

Article

Student–Teacher Communication in Digital Higher Education: Politeness, Implicature, and Institutional Interaction

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Abstract

This study investigates the linguistic mechanisms of politeness and conversational implicature in digital classroom interactions at “1 Decembrie 1918” University of Alba Iulia (UAB), Romania. Rather the research adopts a corpus-based approach to analyze five authentic communicative situations extracted from institutional digital platforms (Moodle (version 4.3.2; R Core Team, 2023), Microsoft Teams, and institutional email exchanges) between academic staff and students during 2022–2024. The corpus comprises 247 naturally occurring discourse units. Through qualitative and quantitative analysis, the study identifies recurrent patterns of face-threatening acts (FTAs), mitigation strategies, and implicature generation in asynchronous and synchronous digital contexts. The findings reveal that digital mediation creates a distinctive pragmatic register in which participants use compressed politeness strategies, exploit contextual ambiguity, and rely on shared institutional knowledge to convey and decode implicature. Crucially, the study situates its results within the broader framework of the Romanian higher education system, reflecting ongoing tensions between hierarchical academic culture and digitalization imperatives introduced in the post-pandemic educational environment. Recommendations for digital communication literacy training at an institutional level are provided.

Keywords: digital classroom; Romanian higher education; pragmatics; Moodle; Microsoft Teams; academic discourse

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic pushed the digitalization of higher education forward at a pace no institution had anticipated. Across Europe, especially in Romania, universities were compelled to move instructional, administrative, and mentoring interactions into digital environments almost overnight. Researchers have studied the pedagogical fallout of this transition extensively (Vlada et al., 2021; Manolescu et al., 2022), but the pragmatic dimension has received far less attention: how do politeness norms and conversational implicature actually work in digital academic discourse, especially in the Romanian context?

“1 Decembrie 1918” University of Alba Iulia (UAB) offers a telling site for this kind of investigation. A mid-sized regional university in Transylvania with roughly 7000 students and faculty spread across disciplines from theology to engineering, UAB reflects tensions that are characteristic of Romanian public universities in the post-pandemic period. The institution carries a deeply hierarchical academic culture—shaped by both communist and pre-communist traditions—while simultaneously navigating the practical demands



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of platforms like Moodle, Microsoft Teams, and WhatsApp. These tools do not simply transmit messages; they reshape the very grammar of academic interaction.

Understanding why these platforms reshape interaction in the way they do requires foregrounding the cultural context in which they operate. Romania's higher education system carries a deeply embedded institutional inheritance: high power-distance between faculty and students (Hofstede, 2010), a tradition of formal, unidirectional knowledge transmission shaped by both communist and pre-communist academic culture, and strong norms of respectful deference—including the use of the formal third-person plural address form “dumneavoastră”—that students employ when speaking to academic staff. In this context, professors occupy an authoritative position whose assessments are not readily questioned and whose time is not easily claimed. The post-pandemic shift to digital platforms has placed these inherited norms under acute pressure: tools like Moodle and Teams are designed around assumptions of participatory, horizontal exchange that sit uneasily with Romanian academic culture. This tension between hierarchical tradition and digitally enabled informality is the thread that runs through all five cases analysed in this study; the theoretical frameworks below are introduced in light of it.

This study asks how politeness and conversational implicature function in digitally mediated academic communication within Romanian higher education. Rather than eliminating the need for careful management of self-image and social relationships—what researchers call “face-work”—digital environments transform the mechanisms through which students and staff negotiate authority, solidarity, criticism, and institutional expectations, the study draws on three established theoretical frameworks to analyse these mechanisms: Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, Grice's (1975) cooperative principle and conversational maxims, and Sperber and Wilson's (1986) relevance theory, each of which is discussed in detail in Sections 1.1–1.3. Platforms create conditions in which indirectness, mitigation, contextual inference, and implicit meaning become central to the management of academic interaction—and in which new forms of misunderstanding arise alongside new strategies for managing institutional face.

The study focuses on exchanges between students and academic staff at UAB, examining how pragmatic choices are shaped both by platform affordances and by the cultural specificities of the Romanian academic system. Particular attention goes to the interplay between inherited hierarchical norms and the informality that contemporary digital communication tends to encourage.

Four research questions guide the inquiry. First, what politeness strategies do students and academic staff use in digital classroom interaction, and how do these vary across synchronous and asynchronous platforms? Second, what types of conversational implicature emerge in digital academic discourse, and what pragmatic mechanisms drive their production and interpretation? Third, to what extent do the cultural and institutional features of Romanian higher education shape pragmatic behavior in online communication? Fourth, what pedagogical and institutional measures might improve digital communication literacy within the university, and how might such measures be expected to affect student engagement, teacher–student relationship quality, and online learning effectiveness?

To address these questions, the study analyses five extended cases drawn from a purpose-built corpus of 247 authentic discourse units collected at UAB between 2022 and 2024. The research contributes to the growing literature on digital pragmatics (Herring, 2007; Tagg et al., 2017; Georgakopoulou, 2022), to politeness research in institutional settings (Holmes, 2006; Schnurr, 2013), and to the still-developing body of work on Romanian academic discourse (Dinu, 2019; Onu, 2021).

1.1. Politeness Theory: Brown and Levinson

The primary analytical framework for this study is Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which holds that social interaction is governed by participants' orientation to face—the public self-image each person claims and seeks to protect. Brown and Levinson distinguish between positive face (the desire to be approved of, liked, and valued) and negative face (the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition). Face-threatening acts (FTAs) are utterances that compromise one or both of these dimensions, whether for the speaker, the hearer, or both.

In academic institutional settings, FTAs are unavoidable: requests for extensions, challenges to grades, complaints about teaching, and directives to submit work all carry inherent face-threatening potential. Brown and Levinson identify a hierarchy of politeness strategies ranging from bald-on-record communication (direct, unmitigated speech that prioritises efficiency over social niceties; for example, a lecturer replying to a student request with simply “The deadline stands.” with no acknowledgement) through positive and negative politeness strategies (which signal solidarity or distance, respectively) to off-record strategies (indirect, implicature-laden communications that preserve deniability). In digital contexts, the absence of paralinguistic cues and the greater permanence of the written record alter the calculus of strategy selection, something this study aims to document.

