Scientific Research Publishing

Politeness in Online Educational Discourse: Exploring Relational Work Strategies in Online Teacher-Student Interactions

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Abstract

The current study explores politeness in computer-mediated communication from the perspective of online educational discourse. Focusing on the use of language in teacher-student interactions, we collect data that consist of 117 naturally-occurring conversations from three online language courses in Ding-talk, one of the most popular online educational platforms in Mainland China. Data are analyzed using an adapted version of politeness theory and the notion of relational work. The results show that the management of relational work and the realization of politeness through certain strategies. The preferred relational work strategies employed by teachers and students are positive relational work strategies, negative relational work strategies, and emoji relational work strategies. The preference for these strategies indicates that teachers and students are concerned about constructing politeness by considering their positive and negative face. In addition to contributing to the existing literature on politeness and relational work in computer-mediated communication, the present study offers practical implications for using relational work strategies to do polite and appropriate relational practices to maintain politeness in the online education community.

Keywords

Politeness, Politeness Theory, Online Educational Discourse, Online Teacher-Student Interactions, Relational Work, Relational Work Strategies

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, the internet and technology have greatly facilitated communication and changed the way people relate to one another (Francisco, 2015;

George et al., 2020; Miller, 2022). In education, educational activities between teachers and students are no longer confined to a face-to-face paradigm in fixed scenarios. They have a wide variety of choices to interact through the use of some electronic devices in a computer-mediated pattern. Especially after the pandemic COVID-19, online education, an important mode of computer-mediated communication, has gained robust development, as teachers and students began to shift to online settings to continue formal education. More specifically, it has become a more appropriate choice (Martin et al., 2020) to keep educational activities accessible, feasible, and functional in the world during the pandemic lockdown.

People are no strangers to online education as it is a "derivative" (Bernard et al., 2004) of distance education, which has existed in higher education for decades. This rich and diverse history of online education has produced a substantial body of research investigating online education from various perspectives, such as the analysis of innovations in online learning strategies (e.g., Davis et al., 2018), quality in online education (e.g., Esfijani, 2018), and more recently, the impact of COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Coman et al., 2020), and so on. However, little research has been conducted on the use of the language of teacher-student interactions in online education in terms of the interpersonal side (including politeness, relational work, and the like). How teachers and students interact with each other through their language in online educational contexts remains a question.

This study is designed to explore the use of language between teachers and students in Dingtalk (see Section 3.1) from the perspective of relational work and politeness. It aims to reveal the potential relational work strategies employed in online teacher-student interactions and investigate the online teacher-student politeness with the use of relational work strategies in their interactions. Language is viewed as one of the essential means for individuals to show politeness and doing relational practices with others in CMC (Crystal, 2006; Locher, 2010), and when people engage with one another in CMC, they are likely to follow several social conventions like politeness. As a result, it is of great importance and necessity for both teachers and students to be conscious of online politeness to achieve their communicative goals. It is also found that research on relational work and politeness in CMC has mainly focused on the context of English, along with some studies investigating the context of Japanese (e.g., Nishimura, 2010), Thai (e.g., Hongladarom & Hongladarom, 2005), while the Chinese context is still under-researched. We aim in this paper to further contribute to this emerging body of research by examining politeness and relational work in CMC by focusing on the use of language in online teacher-student interactions.

In the rest of this paper, Section 2 provides a theoretical and practical review of our research. Section 3 addresses the methodology of this research, including the data collecting and analysis procedure. In Section 4, the findings of the study are discussed. Finally, Section 5 concludes the paper with a summary of the re-

sults and some suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Politeness Theory and Relational Work

