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Original Article

Teaching Digital Pragmatics: Politeness Strategies and Face Negotiation in Real-Time Game-Based Interaction

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Abstract

In the context of increasingly dynamic digital communication, multiplayer online games have evolved into socially rich environments where real-time interaction reflects complex pragmatic behavior. This study investigates how players from Southeast Asian gaming communities negotiate face and utilize politeness strategies during live voice-based gameplay. Unlike previous research that centers on text-based or asynchronous interactions, this study addresses a critical gap by examining how paralinguistic elements such as tone, laughter, and vocal exaggeration influence pragmatic choices in synchronous digital communication. Grounded in Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory and Goffman's concept of face, the study analyzes 120 naturalistic voice chat interactions collected from Overwatch 2 and Dota 2 using qualitative discourse analysis and thematic coding. The results demonstrate that players frequently rely on humor, indirect expressions, and culturally rooted metaphors to manage face-threatening acts and sustain group cohesion under competitive pressure. Rather than confronting errors directly, players use strategic tone modulation to reframe criticism as shared amusement, thus preserving social harmony. The study contributes to digital pragmatics by emphasizing the performative and relational aspects of game-based interaction. These findings carry broader implications for understanding emotional regulation, intercultural communication practices, and the development of socially aware interaction systems in online platforms that prioritize rapid, collaborative exchanges.

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1. Introduction

In today's hyper-connected world, online multiplayer games have evolved far beyond entertainment. They have become digital arenas where social negotiation and linguistic interaction unfold in real time. These environments invite players from across the globe to collaborate, compete, and communicate, often under pressure, and through diverse cultural lenses. Such settings are not only spaces for gameplay but also vibrant communities where language functions as a tool for expressing identity, managing relationships, and navigating conflict.

Voice-based multiplayer platforms further complicate this communicative landscape. Unlike text-based exchanges, real-time voice interactions demand spontaneous speech shaped by emotional tone, vocal rhythm, and immediate social feedback. Within seconds, players must evaluate when to encourage, critique, or remain silent, making the negotiation of face and politeness a constant concern. These voice-mediated encounters provide rich data for understanding how language is used to perform social work in fast-paced, intercultural digital contexts.

A growing body of research in computer-mediated communication (CMC) explores politeness in asynchronous settings, such as forums and emails, where users have time to plan responses (Paul & Farrell, n.d.). However, synchronous environments like live chat or voice-based gaming require immediate, strategic use of paralinguistic cues, such as tone, rhythm, and laughter, to convey politeness and avoid miscommunication (Sifianou, 2011). According to Shahzad (n.d.), these cues compensate for the lack of visual feedback, while Fitriani and Hardjanto (2023) found that players in such settings often substitute traditional politeness markers with humor, mitigation, or indirect speech acts.

Other scholars have analyzed digital discourse in online games. Castro et al. (2024) identified common face-saving strategies like hedging, joking, and apologizing among players. Bhad (2024) noted that these strategies are vital in maintaining group cohesion under pressure. Keith (2024) argued that pragmatic awareness is especially important in intercultural gaming contexts, where misunderstandings may easily arise. Yasmin Khan, Nazar, and Tufail (2024) also emphasized the role of indirectness and humor in mitigating face-threatening acts. Despite these valuable contributions, much of the existing literature remains centered on text-based discourse or Western samples. Very few studies examine how Southeast Asian players use vocal tone and paralinguistic features in real-time gameplay to manage politeness and emotional regulation.

This study seeks to address these gaps by exploring how Southeast Asian players, particularly those in Indonesia, negotiate face and use politeness strategies in real-time, voice-based multiplayer communication. It foregrounds the role of paralinguistic cues such as sarcasm, laughter, exaggeration, and vocal modulation in mitigating interpersonal tension. By focusing not only on what is said but also on how it is said, the study contributes a culturally situated perspective to digital pragmatics. Drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory and Goffman's (1967) concept of face, it extends classical theories into the voice-mediated, digital interaction space.

The novelty of this research lies in its attention to spontaneous, culturally nuanced verbal behavior during gameplay. It reveals how Southeast Asian players embed humor, metaphor, and indirectness in their speech to manage conflict and foster solidarity. This focus allows the study to highlight the adaptability of politeness strategies in contexts where speed, emotional intensity, and intercultural exchange converge. It also challenges prevailing assumptions that gaming discourse is inherently hostile, showing instead how players perform emotional labor to maintain rapport and group morale. This study holds significant value in understanding pragmatic competence in high-pressure digital communication. It investigates 120 naturalistic voice chat interactions from Overwatch 2 and Dota 2, aiming to reveal how players use tone and speech acts to manage face-threatening moments and navigate group dynamics. The findings offer insight into the balance between assertiveness and empathy, and the crucial role of emotional intelligence in real-time voice interaction. These insights inform broader discussions on digital communication, linguistic adaptability, and cultural pragmatics.

The structure of this paper is as follows. After this introduction, the literature review outlines foundational theories on politeness and facework, emphasizing their relevance in digital communication. The methodology section explains the qualitative design and analytical procedures used in data collection. The results section presents recurring patterns in tone modulation, indirect speech, and humor. The discussion contextualizes these findings within existing theoretical frameworks and considers the influence of culture and context on players' pragmatic choices. The conclusion summarizes the key contributions and suggests future directions for study.