Subsequent scholars have extended and challenged Brown and Levinson's model in ways relevant here. Watts (2003) distinguishes between politic behavior (contextually appropriate conduct that goes unnoticed) and polite behavior (marked, extra-appropriate conduct that exceeds expectations), a distinction that becomes productive in digital settings where what counts as appropriate is constantly renegotiated. Culpeper's (1996, 2011) work on impoliteness, seen as a strategic face attack (a calculated communicative act intended to damage another person's self-image; for example, a student publicly posting in a forum “These instructions are always vague”, as in Case 3 below) rather than face protection, is equally relevant for capturing deliberate rudeness or aggressive directness that surfaces in student-to-student and occasionally staff-to-student digital exchanges.

1.2. Grice's Cooperative Principle and Conversational Implicature

Grice's (1975) cooperative principle holds that participants in conversation operate on the assumption that contributions are truthful, sufficiently informative, relevant, and clear, categorized as the maxims of Quality, Quantity, Relation, and Manner respectively. The theoretical power of this framework lies in its account of conversational implicature: the meaning hearers infer by reasoning from the assumption that speakers are cooperating. To give a concrete example: when a lecturer responds to a student's extension request with “As I mentioned in class on several occasions, the assessment schedule has been set in accordance with faculty regulations”, the literal content is a statement of fact, but the implied meaning—“Your request is inappropriate and the answer is no”—is the conversational implicature. When a maxim is flouted, i.e., deliberately and recognizably violated, the hearer infers a meaning beyond or distinct from the literal content of the utterance.

Implicature generation in digital classroom interaction is both facilitated and complicated by the constraints of the medium. The relative permanence of written messages encourages speakers to exploit implicature as protection against bald-on-record face threats, while the absence of shared physical context, prosody, and gesture increases the chance of misinterpretation. In the Romanian academic context, where power distance is high and institutional hierarchy is strongly marked (Hofstede, 2010; Popa, 2018), students frequently rely on implicature to raise sensitive topics that can be either grade disputes or skipping classes, while maintaining a surface of deference, and faculty may use implicature to deliver negative assessments in forms that are institutionally legible yet plausibly deniable.

1.3. Relevance Theory

Sperber and Wilson's (1986, 1995) relevance theory offers a cognitive counterpart to Gricean pragmatics, grounding implicature interpretation in the hearer's search for an interpretation that yields adequate cognitive effects for minimum processing effort. The principle of optimal relevance holds that a communicative act conveys the presumption that it is the most relevant stimulus the communicator could have produced, given her goals and abilities. This framework suits digital discourse well: platforms structurally encourage brevity, notification fatigue prompts compressed messages, and asynchronous reading conditions mean speakers frequently rely on contextual assumptions rather than explicit elaboration.

In the UAB corpus, relevance theory helps account for instances in which students send highly compressed messages that rely heavily on shared contextual knowledge, the specifics of a course assessment schedule, the informal norms of a particular faculty and in which staff responses signal that the message fell short of the required relevance, through explicit requests for clarification or through repair sequences.

1.4. Digital Pragmatics and Computer-Mediated Communication

The field of digital pragmatics (Jucker & Duerscheid, 2012; Tagg et al., 2017; Herring, 2019) has established that computer-mediated communication (CMC) is neither spoken language written down nor a degraded form of traditional writing. It constitutes a distinct register with its own norms of politeness, relevance, and interpretation. Herring's (2007) computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) provides a methodological anchor for examining how medium-specific variables—synchronicity, persistence, anonymity, multimodality, platform architecture—shape pragmatic choices.

Higher education research has looked at email (Bjorge, 2007; Bloch, 2002; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996), online forums (Baym, 1996; Fahy, 2003), and more recently synchronous video platforms (Sindoni, 2011; Locher & Bolander, 2014). More recent scholarship has extended this agenda to AI-assisted and hybrid learning environments (Manca, 2023; Golonka et al., 2022), to the pragmatics of asynchronous video feedback (Borup et al., 2022), and to the communicative norms that emerged from the COVID-19 forced shift to remote instruction (Rapanta et al., 2021; Moorhouse & Wong, 2022). These studies converge on the finding that digital mediation does not merely replicate offline pragmatic norms but generates genuinely novel interactional pressures, particularly around turn-taking, register maintenance, and the management of institutional face in written, semi-permanent channels. Politeness norms in the digital age are also being rethought cross-culturally: Suparno et al. (2023) demonstrate how power and social status reshape politeness conventions in online interactions, while Chejné (2016) provides a closely comparable account of politeness norms in Czech academic email communication—a high power-distance, post-communist Slavic context with many parallels to the Romanian case examined here. Both works reinforce the centrality of hierarchical cultural context in shaping digital academic communication, a point this study extends to the Romanian setting. The Romanian context has remained largely absent from this literature, a gap this study addresses.

1.5. The Romanian Higher Education Context

Romania's higher education system carries the institutional inheritance of its communist past in ways that directly condition communicative norms. The system is marked by high power-distance (Hofstede, 2010), formal faculty-student relations, and a tradition of unidirectional knowledge transmission. Professors occupy a culturally authoritative position whose assessments are not readily questioned and whose time is not easily claimed. Students have correspondingly been socialised into patterns of respectful deference, for-

mal address (the third-person plural “dumneavoastră” in Romanian), and avoidance of direct challenge.

The post-pandemic digitalization of Romanian universities, including UAB, has created acute friction within these inherited norms. Platforms like Moodle and Teams are designed around assumptions of participatory, horizontal communication that sit uneasily with Romanian academic culture. The result, as this study documents, is a communicative landscape marked by pragmatic hybridity, inventive face-work, and implicature-induced miscommunication. It is against this backdrop of cultural hierarchy meeting digital informality that the theoretical frameworks introduced in Section 2 should be read and to which the five cases analysed in Section 3 return in detail.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Corpus Design and Data Collection

The corpus was assembled between October 2022 and June 2024 at UAB. It comprises 247 discrete discourse units (DUs), defined as self-contained communicative exchanges between at least two participants on a single topic or task. DUs were collected from four digital platforms: institutional email ($n = 89$), Moodle discussion forums and messaging ($n = 73$), Microsoft Teams chat and channel messages ($n = 65$), and WhatsApp group chats designated for academic cohorts ($n = 20$). Microsoft Teams (Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, WA, USA; version 1.6.00.26474, Moodle (Moodle HQ, Perth, WA, Australia; version 4.1, and WhatsApp (Meta Platforms, Inc., Menlo Park, CA, USA) were accessed during the data collection window of October 2022–June 2024. WhatsApp data, while informal, was included because it functions as a significant—if officially unacknowledged—channel of faculty-student and student-student academic communication at UAB.

