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STUDENTS' ADDRESS FORMS FOR LECTURERS IN SPOKEN AND WRITTEN INTERACTIONS IN INDONESIAN UNIVERSITY SETTINGS: LINGUISTIC CHOICES AND INFLUENCING FACTORS

Desylva Rima Kumalasari[1]*, Dery Tria Agustin[2]
[1,2]*English Language Education Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas PGRI Yogyakarta, Yogyakarta, Indonesia*
desylvarima@gmail.com[1], dery.agustin@upy.ac.id[2]

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Abstract: Address terms play an important role in shaping social relationships and communication patterns in educational settings. Despite a growing body of sociolinguistic studies on the use of address terms in communication between students and lecturers in higher education, little research has focused on the forms of address used by Indonesian university students when interacting with their lecturers, either verbally or in writing. This study explores forms of address used by three Indonesian university students, especially those majoring in English language education, when communicating with their lecturers, as well as factors influencing these choices. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and the collection of personal documents, including *WhatsApp* chats, and analyzed following a thematic analytical framework. The findings reveal that students predominantly employed two categories of address terms: Indonesian kinship terms and English honorifics when addressing their lecturers. These choices were influenced by sociocultural settings, personal preferences, students' perceptions of politeness, and the lack of explicit institutional guidelines. The findings offer insights into the dynamics of student-lecturer interactions in Indonesian higher education, highlighting the complex interplay between language, culture, and power. They also have implications for understanding communication patterns in multicultural and multilingual settings and for informing institutional policies on English language use in higher education.
Keywords: *Address terms*; *digital communication*, *politeness, university students*; *lecturers*; *Indonesian higher education settings*

INTRODUCTION

Language is a vital medium of human interaction, facilitating not only the exchange of information but also the construction and negotiation of social relationships (Cheng, 2022; Littlejohn et al., 2017). One particularly salient aspect of language use in social interaction is the choice of address terms—linguistic expressions used to refer to or call others in discourse. These terms are more than simple labels; they reflect speakers' perceptions of social distance, power relations, familiarity, and cultural norms (Al-Hamzi et al., 2024; Brown & Gilman, 1960; Brown & Levinson, 1988; Karifianto, 2021; Nose, 2021).

Sociolinguistic studies have long recognized the role of address terms in indexing social hierarchies and interpersonal dynamics (Brown & Gilman, 1960; Bruns, 2022). Address terms vary widely across and within languages, encompassing honorifics, titles, kinship terms, personal names, and even the strategic omission of direct address (Bruns, 2022; Zavitri et al., 2018). The choice of address forms is influenced by a range of social and cultural factors, including age, social status, degree of familiarity, situational context (whether within family or public domains), religious status, educational background, and the level of formality in interaction (Ahmad, 2021; Al-Khawaldeh et al., 2023; Al-Qudah, 2017; Erni, 2016; Hamzah, 2024; Surono, 2018; Zavitri et al., 2018). Communicative intent also plays a crucial role in shaping how address terms are selected and used in social interactions (AwoonorAziaku, 2021; Bisilki, 2017).

In many English-speaking contexts, there is a general tendency toward informality, as first names are commonly used even in professional settings (Ahmad, 2021; Formentelli & Hajek, 2016; Murray, 2002). Conversely, in cultures with strong hierarchical traditions—such as Indonesia—address practices are often governed by complex sociocultural expectations related to age, status, and institutional roles (Efrizah et al., 2025; Wajdi et al., 2024).

In the era of globalization, the field of

*Corresponding Author:
desylvarima@gmail.com

education increasingly demands the implementation of *Culturally Responsive Teaching* (CRT)—an approach that emphasizes the integration of students' cultural backgrounds into all aspects of learning (Houari & Laabidi, 2025). In academic institutions worldwide, the forms students use to address their lecturers provide important insights into how cultural values intersect with institutional norms, particularly when English functions as a Lingua Franca (ELF). In these settings, the choice of address forms reflects power relations, social distance, politeness, and relational goals between students and lecturers (Burt, 2015; Formentelli, 2018).

Research in Ghana has identified multiple address strategies—including title plus last name (TLN), first name (FN), honorific only (HON), and zero address—reflecting both flexibility and social sensitivity (Awoonor-Aziaku, 2021). In contrast, Pakistani students typically use formal titles followed by first names, avoiding first-name-only forms due to cultural norms that emphasize respect and deference in academic hierarchies (Soomro & Larina, 2022). Meanwhile, lecturers' use of informal address forms such as *mate* and *guys* by lecturers can serve as a strategy to foster rapport, maintain politeness, and manage classroom dynamics effectively (Parkinson, 2020).