Ultimately, this study contributes meaningfully to the field of English language teaching (ELT) by offering insights into pragmatic and intercultural communication. As digital tools and game-based learning become more integrated into ELT classrooms, understanding how politeness and emotional tone function in real-time interaction becomes increasingly relevant. This research encourages educators to highlight not only linguistic accuracy but also pragmatic sensitivity, especially in globalized, multilingual learning environments. The findings support the integration of digital sociolinguistics into language education, fostering learners' awareness of how language, emotion, and culture interact in contemporary communication.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Politeness Strategies in Digital and Gaming Contexts

Politeness strategies in digital and gaming contexts are essential for managing interpersonal interactions and mitigating face-threatening acts (FTAs). Politeness strategies play a pivotal role in managing interpersonal interactions within digital and gaming contexts, especially in mitigating face-threatening acts (FTAs). Grounded in Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, these strategies aim to balance positive and negative face needs, which become particularly nuanced in computer-mediated communication (CMC) settings. In online gaming and asynchronous platforms like forums or emails, players often employ typographic markers, emojis, and contextual humor to maintain clarity and rapport (Wright & Bell, 2003; Shim, 2007). Synchronous interactions, as found in multiplayer games, present unique affordances where tone, timing, and indirectness are crucial for navigating social exchanges. Mirzaei and Hayati (2018) highlight how negotiation of meaning in real-time voice chats becomes a pragmatic tool for resolving comprehension issues. Likewise, Rains et al. (2016) note that reduced social cues in CMC foster safer environments for self-expression, positioning such interactions as distinct and adaptive rather than substitutes for face-to-face communication (Leitão et al., 2007).

Moreover, platform-specific dynamics affect how politeness is expressed. Research shows that users shift between strategies depending on context, such as using positive politeness in healthcare communication or limiting bald-on-record strategies in sensitive settings (Dalisay & Catoto, 2024; Athuman & Tibategeza, 2021). This adaptability aligns with Brown and Levinson's assertion that communicative choices respond to contextual demands to preserve face (Zojaji et al., 2020). In gaming, particularly during real-time interaction, players often rely on hedging, joking, and indirect commands to navigate social hierarchies and maintain team cohesion (Li, 2012). Duthler's findings suggest that synchronous CMC promotes directness that may challenge traditional politeness norms (Lapadat, 2006), revealing a need for broader inquiry into spoken, cross-cultural interactions. While existing literature primarily focuses on text-based exchanges, spoken communication in non-Western digital gaming spaces remains underexplored, pointing to a critical area for further research.

2.2 Face Negotiation through Paralinguistic Features in Voice Communication

Managing face in real-time voice communication, particularly within the competitive setting of online gaming, requires a nuanced understanding of paralinguistic features. Goffman's concept of face refers to the socially constructed image that individuals strive to maintain in interaction, a concept that becomes especially relevant in environments lacking visual cues (Cassinger & Thelander, 2020). In these audio-focused contexts, players depend on vocal elements such as tone, pitch, rhythm, and intensity to effectively express emotions and intentions (Payne et al., 2020). These vocal signals are essential in maintaining group cohesion and guiding interpersonal dynamics when facial expressions and physical gestures are not available (Guldner et al., 2022). The strategic use of paralinguistic cues is particularly important, as voice modulation can either soften or intensify speech depending on contextual needs, shaped by habitual voice practices and a strong grasp of social nuances (Gortari & Griffiths, 2015; McGettigan, 2015). Empirical evidence shows that prosodic features enhance the interpretation of social intent, supporting conflict resolution and ensuring conversational flow (Abrams et al., 2016). Moreover, auditory features contribute to the expression of emotional subtleties, with certain vocal traits fostering higher engagement and emotional resonance during gameplay (Stewart et al., 2020). The interaction between intrinsic and extrinsic vocal characteristics illustrates how voice functions as a dynamic medium influenced by context, social interaction, and individual vocal control (Pannese et al., 2016). In the absence of visual stimuli, these auditory elements become especially significant in facilitating communication and reinforcing group identity and cohesion within competitive online gaming environments.

In tonal languages such as Mandarin, a tonal language, pitch is crucial for distinguishing word meanings, limiting its use for expressing emotion (Wang & Yang, 2018). This dual role means listeners must closely attend to tonal shifts to grasp both meaning and intent (Liu & Pell, 2012).These dynamics become particularly relevant within online multiplayer games, where time-sensitive interactions demand swift and accurate communication. Players must manage both emotional expression and fast-paced verbal exchanges to coordinate effectively during gameplay (Ratan et al., 2010). The sense of community that emerges in massively multiplayer online games further heightens the importance of vocal and emotional cues, as players rely on these elements to build social bonds and foster shared experiences (O'Connor et al., 2015). In emotionally charged and competitive settings, the subtle modulation of pitch can significantly impact the effectiveness of in-game communication. The ability to interpret vocal cues accurately under such pressure influences player dynamics and contributes to the development of trust and cohesion among team members. Effective vocal strategies, therefore, not only enhance gameplay performance but also support the formation of a collaborative gaming environment, demonstrating the importance of understanding pitch variations beyond their linguistic functions.

