

Politeness in Business Writing: The Effects of Ethnicity and Relating Factors on Email Communication

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Abstract

This study investigated politeness in workplace emails that were written in a Malaysian educational institute. It examined the use of politeness strategies in relation to the ethnicity of the communicators, power relations and social distance. Previous research on Malaysian workplace emails revealed that Malaysians usually use the direct imperative or declarative politeness strategies in emails. This study however, revealed that the Malaysian employees (i.e., Malay, Chinese Malaysians, Indian Malaysians) mainly used the indirect positive and negative politeness strategies. This is the case to establish rapport and connect with the recipient on the personal level. The study also revealed that social distance played a more significant role than power imbalance as Malaysians, in general, seemed more polite to distant colleagues than they were to close colleagues.

Keywords

Email Communication, Politeness Strategies, Ethnicity, Social Distance, Power Relations

1. Introduction

Globalization, on one hand, and communication technology development on the other, has revolutionized inter organizational and intra organizational communication in workplaces all over the world (Crystal, 2003). This huge development in communication technology in the last thirty years widened the scope of businesses as it widened the scope of ordinary individuals. It opened the door for international mergers and acquisitions. International corporations started looking for partners and opened new branches all over the world. Computers like television made the world a global village (McLuhan & Fiore, 1968).

Since the early days of email, researchers realized that this new medium of communication had new conven-

tions that did not fully belong to spoken or written varieties of language. Shapiro and Anderson (1985: p. 10), for example, pointed out that email was “a fundamentally new medium with significantly new characteristics that cannot be treated with the old rules alone”. Researchers realized that this new medium of communication had affected cultural value, workplace environment, and language use especially in communications among employees who belong to different cultures and ethnic backgrounds. Previous research on politeness in workplace emails either focused on the strategies used by native speakers or compared them with those used by non-natives, however, very little work has been done concerning politeness strategies used by different types of non-native speakers using the lingua franca English (Swangboonsatic, 2006). This study investigates politeness strategies used in emails that are exchanged in a private Malaysian educational institute where the employees belong to different ethnic backgrounds.

2. Literature Review

Exploring previous research on politeness in emails shows that requesting is a very popular function of email, in general, and workplace emails, in particular (Ziv, 1996; Gains, 1999). Nickerson (1999), who examined 200 emails from Dutch-British Company, found that the exchange of information is the most common action of the messages, while requesting is the most common function. In their study of email requests among American native speakers of English and Chinese learners of English, Chang and Hsu (1998) found that while Chinese put their requests at the end of the messages to give themselves and the recipient the chance to prepare and be prepared for it by giving information sequencing; Americans, however, choose to put their requests early at the beginning of the message. On the linguistic form of the request, Chinese presented their request directly, while the Americans presented it indirectly. Cheng and Hsu findings are comparable with Yli-Jokipii's (1994), Akar's (1998), and Paarlahti's (1998) findings. Kankaanranta (2001) and Alatalo (2002), on the other hand, studied email requests in Finnish and Swedish internal email messages written in English. Kankaanranta found that the majority of requests were presented using imperative and interrogative speech act forms, while Alatalo found that the requests in the email messages were mainly indirect especially in the emails that carried out routine tasks.

Researchers also highlighted that politeness strategies used by non-native speakers are different from those used by natives (Akar, 1998; AlAfnan, 2012; Paarlahti, 1998; Kong, 1998). Grindsted (1997) reported that while Danish culture favors affiliation, or what is called positive face, Spanish business culture emphasizes autonomy or negative face in negotiation and business communication. In the Asian context, Maier (1992), who studied business communication between Australian and Japanese, found that the Australians ask questions indirectly where the Japanese used informal and more direct language. In line with the above studies, other researchers also found strategies used by Chinese, Koreans, and Vietnamese differ from those used by native speakers of English (Mulholland, 1999; Sheer, 2000). However, “the Asian mind should not be regarded as homogeneous” (Minah Harun, 2007: p. 29), thus searching politeness strategies in Malaysian business email communication is needed to clarify how Malaysian employees view themselves and other in workplace emails.

This study contributes to the on-going discourse concerning the language used in workplace emails focusing on politeness strategies used in a Malaysian private educational institute that employs Malays, Chinese Malaysians, Indian Malaysians and a Jordanian employee and have partnership with a number of English and British institutes. Particularly, this study strives to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are the politeness strategies used by the ethnically diverse respondents in the institute?
- 2) How do power relations and social distance affect the construction of email messages in the workplace?

3. Methods

This study examines the use of politeness strategies in workplace emails. The researcher collected 522 email messages that were sent and received by seven main informants in 45 day-in-day-out email communications. The informants belong to different genders, age groups and work in different organizational positions that ranged from the assistant academic director to administrative staff. They wrote and received emails from 123 students, fellow employees and external partners. The main informants were three Malays, two Indian Malaysians, one Chinese Malaysian and a Jordanian. The main informants wrote and received emails from Malays, Indians, Chinese, Jordanians, British and Africans. To find out more about social distance and power relations between the senders and the recipients of the emails, the researcher sent a questionnaire to the main informants.

The main informants were asked to state the social distance as close colleague or distant colleague and power relations to superior, equal and subordinate next to the name of every single participant. For ethical purposes, the researchers asked the informants and the participants to sign a consent form to use the emails.