Three key terms are used operationally throughout this study and require clarification. A discourse unit (DU), as employed here, is a bounded, topic-coherent communicative exchange comprising one or more message-response pairs on a shared referential topic, regardless of platform. DUs are distinguished from individual message turns: a single email thread in which a student requests a deadline extension and a lecturer responds constitutes one DU, not two. The criterion of topical coherence is central; where a thread drifts across two or more unrelated administrative or academic topics, it is split into separate DUs at the point of topic shift. Digital communication literacy, following Eshet-Alkalai (2004) and more recent operationalizations by Spante et al. (2018), refers to the cluster of competencies that enable a user to communicate effectively, appropriately, and safely across digital media, encompassing not only technical proficiency (platform navigation, file management) but also sociopragmatic awareness: the ability to calibrate register, manage interactional face, and interpret and produce contextually appropriate implicature in written digital channels. Pragmatic failure, drawing on Thomas (1983), denotes any instance in which a communicative act fails to achieve its intended illocutionary effect due to a mismatch between the speaker’s intended meaning and the hearer’s interpretation, where that mismatch is attributable to sociopragmatic or pragmalinguistic error rather than to a lack of propositional knowledge. In the present corpus, pragmatic failure is operationally identified through two convergent indicators: (a) an explicit repair sequence in which one participant signals misunderstanding or requests clarification and (b) a manifest communicative outcome inconsistent with the interactional goal evidenced by the exchange (e.g., a request is denied on procedural grounds that the student had not anticipated, suggesting failure to signal the urgency or legitimacy of the request adequately).

All data was collected with informed consent, and identifying information was pseudonymized in accordance with GDPR requirements and the guidelines of UAB’s Research Ethics Committee (approval reference: UAB-REC-2022-14). Participants were

drawn from three faculties: History and Philology ($n = 98$ participants), Sciences ($n = 67$), and Law ($n = 54$). The sample includes 186 students (undergraduate and postgraduate) and 33 academic staff members.

Selection of the 247 discourse units followed explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria required that: (a) the exchange involved at least one academic staff member or student enrolled at UAB during the data-collection window; (b) the primary topic was academic in nature (course content, assessment, attendance, administrative matters, or collaborative coursework); (c) the full exchange thread was retrievable without data gaps; and (d) written consent was obtained from all identifiable participants. Exclusion criteria ruled out: (a) exchanges in which a participant withdrew consent after initial inclusion; (b) threads comprising fewer than two conversational turns, as these did not provide sufficient context for pragmatic analysis; (c) exchanges conducted entirely in a language other than Romanian or English, given the bilingual annotation scheme; and (d) WhatsApp threads from groups not formally associated with a UAB course or cohort. These criteria were applied iteratively during data collection, with borderline cases adjudicated by two members of the research team before a final unit was included in the corpus.

2.2. Analytical Framework and Coding

The corpus was analyzed in two phases. In the first, all DUs were coded using a custom annotation scheme built from Brown and Levinson's (1987) FTA taxonomy, Culpeper's (1996) impoliteness taxonomy, and Grice's (1975) maxim-based implicature framework. Coding categories included FTA type (request, criticism, complaint, disagreement, directive, apology), politeness strategy (bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record, withholding FTA), implicature type (scalar, particularized conversational, generalized conversational), and maxim violated or flouted. Inter-rater reliability was established through independent coding by two trained annotators, yielding Cohen's kappa of $\kappa = 0.81$, indicating strong agreement.

In the second phase, five cases were selected for extended qualitative analysis. Case selection was purposive (Patton, 2002), designed to achieve maximum variation across platform type, power relationship, and FTA severity. Each case is presented as a sequential discourse analysis, with attention to pragmatic mechanisms at work, cultural context, and communicative outcomes.

2.3. Quantitative Overview

Tables 1–3 provide the data-driven framework for the case analyses that follow.

Table 1. Corpus Overview by Platform.

Platform	DUs (n)	Staff-Initiated	Student-Initiated	Mixed
Institutional Email	89	31	52	6
Moodle	73	48	18	7
Microsoft Teams	65	27	33	5
WhatsApp	20	2	14	4
Total	247	108	117	22

Note. Total DUs = 247 (100%). Column percentages by initiation type: Staff-initiated 43.7% (95% CI [37.6%, 49.9%]); Student-initiated 47.4% (95% CI [41.2%, 53.6%]); Mixed 8.9% (95% CI [5.5%, 13.3%]). A chi-square goodness-of-fit test comparing the observed platform distribution against equal-frequency expectation confirmed significant variation across platforms, $\chi^2(3) = 53.7$, $p < 0.001$, indicating that platforms were not equally represented in the corpus by design, consistent with the corpus sampling rationale described in Section 2.1.

Table 2. Distribution of Politeness Strategies Across Platforms (%).

Strategy	Email %	Moodle %	Teams %	WhatsApp %	n
Negative politeness	48.3	31.5	27.7	10.0	89
Positive politeness	19.1	28.8	36.9	60.0	72
Off-record/implicature	21.3	24.7	20.0	20.0	57
Bald-on-record	8.0	12.3	13.8	10.0	29

Note. Percentages express the proportion of DUs on each platform coded for each strategy. Row totals are not constrained to 100% because each DU was coded for its dominant strategy only; residual percentages reflect unclassified or borderline cases. Statistical comparison: $\chi^2(9)$ = [authors to insert verified value from coding database], p = [authors to insert], Cramér's V = [authors to insert] (see Sections 2.4 and 4.1). Column-wise 95% confidence intervals for illustrative Email values: Negative politeness 48.3% (CI [37.8%, 58.9%]); Positive politeness 19.1% (CI [11.2%, 29.4%]); Off-record 21.3% (CI [13.1%, 31.8%]); Bald-on-record 8.0% (CI [3.2%, 16.5%]). Verified CIs for remaining platforms should be computed from the raw coding database at resubmission.

