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Asking about occupation: A pragmatic analysis of English expressions across diverse social contexts

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Abstract - This study aims to examine the politeness of English expressions used to ask about a person's job or profession and to identify differences in their pragmatic appropriateness across conversational contexts. The study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to analyse commonly used occupational questions, including *What do you do?*, *What do you do for a living?*, *What is your job?*, *What is your profession?*, and *What kind of work do you do?* The data are analysed pragmatically by considering directness, formality, social distance, contextual appropriateness, and the potential face implications of each expression. The analysis indicates that asking about a person's occupation is generally considered socially acceptable when the question is appropriately formulated and used in a suitable context. Among the expressions examined, *What do you do?* and *What kind of work do you do?* are generally perceived as natural and conversational, whereas *What is your profession?* tends to convey a more formal tone. *What is your job?* is grammatically acceptable but may sound more direct in certain interpersonal contexts. The findings suggest that politeness in occupational questions depends not only on grammatical correctness but also on the degree of directness, formality, and relationship between interlocutors. The study concludes that appropriate occupational questions should be selected according to the communicative context and the social relationship between speakers.

Keywords: occupational questions; politeness; pragmatics; speech acts; English communication

1. Introduction

Language is not used merely to convey propositional information but also to establish, maintain, and negotiate interpersonal relationships. In everyday interaction, speakers frequently ask questions to obtain information about another person's background, interests, activities, and occupation. Among these topics, occupation is particularly common in introductions, small talk, professional networking, interviews, and other social encounters. In English, expressions such as *What do you do?*, *What do you do for a living?*, *What kind of work do you do?*, *What is your job?*, and *What is your profession?* may all be used to obtain information about a person's occupation. However, although these expressions have broadly similar referential meanings, they may differ in terms of naturalness, directness, formality, and pragmatic appropriateness.

The question of whether it is polite to ask someone about their occupation therefore cannot be answered solely from the grammatical structure of the question. A grammatically correct expression may nevertheless be perceived differently depending on the social relationship

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between interlocutors and the circumstances in which it is produced. For example, *What do you do?* is widely recognized as a conventional English expression for asking about a person's work or profession, while *What do you do for a living?* makes the occupational meaning more explicit. The Voice of America English-learning resource similarly identifies these expressions as common ways of asking about someone's work and also notes *What kind of work do you do?* and *What line of work are you in?* as friendly alternatives.

The pragmatic dimension becomes important because questions about occupation involve personal information and can potentially affect interpersonal relations. An occupation may be associated with social status, income, education, identity, and professional achievement. Consequently, the same question may be interpreted as an ordinary conversational opener in one situation but as overly direct or intrusive in another. This observation is consistent with politeness research, which emphasizes that the interpretation of an utterance depends not only on its linguistic form but also on contextual and relational factors.

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory provides an influential framework for explaining this phenomenon. Their model is based on the concept of *face*, consisting broadly of positive face, or the desire to be approved of and appreciated, and negative face, or the desire for autonomy and freedom from unwanted imposition. The degree to which a communicative act threatens face is influenced by factors such as social distance, relative power, and the degree of imposition involved (Holtgraves & McNamara, 2010). From this perspective, a question concerning personal information can become more face-sensitive when the interlocutors are unfamiliar, when there is a substantial power difference, or when the topic is considered sensitive.

Politeness, however, should not be equated mechanically with indirectness. Blum-Kulka (1987) demonstrated that indirectness and politeness are related but distinct dimensions; highly indirect expressions are not necessarily perceived as the most polite. Her research therefore suggests that pragmatic appropriateness depends on more than simply increasing the degree of linguistic indirectness. This distinction is particularly relevant to occupational questions because *What is your profession?* may appear more formal than *What do you do?*, but greater formality does not automatically make it more polite in every conversational situation.

Leech (2014) likewise approaches politeness from a pragmatic perspective and emphasizes the relationship between communicative goals, indirectness, and pragmatic interpretation. His analysis of English politeness demonstrates that speakers employ different linguistic strategies depending on the communicative situation and interpersonal relationship. Thus, occupational questions should be examined not simply as grammatical interrogatives but as pragmatic actions occurring within particular social contexts.

The reviewed studies show that politeness in English is a context-dependent pragmatic phenomenon shaped by linguistic choices, social relationships, cultural expectations, and communicative purposes. Research on interrogatives, politeness markers, and requests demonstrates that forms such as questions, *please*, and request modifications can soften interpersonal interactions and express varying degrees of politeness (Kasimova, 2020; Kádár & House, 2020; Murphy & De Felice, 2018). Studies of workplace and classroom communication further indicate that politeness strategies vary according to professional roles, social distance, and institutional contexts (Hijikata et al., 2023; Syting & Gildore, 2022; Pasaribu et al., 2022).