To investigate the politeness strategies, the research made use of [Brown and Levinson's \(1987\)](#) politeness theory. [Brown and Levinson \(1987\)](#) stated that people are driven by the desire to be approved by others (which they called positive face), but at the same time, be independent (which they called negative face). They suggested five politeness strategies that can be used by communicators in response to Face Threatening Acts (FTA), namely, the on-record politeness strategy, which is the most direct strategy, positive politeness strategies, which appeals to hearer's desire to make the issue more acceptable and convincing, negative politeness strategy, in which the speaker minimizes any imposition on the hearer, and take in considerations hearers' willingness not to be imposed or pushed, off-record strategy, in which the speaker presents his statement or question in an ambiguous or indirect way and the say nothing strategy, in which the speaker chooses to ignore or not to make any requests.

The used strategy depends on the weightiness or the social situation of the face threatening acts. [Brown and Levinson \(1987: p. 77\)](#) argued that speakers usually take in consideration three factors to assess weightiness that are the degree of imposition, the power of the hearer over the speaker and the social distance between the communicators. Even though politeness theory was presented to study face-to-face interactions, it was successfully used in investigating asynchronous communication (see [Akar, 1998](#); [Grindsted, 1997](#); [Maier, 1992](#); [Sheer, 2000](#)).

4. Results and Findings

Using Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, 1168 politeness moves were identified in the content of the 522 email messages in an overall average of 2.23 moves per email message. The moves were written by Indian Malaysians (352 instances), Malays (284 instances), Chinese Malaysians (258 instances), British (200 instances), Jordanian (47 instances) and Africans (27 instances). Examining these moves shows that they mainly belonged to three politeness strategies that are the bald on-record, positive politeness and negative politeness strategies. The off-record politeness strategy was not used in the emails.

4.1. Direct Politeness Strategy

The main motive for using the bald on-record strategy is "whenever S wants to do the FTA with maximum efficiency more than he wants to satisfy H's face, even to any degree" ([Brown & Levinson, 1987: p. 95](#)). However, this does not always mean that the writer pays no attention to the receiver's face. In task oriented communication, the focus might be shifted to the task and "face redness may be felt to be irrelevant". Examining the usage of the bald on-record politeness strategy in the emails shows that this latter point was the main purpose of using the 192 (16 percent) imperative and interrogative bold on-record instances in the emails.

4.1.1. Imperative Direct On-Record Politeness Strategy

The bold on-record imperative form occurred 171 times in the corpus in an overall frequency of 15 percent of the politeness strategies. Imperative sentences appeared in two different forms that are the direct imperative as in "*find attached*", or using "*please*", "*kindly*" or "*please kindly*" in front of the verb as in "*please find*". Noticeably, the participants from all the ethnic backgrounds used the imperative form to construct requests. The Chinese Malaysians have the highest frequency of using this strategy as it occurred in 22 percent of their politeness strategies. The Indian Malaysians, British, and Malay respondents have the second, third and fourth highest frequency of using the imperative on-record politeness strategy as it occurred in 15, 13, and 12 percent of their correspondence, respectively. The Africans students used this strategy in 7 percent of their moves, while the Jordanian lecturer used it in 2 percent.

Noticeably, the overwhelming majority of the imperative forms were preceded by a mitigation device. The writers used "*please*", "*please kindly*" and "*kindly*" to reduce the imposition of the imperative forms. According to [Trecce \(1994\)](#), the usage of "*kindly*" is conventional in business communication as it is formal and polite, whereas the usage of "*please*" is less formal and mainly occurs in oral correspondence ([Angell & Heslop, 1999](#); [Stubbs, 1983](#)). In the emails, however, it was found that the conventional practice is the usage of "*please*" as it occurred in 53 percent of the imperative forms that are written by Chinese Malaysians, 85 percent of the in-

stances of using imperative by Malays, 92 percent of the Indian Malaysians, 92 percent of the British, and 100 percent of the Jordanian and African respondents used this mitigation device. The usage of the double mitigation device “*please kindly*”, which appeared in 18 instances (32 percent), was used by a single respondent which, as a result, reflects a personal rather than an organizational practice. The main purpose of using the double mitigation device, according to the only user, is to be “*more*” polite and motivate the recipient to respond to the request. Linguistically, however, the use of the double mitigation devices can be interpreted as an enforcement and imposition to emotionally thrust the recipient to attend to the presented request.

In addition to the usage of the mitigation device in front of the imperative, it was found that there were six instances of using the direct imperative politeness strategy without a mitigation device. The six occurrences took place in 4 emails that were written by Indian Malaysians and one each by a Chinese Malaysian and a British respondent. The emails that were written by the Indian and Chinese Malaysian respondents were directed to subordinates, whereas the email written by the British respondent was directed to a student, which shows that the tendency of using the bold on-record politeness strategy without a mitigation device in the emails was a practice that was used by superiors. However, as the actual use of bald on-record politeness strategy without mitigation does not exceed 2 percent in the corpus, it does not reflect the conventional practice in the institute.

Examining the influence of power relations on the use of the imperative politeness strategy shows that the 171 imperative on-record moves were used by equals (65 instances) subordinates (64 instances) and superiors (42 instances) (see **Table 1** below). Malay and British subordinates used this technique more than the superiors, whereas Indian Malaysian superiors used it more than subordinates. The overwhelming majority use of this

Table 1. The effect of hierarchy on the usage of Imperative strategy.