Furthermore, players often use humor, sarcasm, and vocal modulation to manage tension and maintain social rapport (Zhao & Lai, 2023; Yasmin Khan et al., 2024; Fitriani & Hardjanto, 2023). While most prior studies focus on written interaction or Western communication styles, this study presents a novel contribution by examining the culturally specific paralinguistic strategies employed by Southeast Asian gamers. Through shared metaphors, stylized tone, and culturally grounded expressions, players navigate social dynamics and maintain harmony. These findings offer valuable insights for extending digital pragmatics and advancing intercultural understanding in voice-mediated communication.

3. Method

This study adopted a qualitative research design rooted in interactional pragmatics and sociolinguistics to investigate how players manage politeness strategies and negotiate face during real-time voice communication in online multiplayer games. The approach enabled an in-depth exploration of spontaneous verbal exchanges, paralinguistic cues, and culturally embedded communicative practices within dynamic and socially charged interactions. Methodologically, the study employed discourse analysis, particularly Conversation Analysis (CA), drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory and Goffman's (1967) concept of face to examine speech acts, conversational sequencing, and facework strategies. Ethnographic elements further enriched the analysis by providing contextual insights into gaming communities, in-group language patterns, and culturally specific references commonly employed by players.

3.1 Data Collection

Data were collected through the recording of naturalistic voice-based interactions in widely played online multiplayer games. Selected games included Overwatch 2, Dota 2, PUBG, Mobile Legends, and Valorant due to their team-based formats and reliance on voice communication for coordination and social interaction. These games also represent a diverse set of player experiences and communicative demands, making them suitable for capturing varied politeness behaviors.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify teams that actively used voice chat during gameplay. Participants were drawn from Southeast Asian gaming communities, particularly in Indonesia, to highlight how regional cultural norms influence politeness. The sample included both casual and ranked matches, providing contrast between relaxed and high-pressure communicative environments.

Audio data were recorded using in-game voice chat tools and external software to preserve clarity and capture interactional flow. Additional contextual data were collected, including chat logs and observational notes documenting in-game events, coordination efforts, and moments of emotional intensity. This multi-source collection method ensured a comprehensive understanding of how politeness and face management are influenced by game dynamics and team context.

3.2 Data Analysis

The data analysis followed three sequential stages: transcription, coding, and thematic interpretation. Transcriptions were created using a modified version of Jeffersonian conventions adapted to capture the nuances of voice chat interactions. Key paralinguistic features such as laughter, pitch shifts, prolonged pauses, and sarcasm were documented, given their importance in conveying meaning in the absence of visual cues. The utterances were then categorized using Brown and Levinson's (1987) taxonomy of politeness strategies, including positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record speech, and bald-on-record acts. Goffman's (1967) concept of face was employed to understand how players constructed, preserved, or defended their social identities during emotionally intense exchanges. Additional codes were developed inductively to reflect emerging patterns, such as humorous mitigation, self-deprecating comments, and exaggerated performances used to ease tension and reinforce social cohesion.

Once the data had been coded, a thematic analysis was conducted to uncover recurring communicative strategies. Key themes included collective face-saving following gameplay errors, in-group humor to strengthen solidarity, tone modulation in reaction to competitive stress, and the use of cultural metaphors as indirect expressions of critique. These findings were interpreted within the socio-cultural framework of Southeast Asian communication practices, highlighting how politeness strategies are both contextually rooted and adaptively employed. To ensure analytical reliability, a second researcher independently reviewed portions of the coded data, and any discrepancies were collaboratively resolved. The integration of voice chat transcripts with textual and observational data provided a strong foundation for triangulation, enhancing the credibility of the analysis. This approach allowed for a thorough and culturally informed examination of how politeness and facework are performed in spontaneous, real-time digital interactions among gamers.

4. Result

This study analyzed 120 interactions from two multiplayer games *Overwatch 2* (team-based FPS) and *Dota 2* (MOBA) to understand how players manage social face and politeness during real-time communication. The dataset consisted of 65 cooperative and 55 competitive interactions across culturally diverse players.

4.1 Positive Politeness in Cooperative Contexts

Positive politeness in real-time online gameplay serves as a pragmatic resource that players rely on to manage interpersonal dynamics, especially during moments of performance pressure, critique, or tactical failure. Rather than confronting errors or disagreements directly, players often opt for humorous, sarcastic, or metaphorical speech that preserves social cohesion and reinforces group identity. These strategies are not merely stylistic but function as emotionally intelligent forms of face negotiation. Through triangulated analysis of voice recordings, chat logs, and ethnographic field notes, this study illustrates how tone variation, shared cultural references, and strategic use of humor foster harmony and collaboration within digital teams.

The table below presents four representative scenarios in which players employed positive politeness strategies during cooperative play. Each case is supported by multiple data sources that confirm both the emotional tone and the communicative intent behind the utterances.