Politeness has a long history in linguistic research focusing on interaction. One of the most prominent theories (Miri, 2019) in politeness was Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) theory. Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) model of politeness draws on Goffman's (1967: 319) concept of "face" which is defined as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself", and they consider "face" as "something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced and must be constantly attended to in interaction". Brown and Levinson introduced two aspects of face desire, which were considered to be ratified, understood, liked or admired (Goodwin & Loyd, 2020). Specifically, they are positive face and negative face. The positive face refers to one's need to be accepted and admired by others, while the negative face reflects one's desire to enjoy freedom and be self-sufficient instead of being imposed upon. It should be acknowledged that there are acts that intrinsically threaten one or both aspects of an individual's face during the interactions. These acts are called face-threatening acts (FTAs). Therefore, redressive language or mitigation strategies are used to compensate the threats to the face in the face-threatening acts. These strategies are what Brown and Levinson (1987) labeled politeness strategies, which include bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record, and do not do the FTA. Solid and comprehensive, it is worth noting that Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) model has received much criticism. They have overemphasized the notion of individual freedom and autonomy (Matsumoto, 1988), disregarded the larger linguistic context (Hayashi, 1996), and ignored the interpersonal or social perspective on the face (Spencer-Oatey, 2000). More criticism was expressed by the proponents who have studied politeness from the perspective of discursive approach (e.g., Eelen, 2001; Mills, 2003; Watts, 2003). They argued that the management of social relations through language entailed a broader range of linguistic phenomena than politeness alone and should consider the "politic" behavior and impoliteness phenomena (Locher & Watts, 2008).

Instead of focusing solely on politeness, Locher and Watts (2008) have advocated that in the field of pragmatics, analytic attention is supposed to focus more on the interpersonal dimensions of language used in interactions. These interpersonal dimensions are closed related to what they have called "relational work" (Locher & Watts, 2008). Originally, the notion of relational work referred to the interpersonal level of communication as opposed to the ideational level (Halliday, 1978). Developed by Locher and Watts (2008), relational work refers to the "work" individuals invest in the construction, maintenance, reproduction, and transformation of relationships with others engaged in social practices. Unlike Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework, which pays more attention to the

self, relational work views politeness as discursive (Locher & Watts, 2005). In other words, the concept of relational work highlights relationship construction as a dynamic process realized through the interactions in situated contexts relative to situated norms. In addition, by choosing different language options, relational effects in relational work can be aggravated, maintained, or enhanced (Locher, 2013).

Locher and Watts (2005: 10) explicitly linked politeness theory to relational work: "Brown and Levinson's framework can still be used, however, if we look at the strategies they have proposed to be possible realization of relational work". Consequently, despite criticism of Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) theory, the current study adopts their model and makes some adaptations by drawing the notion of the relational work. In other words, we further attempt to cooperate the politeness strategies with relational work to carry out a close and detailed analysis of teacher-student interactions from three online courses by looking at how they do relational work and maintain politeness with each other.

2.2. Politeness Strategies and Relational Work in CMC

With the emerging interest in politeness in computer-mediated discourse analysis, a growing body of research explores the application of politeness strategies and the performance of relational work in different CMC contexts. It is seen that most studies look into the analysis of daily online chat communication (e.g., Westbrook, 2007), interactions in institutional settings (e.g., Vinagre, 2008), and language use in social media (e.g., Nishimura, 2010). However, the teacher-student interactions in online educational contexts are under-researched

Within this limited body of work, previous studies investigating online teacher-student interactions have focused mostly on the use of politeness strategies. For example, Vinagre (2008) showed that when exchanging emails, students did not use negative politeness strategies as often, but they relied heavily on positive politeness strategies, especially those relating to claiming common ground, assuming or asserting reciprocity, and conveying cooperation. Contrary to Vinagre's results, Aliakbari and Moalemid (2015) stated that both negative and positive politeness strategies were the most frequent ones, but indirect strategies were the least favored ones applied by the students, and only a minor portion of students chose avoidance of face-threatening act strategies. Parviz (2012) analyzed politeness accommodation in email messages among postgraduate students to their teachers, showing that the students accommodated significantly to verbal politeness indicators in the body of a message and structural politeness indicators of greeting/salutation. However, focusing on greetings in email, Almoaily (2018) held the view that the students' awareness of greetings as a politeness strategy was low. Li (2012) revealed that EFL college students were likely to use three types of politeness strategies, i.e., positive, negative, and bald on record skillfully, to establish friendship, solidarity, and respect in asynchronous com-

munication in a wiki "Discussion" module. Although physical bodies and paralinguistic cues (such as intonation, facial expression, and gesture) are not available in CMC, participants would develop creative means to express interpersonal and affective stances in online communication. In a more recent study, a case study on emoji use in a game-based learning environment was conducted by Beißwenger and Pappert (2019). The results showed that emojis could function as mobilizers within politeness strategies. Studies on how teachers and students do relational work are rare. Only Donaghue (2018) examined the relational work in critical post-observation teacher feedback by drawing data from dyadic post-observation feedback meetings between an experienced teacher and two supervisors. Focusing on the participants' relational work to achieve identities in interaction, Donaghue (2018) revealed that teachers' identities are emergent and relational. Teachers' identities were also shown to be co-constructed. The teacher consciously (and perhaps unconsciously) co-constructs positive identities for both supervisors while at the same time co-constructing an ascribed, negative identity for himself.

