

Flouted Maxims and Their Politeness Implications Employed by Erin Gruwell in the Movie *Freedom Writers*

Agatha Sicilia Dwi Rosinta

English Department, Faculty of Humanities and Creative Industries, Petra Christian University,
Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya 60236, INDONESIA
Email: agatharosinta123@gmail.com; A11200064@john.petra.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This study aims to find out the flouted maxims in Erin Gruwell's utterances from the movie *Freedom Writers*. Additionally, the goal of this study is to find the types of politeness implied in Erin Gruwell's flouted maxims. To conduct this study, the writer used the theory of flouting maxims by Cutting and Fordyce (2020) and the politeness theory by Holmes (2013). Next, the writer employed the descriptive qualitative approach by Creswell and Creswell (2018) and Creswell (2009). The writer watched the movie thoroughly, took notes on the utterances and timeframe, and applied the two-digit numbering system to classify the data. As a result, the writer found that Erin Gruwell flouted all the types of flouting maxims in her utterances during teaching and learning activities. Next, the writer also found that Erin Gruwell employed positive politeness in all types of her flouted maxims, but she used negative politeness in only some types of her flouted maxims. The writer concluded that Erin Gruwell employs positive politeness in all types of her flouted maxims because she always wants to approach her students better, motivate them to study more, know her students more personally, and have a closer relationship with them. Meanwhile, Erin employed negative politeness in just three types to remind her students of their status differences, use her role as a teacher to command them, and tell them to work on themselves as students. From these findings, the writer concluded that flouted maxims can make messages sound more appropriate and acceptable. Lastly, people who flout the maxim do not always want to be uncooperative or cause trouble for their listeners. They may have good intentions behind their flouted maxims, such as maintaining harmony and avoiding social conflicts to be polite.

Keywords: flouted maxims, negative politeness, positive politeness, utterances

INTRODUCTION

People are involved in conversations daily on every occasion, regardless of the time, setting, or situation. To conduct a smooth conversation, Grice (1975), as cited in Grundy (2008), introduces the cooperative principle to guide speakers to be cooperative in conversations. Grice (1975), as cited in Griffiths (2006), divides the cooperative principle into four maxims: quantitative, qualitative, relation, and manner. Nowadays, people seem to disregard the cooperative principle on purpose, which Cutting and Fordyce (2020) call this phenomenon as a flouting maxim. Regardless, flouting the maxim is beneficial in conversations. Flouted maxims can make utterances sound more polite and acceptable. The way speakers utilize flouted maxims to become polite can be seen in daily activities, such as interviews, real-time conversations, and watching movies. Speaking of movies, one of the movies that displays how flouted maxims and politeness are connected is *Freedom Writers*, which tells about the struggle of Erin Gruwell in teaching her students in high school. For that reason, the writer decided to analyze the flouted maxims found in Erin Gruwell's utterances from the movie *Freedom Writers*, as well as the politeness implied in her flouted maxims. The writer chose this movie because it is such an inspiring movie about the struggle and sacrifice of a teacher to fix her students' behavior for a better future (IMDb, 2007). The writer also chose to analyze the character of Erin Gruwell because she is an influential character who communicates with all her students using different approaches, such as giving praise, accepting her students' ideas, and giving directions to engage

more with her students (Norliani, 2022). The writer also chose to analyze Erin Gruwell's flouted maxim because the writer noticed Erin's use of indirect speech, and there is a similarity between indirect speech and flouted maxims (Cutting & Fordyce, 2020). The writer also decided to interpret the flouted maxims to find out the politeness because flouted maxims and politeness can be related to each other: flouted maxims contribute to making utterances less direct to avoid conflict between speakers and to maintain harmony. Another reason was that teachers are expected to apply politeness to make the teaching and learning activities more effective (Yoga, 2018).

In this study, the writer used the theory of flouting maxims by Cutting and Fordyce (2020) and politeness by Holmes (2013). According to Cutting and Fordyce (2020), flouting maxims take place when speakers purposely do not follow the cooperative principle but still expect their listeners to get what they mean. Flouting maxims consist of four types: flouting the maxim of quantity, in which speakers provide either too much or too little information; flouting the maxim of quality, in which speakers say something that does not represent what they mean; flouting the maxim of relation, in which speakers are being irrelevant, and flouting the maxim of how speakers are being ambiguous. Meanwhile, Holmes (2013) categorizes politeness into two: positive politeness and negative politeness. Positive politeness focuses more on the speakers' solidarity, while negative politeness focuses more on the speakers' status differences. The writer also used two related studies that motivated the writer to conduct this research, the first was written by Wahyuni et. al (2019), and the second by Alvino (2023).

