

ISSN 2545 – 4439

ISSN 1857 - 923X

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

Institute of Knowledge Management

KNOWLEDGE



Vol. 72.5

Scientific Papers

HUMANITIES



KIJ

Vol. 72

No. 5

pp. 627 - 745

Skopje 2025

KNOWLEDGE



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

**SCIENTIFIC PAPERS
VOL. 72.5**

October, 2025

**INSTITUTE OF KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT
SKOPJE**



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KNOWLEDGE - International Journal Scientific Papers Vol. 72.5

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ISSN 1857-923X (for e-version)

ISSN 2545 – 4439 (for printed version)

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INTERCULTURAL PRAGMATICS AND POLITENESS IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY OF STUDENT COMMUNICATION IN A MULTILINGUAL HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

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Abstract: This study explores the role of politeness strategies in academic communication among university students of different ethnic backgrounds in North Macedonia. Grounded in the seminal framework of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory—distinguishing between positive and negative face—the research examines how pragmatic behavior varies between Macedonian and Albanian students when navigating face-threatening acts such as requests, disagreements, and feedback in academic settings. Complementary perspectives from intercultural pragmatics (Scollon & Scollon, 2001; Spencer-Oatey, 2008) and contextualized politeness theories (Lakoff, 1973; Watts, 2003) enrich the analysis by addressing cultural variability and the interactional nature of politeness. North Macedonia offers a unique multilingual and multiethnic academic environment where Macedonian, Albanian, and Turkish languages coexist alongside English and German as foreign academic languages. In this complex sociolinguistic context, communication is not only about language proficiency but also about navigating cultural expectations, power dynamics, and social roles. The research seeks to understand how ethnicity and language background shape students' pragmatic preferences and perceptions of politeness in academic interactions. Using a qualitative approach, the study involved 60 students (30 Macedonian and 30 Albanian) from language departments at two public (partly private) universities. Data were collected through written scenarios, semi-structured interviews, and reflective logs. Results show consistent differences in communication behavior: Albanian students exhibit a stronger preference for negative politeness strategies, reflecting cultural values of deference and group harmony, while Macedonian students more frequently adopt direct but respectful communication, emphasizing clarity and pragmatic efficiency. These patterns are evident in how students formulate requests, manage disagreement, and engage in peer interaction. The findings highlight the significance of intercultural pragmatics in academic discourse and underscore the need for educational practices that support pragmatic competence across cultural lines. By offering insight into the intercultural dynamics of politeness, this study contributes to fostering inclusive, respectful, and effective communication in diverse academic settings.

Keywords: intercultural communication, politeness strategies, negative politeness, directness, academic communication

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: POLITENESS IN ACADEMIC COMMUNICATION

Politeness is a key element of communication, helping to manage social relationships and reduce face-threatening acts (FTAs). Brown and Levinson (1987) define it as strategies to protect one's own and others' "face," or public self-image. They distinguish between positive politeness, which builds rapport and solidarity, and negative politeness, which respects autonomy and avoids imposition. Their theory remains central in pragmatics and sociolinguistics as a framework for understanding how speakers minimize threats to face (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 62). Western scholars (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Fraser, 1990; Kasper, 1990; Leech, 2014) have extensively studied Politeness theory, considering it a crucial aspect of human social life and interaction. The central challenge for any social group lies in managing internal aggression while maintaining the capacity for aggression both within the group and in external competitive relationships with other groups (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 1). From this viewpoint, politeness holds sociological importance far beyond mere manners or etiquette; similar to formal diplomatic protocols, politeness assumes the presence of potential aggression and aims to neutralize it, thereby enabling communication between parties that may otherwise be hostile (Goffman, 1971; 1972, p. 90). Consequently, politeness functions as a semiotic system that shapes everyday interactions and serves as a powerful form of social regulation. Sociological perspectives on politeness differ from those in linguistic pragmatics. Thus, the study of politeness attracts interest not only from linguistics but also from other disciplines concerned with understanding the interactive foundations of social life and advancing conflict-free human communication. Earlier politeness research primarily focused on individual sentences, but recent studies have shifted toward examining politeness within broader discourse contexts (Mills, 2003). This research draws primarily on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which distinguishes between *positive face* (the desire to be liked, approved of) and *negative face* (the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition). While Brown and Levinson's theory provides a foundational