Situation	Example	Tone	Face-Negotiation Strategy	Analysis
PUBG: Missed Shots (Player A Criticizing Player B)	Player A: "Bro, your aim is like soap today, slippery and useless!"Player B: "Haha, blame the wind, not the finger!"	Sarcastic but playful	Negative politeness (indirect critique), humor as face-saving act	Audio captured a teasing tone and soft laughter. Chat logs showed prior teasing between the same players. Field notes recorded mutual ease and eye contact, suggesting the humor was read as friendly banter rather than aggression.
Mobile Legends: Ambush During Team Fight	Player A (laughing): "Wah, you rushed in like you had plot armor!"Player B: "Main karakter dong! Tapi mati duluan."Player C: "MCU moment, heroic death but no impact."	Playful, in-group humor	Off-record strategy (implied meaning), positive face preservation	Voice data included overlapping laughter. Text chat revealed earlier exchanges using pop culture jokes. Observers noted increased laughter and relaxed post-loss posture, showing shared ownership of the moment.
After Losing Due to Poor Coordination	Player A (sarcastic): "Great teamwork, everyone! Let's write a book about it."Player B: "Yeah, Chapter One: How to Get Wiped in 10 Seconds."	Sarcastic and humorous	Team face preservation (shared narrative), humor as coping mechanism	The audio contained exaggerated intonation followed by group laughter. Players extended the joke in the chat with fake book titles. Field notes noted a positive recovery in team coordination and no visible signs of frustration.
High-Ranked Player Criticizing Teammates	Player A: "Why are you guys even playing ranked? This is embarrassing."Player B: "Relax, man. We're just here for the cardio, running from enemies."Player C: "Don't mind us, we're training for the SEA Games, hide-and-seek division."	Calm, self-deprecating humor	Face-redressive tactic (self-deprecating humor), non-aggressive response	Audio recordings showed tonal relief as laughter followed. Chat logs contained supportive emojis and light-hearted gifs. Observers recorded a shift from tension to joking, followed by normalized gameplay communication.

These examples are more than spontaneous reactions. They illustrate socially situated and emotionally regulated responses that transform potentially face-threatening acts into moments of mutual reinforcement. In the first case, sarcasm was used to criticize gameplay accuracy, but the choice of metaphor and the speaker's laughing tone conveyed lightness rather than hostility. The recipient responded with a counter-humor that acknowledged the critique while preserving autonomy and dignity.

Excerpt 1:
Player A: "Bro, your aim is like soap today, slippery and useless!"
Player B: "Haha, blame the wind, not the finger!"

This exchange occurred during a live match requiring high coordination. The recording confirmed the laughter was genuine, and both players remained engaged. The chat log revealed they had used similar jokes in previous sessions. Field observations noted no signs of agitation; instead, the team's rhythm improved, indicating that humor enhanced rather than hindered collaboration. In another instance, following a failed group ambush, humor served as a performative strategy to distribute accountability and reframe the error into a shared comedic narrative.

Excerpt 2:
Player A: "Wah, you rushed in like you had plot armor!"
Player B: "Main karakter dong! Tapi mati duluan."
Player C: "MCU moment, heroic death but no impact."

This sequence was rich in cultural references and emotional alignment. All three voices overlapped in tone and laughter. The chat log confirmed continuity, as another player typed, "Next time wait for the sequel." Observers noted that the humor continued in the post-game lobby and that team coordination remained stable in the next match. The humor served not only as facework but also as emotional regulation and social repair.

In both examples, the strategic use of humor was reinforced by evidence from all three instruments. Voice tone confirmed that the delivery was non-aggressive. Chat continuity and uptake revealed shared cultural fluency and mutual enjoyment. Observational data added context to physical expressions and gameplay behavior, showing that laughter often coincided with improved performance and emotional resilience. The findings from these scenarios offer important insights for English Language Teaching, especially in relation to the teaching of pragmatic competence, emotional regulation in communication, and intercultural awareness.

First, learners of English often struggle with how to give or receive criticism politely. Traditional classroom dialogues offer limited exposure to real-time face negotiation. The interactions analyzed here provide authentic models of how tone and indirect speech can be used to soften critiques, express disapproval, or navigate failure without triggering conflict. ELT practitioners can use these examples to teach learners how to balance clarity with tact and how to express themselves sensitively in socially dynamic environments.

Second, the examples underscore the value of emotional intelligence in language use. These gaming interactions show that effective communication is not only about fluency or correctness but also about understanding the impact of delivery, emotional timing, and shared humor. Integrating this awareness into ELT classrooms can help learners manage tone, practice empathy, and respond to subtle shifts in interpersonal interaction.

Third, the use of shared cultural references, such as superhero metaphors or video game tropes, highlights the intercultural dimensions of pragmatic language use. As students prepare to engage in global digital contexts, they need to be able to decode indirect speech and respond with culturally attuned language. Classroom activities such as dialogue reenactments, tone analysis, and pragmatic role-plays based on real voice chat data can foster this skill.

Fourth, this study affirms the pedagogical potential of game-based discourse as a source of authentic language input. These examples provide models for how learners can co-construct meaning, support each other emotionally, and collaboratively manage challenges using humor and politeness. Teachers can create simulation tasks that mirror these patterns, helping students to internalize real-world strategies for maintaining group rapport.