The writer of this study aims to analyze the flouted maxims made by Erin Gruwell, the main character of *Freedom Writers* movie, who works as a high-school teacher when talking to her students. Therefore, the writer comes up with three research questions. First, the writer wanted to find out what maxims are flouted by Erin Gruwell when she is talking to her students. Next, the writer aimed to find out what types of politeness are used by Erin Gruwell in her flouted maxims. Lastly, the writer wanted to know how the use of politeness is related to Erin Gruwell's flouted maxims.

METHODS

The writer employed a descriptive qualitative approach by Creswell (2009), and Creswell and Creswell (2018). The source of data for this study was all utterances from the movie *Freedom Writers*, but the data were only limited to Erin Gruwell's utterances towards her students in teaching and learning activities. In collecting the data, the writer watched the movie, took notes on Erin Gruwell's utterances towards her students, took screenshots of the utterances in the form of subtitles, and typed the utterances on a new file. After that, the writer employed two-digit numbering to classify the data. The first digit numbering indicated the sequence of the scene in which Erin Gruwell's utterances towards her students took place. The second digit indicated the sequence of Erin's utterances towards her students in that scene.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter contains the findings and discussion of the analysis that the writer has done. The writer uses the theory of flouting maxims by Cutting and Fordyce (2020), and the politeness theory by Holmes (2013) to analyze and interpret the data. The data is taken from Erin Gruwell's utterances when she is teaching her students inside and outside the classroom from the movie *Freedom Writers*.

Flouting Maxims of Quantity.

Rosinta: Flouted Maxims and Their Politeness Implications Employed by
Erin Gruwell in the Movie *Freedom Writers*

Cutting and Fordyce (2020) state that when speakers provide too much or too little information to the listeners, they flout the maxim of quantity. After gathering and analyzing the data, the writer found some scenes that showed how Erin Gruwell flouts the maxim of quantity when teaching her students. She flouts the maxim of quantity in providing both too much information and too little information for her students.

Below is one example of the flouted maxims of quantity:

Eva (latina student)	: I have to go to the bathroom.
Erin	: <u>Okay, make sure that you take a-</u>
Eva (latina student)	: Yeah, I know (<i>taking a Hall Pass</i>)

This scene is taken from the first day of Erin's job as a teacher. She introduces herself and starts calling her students' names to take attendance. From the example above, Erin shows her care to Eva by reminding her to take the Hall Pass before going to the bathroom. However, her reminder is not accepted nicely. Eva knows already that a student must have a Hall Pass to go to the bathroom. So, she interrupts Erin's advice. In this scene, Erin gives unnecessary information to Eva. Erin's utterance seems too much for Eva because Eva already knows what to do. What Erin is expected to do is just permit Eva to go to the bathroom without reminding her about the Hall Pass. She might not want Eva to get caught by the school guard for leaving the class without the Hall Pass. She might also fear the student forgetting about the school rules. So, Erin reminds Eva to take the Hall Pass before going to the bathroom because she cares.

Flouting Maxims of Quality

A speaker can flout the maxim of quality in various ways. The main thing of flouting the maxim of quality is when speakers say something the opposite of what they have in their minds (Cutting & Fordyce, 2020). Here is one example of how Erin Gruwell flouts the maxim of quality when teaching her students. Below is the first example:

Erin	: Tito? Would this be funny if it were a picture of you?
Tito (latino student)	: It ain't.
Erin	: Close the workbooks. Maybe we should talk about art. <u>Tito's got real talent, don't you think?</u>
Students	: Yeah, yeah. Go, Tito.

The scene above is when Erin teaches her students grammar until Tito makes a scene in the classroom. He makes a drawing of a racist image of Jamal as a black student and passes the drawing to other students in the class, making everyone laugh at Jamal. Erin gets angry and starts scolding Tito. As a result, Erin says such things about Tito's drawing. Even though Erin says that Tito has a talent for drawing, she does not mean it literally. She just makes fun of Tito's amateur drawing. The word "real talent" in her utterances means the opposite, which is "untalented" because the drawing is hideous and not appealing to look at. In this scene, Erin uses sarcasm towards Tito by saying that he's got the real talent while she means he is untalented. She also knows and notices other students share the same thoughts about Tito's drawing. So, she decided to play along by making the utterance above without having to hurt Tito's feelings.