framework, it has been critiqued for its ethnocentric bias and lack of attention to intercultural variability. Therefore, the study also incorporates perspectives from intercultural pragmatics, particularly those of Scollon and Scollon (2001), who emphasize the role of discourse systems and cultural patterns in shaping communicative behavior. Lakoff (1973) laid the groundwork by linking politeness to rules governing social behavior and power relations. She defined politeness as "a system of interpersonal relations, based on the speaker's sensitivity to the addressee's face needs and social hierarchy" (Lakoff, 1973, pp. 292–305). Watts (2003, pp. 142–143) provides a critical overview of politeness theories, emphasizing that politeness is context-dependent and interactionally negotiated, stating that "politeness is not merely a matter of following fixed linguistic rules but is a dynamic process shaped by the immediate social context and participants' interpretations." The intercultural perspective is particularly relevant in multilingual and multicultural academic contexts, where differing politeness norms can influence communication styles and perceptions of politeness. Spencer-Oatey (2008) expands on the concept of face, emphasizing sociality rights and the cultural context of politeness. According to Spencer-Oatey (2008, pp. 14–15), face can be understood as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for themselves," and politeness involves managing sociality rights, such as respect and solidarity, in interaction. This framework provides a foundation for analyzing how students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds employ politeness strategies in academic discourse.

2. RESEARCH PROBLEM AND RELEVANCE

The present paper provides an overview of the analysis of the project entitled: "*Modern perspectives in the study of intercultural pragmatics and their application in the educational process—from theory to practice*", funded by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of North Macedonia (2025).

In multilingual academic settings such as North Macedonia, where Macedonian, Albanian, and Turkish are spoken alongside English and German as foreign languages, communicative behavior is shaped not only by linguistic competence but also by cultural and pragmatic awareness. In this complex sociolinguistic landscape, academic communication is not merely a transmission of information but also a site for negotiating face, identity, and social relationships. Politeness strategies, as manifestations of intercultural communicative competence, are essential for maintaining effective interaction in such environments. Despite the recognized importance of intercultural communication skills in globalized education systems, limited research has been conducted in the Balkan region, particularly in North Macedonia, on how language and ethnicity influence pragmatic behavior in academic discourse. This study addresses this gap by examining the use and perception of politeness strategies among students of different ethnic backgrounds—primarily Macedonian and Albanian—in academic settings. It focuses on how ethnic affiliation and language use impact the way students express disagreement, make requests, or give feedback in classroom interactions.

3. OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main objective of this study is to explore how ethnicity and language background influence the use and interpretation of politeness strategies among university students in academic interactions. Specifically, the study seeks to: a) identify the pragmatic preferences and politeness strategies used by Macedonian and Albanian students during academic communication, b) analyze whether and how students' ethnic background and first language affect their perception of (in)directness and politeness, c) assess the role of pragmatic competence in fostering successful intercultural academic interactions.

The study is guided by the following research questions: a) What politeness strategies do students from different ethnic backgrounds use in academic interactions? b) How do students perceive the appropriateness of direct versus indirect speech acts across ethnic lines? c) To what extent does ethnicity influence students' pragmatic choices and interpretations in academic discourse?

4. METHODOLOGY

The study employs a qualitative research design to explore the influence of ethnicity and language background on politeness strategies in academic communication. The study involved 60 university students enrolled in language and communication programs at two public universities in North Macedonia: Goce Delčev University in Štip and South East European University in Tetovo. All participants have experience engaging in academic interactions in both their native language and a foreign language (primarily English or German). Data collection was carried out through three complementary methods corresponding to the different parts of the study: written scenarios to assess communication strategies (Part 2), semi-structured interviews for in-depth exploration, and reflective logs to capture participants' personal reflections (Part 3).

In the written scenarios, students were asked to respond to hypothetical academic situations that required performing face-threatening acts, such as disagreeing with a professor, making a request, or giving peer feedback. These

scenarios were designed to elicit spontaneous pragmatic choices. The interviews provided deeper insights into the motivations behind these choices, as students reflected on their communicative intentions and cultural norms. Reflective logs, kept over a two-week period, captured real-life experiences of classroom communication and allowed participants to report and reflect on specific instances of politeness, misunderstanding, or pragmatic negotiation. The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Responses from the written scenarios and reflective logs were coded for politeness strategies based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) typology, while interview transcripts were examined thematically to identify patterns in students' interpretations and pragmatic reasoning. A comparative approach was applied to highlight similarities and differences between Macedonian and Albanian students in their use and perception of politeness strategies.