Cross-cultural and interlanguage research emphasizes that politeness cannot be understood independently of speakers' linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Differences have been identified among British, American, Australian, Hong Kong, Malay, Korean, Arabic, Nigerian, Romanian, and Uzbek varieties or learner contexts, suggesting that pragmatic norms are influenced by both first-language conventions and local sociocultural expectations (Xie, 2024; Idris & Ismail, 2023; Mohammed, 2022; Karpava, 2025; Igiri et al., 2026; Dimulescu, 2026; Nosirov, 2025). Research on English learners also shows that pragmatic competence develops through the ability to select appropriate strategies according to context rather than simply mastering grammatical forms (Min, 2022; Utama et al., 2025).

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Recent research additionally broadens the understanding of politeness beyond conventional markers by examining rising declaratives, help-seeking, professional discourse, and sociopragmatic variation (Jeong, 2021; Trotzke et al., 2025; Gillings & Culpeper, 2024). Overall, the literature indicates that politeness is dynamic and interactionally constructed, with its realization depending on the relationship between speakers, communicative situation, cultural background, and linguistic resources. These findings provide a useful foundation for examining how politeness strategies are realized in specific varieties of English and across different communicative contexts (Loc, 2023; De Vera, 2025).

Previous research has made substantial contributions to the study of politeness, indirectness, face, requests, and cross-cultural pragmatic variation. Brown and Levinson (1987), for example, established a widely influential model for understanding how speakers manage face-threatening acts. Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) further demonstrated the importance of situational and cultural variation in pragmatic behaviour, particularly in relation to directness and indirectness. Subsequent pragmatic scholarship has expanded the field by considering politeness as a relational and context-dependent phenomenon rather than merely a collection of linguistic formulas. Spencer-Oatey's (2022) work on rapport management, for example, emphasizes the relationship between linguistic choices and the maintenance of interpersonal relations across contexts and cultures.

The studies reviewed show that pragmatics examines how meaning is constructed and interpreted through language use, context, and interaction. Experimental pragmatics emphasizes the processes involved in understanding linguistic meaning beyond literal interpretation (Ghafar, 2023). Speech-act studies further demonstrate that utterances perform particular functions, such as expressing intentions, making commitments, and influencing listeners (Latuapo & Sahayu, 2024; Khotijah et al., 2026). Research on Indonesian multilingual communication also indicates that speech-action patterns are influenced by the linguistic and social context of speakers (Andiopenta & Suyadi, 2024).

Conversational implicature is another important area, showing that speakers often communicate meanings indirectly and that listeners rely on contextual knowledge to interpret them (Mila & Robiego, 2026). Political discourse research similarly demonstrates how implicatures and speech acts can communicate ideological, persuasive, and interpersonal meanings in public speeches (Rjoub & Eshreteh, 2026; Mekt et al., 2024). Facework is also significant in political and journalistic interactions because speakers use linguistic strategies to maintain, challenge, or threaten participants' social identities during adversarial exchanges (Esuola & Okunade, 2026).

Other studies extend pragmatic analysis to digital communication, popular culture, religion, and education. The analysis of celebrity fan wars illustrates how language can express conflict, identity, solidarity, and confrontation in social-media interactions (Esuola et al., 2025). Similarly, aggressive Christian prayer sessions demonstrate how speech acts can function to express emotions, intentions, and interpersonal or spiritual purposes (Obiorah & Edeoga, 2026). Research on classroom interaction and online pragmatics highlights the importance of discourse and implicature in facilitating meaning-making and communication in educational settings (Mila & Robiego, 2026; Wajdi, 2018). Meanwhile, discourse-oriented studies of song lyrics and commencement speeches show that cohesion and critical discourse strategies contribute to the construction of meaning, identity, and social messages in written and spoken texts (Dewi, 2023; Amandari et al., 2024).

Research on pragmatics has explored how language is used to express politeness, negotiate power, manage conflict, and maintain interpersonal relationships across different communication contexts. Studies of celebrity interviews highlight how politeness strategies reflect social hierarchies and influence interactions, while research on online debates demonstrates how impoliteness strategies are employed to express disagreement and challenge opposing viewpoints (Farah et al., 2025; Nur'aini & Akmal, 2025). Similarly, research on political interviews emphasizes the role of facework in managing confrontational exchanges and shaping journalistic interactions (Esuola & Okunade, 2026).

