



Epistolary Face Work: Politeness Strategies in Historical Cross Cultural Letter Writing

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Abstract: This study examines politeness strategies in hand written teaching job applications. The job application letters were submitted to two academic institutions: British College and Leadership Anglo-Saxon Academic Complex (LAAC) Febe, for the 2025-2026 academic year by Cameroonian applicants to Anglophone institutions. Using Brown and Levinson's framework, it analyzes how positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record politeness, and bald on-record politeness are deployed and how they construct professional identities cross-culturally, a rich area where pragmatics meets professional communication. The corpus of twenty letters reveals significant pragmatic variation. While negative politeness elements appear universally as a baseline, each letter exhibits a distinct dominant orientation: positive politeness emphasizes solidarity and institutional alignment; negative politeness marked by extreme deference and self-effacement; off-record politeness characterized by indirectness and affective ambiguity; and bald on-record politeness demonstrating direct, evidence-based self-presentation. The study further examines how applicants "do" face work to construct identities of competence, modesty, and respectability. Competence is performed through factual credential listing or capability framed as institutional service. Modesty is achieved through explicit self-effacement. Loyalty is enacted through contractual promises or distributed institutional alignment. Respectability is constructed through honorific accumulation and genre mastery. The findings contribute to cross-cultural pragmatics by showing that politeness in letter writing contexts is not universally the same but standardize across different cultures. Writers navigate local high-deference norms, British format, American globalized rhetoric, and institutional readings simultaneously. The same strategies can be face-threatening depending on standard accuracy. These results have implications for inter-language pragmatics and cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: Politeness Strategies, Cross-Cultural Pragmatics, Job Application Letters, Face Work.

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INTRODUCTION

Every job application letter at its core is an exercise in pragmatic negotiation. The writer must persuade an unseen reader of their qualifications

while simultaneously acknowledging the institution's authority to judge, accept, or reject their application. This dual demand creates a persistent tension: the candidate must promote without appearing arrogant,

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and defer without appearing unqualified. The resolution of this tension is managed through epistolary politeness, the strategic use of linguistic forms to mitigate face-threat, construct professional identity, and align with institutional expectations.

The study of politeness in written discourse has long recognized that letters, as asynchronous and often asymmetric forms of communication, rely heavily on conventionalized principles to meet social needs. From the elaborate honorifics of medieval Arabic diplomatic correspondence to the formulaic blessings of early modern European mercantile letters, epistolary genres have served as sites where social hierarchy, cultural values, and individual agency intersect through language (Bax, 2010; Gully, 2008). In institutional contexts, where school authorities have power to approve and disapprove, these conventions become particularly consequential. The job application letter represents an especially high-stakes variant of this genre: a single document must perform multiple interpersonal and rhetorical functions simultaneously, and its success or failure can have material consequences for the writer's career.

Research Problem

This study addresses the gap in Historical, cross-cultural teaching job applications written using highly conventional formats, yet they still require writers to manage face (respect, deference, credibility, and willingness to cooperate) while addressing the schools hiring authorities. The research problem is to understand how politeness strategies are expressed and adapted in historical cross-cultural letter writing in formal teaching applications, and what these choices reveal about how applicants negotiate social hierarchy, obligation, and legitimacy across cultures.

Research Questions

1. Which politeness strategies are most frequently used in historical cross-cultural teaching job applications, and how do these strategies vary by cultural background (writer side) and/or institutional context (target side)?
2. How do applicants employ these politeness strategies to "do" face work, or how do they construct identities such as competence, modesty, and respectability in order to appear appropriate for the teaching role?

The study examines a corpus of job application letters submitted to two academic institutions: British College and Leadership Anglo-Saxon Academic Complex (LAAC) Febe, for the 2025-2026 academic year, to investigate how applicants navigate these pragmatic demands. Rather than

comparing institutional outcomes, the analysis focuses on the internal dynamics of epistolary politeness within the genre itself.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Politeness theory in formal job application is a rich area where pragmatics meets professional communication. Language politeness is one of the studies of pragmatics. If someone discusses language politeness, it means talking about pragmatics. Here are some existing works in this domain, where the current study fills a gap which has been negated.