Ethnicity	IMP	IMP with please	IMP with kindly	IMP with please kindly	Total
Malay	(0)	(28)	(5)	(0)	33
Equal	0	7	0	0	7
Superior	0	5	3	0	8
Subordinate	0	16	2	0	18
Chinese Malaysian	(1)	(30)	(8)	(18)	57
Equal	0	25	8	14	47
Superior	1	0	0	0	1
Subordinate	0	5	0	4	9
Indian Malaysian	(4)	(49)	(0)	(0)	53
Equal	0	3	0	0	3
Superior	4	31	0	0	35
Subordinate	0	15	0	0	15
British	(1)	(23)	(1)	(0)	25
Equal	0	6	0	0	6
Superior	1	1	0	0	2
Subordinate	0	16	1	0	17
Jordanian	(0)	(1)	(0)	(0)	1
Equal	0	0	0	0	0
superior	0	0	0	0	0
Subordinate	0	1	0	0	1
Africans	(0)	(2)	(0)	(0)	2
Equal	0	0	0	0	0
Superior	0	0	0	0	0
Subordinate	0	2	0	0	2

Note: IMP: imperative.

technique among Chinese Malaysian respondents, however, was among equals. The single case of using the imperative on-record strategy by the Jordanian lecturer and the two used by the African students were written by subordinates as well. This shows that subordinates and equals used this strategy more than superiors, which supports Bishop and Levine's (1999) assumption that the usage of emails reduces status imbalance.

Examining the effect of social distance on the use of the imperative politeness strategy shows that 106 out of the 171 imperative on-record politeness moves (62 percent) were sent to close colleagues, while the remaining 38 percent were sent to distant colleagues. As Table 2 shows, the Malay, Chinese Malaysian, Jordanian, and African respondents mainly used the imperative form when communicating to close colleagues, while Indian Malaysians used this strategy when communicating to close and distant colleagues alike. Given that all the British respondents are based in the UK, all Malaysian informants categorized them as distant colleagues, except a single British contact who had been based in Malaysia for a short time in the past. This shows that social distance played a more significant role than hierarchy in using the direct on-record politeness strategy. It was found that Malaysian respondents in general, and Malay and Chinese Malaysian in particular, used this technique when communicating to close colleagues more than using it when communicating to distant colleagues.

As such, this demonstrates that the use of the imperative on-record politeness strategy was not very common in the emails as it was used in an overall frequency of 15 percent of politeness moves in the corpus. It was clear that social distance plays the most significant role in using this strategy. Noticeably, the usage of this move did not create flaming or unease among the respondents, as 98 percent of the imperative forms were preceded by a mitigation device that indicated politeness and weakened the effect of the direct on-record strategy.

4.1.2. Interrogative Direct On-Record Politeness Strategy

The usage of the interrogative direct on-record politeness strategy is the least frequent politeness strategy in the corpus. It occurred 21 times, giving an overall frequency of eleven percent of the bald on-record politeness strategies and 1.6 percent of the overall politeness strategies in the emails. The communicators used three different forms of interrogative sentences to present their requests: they are the "yes/no questions", "Wh-questions", and "any news on". Generally, interrogative on-record politeness strategy is rated less direct than the imperative on-record; however, the actual use of these two on-record politeness strategies in the emails shows that the usage

Table 2. The effect of social distance on the usage of the imperative politeness strategy.

Ethnicity	Imperative	Imperative with please	Imperative with kindly	Imperative with please kindly	Total
Malay	(0)	(28)	(5)	(0)	33
CC	0	17	4	0	21
DC	0	11	1	0	12
Chinese Malaysian	(1)	(30)	(8)	(18)	57
CC	1	28	8	15	52
DC	0	2	0	3	5
Indian Malaysian	(4)	(49)	(0)	(0)	53
CC	4	26	0	0	30
DC	0	23	0	0	23
British	(1)	(23)	(1)	(0)	25
CC	1	1	0	0	1
DC	1	22	1	0	24
Jordanian	(0)	(1)	(0)	(0)	1
CC	0	1	0	0	1
DC	0	0	0	0	0
Africans	(0)	(2)	(0)	(0)	2
CC	0	2	0	0	2
DC	0	0	0	0	0

Note: CC: close colleagues; DC: distance colleagues.

of the imperative is less direct than the usage of the interrogative. The conventional practice of using the imperative form in the emails, as explained in previous section, was affiliated with a mitigation device (98 percent), which downplayed the effect of the imperative and helped the employees to view it as a polite request. The usage of the interrogative form, however, was mainly presented directly stating the request without using mitigation devices. The overall frequency of using this strategy shows that it was not a very common practice among the communicators and it cannot be considered as a conventional practice of requesting in the workplace. The 21 occurrences of the interrogative on-record politeness strategy were used mainly by Indian Malaysian respondents (11 instances). The remaining 10 instances were used by Malay (4 instances), Chinese Malaysians (2 instances), African (2 instances), and British respondents (1 instance). Unlike the usage of the imperative on-record politeness strategy that was taken in good faith by the recipients, some of the interrogative questions may have been received with some unease (see example 1).

Ex 1: (2.4) Where is the supposed to be already bank-in cheque?

The email in example 1 was sent by a part-time lecturer to the head of professional studies asking about the salary that supposed to be banked in earlier. Even though asking about the salary is a normal question in a workplace context, the wording used in this email is very direct and imposing showing that the writer does not care about recipient's face. Even though the usage of interrogative is already considered a direct politeness strategy, the lecturer added to the directness a high amount of imposition by not only asking, but also questioning the credibility of the superior by using "*the supposed to be*". In response to the email, the superior wrote explaining the procedures taken by banks before clearing up the cheques, and accused the lecturer of not knowing about the process.