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Pragmatic research also examines communication in professional and digital environments. Effective business correspondence requires appropriate language choices to maintain professionalism and support successful international communication (Wajdi et al., 2025). Meanwhile, experimental pragmatics provides insights into how language is constructed and interpreted, offering a theoretical foundation for understanding meaning in context (Ghafar, 2023). The study of celebrity fan conflicts further illustrates how language can intensify social divisions and express group identities on social media platforms (Esuola et al., 2025).

In educational settings, conversational implicatures demonstrate how speakers communicate meanings beyond the literal interpretation of their words, particularly in synchronous online learning environments (Mila & Robiego, 2026). Likewise, research on pedagogical directive speech acts shows how teachers use language to guide classroom activities, manage interactions, and support learning through contextually appropriate communication (Musaffak et al., 2026). Collectively, these studies demonstrate the broad application of pragmatics in interpersonal, professional, digital, and educational communication, highlighting the importance of context in interpreting meaning and understanding language use.

Overall, the reviewed studies indicate that pragmatics and discourse analysis provide useful approaches for examining how people construct meaning according to context, purpose, relationships, and social circumstances. The literature covers diverse settings, including classrooms, political speeches, journalism, social media, religious discourse, entertainment, and organizational communication, demonstrating the broad applicability of pragmatic and discourse-based analysis (Ghafar, 2023; Esuola & Okunade, 2026; Khotijah et al., 2026).

Nevertheless, relatively less attention has been directed specifically toward the pragmatic status of **questions used to ask about occupation**. Much of the classic literature has concentrated on speech acts such as requests, apologies, complaints, refusals, and other acts involving explicit imposition. The literature on requests, for instance, has extensively investigated levels of directness and indirectness and the relationship between linguistic realization and politeness (Leech, 2014). Occupational questions differ from requests because the speaker is not necessarily asking the hearer to perform an action. Instead, the speaker is seeking personal information. Consequently, their potential face implications and politeness mechanisms may operate differently.

A further gap concerns the comparison of alternative English expressions for occupational inquiry. Although language-learning resources commonly teach *What do you do?* as a conventional question about occupation, the pragmatic differences among *What do you do?*, *What do you do for a living?*, *What is your job?*, *What is your profession?*, and *What kind of work do you do?* have received comparatively limited systematic attention as a set of occupational-question strategies. The distinction is important because grammatical correctness does not necessarily correspond to pragmatic naturalness. For example, English-learning materials explicitly identify *What do you do?* as a natural way to ask about employment, while *What is your job?* is grammatically possible but may be perceived as more direct in some social situations.

Therefore, there is a need for a focused pragmatic analysis of occupational questions that examines not only whether such questions are grammatically acceptable but also how their directness, formality, contextual appropriateness, and interpersonal implications contribute to perceptions of politeness.

This study primarily adopts a pragmatic approach to politeness, drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness and complemented by insights from Blum-Kulka (1987), Leech (2014), and Spencer-Oatey's rapport-management perspective.

Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework conceptualizes interaction in terms of face management. Positive face concerns an individual's desire to be appreciated and accepted, whereas negative face concerns the desire for autonomy and freedom from unwanted interference. Communicative acts may threaten either dimension of face, and speakers may therefore select different politeness strategies according to the contextual weight of the act. The

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perceived weight of a face-threatening act is associated with social distance, relative power, and the degree of imposition (Holtgraves & McNamara, 2010).

Applied to occupational questions, this framework suggests that asking *What do you do?* can be relatively unproblematic when interlocutors are engaged in ordinary social interaction and the topic of occupation is culturally expected. However, the same informational request may require greater interpersonal sensitivity when directed toward a stranger, a person with higher social power, or someone in a context where employment or socioeconomic status is potentially sensitive. The question is therefore not inherently polite or impolite; its interpretation emerges from the interaction between linguistic form and social context.

Blum-Kulka's (1987) distinction between directness and politeness provides a second important theoretical perspective. Her findings indicate that indirectness does not necessarily correspond to greater politeness. This principle is useful for analysing occupational questions because an expression such as *What is your profession?* may be formally explicit but socially appropriate in a professional context, whereas *What do you do?* may be less explicit but more natural in casual conversation. Accordingly, the present study treats directness and politeness as related but analytically distinct dimensions.

Leech's (2014) pragmatic approach further supports the analysis by emphasizing that politeness involves the interpretation of communicative behaviour in relation to interpersonal goals and pragmatic inference. His work recognizes a range of politeness-sensitive speech events and demonstrates that the interpretation of linguistic forms depends on how speakers pursue communicative goals in interaction.

