

A Case Study on Adaptation and Politeness Strategies of International Students

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Abstract: Studying and living abroad provide people with the chance to improve their social and cultural knowledge by experiencing the local culture and lifestyle in general. There must be quite a number of international students leaving their homelands and living in a foreign country to study. Consequently, they will have the need to adapt and to survive in the new environment. Adapting to a new place and its people (not to mention its culture) is a serious matter for them. These students cannot avoid social contacts as they live through their daily activities, at least when communicating with their classmates or a teacher in a class. In this 'foreigner-native' type of communication, problematic This case study is expected to provide useful insights in social adaptation strategies used by the international students. The result found that students have done strategies during their study to deal with the potential conflicts. There are two ways of politeness strategy applied by the international students to avoid a potential conflict. First is the negative politeness strategy and second is the positive politeness strategy. Students also applied convergence and divergence strategy to adapt with the differences.

1 INTRODUCTION

There is a range of motives behind the decision of leaving one's comfortable homeland. One might leave for a simple vacation, for making a new living, or for education. On educational reason, aside from their actual need to study, students going overseas are considered prestigious in some countries. Based on the statistical data obtained by UNESCO in "Top 20 countries for international students" (Top 20 countries for international students 2016 Online), there were 740482 international students in the USA, 427686 international students in the UK, and hundred thousands more students were spread across the globe. Furthermore, Indonesia's universities have recently become the destination for international students. In 2016, there were 6,967 study permits issued by the Directorate of Institutional Supervision of Higher Education (Perguruan Tinggi Indonesia Diminati Mahasiswa Asing 2017 Online). Among those universities, UI, UGM, ITB, and UNAIR appear to be some of the most popular destinations, based on Top Universities (Top Universities Destination Guides: Study in Indonesia 2018 Online).

Related to the previous information, there must be quite a number of international students leaving their homelands and living in a foreign country to study. Consequently, they will have the need to adapt and to survive in the new environment. Adapting to a new place and its people (not to mention its culture) is a serious matter for them. These students cannot avoid social contacts as they live through their daily activities, at least when communicating with their classmates or a teacher in a class.

In this "foreigner-native" type of communication, problematic encounters are bound to happen -such as misunderstanding, stereotyping, intolerance, etc. These students might already have expected that there would be problems at some point in their adaptive life as foreigners. Thus, they will act and find strategies to cope with such communication problems. In helping the students to adapt to the new place, basic knowledge about the local life and culture is considered necessary, aside from learning new language, especially if English is not used as the delivery language. However, the preparation does not only go one way, the destination country for studying should also make effort to ensure they successfully provide the best possible education experience for the

international students. Correspondingly, the researchers were interested to investigate the international students' strategies to adapt to the new environment.

This study particularly focused on their strategies to deal with potential communication conflicts occurring their encounter with native Indonesian students and lecturers in campus. The strategies included non-verbal (actions) and verbal (talks) responds to the conflicts. The research subjects were international students of UNAIR (Airlangga University) who were not originally from western countries or popular Asian countries. The students were the awardees of KNB (*Kemitraan Negara Berkembang* - Developing Country Partnership) grants (also called "Dharmasiswa" scholarship). These students did not speak neither English nor Bahasa Indonesia quite fluently. So, whether they want it or not, learning (or even mere understanding) the locally spoken language is essential to them as a part of social adaptation. Therefore, this case study is expected to provide useful insights in social adaptation strategies used by the international students.

2 THEORETICAL REVIEW

2.1 Communication Accommodation

Communication Accommodation is a theory focusing on roles of verbal and nonverbal communication in conversation, based on the belief that people from different cultural community will adapt their communication to accommodate others. Accommodation here is defined as the ability to adapt, modify, or manage someone's behavior in response to others. This theory focuses on interactions and understanding individuals from different groups by examining the language, non-verbal attitudes, and individual paralinguistic use. Through this concept, the understanding between people from various groups becomes an important part in achieving the purpose of communication (Turner H L and West R, 2008).

