

**“IS IT ME BEING TOO CONSERVATIVE OR THEM BEING TOO INSENSITIVE?”
A REFLECTIVE THOUGHT ON POLITENESS IN STUDENTS’ SHORT MESSAGE SERVICE (SMS)**

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ABSTRACT

Abstract: With the spirit of qualitative study, the researchers investigated the use of politeness strategies reflected in the students’ SMS to their lecturer. The messages were analyzed in the aspects of the politeness strategies employed by the students and the possible rationales underlying them. The results signify that the students failed to perform sufficient politeness strategies. Thus it is important for lecturers to explicitly integrate politeness issue in the classroom.

Keywords: *students’ SMS, politeness strategy*

I. PENDAHULUAN

I am a novice lecturer who just graduated from undergraduate degree. I have been teaching ESP for freshmen in the university for three semesters. Although college students can be considered as adult students who are aware of the acceptable conventions and values in the society and university, sometimes I must deal with students’ attitude and other character-building issues in the classroom. One of the most striking parameters of the students’ attitude is the way they send text messages to me. In the first meeting, I always give them my phone number in case they need to ask my permission for being absent and late or submitting the assignments. Then, it is interesting to see that there are various styles of text messages that I have received. Actually, the prominent aspect that caught my

attention was the politeness issue in the messages. I am not saying that I am a conservative teacher who needs absolute respect from their students. Nevertheless, I am often bothered with the fact that students’ messages are not appropriate in terms of politeness parameter in the academic context.

The above anecdote illustrates the importance of teaching pragmatics in the classroom. The success of learning process is determined not only by the linguistic competence the students get but also by the quality of the students and teacher interaction inside and outside the classroom. In this case, pragmatic knowledge influences the quality of teacher and student interaction as it involves the ability to behave and respond in different situations and contexts (Senowarsito, 2013). Brock and Nagasaka (2005) assert that the incompetence of Pragmatics may lead the

speaker and interlocutor to misunderstanding and miscommunication or even the perception that the speakers are ignorant or impolite. Brock and Nagasaka then illustrate the example of pragmatics ability in two statements, "Borrow your pen" and "Can I borrow your pen?". Both of these requests are actually understandable, but people may be more in favor with the second statement simply because it sounds more polite than the other.

Furthermore, the interaction between students and teachers does not happen only in the classroom. Nowadays, it is acceptable for teacher and students to communicate via emails and other devices like Short Messaging Service (SMS) ; especially for university students and their lecturers (Faiz and Suhaila, 2013). Lecturers and students prefer communicating via email and SMS as they offer great speed and low cost (Najeb et al, 2012 and Dansieh, 2013). Besides, it allows for communication at a cost that is less than that of a phone call, offering more privacy and allowing users to communicate without being disturbed or disturbing those around them (Crystal in Winzker et al 2009). Meanwhile, college students, who are still included as teenagers, are the great main consumer of phone message (Ling, 2004 in Barkhuus, no year). Thus, many lecturers choose SMS as their means of communication since most students utilize it in their daily life.

Short Messaging Service (SMS) is automobile message service in which the sender and receiver are restricted to send only 160 characters in each message (Wikipedia, 2014). Because it is restricted into 160 characters, the texters often disregard the standard features of texting for the sake of efficiency cost and energy during texting (Thurlow, 2003:5 in Geertsema et al, 2005). Thurlow then claims that SMS can be included into non-standard form of written texts as it has the following features such as g-clippings (excluding the end -g letter), for example: "Goin" (Going), shortenings (deletion of end letters, excluding the -g letter), for example: "Aft" (After), contractions (deletion of middle letters), for example: "Nxt" (Next), acronyms and initialisms (formed from initial letters of

various words), for example: "LOL" (Laugh out loud), number homophones, for example: "B4" (Before), letter homophones, for example: "U" (You), and non-conventional spellings, for example: "Nite" (Night).