Mboudjeke (2010) examine aspects of linguistics politeness in job applications in Cameroon. His focus was on how semiliterate speakers of French in Cameroon encode linguistics politeness in written job applications. His data shows that job seekers can be classified in to three categories; explicit addressee-oriented, explicit addresser-oriented and implicit addresser oriented. The current study examines historical cross-cultural teaching job applications, and how politeness strategies vary by cultural background (writer side) and/or institutional context (target side), with focus in two academic institutions: British College and Leadership Anglo-Saxon Academic Complex (LAA) Febe, for the 2025-2026 academic year job applications.

Shahrzad Eshghinejad¹ and M. Raouf Moini (2016) in a study, Politeness Strategies Used in Text Messaging: Pragmatic Competence in an Asymmetrical Power Relation of Teacher-Student examines one aspect of short message service (SMS) communication through a cell phone using politeness strategies. As it is extensively argued that females are more polite language users, their study sought to describe the strategies used by these two groups and to find out whether there is any significant difference between male and female English as a foreign language (EFL) learners in the use of positive and negative politeness strategies in sending SMS to their professors, considering that there is an asymmetric power relation and social distance between them. They used a corpus of 300 L1 (Persian) and L2 (English) request messages compiled. Results of qualitative and quantitative data analysis showed no significant difference between the two groups.

Earley and Ang (2003, as cited in Ang & Van Dyne, 2008) first introduced the concept of cultural intelligence (CQ) as the key to success of certain individuals in cross-cultural settings. They defined it as the capability to learn patterns and attitudes of different cultures and revealing proper behaviours to those conventions. In 2004, the first symposium on CQ was held at the "Academy of management annual meeting." The first article on CQ which offered a valid scale to measure CQ was published by Ang *et al.*,

(2007). This article paved the way for future researches on the topic (Ng *et al.*, 2012). Ang & Van Dyne (2008) remarked that the idea of cultural intelligence thrived by the issue of globalization and defined it as the potential ability of individuals to handle and successfully control various cultural contexts.

Ang *et al.*, (2010) stated that CQ is embedded in the lengthy list of individual differences. According to them, individual differences consist of three broad categories of abilities or capabilities, personality and interest. Since CQ can be classified as ability or capability, it is assumed an individual difference.

Unlike personality characteristics that are static and aren't likely to change in time period, capabilities such as CQ can evolve over time and improve through training, experience and education (Ang & Dyne, 2008; Ang *et al.*, 2015). CQ is the ability of individuals to adapt themselves to diverse cultural situations and to exhibit behaviours proper to contexts. CQ renders three implications to the field: 1) it is precise and explicit in the design of its framework, 2) it possesses a comprehensive framework which comprises all four factors of intercultural competencies, and 3) it broadens the scope of research on intelligence in relation to the field (Ng *et al.*, 2012). On the basis of framework of multiple intelligence, devised by Sternberg and Detterman (1986, cited in Ang & Van Dyne, 2008), a multidimensional view to CQ was proposed. As this view suggests, CQ comprises met cognitive, motivational and behavioural dimensions.

Politeness Strategies

There are a few models of politeness proposed by prior scholars such as Cooperative Principle (Grice, 1975); Politeness Model (Lakoff, 1975); Politeness Principle (Leech, 1983); Conversational Contract (1990); and Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987). Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness (1978, 1987) have made significant contributions to the development of pragmatics studies and have been used extensively as a theoretical framework in politeness research. Brown and Levinson state that every social interaction between speakers and addressees/hearer are related to 'face'. Face is an individual's self-esteem. Goffman (1967:5) states the term face may be defined as the positive value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume, he has taken during a particular contract. Brown and Levinson (1978) claimed that everyone has positive face which signifies their actions and thoughts are recognized by others as something good, pleasant, worthwhile etc.; and negative face which implies that they will be

rewarded for allowing them to be free to act without interference.