Combined with politeness strategies and the notion of relational work, this article contributes to current discussions about the performance of relational work and the realization of politeness in CMC. We examine the ways teachers and students utilize relational work strategies to maintain teacher-student politeness and achieve successful communication in their online interactions. This article also extends previous research by adding layers of discourse analysis. Analysis of data from three online courses contains various teacher-student interactions, enabling our study to identify different relational work they do and potential relational work strategies they perform. The following research questions guide this study:

1) What are the preferred relational work strategies teachers and students employ in their online interactions?

2) How are these relational work strategies employed to maintain the politeness and harmonious relationship between teachers and students in their online interactions?

3. Methodology

3.1. Dingtalk

The data of this study is from a 17,540 words corpus of naturally-occurring teacher-student interactions in Dingtalk. Founded in 2014, Dingtalk is an enterprise communication and collaboration platform developed by the Alibaba Group. It enjoys multiple functions to support text, photo, voice and video communication, work flow management, and collaboration among members, company staff, school teachers and students, etc. (Fitzgerald et al., 2022). In other words, focusing on education, Dingtalk is an interactive multimodal educational platform that allows teachers to carry out teaching activities via an internet connection and enables students to participate freely, eliminating the barriers of time and

space. Several reasons contributed to selecting this online educational platform for the study. At first, the corpus was retrieved in Mainland China, and at the time of data collection, an online learning program was launched by Dingtalk to maintain normal teaching order and minimize the impact of the pandemic. According to Hu and Xie (2020), it is one of the most popular and welcomed online teaching platforms in Mainland China when schools were closed. Secondly, it has high applicability with a simple and clear interface, which is easy for teachers and students to operate. In addition, different from other online educational platforms, it enjoys many unique functions to meet teaching requirements fully. For example, teachers can easily establish private group chats according to the assignment of their teaching classes. In short, Dingtalk provides an innovative space where teachers and students can smoothly interact as if in offline classrooms. It equips both teachers and students with a new teaching approach and a new way of knowledge transmission.

3.2. Data Collection

This study's data were obtained and complied from three online language courses in Dingtalk between January 2021 and June 2021. The three online language courses are *Second Language Acquisition*, *Integrated English Course II*, *Integrated English Course IV*. Although these courses were delivered in Chinese and English, we encoded our data based on the use of language in their meaning rather than the form. The participants were 3 teachers and 90 students. The teachers were females, whose ages ranged from 37 to 45. Among 90 students, there were 11 males and 79 females. The main reason why there were fewer males than females was that the courses for which we collected data came from foreign language courses. It was quite natural in Mainland China, there were fewer male students choosing language study as their major. It was important to mention that although there was a gender difference in student numbers, we did not take them into account as the research focused on the teachers and students, the two main teaching parties, from a macro perspective. We used T and S to anonymize the data, representing teachers and students respectively, and other information that might potentially reveal the participants' identities was excluded.

3.3. Procedure

Dingtalk teacher-student interactions provide an opportunity to analyze natural language, which enables our work to be done in the field of CMC analysis (Herring, 2004, 2007) by using natural data. Since the study aims to unpack the performance of relational work and the construction of online politeness by teachers and students, we focus on conversations produced by teachers and students in different online teaching sections. They are "greeting", "initiation", "response", "feedback" and "closing". Accordingly, there were 117 conversations in the corpus. The conversations between teachers and students were firstly received

as screenshots, and then they were manually recorded into a Microsoft Word document. Other files, such as photographs, audio messages, and videos, could not be retrieved using this method and hence were excluded from the analysis. Interactions that occurred during break time or were unrelated to the teaching activities were also omitted.

