatched moral order, over-politeness, emotion-laden impoliteness, and subsequent re-evaluation. Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes.

All interviews were conducted in Indonesian to allow the participants to express pragmatic meanings, emotions, and culturally specific evaluations in the language in which they felt most comfortable. The translation process prioritised pragmatic and semantic equivalence rather than word-for-word literalness. First, the Indonesian transcripts were translated into English while retaining key evaluative terms such as "rude," "too polite," "respect," "please," "sir," and "madam" where these were central to the analysis. Second, excerpts were checked against the original Indonesian to ensure that stance, intensity, and politeness meanings were not lost. Third, a professional English editor and a certified Indonesian translator reviewed the translated excerpts. This procedure follows cross-language qualitative research guidance that translation should be treated as part of analysis rather than a purely mechanical transfer of words (Squires, 2009; Temple & Young, 2004).

The data were analysed through an evaluative approach to (im)politeness grounded explicitly in Spencer-Oatey and Kádár's (2021) evaluation model. The analysis focused not only on linguistic forms but also on how participants perceived and evaluated those forms in context. To make the procedure replicable, the model was operationalised in six steps. First, interview transcripts and observation notes were read repeatedly to identify episodes in which participants explicitly evaluated an interaction as polite, impolite, over-polite, rude, uncomfortable, respectful, inappropriate, or emotionally disturbing. Second, the contextualised interpersonal behaviour was identified, including verbal cues such as "please," address terms, first-name use, "love," "mate," "buddy," and "rubbish," as well as embodied cues such as smiling and facial expression. Third, the episode was located against the participant's normalcy zone and threshold: behaviour was coded as crossing the threshold when the participant treated it as sufficiently unusual, excessive, inappropriate, or rights-threatening to require comment or emotional response. Fourth, the participant's evaluation of the behaviour and/or agent was coded. A cue was coded as polite when the participant evaluated it as appropriate, respectful, or rapport-enhancing; impolite or rude when it was evaluated as offensive, face-threatening, disrespectful, anger-inducing, or rapport-undermining; over-polite when it was evaluated as excessive, role-misaligned, too intimate, or unnecessarily deferential; and inappropriate when it was judged unsuitable for the situation without necessarily being described as intentionally offensive. Fifth, the local situation was analysed by considering participants, setting, institutional role relations, rights and obligations, and interactional purpose. Sixth, earlier and later interviews were compared to trace whether participants re-evaluated the same behaviour after gaining more intercultural experience. In this way, Steps 2 and 3 of Spencer-Oatey and Kádár's (2021) model were used to distinguish normalcy-threshold breaches from subsequent evaluations of behaviour or agent, while Step 4 was used to explain the