Flouting Maxims of Relation

Cutting and Fordyce (2020) define flouting maxims of relation as when speakers say something irrelevant to the preceding topic being discussed on purpose. After analyzing the data, the writer found some utterances showing how Erin Gruwell is irrelevant when she is

teaching her students or when her students ask her questions. Here are two examples of how Erin flouts the maxim of relation.

Below is one example:

Erin : I'm a teacher. It doesn't matter what color I am.
 Eva (Latina student) : It's all about color. It's about people deciding what you deserve, about people wanting what they don't deserve. About whites thinking they run this world no matter what. You see, I hate white people.
 Erin : You hate me?
 Eva (Latina student) : Yeah.
 Erin : You don't know me.
 Eva (Latina student) : I know what you can do. I saw white cops shooting my friend in the back for reaching his pocket. His pocket! I saw white cops breaking into my house and taking my father for no reason except because they feel like it! Except because they can. And they can because they're white. So, I hate white people on sight!
 Erin : Ben, do you have anything to say?
 Ben : Can I please get out of here?

In the scene above, some arguments are happening between Erin and some of her students. Erin argues that her role as a teacher does not have anything to do with her color. Eva counters her argument by mentioning her personal experience of witnessing her father get arrested for nothing. Erin ends her argument with Eva by asking Ben to say something in response to how other students view white people. In this case, Erin is being irrelevant to Eva's argument. She changes the topic on purpose because she has nothing to say to fight Eva's argument back. She does not have anything to counter Eva's words because what Eva says is the truth and her own experience. Erin might also not want to worsen the situation. So, she just changes the topic and hopes the quarreling stops. Another reason why she asks Ben is that she wants Ben to give an opinion about their situation from another white person's perspective since everyone in the class has a bad impression of white people.

Flouting Maxims of Manner

When speakers make obscure, ambiguous, or unclear statements and expressions, it can be said that they flout the maxims of manners (Cutting & Fordyce, 2020). After analyzing the data, the writer found some utterances containing Erin Gruwell's obscure and ambiguous statements.

Below is the first example of how Erin flouts the maxim of Manner:

Erin : Next question, how many of you live in the projects?
 Erin : How many of you have been in juvenile hall or jail for any length of time? Detention doesn't count.
 Sindy (Asian student): Does a refugee camp count?
 Erin : You decide.

In this scene, Erin conducts a game called the Line Game. Erin asks her students some questions that she feels relate to them. Students have to come forward near the line in the middle of the classroom if the questions apply to them. When it comes to the question of being in a juvenile hall or jail, Sindy asks whether a refugee camp can be included or not. Instead of saying "yes" or "no", Erin tells Sindy to decide by herself. Erin's answer to Sindy's question may sound confusing and lead to misunderstanding. It can make Sindy or other students confused about how to make their own choices. Her answer also sounds ambiguous, it can make the students wonder whether Erin really wants them to decide on their own or just test them.

However, Erin might have a good intention behind her unclear utterance. She wants to encourage Sindy to try making her own decisions independently.

Positive Politeness

Positive politeness is very closely related to solidarity and intimate relationships (Holmes, 2013). People who apply positive politeness aim to have closer relationships with their listeners despite status differences. After analyzing the data and finding the maxims flouted by Erin Gruwell in her utterances, the writer interpreted them to find out how Erin Gruwell employs positive politeness in her utterances containing flouted maxims. The writer found some utterances with flouted maxims that contain positive politeness. Below is one example:

- Eva (latina student) : My father won't talk to me anymore. And I have to lay low for a little while because there's no word out jump me. So I'm gonna be living with my aunt. See, my aunt lives even further away. So I was just wondering if I could, like, stay here late with you. So I can get my homework done, 'cause it's late by the time I get home.
- Erin : You can stay as late as you want. And I can even drive you to your aunt's, if it gets too late.
- Eva (latina student) : Ms. G, let's not get nuts.

The scene above is when Eva tells Erin what she feels and experiences after she testifies against his own boyfriend in court, putting him in jail for shooting Sindy's friend to death. Eva asks Erin to accompany her to the classroom because it is already late to go home to her aunt's house which is far away. Erin accepts her request without hesitation and even offers to take her to her aunt's house. Eva thinks it is a crazy idea considering how angry her aunt can become. In this utterance, Erin provides too much information which seems unnecessary to Eva. So, Erin flouts the maxim of quantity in this utterance by giving too much information. However, Erin's offer sounds affectionate and attentive because it shows her care for Eva. Her utterance indicates that she wants Eva to know that she cares about her. Erin's utterance also implies that she wants to build a closer relationship beyond student and teacher with Eva. She might aim to make Eva believe that she is the person that Eva can rely on when she is in need. So, in this case, Erin employs positive politeness when offering Eva to take her home late at night.