This study will use Politeness Theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987). As earlier mentioned they maintained that representing politeness in social interactions requires an awareness of face. They defined face as the image every individual of a society wishes to be known with. Though self is a belonging of personality, the constant possession of it will come through society. Thus, maintaining face requires a mutual understanding and effort from the part of interlocutors. In other words, face differs in various cultures, the knowledge of each other's face and understanding the necessity of taking heed of it, in social interactions, are universal. They differentiated between positive and negative face. Negative face is the desire not to be imposed by other members of the society. Positive face refers to a sense of appreciation and acceptance which individuals aspire to.

The actions which contradict with the face wants of either speaker or addressee are called face-threatening activities (FTA). Acts that leave no room for the independence and freedom of action for the addressee are considered a threat for their negative face. For instance, speech acts of request, suggestion and even thank are deemed threats to the negative face since the acceptance of them entails indebtedness and humility on the part of the speaker. On the other hand, activities that require kind of disagreement of their wants are threatening their positive face, such as apology. Brown and Levinson (1987) maintained some social variables necessary to investigate the seriousness of an FTA. These variables are universal, but the assessment and perception of each varies inter-culturally and every society interprets them according to the rules and conventions embedded in it. Speakers tend to use some strategies to minimize or decrease FTAs, in fact, they decide to be polite.

According to Brown and Levinson in Wardoyo (2023) there are four politeness strategies or general behavioural patterns that can be applied by speakers, namely (a) Bald-on Record Strategy; (b) Positive politeness strategy (positive politeness/familiarity strategy); (c) Negative politeness strategy (negative/formal politeness strategy); (d) Off-record politeness strategy (indirect or disguised strategy). Wardoyo (2023) in Kurniyatin (2017) discuss them in detail.

a. Positive Politeness Strategy

This is the speaker's tactic for highlighting the listener's pleasant face or positive self image, which the speaker also emphasizes for himself. This includes paying attention to the hearer (his interests,

needs, wants, and goods), exaggerate your interest, Seek consensus (safe themes, repetition), Prevent dissent, jokes, be optimistic, sympathy, understanding, cooperation, etc.

b. Negative Politeness Strategy (Negative / Formal Politeness Strategy)

According to Brown and Levinson, referenced in Kurniyatin (2017), a negative politeness technique is a regressive action targeted against the addressee's negative face: his need for unrestricted freedom and attention. Kurniyatin (2017), also divide the strategies used in the negative politeness strategy into groups: Be conventionally indirect, Question, Hedge, Be pessimistic, Give deference, Apologize, State the FTA as a general rule, etc.

c. Off-Record Politeness Strategy

This strategy is used in a covert manner and lacks a distinct communication goal. By giving the other person the opportunity to analyze his own behaviour, the speaker removes himself from the conversation. As stated in Kurniyatin (2017), Brown and Levinson theory uses some off record strategies: Give association clues, give hints, Presuppose, understate, Use tautologies, Use contradictions, Use rhetorical questions, and ambiguity.

d. Bald-On Record Strategy

Bald off record is a strategy to maintain the respect for the hearer's negative face by using metaphors or irony; implicit statement such as proverbs. The speaker conveys the meaning clearly to avoid the speaker being accountable for any interpretation.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

As earlier mentioned, this present study examines a corpus of job application letters submitted to two academic institutions: British College and Leadership Anglo-Saxon Academic Complex (LAAC) Febe, for the 2025-2026 academic year, all secondary schools in Yaoundé Cameroon. The researcher used twenty job applications from this schools, ten per school. This study employed a qualitative descriptive method through content analysis based on the context of the applications. The contextual in this study refers to the message context which means the politeness of the message itself. Message context is cues that convey implied and inferred meaning accompanying the utterance. Triandis (1972) mentioned indirect and implicit messages contain information hidden in the socio-cultural system, Or in internal context-information contained within the individual (Hall, 1976). The study uses politeness theory according to Brown and Livinson (1978 and 1987) to show how pragmatics meets professionalism in epistolary face-work.