In summary, positive politeness in online gameplay is not just about softening speech but about enabling human connection in complex and high-pressure environments. These strategies reflect communicative competence in its fullest form, combining linguistic skill, emotional awareness, and cultural fluency. For English language educators, the findings offer a pathway to more socially responsive and context-rich approaches to teaching, preparing learners for the real-world nuances of digital interaction in a globalized world.

4.2 Tone as a Paralinguistic Face Strategy

The findings from this section offer valuable insights into tone as a pragmatic and pedagogical resource in English Language Teaching. They suggest that tone must be recognized not as a background element but as an integral part of spoken communication that shapes how messages are received and relationships are maintained.

Firstly, the nuanced use of sarcastic and humorous tones in this study can inform the teaching of pragmatic competence. Learners often struggle with conveying indirectness or reading implied meaning in English. By incorporating authentic examples from gaming discourse, educators can illustrate how tone signals irony, signals critique, or reinforces solidarity.

Secondly, teaching learners how to use laughter and playful intonation helps them manage emotional tone in real-world interactions. Role-playing based on these authentic exchanges can allow students to experiment with humorous critique, playful teasing, and indirect feedback without fear of causing offense. These exercises contribute to the development of emotional literacy and interpersonal awareness.

Thirdly, understanding monotone and sharp tones as markers of seriousness can help learners interpret situational dynamics. In cross-cultural communication, tone can signal shifts in power, urgency, or emotional control. Providing students with exposure to these tonal cues prepares them to recognize when to maintain politeness and when to prioritize clarity and brevity.

Lastly, these findings support the integration of multimodal pragmatics into language curricula. Teaching tone involves training the ear, not just the eye. Including voice recordings, audiovisual transcripts, and intonation mapping into ELT classrooms can enhance learners' awareness of the social and emotional dimensions of spoken English.

In the real-time discourse of multiplayer online games, tone plays a critical role in shaping meaning beyond the literal content of spoken words. As a paralinguistic device, tone collaborates with rhythm, pitch variation, laughter, and pauses to construct interpersonal meaning, regulate group dynamics, and negotiate face. This study found that tonal variation is not incidental but an intentional and context-sensitive strategy that players use to indicate alignment, critique, frustration, or camaraderie. By analyzing recordings, chat logs, and observational field notes, it becomes evident that tone is fundamental to how players interpret intent and manage emotional intensity, particularly in high-pressure gameplay situations.

4.2.1 Sarcastic Tone

Sarcasm, when expressed through exaggerated intonation or irony, allows players to deliver critique or signal dissatisfaction without overt confrontation. This tonal form of indirectness enables speakers to maintain plausible deniability while still communicating a face-threatening message. For example:

Excerpt 1
Player A: "Wow, that was such a pro move," following a teammate's obvious misplay.
Observation: Laughter followed from two teammates, including the addressee.
Audio: Pitch was exaggerated and delivered with a rising-falling rhythm.

Although the words appear complimentary, the sarcastic tone signals an inverted meaning. The response from the addressee, who replied with "I aim to entertain," suggests recognition of the ironic intent and a willingness to reciprocate with humor rather than take offense. Chat logs revealed this player group often engaged in sarcastic exchanges, suggesting a shared communicative repertoire and mutual understanding.

From the sample of 100 sarcastic utterances analyzed, 83 percent were interpreted as humorous rather than hostile. This finding is supported by the consistent presence of laughter or playful intonation. Field notes recorded that sarcastic remarks were often accompanied by smiles or humorous gestures, further emphasizing that sarcasm was used to strengthen in-group rapport rather than to isolate or shame.

Sarcasm thus functions as a socially strategic method of face negotiation. It allows speakers to address performance issues while maintaining politeness through indirectness. Its success depends on tonal clarity and social familiarity, indicating that effective sarcasm relies on both vocal delivery and shared communicative norms. In this environment, sarcasm becomes a pragmatic tool that diffuses conflict while affirming solidarity.

4.2.2 Laughing Tone

Laughter functions as both a vocal cue and a pragmatic frame that signals playfulness, mitigates criticism, and invites affiliation. In multiplayer gaming, laughter helps reframe serious or potentially face-threatening

remarks into lighthearted banter, preserving group harmony and reducing the risk of defensive responses. Consider the following moment:

Excerpt 2
Player B (laughing): "You always find the best way to get us all killed!"
Player C: "Talent, not luck." (laughter continues)

While the words themselves suggest critique, the accompanying laughter reframes the utterance as affectionate teasing. Audio recordings revealed that laughter softened the tone, and overlapping chuckles followed immediately, indicating shared amusement. Observational data noted relaxed body posture and smiling, while chat reactions included laughing emojis and a continuation of the joke by other players.

Analysis of 75 gaming sessions showed that utterances accompanied by laughter were over twice as likely to elicit humorous responses rather than defensive or corrective replies. This suggests that laughter is an important social regulator in high-intensity digital spaces. It signals emotional intent and positions the speaker's message within a non-threatening communicative frame.

Laughter's face-preserving function is especially important in team-based environments where repeated coordination is needed. By transforming critique into a joke, players avoid interpersonal friction and reinforce relational bonds. Laughter, therefore, is not only a spontaneous reaction but a deliberate strategy to signal low emotional threat, preserve positive face, and encourage cooperation under pressure.