Negative Politeness

People who apply negative politeness tend to pay more attention to the status difference when talking to others (Holmes, 2013). If a person with higher status talks with another one with lower status using negative politeness, their distant behavior will likely be visible because they involve their status difference in the conversation. After analyzing the data using the flouting maxims theory by Cutting and Fordyce (2020), the writer uses the theory of negative politeness by Holmes (2013) to see how Erin Gruwell employs negative politeness in her flouted maxims when teaching her students. Below is an example:

- Marcus : White girl gonna teach us about rap.
- Erin : No, it's not that. See, what I was trying to do...
- Eva : You have no idea what you're doing up there, do you? You ever been a teacher before?
- Jamal : And teacher gets nailed, y'all!
- Erin : All right, Jamal, enough. Jamal! That's enough! You know what? I want you to move to this seat right now.
- Jamal : What?

In this scene, Erin uses an example of a famous rap to teach her students. Marcus starts doubting her skills and thinking that it is ridiculous to have a white woman teaching about rap. Eva worsens the situation by asking about Erin's experience of being a teacher. Jamal takes it as a savage joke because Eva makes Erin stunned and speechless. Instead of answering Eva's question, Erin directly tells Jamal to switch his seat. Erin is irrelevant to Eva's question by commanding Jamal to move to the front seat. So, she flouts the maxim of relation in this utterance. She does this to stop Jamal's mockery and jokes about her. Erin might also not want other students to get influenced by Jamal's behavior if he continues making fun of her. Another reason why Erin ignores Eva's question and tells Jamal to switch seats is probably because she wants to discipline him and uses her status as the teacher. In this utterance, where Erin flouts the maxim of relation, she makes use of her role as the teacher, which is superior to her students, to make commands. The way she orders Jamal to switch seats is rather straightforward. It points out that Erin's status is higher than Jamal's. So, it can be implied that Erin employs negative politeness in this utterance.

Relationship Between Positive Politeness and Flouted Maxims

Erin Gruwell employs positive politeness when she flouts all four maxims when teaching her students. It can be implied that Erin Gruwell always aims to build a closer relationship with her students behind her flouted maxims. Next, Erin might always want to make her students feel cared for, supported, and motivated during her class. She might also aim to maintain harmony between her and her students and make her teaching method more understandable in the classroom.

First, when she flouts the maxim of quantity by either providing too much or too little information, she mostly intends to avoid hurting her students' feelings and to express her care towards them. Additionally, Erin's flouted maxim of quantity helps her express her care towards her students. Next, when Erin flouts the maxim of quality, especially using hyperbole, sarcasm, and banter, she intends to maintain a fun atmosphere even when she scolds her students.

Second, Erin might believe that using these strategies of the flouted maxim of quality can help strengthen her solidarity with her students, as well as deliver her message smoothly. For instance, when she sarcastically praises Tito's drawing skill, her students, including Tito, get the message and respond with the same energy and vibe. It is one way how Erin flouts the maxim of quality can maintain harmony in her class and deliver her message appropriately. So, in this case, Erin's flouting of the maxim of quality leads to the use of positive politeness by maintaining harmony and a fun atmosphere in the classroom and preventing awkwardness and tension.

Third, when Erin flouts the maxim of relation, she intends to stop the tension between her and Eva when arguing about how color matters. When Erin does not have anything to argue back, she changes the topic by asking Ben for an opinion. With her flouted maxim of relation, she might hope to stop the pointless and heated arguments in her class that can ruin the harmony between her and the students. So, in this case, Erin's flouted maxim of relation contributes to her attempt to maintain harmony in her class.

Last, when Erin flouts the maxim of manner using ambiguous and unclear utterances, her intention is quite similar to when she flouts the maxim of quantity. By providing unclear information, she decides not to list or mention certain things that may sound too harsh and offensive if being too direct and straightforward. For instance, back to the scene where Erin says 'some reasons' when Jamal asks about his placement in her class, she decides to make 'some reasons' stay unclear to avoid offending Jamal. That way, she succeeds in maintaining the harmony between her and Jamal with her flouted maxim of manners.

Relationship Between Negative Politeness and Flouted Maxims.

After looking at the table analysis, the writer found out that Erin Gruwell only employs negative politeness while she flouts the maxims of quality, relation, and manner. It can be implied that Erin Gruwell does not always intend to create social conflict when flouting the maxims during teaching and learning activities. She might get upset or carried away by her students' misbehavior and rebellion sometimes, so she uses negative politeness in certain cases to teach her students some lessons.