In addition to the lack of linguistics features, many students failed to perform adequate Pragmatics competence in their communication via SMS. A study conducted by Faiz and Suhaila (2013) investigating a sample of 50 sms messages selected from either undergraduate or diploma students to their lecturers in Malaysia signifies that most students did not employ the appropriate politeness strategies in their messages to the lecturers. The absence of awareness of the difference in social distance, power, and face in students' messages could lessen face-threatening acts between students and lecturers.

Considering the condition above, this study also concerns with the politeness issue raised in students' messages to their lecturer; especially in their permission messages. The objective of this study is to reveal students' politeness strategies in their short message service messages and the possible considerations in utilizing it. The findings of this study can be a consideration of lecturers in addressing the politeness issue in the classroom, especially related to the importance of teaching politeness in the classroom.

REVISITING POLITENESS THEORY

Brown and Levinson (1978 in Maginnis, 2011) believe that everyone is basically always concerned with other person's autonomy needs and his/her desire to be liked by others during the interaction. The need and intention are then reflected in the strategies employed during communication. One of the strategies is politeness strategies which are actually aimed at saving other people's feelings and the speakers' image. Besides, the conventions for expressing politeness have been used to minimize conflict and maintain ritual stability (Kachru and Smith, 2008:54).

Politeness is defined by Yule (2002:40) as "the means employed to show awareness for another person's face." Meanwhile, Arndt

and Janney (1985) propose that politeness is how people use the right words or phrases in the right context. The context itself is set by the established agreement in the society. Wardaugh (1986) supports Arndt and Janney's claim in which politeness depends on the existence of standards or norms among people. Based on these definitions, it can be inferred that politeness is the use of appropriate words which aim at respecting other people's feelings in which the degree of appropriateness is defined by the agreement in the society.

We might question the definition of face addressed in Yule's statement. Someone's face is the image in the aspect of emotional and social which everyone expects others will see (Yule, 2002:42). Similar to Yule, Brown and Levinson (1978) and Goffman (1967 in Maginnis, 2011) also believe that every person has self image drawn from social attribute which is called as face. He further claims "face" as public self-image which every member expects to claim for himself. The 'face' is then categorized into two aspects, positive face and negative face. Positive face reflects the needs for social approval or the desire to be liked by others. Meanwhile, negative face refers to claims to territories and freedoms of action as well as freedom from imposition. In taking part in a face threatening act (FTA), one should support each other's face. Kachru and Smith (2008:43) argue that any actions which limit the addressees' freedom of action and freedom from imposition are considered to be face-threatening. FTAs that threaten the negative face of the hearer include advice, requests, offers and compliments in that advice and requests attempt to restrict the addressees' options of actions, while compliments may suggest that the speaker is envious of the addressee and is, therefore, eager to get what the addressee has. On the other hand, FTAs that threaten the positive face of the hearer include disagreements, disapproval and contradictions in that they may imply that the speaker thinks the addressees have been mistaken in certain aspects.

In implementing the politeness strategies, Brown and Levinson (1978) believe

that people consider three parameters of politeness. Those are social distance, relative power and ranks. The greater and the higher the distance, power, or rank of the people are, the more politeness strategy they are likely to implement during interaction.

Parameters of Politeness

According to Kachru and Smith (2008: 41-54), there are twelve parameters of politeness that can be studied of what being polite means in different cultures. They are values, face, status, rank, role, power, age, sex, social distance, intimacy, kinship, and group membership. All parameters are not equally separated each other and they interact each other with complex ways. Besides, it is inevitable to separate parameters of politeness because they interact each other. It is very easy to combine some of them into three dimension of analyzing linguistic politeness: social distance vs. intimacy, power vs. lack of it, and informal vs. formal. Not to mention, in showing the parameter of politeness tact or linguistic behavior is used. For example, a boss asks his secretary, "Get me the file over there" is considered polite. However, when he asks, "Get me a cup of coffee" is not considered polite because it is not the secretary's task. However, if they are close friends, probably a more casual verbal interaction is possible.

In classroom context, the parameters of politeness which may occur are the values, face, status, role, power, age, social distance, and kinship. In the classroom, the lecturers are seen as the person who has more power and commonly are older than the students. Considering this common context, the values perceive that the lecturers receive more politeness from their students. Sometimes, we find that the lecturers are much younger than the students. In this case, politeness is still utilized as the power of the lecturers is seen more important value. In other words, parameter of politeness is not a fixed formula in the society; it depends on the situation.