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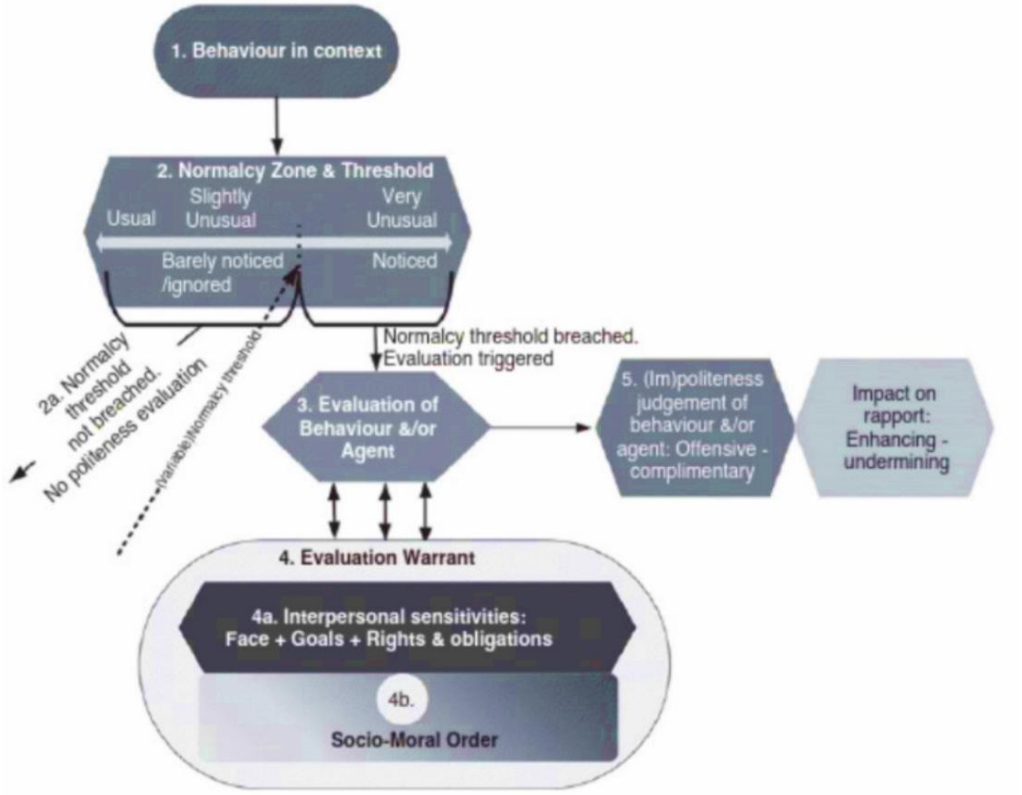
warrants for those evaluations in relation to interpersonal sensitivities and socio-moral order.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the analytical sequence begins with contextualised interpersonal behaviour (Step 1). The next stage asks whether the behaviour remains within the participant's normalcy zone or crosses the normalcy threshold (Step 2). In this article, the "normalcy threshold" is not identical to the cue itself; rather, it is the participant's baseline expectation against which cues such as address terms, "please," smiling, direct feedback, or informal phatic expressions are judged.

Figure 1

Operationalised Evaluation Process Used in This Study (adapted from Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021)



When the threshold is breached, evaluation is triggered (Step 3), and the evaluation is then warranted through interpersonal sensitivities, rights and obligations, and socio-moral order (Step 4). The final stage is the participant's (im)politeness judgement and its effect on rapport (Step 5). The findings below therefore map each empirical example onto this sequence by showing the behaviour in context, the cue that crossed the normalcy threshold, the participant's evaluation, the warrant for the evaluation, and the later re-evaluation that supported intercultural competence development.

FINDINGS

From Contextualised Behaviour to Normalcy Thresholds: Mismatched Moral Order and Communicative Norms

This section presents the findings in direct alignment with Spencer-Oatey and Kádár's (2021) evaluation model. Across the cases, the observed behaviours in context included neighbourly smiling, request formulation with "please," supervisor-student address and apology practices, direct academic feedback, healthcare reprimands, and informal address terms such as "love," "mate," and "buddy." These cues became analytically relevant because they crossed participants' normalcy thresholds: participants compared them with expectations of appropriate language use, address, tone, feedback, or embodied pragmatic conduct. The findings are therefore organised from behaviour in context and threshold breach, to evaluation of behaviour or agent, to evaluation warrant, and finally to re-evaluation as intercultural competence development. The term "conflict" in this article does not refer to open argument or personal dispute. It refers to interactional tension or communicative misunderstanding that emerged when participants' expectations differed from those encountered in the host environment.

Behaviour in Context and Normalcy Threshold: Smiling and Neighbourly Friendliness

The first finding concerns how participants interpreted unexpected behaviours and pragmatic cues in social encounters. Although some cues were

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non-verbal, they functioned interactionally as signs through which participants inferred friendliness, distance, respect, or impoliteness. This point is exemplified by MT, who attempted to initiate friendly contact with neighbours by smiling. As shown in Excerpt 1, MT had limited prior cross-cultural experience before relocating to the UK and evaluated the neighbours' lack of reciprocal friendliness through norms familiar from his Sundanese background. In terms of the model, smiling was the behaviour in context, while the lack of reciprocal smiling crossed MT's normalcy threshold for neighbourly friendliness.