In Indonesia, forms of address in educational contexts reflect deeply embedded cultural values tied to social hierarchy and politeness. In primary and secondary schools, students commonly address their teachers using the honorifics *Pak* (for males) and *Bu* (for females), often followed by the teacher's name or role. These terms signal recognition of the teacher's seniority and institutional authority. This pattern persists in university settings, where students typically use *Pak* or *Bu*, sometimes combined with academic positions—such as *Pak Rektor* (Mr. Rector) or *Bu Dekan* (Ms. Dean)—to acknowledge status and professional position (Kusumaningsih, 2015). These practices highlight how culturally specific values shape linguistic behavior. Such norms are closely associated with concepts such as *malu* (a sense of social shame), *sopan* (politeness), and *raso jo pareso* (social sensitivity and discernment) (Revita, 2013).

Existing studies have offered valuable cross-cultural insights into how students manage institutional relationships through language. Afful (2006) and Benjamin et al. (2012) documented the use of titles, personal names, and kinship terms in Ghanaian universities, while Formentelli (2009) showed that British students tend to adopt more informal terms over time as familiarity with lecturers increases. Comparative work by Formentelli and Hajek (2016) highlighted cultural contrasts in address strategies: Australian students favored informality, whereas American and British students typically began with more formal expressions. In Indonesia, scholars such as Efrizah et al. (2025), Kusumaningsih (2015), Revita (2013), and Wajdi et al. (2024) have identified the dominance of hierarchical address forms such as *Pak/Bu* followed by a name or title, as well as the influence of local value systems on communicative behavior. Situmorang (2019) noted that students may misapply English address conventions in academic settings, suggesting gaps in pragmatic and intercultural competence.

Despite this growing body of literature, two notable gaps remain. While Indonesian research has established the prevalence of hierarchical address forms, existing studies have paid limited attention to the influence of globalization—particularly English-medium instruction, international academic interactions, and exposure to Western communication norms—on students' address choices. As Indonesian higher education becomes increasingly internationalized, students must navigate complex linguistic and cultural expectations

that may not align with traditional norms.

To address these gaps, the present study investigates (1) the address terms Indonesian university students use when communicating with their lecturers and (2) the sociocultural and pragmatic factors that inform these choices. By focusing on students' linguistic behavior and underlying motivations, this research aims to shed light on how global influences interact with local values in shaping communicative practices, especially in academic settings.

The study reported in this paper was guided by the following research questions:

1. What address terms do Indonesian students use when interacting with their lecturers?
2. What factors influence Indonesian students' choices of address terms when interacting with their lecturers?

METHOD

This research used a qualitative approach and a case study design. The research was conducted at two universities located in the Special Region of Yogyakarta, comprising one state and one private institution. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants based on the following criteria: the students had to be (1) majoring in English language education, (2) enrolled in universities in the Special Region of Yogyakarta, and (3) in their fourth semester or above. These students were chosen based on the assumption that they had greater exposure to and understanding of the English language and culture than students from other majors. Based on these considerations, three participants took part in this study: DA, LN, and MF. In case study research, three participants are considered sufficient. Creswell (2013) advises limiting a case study to no more than four or five cases, as examining a larger number may reduce the depth and richness of analysis that the researcher is able to present. DA was a sixth-semester student at a state university, while LN and MF were enrolled at a private university and were in the sixth and eighth semesters, respectively.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and the collection of personal documents. During the interviews, the researcher prepared a set of open-ended questions that could be adapted to follow the natural flow of conversation. Personal documents included WhatsApp chat screenshots submitted by the participants. The interviews were conducted in Indonesian and audio-recorded with the participants' consent. The interview data were subsequently transcribed and translated into English. The interviews addressed both research questions: RQ1 (concerning the types of address terms used by students when interacting with their lecturers) and RQ2 (related to the factors influencing those choices). The WhatsApp screenshots provided authentic examples of address terms in student–lecturer interactions, offering naturally occurring evidence of the forms used. Overall, the data collection process lasted three weeks.