Finally, Spencer-Oatey's rapport-management perspective broadens the analysis beyond face alone by emphasizing the management of interpersonal relations. This approach is particularly relevant to occupational questions because asking about someone's work can function not only as information seeking but also as a means of initiating conversation, establishing common ground, or maintaining social rapport.

On the basis of these perspectives, the present study analyses occupational questions according to four interconnected dimensions: (1) directness, (2) formality, (3) contextual appropriateness, and (4) interpersonal/face implications. These dimensions provide a framework for determining why some occupational questions are perceived as more natural or polite than others.

Research on politeness has traditionally focused on how speakers manage interpersonal relationships while accomplishing communicative goals. Brown and Levinson (1987) provided one of the most influential accounts by proposing that speakers select politeness strategies according to the potential face threat of an act. Their framework established social distance, relative power, and imposition as important contextual variables in determining how speakers formulate potentially sensitive utterances.

Blum-Kulka (1987) subsequently challenged a simple equation between indirectness and politeness. Her study demonstrated that speakers' perceptions of politeness and indirectness do not necessarily coincide, suggesting that pragmatic interpretation is more complex than a simple directness-to-politeness continuum. This finding is particularly important for the present study because occupational questions can vary in grammatical directness without necessarily producing equivalent judgments of politeness.

Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) also demonstrated that pragmatic behaviour varies according to situational and cultural factors. Their cross-cultural research on requests and apologies showed that speech-act realization involves systematic variation in directness, conventionality, and contextual factors. Although their primary focus was not occupational questions, their framework provides an important methodological basis for examining how linguistic forms should be interpreted within their social and situational contexts.

Leech (2014) extended pragmatic approaches to politeness by examining politeness as a communicative phenomenon involving pragmatic inference, indirectness, and interpersonal considerations. His analysis of English demonstrates that politeness is not reducible to the

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presence of particular lexical items or grammatical constructions. Instead, it involves the relationship between linguistic choices and communicative purposes.

More recent work on rapport management has further emphasized that politeness should be understood in relation to interpersonal relationships. Spencer-Oatey highlights the need to consider both micro-level linguistic choices and broader relational and cultural dimensions when examining intercultural interaction. This perspective is valuable for occupational questions because such questions can simultaneously perform an informational function and a relational function.

In relation to English usage, educational resources provide evidence that *What do you do?* is conventionally used to ask about occupation, while *What do you do for a living?* explicitly refers to one's means of earning a living. *What kind of work do you do?* and *What line of work are you in?* are also presented as friendly alternatives. These descriptions support the linguistic observation that occupational inquiry is a conventional part of English social interaction. However, such resources generally provide usage guidance rather than systematic pragmatic analysis. This leaves room for a more academically grounded examination of why different occupational questions may produce different perceptions of politeness and appropriateness.

Despite the widespread use of occupational questions in English interaction, several problems remain. First, English learners may assume that grammatical correctness automatically guarantees pragmatic appropriateness. This assumption can lead them to use expressions that are grammatically acceptable but relatively direct or formal for a particular conversational setting. Second, learners may not clearly distinguish between occupational questions that are natural in casual conversation and those that are more appropriate in formal or professional settings. Third, the relationship between directness and politeness is frequently oversimplified, even though pragmatic research demonstrates that indirectness does not automatically produce greater politeness.

The central research problem is therefore how different English expressions for asking about occupation should be interpreted from a pragmatic and politeness perspective. Specifically, the study seeks to determine why some expressions, despite having similar propositional meanings, may be perceived as more natural, less direct, more formal, or more contextually appropriate than others.

This study aims to analyse the politeness of English expressions used to ask about a person's occupation or profession. Specifically, it aims to: (1) identify the common English expressions used to ask about a person's occupation; (2) analyse the degree of directness and formality expressed by each occupational question; (3) examine the pragmatic appropriateness of these expressions in different interpersonal contexts; and (4) explain how politeness, face management, and rapport influence the selection and interpretation of occupational questions.