Examining the effect of hierarchy shows that the 21 instances occurred in 13 emails that are written by subordinates, four written by equals and four written by superiors, which supports the finding in previous section that subordinates use direct politeness strategy more than superiors do (see [Table 3](#)).

According to [Brown and Levinson \(1987\)](#), the usage of this strategy may occur in task-oriented communication where face threatening is not relevant. Even though the emails are task-oriented communication, however, the intensive use of the direct form by the subordinates could be interpreted as that the subordinates "does not care about maintaining face" (p. 97). This point, in fact, was realized by [Bishop and Levine \(1999\)](#), who stated that email helps to reduce status imbalance in workplaces. Examining the use of the interrogative on-record politeness strategy among the employees representing the different ethnic backgrounds shows that Indian Malaysian subordinates were the most active in requesting using the interrogative form, as they used this strategy eight times, whereas the four occurrences that were used by Malay respondents were equally distributed between superiors and subordinates. Equals wrote the two occurrences used by the Chinese Malaysian respondents. This shows that subordinates and equals preferred the direct on-record interrogative politeness strategy more than superiors.

Examining the effect of social distance shows that 19 out of 21 occurrence of the interrogative on-record politeness strategy took place in emails that were exchanged between close colleagues (see [Table 4](#)). The only two occurrences that were exchanged between distant colleagues were written by Malay and Indian Malaysian respondents. This confirms the finding that Malaysian respondents, in general, are more polite to distant colleagues than to close colleagues. Obviously, the closeness in the relationship gives the chance to subordinates, particularly, to feel freer and use direct politeness strategies when communicating to their superiors.

Examining the use of the interrogative on-record politeness strategy shows that writers used "*yes/no question*" (8 instances), "*Wh-questions*" (11 instances), and "*any news on*" (2 instances) (see example 2, 3 and 4).

Ex 2: (3.3) Do you have a USN for him?

Ex 3: (2.7) When and where the reports were sent?

Ex 4: (3.15) Any news from XX regarding the moderation fee?

According to [Schiffrin \(1987\)](#), yes/no questions give two options, while Wh-questions states the type of information needed, which gives a wider possibility. In practice, however, it appears that the "*yes/no question*" in example 2 is an extended question. That is, if the answer was affirmative, the writer of the email expected the recipient to give the "*USN*" to her. The same is applicable on example 4. Even though "*no*" is a possible answer for the question, in the case there was "*any news*", the writer of the question is expecting the "*news*", not simply the answer "yes". In example 3, however, the question is about the date and the place where the reports were sent.

As such, it is clear that the usage of the on-record interrogative politeness strategy was particularly common

Table 3. The effect of power on the usage of the interrogative politeness strategy.

Ethnicity	Yes/no questions	(Wh)-questions	Any news on...?	Total
Malay	(2)	(2)	(0)	4
Equal	0	0	0	0
Superior	2	0	0	2
Subordinate	0	2	0	2
Chinese Malaysian	(0)	(2)	(0)	2
Equal	0	2	0	0
Superior	0	0	0	2
Subordinate	0	0	0	0
Indian Malaysian	(5)	(5)	(2)	12
Equal	2	0	0	2
Superior	1	0	1	2
Subordinate	2	5	1	8
British	(1)	(0)	(0)	1
Equal	0	0	0	0
Superior	0	0	0	0
Subordinate	1	0	0	1
Jordanian	(0)	(0)	(0)	0
Equal	0	0	0	0
Superior	0	0	0	0
Subordinate	0	0	0	0
Africans	(0)	(2)	(0)	2
Equal	0	0	0	0
Superior	0	0	0	0
Subordinate	0	2	0	2

in the emails that were written by subordinates when communicating to close superiors. This finding contradicts [Brown and Levinson's \(1987\)](#) assumption that this strategy is used when the speaker has high power over the recipient and the relation is close, and supports [Nickerson's \(2000\)](#) findings that a decrease in distance and an increase in the shared context lead to using this strategy in organizations.

4.2. Indirect Politeness Strategies

4.2.1. Positive Politeness Strategies

According to [Brown and Levinson \(1987\)](#), there are fifteen positive politeness strategies that act as “social accelerates” (p. 103) to come closer to the recipient. Examining the instances of positive politeness strategies in the emails shows that the respondents used eleven of which (see [Table 5](#) below).

As [Table 5](#) shows, the overwhelming majority of positive politeness strategies were used by the Malaysian respondents who used around 82 percent of the occurrences. Investigating the frequency of using this strategy according to the ethnic background shows that Indian Malaysians used 154 instances which equal 44 percent of their politeness strategies. The frequency of using positive politeness strategies by the Jordanian and Malay respondents equals 43 percent of their politeness strategies. Chinese Malaysian respondents, however, used positive politeness strategies in 41 percent of their politeness strategies, whereas the British respondents used them in 31 percent. The lowest frequency of using positive politeness strategies was by African students who used it in 11

Table 4. The effect of social distance on the usage of interrogative politeness strategy.

Ethnicity	Yes/no questions	(Wh)-questions	Any news on...?	Total
Malay	(2)	(2)	(0)	4
CC	1	2	0	3
DC	1	0	0	1
Chinese Malaysian	(0)	(2)	(0)	2
CC	0	2	0	2
DC	0	0	0	0
Indian Malaysian	(5)	(5)	(2)	12
CC	4	5	2	11
DC	1	0	0	1
British	(1)	(0)	(0)	1
CC	1	0	0	1
DC	0	0	0	0
Jordanian	(0)	(0)	(0)	0
CC	0	0	0	0
DC	0	0	0	0
Africans	(0)	(2)	(0)	2
CC	0	2	0	2
DC	0	0	0	0

Note: CC: close colleagues; DC: distance colleagues.

percent of their politeness strategies. Given that all African respondents are students in the institute; this could have affected their tendency of using positive politeness strategies as they wanted to keep the distance with their lecturers and administrative staff.