After the data from the interviews and document collection were transcribed and translated, the analysis began. The analysis was carried out using Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. The process commenced with the generation of initial codes through a line-by-line manual coding process using an inductive approach. This step involved identifying significant patterns, such as the use of specific address terms (e.g., *Pak, Bu, Mr., Miss, Sir,* and *Ma'am*) and influencing factors (e.g., peers, personal comfort, perceptions of politeness, and the absence of formal rules). The next step involved searching for themes by grouping the codes into broader categories. For example, *Pak* and *Bu* were grouped under the theme "Indonesian kinship terms as honorific address terms," while *Mr., Miss, Sir,* and *Ma'am* were grouped under "English honorific address terms." The influencing factors were categorized into themes such as "socio-cultural setting," "personal

preference," "perception of politeness," and "absence of written rules." In the theme-review phase, each theme was refined to ensure internal consistency and relevance. The researcher re-evaluated the data excerpts to verify their alignment with the assigned themes and revised them when necessary. This was followed by defining and naming the themes to reflect their central ideas clearly.

For the first research question concerning the types of address terms used, two major themes emerged: Indonesian kinship terms as honorific address terms and English honorific address terms. For the second research question regarding the factors influencing students' choices of address terms, four themes were identified: socio-cultural setting, personal preference, politeness, and rules. The final phase—producing the report—involved the systematic presentation of findings using excerpts from interviews and personal documents. Each theme was described in detail and discussed in relation to the research questions and relevant literature to provide a contextualized interpretation of the data.

In this study, trustworthiness was ensured through credibility, dependability, and transferability. Credibility was achieved through member checking, dependability through peer examination, and transferability through thick description of the data and research context. Ethical considerations were addressed by providing explanatory statements and obtaining informed consent from all participants. Data confidentiality was maintained, and pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Terms the Student Participants Used When Interacting with Their Lecturers

Based on the analysis of data elicited from interviews and the collection of personal documents, as summarized in Table 1, two categories of address terms were identified: (1) Indonesian kinship terms as honorific address terms and (2) English honorific address terms.

Table 1. *Address terms used by the student participants toward their lecturers*

Respondents	Address terms	Categories
DA, LN, MF	*Pak, Bu*	Indonesian kinship terms
DA, LN	*Miss, Mr.*	English honorific
DA, MF	*Sir, Ma'am*	English honorific

Each will be further explained below.

Indonesian Kinship Terms as Honorific Address Terms

Each student participant consistently used *Pak* and *Bu*—abbreviated forms of *Bapak* and *Ibu*—to address male and female lecturers, respectively. Analysis of the data (e.g., WhatsApp chats) demonstrated the use of these terms as a strategy to convey politeness and maintain social distance. For example, DA stated, "[I use] *Pak* or *Bu*…" (Interview), LN said, "I usually just use Pak or Bu…" (Interview), and MF mentioned, "I usually just say *Pak* or Sir," (Interview), adding, "Yeah, I sometimes use *Bu* and Ma'am" (Interview).

The following excerpts illustrate how the participants addressed their lecturers via WhatsApp: "*Selamat sore Pak, baik Pak, terima kasih atas informasinya*" (Good afternoon, Sir. Alright, Sir, thank you for the information) (LN's personal documents). Another message reads, "*Baik Bu, terima kasih atas informasinya*" (Alright, Ma'am, thank you for the information) (LN's personal documents). Similarly, MF texted, "*Saya nggak tau yang daftar siapa aja, Pak*" (I am not sure who registered, Sir) (MF's personal documents).

The use of *Pak* and *Bu* by all three participants reflected their intention to maintain politeness and show respect to their lecturers. These practices align with the negative and positive politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), as they maintain respectful distance to avoid

imposition while simultaneously fostering familiarity and a sense of in-group identity through the use of kinship terms. These findings are consistent with earlier studies showing that kinship terms can function as culturally embedded honorific address forms in academic contexts across different cultures, such as in Ghanaian universities (Benjamin et al., 2012) and in academic interactions influenced by East Asian cultural norms (Chen & Ren, 2020).

English Honorific Address Terms

In addition to Indonesian kinship terms, participants also used English honorific address terms such as *Sir*, *Ma'am*, *Miss*, and *Mr.*, sometimes interchangeably. Their uses were influenced by exposure to English language instruction, as all participants were enrolled in an English Language Education program. Data, including *WhatsApp* chats, consistently reflected the use of these terms to maintain a respectful distance and demonstrate politeness. They were primarily used in academic interactions conducted in English, whether in face-to-face communication or via WhatsApp.

The first participant (DA) explained that she employed a range of English honorific address terms when interacting with her lecturers. She stated, "[I used] *Sir* or *Ma'am* or *Miss*" (Interview). Similarly, the second participant (LN) reported using comparable terms: "I usually just use *Pak* or *Bu*, but sometimes I also use *Miss* or *Mr*., something like that" (Interview). The third participant (MF) indicated that he generally addressed male lecturers as *Pak* or *Sir*: "I usually just say *Pak* or *Sir*" (Interview). He further noted that he occasionally used *Bu* and *Ma'am* when addressing female lecturers: "Yeah, I sometimes use *Bu* and *Ma'am*. It's kind of mixed like that" (Interview).

