

Beyond ‘Greeting’ and ‘Thanking’: Politeness in Job Interviews

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ABSTRACT

Despite the steps taken by Malaysian institutions of higher learning to equip their graduates with the necessary communication skills, local graduates are still failing to create a positive impression on the employers especially during job interviews. Hence this study explored the face-related concept of politeness proposed by Brown and Levinson (1999) at job interviews. Eight final-year undergraduates taking a communication for employment course volunteered for a mock-interview session with a human resource manager from the banking industry. The interviews were audio- and video-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Then a micro-analysis of the data was carried out using Brown and Levinson’s (1999) framework to identify the politeness strategies that the candidates used. Two positive politeness strategies were identified, the first is noticing and attending to interviewer’s interests, wants, needs or goods, and second is raising/asserting common grounds to establish solidarity. One negative politeness strategy was identified which is requesting for clarification or repetition. The pedagogical implications of these findings will be discussed and recommendations for teaching face-related politeness in communication for employment courses will be offered.

Keywords: politeness strategies; face; job interviews; impression management; communication skills

INTRODUCTION

Following the introduction of the Ninth Malaysian Plan in 2010 with its objective to upgrade Malaysia to a developed country through raising the standards of human capital, the Ministry of Higher Education instructed that ‘soft-skills’ elements must be incorporated in the undergraduate syllabus of public institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. This was because of two major factors. Firstly, employer feedback showed that graduates are “academically proficient but lacking in soft skills” and secondly, globalization has greatly increased the competitiveness in the work force and job market (Shakir 2009, p. 309). One of the significant skills needed is a good command of the English language which is an important soft skill for the globalised workforce (Norafini & Kaur 2014, p. 93).

Compulsory and elective programmes were conducted to develop communication skills among the undergraduates as well as to prepare them for employment interviews, yet graduates were still found to be incapable of expressing themselves during interviews, resulting in them being unable to present themselves as competent members of the workforce. A study conducted by Noor Azina Ismail (2011) reveals that graduates who are competent in English are more employable than those who lack the language competence. Most of these graduates are not able to communicate effectively in English during interviews thus causing them to lose employment opportunities especially in the corporate sector (Azizan & Lee 2011). This could be an indication that there is a gap between what the education system is

producing and what employers are seeking (Normazidah, Koo & Hazita 2012). In fact, a survey of some Language for Specific Purpose (LSP) courses at several local public universities in Malaysia revealed that there is “a gap between what is offered to these students at the university before they exit and the immediate English needs once they exit” (Zarina & Taufik 2011 p. 6).

Employment interviews are often considered as a ‘gateway’ to the organization and interviewers are considered as ‘gatekeepers’ (Kerekes 2006, 2007). While there may be different stages of the employment interview process, the initial interview is often the stage where the interviewer assesses the behaviour and personality of the candidate to determine if the candidate will be able to perform and be an asset of the organization. Surveys conducted by private and government employment agencies have shown that interviewers look for candidates who are able to think critically, who are of sound reasoning, mature and able to articulate their thoughts clearly (Gradmalaysia.com.). Additionally, it has also been highlighted that interviewers would “consider the way graduates converse and portray themselves to be more important than what’s in the CV”, therefore possessing good communication skills could boost candidates’ display of higher-level of confidence (Education system not producing 2012). This affirms that communication is an important aspect of portraying a positive self-image, which is an important aspect of impression management (Higgins & Judge 2004).