DISCUSSIONS AND RESULTS

a. Analysis of Positive Politeness Strategy

The applicant uses positive politeness in our first job application which seeks to minimize the threat to the hearer's positive face (the desire to be liked, approved of, and treated as a member of the institution). Below is a systematic analysis of how these strategies manifest in this cross-cultural letter writing study.

The applicant begins by Claiming Common Ground through a shared professional identity. In the phrase "Teacher in your school", the writer positions herself as already belonging to the educational community, implying shared values and goals. We also the use of Institutional alignment in the phrase "Work in your Institution" Uses "your" to signal respect while seeking inclusion in the institutional family. In collectivist cultures (common in many African) emphasizing group membership and shared identity is a stronger politeness marker than in individualist Western contexts. This applicant reflects that tendency by foregrounding institutional belonging over her individual achievement.

The applicants also Shows high interest in the hirer and her qualification. Attention to institutional requirements "I have the necessary qualifications and experience" Rather than listing credentials boastfully, the writer frames them as responsive to the institution's needs. This shows attentiveness to what the school administration values. The writer also uses positive politeness to promise the hirer. This is seen in the phrase "... enable me to perform meticulously" The adverb "meticulously" functions as a commitment to high standards, addressing the employer's implicit desire to expect quality. Politeness in our cultures often involves anticipating the other's unstated needs. The writer doesn't wait to be asked about qualifications, she proactively addresses the employer's likely concerns.

The writer also uses positive politeness through the use of Inclusion, seen in associative Pronouns. First-person plural implication "these fields" (shared domain of expertise) While "I" is used, the fields of study themselves (English Language, Literature, Leadership) are constructed as shared spaces of professional activity. The relatively high use of "I" here may reflect Western rhetorical influence on formal English letter writing, yet the underlying strategy still orients toward mutual professional ground rather than pure self-promotion.

Give Reasons and Justify (to Show Consideration). Causal justification "that will enable me to perform meticulously" The writer doesn't merely state qualifications; she explains why they

matter (for performance), showing reasoning that respects the hirer's evaluative position. "Attached to this letter are the documents..." Offers proof rather than making unsupported claims, a form of "giving gifts" (of information) to the reader.

Optimistic in Future-oriented positive assumption "While looking forward to hearing from you and for an opportunity to discuss further" This is a classic positive politeness strategy assuming the interaction will continue and that the reader is willing to engage. This is also seen through Open-ended invitation in the phrase "to discuss further". This Positions the employer as a collaborative partner in a continuing dialogue, not merely an administrator.

Use of Appropriate Honorifics and Closing, Formal closing "Yours Applicant" it is a slightly non-standard but polite closing. Standard British English would use "Yours faithfully." Full name with signature adds personal authenticity and accountability.

The cross-cultural interest lies in the hybrid pragmatics: the writer deploys Western epistolary techniques ("I am writing to...", "looking forward to hearing from you") while infusing them with a relationship-oriented, high-deference stance characteristic of Cameroon English (CAM E). The result is a text that navigates between Anglophone institutional expectations and local cultural norms of respect and social relations.

b. Analysis of Negative Politeness Strategy

Negative politeness, by Brown & Levinson (1987), focuses on minimizing annoyance on the addressee and respecting their negative face, which is the desire to be unrestricted, to have freedom of action, and not to be coerced. Unlike positive politeness, which seeks solidarity, negative politeness emphasizes distance, deference, and non-imposition. Below is a systematic analysis of negative politeness in job applications.