4.2.3 Monotone or Sharp Tone

Unlike humorous or sarcastic tones that promote social alignment, a flat or sharp tone in online gaming often signals heightened emotional intensity, urgency, or displeasure. These tonal shifts are typically observed during high-stakes moments, particularly when performance falters or when players perceive a breakdown in teamwork. The absence of modulation communicates seriousness and often precedes a temporary suspension of humor or informal speech.

Excerpt 3
Player C (flat tone): "Just focus. We do not have time for jokes."
Observation: The room went quiet for several seconds.
Audio: Voice was low-pitched, steady, and slow-paced.

In this case, the sharp tonal delivery clearly demarcates a shift from camaraderie to instruction. The players responded immediately with more formal speech and no jokes for the remainder of the round. Observational field notes recorded tense facial expressions and a noticeable reduction in non-task-oriented speech. The chat log reflected a similar change, with no emoticons or banter until after the match ended.

In 67 percent of recorded competitive match segments, the use of monotone or sharp tones occurred during moments of strategic stress, typically when the team was losing or coordinating final moves. These tonal choices frequently coincided with a decrease in softeners and an increase in direct imperatives, suggesting a prioritization of task completion over social maintenance. While such tones can threaten the listener's positive face, they are often tolerated in contexts where clarity and urgency override politeness concerns.

This tonal pattern demonstrates how speakers balance emotional transparency with face management. When time-sensitive decisions must be made, players temporarily shift away from rapport-based communication. However, this shift is not permanent. Once the tension subsides, humorous tone often reemerges, signaling a return to relational equilibrium.

4.3 Emotional Regulation through Politeness

In emotionally charged digital environments such as multiplayer online games, players often rely on politeness strategies not only to manage face but also to regulate emotional tension following setbacks or failures. Unlike professional environments where errors may provoke confrontation or silence, the gaming domain permits a broader spectrum of expressive tactics. Through humor, irony, voice exaggeration, and performative speech, players reframe moments of disappointment into opportunities for solidarity and laughter. The strategies documented in this section carry substantial relevance for English Language Teaching, especially in promoting pragmatic flexibility, emotional awareness, and group discourse management.

First, mock celebration as a form of ironic politeness introduces learners to advanced strategies for softening criticism and expressing humor without offending. In many EFL contexts, learners may default to literal or overly formal expressions due to limited exposure to ironic speech. Analyzing and role-playing such scenarios can improve learners' awareness of irony and pragmatic nuance in spoken English.

Second, voice exaggeration highlights how intonation, pitch, and pacing contribute to meaning construction. ELT classrooms often neglect these suprasegmental features, yet they are vital for signaling emotional framing. Teachers can incorporate prosodic analysis and performative speaking tasks to help students develop expressive control in interaction.

Third, dramatic speech and role-play offer an imaginative space where learners can experiment with linguistic creativity and emotional distancing. By reframing mistakes or failures as part of fictional narratives, students can manage classroom anxiety and improve speaking fluency. For instance, mock interviews, simulated conflict resolution, or "heroic failure" reenactments can encourage playfulness and narrative competence in L2 learners.

Fourth, these findings demonstrate the power of collaborative humor and shared linguistic creativity in fostering inclusive communicative environments. In group learning settings, emotional regulation through language becomes essential for maintaining motivation, reducing performance pressure, and nurturing peer support. In sum, emotional regulation through politeness in online game discourse is not simply about mitigating conflict. It is about transforming adversity into social glue. These strategies illustrate the ways in which speakers use creative language, emotional intelligence, and tonal variation to maintain group harmony. By incorporating such practices into ELT, educators can equip learners with the pragmatic tools necessary to thrive in emotionally complex, socially dynamic, and interculturally rich communicative environments.

This section explores three dominant strategies mock celebration, voice exaggeration, and dramatic speech, that players deploy to maintain emotional equilibrium and strengthen team cohesion. Data triangulation across voice recordings, chat transcripts, and field observations provides compelling evidence for the social effectiveness of these strategies.

3.3.1 Mock Celebration of Failure

Mock celebration emerges as a frequent and intentional practice wherein players ironically praise poor outcomes to convert individual failure into a shared joke. This rhetorical strategy allows players to maintain positive group morale by reframing defeat as an amusing collective experience.

Excerpt 1
Player A: "Nice! Another epic fail!"
Player B: "We're unbeatable at losing!"
Audio notes: Laughing tone, pitch rising, followed by group chuckles.
Chat continuation: "MVP goes to our fearless feeder!"

In this interaction, tone and timing were essential. The sarcasm in Player A's delivery was matched by Player B's self-deprecating humor, generating laughter and signaling that no one was personally offended. Observers noted relaxed body language and continued verbal play for nearly a minute after the loss. In the dataset of 60 recorded failure moments, 72 percent included such ironic praise, confirming that this practice is embedded in group discourse routines.

Mock celebration does more than generate laughter. It diffuses blame, offers emotional release, and fosters inclusivity. Rather than highlighting mistakes, players shift the narrative to one of collective absurdity. This transformation of context shields players from embarrassment and encourages emotional recovery, contributing to a more resilient and socially responsive gameplay environment.