According to Schlenker (1980, cited in Stevens & Kristoff 1995, p. 588), impression management (IM) is the “conscious or unconscious attempts to control the images that are projected in...social interactions” and the notion of impression management can be likened to maintaining ‘face’. Following Goffman’s (1967) early work, Yule (2008 p. 60) defines face as “the public self-image of a person...emotional and social sense of self that everyone has and expects everyone to recognize”. According to Brown and Levinson (1999), the universal assumption is that every individual has face wants, either positive or negative; therefore in any given social interaction, it is expected that every participant of the interaction acknowledges and attends to the face wants of everyone else. Holtgraves (2010, p. 193) also suggests that “people co-operatively engage in protecting and supporting one another’s face; in short, they engage in facework”. Arundale (2006) points out that Goffman’s (1967) notion of face is to be considered as an interactional construct, not individual because in a social interaction, face is not something that an individual can claim by him-/herself and it does not exist on its own. Instead it has to be acknowledged and approved of by others, hence co-existing with the face of others. Therefore, the maintenance and preservation of others’ face is also a simultaneous maintenance and preservation of one’s own face, thus raising the importance of employing effective and collaborative facework, defined by Goffman (1999) as ‘actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face’. This study examines the discourse of employment interviews in relation to the face-related concept of politeness and identifies to what extent the interviewees were able to effectively answer the questions posed to them, and those who were effective inevitably portrayed a positive self-image.

POLITENESS IN JOB INTERVIEWS

Normative articles and books providing job interview tips would mention the importance of being polite during an interview by observing polite mannerisms (Eyring 2012, Dehne 2011, Sweeney n.d.). In fact, a general definition of the word ‘polite’ according to the Oxford Advanced Learners’ Dictionary (2011) is as follows:

¹ *having or showing good manners and respect for the feelings of others*

² *socially correct but not always sincere*

³ *[only before a noun] from a class of society that believes it is better than others*

The politeness described is closely related to etiquette and socially acceptable behaviour which ought to have been ingrained since young. Thus, it can be assumed that most socially competent adult would instinctively show polite behaviour in any interaction. Nonetheless, as Yule (2008, p. 60) points out, there is a “more narrowly specific type of politeness at work” which is the linguistic-oriented politeness closely related to face and facework. While studies have explored this face-related concept of politeness in other employment-related communicative genres, for example, politeness in writing job applications (Mboudjeke 2010), few have examined this concept within the context of job interviews. Job interviews are situations where both applicants and interviewers normally do not have much information about each other. As initial interviews tend to be rather short, accurate assessment of the suitability of the candidate is crucial to the success of the selection process. Among the factors that have been cited to have been found to influence interviewers’ evaluations are paper qualifications, work experience age and race (Stevens & Kristof 1995) and also impression management. This is because it is relatively easy to manage one’s impression in an interview lasting about 30 minutes compared to managing one’s impression over an extended period (Higgins & Judge 2004). Thus, in this paper, we would like to explore this face-related concept of politeness during job interviews, and following that, we hope to suggest some pedagogical implications for teaching politeness to Malaysian learners.

BROWN & LEVINSON’S POLITENESS THEORY

Drawing from the considerations of face and facework, Brown and Levinson (1999, based on Brown & Levinson 1978, 1987) posited a theoretical framework on politeness which attempted to account for the diverse linguistic variations of facework in social interaction. They further extended Goffman’s (1967) notion of face into two categories, positive face and negative face and following that, suggested strategies that may be employed to maintain these faces.

Positive face can be described as “the need to be accepted, even liked, by others, to be treated as a member of the same group, and to know that his or her wants are shared by others” (Yule 2008, p.61) therefore, positive politeness is geared towards these needs, in other words, acts which Brown and Levinson (1999, p. 328) described as “approach-based”. Negative face, on the other hand, can be described as the need to be independent, to have freedom of action, and not to be imposed on by others” (Yule 2008, p. 61). Therefore, negative politeness is an “avoidance-based” act and “orientated mainly toward partially satisfying (redressing) H’s [hearer] negative face, his basic want to maintain claims of territory and self-determination” (Brown and Levinson 1999, p. 328).

According to this framework, politeness strategies are carried out to mitigate face-threatening acts (FTA) which could threaten the positive/negative face of the speaker/hearer, if these acts were to be carried out. By taking into consideration “the want to communicate the content of the FTA,...the want to be efficient or urgent,...and the want to maintain H’s [hearer’s] face to any degree” (Brown & Levinson 1999, p. 326), an individual would either do the FTA directly (on record) or indirectly (off record). A direct FTA could either be carried out “without redressive actions” or “with redressive action” (p. 327); the latter which would employ the use of positive or negative politeness strategies. Building on Brown and Levinson’s list of FTAs, Jaworski and Coupland (1999, p. 334-335) presented a list of

politeness strategies which included positive politeness strategies, negative politeness strategies, as well as off-record strategies.