> **Excerpt 1 (MT, initial interview, neighbourhood smiling encounter)**
> I have a problem with perceptions about smiling in this culture. I came from a Sundanese culture, where this culture emphasises hospitality and smiles at everyone. When I try to smile at the people here, this habit is unfamiliar to them. So, they responded with an unfriendly gesture which is a very inappropriate norm. So, I was a bit worried about living here, if I'm going to live with people who aren't nice, and it made me feel homesick.

Using the evaluation model, the contextualised behaviour was MT's attempt to use smiling as an embodied phatic cue of friendliness in a neighbourhood encounter. The unexpected response was the absence of reciprocal smiling or a welcoming facial expression. This absence breached MT's normalcy threshold because, in his cultural experience, smiling commonly indexes hospitality and goodwill. MT then evaluated the response as "unfriendly" and "inappropriate." The relevant evaluation warrant was therefore not only about facial expression but about the moral order of neighbourly conduct: a friendly cue should be acknowledged with a friendly response.

The reaction unsettled MT and contributed to homesickness because he interpreted the response as a sign that people around him might not be welcoming. This example shows how embodied pragmatic cues may become part of (im)politeness evaluation when interlocutors attach different social meanings to them. The analysis therefore does not treat smiling as a purely anthropological detail, but as a situated semiotic resource through which rapport was attempted and then evaluated. The episode illustrates how moral order reflects culturally embedded judgments about what counts as appropriate conduct (Domenici & Littlejohn, as cited in Parvaresh & Tayebi, 2018).

Behaviour in Context and Evaluation of Behaviour: DB's Supermarket Request Encounter

The narrative below illustrates how one participant, DB, encountered an unexpected and unsettling situation in a new cultural setting. During an interview, DB described a conflict that occurred with a British shop assistant at a supermarket. He had difficulty locating an item and, despite feeling uncertain about communicating with local people, he approached a shopkeeper for assistance. However, the interaction did not unfold as expected, as shown in Excerpt 2.

> **Excerpt 2 (DB, initial interview, supermarket request encounter)**
> Once, when I was at the supermarket, there was a shop assistant grumbling in front of me, when I asked for help and wanted to see some items. At the end of the conversation, with an unpleasant tone, I was shocked as he said that when you want to ask for help, don't forget to end the sentence with the word 'please'. I didn't know this beforehand, and I asked for help in a friendly tone and smile. After that incident, I become less confident when I wanted to communicate with British people working as shop assistants.

This incident illustrates a mismatch in expectations surrounding request formulation and service interaction. The contextualised behaviour was DB's request for assistance, while the salient cue was the missing formulaic marker "please." The shop assistant oriented to "please" as a necessary linguistic cue for courteous service encounters. DB, however, assumed that a friendly tone and smile were sufficient to make the request polite. The cue therefore crossed DB's normalcy threshold because the correction was unexpected and was delivered in a tone he evaluated as unpleasant. This clash aligns with Kádár and Haugh's (2013) argument that successful intercultural communication requires shared understanding of what is socially appropriate, polite, or offensive in context.

DB evaluated the shop assistant's correction as unnecessarily harsh because he interpreted the staff member's tone as reprimanding rather than helpful. The episode had an affective consequence: DB became less confident about initiating interactions with British shop assistants. In the terms of the evaluation model, the contextualized behavior was the correction of a missing "please," the participant's evaluation was offence and reduced confidence, and the moral order involved competing expectations about whether politeness is primarily conveyed through formulaic language or friendly relational demeanor.