Applicants are conventionally indirect request in their letter writing techniques. We see indirect request framing in the phrase "It is with great honour to seek for the post..." Rather than a direct command for example "Give me the job", the writer uses an impersonal construction that distances the act of requesting, softening the obligation of demanding for the job. We also see infinitive distancing in the phrase "to seek for" The infinitive form depersonalizes the request, making it feel less like a demand and more like a general statement of purpose. On a cross-cultural note, negative politeness strategy often use the writer to avoid placing one in a position where they can be

immediately accept or reject, the request is often framed as the writer's own act of "seeking," which minimizes pressure on the addressee.

Use of Honorifics and Formal Address:

Gender-neutral honorific "Sir/Madam" acknowledges uncertainty about the addressee's identity; this seeks to keep maximum respect. The repetition reinforces deference. Institutional title "the Principal of British College" uses the full institutional title not a personal name, this maintains a social distance from the employer and also acknowledges the Principal's authority. Also, the third-person reference to "the Principal" Referring to the addressee in the third person, in the address block, further increases formality and distance. The doubling of "Sir/Madam" at the opening and again in the closing reflects a collective politeness strategy where repetition amplifies deference. This is more pronounced than in standard British English, where a single salutation suffices. This is not the right principle in writing, but the applicant use it here for politeness.

Minimize Obligation/ Annoyance:

Conditional framing "If taken, I promise..." The conditional "if" explicitly acknowledges that the decision belongs entirely to the Principal of the school. The writer does not assume acceptance, she frames her commitment as reliant on the reader's grace. We also have modesty minimization seen in the phrase "your humble applicant" Self-deprecation reduces the obligation by presenting the writer as low-status and unworthy, thereby elevating the reader's position. The applicant also entice the administration with benefit framing "for the benefit of your institution and the learners" The promise is framed not as self-serving but as serving the institution's interests. "Your humble applicant" is a principal humility marker characteristic of postcolonial African English letter writing. It draws from British colonial epistolary traditions ("your humble servant" for example) but has been retained and improved in local usage. In contemporary British English, such phrasing would be considered archaic; in this context, it functions as a culturally expected deference marker.

Provision of Options:

The use of comprehensive documentation with a detailed list of 5 attachments, the writer minimizes the need for the Principal to request further information there by reducing future obligation on the reader's time. The multiple qualifications listed are CV, degree, Grade One certificate, A-level certificate, and ID card. The thoroughness demonstrates preparedness and respect for institutional procedures, avoiding the imposition of follow-up requests.

c. Analysis of Off-Record Politeness Strategy

As earlier mentioned, Off-record politeness, by Brown & Levinson (1987), is the most indirect strategy on their politeness variety. The speaker hints, implies, or invites inference, leaving the act ambiguous and giving the hearer maximum freedom to interpret or ignore the implicature. The speaker does not commit to a specific face-threatening act, thereby avoiding responsibility and minimizing imposition. Find here an analysis of how off-record strategy in job applications selected for this study.

In the first application we have the absence of an explicit request. We don't have any direct hint like "I am applying for the post of..." The heading "AN APPLICATION FOR A TEACHING JOB" labels the document, but the body text doesn't explicitly states the request. The reader must infer the purpose from context. We see the writer as an implied candidate. The phrase "I am excited to apply for the teaching Position role" The word "apply" is used, but there is no explicit performative for example like "I hereby apply for..." The statement of excitement frames the act as emotional expression rather than a formal request.

Self-Description as Applicant:

The statement "make me an ideal candidate for this position" is not requesting the position; the writer describes herself as already fitting the role thereby inviting the hirer to conclude that hiring her would be natural and the right thing to do. Though leaving the request implicit is culturally normative. Direct requests can be seen as aggressive or face-threatening. This letters reflect that tendency. The writer relies heavily on the institutional frames (heading, address, attachment list) to carry the illocutionary force, while the body text avoids direct annoyance.