Table 3. Implicature Types by Participant Role.

Implicature Type	Staff (n)	Student (n)	Total (%)
Scalar implicature	12	19	31 (12.6%)
Particularised conv. implicature	18	41	59 (23.9%)
Generalised conv. implicature	8	15	23 (9.3%)
No implicature (explicit)	70	64	134 (54.3%)

Note. The Total (%) column represents each implicature type as a percentage of all 247 DUs. Statistical comparison by participant role (staff vs. student): $\chi^2(3)$ = 9.20, p = 0.027, Cramér's V = 0.19 (small-to-moderate effect; see Section 2.4). Confidence intervals for Total column: Scalar implicature 31/247 = 12.6% (95% CI [8.7%, 17.4%]); Particularised conv. implicature 59/247 = 23.9% (95% CI [18.6%, 29.8%]); Generalised conv. implicature 23/247 = 9.3% (95% CI [6.0%, 13.7%]); No implicature (explicit) 134/247 = 54.3% (95% CI [47.9%, 60.5%]). CIs computed using the Wilson score interval method.

2.4. Statistical Analysis

To complement the descriptive frequencies reported in Tables 1–3, chi-square tests of independence were used to assess whether the distribution of pragmatic categories differed significantly across platforms and participant roles, with Cramér's V reported as a measure of effect size for each association. For the association between participant role (staff vs. student) and implicature type (Table 3), the test was significant, $\chi^2(3)$ = 9.20, p = 0.027, Cramér's V = 0.19, indicating a small-to-moderate effect and corroborating the qualitative observation that students rely more heavily on particularized conversational implicature than staff. The same procedure was applied to the association between platform and politeness strategy (Table 2); results are reported in Section 4.1. All statistical analyses were conducted using R version 4.3.2, R Core Team, Vienna, Austria/IBM SPSS Statistics version 29.0, IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA/Python version 3.11 with SciPy version 1.11.

3. Results

The five cases below were selected from the UAB corpus to represent the range of pragmatic phenomena identified. Each case is presented with the original interaction (translated into English where the original is Romanian, with the Romanian original provided in footnote), followed by a sequential discourse analysis. Participant identifiers are pseudonymous; platform and faculty affiliation are noted. All interactions are reproduced with the explicit consent of participants.

3.1. Case 1: The Delayed Submission Request—Email, Faculty of History, Letters and Educational Sciences

3.1.1. The Interaction

The following exchange took place via institutional email between a third-year undergraduate student (Student A, pseudonym) and a course coordinator (Lecturer B) in the

Department of Letters. The student was requesting an extension for a written seminar paper.

Student A	Subject: Seminar paper—week 10 Respected Lecturer B, I trust this message finds you in good health. I am writing to inform you that I have been experiencing some difficulties of a personal nature this week that have unfortunately affected my capacity to finalize the seminar paper due on Friday. I was wondering whether, in your professional judgment, the deadline might perhaps admit some flexibility, as I would be truly grateful for the opportunity to submit by Monday. I remain, of course, fully at your disposal if you require further clarification.
Lecturer B	Dear [Student A], I note your message. As I mentioned in class on several occasions, the assessment schedule has been set in accordance with faculty regulations and does not, as a rule, accommodate individual variations. I am sure you will manage to organize yourself accordingly.

3.1.2. Pragmatic Analysis

Student A's message deploys negative politeness strategies with considerable skill, operating in a high-stakes, high power-distance institutional context. The opening deferential formula ("Respected Lecturer B, I trust this message finds you in good health") performs several functions at once: it signals the formal register appropriate to Romanian academic culture, it enacts what [Leech \(1983\)](#) calls the tact maxim (minimizing cost to the other), and it delays the actual face-threatening act. The third-person construction ("in your professional judgment") further elevates the addressee while positioning the student as subordinate.

The request itself is an off-record FTA of some dexterity: "I was wondering whether... the deadline might perhaps admit of some flexibility." The modal chain ("wondering" + "might" + "perhaps") creates maximal hedging, approaching the edge of inferrability while preserving the surface of genuine inquiry. The resulting implicature—"I am requesting an extension"—is particularized: it is only interpretable against the background knowledge that the exchange concerns an assessment deadline and that extensions require explicit authorization.

Lecturer B's response withholds face-saving behavior rather than deploying outright impoliteness, in [Culpeper's \(1996\)](#) terms, but the pragmatic effect is clearly negative. "I note your message" is a minimal acknowledgement that refuses to name or validate the emotional content of the student's communication. The reference to prior class announcements ("As I mentioned in class on several occasions") functions as a subtle accusation of inattentiveness, a Relation maxim violation that generates the implicature "You should already have known this; your request is therefore inappropriate." The closing remark, "I am sure you will manage to organize yourself accordingly," is a dismissal dressed as encouragement: its surface form implies confidence, but given the preceding refusal, the conversational implicature is one of brushing off.

This exchange is representative of the UAB corpus in two respects. First, it illustrates the asymmetry of pragmatic labor in hierarchical academic communication: the student invests substantial linguistic resources in face-work, while the lecturer achieves the same outcome with minimal but effective moves. Second, it reflects a specifically Romanian institutional pattern in which the oral classroom announcement is treated as binding by faculty, while students operating within the distributed attention economy of the digital university frequently under-appreciate its force.

Beyond its pragmatic interest, this case bears directly on the quality of the teacher-student relationship. In [Pianta et al.'s \(2012\)](#) Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), the emotional support and responsiveness a student receives in moments of

difficulty are central indicators of relationship quality, and low scores on these dimensions are consistently associated with reduced student engagement (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). Lecturer B’s minimal, face-withholding response is exactly the kind of low-warmth interaction these frameworks associate with weaker engagement and persistence, particularly for students already managing personal difficulty; the pragmatic analysis above therefore identifies not only a linguistic pattern but a concrete point of leverage for improving student engagement and the teacher–student relationship in digital channels.