Evaluation of Behaviour and Agent: Over-Politeness and Hierarchical Misalignment in SS's Academic Encounter

In intercultural academic communication, politeness is frequently realised through address forms, role expectations, and the degree of formality used between lecturers and students. What is considered respectful in one academic culture may be evaluated as excessive, distant, or inappropriate in another (Haugh, 2007; Culpeper et al., 2017). The following case concerns SS's evaluation of her supervisor's

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repeated apologies, offers of help, and informal relational style as "too polite." The linguistic issue is not simply hierarchy as a cultural value, but how status relations are pragmatically negotiated through forms of address, apology, and offers in academic interaction.

> **Excerpt 3 (SS, initial interview, supervisor-student over-politeness encounter)**
> 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 with the over-politeness here. It makes me uncomfortable and does 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.

SS experienced discomfort during initial meetings with her academic supervisor because the supervisor's interactional style conflicted with SS's expectations of lecturer-student relations. SS expected a degree of institutional formality that would index the lecturer's authority and the student's deference. Instead, she encountered repeated apologies, offers to carry her belongings, offers of drinks, and a more symmetrical interactional stance. These linguistic and interactional cues were intended as courteous, but SS evaluated them as over-polite because they unsettled her expectation of how academic status should be communicated.

The example shows how academic politeness is evaluated through metapragmatic expectations about role and address. SS's statement that "a teacher has a higher position than the student" explains the normalcy threshold and moral order she brought to the encounter. For her, a supervisor should not need to apologise repeatedly or perform service-like offers for a student. The supervisor's behaviour was evaluated as over-polite because it disrupted expected rights and obligations in lecturer-student relations. The mismatch affected her academic engagement because she avoided informal meetings with the supervisor and became hesitant to ask questions about course material.

The tension therefore stemmed from different pragmatic assumptions about how respect is displayed in academic interaction. In this case, over-politeness did not mean that the supervisor was impolite in intention; rather, SS evaluated the supervisor's relational style as inappropriate because it conflicted with the hierarchical moral order she expected. This finding reinforces Haugh and Kádár's (2017) argument that interlocutors assess conduct through culturally grounded moral lenses.

Evaluation Outcomes: Emotion-Laden Evaluations of Institutional Impoliteness

Another instance of misaligned expectations regarding moral order involves the participants' emotional responses, particularly anger and offence. In the model, these responses represent evaluation outcomes triggered when the normalcy threshold was breached and when the participant attributed the behaviour to a violation of professional or relational obligations. The following excerpt illustrates how SS evaluated a healthcare interaction through expectations of how staff should address patients.

> **Excerpt 4 (SS, initial interview, GP reception encounter)**
> I once got an offensive utterance from the GP reception when I arrived a little late for an appointment. They said I wasted their time waiting for me with an unpleasant face and, in my opinion, they were not polite in terms of serving customers. As my background as a midwife, they could not talk to any patients like this in any health centre anywhere. They seemed to say that I had made a huge mistake. As a British lady, I think, she was racist as I am wearing hijab (craft). I understand here how people here value their time. However, I am a new resident here, so I need to learn the rules. They should understand if we could not manage to be on time. However, I was shocked and offended when they expressed those impolite words when reprimanding me

This interaction occurred at a healthcare facility shortly after SS arrived in the host country. The contextualised behaviour was a reprimand for lateness delivered by reception staff, and the linguistic cue that SS evaluated negatively was the wording that she understood as blaming her for having "wasted" the staff's time. The utterance and facial expression crossed her normalcy threshold because she expected health-service staff to reprimand patients carefully and respectfully. Her evaluation warrant drew on a professional moral order from her background as a midwife. Valdesolo (2018, as cited in Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021) highlights how anger is closely tied to moral evaluation, and this case shows how perceived impoliteness may be intensified when the listener interprets the utterance as both professionally inappropriate and identity-threatening.

Another participant, FB, reported feelings of anger and emotional distress following his interpretation of a remark made by his supervisor, as shown in the following excerpt:

> **Excerpt 5 (FB, interview, academic feedback encounter)**
> I was devastated when my lecturer gave feedback through email about my writings submitted in one of the exams. She said my writing was rubbish. I never heard a teacher say that before. That word is more than impolite behavior, but she was so rude. As a teacher, she could not say that. After that moment, I

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> was very less motivated to study because I felt that my writing wasn't enough to be at the master level.