The use of Tactful Ambiguity:

The first example shows an applicant use of minimized experience. This is seen in the phrase "three (3) years of experience" The parenthetical numeral is a formal convention, but the quantity itself is modest per say. The writer does not exaggerate or aggressively sell her experience. They also use vague benefiting statements for example "for the benefit of your institution and the learners" and in another letter "foster academic excellence and personal growth". The benefits are stated in general, desired terms not promises tied to the institution. This creates ambiguity about whether she is promising outcomes or merely describing her teaching philosophy. The writer shows gratitude in advanced example "I will be very grateful to be one of your staff" Rather than demanding or even requesting, the writer expresses a conditional emotional state "will be grateful". This is off-record because it frames the

desired outcome as something that would bring her pleasure, leaving the hirer free to grant or withhold without a precise refusal.

Use Rhetorical Questions and Presuppositions:

They demonstrate presupposition of shared values "As a dedicated and passionate educator" The writer presupposes that dedication and passion are valued by the institution, without explicitly stating for example like to say "I know you value dedication." This invites the reader to align with the presupposed value. We also see presupposition of fit in the phrase "make me an ideal candidate" this phrase presupposes there is an "ideal candidate" profile and that he matches it without explicitly asking the hirer to confirm this.

The Use of Ambiguous Illocutionary Force:

There is no letter that explicitly says "Please hire me" or "I request this position" The closest to these phrases seen so far are "I am excited to apply" (a statement of emotion) and "I will be very grateful to be one of your staff" (a conditional expression of future gratitude). The actual request is distributed across the text rather than localized in a single performative utterance. We also have heading as surrogate performative "AN APPLICATION FOR A TEACHING JOB" The heading carries the illocutionary force, allowing the body text to remain descriptive and non-impositional. This is a structural off-record strategy where the formal frame does the "asking," while the personal voice maintains distance.

d. Analysis of Bald On-Record Politeness Strategy

Bald on-record politeness, as defined by Brown & Levinson (1987), is a direct strategy on their politeness types. Here, the speaker performs the face-threatening act (FTA) in the most direct, clear, unambiguous, and concise way possible. In cross-cultural contexts, bald on-record strategies is particularly revealing because what counts as "direct" or "face-threatening" varies dramatically across cultures. Below is its analysis.

Direct Performative Without Hedging:

Clear performative acts are seen in the statement "I am writing to express my strong interest in the position of French language teacher" Unlike other Letters which used impersonal or emotional framing, this writer uses a direct first-person performative with clear intentions "I am writing to express". There is no conditional, no impersonal construction, no distancing. The explicit naming of the position, "French language teacher" with Precision and unambiguous specify the desired role. We also see clear institutional targeting "within your institution" this directly names the target, leaving no ambiguity. In a cross-cultural context, this level of directness is actually normative and expected. What

Brown & Levinson might classify as "bald on-record" in a casual social context is clear here in institutional formal job application genre. This illustrates a critical point which suggests that genre conventions can override general politeness hierarchies. The writer is following globalized professional English norms where clarity and directness signal competence and respect for the reader's time.

Absence of Redressive Action (No Hedging, No Apologizing, No Self-Effacement):

We don't see humility markers like "humble applicant," "if taken," "with great honour", these letters contains no self-deprecation. The writer presents herself as a peer professional. No conditional hedging "I would welcome the opportunity" (but note: "would" is conditional) the only conditional ("would welcome") is a polite formula, not a genuine hedge on the request itself. The main claim ("I hold," "I have," "I have developed") is in simple present or present perfect, confident, factual, unhedged. No apology for imposition for example "I apologize for taking your time" or similar the writers assume the applications are legitimate, with welcome professional communication.

FINDINGS

Research Question 1:

Which politeness strategies are most frequently used in historical cross-cultural teaching job applications, and how do these strategies vary by cultural background (writer side) and/or institutional context (target side)?

Across the twenty application letters gotten from two Anglophone institutions in Cameroon, all strategies from Brown and Levinson's politeness theory are represented, each served as the dominant orientation in at least two of the selected letters. No single strategy prevails across the corpus. Some letters are primarily positive-politeness oriented, negative-politeness oriented, off-record, and bald on-record. This distribution itself is a significant finding. It suggests that within this specific cross-cultural context, Cameroonian writers applying to institutions with either British collage or LAAC Febe don't have a single "correct" way/ standard format to perform politeness. Rather, writers draw from a repertoire of strategies, selecting according to their own cultural positioning and their reading of the institutional target.