The written data also revealed that two participants used English honorific address terms in WhatsApp interactions. DA's messages showed that she addressed male lecturers as *Sir* and female lecturers as *Ma'am*. For example, she wrote, "*Assalamu'alaikum wr. wb*. Good morning, Sir. Sorry if I disturbed your activities this morning." (DA's personal documents). Another message reads, "*Assalamu'alaikum wr. wb*. Good morning, Ma'am. I'm sorry to interrupt your time." (DA's personal documents). Similarly, MF's WhatsApp messages showed the use of *Sir* in communication with lecturers. In one message, he wrote, "Alright, Sir, and will tomorrow's exam be randomized or in attendance list order?" (MF's personal documents).

The use of English honorific address terms—*Sir*, *Ma'am*, *Miss*, and *Mr.*—alongside Indonesian kinship terms indicated that the student participants adjust how they address their lecturers depending on the situation. The preference for English honorifics reflects the participants' awareness of hierarchical relationships, aligning with the negative politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). This study corroborates prior research (e.g., Afful, 2006; Awoonor-aziaku, 2021; Soomro & Larina, 2022), which shows that students in multilingual and multicultural academic settings frequently employ English honorifics to signal deference, maintain formality, and convey respect.

Factors Influencing the Student Participants' Choices of Address Terms When Interacting with Their Lecturers

Based on the analysis of interview data, as summarized in Table 2, several factors influencing the student participants' choice of address terms were identified: (1) socio-cultural setting, (2) personal preference, (3) perception of politeness, and (4) absence of written rules.

Table 2. *Factors influencing the student participants' choices of address terms.*

Respondents	Factors
DA, LN	Socio-cultural setting
MF	Personal preference
DA	Perception of politeness
LN, MF	Absence of written rules

Socio-Cultural Setting

The student participants' choices of address terms were influenced by their social environment, including linguistic practices modeled by peers, lecturers, and institutional norms. They tended to adopt forms of address commonly used in their immediate surroundings. When they observed others using particular terms to address lecturers, they often adopted the same expressions, either out of habit or to conform and gain social acceptance. For example, DA stated, "Because I am simply going along with what is common in my surroundings" (Interview). Similarly, LN remarked, "…so I just follow what is commonly used around me" (Interview). These responses indicate that the participants' choices of address terms were shaped by norms and practices within their socio-cultural setting.

From the perspective of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, this tendency reflects positive politeness strategies. By aligning their speech with that of others, the student participants seek to build solidarity and foster a sense of belonging within the academic community. Using address terms similar to those of their peers helps maintain social harmony and minimize potential friction, particularly in formal academic settings where respect and politeness are emphasized. These findings support previous research demonstrating that students' choices of address terms are shaped by cultural values, social norms, and hierarchical structures in both academic and broader societal contexts (Afful, 2006; Awoonor-Aziaku, 2021; Efrizah et al., 2025; Punyanunt-Carter & Akdilek, 2025; Revita, 2013; Situmorang, 2019; Soomro & Larina, 2022; Yulianto & Daniela, 2025).

Personal Preference

Some participants selected address terms based on personal preference, encompassing individual comfort, habitual use, and personal tendencies when addressing lecturers. The findings show that certain participants did not always follow commonly used or socially expected forms. Instead, they chose address terms they perceived as natural, respectful, or personally appropriate. For instance, the third participant, MF, stated, "…Because at first I just felt more comfortable doing it like that…" (Interview).

From the perspective of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, personal preference may reflect either positive or negative politeness strategies, depending on the speaker's intention. When students select address terms they perceive as respectful or familiar, they negotiate between social expectations and personal judgments of appropriateness. Thus, personal preference plays a significant role in how participants manage formality, politeness, and relational dynamics with their lecturers. This finding aligns with Afful's (2006) study, which showed that students develop their own speech practices within their communities. It also highlights their linguistic creativity and autonomy, indicating that address-term choices are influenced by individual agency (Hamzah, 2024).

Perception of Politeness

The student participants' perceptions of what constitutes polite and respectful language significantly influenced their choice of address terms. They tended to select expressions they considered culturally appropriate and reflective of respect toward authority figures. This was illustrated by the first participant (DA), who remarked, "Because in Indonesia, when we address someone older, we usually use terms like *Pak* or *Bu*. Just calling someone by name feels a bit impolite in Indonesia" (Interview). Her response highlights how such address terms are perceived as a means of maintaining respectful boundaries in communication.