FB's case is more explicitly linguistic because it centres on the evaluation of a single lexical item in written academic feedback: "rubbish." In terms of the model, the behaviour in context was written feedback from a lecturer, the normalcy-threshold breach was the unexpected use of a strongly negative lexical item, and the evaluation was that the lecturer was "rude." Although the supervisor may have intended blunt evaluation of academic writing quality, FB evaluated the term as beyond ordinary criticism and as a breach of teacher-student rapport. The episode therefore shows how lexical choice in academic feedback can trigger an impoliteness evaluation when the learner's expectations of educational authority include care, encouragement, and face-sensitive correction.

Together, the healthcare and academic-feedback examples show that anger emerged when participants evaluated linguistic cues as violating expected moral conduct. SS focused on the reception staff's reprimanding wording and tone, whereas FB focused on the lexical item "rubbish." In both cases, the participants' interpretations were shaped by prior expectations of how professionals and teachers should speak to patients or students. These examples also demonstrate why the analysis of (im)politeness in this study belongs to applied linguistics: the focus is on how specific utterances, address practices, and evaluative language are interpreted by language users in institutional encounters.

Re-Evaluation and Intercultural Competence Development through Politeness Evaluation

Building on the previous findings, this section explains how participants developed intercultural competence through repeated evaluations and re-evaluations of (im)politeness. The alignment with the evaluation model is explicit here: participants first identified an unfamiliar behaviour in context, then judged whether it breached their normalcy threshold, then evaluated it as polite, impolite, over-polite, rude, or inappropriate, and later reinterpreted the same cue through a broader understanding of local pragmatic norms. The data show that competence was not simply acquired as general cultural knowledge. It developed through attention to pragmatic cues, reflection on the moral order behind those cues, and gradual adjustment of participants' own interpretations and communicative practices.

Re-evaluating Over-Polite Behaviour and Informal Address Terms

This study highlights how participants gradually redefined what they initially evaluated as excessive politeness by learning the situational norms observed in the English university, retail, café, and healthcare settings where the research took place. The term "British social norms" is therefore used cautiously here: the study does not claim to describe all UK regions or communities, but the local and institutional norms encountered by the participants in Nottingham, London, and related everyday settings. One participant initially struggled with overtly polite or informal expressions, but later became more able to interpret them from the speaker's situational perspective. A comparable transformation is illustrated in the following excerpt:

> **Excerpt 6 (AR, follow-up interview, service-address term "love")**
> So like, when she yesterday (the cashier, white lady British middle-age), called me love, and for me, even I still that is too much, but I feel now, she tried to call me in the positive way, now I feel that she respects me a lot.

The narrative highlights AR's growing awareness of local address practices. The term "love," used by a middle-aged British cashier, was first evaluated as too intimate or excessive. Later, AR reinterpreted it as a friendly and socially acceptable address term in that service encounter. The re-evaluation shows developing pragmatic awareness: AR shifted from judging the expression through Indonesian expectations of appropriate distance to considering how the expression functions locally.

According to Kádár and Haugh (2013), the interpretation of (im)politeness is shaped by multiple contextual factors. AR's case shows how intercultural competence develops when students acquire new knowledge about the pragmatic function of formulaic address terms. The participant did not merely learn that the word "love" exists in English; he learned how it may index friendliness or respect in a particular service interaction. This kind of pragmatic learning enabled a more positive evaluation of the encounter.

Re-Evaluating Classroom Participation and Academic Address Practices

Evaluations of (im)politeness frequently arise during intercultural interactions because they are connected to identity and perceived social norms (Kádár & Haugh, 2013). In academic settings, the relevant cues included turn-taking practices, raising hands before speaking, using titles or first names, and asking questions during lectures. During her early adjustment, SS evaluated these practices through Indonesian expectations of classroom respect and lecturer authority.