A qualitative analysis of the selected conversations was performed to gain further insights into how relational work is performed and online politeness is constructed, maintained, or realized in the corpus. The methodology combines the computer-mediated discourse analysis (Herring, 2004), politeness strategies in Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework, and the notion of relational work (Locher & Watts, 2008). In the corpus, the use of language displays certain relational work strategies to handle different demands of the teacher-student interactions, both from an interpersonal and a discursive standpoint. Several contextual factors were observed to exert impacts on the use of language and were thus considered in the analysis: 1) the social distance, status, and power between teachers and students; 2) the relational effects (Locher, 2013) achieved by teachers and students choosing different language options; 3) the language used in the different teaching process (greeting, initiation, response, feedback and or closing); 4) the use of emojis in teacher-student interactions as they effectively integrate non-verbal communication with visual cues, allowing online teacher-student interactions no longer to stay at the dimension of purely written discourse (Yao, 2021).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

According to the politeness strategies and the notion of relational work, three relational work strategies and their sub-strategies employed by teachers and students in online interactions have been observably employed in the data. They are positive relational work strategies, negative relational work strategies, and emoji relational work strategies. The frequencies of the use of these strategies are displayed in Table 1. In addition, they will be demonstrated in the course of our discussion. In the following sections, some typical online teacher-student interactions observed in the corpus are presented. In order to ensure the authenticity of the corpus, we have not made any modifications to the displayed examples, so

Table 1. Realational work strategies and their frequencies.

Relational work strategies	Sub-strategies	Frequencies
Positive relational work strategies	Claiming common ground	17 (19.1%)
	Being cooperative	15 (16.6%)
Negative relational work strategies	Showing uncertatinty	13 (14.6%)
	Apologizing	8 (9%)
Emoji relational strategies	Using emojis	36 (40%)

there may be some inadequacies with grammar, punctuation, etc. The analysis of the use of language by teachers and students in this study focuses on the relational work strategies embodied in their politeness and relational work performance. The analysis tries to expose the potential relational effects through relational work strategies. Based on the analysis, we further investigate their impact on the construction of teacher-student politeness.

4.2. Positive Relational Work Strategies

A positive relational work strategy refers to the use of redressive language to make relational work polite/politic/appropriate (Locher & Watts, 2008) directed to the addressee's positive face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In positive relational work strategies, politeness is viewed as the performance of interlocutors' polite/politic/appropriate relational practices to stay away from being too direct to infringe on others' positive face in interaction. Indeed, these strategies are used as a kind of extension of intimacy, which are useful not only for FTA redress but in general as a kind of social accelerator. It indicates that when S uses them, he wants to come close to H. Some examples will be demonstrated below.

4.2.1. Claiming Common Ground

First, the management of positive-face desire and relational work is reflected in the use of language by the teachers and students through claiming common ground by using in-group identity markers and by noticing, attending to each other (his interests, wants, needs) following Brown and Levinson's (1987) positive politeness strategy. By seeking common ground, teachers and students aim to reduce social distance. Teachers and students seek common ground by expressing shared backgrounds in knowledge, interests, or experiences. This tactic contributes to decreasing social distance and building common and mutual understanding between them.

> (1)
> T: Good morning, *class*!
> S(s): Good morning!
> T: *How was your last week*? A lot of homework? Are they hard for you? *Haha...*
> S1: *Haha...I'm fine.*

Example (1) shows that the teacher does relational work with her students by using in-group identity markers at the beginning of the online course. Addressing "*class*" instead of "children" or "students" could be identified as a positive relational work strategy; that is, the teacher does not position herself as the more powerful side or keep a distance from students. The strategy used is to reduce the threat of face (of dignity) of the students. Similarly, according to students' responses to the greeting, they give respect and feel close to the teacher. This data set indicates that the two parties have a good emotional relationship. It is further demonstrated in the utterances "*how was your last week...*" followed by the

onomatopoeia expression of "*Haha*" of both the teacher and students. By doing so, both the teacher and the students enhance the relational effect, which further paves the way for the construction of online teacher-student politeness.