The participants in this study were university students from North Macedonia, specifically of Macedonian and Albanian ethnic backgrounds. A total of 60 students took part in the survey, representing both genders and a range of ages, typically between 19 and 28 years old. All participants had at least a B2 level of German language proficiency. All participants were enrolled in undergraduate programs, with a majority studying at German language departments at state or partly private universities. Their linguistic backgrounds varied: while some reported Macedonian or Albanian as their mother tongue, many had competence in multiple languages, including German and English as foreign languages. The questionnaire consists of three main parts and is designed to investigate the communication behavior of Macedonian and Albanian university students, with a particular focus on politeness strategies in academic contexts. In Part 1, participants provide background information including gender, age, ethnicity, native language, academic setting (i.e., whether they study at a German-speaking faculty), and foreign language skills. This demographic section enables the categorization of respondents according to linguistic and cultural variables relevant for analyzing their communication preferences and pragmatic choices.

Part 2 presents three everyday academic situations in which students are asked to rate on a Likert scale (1 = very unlikely to 5 = very likely) how likely they are to use one of several communication strategies—ranging from direct to indirect or mitigated. These scenarios include requesting a deadline extension from a professor, responding to a peer's incorrect answer in a seminar, and asking to borrow class notes from a fellow student. Part 3 adds a reflective element, inviting students to comment in open-ended form on their perceptions of politeness across languages, the impact of their cultural background on their communication style, and differences they perceive between communicating with faculty versus peers. This mix of quantitative and qualitative data allows for a nuanced analysis of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic factors in academic interaction.

5. COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS INTO THE COMMUNICATION BEHAVIOR OF MACEDONIAN AND ALBANIAN STUDENTS (Part 2)

The evaluation of the responses to the three presented communication scenarios reveals clear tendencies in the use of politeness strategies and degrees of directness, with cultural and linguistic backgrounds playing a central role.

Situation 1: Requesting a deadline extension from a professor

In the situation of requesting a deadline extension from a professor, Macedonian students more frequently tend to make a direct request, typically accompanied by a brief explanation or apology. Albanian students, on the other hand, show a stronger tendency toward indirect and polite formulations, often providing a detailed explanation and demonstrating greater consideration for the professor's position. This behavior reflects a greater need for negative politeness among Albanian students in order to avoid threatening the professor's authority, while Macedonian students aim for a balance between efficiency and politeness. Based on the responses of 30 Macedonian students, 65% (19 students) opted for a direct request with a brief explanation, 25% (7 students) preferred an indirect or polite strategy, and 10% (4 students) used indirect hints without explicitly requesting. Among 30 Albanian students, 70% (21 students) chose an indirect and polite request with a detailed explanation, 20% (6 students) made a direct request with a brief apology, and 10% (3 students) relied on indirect hints. These findings suggest that Albanian students display a stronger preference for negative politeness strategies (70%), while Macedonian students tend to favor a more direct yet respectful approach (65%), prioritizing clarity and pragmatism in academic communication.

Table 1. Preferences for politeness strategies in academic requests among Macedonian and Albanian students

Politeness strategy	Macedonian students (n = 30)	Albanian students (n = 30)
Direct request with brief explanation	65% (19 students)	20% (6 students)
Indirect/polite request with explanation	25% (7 students)	70% (21 students)
Indirect hints (no explicit request)	10% (4 students)	10% (3 students)