> **Excerpt 7 (SS, initial interview, classroom interaction)**
> 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.

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> 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 of 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.

Over time, SS developed intercultural competence through self-directed learning and repeated participation in academic interaction. She began to recognise that speaking up, interrupting with a relevant question, or using a lecturer's first name could function as engagement rather than disrespect in the specific classrooms she attended. This shift did not require her to abandon Indonesian norms; rather, it enabled her to interpret academic behaviour through more than one pragmatic frame.

> **Excerpt 8 (SS, follow-up interview, supervisor address term)**
> 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 calling 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 the 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

By the start of the fourth week, SS felt more comfortable sharing ideas and asking questions when she needed clarification. She also started to reflect on differences between Indonesian academic politeness and the host university's norms of interaction. This change was visible not only in classroom participation but also in everyday service encounters, where she experimented with locally appropriate phatic expressions and address terms. Consider the following excerpt from a follow-up interview with SS:

> **Excerpt 9 (SS, follow-up interview, campus café phatic interaction)**
> I'm starting to enjoy living here because I can build a harmonious conversation with the people around me. I began to learn simple words, by calling them 'mate or buddy'. Then ask about the news, the weather, or how their weekend is. Until now I have a new friend a barista in a café on my campus.

The narrative shows how SS gradually adapted to local phatic routines in a campus café. At first, she used formal address terms such as "sir" or "madam," which she intended as respectful but which sounded too distant in the café context. She later adopted more informal terms such as "mate" and "buddy" and engaged in small talk about the weather, the weekend, or the café's busyness. These were not trivial vocabulary items; they were pragmatic resources that helped her build rapport and participate more comfortably in everyday intercultural interaction.

Re-Evaluating Moral Order and Local Pragmatic Cues

Moral order plays a crucial role in effective communication because interlocutors evaluate language and behaviour through implicit expectations about what is appropriate (Haugh, 2013; Parvaresh & Tayebi, 2018). Misalignment in these expectations may lead to offence, as shown by MT's initial evaluation of smiling and reciprocal friendliness in the following narrative:

> **Excerpt 10 (MT, follow-up interview, smiling norms)**
> I have a problem with perceptions about smiling in this culture. When I try to smile with the people here, they think this habit is a bit unfamiliar for them. As a result, I feel they are uncomfortable with my habit of inviting a smile to them. They are not responding me with a smile, on the contrary, they responded with a less friendly face.

The narrative shows that MT was disappointed by how his housemates responded to his attempts at friendliness. In his cultural frame, smiling at others functions as an embodied greeting and a signal of positive social intention. When his housemates did not respond with a smile, he evaluated their reaction as cold or unwelcoming. The episode demonstrates that (im)politeness evaluation may involve a combination of verbal, embodied, and relational cues rather than words alone (Kádár & Haugh, 2013; Sifianou, 2013; Parvaresh & Tayebi, 2018).

After reflecting on this difference, MT became more comfortable with the coexistence of different moral orders. Rather than continuing to interpret the absence of a smile as necessarily impolite, he began to adjust his expectations of everyday public interaction. This re-evaluation illustrates how intercultural competence develops through reflection on repeated encounters. As he explained during the interview:

> **Excerpt 11 (MT, follow-up interview, moral-order re-evaluation)**
> Now I began to think that there were differences in good or bad manners in this country when compared to my culture in Indonesia.

When MT referred to "good or bad manners," he was articulating a metapragmatic awareness that moral order varies across contexts. He became more tolerant of behaviour he initially perceived as impolite and learned to attend to alternative politeness cues, including the use of "please" in requests and door-holding in public spaces. This development shows that intercultural competence involves the ability to re-evaluate one's first interpretation of an interaction and to identify the local cues through which rapport is managed.