> (2)
> T: 早上好！今天的课程马上就要开了，*请问大家的设备都没有问题吧？*
> Good morning! Today's course will start soon. *Is everyone's equipment OK?*
> S1: 没有
> OK
> S2: 没有
> OK
> (3)
> T：请大家接下来打开阅读材料，快速阅读一下。
> Next, please open up the reading material and look through it quickly.
> S：不好意思老师，我还在看您之前发的内容。
> Sorry, teacher, I am still reading the content you sent before.
> T：*好的，慢慢来。我停下来，请大家不要着急。*
> *All right, take your time. I'll stop. Everybody, please take it easy.*

In the above two conversations, the teacher uses the positive relational strategy of claiming common ground by noticing and attending to students' needs. Example (2) occurs in the greeting section, where the teacher greets the students and then issues her instruction. Due to their shared common knowledge that it is of great importance to take the conditions of equipment and network environments into consideration when taking part in online courses, the teacher asks her students to check about their equipment and network in advance to avoid the negative impact of equipment and network problems on the class as much as possible. Example (3) happens at the interactive part of the class. The teacher gives instructions to the students to look through the reading material. However, a student claims that he does not complete the previous step. After receiving the response, the teacher takes it into full consideration and assumes that there might still be other students in the class with this situation. Hence, she utters, "*好的，慢慢来。我停下来，请大家不要着急*" (*All right, take your time. I'll stop. Everybody please takes it easy*) to slow down her teaching progress. In these two conversations, teachers do relational work to give full consideration to the state of students in all aspects. By doing so, the teachers not only shorten the social distance between their students caused by their status, but also achieve the relational effect of maintaining their relationships and lay a foundation for the construction of online teacher-student politeness.

4.2.2. Being Cooperative
Second, the management of positive-face desire and relational work is reflected in the teacher's and students' language use by conveying that they are cooperators by being optimistic and seeking agreement following Brown and Levinson's

(1987) positive politeness strategy. Teachers and students attend to the positive-face desire of others through the expression of agreement and by avoiding overt disagreement and showing positive attitudes to each other. By conveying that they are cooperators, teachers and students aim to perform polite/polite/politic/appropriate relational behaviors to maintain politeness.

(4)

T：各位，这周在线平台无法进入课程页面，到现在还是不行。*但是我们有信心尽快解决问题，上传第 5 周的课程资源，敬请期待哈！*

Guys, the online platform has not been able to access the course this week until now. However, *we are confident to solve the problem as soon as possible to upload the course resources for week* 5. *Please look forward to it!*

S：好滴，*我也相信会尽快解决的!*

OK. *I also believe that it can be solved soon!*

(5)

T：第一题谁来分享下？有点难度哦。

Who would like to share his opinions on the first question? It's a little difficult.

S：我来回答第一题。

Let me answer the first question.

T：*嗯嗯，期待中。*

Enen, I am looking forward to your answer.

The teacher and the students utilize the relational work strategies from the conversations above by expressing optimism and seeking agreement. In Example (4), due to the failure of the online platform, course resources cannot be uploaded and shared with students, which exerts a negative impact on students' learning. To alleviate the consequences caused by this problem, the teacher shows her confidence to solve the problem as soon as possible by adopting some optimistic expressions, such as "*有信心*" (*have confidence*), "*尽快*" (*as soon as possible*), *and* "*敬请期待*" (*please look forward to it*) in a positive tone in her utterance. At the same time, it can be seen from the student's response that the teacher's optimistic attitude does have a positive impact on them, which enhances the sense of trust between the two parties. In addition, in the student's response, he also adopts a positive relational work strategy by seeking agreement to guide his utterance. His response shows his attitude to be in line with the teacher's desire to solve the problem as soon as possible by uttering "*我也相信会尽快解决的*" (*I also believe that it can be solved soon*). Similar to Example (4), in Example (5), the teacher uses the positive expression "*期待中*" (*I am looking forward to your answer*), which undoubtedly gives psychological encouragement to the student who is going to answer this question and makes the student feel the warmness of the teacher. This relational work strategy increases the student's expectation of solving the problem and improves the relationship between the teacher and the student.

4.3. Negative Relational Work Strategies

A negative relational work strategy refers to the use of redressive language to make relational work polite/politic/appropriate directed to the addressee's negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Similar to positive relational work strategies, in negative relational work strategies, politeness is viewed as the performance of interlocutors' polite/politic/appropriate relational practices to serve to meet and attend to the negative-face desires to be unimpeded autonomous and free from imposition. Accordingly, the term "negative" in negative relational work strategies is not related to something bad or harmful, and it corresponds to the negative face and negative politeness strategies put forward by Brown and Levinson (1987). Some examples will be demonstrated below.