Politeness Strategy

The following are politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1978) which are used to save the addressees' face when face-threatening acts are desired or necessary.

- a. **Bald on-Record**
This strategy refers to the usage of direct statements which are employed in a succinct way without any attempts to minimize the imposition on the addressees. The speakers mostly only concentrate on conveying the message to the addressee clearly without considering about the face-threatening acts that might be happening. It usually employs a very minimum effort to save the addressee's face. This strategy is usually used only for those who have a close relationship between each other. It includes several contexts such as task oriented, request, emergency and alert.
- b. **Positive Politeness**
It reflects the approval of addressee and considers the wishes of addressee highly. The speaker also sounds friendlier to show more respect to the interlocutor by talking about what the interlocutor wants, and then trying to maintain a comfortable situation for both of them. Avoiding disagreement and assuming agreement between the interlocutors are typical in this type of politeness strategy. This strategy is also commonly employed in social community such as groups of friends.
- c. **Negative Politeness**
This type of politeness strategy is usually oriented from the addressees' negative face. It attempts not to impose on the addressee's freedom of choice. In other words, the addressee wants to feel free from any imposition and to be respected by the speakers. This usually happens in a situation where the interlocutors have a great social distance, such as a teacher with his students or a boss with his subordinates.
- d. **Off-record Strategy**
In employing the off-record strategy, the speakers usually use an implicit ways of conveying a message, by giving hints or being vague. The speakers are likely to let

the addressee decide how to response to the acts without feeling imposed by the speakers.

METHODS

In the spirit of qualitative study, this research is conducted by the analysis of seven short messages in requesting permission from the students. In this study, one of the researchers is the lecturer who gathered the sample of messages received in the first month of the third semester of the ESP session. The messages were gathered during March to April. Out of 18 messages, the researcher only took seven messages due to the similar pattern occurred in the text messages. Because the data were collected in the beginning of the semester, the topic of the short messages was dominated with students' permission request and negotiation of class schedule.

In analyzing the data, the researcher judged whether or not the messages utilized the politeness strategies based on politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1978). The process continued with the analysis of possible considerations or rationales why the students use certain styles. Since the politeness parameter is very subjective and relative from one person to another, the researchers avoided subjectivity in the process of judgment the degree of politeness in students messages by asking other students and lecturers to judge the sample messages based on politeness values that they have. Other students and lecturers were also asked their parameters in indicating the degree of politeness in the sample messages.

Message One; Tell Me Who You Are

Student

Assalamualaikumwarahmatullahiwabarakatu h. Maaf mengganggu Miss. Besok kita jd pindah kelas jam 9-10?

Lecturer

Sorry, besok tidak ada ruangan untuk jam 9-10. Kita bertemu hari kamis saja. Thanks.

Student

Iya miss. Maaf mengganggu.

Walaikumsalamwarahmatullahi-wabarakatuh. Selamat malam Mis.

When I received this message, I was wondering who the sender was. The sender did not mention his identity in his message, which gave me no clues about who the sender of the message could be. Despite the absence of identity, I replied the message since I was quite sure with my assumption that he must have been one of the students in my class held in the following day. In the next class meeting, I asked the class who might have sent me the message, and figured out that it was Andika who did so.

Andika is the vice-captain of the class, who had not interacted with me before. Instead of contacting him, I usually contacted the captain of the class. In this extract, a sense of distance and power between Andika and me is quite obvious. He seems to employ negative politeness strategy (Brown & Levinson, 1978). The way he initiated the message by providing an expression of greeting "*Assalamualaikumwarahmatullahi-wabarakatuh*" and apologizing for possible disturbance he might cause "*Maaf Mengganggu*" clearly indicates that he did not want me to feel imposed upon his real intention of texting. After receiving my response to his inquiry, he once again replied and asked for forgiveness if his message might have caused disturbance or imposition on me. Relating to the politeness strategy postulated by Brown & Levinson, it seems that Andika employs the negative politeness strategy when texting to his lecturer by minimizing the sense of imposition as much as he could. He further ended his text, as if it were not polite enough, by providing double formal partings "*Walaikumsalamwarahmatullahi-wabarakatuh*" and "*Selamat malam Mis.*".