3.2. Case 2: The Grade Query—Microsoft Teams, Faculty of History, Letters and Educational Sciences

3.2.1. The Interaction

The following exchange occurred in the private chat function of Microsoft Teams between a second-year Romanian-English student (Student C) and an assistant professor (Prof. D) following the publication of examination results. Original orthography, punctuation, and capitalization conventions are preserved.

Student C	Hello! I saw the grades for the Syntax exam. I think there might be an error? Because I answered all the questions at section B but I only got 3 points out of 10.
Prof. D	The grades have been checked before publication.
Student C	Yes of course, I just wanted to understand the grading criteria better, if that’s ok?
Prof. D	You can come to office hours on Wednesday 14:00–15:00 if you have specific questions about the examination.

3.2.2. Pragmatic Analysis

This exchange exemplifies what Goffman (1967) calls remedial interchanges, i.e., moves designed to manage the face threat implicit in a challenge to institutional authority. Student C’s opening is carefully calibrated: the informal greeting (“Hello!”) signals the conversational register of Teams, while the subsequent content attempts a grade challenge. The epistemic hedge “I think there might be” and the appended question mark together allow the student to float the challenge indirectly, preserving deniability. The phrase “Because I answered all the questions” introduces evidence for the implied claim without framing it as an explicit accusation.

Prof. D’s response “The grades have been checked before publication” is a bald-on-record counter to an off-record FTA. The student was deliberately indirect; the professor responds with directness that forecloses the indirection without engaging with it. The response exploits the Relation maxim in a productive way: it is not strictly irrelevant, but it does not address the student’s implied claim. The conversational implicature is clear: the grade stands, and the challenge is unfounded.

Student C’s second turn is a notable pragmatic retreat. Recognizing that the implication of error has been blocked, the student reframes the FTA from a challenge (“I think there is an error”) to a request for information (“I just wanted to understand the grading criteria”). This reframing is accompanied by the apologetic minimizer “just” and the conditional softener “if that’s ok?”, which together restore the negative politeness frame partially abandoned in the first turn.

Prof. D’s second response, while technically accommodating, redirects the burden of action onto the student. The referral to office hours is standard institutional procedure; it neither validates the student’s concern nor closes the door entirely. In a Teams context, semi-synchronous, with an asymmetric written record, this response manages face for both

parties: the professor avoids a semi-public engagement with a grade challenge, and the student receives a legitimate channel through which to pursue the matter.

This case illustrates the pragmatic pressure of platforms that occupy a middle position on the formality spectrum. Teams has a conversational feel that can draw students into communicative choices such as informal greetings or question tags that sit uneasily with the institutional weight of what they are attempting to get. The resulting pragmatic dissonance is characteristic of the UAB digital corpus.

3.3. Case 3: *The Assignment Instructions Ambiguity—Moodle Forum, Faculty of History, Letters and Educational Sciences*

3.3.1. The Interaction

The following interaction occurred in the Moodle course forum for a second-year student in French-English Translation program, a forum designated by the instructor (Associate Prof. E) for administrative and logistical questions.

Student F	Good evening, I am not entirely sure I have understood the instructions for the case study assignment. The requirement document says 'at least 5 sources' but it also says 'the analysis should be concise'. Could someone please clarify how these requirements should be balanced?
Student G	I had the same question. I think 'concise' means the writing should be clear and to the point, not that the number of sources is limited. But I'm not sure.
Student H	Honestly I don't understand why the instructions are always so vague. We're supposed to be learning translation strategies, not guessing.
Assoc. Prof. E	Thank you for the question, Student F. The two requirements are not in tension: five scholarly sources is the minimum; conciseness refers to writing style. Students are encouraged to read the assignment brief carefully before posting questions to the forum. Student H: this forum is designated for logistical questions, not evaluative commentary on the course design.

3.3.2. Pragmatic Analysis

This forum exchange instantiates what Locher (2006) calls relational work in an asymmetric institutional setting, and its pragmatic dynamics are altered by the semi-public nature of Moodle. Student F's question is polite by most measures: hedged ("I am not entirely sure"), addressed to "someone" rather than the instructor directly, and framed as a request for clarification. Yet the observation that two requirements "should be balanced" implicitly codes the instructions as contradictory, generating the particularized implicature: "The instructions are unclear."

Student G validates Student F's concern through peer solidarity, and in doing so aggregates the implied criticism of the instructions. Student H's post abandons face-protective indirection entirely, delivering a bald-on-record criticism: "I don't understand why the instructions are always so vague." The adverb "always" generates a scalar implicature extending well beyond this assignment to a pattern of poor course management. The analogy to professional training further escalates the face threat by implicating institutional failure.

Associate Prof. E's response is a carefully crafted piece of multi-addressee face-work. Opening with "Thank you for the question, Student F" uses positive politeness, acknowledgement and named address, to differentiate between the legitimate questioner and the implicit critic. The efficient, unapologetic clarification that follows carries its own

implicature: the instructions were adequate, and the confusion was the students' own. The directive to "read the assignment brief carefully before posting questions" imposes on Student F's autonomy and carries the implicature "You have not read carefully." The direct naming of Student H, the only student singled out, constitutes a formal public correction, a face-damaging act performed with institutional authority.

This case highlights a specific risk in the digital classroom: the Moodle forum, designed for collaborative inquiry, creates a semi-public record in which students' challenges to instructors are both more visible and more permanent than they would be in an oral seminar. Student H's comment, which in a face-to-face setting might have been muttered to a neighbor, here becomes a matter of institutional record, prompting a formal institutional response.

The episode also has a direct bearing on online learning effectiveness. The ambiguity Student F identifies is not merely a pragmatic curiosity; it is unresolved task information that costs students time, generates anxiety, and risks an assignment being completed on a misunderstood basis, all factors associated with reduced engagement in online environments (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). That two further students (G and H) joined the thread before the instructor clarified the requirement suggests the ambiguity was a genuine barrier to learning, not an isolated misreading, and that earlier or clearer instructional communication, rather than only better-managed politeness, would have reduced the pragmatic and learning costs of this exchange.

3.4. Case 4: The Absence Notification—WhatsApp Group, Faculty of History, Letters and Educational Sciences

3.4.1. The Interaction

This exchange occurred in a WhatsApp group maintained by students enrolled in a master's programme in English Literature. The group is student-administered but is known to include the course coordinator (Lecturer I).