4.3.1. Showing Uncertainty

First, the management of negative-face desire and relational work is reflected in the language use of the teachers and students through showing uncertainty by using hedges (discourse markers), circumlocution (lengthy explanation, preface prior to primary message), and questions following Brown and Levinson's (1987) negative politeness strategy.

(6)
T：@S, 这个问题你*可以来试试*吗？
@S, *Can you have a try* on this question?
S：我试试.
I can have a try.
(7)
T：今天我们尝试视频会议<u>哈</u>。虽然之前在别的班试过比较卡。但是我们人少，*或许可以试一试。*
Today we're going to try to use video conferencing. However, the effect of the previous test in other classes is not ideal. But the student number in our class is small. *Perhaps, we might have a try.*
S：好的
OK

From the two conversations above, teachers and students adopt the negative relational work strategies by using circumlocution and hedges. In Example (6), the teacher-student interaction begins with raising a question through the teacher's use of "*@S*". Such relational practice can easily threaten students' negative face because it can affect their autonomy of choice and freedom from imposition, thus threatening the student's sense of equity rights. To make her relational work politic and polite, the teacher then pays attention to her sentence type by using an interrogative sentence "*可以来试试吗*" (*can you have a try...*) to mitigate the negative impact of her utterance. In Example (7), the teacher instructs to carry out teaching activities by using video conferencing. While he is giving the instruction, he adopts the Chinese modal particle "哈", which can be interpreted as the creative form of hedges. In addition, to let the students better

accept her instruction, she uses hedges like "或许" (*perhaps*), "试一试" (*have a try*) to do relational practice by making an assumption that the requirements of video conferencing on the network will be reduced to some extent in the class with few students. It can be seen that the appropriate use of hedges and questions enables teachers and students to achieve the positive relational effect by reducing the possibility of unpleasant relationship development and further maintaining online teacher-student politeness.

4.3.2. Apologizing

Second, the management of negative-face desire and relational work is reflected in the language use of the teachers and students through apologizing. By apologizing for doing an FTA, the teachers and students can indicate their reluctance to intrude on others' negative face and thereby partially redress the impingement.

(8)

T：*第一周的要点我终于讲好了，不过还是花了超过预计的时间。抱歉！*

I finally got through the lesson, but it took me longer than expected. *I'm sorry!*

S：*老师，没事的*

Teacher, it's OK.

(9)

S：*实在不好意思，老师。我家外面在下雨，我的网不好刚刚卡在外面了*

I am so sorry, teacher. It's raining outside, and <u>I have trouble with my internet.</u>

T：*没关系。*

That's OK.

The use of negative relational work strategy of apologizing by teachers and students has been observed in the above two conversations. In Example (8), the teacher's class delay impedes students' negative face as their break time is violated. To alleviate students' negative emotions, the teacher does her relational work with students through the use of apology "不好意思" (*I'm sorry*) to express his sorriness in advance. This relational practice greatly shortens the distance between teachers and students and fosters the affiliation between the teachers and students as it is not common for teachers to apologize to their students. In Example (9), the student suffers offline, which results in his slow response to the teacher, thus infringing the teacher's negative face through the "cost" of wasting her time. To alleviate the negative influence of his failure to timely respond to teachers' questions, the student performs negative relational strategy by expressing his apology "不好意思" (*I am sorry*) with an intensifying adverbial "实在" (*so*). According to the response, the teacher does not think much of it and accepts his apology. Consequently, both parties' face is preserved, and the psychological distance between teachers and students is shortened.

4.4. Emoji Relational Work Strategies

An emoji relational work strategy refers to using language combined with emojis to make relational work polite/politic/appropriate (Locher & Watts, 2008) directed to addressee's positive face or negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In emoji relational work strategies, politeness is viewed as the performance of interlocutors' polite/politic/appropriate relational practices either to stay away from being too direct to infringe on others positive face or to attend to the negative-face desires to be unimpeded, autonomous, and free from imposition in interaction. For example:

(10)

S: 这次的讨论深化了我对议论文写作结构与逻辑方面的认识，结构与逻辑是议论文写作中必不可少的两大基本要素啊！

This discussion has deepened my understanding of the structure and logic of argumentative writing. Structure and logic are two essential elements of argumentative writing.