2.2 Face Negotiation and Politeness Strategies

Ting-Toomey (1998, cited in West and Turner [6 pp. 460-462]) was influenced by research on politeness theory (Levinson S C and Brown P, 1987) which contends that people will use a politeness strategy

based on the perception of face threat. Ting-Toomey believes that although face is a universal concept, there are various representations of it in various cultures. Face needs exist in all cultures, but all cultures do not manage the needs similarly. Ting-Toomey contends that face can be interpreted in two primary ways: face concern and face need. Face concern may relate to either one's own face or the face of another. In other words, there is a self-concern and another-concern. Face concern answers the question, "Do I want attention drawn toward myself or toward another?" Face need refers to an inclusion-autonomy dichotomy. That is, "Do I want to be associated with others (inclusion) or do I want dissociation (autonomy)?" (Turner H L and West R, 2008).

The concept of face and FTA (Face Threatening Act) were put forward by Brown & Levinson. It discusses certain kinds of acts threatening face, namely those acts considered contrary to the "facewant" of the addressee and/or the speaker (Levinson S C and Brown P, 1987). In this case, "act" can be both verbal and non-verbal communication. In their notion, one would rationally look for a way to avoid doing any FTA or use certain strategies to minimize the threat (in verbal communication), as schematized in Figure 1 by Brown & Levinson (Levinson S C and Brown P, 1987).

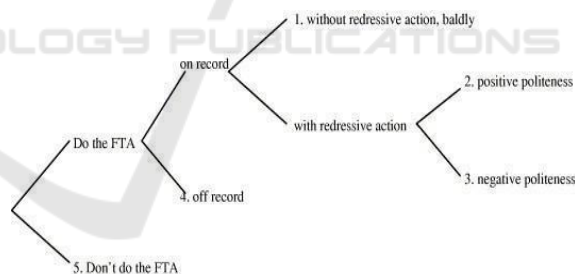


Figure 1. Strategies in Doing FTAs.

According to the scheme (when one decides on doing FTA), being 'off record' means the speaker has more than one intentions and is being ambiguous (such as using metaphor, irony, rhetorical questions, understatements, etc.). Thus, the speaker can avoid being responsible for doing FTA as the other party is left to interpret the intention on his own.

The next FTA is when a speaker goes 'on record', this means that the communicative intention is clear to both the speaker and hearer (non-ambiguous). There are two types of going on record: without redress or with redress. If one goes without redress, he would do the FTA directly, baldly, unambiguously, and would do it as concise as

possible (such as commanding someone to do something). On the contrary, going with redress means one needs to ‘give face’ to the other participant, he would attempt to recognize the hearer’s face and compensate for the potential face damage by doing either negative or positive politeness which depends on which face is being threatened - negative/ positive face.

3 RESEARCH METHODS

This research is a case study with descriptive qualitative approach. Purposive technique was chosen to determine the informants, in which specific criteria or considerations were used. The informant’s criteria are:

1. International students who are no longer learning in language class
2. The international students must come from outside Southeast Asia, thus the complexity of different culture and geographical location will generate more diverse data

The informants’ origin and general information are: one student from Senegal, three students from Madagascar, one student from Pakistan, one student from Palestine, and one student from Afghanistan. The data were collected directly from interviews conducted with the informants. Additionally, direct observation was also conducted to study their behavior and activities.

4 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The researchers found that all of the informants mostly chose not to do FTAs whenever possible; they thought it was better to remain silent and to avoid any conflicts since they lived in a foreign environment. Nevertheless, should they really had to communicate, they applied negative politeness strategies (in doing FTA) when dealing with their lecturers. Negative politeness strategy is commonly associated with “formal respect” politeness.

According to Brown and Levinson (Levinson S C and Brown P, 1987), the outputs are all forms useful for social “distancing” and therefore the strategy is likely to be used for putting a social brake in an interaction. A clear example of this strategy is the use of honorific address-form such as Pak/ Bu/ Professor before the lecturer’s name. The honorific address that is mentioned as a part of negative

politeness strategy is a part of convergence as it mentioned in accommodation theory.