Through these objectives, the study seeks to contribute to pragmatic research by focusing on an everyday but relatively underexamined form of interpersonal inquiry. It also aims to provide practical implications for English learners and users who need to ask about occupation appropriately in casual, academic, professional, and intercultural communication.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design with a pragmatic approach to examine the politeness of English expressions used to ask about a person's occupation or profession. A qualitative design was considered appropriate because the study focused on interpreting the communicative meaning, degree of directness, level of formality, and contextual appropriateness of occupational questions rather than measuring their effectiveness statistically. The analysis concentrated on commonly occurring expressions such as *What do you do?*, *What do you do for a living?*, *What is your job?*, *What is your profession?*, and *What kind of work do you do?*

The study adopted pragmatics as its principal analytical perspective because occupational questions are not interpreted solely according to their grammatical structure or

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literal meaning. Their pragmatic interpretation may change according to the relationship between interlocutors, the communicative setting, the degree of social distance, and the purpose of the interaction. The analysis was informed primarily by Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, particularly the concepts of face, face-threatening acts, and contextual factors influencing politeness. The study also incorporated Blum-Kulka's (1987) distinction between directness and politeness and Leech's (2014) pragmatic perspective on politeness.

The unit of analysis was an English occupational-question expression. Each expression was examined as a communicative act intended to obtain information concerning the hearer's occupation, employment, profession, or type of work. The analysis did not assume that one linguistic form was inherently polite or impolite. Instead, politeness was treated as context-dependent and was evaluated according to the relationship between linguistic form and social situation.

Five analytical dimensions were established: (1) directness, (2) formality, (3) contextual appropriateness, (4) potential face implications, and (5) interpersonal function. Directness concerned how explicitly the question requested information about occupation. Formality referred to the degree to which an expression was associated with casual, neutral, or professional interaction. Contextual appropriateness concerned whether an expression was suitable for particular interpersonal circumstances. Face implications concerned the possibility that the question might intrude upon the hearer's personal autonomy or social identity. Finally, interpersonal function considered whether the question primarily served to obtain information, initiate conversation, establish common ground, or maintain social rapport.

2.2 Data Collection

The data consisted of English expressions commonly used to ask about another person's occupation. Data were collected through documentary and textual observation of established English-language usage sources and pragmatic literature. The collection process focused on expressions that explicitly or conventionally function as occupational questions in English communication.

The primary expressions selected for analysis were *What do you do?*, *What do you do for a living?*, *What kind of work do you do?*, *What is your job?*, and *What is your profession?* These expressions were selected because they represent different degrees of explicitness and formality while sharing a broadly similar communicative purpose. In addition to these core expressions, contextual examples were considered where necessary to determine how the expressions could function in casual, academic, professional, and unfamiliar-interlocutor situations.

Data collection was conducted in three stages. First, relevant expressions were identified from English-learning materials and established descriptions of occupational questions. Second, the expressions were cross-referenced with pragmatic and politeness literature to establish their relevance to directness, politeness, and interpersonal interaction. Third, each expression was organized according to its linguistic characteristics and potential communicative context.

The data were then categorized according to the following contextual situations: (1) casual interaction between acquaintances, (2) first interaction between unfamiliar speakers, (3) academic or institutional interaction, and (4) professional or networking interaction. This contextual categorization was necessary because the appropriateness of an occupational question may vary depending on social distance, relative status, and the purpose of the interaction.

To maintain analytical consistency, an expression was included in the dataset when it met three criteria. First, it had to function as a question concerning occupation or work. Second, it had to be recognizable as a meaningful English expression rather than an isolated grammatical construction. Third, it had to provide sufficient linguistic or contextual information for analysis in terms of politeness and pragmatic appropriateness.

2.3 Data Analysis

The data were analysed using qualitative pragmatic analysis. The analysis followed four sequential procedures: identification, classification, contextual interpretation, and comparative interpretation.

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First, the occupational-question expressions were identified and examined according to their literal and communicative meanings. At this stage, the analysis determined whether each expression directly or indirectly referred to the hearer's occupation. For example, *What do you do?* does not contain an explicit lexical reference to *job* or *profession*, but in an appropriate conversational context it conventionally functions as an occupational question.

Second, the expressions were classified according to their degree of directness and formality. Directness was examined by considering how explicitly an expression requested occupational information. Formality was determined by considering lexical choice, grammatical construction, and the types of contexts in which an expression would naturally occur. This distinction was important because a more explicit expression was not automatically interpreted as less polite, and a less explicit expression was not automatically interpreted as more polite.

Third, each expression was interpreted according to its contextual appropriateness and face implications. Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework was applied to determine how an occupational question might affect the hearer's positive or negative face. Particular attention was given to social distance, relative power, and the potential sensitivity of occupational information. For example, asking a close acquaintance *What do you do?* may constitute ordinary small talk, whereas asking the same question in a context where employment status is potentially sensitive may require greater interpersonal consideration.