Source: Authors' research

Situation 2: Responding to a classmate’s incorrect answer in a seminar

Both groups generally prefer indirect or reserved reactions to avoid causing the other person to lose face. However, Macedonian students tend to correct their peers more directly than their Albanian colleagues. This tendency may reflect different cultural perceptions of group harmony and avoidance of confrontation. In response to a classmate’s incorrect answer in a seminar, Albanian students may place greater importance on maintaining group cohesion and avoiding face-threatening acts. Among 30 Macedonian students, 40% (12 students) reported that they would correct their peer directly, 35% (11 students) would offer an indirect suggestion, and 25% (7 students) would choose silence or avoidance. In contrast, among 30 Albanian students, only 20% (6 students) would correct directly, whereas 40% (12 students) would use an indirect suggestion, and another 40% (12 students) would remain silent. These findings suggest that Albanian students overwhelmingly favor face-saving strategies (80%), either by avoiding confrontation or by proposing alternatives in a non-threatening manner—an approach that reflects a cultural emphasis on group harmony and social cohesion. Macedonian students, while also employing indirectness and tact in many cases, show a greater willingness to engage in direct correction (40%), indicating a higher tolerance for open disagreement and critical feedback within academic peer interactions.

Table 2: Students’ strategies for peer correction in academic contexts

Strategy	Macedonian students (n = 30)	Albanian students (n = 30)
Direct correction	40% (12 students)	20% (6 students)
Indirect suggestion	35% (11 students)	40% (12 students)
Silence/avoidance	25% (7 students)	40% (12 students)

Source: Authors' research

Situation 3: Asking a classmate to borrow his/her notes

The majority of both groups use politeness strategies, particularly apologies or indirect hints. Albanian students often phrase their request more cautiously, while Macedonian students tend to be somewhat more direct, though usually preceded by a brief apology or introductory remark. The findings suggest a strong awareness of social roles in peer interactions, with cultural norms of politeness subtly shaping the degree of directness. In the context of asking a classmate to borrow their notes, 30 Macedonian and 30 Albanian students provided insights into their preferred communication strategies. Among the Macedonian students, 45% (14 students) reported they would make a direct request, while 20% (6 students) would use an indirect comment or excuse, and 35% (10 students) would formulate a polite request with an apology. In comparison, only 25% (8 Albanian students) preferred a direct request, whereas 30% (9 students) chose an indirect approach, and 45% (13 students) opted for a polite and apologetic formulation. These results indicate that both groups apply politeness strategies, but Albanian students tend to phrase their requests more cautiously, with 75% (22 students) choosing either indirect or polite forms. This reflects a higher sensitivity to social roles and face concerns in peer interactions. Macedonian students, while somewhat more direct in approach (45%), still demonstrate a strong awareness of politeness through the use of mitigating expressions such as apologies and contextual justifications.

Table 3: Preferred communication strategies when asking a classmate to borrow notes among Macedonian and Albanian students

Strategy	Macedonian students (n = 30)	Albanian students (n = 30)
Direct request	45% (14 students)	25% (8 students)
Indirect comment or excuse	20% (6 students)	30% (9 students)
Polite request with apology	35% (10 students)	45% (13 students)

Source: Authors' research

6. ANALYSIS OF THE REFLECTION QUESTIONS ON LANGUAGE CHOICE, POLITENESS, AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES IN ACADEMIC COMMUNICATION (Part 3)

The three questions aim to encourage students’ subjective reflection on language choice, cultural background, and communicative roles in the academic context. They provide insights into intercultural pragmatic competence and reveal different patterns of communication among Macedonian and Albanian students.

The first question („*In welcher Sprache fühlen Sie sich im akademischen Kontext am höflichsten/angemessensten? Warum?*“) focuses on the perception of politeness in different languages. Both language proficiency and the social

function of the language play a role here. Macedonian students often perceive their mother tongue (Macedonian language) or German (Deutsch als Fremdsprache) as appropriate, especially if they have internalized German as an academic language. Albanian students might perceive English or Albanian as more polite, depending on their educational background or exposure to international contexts. The choice of language as an expression of politeness is culturally conditioned and heavily influenced by previous educational socialization. Students often associate "politeness" with formality, distance, and clarity—traits they ascribe to certain languages.

To conduct an in-depth evaluation of the open reflection questions, Philipp Mayring's (1993) qualitative content analysis was applied. This method is particularly suited for the systematic interpretation of open text material within the framework of social science research. The goal is to identify recurring response patterns through inductive category development and to derive intercultural communication profiles of the students. This approach enables valuable insights into linguistic-pragmatic and culturally influenced differences between Macedonian and Albanian students in the academic context.

7. QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE REFLECTION QUESTIONS (according Mayring)

/Question 1: In welcher Sprache fühlen Sie sich im akademischen Kontext am höflichsten/angemessensten? Warum?/

Using Mayring's (1993) qualitative content analysis, responses to this question were categorized inductively based on recurring patterns. The aim was to identify students' perceptions of politeness in relation to language use, and how these perceptions reflect their cultural and educational backgrounds.

The following main categories emerged:

a. Mother tongue as a source of polite self-expression

Many Macedonian and Albanian students associated their native language with emotional safety and natural politeness. For example, one student stated: *Auf Mazedonisch kann ich mich am besten ausdrücken und klinge dabei aufrichtig.* Macedonian students frequently mention German as a formal and respectful language, while their mother tongue is perceived as emotionally safe and familiar. In contrast, Albanian students tend to prefer English as a carrier of academic politeness, while Albanian is viewed as a culturally familiar way to express respect. These preferences highlight differing perceptions of language roles shaped by linguistic socialization and intercultural experiences.

b. German as the language of academic appropriateness

A significant number of Macedonian students viewed German as neutral, formal, and respectful. Statements like *„Deutsch klingt distanziert und respektvoll, es passt zu akademischen Diskussionen.“* were common.

c. English as a globally accepted polite language

Albanian students, particularly those with greater international academic exposure, identified English as a polite language for academic use due to its familiarity and global relevance. One respondent noted: *„Ich studiere/lerne meistens auf Englisch, daher wirkt es natürlich und höflich.“*

d. Context-dependent language choice

Some students explained their politeness strategies depended on the communication partner and context. For example: *„Mit Professoren spreche ich Deutsch, mit Kommilitonen Albanisch.“* This analysis reveals that perceptions of politeness are shaped not only by linguistic proficiency but also by cultural norms, prior educational experiences, and socialization. The students link "politeness" with clarity, distance, and respect—concepts that are attributed differently depending on the language and the cultural background.

Table 4. Perceptions of politeness in academic language use: categories from qualitative content analysis

Category	Description	Examples
Mother tongue as safe politeness	The native language is associated with natural politeness	„Auf Mazedonisch kann ich mich am besten ausdrücken.“
German as academically appropriate	German is perceived as neutral, professional, and polite	„Deutsch klingt distanziert und respektvoll.“
English as an international language	English is preferred due to its global use and academic familiarity	„Ich studiere/lerne auf Englisch, daher wirkt es höflich.“
Context-dependent language choice	Perceived politeness depends on the communication partner or academic field	„Mit Professoren Deutsch, mit Freunden Albanisch.“

Source: Authors' research

The second question “*Glauben Sie, dass Ihre kulturelle Herkunft Einfluss auf Ihre Kommunikationsweise hat? Wenn ja, inwiefern?*“ requires metacommunicative self-reflection. It activates awareness of cultural norms in communication. Macedonian students emphasize cultural influences in terms of a more direct way of expression, a formal tone toward authority figures, and respectful behavior. Albanian students point more strongly to hierarchical thinking, restraint when interacting with lecturers, and collective forms of communication. Many students perceive their cultural background as a shaping factor for their communication style. Differences often lie in orientation toward proximity versus distance, direct versus indirect expression, and the use of politeness formulas.

Table 5. Metacommunicative self-reflection on the influence of cultural background on communication styles among Macedonian and Albanian students

Category	Description	Examples
Direct and formal communication	Emphasis on directness and formal tone toward authority figures, respectful behavior (Macedonian students)	„Ich spreche direkter und formeller mit Lehrenden.“
Hierarchical and restrained style	Focus on hierarchy, restraint in interactions with lecturers, collective communication (Albanian students)	„Gegenüber Lehrenden bin ich zurückhaltender und respektvoller.“
Cultural background as influencer	Recognition that cultural heritage shapes communication style	„Meine Kultur beeinflusst, wie ich mich ausdrücke.“
Proximity vs. distance orientation	Differences in preference for social closeness or distance in communication	„Ich halte mehr Distanz zu Autoritäten als zu Kommilitonen.“
Direct vs. indirect expression	Variations in how explicitly thoughts and feelings are communicated	„Manchmal sage ich Dinge direkt, manchmal indirekt.“
Use of politeness formulas	Different application of polite expressions and conventions	„Ich benutze viele Höflichkeitsformen gegenüber Lehrenden.“

Source: Authors' research

The third question („*Welche Unterschiede beobachten Sie zwischen der Kommunikation mit Lehrenden und der mit Kommilitonen?*“) highlights situational politeness and the understanding of social roles in communication.