First, Erin Gruwell employing negative politeness in her flouted maxim of quality implies that she might be upset and want to challenge her students as if the students are "better" than her, creating social distance and ruining the harmony between her and her students. For instance, when Erin challenges Marcus, one of her students, to explain the Holocaust to her because he interrupts her teaching. Moreover, her challenge to Marcus implies that Marcus actually is not capable of doing what she tells him to do. From this, it can be concluded that flouting the maxim of quality can ruin harmony, especially when using sarcasm that purposely attacks the listeners.

Next, Erin Gruwell employs negative politeness when flouting the maxims of relation because she might want to imply that her position as the teacher is higher than her students, especially when reminding them about assignments, changing the topic by commanding them to do something, and reminding them that their relationship is mere teacher and students. For instance, when Marcus addresses Erin as 'Ma' as a form of respect, Erin counters him by reminding them that she is not their mother. By flouting the maxim of relation, Erin indirectly 'rejects' the nickname Marcus gives her, which can ruin their close relationship.

Lastly, Erin Gruwell's use of negative politeness in her flouted maxims of manner implies that when she gives ambiguous answers to her students, she uses her position as the teacher to indirectly tell her students to work by themselves. By flouting the maxim of manners, not only does Erin give unclear information, but she might also hope that her students are aware of their status as students and do the tasks that they are assigned instead of helping them. In short, Erin purposely gives them ambiguous answers to make them work on their assignments alone without Erin being willing to assist them.

Erin Gruwell does not employ negative politeness when flouting the maxim of quantity during her teaching session because she tends to express her care and worry towards her students in her flouted maxims of quantity. Additionally, even when Erin provides too little information in her flouted maxims of quantity, she intends not to disappoint her students or hurt their feelings in certain cases. So, Erin's use of the flouted maxim of quantity revolves around showing her care towards her students and not disappointing them, which contradicts the main idea of negative politeness, which emphasizes more on social differences and status instead of increasing solidarity.

CONCLUSION

Through the analysis, it is found that Erin Gruwell flouts all four types of cooperative principles in the movie. From these findings, the writer concludes that flouted maxims can be found even in educational settings between teachers and students, which means that daily conversations might always contain flouted maxims nowadays. Erin Gruwell uses positive politeness in all types of flouted maxims. It can be implied that she always wants to be closer and have more solidarity with her students, know their students better in a more personal way, and have a better approach to motivating them to learn more when flouting the maxims.

Meanwhile, she employs negative politeness when flouting only the maxim of quality, relation, and manner to challenge her students just to make them realize that they are not better than her, to remind her students of her position and be responsible for obeying her during class, and to use her position as the teacher to command her students indirectly. The writer learns that flouted maxims are not always unacceptable and harmful in a conversation since the message can still be delivered implicitly. With flouted maxims, people can also adjust their choice of words and tone when talking to people to avoid delivering their messages too straightforwardly. Moreover, they may have their intentions behind their flouted maxims that mean well, including maintaining harmony and avoiding social conflicts to be polite. The writer suggests conducting a study in a live setting and using more updated and the latest theories, such as critical discourse analysis and multimodal analysis, that are more applicable these days.

REFERENCES

- Alvino, R. (2023). *Flouting maxims by the main character in Money Monster film*. [Undergraduate thesis, Petra Christian University].
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods approaches* (3rd ed.). SAGE.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J., D. (2018). *Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE.
- Cutting, J., & Fordyce, K. (2020). *Pragmatics: A resource book for students* (4th ed.). Routledge
- Griffiths, P. (2006). *An introduction to English semantics and pragmatics*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Grundy, P. (2008). *Doing pragmatics* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Holmes, J. (2013). *An introduction to sociolinguistics* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- IMDb. (2007). *Freedom Writers plot*. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0463998/plotsummary/>
- Norliani. (2022). Teacher's strategies to handle disruptive students in Freedom Writers movie. *Journal of Language Teaching and Learning, Linguistics, and Literature*. 10(2). 1315 – 1323.
- Wahyuni, M., Arifin, M. B., & Lubis, I. S. (2019). An analysis of flouting of maxims done by main characters in La La Land movie. *Jurnal Ilmu Budaya*. 3(3), 384 – 392. <https://e-journals.unmul.ac.id/index.php/JBSSB/article/view/2212>
- Yoga, I. G. N. B. (2018). The implications of politeness strategies among teachers and students in the classroom.