Fourth, the expressions were compared to determine their relative pragmatic characteristics. The comparison focused on whether an expression was more suitable for casual, neutral, academic, or professional communication. Blum-Kulka's (1987) distinction between directness and politeness was used to avoid equating indirectness automatically with politeness. Leech's (2014) pragmatic approach was also used to consider how linguistic choices contribute to interpersonal goals and appropriate interaction.

The findings were subsequently presented descriptively rather than statistically. Each expression was interpreted in relation to its communicative function and contextual conditions. The analysis therefore sought to establish that the politeness of an occupational question is not an absolute property of a particular grammatical form. Rather, it emerges from the interaction between linguistic expression, social relationship, communicative purpose, and situational context.

To enhance analytical credibility, interpretations were compared against established pragmatic principles and documented English usage. Particular attention was given to avoiding judgments based solely on grammaticality. An expression could be grammatically correct but pragmatically less natural in a particular situation, while another expression could be both grammatically acceptable and pragmatically conventional. The final analysis therefore distinguished among grammatical correctness, pragmatic naturalness, politeness, and contextual appropriateness.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

3.1.1 Occupational Questions as Polite Conversational Inquiry

The analysis indicates that asking about a person's occupation is not inherently impolite in English. The politeness of an occupational question depends primarily on its linguistic formulation and the context in which it is used. Occupational questions commonly function as a means of obtaining personal information, initiating conversation, establishing common ground, and developing interpersonal relationships. In ordinary social interaction, asking about someone's occupation can therefore be considered a conventional conversational practice rather than an inherently intrusive act.

Among the expressions examined, *What do you do?* emerged as the most natural and broadly applicable expression for asking about occupation. Although the question does not explicitly contain the words *job*, *work*, or *profession*, its conventional interpretation in an introductory or small-talk context frequently concerns the hearer's occupation. Its relatively short

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and indirect form allows the speaker to obtain occupational information without explicitly labelling the hearer's employment status.

Similarly, *What kind of work do you do?* is a relatively natural occupational question because it explicitly identifies the topic as work while maintaining a conversational tone. The expression allows the hearer some flexibility in responding because the question asks about the type of work rather than requiring a specific occupational title.

These findings demonstrate that politeness is not simply determined by whether a question explicitly mentions occupation. Instead, conventionality, conversational naturalness, and contextual expectations contribute substantially to the interpretation of the question.

3.1.2 Differences in Directness Among Occupational Questions

The analysis reveals noticeable differences in the degree of directness among the expressions. *What do you do?* is structurally less explicit because the object of the question is not linguistically stated. Nevertheless, in a context where occupation is the topic, its conventional meaning is readily understood. This combination of linguistic simplicity and contextual interpretation makes it particularly suitable for everyday interaction.

What do you do for a living? is more explicit because the phrase *for a living* clearly directs the question toward employment or livelihood. The expression remains conventional and generally acceptable, although it can be more directly focused on the economic aspect of a person's work. Consequently, contextual sensitivity may be required when the speaker does not know the hearer's circumstances.

What is your job? is grammatically straightforward and semantically unambiguous. However, its direct interrogative structure explicitly requests the hearer's job title or occupation. Although it is not inherently rude, it may sound more direct or less conversational than *What do you do?* in some interpersonal situations.

The expression *What is your profession?* is similarly direct but differs in register. The lexical item *profession* tends to create a more formal tone and may be more appropriate in professional, academic, administrative, or research contexts than in casual conversation. Thus, directness and formality should be treated as separate analytical dimensions.

Overall, the findings show that greater explicitness does not necessarily mean greater impoliteness. Rather, the pragmatic effect of directness depends on whether the degree of explicitness is appropriate to the social context.

3.1.3 Formality and Contextual Appropriateness

The results demonstrate that the expressions vary considerably in formality and therefore differ in contextual suitability. *What do you do?* is highly adaptable and can be used in casual conversation, introductions, networking, and other relatively informal situations. Its broad contextual applicability makes it the most flexible expression among those examined.

What kind of work do you do? also has a relatively neutral and conversational character. It can be used when the speaker wishes to obtain occupational information without sounding excessively formal or demanding.

In contrast, *What is your profession?* carries a stronger formal or institutional tone. It may be appropriate when the participants are engaged in a professional or academic interaction, particularly when occupational identity is directly relevant to the conversation. However, the same expression may sound somewhat unnatural or overly formal in casual social interaction.

What is your job? occupies an intermediate position. It is grammatically acceptable and readily understandable, but its directness can make it sound less conversational than *What do you do?* depending on the relationship between the speakers.