A close look to **Table 5** reveals that the eleven positive politeness strategies can be distinguished to two main categories that are the “*indispensable*” and “*social accelerators*” strategies. Indispensable strategies refer to the strategies that are vital in the workplace. These strategies include offer and promise and give/ask for reasons. The social accelerator strategies, however, refer to the strategies that are used to build or maintain a relationship between the sender and the recipient of the email. They are used to come closer to the recipient in order to show intimacy in the relationship. These strategies include the nine remaining strategies. The use of the two indispensable positive politeness strategies could be redressive, as explained by **Brown and Levinson (1987)**, but their presence is unavoidable for a smooth and a straightforward exchange of information in the institute (see example 5 & 6).

Ex 5: (4.29) The ABE student welcome packs *will be dispatched to your college*.

Ex 6: (3.23) We have planned this Conference *so that it incorporates a number of different areas that should prove valuable to members of staff*.

As example 5 shows, the writer promises the recipient that the welcome packs “*will be dispatched to the college*”. In fact, the recipient of this email wrote a number of emails earlier inquiring about the welcome packs, but there were a number of problems regarding the registration of the students. In this email, the English partner promises to dispatch the welcome packs to the institute. In example 6, the writer gives reasons about the purpose of planning the given conference to clarify the expectations to the recipients. This “give reasons” positive politeness strategy was preceded by the initial move informing about the conference and was followed by a move explaining that for the “given reasons”, the management expects at least a single participant from each center to participate in the conference. As such, the use of these two positive politeness strategies is vital in the workplace to conduct the organizational tasks, which explains their high frequency in the corpus. The use of these two positive politeness strategies was common among all the respondents representing the different ethnic backgrounds in an overall frequency of 48 percent of the positive politeness strategies used in the emails.

Table 5. Positive politeness strategies used by in the emails.

Ethnicity	Positive	Malay			Chinese Malaysian			Indian Malaysian			British			Jordanian			Africans	
		SP	EQ	SB	SP	EQ	SB	SP	EQ	SB	SP	EQ	SB	SP	EQ	SB	SB	
		59	13		30			7			5			3			1	
	Notice, attend to recipient	CW 38			4	18	8	3	1					2	1		1	
		DW 21	6	7				1	1	1		3	2					
		39	4		20			11			1			3			0	
	Exaggerate	CW 28			4	11	5		5				2	1				
		DW 11	1	2	1			1	5			1						
		6						5					1					
	Seek agreement	CW 5						2		3						1		
		DW																
		19	6					13										
	Assert common ground	CW 18	6					13										
		DW																
		1						1										
	Intensify interest to recipient	CW 1						1										
		DW																
		119	25		23			46			19			5			1	
	Offer and promise	CW 77	12	8	2	5	12	6	12		9	4	2	2		3	1	
		DW 41		1	2				15	6	4	3	2	8				
		105	25		28			30			17			5			0	
	Give (ask for) reasons	CW 61			4	8	13	7	17		1	2	4		2	3		
		DW 44	12		9				5		8	3	4	3				
		60	37		2			12			7			1			1	
	Be optimistic	CW 13					1	1		4	2	3			1		1	
		DW 47		26	11				1		5		1	3				
		17	3		0			14			0			0			0	
	Include both writer and recipient in the activity	CW 10						9		1								
		DW 7		2	1			1	2	1								
		1						1										
	Assume or assert reciprocity	CW 1						1										
		DW																
		41	4		9			14			12			2			0	
	Show understanding and cooperation	CW 19	1			3	2	4	2	1	4				2			
		DW 22	2		1				2	4	1	2	6	4				
	Total	467	40	46	31	24	57	31	86	29	39	12	22	27	4	8	8	3
				117			112			154			61		20		3	

Note: SP: superior, EQ: equal, SB: subordinate, CW: close workmate, DW: distant workmate.

“Social accelerator” positive politeness strategies, however, were mainly used to maintain a friendly workplace environment. Unlike the use of the indispensable strategies that were popular among all the respondents from the different ethnic backgrounds, the use of these nine strategies varied among the respondents, which reflects different approaches to maintaining a friendly and intimate relationship in the workplace. As table 5 shows, the favored social positive politeness strategy among Malay respondents is “*be optimistic*”. In fact, 37 out of the 60 occurrences of the “*be optimistic*” positive politeness strategy were used by Malay respondents. The main function of this politeness strategy is assuming that the recipient will help the sender obtain his/her wants (see example 7 & 8). In example 7, the writer wrote the email to an external partner requesting feedback regarding an issue. In order to stimulate a quicker response, the writer assumes that the recipient will respond to the email “*shortly*”. The same technique was used in example 8, in which the writer, who is the head of students’ counseling unit, explains an issue regarding one of the students. As she cannot help the student solve the problem, she wrote the email “*hoping*” that the recipient will help her regarding the matter.

Ex 7: (5.25) I look forward to hearing from you shortly.

Ex 8: (2.44) I hope that ABE will assist me in this matter.

