

How Polite are Malaysian Undergraduates?

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Introduction

A growing number of universities and colleges in Japan have started providing information on good manners to their students, especially freshmen (*The Sunday Star*, 7 March 2010). Many university officials, the report adds, say they have had to train their students in good manners because many do not seem to have much awareness of what behaviour is considered socially acceptable. One of the reasons motivating such efforts is the tight employment situation in the country in recent years.

The scenario regarding the employment situation in Japan is more or less the same as in Malaysia. Many undergraduates' failure to find suitable jobs is not so much due to their lack of academic knowledge but it is very much due to their lack of soft skills. Many studies (e.g. Kong, 1998; Aniswal, Munir and Haslina, 2005) have reported that the ability to behave and communicate politely is one of the soft skills required by employers. Thus, it is imperative that higher education institutions equip their students with such skills to help them prepare for the job market. However, despite the multitude of studies on the employability and marketability of graduates, not many studies have been carried out on how Malaysian undergraduates perceive the importance of politeness and how they use this pragmatic feature when communicating.

The aim of this paper is to briefly report some findings from a study on the awareness and use of politeness among undergraduates in a local university in Malaysia. The study employs Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness features as its theoretical framework. They argue that there are two forms of politeness: positive politeness (attempts by a speaker to treat the listener as a friend or as someone to be included in discourse) and negative politeness (attempts by the speaker to save the listener's face by engaging in some formality or restraint). The objectives of the study are to determine the undergraduates' awareness and practices of politeness.

This paper, however, will focus only on the respondents' perceptions of the importance of politeness, their use of politeness when communicating with individuals and their perception of their level of politeness.

The sample comprises 123 undergraduates from both the Arts and Sciences ranging from first year to third year students. 21.9 per cent are males whereas 78.1 per cent are females. Questionnaires and focus group interviews were employed in order to obtain data.

Findings and Discussion

To determine the respondents' perception of the importance of politeness in communication, respondents were asked to choose a range of options from 'very important' to 'not important at all'. The study found that the majority of the respondents felt that politeness was important in communication, as indicated in Figure 1 below.

As can be seen, of the 123 respondents, 55.3 per cent ranked politeness as very important and 20.3 per cent ranked it as important. What is interesting, however, is that there were also respondents (13.8 per cent) who felt that politeness was either of little importance or not important at all. Although the number was relatively small, it is still a cause for concern.

As for the respondents use of politeness when communicating with different individuals, the results are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2 shows that the majority of the respondents claimed that they were always polite when communicating with their dean, lecturers, office clerks and strangers. However, when it comes to communicating with their friends, a majority (59.3 per cent) of respondents claimed that they sometimes practiced politeness. In fact, there were some (16.3 per cent) who stated that they rarely did so.