Message Two; Please, You Left Me with No Choice

Good morning.

I am ... NIM D class Biology.. Sorry Miss I could not attend your class today

because I was sick. Please understandable. Thanks

Azmi is a student of English department class, who never got in touch with me prior to this message. In this message, she began her message by providing an expression of greeting "good morning" and continued by providing her identity and intention of texting in a concise and direct way. Upon reading this message, I felt that Azmi had successfully and clearly sent her intention of texting me; unfortunately, in my point of view, the way she composed the text message was not quite polite "*Sorry Miss I could not attend your class today because I was sick*".

Upon reading this message, I felt that she left me no choice of actions or decisions about her presence or absence in my class. As a matter of fact, I am the lecturer, the one who should have more power in deciding whether she was to be present or absent in my class. The way of her delivering this message has threatened my face, or public self-image as a lecturer (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 61). Furthermore, her message shows a little effort in face-maintaining linguistic behavior. In fact, the greater effort expended in face-maintaining linguistic behavior is, the greater the politeness will be (Brown & Levinson in Kachru, 2008). Even though she mentioned that she could not attend the class because of her health, it should not give her every reason to take a decision prior to her lecturer. Relating to Brown & Levinson's strategies of politeness, Azmi seems to employ bald on-record strategy by conveying her message as efficient as possible without paying attention about face-threatening act that is potentially happening.

I did not reply this message at that time since I could not manage to do it. I believe that the message would have been more appropriate if Azmi had made a little modification on her message, such as topicalization, by stating "I am sorry, I am afraid I could not attend ..." to make the impression of greater effort in her message.

Message Three; Sorry, You are Not Understandable.

Asalamualaikum.

Ijin bu ini Reni.. Komunikasi B ijin bertanya hari ini ibu hadir apa tidak

I had to read this message three times once I received this message. The absence of punctuation makes this message difficult to be understood. Reni actually intended to be polite by asking my permission to ask if I came to the classroom at that time.

However, I was a bit upset with this message because of two reasons. First, the message is not written grammatically correctly, so that it is hard for me to understand the message. Secondly, this message implies a low degree of seriousness of attending the class that I could catch from Reni. It was supposed to be the first meeting of the class, and it was raining heavily. Reni and I had never met in advance. However, Reni seemed to have the intention to be absent in her first class with me just due to the rain. She made sure my presence in the classroom by texting me before hand. Thus, she did not need to come to the class in case I was not around. Due to this disappointed feeling, I ignored her message. I also considered her as absent in my class due to invalid reasons of not coming to the classroom.

Message Five; It is the way too casual

- a. *Saya mau omong"an soal project kita bu. Takutnya kalau saman g bs ngajar bu.*
- b. *Miss Fima, saya pengen ngumpul in tugas. Miss fimanya lagi ngajar ya?*

Both messages above were written by two students of English department who, compared to the other students, interact quite often with me dealing with class activity or assignments. The way both students texted me does not indicate a great distance or power between the students and me. Both messages use a very informal language "saya mau omong"an (in message a), and saya

pengen ngumpul in (in message b)". The words "mau omong"an and pengen ngumpul in" are not actually Indonesian or English words, but Javanese words, which are not appropriately used in academic settings especially should it be delivered by a student to his lecturer. Moreover, the messages were casually created using abbreviations, such as "omong"an, which means *berbicara* (Indonesia) or discuss (English)", "g bs" which means *tidak bisa* (Indonesia) or cannot (English).

Moreover, both messages were not equipped with any expressions of greetings or personal identity which implies that there is sense of distance and power between the students (senders) and the receiver (the lecturer). Related to the politeness strategy proposed by Brown & Levinson, both students seem to apply negative politeness strategy by minimizing a sense of imposition on the lecturer "takutnya kalau saman g bs ngajar, and Miss fimanya lagi ngajar ya?" However, in attempting to use the negative politeness strategy, the students did not use an appropriately good language in terms of the structure and the diction of the sentences.