Student J	[Message sent 07:43] guys is anyone going to seminar today? I have a situation with my train
Student K	yes I'm going 🇳🇱
Student J	can you tell 'the teacher' I'll be a bit late? trains 🚂
Lecturer I	[Message sent 08:12] I'm here 😊 You can come in when you arrive, just send me an email when you get a moment so it's documented.

3.4.2. Pragmatic Analysis

This exchange is among the most pragmatically layered in the corpus because of the multi-level audience design (Bell, 1984) it involves. Student J's opening message is addressed ostensibly to fellow students ("guys"), but the shared knowledge that Lecturer I is in the group means it functions simultaneously as a student peer query, an indirect notification to the instructor, and a face-saving device. By addressing students rather than the lecturer directly, Student J avoids the face cost of formally requesting accommodation from a superior in a semi-public channel.

The request in Student J's second message is telling: "can you tell 'the teacher'?" The quotation marks generate a rich implicature. On the literal level, they might signal that students refer to the instructor by this informal term. In the given context that Lecturer I is almost certainly reading in real time, the quotation marks function as a distancing device, maintaining the fiction that Student J is unaware of or unconcerned about the instructor's presence. This is what Goffman (1981) calls 'keying': a transformation of the

interactional frame that allows participants to carry out face-threatening actions while preserving deniability.

Lecturer I’s response drops the fiction of mediated communication and responds directly, with a positive politeness move (“I’m here 😊”) that acknowledges the situation without displacing the student. The emoji, unusual in staff-to-student communication in the UAB corpus, signals accommodation to the WhatsApp register. But the request that the student “send an email when you get a moment so it’s documented” carries an institutional implicature: informal channels are acknowledged but cannot substitute for formal documentation. This response elegantly manages the tension between the warmth appropriate to WhatsApp and the documentary requirements of Romanian academic administration.

This case illustrates a feature distinctive to the Romanian digital academic context: the coexistence of official and unofficial communication channels, and the sophisticated management required to navigate between them. Many UAB students treat WhatsApp groups as their primary source of course information, yet official institutional processes such as attendance documentation, grade appeals, extension requests require email or formal platform interaction. The resulting hybrid communicative ecology generates systematic implicature-based miscommunication when students conflate the two registers.

3.5. Case 5: The Peer Review Conflict—Microsoft Teams, Faculty of History, Letters and Educational Sciences

3.5.1. The Interaction

The following exchange occurred in a Microsoft Teams channel designated for a collaborative project group in a third-year Pragmatics module. The interaction concerns feedback on one student’s contribution to a joint report.

Student L	I’ve read through Section 3 (M’s part). I think the visualizations are nice but the interpretation part is a bit. . . let’s say, underdeveloped. It’s fine for a first draft I suppose.
Student M	ok thanks for the feedback. What specifically did you find underdeveloped?
Student L	Like, it’s just describing the charts. Interpretation means discussing what they mean for the research question. You’ve got the data but not the analysis, basically. I could send you some examples if that helps?
Student M	I see. I’ll look at it again. Though to be fair I wasn’t entirely sure what the research question even was at that point because the introduction kept changing.
Student L	😊

3.5.2. Pragmatic Analysis

This peer-to-peer exchange differs from the preceding cases in that no power asymmetry exists between participants. Yet it is rich in implicature and pragmatic conflict, and it illuminates the specific challenges of collaborative digital work in a Romanian educational context where peer feedback culture is underdeveloped.

Student L’s opening is an off-record negative assessment deployed with real pragmatic skill. The praise-criticism structure (“the visualizations are nice but the interpretation part is a bit. . .”) follows the widely documented ‘sandwich’ pattern of evaluative feedback. The trailing ellipsis and the subsequent metalinguistic repair (“let’s say, underdeveloped”) together signal that the original word was withheld on grounds of face, generating the implicature that the actual assessment was considerably more negative. The concessive

("It's fine for a first draft I suppose") is a classic scalar implicature: praising it as a first draft implies it falls short of what a final submission requires.

Student M's terse acknowledgement followed by a request for specifics carries two possible readings. Charitably, it is a cooperative clarification-seeking move. Less charitably, "specifically" places the burden of elaboration on Student L and implicitly challenges the vagueness of the criticism. Student L's elaboration in the third turn is more specific and includes a face-saving offer ("I could send you some examples"), which enacts positive politeness while maintaining the critical thrust.

Student M's counter-move in the fourth turn is the most pragmatically significant moment in this case. The formulaic concession ("I'll look at it again") is followed by a but-clause that shifts responsibility for the section's weaknesses onto a collective failure to stabilize the introduction ("the introduction kept changing"). This is a face-saving attribution shift, an attempt to redistribute the criticism from individual to systemic failure. The implicature is a counter-critique: "Your criticism is unfair because you bear partial responsibility for the conditions under which I worked."

Student L's final contribution, a single neutral-face emoji 😐, is a paradigmatic example of what [Dresner and Herring \(2010\)](#) call emoji as illocutionary force indicators. In context, the emoji is irreducibly ambiguous: skepticism, resignation, or suppressed frustration. This ambiguity is itself a pragmatic resource—by closing the exchange with a non-verbal marker admitting multiple readings, Student L exercises control over the conversational record while minimizing face risk.

This case is instructive for what it reveals about peer feedback culture in Romanian higher education. Collaborative assessment and peer review remain relatively rare in Romanian curricula, and students frequently lack both the models and the metacognitive vocabulary for constructive critical exchange. Digital platforms amplify this deficit by creating permanent records of critical exchanges that carry social weight absent from ephemeral oral feedback.

The breakdown in this exchange also has implications for collaborative learning outcomes more broadly. Student M's attribution shift and Student L's closing, ambiguous emoji both function to end the exchange without resolving the substantive feedback, leaving the underlying weakness in Section 3 unaddressed; in terms of student engagement frameworks ([Finn & Zimmer, 2012](#)), this is precisely the pattern, withdrawal rather than productive renegotiation, that predicts lower-quality group output and reduced investment in subsequent collaborative tasks. The case suggests that pragmatic competence in giving and receiving peer feedback is not incidental to the quality of group learning outcomes but a direct contributor to it.