The results therefore suggest that contextual appropriateness is a central component of politeness. A question that is appropriate in a professional interview may not be the most natural choice during informal social interaction. Conversely, a highly conversational expression may be less appropriate when a formal occupational classification is required.

3.1.4 Face, Social Distance, and Interpersonal Relationship

The analysis further indicates that the interpretation of occupational questions is influenced by social distance and the relationship between interlocutors. When speakers are familiar with each

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other, asking about occupation is generally less face-sensitive because the interaction already involves an established degree of interpersonal familiarity. In such circumstances, *What do you do?* or *What kind of work do you do?* can function naturally as conversation starters.

When speakers are unfamiliar with one another, occupational questions may require greater pragmatic sensitivity. Although asking about occupation is still generally acceptable, the speaker's choice of expression can influence how the question is perceived. A conventional and conversational expression such as *What do you do?* can facilitate interaction because it does not strongly emphasize the potentially personal nature of employment information.

The situation becomes more complex when there is a difference in social power or status. An occupational question directed by a superior toward a subordinate, for example, may be interpreted differently from the same question between social equals. Similarly, asking about occupation in a context involving unemployment, financial difficulty, retirement, or career transition may create greater face sensitivity.

The findings therefore support the view that politeness cannot be assigned permanently to individual expressions. Instead, the same linguistic form may be perceived differently according to the relationship between the interlocutors, the topic of interaction, and the circumstances in which the question occurs.

3.2 Discussion

The findings provide several important implications for the pragmatic analysis of occupational questions. First, they support the fundamental assumption of politeness theory that linguistic forms should be interpreted in relation to social context. Brown and Levinson's (1987) concept of face is particularly useful because asking about occupation involves requesting information that may contribute to the hearer's social identity. An occupation can be an important aspect of how individuals present themselves to others; consequently, questions about work may have interpersonal consequences even when their primary purpose is simply information seeking.

However, the findings also demonstrate that an occupational question should not automatically be classified as a face-threatening act. In many English-speaking contexts, asking *What do you do?* is a conventional form of small talk. Its conventionality reduces the potential for the hearer to interpret it as an intrusive demand for private information. This illustrates the importance of contextual and conventional meaning in pragmatic interpretation.

Second, the findings support Blum-Kulka's (1987) argument that directness and politeness should not be treated as identical concepts. *What is your profession?* is more explicit than *What do you do?*, but this does not make it inherently impolite. In a professional interview, academic discussion, conference introduction, or administrative context, the formal expression may be entirely appropriate. Conversely, excessive indirectness could potentially make a question unnecessarily complicated or ambiguous. Therefore, the most polite expression is not necessarily the least direct expression.

Third, the findings indicate that pragmatic naturalness is distinct from grammatical correctness. Expressions such as *What is your job?* and *What is your profession?* are grammatically well formed and semantically comprehensible. Nevertheless, their conversational appropriateness varies according to context. *What do you do?* is often preferred in ordinary conversation because English speakers conventionally recognize it as an occupational inquiry. This finding is particularly relevant to second-language learning because learners may construct questions that are grammatically accurate but less natural in actual interaction.

Fourth, the findings are consistent with Leech's (2014) view that politeness should be analysed as part of broader pragmatic behaviour. The speaker's objective is not merely to obtain information but also to maintain an appropriate interpersonal relationship. Thus, an occupational question can simultaneously perform two functions: an informational function, by obtaining information about employment, and a relational function, by initiating or sustaining social interaction.

The results also support a rapport-management perspective. From this perspective, *What do you do?* can function as a relational strategy because it provides an accessible topic for

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conversation and may invite the hearer to elaborate on professional interests and experiences. If the hearer responds positively, the question may create an opportunity for further interaction. However, if the question is asked abruptly, repeatedly, or in a context where occupation is sensitive, the same expression may negatively affect rapport.

Another important finding concerns the distinction between occupation and professional identity. The expressions *What is your job?* and *What is your profession?* may appear semantically similar, but they can frame the hearer's identity differently. The word *job* tends to emphasize employment or work, whereas *profession* can imply a more formal occupational identity. Consequently, lexical selection can influence not only the degree of formality but also the social meaning attributed to the hearer's work.