Message six; Threatening

NADIA ISMINANDA 20134567..

Sorry miss I permission cause I am gonna be late on our class at 1 a.m. cause I've part time job it done on 12.15

The student sending this message to me is an English department student who does not interact with me intensively. In other word, the relation between her and me is like any other students with their lecturer. In my point of view, the way she texted me was quite threatening. She did not begin or end the message by providing any expression of greeting or parting. Instead, she began the message by giving a direct and brief notification about name and school identity number in capital letters, which was quite shocking to me at first since capital letter writing usually indicates that the message is

urgent. In fact, it turned out to be an asking-for-permission message.

In addition, the sender of the message could have been more polite by using some precursors or alerts in indicating her name by saying "excuse me, I am Nadia Isminanda" rather than going directly to say "NADIA ISMINANDA,." Furthermore, she then continued her message by giving direct, informal and non-structurally correct English sentences. Firstly, the directness of the message can be seen from the way she only concerned about conveying the message to the receiver without paying attention to the face threatening act that might happen (Sorry,. I am gonna be late,. I've part time Job). Secondly, the informality of the message was indicated by the diction and abbreviation she uses, such as "Sorry miss,. I am *gonna* be,. I've part time job". Thirdly, the sentences of the message were not structurally correct "I permission,. I've part time job". Apart from the lack of politeness instruments, the message seems to threaten my face or public self-image since it seems to ignore the existence of the lecturer's power who has the authority to decide students' presence in the classroom. She seemed to force the lecturer to understand that she can come late due to her unfinished part time job. Relating to the politeness strategies proposed by Brown & Levinson (1987), the student seems to employ bald on-record strategy in that the student only try to convey the message to the addressee clearly without considering to prevent the face threatening act which is possibly happening to the addressee.

WHAT DO THESE MESSAGES IMPLY?

Crystal (2001:28 in Winzker et al, 2009) believes that sending SMS is similar to face to face speech interaction. Through this means of communication, the texters expect the immediate response. Besides, the texters manifest the use of creative style reflecting emotions or feeling through the use of spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. The challenging part of texting is the participants are required to use written messages to speak; the language which is intended to be, but it

must be written (Collot & Belmore, 1996:14 in Winzker et al, 2009). Thus, people usually text the words as they are spoken, overuse the punctuation to deliver the feelings to the receiver, and omit punctuation to text efficiently.

The way people text using spoken mode might then leads them to informal written language. This problem also happens among the students. Winkzer et al (2009:3) claims that students are difficult to shift from SMS language to standard language because of the prolonged use of SMS language. Consequently, the students are difficult to express their intention using the appropriate diction in context (Aziz, et al, 2013). The students believe that this practice is accepted as the informal use of SMS language is also exposed in the form of text messages, television, billboards, comics, books, newspapers and sometimes circulars from their institutions.

The insufficient competence of texting messages in the formal written language is also reflected in the above samples of students' messages. The first message might imply that the texters forgot to include their identity in the message to the lecturers due to the prolonged use of SMS language (Winkerz et al, 2009). On the other hand, The absence of identity might also imply that the texter, in fact, intentionally did not provide his identity because he assumed that the recipient has already known his identity, indicating a close relationship. This assumption might then lead the texter to simplify his message, without providing identity notifications, since he/she is sure that the message will be successfully understood by the recipient. It is in line with the fact happening in message one where the students forgot to include the name, or intentionally provided no identity notification. However, the lecturer still replied to the message because she knew that the sender must be from one of her students of the following day's class. Nevertheless, the absence of identity notifications will hinder the communication when the teacher has some classes on that day as she has no idea in what class the student is.