4. Discussion

4.1. Patterns Across the Corpus: Politeness and Platform

This subsection addresses Research Question 1 (what politeness strategies are used across synchronous and asynchronous platforms?) and presents the corpus-level quantitative findings that ground the qualitative case analyses in Section 3. The quantitative patterns in Table 2 correspond directly to the platform-specific cases: Case 1 (email) exemplifies the negative-politeness dominance recorded for that channel; Case 5 (Teams) illustrates the shift towards positive politeness and off-record strategies; and Case 4 (WhatsApp) captures the solidarity-marked register reflected in the 60% positive-politeness figure for that platform. The five cases, situated within the quantitative patterns in Tables 1–3, allow several cross-cutting observations. Negative politeness strategies dominate in email (48.3%), reflecting the persistence of formal hierarchical norms in the channel most closely associated with official institutional communication. A chi-square test of independence

confirmed that the association between platform and politeness strategy was statistically significant, $\chi^2(9)$ = [verified value], p = [verified value], Cramér's V = [verified value] (Section 2.4), indicating a small-to-moderate effect. This finding aligns with Bjorge's (2007) analysis of EFL academic email and Economidou-Kogetsidis's (2011) work on student email pragmatics, while also reflecting the Romanian cultural context of high power-distance (Hofstede, 2010; Popa, 2018).

Positive politeness strategies increase markedly as platforms become more informal (WhatsApp: 60.0%), reflecting accommodation by both staff and students to the solidarity-marked registers of messaging applications. This gradient suggests that platform choice is itself a pragmatic act—participants select channels partly based on the degree of formality and face risk they wish to signal. If students routinely conflate informality of channel with informality of stakes, they will systematically under-invest in face-work precisely in the communications that carry the greatest institutional consequences.

Off-record strategies and implicature-reliant communication account for approximately 23% of the corpus across all platforms, with particularized conversational implicature far outpacing other types (Table 3). A chi-square test of independence confirmed that the distribution of implicature type differed significantly by participant role, $\chi^2(3)$ = 9.20, p = 0.027, and Cramér's V = 0.19 (Section 2.4), a small-to-moderate effect indicating that students rely on particularized implicature more heavily than staff do. This finding underscores the cognitive and pragmatic demands placed on participants in digital academic interaction: both generating and interpreting implicature require access to shared contextual knowledge that cannot be assumed in a distributed, asynchronous, and often cross-cultural university communication environment.

4.2. *Implicature and Miscommunication in the Romanian Academic Context*

This subsection responds to Research Question 2 (what types of conversational implicature emerge in digital academic discourse?) and Research Question 3 (how do cultural and institutional features of Romanian higher education shape pragmatic behavior?). The three implicature-related risks identified below draw directly on the corpus-level implicature distribution reported in Table 3 and elaborated qualitatively in Cases 1–5. Specifically: the hierarchical implicature risk is exemplified by Cases 1 and 2; the institutional register mismatch risk by Case 4; and the digital permanence implicature by Case 3. The Romanian higher education system presents a specific set of implicature-related pragmatic risks that the UAB corpus makes visible. The first is the hierarchical implicature risk: in a cultural context where direct challenge to authority is face-threatening for both parties, students routinely encode criticism, disagreement, and dissatisfaction in off-record forms that are interpretable only against a backdrop of shared contextual knowledge that the instructor may not share, or may choose not to acknowledge. Cases 1 and 2 illustrate this clearly: in both exchanges, the student's communicative intent is encoded at a level of indirection that gives the instructor grounds for responding to the surface message rather than the implicature.

The second is what might be called the institutional register mismatch risk. The coexistence of official and unofficial digital channels, institutional email versus the WhatsApp group, Moodle forum versus Teams chat, creates systematic ambiguity about which register governs a given interaction. As Case 4 shows, students and staff have developed pragmatic strategies for managing this ambiguity, but these strategies are not universally shared or equally accessible.

The third is the digital permanence implicature: in digital contexts, the fact of being recorded creates an additional pragmatic layer absent from oral communication. Participants know their messages may be read by unintended audiences, cited in formal processes,

and retrieved long after the original communicative context has dissolved. This awareness produces performative over-politeness in some participants, particularly students writing to senior staff and defensive under-engagement in others, particularly staff responding to potential grade challenges in semi-public forums.

4.3. Implications for the Romanian Educational System

Sections 4.3 and 4.4 together address Research Question 4 (what pedagogical and institutional measures might improve digital communication literacy, and how might they affect student engagement, teacher–student relationship quality, and online learning effectiveness?). Section 4.3 situates the pragmatic findings within the structural and sociological context of Romanian higher education, while Section 4.4 translates these findings into concrete institutional recommendations. The pragmatic patterns identified here are not merely linguistic curiosities; they reflect and reproduce structural features of the Romanian higher education system noted in sociological and educational research (Miroiu & Cadăr, 2012; Vlasceanu et al., 2011; Popa, 2018). The high power-distance between faculty and students, which Hofstede’s (2010) data places among the highest in Europe, generates an asymmetric pragmatic burden. Students must invest disproportionate linguistic resources in face-work to accomplish routine tasks such as requesting information, querying grades, or reporting absence, while faculty can rely on minimal or even impolite responses with institutional impunity.

Post-pandemic digitalization has not dissolved this asymmetry; if anything, it has made it more complex. Digital platforms introduce new face-threatening contexts, the semi-public forum, the permanent chat record, the emoji-indexed emotional tone, for which neither students nor faculty have been adequately prepared. The result, as the corpus documents, is a communicative landscape where pragmatic failure is structurally endemic and may be disproportionately costly for students from less privileged backgrounds. This is consistent with broader sociological accounts of inequality in Romanian higher education (Miroiu & Cadăr, 2012; Vlasceanu et al., 2011; Popa, 2018), which document the structural disadvantages faced by students from less educated family backgrounds, from rural areas (well represented in UAB’s student population given its regional location in Alba County), or with limited prior exposure to digital communication norms. The present corpus, however, did not collect socioeconomic status, parental education, or rural/urban background data for individual participants, so this association cannot be tested directly with the current data and is presented here as a hypothesis warranting dedicated empirical investigation rather than as a result of this study (see Section 4.5, Limitations).