T：我很赞同你的看法　👍

I can't agree with you anymore.　👍

In Example (10), the emoji thumb-up sign has been observably deployed by the teacher to do relational work to enhance the student's positive face. Example (10) takes place in the sections of student's response and teacher's feedback. From the conversation, we can see that the student shows his understanding of the discussion of argumentative writing. This discussion inspires him a lot. From the teacher's response, we can see that the teacher favors the student's opinion. Except for showing his praise by uttering "*我很赞同你的看法*" (*I can't agree with you anymore*), the emoji thumb-up sign is adopted to strengthen the student's positive face. In addition, the teacher is not only visually boosting her praise, but also showing her orientation for the enhancement of relational effect with a desire to maintain harmonious relations between the student by using the emoji thumb-up sign.

(11)

T：今天我们的课就上到这里，下节课我们读两篇论文，请大家提前做好准备　😊

This is the end of today's class. We will read two papers in the next class. Please get ready in advance.　😊

S(s)：好的，谢谢老师 💐 💐

OK, thank you, teacher 💐 💐

In Example (11), emojis like a smiling face and sending a flower are used by both the teacher and students in their utterances. Example (11) takes place in the closing section of the online class. It is common for the teacher to take the first turn to dismiss the class and assign some homework or issue some instructions for the next class. When giving a request, similar to Example (6), the teacher is likely to infringe the student's negative face. According to her request, the stu-

dents need to do some preparatory work in advance, which could do "cost" to their time. It is worth noting that the teacher uses the emoji of a smiling face. The use of this emoji can not only function as a downgrader (Blum-Kulka, 1987) to mitigate the force of the speech act request, but also shows the teacher's desire to preserve the students' negative face. From the students' responses, it is seen that they are pleased to accept the teacher's request. In addition, the students do their relational work by expressing their gratitude to the teacher in their utterance "谢谢老师" (*thank you teacher*) combined with the emoji sending a flower, which enhances the teacher's positive face in return. All in all, the use of emojis in teacher-student interactions creatively functions as relational work strategies, allowing online teacher-student interactions no longer to stay at the dimension of purely written discourse (Yao, 2021).

5. Conclusion

The study sets out to explore how teachers and students maintain politeness online. By investigating their performance of relational work and unpacking the relational work strategies they adopt, this study yields the following conclusions. The preferred choices of relational work strategies employed by teachers and students in their online interactions are positive relational work strategies, negative relational work strategies, and emoji relational work strategies. Positive relational strategies are mostly realized by claiming common ground and being cooperative through in-group identity markers, noticing, attending to each other, being optimistic, and seeking agreement. Negative relational work strategies are mainly performed by showing uncertainty by employing questions and hedges as well as through apologizing to indicate a reluctance to impinge on others' negative face. By adopting the unique device of emojis in CMC, teachers and students do their relational work in a more vivid manner. These preferred strategies contribute to managing teachers' and students' positive and negative face, further closing the distance between teachers and students to maintain the online teacher-student politeness. The preference for these strategies also shows that teachers and students are both concerned about balancing online interactions with showing consideration and respect to each other than with protecting the basic right to be unimpeded in their territories. Thus, in the current study, politeness and relational work imply a form of online interpersonal relationship, which is reciprocated between relational parties of teachers and students. Moreover, it implies that using these relational work strategies to do polite, politic, and appropriate relational practices to maintain politeness is suitable for the online education community.

The present study contributes to the literature on online politeness and relational work by investigating the use of language in teacher-student interactions. However, the study analyzed the teachers' and students' use of language based on the data from Dingtalk. More research on different online educational platforms is possibly encouraged to explore the specificity and universality of using

relational work strategies served for teacher-student politeness. As mentioned before, the study did not consider gender. Future studies on gender variation employing language to do relational work and maintain politeness in online teacher-student interactions may be illuminating. In addition, the present study focused on the context in Mainland China. Future research can do comparative studies to explore the similarities and differences of the performance of relational work and the management of politeness in online teacher-student interactions between different countries.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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