The following differences can be observed in students' communication behavior: toward lecturers, students tend to adopt a more formal tone, using respectful forms of address such as academic titles and the formal pronoun *Sie*, and often show restraint when asking questions. In contrast, communication with fellow students is characterized by an informal style, including the use of humor, direct language, and colloquial expressions, as well as the informal pronoun *du* instead of *Sie*. The following intercultural differences emerge: Albanian students show more pronounced differences in communication style, maintaining greater distance from lecturers and placing more emphasis on respect, while Macedonian students tend to be somewhat more flexible or informal in their communication with lecturers, especially when the relationship is already familiar. This question clearly illustrates that communicative politeness strategies are not only language-dependent, but also context- and role-dependent. The ability to switch between communication registers is an indicator of pragmatic competence. This question targets students' awareness of situational politeness and their understanding of social roles in academic communication. It reveals how students adapt their communicative behavior depending on the hierarchical or peer-related context, shedding light on pragmatic flexibility and role sensitivity.

Table 6. Common patterns in the responses (Mayring, 1993)

Category	Description	Examples
Formality in communication with lecturers	Use of formal language, respectful tone, and cautiousness in expressing opinions	„Ich verwende immer Titel und vermeide Umgangssprache, wenn ich mit Professoren spreche.“
Informality with peers	Use of informal speech, colloquialisms, humor, and relaxed interaction	„Mit Kommilitonen rede ich ganz normal und mache auch mal Witze.“
Role awareness	Recognition of the power dynamics and expectations in each communicative relationship	„Mit Professoren bin ich zurückhaltender, weil sie mich bewerten.“

Category	Description	Examples
Code-switching and register-shifting	Conscious shift between formal and informal styles depending on the addressee	„Mit Lehrenden wechsele ich zur formellen Sprache, aber mit Freunden spreche ich frei in meinem Dialekt.“

Source: Authors' research

The data suggest that Albanian students consistently prefer indirect and polite strategies, especially in hierarchical situations (e.g., with professors). Macedonian students generally communicate more directly, especially with peers, but also employ mitigating language to maintain harmony. These patterns highlight cultural differences in negotiating social roles and boundaries. Albanian students tend to show more formality and distance with lecturers, reflecting respect for authority, while Macedonian students adopt a more flexible, often relaxed approach that varies with context and familiarity.

8. CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of the communication behavior of Macedonian and Albanian students (Part 2) reveals distinct patterns in the use of politeness strategies and degrees of directness, shaped by cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Across the three hypothetical scenarios—requesting a deadline extension, correcting a peer, and asking to borrow notes—Albanian students consistently demonstrate a stronger preference for indirect, polite, and face-saving strategies, especially in hierarchical situations such as addressing a professor. This behavior reflects cultural values of respect, formality, and the desire to avoid confrontation. Macedonian students, while also employing politeness strategies, tend to be more direct and pragmatic, particularly in peer interactions, though often accompanied by mitigating elements such as brief apologies or explanations. These patterns suggest that both groups possess a well-developed pragmatic awareness and the ability to adjust their communicative behavior based on context and social roles. However, Albanian students show greater sensitivity to power dynamics and potential face threats, whereas Macedonian students exhibit more flexibility and a slightly higher tolerance for directness in academic discourse. The analysis demonstrates that students' communicative choices are not only shaped by linguistic competence but also deeply influenced by cultural norms and the perceived appropriateness of speech acts within academic settings. This highlights the importance of intercultural pragmatic competence in multilingual university environments and underlines the need for communicative training that fosters both linguistic accuracy and cultural sensitivity. The analysis of the three reflection questions (Part 3) highlights the complex interplay between language, culture, and social roles in shaping academic communication among Macedonian and Albanian students. The responses reveal distinct intercultural patterns in language preference, politeness strategies, and interaction styles, influenced by cultural norms, educational background, and linguistic identity. These insights emphasize the need for greater awareness of intercultural pragmatics in higher education, supporting the development of students' pragmatic competence and their ability to adapt communication across diverse academic and cultural contexts.

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