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DISCUSSION

This section discusses how the findings answer the study's aim and contribute to applied linguistics. The first major finding is that participants' evaluations of (im)politeness were shaped by mismatches between prior moral order and the local pragmatic norms they encountered in the UK. These mismatches were not abstract cultural differences; they were realised through concrete communicative cues, including "please," "rubbish," first-name address, "love," "mate," "buddy," apologising, offering, turn-taking, and embodied signs of friendliness.

The discussion can therefore be read as a direct extension of the analytical framework. In every case, the analysis moved from a situated cue, to a normalcy-threshold breach, to an evaluation of behaviour or agent, to an evaluation warrant grounded in rights, obligations, and moral order, and finally to a re-evaluation that supported intercultural competence. This mapping strengthens the link between the methodological procedure and the empirical findings.

The study therefore supports research on moral order and (im)politeness evaluation by showing how international students interpret interactional behaviour through culturally grounded expectations (Parvaresh & Tayebi, 2018; Parvaresh, 2019; Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021). It also extends this work by showing that these evaluations can become moments of learning. Participants initially evaluated certain forms as rude, excessive, or inappropriate, but later reinterpreted them after repeated exposure and reflection.

The second major finding concerns over-politeness. SS's case shows that politeness may be evaluated negatively when it disrupts expected academic role relations. The supervisor's apologies and offers were not inherently impolite; they became problematic because SS interpreted them through a moral order in which lecturers should maintain institutional authority and students should show deference. This finding demonstrates that politeness is not simply the more courteous alternative to impoliteness. In intercultural academic settings, what counts as "too polite" may also threaten participants' sense of appropriate role alignment.

The third finding concerns emotion-laden evaluations of impoliteness. SS's healthcare encounter and FB's response to the word "rubbish" show that anger and offence can arise from specific linguistic choices in institutional settings. From an applied linguistic perspective, these cases are important because they show how feedback, reprimands, and evaluative vocabulary may affect learners' confidence and willingness to communicate. International students' academic adjustment is therefore connected to how they interpret the pragmatic force of institutional language.

The findings also show that intercultural competence develops as a dynamic and recursive process. Participants did not simply acquire factual knowledge about British or English culture. They learned to compare moral orders, identify locally meaningful pragmatic cues, and re-evaluate their first impressions. This process involved both skills, such as observing and learning new interactional norms, and attitudes, such as openness to alternative interpretations of (im)politeness.

These findings have implications beyond Indonesian students. They suggest that international student support, English for Academic Purposes, and intercultural communication programmes should include explicit discussion of pragmatic evaluation: how request markers, address terms, feedback vocabulary, turn-taking, and informal phatic expressions may be interpreted differently across contexts. In this way, the study contributes to applied linguistics by linking interpersonal pragmatics, linguistic ethnography, and intercultural competence development.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Indonesian PhD students in the UK perceived and evaluated cultural differences in (im)politeness and how these evaluations contributed to intercultural competence development. The findings show that participants' evaluations were shaped by mismatched expectations of moral order, over-politeness in academic relations, and emotion-laden responses to verbal and interactional impoliteness. These evaluations were connected to specific pragmatic cues, including request markers, address forms, feedback language, and phatic expressions. Over time, participants learned to re-evaluate some encounters by recognising local norms and by developing more flexible interpretations of politeness. The study contributes to applied linguistics by showing that perceptions of (im)politeness are a key site where intercultural competence is negotiated and developed in real interaction.

The findings are useful not only for Indonesian students but also for educators, supervisors, and student-support staff working with international students in English-medium higher education. Training that explicitly addresses pragmatic norms, feedback language, address practices, and culturally variable interpretations of politeness may help prevent avoidable misunderstandings and support academic and social integration. The study is limited by its small sample and by the fact that most participants were from Java and were studying in England. Further research could include students from a wider range of Indonesian regions and

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compare experiences across other study destinations, such as Australia, the United States, China, South Korea, and other multilingual academic contexts.

AI USE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author used SCITE AI and SCOPUS AI in the application of AI to find relevant references for the discussion chapter, and the author takes full responsibility for the content of the article.

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