Examining the effect of hierarchy shows that 35 percent of the positive politeness strategies were used by superiors, 35 percent by equals and 30 percent by subordinates, which supports Brown and Levinson’s (1987: p. 250) assumption that positive politeness strategies are mainly used when the recipient has no or low power over the sender. Examining the effect of social distance shows that 58 percent of the strategies were exchanged between close workmates, whereas the remaining 42 percent between distant workmates, which also supports Brown and Levinson’s (1987) assumptions that positive politeness strategies are mainly used when the writer and the recipient have “low D” relations (p. 250). However, it is noticed that some positive politeness strategies were more popular among distant workmates such as “*be optimistic*” and “*show understanding and cooperation*”. Malay respondents, for example, used “*be optimistic*” positive politeness strategy 37 times, all of which in emails sent to distant workmates. In fact, 81 out of the 117 positive politeness strategies (69 percent) used by Malay respondents were used in emails that were sent to distant workmates, which shows that the use of these strategies by the Malay respondents functioned as social accelerators to come closer to the distant workmates. Chinese Malaysian respondents, however, used all the 112 positive politeness strategies in emails that are sent to close workmates, which shows that they used these strategies to maintain a friendly workplace environment. The use of these strategies by Indian Malaysian respondents, however, varied between close and distant workmates as 58 percent were used by close workmates and 42 percent by distant workmates. This shows that Indian Malaysian respondents were keen to keep a friendly and intimate relationship with the close and distant workmates. Given that the majority of the British respondents were regarded as distant workmates, almost all of the positive strategies that were used by them were also regarded as exchanged between distant workmates. As such, it is apparent that even though the overall practice of using positive politeness strategies was between intimates, the per ethnic background practice shows great variation, which reflects different perspectives when dealing with close and distant workmates.

4.2.2. Negative Politeness Strategy

Examining the use of negative politeness strategies reveals that the respondents mainly used nominalize, be conventionally indirect, question and hedge, minimize the imposition, give deference, apologize, impersonalize, go on record as incurring debt or not indebting the recipient, and state the FTA as general rule (see Table 6).

As Table 6 shows, the 509 instances of negative politeness strategies were used by respondents represent all the ethnic backgrounds participating in the study. In fact, negative politeness is the most popular politeness strategy used in the emails, as the overall use of this strategy equals 44 percent of the actual use of politeness strategies in the emails.

It is found that African respondents used negative politeness in about 74 percent of their politeness strategies. British respondents have the second highest frequency of using this strategy, as it occurred in 57 percent of their politeness strategies. The Jordanian lecturer, however, used this strategy in 55 percent of his politeness strategies. The Malay respondents used this strategy in 46 percent, the Indian Malaysians in 38 percent while Chinese Malaysians used it in 34 percent of their politeness strategies. This shows the relatively high tendency of using the negative politeness strategies among the majority of the respondents represent the different ethnic backgrounds.

Examining the actual use of the negative politeness strategies shows that some strategies were more popular than others. “*Give deference*” negative politeness strategy, for example, was used in 34 emails, 13 of which were

Table 6. Negative politeness strategies in the emails.

Ethnicity	Negative	Malay			Chinese Malaysian			Indian Malaysian			British			Jordanian			Africans	
		SP	EQ	SB	SP	EQ	SB	SP	EQ	SB	SP	EQ	SB	SP	EQ	SB	SB	
Nominalize		<u>32</u>	<u>11</u>		<u>2</u>			<u>4</u>			<u>11</u>			<u>3</u>			<u>1</u>	
	CW 10	1		1		1	1	1				1			2	1	1	
	DW 22	1	7	1					2	1	1	2	7					
Be conventionally indirect		<u>21</u>	<u>4</u>		<u>2</u>			<u>8</u>			<u>2</u>			<u>3</u>			<u>1</u>	
	CW 8	1		1	2			1		1					1		1	
	DW 13	2	1					3	2	1			2	2				
Question, hedge		<u>109</u>	<u>16</u>		<u>17</u>			<u>42</u>			<u>23</u>			<u>11</u>			<u>0</u>	
	CW 57	6	1	1	4	6	7	7	3	4		1	6	3	2	6		
	DW 52	6	2					9	6	13		5	11					
Minimize the imposition		<u>40</u>	<u>8</u>		<u>8</u>			<u>14</u>			<u>8</u>			<u>2</u>			<u>0</u>	
	CW 16		1		1	5	2	2	2	1				2				
	DW 24	2	2	3				4	3	2	1	3	4					
Give deference		<u>34</u>	<u>16</u>		<u>0</u>			<u>5</u>			<u>0</u>			<u>0</u>			<u>13</u>	
	CW 13																13	
	DW 21	16								5								
Apologize		<u>33</u>	<u>9</u>		<u>8</u>			<u>13</u>			<u>3</u>			<u>0</u>			<u>0</u>	
	CW 14			2	1	2	5	1	1	2								
	DW 19	3		4				2	3	4		1	2					
Impersonalize		<u>129</u>	<u>31</u>		<u>32</u>			<u>31</u>			<u>35</u>			<u>0</u>			<u>0</u>	
	CW 65	4		4	2	28	2	17	2	5		1						
	DW 64	15		8				3		4	2	11	21					
Go on record as incurring adept, or as not indebting H		<u>60</u>	<u>25</u>		<u>5</u>			<u>7</u>			<u>11</u>			<u>7</u>			<u>5</u>	
	CW 28	2	4			2	3	3			1	1		3	1	3	5	
	DW 32	8	2	9				1	2	1	1	4	4					
State the FTA as a general rule		<u>51</u>	<u>9</u>		<u>13</u>			<u>9</u>			<u>20</u>			<u>0</u>			<u>0</u>	
	CW 34	9			4	9		9				3						
	DW 17										2	7	8					
Total		509	76	20	34	14	53	20	63	26	44	8	40	65	10	6	10	20
				130			87			133			113			26		20