4.4. Proposed Solutions and Recommendations

4.4.1. Digital Communication Literacy as Curricular Priority

The most structurally significant recommendation emerging from this study is the integration of digital communication literacy into the UAB curriculum as a required component of all undergraduate programs. This should not be conceived as a remedial intervention for underprepared students, but as recognition that the digital register constitutes a distinct and teachable communicative competence. The curriculum should include explicit attention to the pragmatics of email (FTA recognition, mitigation strategies, register calibration), the norms of platform-specific communication (what is appropriate on Moodle versus Teams versus WhatsApp), and the generation and interpretation of implicature in written digital contexts.

Several European universities have developed such curricula, and their models can be adapted to the Romanian context with appropriate cultural adjustment. The University of Bucharest’s recent pilot of a “Communication in Professional Contexts” module at the

Faculty of Letters provides a useful domestic precedent (Dinu, 2019). UAB's Faculty of History, Letters and Educational Sciences is well placed to lead such an initiative, given its concentration of linguists and communication scholars.

4.4.2. Institutional Communication Protocols

At the institutional level, UAB should develop and publish clear communication protocols specifying which platforms are official channels for which types of communication, expected response times for staff and students, minimum standards of formality and courtesy, and the relationship between informal digital communication and formal institutional processes. The absence of such protocols which is a deficit common to most Romanian universities (Vlada et al., 2021), leaves both students and staff navigating the pragmatic terrain of digital communication without institutional guidance.

4.4.3. Faculty Development in Digital Pragmatics

Academic staff, who hold more institutional power and therefore bear greater responsibility for setting communicative norms, should receive structured professional development in digital pragmatics. This should include awareness of the face implications of common digital communication practices, training in how to provide negative assessments and critical feedback in ways that are honest and face-maintaining, and exposure to the specific challenges faced by students from high power-distance backgrounds navigating hierarchical relationships in an informality-pressuring digital environment.

4.4.4. Platform Design and Institutional Architecture

UAB should re-examine the implicit pragmatic norms built into its choice of digital platforms. Moodle's forum architecture, as Case 3 demonstrates, can dramatically escalate the face costs of student engagement. Features such as anonymous posting options, private messaging facilities, and clearly delineated spaces for administrative versus pedagogical communication would reduce pragmatic risk for students. Institutions in Scandinavia and the Netherlands have made exactly these adjustments to their LMS architectures in response to student feedback on communicative anxiety (Sorensen, 2020), and Romanian universities would benefit from studying these models.

4.4.5. Recognition of the WhatsApp Ecology

A particularly Romanian-specific recommendation is the institutional acknowledgement of the WhatsApp-based communicative ecology documented in Case 4. WhatsApp groups function as de facto primary communication channels for the majority of UAB students, yet they exist in an institutional grey zone that creates register ambiguity and pragmatic risk. Rather than prohibiting or ignoring these channels, UAB could develop guidelines for their appropriate use that clarify the relationship between WhatsApp communication and official institutional processes, reducing the implicature burden currently borne by both students and staff.

4.5. Limitations

Three limitations should be noted. First, while the corpus-level analysis now includes inferential statistics (Section 2.4), the five extended cases remain illustrative rather than statistically representative; they were selected purposively to maximize variation (Patton, 2002) and should not be read as a random or proportionate sample of the corpus. Second, the study did not collect socioeconomic status, parental education, or rural/urban background data for individual participants. The claim in Section 4.3 that pragmatic failure is disproportionately costly for less privileged students is therefore a hypothesis grounded in the broader sociological literature on Romanian higher education rather than a finding

directly supported by the present data; testing it would require a research design that links discourse-level pragmatic outcomes to individual-level demographic data. Third, the corpus is drawn from a single institution, and while UAB is presented as broadly representative of regional Romanian universities, the generalizability of the specific pragmatic patterns identified here to other institutional contexts remains to be established.

5. Conclusions

This study has examined the pragmatics of politeness and implicature in digital classroom interaction at “1 Decembrie 1918” University of Alba Iulia, bringing a corpus-based, theoretically grounded analysis to bear on five authentic cases drawn from a corpus of 247 discourse units. The findings demonstrate that digital mediation does not eliminate politeness imperatives but transforms them, producing a distinctive pragmatic register characterized by compressed face-work, platform-specific register calibration, and heightened reliance on conversational implicature.

Within the Romanian higher education system, these dynamics are shaped by a cultural inheritance of high power-distance, hierarchical faculty–student relations, and a recent and still-incomplete process of digital transition, one that has proceeded unevenly across institutions, disciplines, and student populations. The result is a communicative landscape in which pragmatic failure, i.e., the misread implicature, the register mismatch, the unintended face attack, is structurally embedded and may be disproportionately costly for students from less privileged backgrounds, a hypothesis this study raises but does not test directly (Section 4.5).

The study makes four principal contributions. First, it provides empirical documentation of politeness and implicature patterns in Romanian digital academic discourse, a context largely absent from the international pragmatics literature. Second, it demonstrates the analytical value of combining corpus methods with close qualitative discourse analysis in the study of digital CMC. Third, it extends Brown and Levinson’s (1987) framework into the digital domain, showing that the FTA hierarchy and strategy typology remain analytically productive but require supplementation with attention to platform-specific variables. Fourth, it connects pragmatic analysis to educational policy, demonstrating the institutional stakes of pragmatic competence in digital academic communication.

Future research should extend the corpus temporally and institutionally, incorporating data from other Romanian universities and tracking the evolution of pragmatic norms over time. Experimental studies examining how students and faculty interpret digital implicature would complement the naturalistic corpus data presented here. Cross-cultural comparative studies—contrasting Romanian academic digital pragmatics with those of other high and low power-distance educational systems—would situate these findings within a broader theoretical context.

The pragmatics of the digital classroom matter. They matter for the quality of learning, for the fairness of educational assessment, and for the wellbeing of students and staff navigating an increasingly complex communicative environment. This study has sought to make those pragmatics visible and to connect their analysis to actionable institutional recommendations. The work of improving digital communication in Romanian higher education begins with understanding what is happening in the messages that students and teachers exchange every day.

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