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Politeness Strategies in Students' Written Discourse: Memorandum of Complaint

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ABSTRACT: *This study was conducted to compare the types of politeness strategies applied by cadet officers and civilian students in writing memorandum of complaint. Based on Brown and Levinson's theoretical framework, the results found that the cadet officers tended to use more "bald on record strategy" while the civilian students showed a higher frequency in the use of positive and negative politeness strategies. This paper highlights the importance of language instructors in sensitizing their students to the effective use of politeness strategies in their writing and speaking in order to avoid miscommunication.*

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1. Introduction

Memorandum or memo is a business document which the writing must be up-front and concise. Even though the nature of the memo to be written as such, it is vital for every careful writer to take linguistic politeness into consideration in their writing. Many textbooks of commercial correspondence seem to ignore politeness, or, at most only give advice on how to begin and end the letter in a polite way. Politeness is the expression of the speakers' intention to mitigate face threats carried by certain face threatening acts toward another (Mills, 2003). Politeness theory is first formulated in 1978 by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson that accounts for the redressing of the affronts to face posed by face-threatening acts to addressees. According to Brown and Levinson, politeness strategies are developed in order to save the hearers' "face." Face refers to the respect that an individual has for him or herself, and maintaining that "self-esteem" in public or in private situations. Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) are acts that infringe on the hearers' need to maintain his/her self-esteem, and be respected. Three factors need to be taken into consideration when calculating the weightiness of the FTA: power status, social distance and the imposition. Brown and Levinson (1987) introduce four strategies for politeness in relation to FTAs: bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record. The size of the threat varies and so does the redressive action of strategies, thus the speaker/writer can choose a right kind of strategy for a particular FTA (Brown & Levinson 1978:65). If the act is decidedly threatening, the speaker generally chooses highly redressive strategy.

Figure 1 illustrated the redressiveness of actions; each strategy on the scheme is numbered, the higher the number, the more polite the strategy. Clearly, strategy (5), which avoids the FTA altogether, represents no imposition at all. Silence may be adopted when the FTA is too dangerous to commit. 'Better not to speak than to be sorry' is the understanding behind it. Strategy (4) is the 'off-record' realisation of an FTA; it includes "metaphor and irony, rhetorical questions, understatement, tautologies, all kinds of hints [...] so that the meaning is to some degree negotiable" (Brown & Levinson 1987: 69). The most redressive strategy is not to do the FTA and the least redressive is to do the FTA baldly.

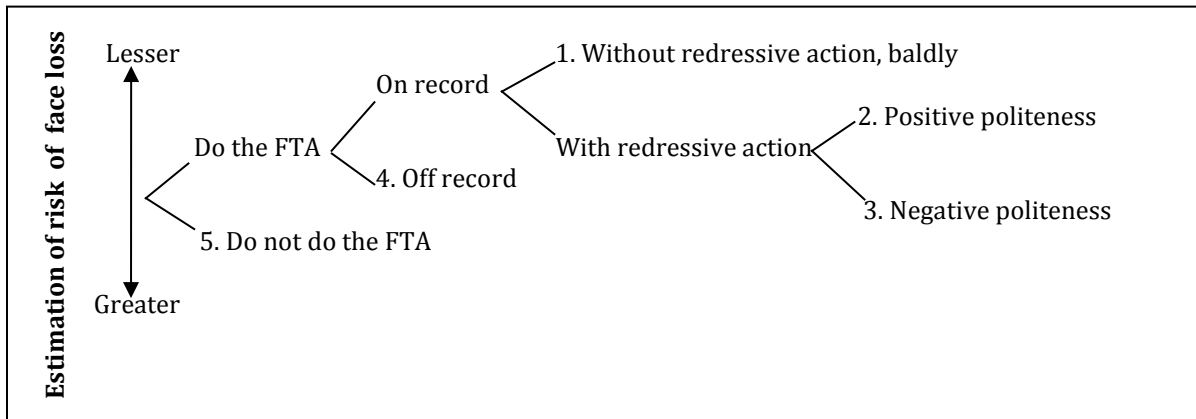


Figure 1. Circumstances Determining Choice of Strategy by Brown and Levinson (1978).

Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) influential work on politeness has generated much interest among researchers to study politeness in various areas. Many studies have been conducted the topic on linguistic politeness (e.g; Goffman, 1967; Lakof 1973; Leech, 1983) but these mainly concentrated on the spoken discourse. Although some studies have been made on the written language, and also politeness in business writing (e.g. Maier, 1992 & Pilegard, 1997), there has not been much research on politeness in professional writing.

Several researchers (Danet, 2001; Herring, 2002; Chen, 2006) have discussed stylistic differences in messages with different audiences. One important aspect of style is linguistic politeness, in other words the courtesy or deference of the writing. According to Ashley (1993:20), the stylistic devices which make writing more polite are complex sentences joined by conjunction rather than short sentences, passive rather than active, and full forms rather than abbreviation forms. However, this does not appear to be very helpful in shaping linguistically polite letters.

In addition, the form of address or the manner in which they refer to the same person is not always similar. The use of direct address formula is governed by a relationship between two participants who are the speaker and hearer. When choosing a term of reference, however, the speaker does not only have to take into account his/her relationship with the hearer, but also have to decide how to present the referent in a situational appropriate manner (Nevala, 2004).

Some sociolinguistics and pragmatics research have explored cultural differences in manifestations of politeness and such findings can provide suggestions for language teachers/learners in overcoming intercultural miscommunication due to different norms of politeness when diverse conventions of politeness contrast with perceptions of rudeness (e.g. Conlan 1996; Beebe and Waring 2005; Lanteigne 2007)." According to Kienpointner (1997), "one and the same type of speech act can be polite within one language and/or culture, but impolite or even rude in other languages and/or cultures." However, intra-cultural miscommunication could occur if people evaluate others' speech or writing according to their own standards.

Even though two groups of students (cadet officers and civilian students) in this study are both studying for a degree at the same educational institution, cadet officers have different routines of life and are bound to a subculture, namely, military culture. From researcher's observation in classroom teaching and learning, cadet officers were prone to have their own terms and style of speaking that is short and to the point compared to civilian students who are prone to be long-winded. Memorandum of complaint is chosen for this study because of the nature of the memo to be written in a very condensed manner and straightforward. As such, civilian students are restricted to write in the style which cadet officers communicate. Therefore, the focus of this paper is to investigate to extent to which politeness strategies

used are different between these two groups of students (cadet officers and civilian students) in the written discourse that require them to communicate or write in short and precise.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1 Sample

The sample of this study consists of informants from the National Defence University of Malaysia (NDUM). The informants are Malay ethnic, majority of them are from east of peninsular Malaysia and use English as a second language in their study. They will be majoring in the Science Computer and Management Studies, and they were researcher's students in a pre-requisite course - English for Academic Writing in semester 2, session 2011/2012. The informants consist of 15 civilians and 15 cadet officers of these two classes. They were requested to write a memo of complaint for poor cleanliness of their college cafeteria. The sample was based on convenience sampling as subjects were also the researcher's students who took the course during that semester.

2.2 Material

The material consists of 30 memos of complaint written in English. 15 memos were written by cadet officers and another 15 memos by civilian students. 30 memos (out of 47) were utilised for this study as they had at least half page long and written in the correct format as required. The length of the messages is ranging from 46 words or eight sentences to 120 words or 15 sentences. The memos were examined for politeness strategies (focusing on the clause or sentences of complaint making), followed by the comparison of analysis results of the two sets of memos.

2.3 Instrument

Brown and Levinson's (1978) framework on politeness strategies were adopted to enable the researcher to identify the types of politeness strategies present in the written memos as it offers a wide variety of empirical examples. Brown and Levinson's (1978) framework on politeness strategies could be considered as the most influential one in providing a paradigm for linguistic politeness which goes beyond a mere extension of Gricean maxims (Fraser1990: 228).