Note: SP: superior, EQ: equal, SB: subordinate, CW: close workmate, DW: distant workmate.

written by African students, who merely used 20 negative politeness strategies. According to [Brown and Levinson \(1987\)](#), the “give deference” strategy is used in two realizations that are humbling the self or raising the other. The main practice of giving deference by the African students was through the use of “sir”, out of the normal greeting or salutation position. As example 9 shows, the student used “Sir” in the middle of the request to give deference to the lecturer. This practice, in fact, was very popular by the African students as they, out of respect, did not want to use the actual name of the lecturer or refer to him using the pronoun “you”. However, if the use

of “you” was unavoidable, they used “sir” after the second person pronoun as it is clear in example 9. In addition to raising the recipient, some of the African students used humbling the self-strategy, however, in the pre-closing move of the email using “your student”. Another interesting point in example 9 is the mixture of the positive and negative politeness strategies in a single sentence. As it is clear in example 9, the student used the “give deference” negative politeness strategy in the middle of the “be optimistic” positive politeness strategy. That is, the student expressed his need, using the “be optimistic” positive politeness strategy, expecting the lecturer to fulfill his want or need, however, in a very polite way by giving deference. The mixing of the positive and the negative politeness strategies, in fact, intended to make the request, which is a face-threatening act, friendlier and less imposing. In addition to the African students, it is noticed that Malay respondents used this strategy in 16 instances. Malay respondents mainly used this strategy when communicating to superiors, particularly with the executive director of the institute. As example 10 shows, the head of students’ counseling unit wrote an email to the executive director expressing a lecturer’s “want” to have an appointment with him. As it is clear in the example, the writer did not want to use the second person pronoun “you” as a matter of respect. Alternatively, she replaced it by “Sir” to give deference to the director, who is actually the co-owner of the institute.

Ex 9: (7.10) This is WxxxYxxx, your Ghanaian student, I need to see you **Sir** to talk about something.

Ex 10: (2.59) He wants to have an appointment with **Sir** on 24/5/2010 (Monday) at 12.00 noon.

According to [Brown and Levinson \(1987\)](#), the use of negative politeness strategies is high when the hearer has high power over the speaker and the distance is low, or when the hearer has no or low power over the speaker and the distance is high. That is, the use of negative politeness strategies should be high by subordinates close and distance workmates and by equals or superiors distant workmates. Examining the effect of power and social distance on the use of the negative politeness strategies shows that close and distant subordinates used 193 negative politeness strategies (38 percent), superiors and equals distant workmates used 149 (29 percent), and superiors and equals close workmates used 167 (33 percent). As such, it is clear that 66 percent of the negative politeness strategies were used by close and distant subordinates and distant superiors and equals, which supports [Brown and Levinson’s \(1987\)](#) assumption. Examining the use of these strategies in relation to the ethnic backgrounds shows that their use by the Malays, Indian Malaysians, British and Africans supports Brown and Levinson’s assumption. As the majority of the emails written by the Chinese Malaysian and Jordanian respondents were sent to close superiors, equals and subordinates, it is obvious that they took care of the recipients’ negative face regardless of the position or social distance.

5. Discussion

Research on politeness mainly focused on the strategies used by native speakers of English and compared them to the strategies used by non-native speakers. Examining the strategies that are used by different types of non-native speakers, however, did not attract much attention. This study investigated the use of politeness strategies in workplace emails in relation to ethnicity, power relations and social distance. The researcher adopted [Brown and Levinson’s \(1987\)](#) politeness theory. Even though this politeness theory was presented to study utterances, the move to apply it on written discourse, according to [Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris \(2006\)](#), is recognized in politeness research.

Previous research on politeness in workplace emails, in Malaysia, claimed that politeness is minimal ([Abdullah, 2003](#)), and messages are written in imperative and declarative forms ([Ng, 2003](#)). Additionally, research showed how politeness strategies used by “Westerners” are different from these used by “Asians” ([Grindsted, 1997](#); [Maier, 1992](#)), as strategies used in Chinese ([Sheer, 2000](#)), Koreans and Vietnamese cultures ([Mulholland, 1999](#)) could be viewed in an unpleasant way by natives and vice versa. This study, however, revealed that the respondents from the different ethnic backgrounds used more indirect than direct politeness strategies. Overall, the indirect politeness strategies were the most common in an overall frequency of 88 percent (44 percent negative strategies and 40 percent positive strategies). The use of the direct on-record politeness strategies, however, occurred in 16 percent of the correspondence. It was noticed that the respondents representing the different ethnic backgrounds used the three different strategies, however, in different frequencies and for different purposes.

Malay and Jordanian respondents mainly used indirect, negative (46 & 55 percent) and positive (41 & 43 percent), politeness strategies. The use of negative politeness by Malay respondents mainly functioned as a method to disassociate the writer and/or the recipient from the infringement, communicating writers’ wants not to impinge on the recipient and minimizing the threat by making explicit references to power and social distance.