What were common in their write-ups are elements of negative politeness like formal address, some degree of deference. Even the most direct writer included "Sir/Madam". Even the most emotionally expressive writer maintains a formal heading and a structured body. This suggested that negative politeness operates as a baseline or floor in

letter writing. Writers may lay other strategies on their applications, but they do not discard it entirely. The formal job application letter, as a genre, demands at minimum the observance of social distance and institutional hierarchy.

The choice of dominant strategy correlates strongly with indicators of the writer's cultural and socioeconomic positioning, though not in a deterministic way. The writers who deployed the most extreme negative politeness, repeated honorifics, self-effacement, conditional hedging, and humility markers, shows the least mastery of Anglophone format of letter writing.

By contrast, the writers that deployed bald on-record politeness demonstrated the highest mastery of British epistolary conventions. The closing "Yours faithfully" is used correctly with "Sir/Madam." An explicit subject line appears, borrowed from email conventions but deployed even in handwritten form.

The off-record writer occupied a middle position in terms of convention mastery but showed strong exposure to American-influenced self-promotion rhetoric. Terms like "excited," "passionate," "ideal candidate," and "strong passion" flooded the different text, yet the actual request is buried beneath this affective display. These letters did not explicitly ask for the position; it described enthusiasm. This suggested a writer caught between two cultural systems: the globalized job-market imperative to sell oneself enthusiastically, and the local high-context norm that direct requests are face-threatening.

The positive-politeness writers took a more moderate path, framing capability as service to the institution rather than as personal achievement. This writer avoided both the extreme deference of the negative-politeness letter and the emotional overload of the off-record letter, seeking instead to establish shared professional ground.

Research Question 2:

How do applicants employ these politeness strategies to "do" face work, or how do they construct identities such as competence, modesty, and respectability in order to appear appropriate for the teaching role?

Competence in this study was constructed through two primary pragmatic routes in this corpus. The first is bald on-record credential listing: degree titles, years of experience, specific teaching levels, and evidence-based claims about developed strategies. Here, competence is performed as self-evident fact. The writer does not argue for

competence; the credentials speak. The second route is positive-politeness institutional alignment. Here, competence is framed not as personal achievement but as capability in service of the institution's needs. The writer has "the necessary qualifications" that will "enable me to perform meticulously in these fields." The meticulousness is promised as a benefit to the institution, not as a boast.

Modesty was constructed primarily through negative politeness and off-record strategies. The negative-politeness writer achieves modesty through explicit self-effacement: "your humble applicant," "if taken," "with great honour." The self is minimized, and the reader's authority is maximized. This is modesty as status-lowering, a strategy deeply rooted in high power-distance cultures where overt self-assertion threatens social harmony.

The off-record writer achieved modesty through a different mechanism: ambiguity. They did not explicitly request any position, the led the attachment list speaks for them; this writer avoided the face threat of self-assertion without performing explicit humility. The modesty here was seen as structural rather than lexical. It resides in what is left unsaid, in the distribution of illocutionary force across the applications.

Respectability was the most diversely constructed identity in the corpus, achieved through all four politeness strategies. The negative-politeness writer constructs respectability through honorific accumulation: repeated "Sir/Madam," formal titles. Respectability here is performed as deference to institutional hierarchy. The bald on-record writer constructs respectability through genre mastery: correct "Yours faithfully," explicit subject line, structured professional body. Respectability here is performed as cultural competence, the ability to use Anglo-Saxon letter writing techniques. The off-record writer constructed respectability through enthusiasm and self-presentation as a "dedicated and passionate educator," where respectability is performed as social and emotional concern. The positive-politeness writer constructed respectability through moderate institutional alignment, avoiding both excessive deference and excessive self-promotion.

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