However, from the data, the researcher also noticed that the international students tended to avoid doing any FTAs if possible, even if they really needed to do it (such as asking questions or requesting for further explanation). In their culture, interfering a lecturer’s on-going speech delivery in class is considered very impolite. Students remain silent in the class even though they are confused or having difficulty to understand the subject. To keep the class going unbothered, their avoidance method is by nodding to the lecturer. Therefore, even if the lecturer actually let his students to ask questions in the middle of delivering the lesson if they have difficulty understanding it, the international students chose not to do it and waited until the end of the class or even met the lecturer personally outside the class schedule (should they really needed to). In face negotiation, when it comes to avoiding it means staying away from disagreement [5 p. 458].

The next analysis discusses the politeness strategies used by the international students in interacting with fellow classmates and other student acquaintances (including the interviewer herself). From the data, students went on different strategies when communicating with other students. Some of them went bald on record “because it is the way they do in their country as it is better to be direct”, so they had no reason to “minimize the threat”. Going bald on record usually aims at maximum efficiency in communication. For instance, in a potentially conflictive and sensitive conversation topic like “dark skin tone” or “racism” brought by a local classmate, one of the international students directly attacked the hearer’s positive face want by disapproving and reprimanding. The dialogue is shown as follows (context: the international student was from Madagascar and she has dark skin tone, while the local student thought dark skinned people - like the Papuans - are bad, so the local student was implying that the Madagascar student was bad):

Local classmate : “do you know, orang Indonesia baiksemuatapi yang paling jahat orang Papua” (Indonesian people are all good, but the worst ones are Papuans)

International student : “orang Papua orang Indonesia jugakan, sayapunyabanyakteman Papua tapimerekatidakjahat, kamulebihjahat” (Papuans are also Indonesians, right? I have a lot of Papuan friends but they are not bad, you are worse).

From the response, it is clear that the international student went directly “bald on record” without redressing her classmates’ positive face. In her defense, being direct is a part of her culture. So, there is no need to sugarcoat when it comes to one’s belief. When she saw or heard something she dislikes, she would tell others about it directly.

Furthermore, most of the informants (four of seven) chose to apply negative politeness strategies in their interaction with fellow students because of the social distance between them and the local students. Thus, they tried to respect the locals negative face want. An example is taken from the interview response by a Palestinian student to show the use of this strategy. When the interviewer asked for his opinion about the existence of “Dolly” - the biggest prostitution business in Southeast Asia - in Surabaya (the city in which UNAIR is located), he said, “It’s hard to see the biggest Muslim country have things like this. I’m sorry, I’m sorry”. From his response, he used two types of negative politeness strategies: the impersonalization of the speaker and hearer (by using dative agents for the verb - “it is hard to see”) and the apology (by saying “I’m sorry”). This implies that in spite of disapproving the fact that Indonesia, as one of the biggest Muslim countries in the World, has a well-known prostitution business, he minimized the threat to the hearer’s (who is both a Muslim and an Indonesian) negative face. What the Palestinian student said previously is a model of communication divergence applied during his study in Indonesia.

The last strategy used by the international students is positive politeness strategy. This strategy is chosen whenever a speaker wants to minimize the threat to the hearer’s positive face and thus it is the opposite of negative politeness; positive politeness realization is used for minimizing social distance, as stated in Brown and Levinson (Levinson S C and Brown P, 1987). The example of applying this strategy is when one of the international students (she is from Senegal) used “familiar” name to call her classmates and

acquaintances (e.g. she called the interviewer by her nickname) in order to be “closer” to them. Since she had been learning Bahasa Indonesia, she also used the language to answer the interview questions as well as communicating in campus area. She even used the locally common informal terms like “okehlah” (okay), “ndaksuka” (do not like, but the ‘not’ is in Javanese), “kokbisa yah!!” (how could he! - when she gave a comment to a male classmate), and “haduuuhhaduu..” (an interjection similar to

‘uurgh’). This example is a realization of “using in-group identity markers/language” strategy.