The Jordanian respondent, however, mainly used it to make minimal assumptions about recipients' wants. The use of positive politeness strategies, by both ethnic groups, mainly functioned as a method of claiming that the writer and the recipient are cooperators. The use of the on-record politeness strategy, however, was not a popular practice in the emails written by the Malay and Jordanian respondents (13 & 7 percent respectively). They mainly used imperative preceded by a mitigation device such as "*please*" and "*kindly*".

Chinese and Indian Malaysian respondents mainly used positive (43 & 44 percent respectively) politeness strategy, however, for different functions. Chinese Malaysian respondents used it to claim that the same wants of the recipient is admirable and interesting to the speaker too, and claiming reflexivity¹ (Brown & Levinson, 1987), Indian Malaysian respondents, however, used them to claim reflexivity by being optimistic, including both parties in the activity, promising and giving reasons, and claiming common opinions by asserting common ground. It is also noted that Chinese and Indian Malaysian respondents used negative politeness in 34 & 38 percent respectively. They mainly used this strategy to disassociate the writer and the recipient from the infringement, and making minimal assumptions about recipients' wants. It is also noticed that Indian Malaysian respondents used negative politeness strategy to communicate writers' wants not to impinge on the recipient. In addition, the use of the direct on-record politeness strategy was the most popular in the emails written by the Chinese and Indian Malaysian respondents (23 & 18 percent respectively). As the use of this strategy in the emails that are written by Malay respondents, the overwhelming majority of the direct on-record strategy was using the imperative form that is preceded by a mitigation device.

As it occurred in 74 and 56.5 percent of their politeness moves respectively, it is apparent that African and British respondents mainly used negative politeness strategy. The main use of negative politeness strategies by African respondents was redressing other wants of recipients that are derived from the negative face by giving deference and going on record as incurring debt. British respondents, however, mainly used negative strategies to disassociate the writer and/or the recipient from the infringement and going on record as incurring debt. It is also perceived that British respondents used positive politeness strategies in 30.5 percent of their politeness strategies mainly to claim reflexivity. In addition, British and African respondents used direct strategies in 15 and 13 percent of their strategies respectively. The main purpose of using this strategy by British respondents was to divert the attention of the recipient to the attached file in the emails, whereas African respondents used it to request approval from the recipient.

The influence of relating factors varied according to the ethnic background of email writers. Malay respondents mainly used direct politeness strategies when the writer has no power over the recipient and the distance is low. They used positive politeness strategies when the writer has high or low power over the recipient and the distance is high, whereas they used negative politeness strategies when the writer has high or low power over the recipient and the distance is either high or low. The use of these strategies in the emails that are written by Chinese Malaysian respondents, however shows that they use direct politeness strategies when the writer has low power over the recipient and the distance is low, whereas they use indirect politeness strategies (positive and negative) when the writer has high and low power over the recipient and the distance is low. Indian Malaysian respondents used direct politeness strategies when the writer has high power over the recipient and the distance is high or low, whereas they used indirect politeness strategies when the writer has high or low power over the recipient and the distance is also high or low. British respondents used direct politeness strategies when the speaker has no or low power over the recipient and the distance is high, whereas they use indirect politeness strategies when the writer has high or low power over the recipient and the distance is high. Jordanian respondent, however, used the direct on-record politeness strategy a single time in an email that was sent to a close workmate subordinate, whereas he used the indirect politeness strategies when the recipient has high power over him and the distance is low. Finally, all politeness strategies used by the African respondents were used when the writer has no power over the recipient and the distance is low.

As such, hierarchy and social distance played a vital role in the construction of the emails; however, the effect of social distance was more influential. This, in fact, is patent in the actual choice of politeness strategies by subordinate close workmates who usually used direct strategies. The effect of hierarchy was noticed in the emails that were written by subordinate distant workmates who used more formal and mainly indirect politeness strategies. However, it is also noticed that superiors used direct politeness strategies when communicating to close workmates, whereas they used indirect politeness strategies when communicating to distant workmates.

¹Claiming reflexivity between speaker and hearer wants is a positive politeness strategy which shows that speaker and hearer are cooperators. This may happen by showing that "S wants what H wants for H or... H wants what S wants for himself" (Brown & Levinson, 1987: p. 125).

This actually means that the communicators are more polite to distant workmates than they are to close workmates, and the influence of unequal power is clearer in the emails that were written by distant workmates, whereas this affect was minimal in the emails that were exchanged between close workmates.

6. Conclusion

This study has revealed that Chinese and Indian Malaysian respondents are more concerned about presenting the task in an efficient and friendly way than they are concerned about the recipient's "want to have his freedom of action unhindered" (Brown & Levinson, 1987: p. 129). The Malay and the Jordanian respondents, however, are more concerned about the recipients' want to be desirable and freedom of action. The African and British respondents, however, are mainly concerned about having the recipients' freedom of action unhindered. That is, they mainly focused on giving the recipient options rather than imposing on him/her.

This study also revealed that social distance played a more significant role than power imbalance in the actual choice of politeness strategies. This is supported by the fact that most direct politeness strategies were used by close workmates regardless to their organizational position, whereas a great deal of negative politeness strategies were used by distant workmates. This actually means that Malaysians (Malays, Chinese Malaysians, and Indian Malaysians) are more polite to distant workmates than they are to close workmates.

This study revealed that the ethnically diverse respondents used different politeness strategies. A future study could be carried out to investigate the use of politeness in email communication exchanged in the educational sector in relation to the co-operative principles (Lakoff, 1973; Leech, 1983). This may create the chance to compare and contrast the actual use of politeness in workplace emails from a different point of view focusing on the same or different ethnicities. Future research may also examine gender differences in email communication.

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