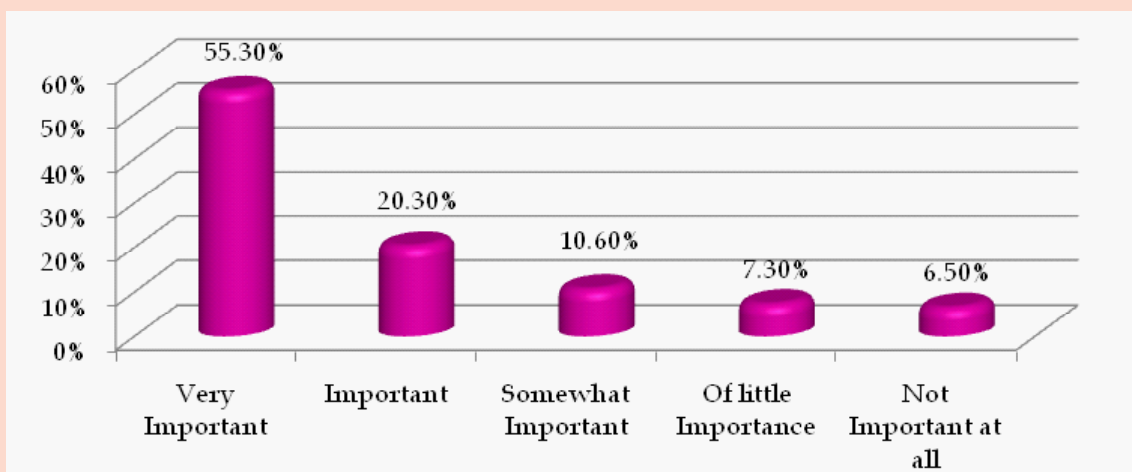


FIGURE 1: The importance of politeness in communication

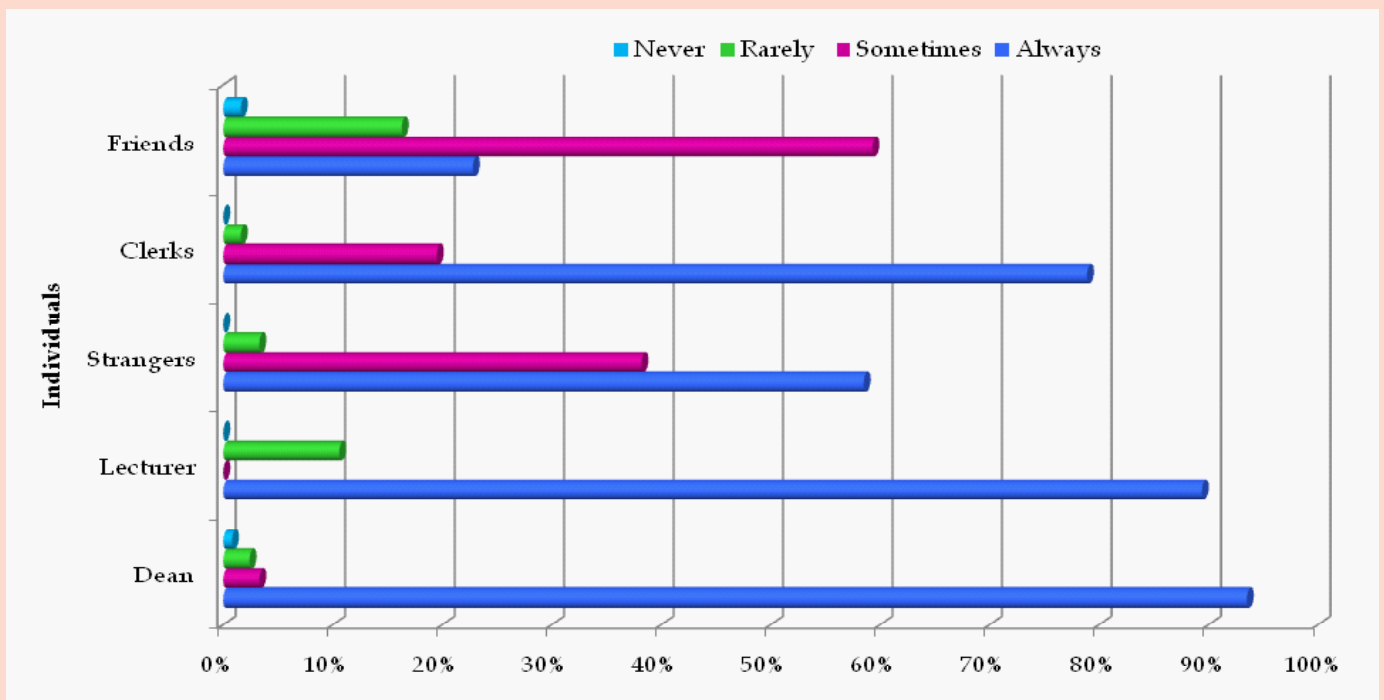


FIGURE 2: The use of politeness with various individuals

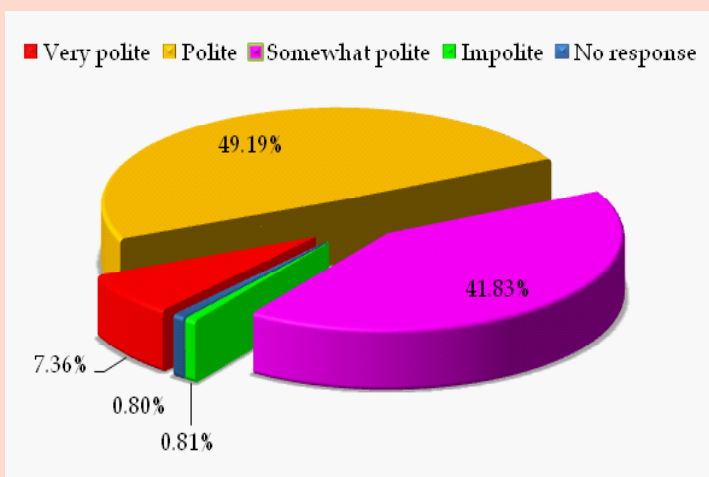


FIGURE 3: Politeness level among undergraduates

As for the level of politeness, the majority (48.8 per cent) believed that their politeness level was high. Some (7.3 per cent) even claimed that they had very high politeness level. However, quite a number of the respondents (41.5 per cent) claimed that their politeness level was only average. The results are shown in Figure 3 below.

On the whole, the findings indicate that generally Malaysian undergraduates in the study were aware of the importance of politeness and did practice politeness in communicative situations with various individuals. The focus group interviews involving five undergraduate respondents confirmed these quantitative findings. All the respondents agreed that politeness is important in communication. They also agreed that undergraduates were generally polite when they communicate with others but there were many who they claimed lacked politeness due to “attitude problems”. It

is interesting to note that they also agreed that there was no need to be polite when communicating among friends.

While no firm conclusion may be made from this study due to its limitation in sample size, there are nevertheless two interesting issues which have emerged from the findings. To begin with, even though the majority considered politeness as important, quite a number of the respondents considered it as either only somewhat important, of little importance or even not important at all. In total these respondents made up almost 25 per cent of the total sample. In addition, almost half of the sample considered themselves as only somewhat polite or even impolite. In other words, although many knew that politeness was important, many too did not consider themselves sufficiently polite and some did not even think that politeness was important in communication, especially among friends.

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These two issues may have serious implications so far as their preparedness for the workplace is concerned. As mentioned earlier, politeness is considered one of the most important requirements by employers. However, this study seems to indicate that many undergraduates may enter the workforce with a lack of appropriate level of politeness and with a relatively