Another example of the student’s strategy of adaptation is when a male student from Madagascar copied Indonesian students’ habit to come late. Meanwhile, an Afghanistan student used his adaptive strategy by doing some of Indonesian style of socializing to build friendship. Things that he can do for adaption are something that he had to cope with the cultural differences. By adapting to his Indonesian friends’ habits, he believed that it would be easier to build a friendship during his study. In his view, having a lot of friends would be an advantage for him should he need any help to finish his thesis.

Aside from choosing not to do any FTAs at all, there are two ways of politeness strategy applied by the international students to avoid a potential conflict. First is the negative politeness strategy. People from different culture are trying to adapt with the differences, some others would try to keep the distance by using the formal form of address (if the country has it) while others would try to remain silent and leave things as they are. Students in this research chose to be silent as a strategy to avoid a potential conflict during their study in the university. The silence-strategy is showed with the body gesture such as nodding their head when their local friends or their lecturer talk, and by verbally not telling their difficulty in the class to the lecturer.

Negative politeness strategy is related to divergence strategy in accommodation theory where the students do not feel comfortable adapting their habit with the local due to the difference of value and belief. They consider this as something that cannot easily be changed no matter where they live. Divergence here can also be understood as a social identity that has to be maintained especially when someone lives abroad or lives in the different area. When people use this strategy, they simply choose to dissociate themselves from the communicator and the conversation [6 p.487].

Second is the positive politeness strategy. For those willing to be open to differences, they can accept and adapt to Indonesians’ habits without much difficulty. The strategy can also relate with the convergence strategy, in which the students are trying and willing to adapt to the different culture and be more open minded toward the cultural differences. It is a selective process people do by relying on their perceptions of the other person’s speech or behaviour, which they will use as a guide in behaving and responding to the other person. From this research, the students applied this strategy

by accepting and tolerating those who often come late to class, using locally common informal terms while talking with friends, and so on. Those students felt that using such strategy will also give them advantages during their study, on top of the benefit of being able to improve their social life.

The discussion of politeness strategies shows that different culture may have different styles of communicating [7 p. 450], which may cause problems in intercultural communication. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of intercultural communication is the goal and it is important to know how to do so. Beside understanding the language spoken or using English as a global language, being culturally sensitive is also crucial for effective communication to happen. Murray (2003, cited in Ruddock and Turner, [8 p. 362]) argued that to be culturally sensitive, there needs to be openness, respect, and understanding of the cultural difference itself. The different strategy used by the international students as explained above showed that they have made an effort to understand the local (Indonesian culture) and tried to adapt to it in order to blend well with the locals as well as to avoid conflict with the people around them.

5 CONCLUSION

The following table summarizes the politeness strategy and adaptation strategy used by the international students. This research also shows that each student has their own decision to use the strategy according their personal background or their culture.

Table 1. Politeness Strategy and Adaptation Strategy of International Students.

Student	Politeness Strategy		Adaptation Strategy	
	Negative Politeness	Positive Politeness	Divergence	Convergence
Afghanistan		v		v
Madagascar (Male)		v		v
Madagascar (Female)	v		v	
Madagascar (Female 2)	v		v	
Pakistan	v		v	
Palestine	v		v	
Senegal		v		v

As we can see above, 4 out of 7 students who used negative politeness also used divergence strategy during their study. The rest of international students used positive politeness strategy also used convergence strategy during their study. It means that those students are willing to adjust themselves into something new and blend in with the local students. Students in this strategy prove that positive and open minded personality will give them easier time during their study. Moreover, it will help them to befriend the locals and have an overall better social life.

The researchers propose some recommendations based on the finding. First, for the educational institutions to better accommodate the international students' needs in order to give them better studying and living experience as well as maintaining their and the country's reputation. Those students should be provided with not only the knowledge of Indonesian Language, but also the social and cultural life because they will interact directly with the local cultures daily.

Secondly, the institution can propose some kind of sessions for the international students to help them adjust to their new life and environment. It is important that the students know that regardless of the differences of culture, values, daily habits, or the learning and studying style, it will be better if they can be more open minded and consider the differences as a part of their self-learning to broaden their perspective about the different countries and the way of life. Once they manage to do that, they will not have a difficult time living and studying abroad.

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