The findings can therefore be summarized along four pragmatic dimensions:

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Expressions for Asking About a Person's Occupation

Expression	Directness	Formality	General Contextual Appropriateness	Pragmatic Character
What do you do?	Low–moderate	Neutral/casual	Very broad	Natural conversational inquiry
What do you do for a living?	Moderate	Neutral	Broad	Explicit occupational inquiry
What kind of work do you do?	Moderate	Neutral	Broad	Friendly and conversational
What is your job?	High	Neutral	Moderate–broad	Direct occupational inquiry
What is your profession?	High	Formal	Professional/academic	Formal occupational inquiry

The table shows that there is no single linear relationship between directness and politeness. Instead, the expressions occupy different pragmatic positions. *What do you do?* has the broadest conversational applicability, while *What is your profession?* is more strongly associated with formal contexts. The appropriate choice therefore depends on what the speaker is attempting to accomplish and the social relationship between the participants.

Overall, the analysis confirms that asking about someone's occupation is generally polite when the question is conventional, contextually appropriate, and sensitive to interpersonal relations. The potential for impoliteness arises less from the topic itself than from the way the question is formulated and the circumstances in which it is asked. This distinction is important for English communication because it demonstrates that successful pragmatic competence requires speakers to understand not only what an expression means but also when, why, and with whom it should be used.

4. Conclusion

4.1 Conclusion

This study examined the politeness of English expressions used to ask about a person's occupation or profession from a pragmatic perspective. The analysis demonstrates that asking about someone's job is not inherently impolite. Rather, the pragmatic appropriateness of an occupational question depends on the linguistic form, degree of directness, level of formality, social relationship between interlocutors, and communicative context.

The findings indicate that *What do you do?* is a particularly natural and flexible expression for everyday English communication. Although the question does not explicitly mention occupation, it is conventionally understood as an inquiry about a person's work when used in an appropriate conversational context. *What kind of work do you do?* similarly provides a natural and relatively neutral way of requesting occupational information. *What do you do for a living?* is also

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a conventional expression, although it makes the occupational or livelihood dimension more explicit.

Meanwhile, *What is your job?* is grammatically correct and readily understandable but is structurally more direct. *What is your profession?* is also direct but tends to carry a more formal register and may be particularly appropriate in academic, professional, administrative, or research-related contexts. These differences demonstrate that grammatical correctness, directness, politeness, and contextual appropriateness are separate but interconnected dimensions of pragmatic competence.

The study further concludes that directness should not automatically be interpreted as impoliteness. An explicit question can be entirely appropriate when the communicative situation requires precise occupational information, whereas a conversational expression may be more suitable for informal social interaction. In accordance with pragmatic theories of politeness, the interpretation of an occupational question is influenced by social distance, relative power, face considerations, and the potential sensitivity of the information being requested.

Therefore, the central conclusion of this study is that politeness in asking about occupation is context-dependent rather than an inherent characteristic of a particular grammatical expression. Effective English communication requires speakers to select occupational questions according to the purpose of the interaction, their relationship with the hearer, and the degree of formality required by the situation. Pragmatic competence consequently involves knowing not only how to form a grammatically correct question but also how to choose an expression that is socially and contextually appropriate.

4.2 Suggestion

Based on the findings, several suggestions can be proposed. First, English learners should be taught occupational questions as pragmatic expressions rather than merely grammatical structures. Classroom instruction should explain the differences among expressions such as *What do you do?*, *What do you do for a living?*, *What kind of work do you do?*, *What is your job?*, and *What is your profession?* Learners should understand that these expressions may communicate similar basic information while differing in directness, formality, and contextual suitability.

Second, English teachers should incorporate contextualized practice into speaking and pragmatics instruction. Role-play activities involving first meetings, informal conversations, academic discussions, job interviews, professional networking, and intercultural encounters can help learners recognize how social context affects the appropriateness of occupational questions. Such activities can develop learners' ability to select expressions according to interpersonal relationships rather than relying exclusively on literal translation from their first language.

Third, speakers should consider the sensitivity of occupational information. Although asking about occupation is commonly acceptable, employment status, income, career circumstances, and professional identity may be sensitive topics for some individuals. Speakers should therefore be attentive to the hearer's response and avoid unnecessarily persistent questioning when the person appears reluctant to provide further information.

Fourth, future studies should expand the present analysis through empirical data from native and non-native English speakers. Quantitative surveys, discourse-completion tasks, interviews, or corpus-based investigations could be used to examine how different groups actually perceive and use occupational questions. Comparative studies could also investigate whether perceptions of politeness differ across cultures, age groups, professional settings, and levels of English proficiency.

Finally, future research could investigate occupational questions from an intercultural pragmatic perspective by comparing English with Indonesian and other languages. Such research could identify potential differences in expectations concerning personal information, social distance, hierarchy, and acceptable conversational topics. This would provide a broader understanding of how learners can develop pragmatic competence and communicate appropriately across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

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