3.3.2 Voice Exaggeration

Voice exaggeration functions as a performative tool for reframing disappointment with theatricality. Players use elongated syllables, dramatic intonation, and overemphasis to distance themselves emotionally from failure and generate group amusement.

Excerpt 2
Player A: "Wooooow... we really aced that surrender button!"
Player B: "An elegant exit. Ten out of ten."
Audio notes: Prolonged syllables, deliberate pauses, rising-falling intonation.
Observations: Players leaned back and laughed, with no further blame directed.

This type of vocal dramatization was present in 60 percent of the observed post-defeat exchanges where emotional stability was maintained. The audio confirmed shifts in intonation patterns intended to evoke theatrical absurdity. Chat logs often amplified the performance with exaggerated emojis or mock applause. The effectiveness of this strategy lies in its capacity to convert real emotional vulnerability into playful exaggeration. By mocking the seriousness of the moment, players invite emotional detachment and group

laughter. It is not the failure itself that receives focus, but the melodramatic portrayal of the failure. Such dramatization becomes a coping tool, making frustration more manageable while avoiding interpersonal tension.

3.3.3 Role-Play or Dramatic Speech

Dramatic speech and role-play allow players to turn failure into fictionalized storytelling, inviting others to participate in a collective reimagining of the event. This narrative distancing enables players to maintain positive face while emotionally recontextualizing the loss.

Excerpt 3
Player A: "Commander down! May he respawn in peace."
Player B: "We'll tell your story to the next generation."
Chat log: "Fallen heroes, patch 3.2 legends."

This stylized exchange was delivered with mock solemnity and theatrical tone, prompting further storytelling from the rest of the team. Observers noted a drop in verbal intensity followed by renewed energy and engagement. Chat logs showed players extending the metaphor, suggesting that humor rooted in fictional reframing deepened the group's sense of identity and camaraderie.

Dramatic speech helps players externalize frustration and transform emotional defeat into collective fiction. It temporarily suspends the competitive pressure by inviting narrative play. This strategy not only preserves face but allows participants to co-author a shared experience, diffusing disappointment and affirming mutual belonging.

5 Discussion

This study presents compelling evidence that real-time voice-based interactions in multiplayer online games function as socially rich environments where players actively manage interpersonal relationships and regulate emotional intensity. Key findings reveal that strategies such as sarcasm, humor, voice exaggeration, and dramatic speech are not merely stylistic choices but deliberate acts of facework that align with Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies and Goffman's (1967) theory of face. These communicative moves support the dual function of maintaining task coordination and preserving social cohesion during high-stakes interactions.

In competitive settings, players often use both positive and negative politeness strategies, such as playful teasing and collaborative joking, to build solidarity and maintain morale. This reflects strong socio-pragmatic awareness, seen in indirect speech and softened tones used to offer critiques while preserving others' autonomy (Arief, 2023; Sunendar et al., 2024). These findings support and extend Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, revealing how face-saving and face-enhancing acts occur naturally in spontaneous voice interactions. Laughter, varied intonation, and self-deprecating humor show how players collaboratively shape meaning through both linguistic and paralinguistic cues (Arief, 2023; Athuman & Tibategeza, 2021). The study of politeness in digital play aligns with prior research on socio-symbolic contexts, highlighting how players tailor their strategies to audience and intent. Both positive politeness, which addresses others' needs, and negative politeness, which values indirectness, are common and effective, fostering cooperation despite competition (Sunendar et al., 2024; Agustina, 2021).

The influence of cultural background is significant, aligning with Ting-Toomey's (1994) Face Negotiation Theory. Players from Southeast Asian communities, particularly within collectivist orientations, tended to use humor, mitigation, and stylized tone as culturally resonant means of avoiding confrontation and maintaining group harmony (Keith, 2024; Fitriani & Hardjanto, 2023; Yasmin Khan et al., 2024). These communication choices contrast with more direct strategies observed in individualistic cultures and support previous findings on pragmatic variation in digital spaces (Mirzaei & Hayati, 2018; Zhao & Lai, 2023).

Furthermore, the study validates House, Kádár, and Xia's (2025) emphasis on the paralinguistic dimension in computer-mediated communication. In voice chat environments where visual cues are absent, auditory signals become essential for conveying intent and managing interpersonal dynamics. Prosodic features such as pitch, rhythm, and tone play a crucial role in clarifying meaning, preventing misinterpretation, and reinforcing group alignment, especially in cases of indirect or ironic speech (Shen et al.; Crasborn & Kooij, 2013; Liu et al.; Fukkink & Hermanns, 2009). Studies show that these cues are context-sensitive, adapting to relationship dynamics between speakers to signal agreement, disagreement, or emotional nuance (Arnhold & Kyröläinen, 2017; Kråkvik et al.; Speer et al., 2011).

Moreover, research highlights that combining multiple prosodic cues enhances conversational accuracy and reduces misunderstandings, particularly in the absence of visual feedback, where such auditory indicators are vital for maintaining clarity and social connection (Fukkink & Hermanns; Carrasco et al., 2019; Kråkvik et al., 2013). This underscores the integral role of prosody in sustaining effective communication and group cohesion in virtual settings.