Not to mention, the samples of messages also signify how students cannot use mechanics and capitalization appropriately as well as the use of abbreviation which make them informal. First, in the aspect of punctuation, message three affirms how the absence of correct punctuation makes the lecturers upset. The texter in message three actually wants to make a question to the lecturer, but the statement does not end with a question mark. In addition, in the aspect of capitalization, the texter in message six employs capitalization to let the lecturer notice her name. These two examples confirm the characteristics of SMS proposed by Crystal (2001: 34) and Thurlow et al (2004: 125) as cited in Whinskerz et al (2009) in which there are repetitions of letters and punctuation marks as well as the use of capitalization to show the emphasis of emotion and feelings. The other point about typical SMS language appears when the students employ *spokenly* written words which make the language too informal. The informality is reflected when the texter in message six use the word *gonna* in her text. Besides, message five is the precise example of informal language use in SMS as the texter use spoken style instead of the written ones.

The informality and errors in the terms of punctuation, mechanics, and the appropriateness issue reflected in SMS implies to the degree of politeness that the receiver perceive. Ling (2003 in Elvis, 2009) argues that the limitation happened in SMS is perceived rude since it indicates that the texter is not willing to allocate more time and energy to text appropriately. The lecturer in this case is upset when she receives the message with some limitation in its linguistic features as it suggests that the students do not reread their message to make sure whether or not they have sent the correct message.

With regard to the effort or energy that the texter should expose in his/her message, Kachru and Smith (2008: 41-54) also regards this parameter as the indicator of whether or not the texter is being polite. Kachru and Smith believe that people who utilize the greater effort demonstrated in face maintaining linguistic behavior likely to be

more polite. In addition, the use of topicalization reflects the greater effort before stating the main points. The lecturer in this study regards the texters in message two and six as impolite as they are being too direct in their message. The absence of topicalization then imposes the lecturer's freedom which can threaten her negative face. Actually, more effort can be given in the message through the use of appropriate opening and closing like in the formal letter using *Dear ...*. The use of opening and closing increases the degree of formality of the message which can lead to the perception of being polite.

However, in the eye of the students, they may think that they use standard SMS language in order to show intimacy and social relationship. The texters especially young generations, employ unconventional use of language to show intimacy and their identity. As what has been mentioned by the lecturer, she is still young. Thus, some students might perceive that the lecturer more to be their facilitators or tutors instead of being typical 'college lecturer' who is commonly much older than them. In light of this condition, the young lecturer receives less degree of politeness from their students

In addition, many students utilize bald on record and negative strategy in showing the politeness which impacts on the lecturer's response. The lecturers are likely to ignore the messages if the messages were sent using bald on record strategy as she felt to be imposed by the students.

Should Teachers Teach How to Text?

Considering the importance of pragmatic competence which involves the ability to text politely to the lecturers, the students have to possess sufficient pragmatic competence. This competence functions as the bridge to enable the successful interaction between the students and lecturers which can prevent them from misunderstanding and feeling offended.

The next question raised on how we should teach the students how to text. Brock and Nagasaka (2005) proposed a way to teach pragmatic in the classroom. They claim that

pragmatic competence should not be a bonus for language classroom. Instead, the teachers are suggested to explicitly teach the competence. They name the strategies with SURE which stands for See, Use, Review, and Experience.

The first thing to do is to see which refers to the activity where the students see the importance of pragmatics competence in their daily communication, especially for the use of politeness strategies. In this stage, the students are encouraged to be aware of kinds of politeness strategies and how the consequences of each strategy. Then, 'Use' refers activities in which students can apply English in contexts (simulated and real) where they choose how they interact based on their understanding of the situation suggested by the activity. After that, the activity moves to the review, where the students receive reinforcement and review of the pragmatic knowledge that they have obtained. The last stage is to experience in which the students experience the real communication use and see how pragmatics works on that.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study reflects how students utilize their pragmatic competence within their real communication. It turns out that some students have lack competence in using politeness strategies especially when it comes to communicate in a written mode via SMS. The most possible rationale of this action is due to the effect of SMS features which may influence their perception in using formal language and the perception of student-lecturer interaction in the classroom. We believe that teaching how to text politely is needed to be explicitly carried out in language classrooms in order to enable the students to communicate appropriately. This study is only a sample of some students' short messages. Thus, we suggest that further bigger and deeper research on students and teachers' perception of politeness needs to be conducted.

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