low awareness of its importance in communication. It may even be possible that the low level of importance to be polite among friends which they appear to practice at their university be carried over to the workplace later on. This is certainly a cause for concern as it may negatively impact the organisations which employ them. At the same time this low level of politeness may reflect poorly on the higher education institution that graduated them. According to Porath and Pearson (2009) who carried out a study on the cost of bad behaviour at work, rudeness in the workplace could be costing companies billions in lost productivity due to various factors including performance decline as well as lost of loyalty and commitment.

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Although such problems may not be encountered by majority of the undergraduates, it may still be important for universities to take appropriate proactive measures in order to ensure as many students as possible graduate with appropriate awareness and use of politeness as expected in today's increasingly globalised workplace environments. The measures may be direct or indirect. A direct approach involves including elements of politeness as part of the course content. A popular practice by universities is to incorporate the teaching of politeness forms and strategies in language proficiency courses (Wen Chia, 2003). However, politeness may also be instilled in or exposed indirectly to students. This can be done through non-academic activities such as by politeness campaigns, for example the recent local university's *Karnival Budi Bahasa*. Another avenue could be via internship programmes. In addition to technical knowledge, interns can have hands-on exposure about workplace communication skills including the use of politeness during their internship at their chosen organisation. According to Porath and Pearson (2009) “civility is best learned experientially”.

Conclusion

Whatever the approach may be, there is no denying that politeness is an important communicative competence that university students should possess and, as the present study seems to indicate, many university students may still need exposure and practice in appropriate use of politeness in appreciation of the rich diversity of the cultures in today's workplaces. Further larger scale studies, however, are needed to support the findings especially involving other categories of respondents.

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