2.4 Data Analysis

The measurement process was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, the memos written were segregated manually on the basis of groups of students. The group, 'cadet' or 'civilian,' of the sender was written on top of the memos to facilitate coding on the basis of students' group. Subsequently, the memos were assigned numbers for easy identification. Under these two categories, the memos were further coded by identifying words or clauses of complaint that were mutually agreed by the researcher and the inter-raters as measures for politeness. The criterion for categorization of memos into different categories was based on adherence to different strategies of politeness. The memos were coded on the basis of the politeness strategies as Bald on Record, Negative Politeness, Positive Politeness, and Off-Record (indirect strategy). The data were presented in the form of tables and diagrams. Thus, it would enable the researcher to explain and interpret as well as compare them in various kinds of angles and scopes. The data then were compared to examine to the extent to which members of both group differed in their use of politeness strategies. The researcher conducted T-test to analyse the relationship between cadet officers and civilian students in the use of politeness strategies in written memo. Finally, the researcher gathered all the analysis and interpretations of the data and presented the outcomes and conclusions together with some comments and suggestions.

3. Results and Discussion

In general, it could be said that cadet officers and civilian students used the same types of politeness strategies in their written memos. However, their frequency of use for each type of politeness strategies differed. Based on the results of the study, bald-on record became apparent to be the most dominant type of politeness strategy used in written memos of the cadet officers and civilian students. The second dominant type of politeness strategies used was positive politeness strategy, and followed by negative

politeness strategy. However, neither cadet officers nor civilian students were found to use off record strategies in their written memos.. The details of the data can be seen in Table 1:

Table 1: Frequency of Politeness Strategies (overall) according to Brown and Levinson's (1978) Politeness Strategies.

Types of Politeness Strategies	Strategies (per 30 memos)		TOTAL
	Cadet officers	Civilian Students	
Bald on Record	9	7	16
Off Record	0	0	0
Positive Politeness	5	6	11
Negative Politeness	1	2	3

Apart from looking at the use of four main types of politeness strategies by cadet officers and civilian students, their frequency of use was compared between the two groups. The frequency of use for bald on record strategy was 16 occurrences per 30 memos which is equivalent to 53.3%. As for positive politeness strategy, the frequency of use was 11 occurrences per 30 memos (46.7%) while the frequency of use for negative politeness strategy was three occurrences per 30 memos (10%).

In terms of group difference in the use of each type of politeness strategies, it was found that bald on record strategy had a greater frequency of use by cadet officers while another two strategies (positive politeness strategy and negative politeness strategy) had a greater frequency of use by civilians. Of 16 occurrences per 30 memos used for bald on record strategy, nine of them (30%) were used by cadet officers and seven of them (23.3%) were used by civilian students. As for positive politeness strategy, of 11 occurrences per 30 memos were used, six of them (20%) were employed by civilian students and the remaining five of them (16.7%) were employed by cadet officers students. Apart from that, out of three occurrences per 30 memos used for negative politeness strategy, two of them (6.7%) were used by civilian students and another one left or 3.3% was used by cadet officers. However, the T-test did not show any significant differences between cadet officers and civilian students in the use of politeness strategies. The above analysis is shown in Figure 1, Figure 2 and Table 2 as below:

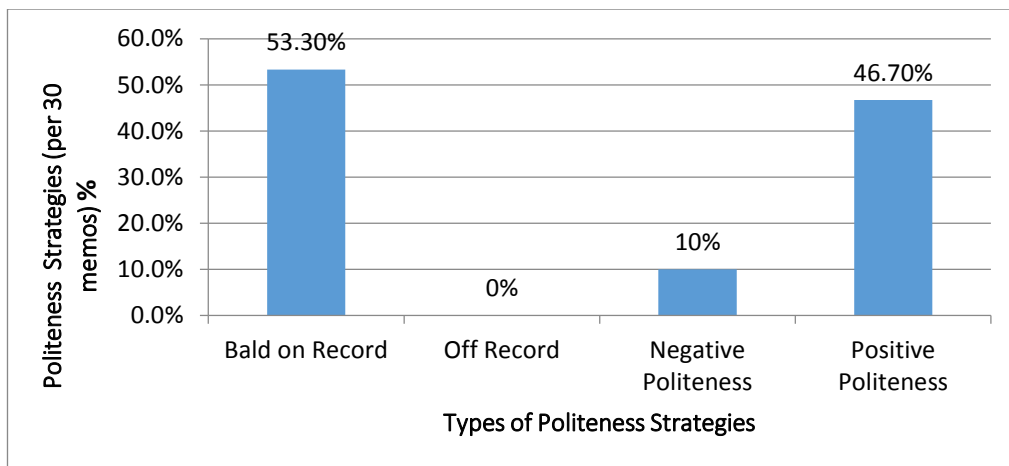


Figure 1: Percentage of politeness strategies used in memos

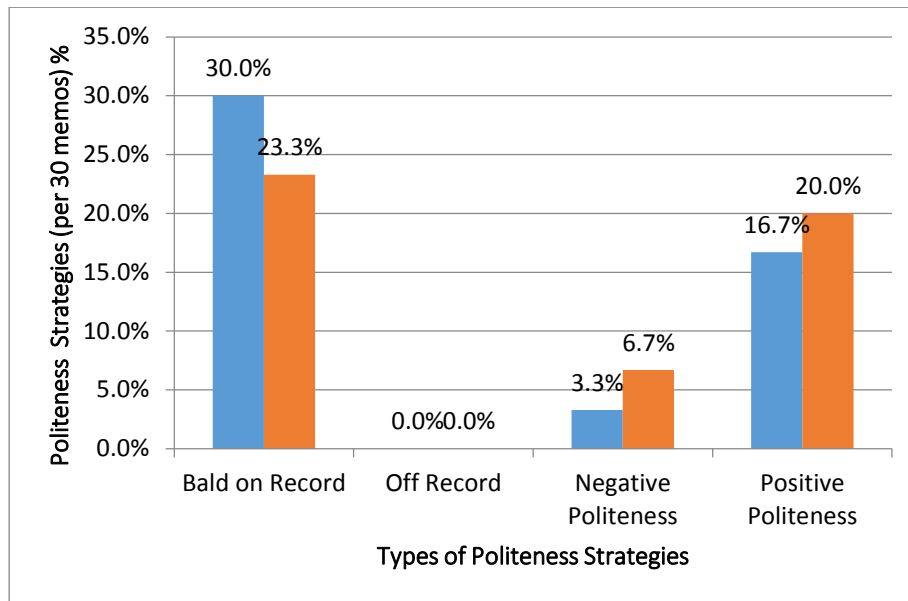


Figure 2: Percentage of politeness strategies used in comparing between cadet officers and civilian students

Table 2: Relationship between cadet officers and civilian students in the use of politeness strategies in memos.

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variance		t-test for Equality Means		
		F	Sig	Sig (2-tailed)	Mean Different	Std. Error Different
Memo	Equal variances assumed	.002	.964	.022	.933	.386
	Equal variances not assumed			.022	.933	.386

With regards to the dominant use of bald on record strategy by cadet officers and civilian students, it shows that both groups of students did not attempt to minimize the threat to the reader's face, although there are certain means that bald on record strategy can be used in trying to minimize FTAs implicitly. Cadet Officers tend to give command and warning when employing negative FTAs. Furthermore, they seemed to show excessively emotional expression and when employing positive FTAs. Apparently, this is happened due to the influence of military culture they are bound to; they usually reduce their speech to extreme brevity (which they call it as a 'short and sound' communication). As for civilian students, they also tend to give order when employing negative FTAs but they prefer to provide suggestion instead of making request. Similar to cadet officers, they seemed to show excessively emotional expression and disagreement to the addressee when employing positive FTAs but they do not challenge the addressee like the cadet officers do. Perhaps, the students are lack the exposure to politeness strategies in their writing. This may have been resulted the ignorant of polite strategies among students in their writing, and even in their speaking.

Conclusion

In conclusion, being impolite can cause much strain in relationships and result in disharmony and breakdown in relationships. Despite the potential negative consequence of being impolite or rude, it is unfortunate that politeness can be regarded as had been taken for granted by the NDUM students in this study. They seemed to be unaware of the importance of it as politeness strategy of bald on record is the most dominantly and frequently used in memos written by these two groups of students. Language instructors should have a greater sense of awareness on the importance of politeness strategies in their teaching, especially in writing class. Language instructors at tertiary institutions should be given some

exposure in the form of a workshop where the importance and the use of politeness strategies in communication and writing is highlighted. Moreover, some effective methods and techniques should be introduced to the instructors. It is hoped that this effort would increase the awareness and sensitivity among students to the appropriate use of politeness strategies in any occasion or situation.

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