According to Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, this behaviour exemplifies a negative politeness strategy, whereby speakers demonstrate deference and minimize imposition on the addressee. By employing polite and formal address terms, the student participants seek to maintain

appropriate social boundaries and avoid appearing disrespectful. This suggests that they are not only aware of social norms but also actively regulate their choice of address terms to uphold politeness (Efrizah et al., 2025; Hamzah, 2024; Kusumaningsih, 2015; Lasan, 2025; Punyanunt-Carter & Akdilek, 2025).

Absence of Written Rules

The absence of explicit institutional guidelines on how to address lecturers gave the student participants greater freedom in selecting what they considered appropriate. Some relied on forms that felt natural to them, while others adopted expressions commonly used by their peers. This ambiguity led to varied address practices. The point was illustrated by the second participant (LN), who stated, "If there were a policy regarding that at PBI U**, I would certainly follow it. However, since there is no written rule about how we should address lecturers, I just use whatever feels appropriate…" (Interview). This suggests that, in the absence of formal guidelines, the participant relied on personal judgment. Similarly, another participant (MF) noted, "…there's no pressure to address lecturers using academic titles" (Interview), indicating that the lack of institutional rules afforded participants greater flexibility in choosing address terms.

According to Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, this behaviour reflects a form of negative politeness strategy. Even in the absence of strict rules, students seek to avoid offending and to demonstrate deference by selecting address terms they perceive as safe and respectful. Their choices aim to maintain social distance and avoid threatening the lecturer's face, particularly in formal or hierarchical contexts.

This finding regarding institutional rules aligns with the study conducted by Formentelli and Hajek (2016), which reported that politeness norms for addressing lecturers are often not clearly communicated to new students. Lecturers also rarely state their preferred forms of address explicitly, leaving students to infer which terms are appropriate. This lack of clarity contributes to variation in address practices within academic interactions. Other studies, such as Saputra et al. (2024) also indicates that the absence of explicit rules regarding forms of address necessitates a more active role from educational institutions and lecturers in providing clear guidance on communication ethics in academic settings to enhance students' understanding of the importance of politeness in academic communication.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the types of address terms used by Indonesian university students when interacting with their lecturers and the factors influencing their choices. The findings reveal that students commonly use both Indonesian kinship terms (e.g., *Pak*, *Bu*) and English honorifics (e.g., *Mr.*, *Miss*, *Sir*, *Ma'am*), reflecting a blending of local cultural norms and the influence of English-language education. The selection of address terms was shaped by several factors, including socio-cultural setting, personal preference, perceptions of politeness, and the presence or absence of institutional rules.

This study contributes to the field of sociolinguistics by enhancing the understanding of address-term practices in higher education settings within a non-native English-speaking context, such as Indonesia. It provides empirical evidence of how Indonesian university students navigate terms of address in student–lecturer interactions, balancing cultural norms of respect and hierarchy with the influence of English as a global academic language. Furthermore, the study supports Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory by illustrating how students employ both positive politeness strategies—such as using familiar forms to build rapport—and negative politeness strategies—such as maintaining distance and

demonstrating deference—to manage power relations and avoid face-threatening acts in academic contexts. Overall, the findings extend knowledge of politeness strategies in student–lecturer communication in Indonesian higher education and highlight the central role of cultural context in shaping communicative practices.

The study also offers several practical implications for students, educators, and academic institutions. For students, particularly those in non-native English-speaking contexts, the findings underscore the importance of addressing lecturers appropriately in English, especially when local and international norms differ. This is particularly relevant for students preparing to engage in international academic environments, where intercultural communication competence is essential. For language educators and curriculum designers, the results indicate the need to incorporate pragmatic elements of language use—including address terms and politeness strategies—into academic communication courses. In addition, the findings support efforts by universities to promote clearer and more effective communication through the formulation of institutional guidelines recommending appropriate and respectful language use in student–lecturer interactions. Such initiatives may contribute to a more respectful academic culture and reduce misunderstandings arising from culturally inappropriate or ambiguous forms of address.

This study has several limitations. First, the interviews were relatively brief, ranging from five to twelve minutes, which limited opportunities for in-depth probing. Second, data collection lasted only three weeks. Future research should consider conducting longer interviews and extending the data-collection period to obtain richer and more comprehensive insights into address-term practices in academic settings.

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