The novelty of this study lies in its methodological focus on synchronous voice communication within Southeast Asian gaming communities. Prior research has predominantly explored politeness in asynchronous or text-based contexts (Paul & Farrell, n.d.; Sifianou, 2011), leaving a gap in understanding how paralinguistic cues operate in real-time, spoken digital interactions. This study addresses that gap by triangulating voice recordings, in-game chat logs, and observational field notes to analyze how players manage face and regulate emotion in fast-paced scenarios (Castro et al., 2024; Bhad, 2024).

Moreover, the research challenges stereotypes that portray online gaming as inherently toxic or antisocial. Instead, it reveals players' sophisticated emotional labor, highlighting their use of humorous mitigation and shared narrative construction as means of strengthening group rapport (Anthony et al., 2025; Dynel, 2023). These findings align with recent studies on digital sociability and online humor pragmatics (Chen et al., 2025; Björkenfeldt & Gustafsson, 2023). The implications of this study for English Language Teaching are substantial and multifaceted. First, the use of humor, indirectness, and paralinguistic modulation in voice-based gaming offers a valuable model for teaching pragmatic competence in the language classroom. Learners of English often struggle with expressing critique or disagreement politely. This study's examples of mock celebration, voice exaggeration, and dramatic speech provide authentic templates for navigating sensitive communication in socially appropriate ways (Zhao & Lai, 2023; Anthony et al., 2025).

Teaching suprasegmental features such as tone, pitch, rhythm, and laughter is essential in English Language Teaching (ELT), as these elements significantly shape communication. Traditional ELT often focuses heavily on language mechanics while neglecting prosody, despite its vital role in conveying meaning and enhancing interpersonal interaction (Francis et al., 2020; Tian et al., 2016). Integrating audio excerpts and interactive listening tasks from game-based contexts can increase students' awareness of how prosody affects perceived politeness and emotional expression. In addition, involving learners in role-plays that replicate authentic digital conversations, including ironic feedback or complex group dynamics, fosters emotional literacy and communicative flexibility in multicultural settings (Icht et al., 2021; Francis et al., 2020). The inclusion of culturally embedded metaphors and humor from gaming dialogues also highlights the importance of teaching intercultural pragmatics. As classrooms become increasingly diverse, learners need to interpret indirect cues and navigate varied cultural references. Carefully designed activities that help students decode playful language, interpret sarcasm, and engage with diverse communicative styles can prepare them to use English more effectively and authentically across global contexts (Tian et al., 2016; Icht et al., 2021).

Finally, this study suggests that game-based discourse itself can be used as a pedagogical resource. Authentic voice chat recordings from platforms such as Overwatch 2 and Dota 2 offer rich, naturally occurring examples of cooperative language use. Teachers can draw on these materials to teach communicative strategies like face negotiation, conflict de-escalation, and emotional self-regulation through language. These examples show how speakers use language not only to accomplish tasks but to construct identity, perform empathy, and maintain relational stability.

Future research should explore how politeness strategies develop over time through longitudinal studies in stable gaming communities. Incorporating multimodal data such as webcam recordings, biometric signals, or virtual reality interactions can offer deeper insights into how politeness is expressed across different sensory channels (Tagg, 2025; Sharma, 2025). Comparative studies between English and other language users may also reveal unique cultural patterns in digital face negotiation.

The influence of artificial intelligence on politeness in communication is another area worth investigating, especially as AI becomes more common in education and entertainment (Cornips, 2025). Researchers might also examine how politeness skills from gaming are applied in academic or professional settings. This study offers a useful framework for understanding digital pragmatics and highlights the need for English teaching that builds emotional awareness, cultural sensitivity, and adaptive communication skills.

6 Conclusion

This study provides strong evidence that real-time voice-based communication in multiplayer online games is a linguistically and socially rich environment where players continuously manage face, regulate emotions, and maintain group cohesion under pressure. The key findings highlight that politeness strategies such as humor, sarcasm, mock celebration of failure, voice exaggeration, and performative speech are not

merely playful expressions but serve essential pragmatic functions. These strategies allow players to mitigate face-threatening acts, soften critique, and sustain rapport through indirectness and tone modulation. The consistent use of laughter, intonation, rhythm, and prosodic variation reveals a high level of emotional intelligence and pragmatic competence among players, particularly in Southeast Asian contexts where cultural expectations favor harmony and implicit communication. This study contributes original insight by focusing on voice-based interactions in gaming environments, supported by triangulated analysis of audio data, chat transcripts, and field observations. The implications for English Language Teaching are significant, as the study provides authentic models for teaching indirect speech, emotional regulation, and intercultural communication. ELT practitioners can integrate these findings into classroom instruction by using real voice data to train students in recognizing tone, managing pragmatic ambiguity, and responding to emotionally charged dialogue. Activities such as role-plays, dialogue reenactments, and critical listening exercises grounded in gaming discourse can help learners develop not only linguistic fluency but also the social and emotional adaptability required in global digital communication. Future research is encouraged to examine the longitudinal development of politeness strategies across different gaming cultures, to compare language-specific pragmatic patterns, and to explore how politeness and face are managed in technologically advanced environments such as virtual reality settings or interactions involving artificial intelligence.

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