The choice of which strategies to use would involve the assessment of the seriousness of the FTA based on a consideration of the “social distance” between speaker and hearer, “relative power” between speaker and hearer, and the “absolute ranking of impositions in the particular culture” (Brown & Levinson, 1999, p. 331). In the context of this study, it can be assumed that there is a wide social distance between the candidate (speaker) and the interviewer (hearer) as this is their first encounter with each other; the interviewer would be expected to have more relative power and can thus impose his evaluation or control of the situation; while the ranking of imposition would depend on the general expectations at a job interview in a Malaysian context.

The universality of Brown and Levinson’s framework has over the years, been challenged for various reasons as highlighted by Haugh (2010, p. 2) such as “overly individualistic and unnecessarily focused on the avoidance of imposition” and “neglecting the rich socio-cultural milieu from which the metaphor of face originally emerged”. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that this framework has a high generative quality (Holtgraves 2010, p. 194) and thus would be beneficial when used in a relatively new context, such as this study.

METHODS

The TCEE1320 (Communication for Employment) is a 3-credit elective course introduced in the University of Malaya, focusing on helping students to prepare for employment. Among some of the areas covered in this course are resume writing and attending job interviews. As part of the course requirements, students have to participate in a mock interview at the end of course (14 weeks) where the instructor assesses their performance and provides them feedback for self-improvement. This paper is a part of a larger project investigating student performance during job interviews with real-world practitioners, with the aim to identify problems faced by students so that this feedback may be used to improve the course. The eight candidates identified (C1-C8) were students with Band 3 and Band 4 language proficiency level, based on the Malaysian University English Test (MUET), hence they are considered to have at least a fair level of communicative ability in English.¹ Permission for their interview session to be audio and video-recorded was obtained. The audio recording was transcribed based on an adapted version of the Gail Jefferson transcription system (Jefferson 2004). A human resource manager with 20 years of experience from the banking industry was engaged to conduct the interviews. The interviews took the form of a semi-guided interview; questions asked were similar for all eight participants, but may have differed in its order. The audio-recording was transcribed using conversation analysis conventions, and then analysed using Brown and Levinson’s (1999) politeness framework as well as Jaworski and Coupland’s (1999) list of politeness strategies.

FINDINGS

Both positive and negative politeness strategies were identified in the data comprising approximately 63 minutes of recording. We will first look at positive politeness strategies, then negative politeness strategies by examining several extracts from the interview

transcripts, and we will also discuss how these strategies contribute to possible impression management.

POSITIVE POLITENESS STRATEGIES

Two strategies of positive politeness were identified, namely; noticing and attending to interviewer’s interests, wants, needs or goods and raising/asserting common grounds to establish solidarity. According to Brown and Levinson (1999, p. 328), these two strategies are used to show that to a certain extent, the speaker “wants” what the hearer wants, and that the hearer is similar in some aspects to the speaker, and therefore, the hearer is accepted, liked and treated as the speaker’s in-group. This is considered an adherence to the hearer’s positive face. However, it is interesting that these strategies were identified in the job interview because based on the sociological variables of the situation (social distance, relative power and ranking) as well as the context of a job interview, the interviewer, who is the hearer, is not the one needing acceptance or approval; instead, it is the interviewee who is the one seeking for acceptance and approval in order to be employed. In a sense then, the function of these two strategies when used in our data varies slightly from Brown and Levinson’s (1999) in that the interviewee (speaker) attempts to highlight the similarities between themselves and the interviewer, not to accept or show favour upon the interviewer, but rather to be accepted and gain the interest of the interviewer (hearer). This finding will now be discussed in more detail using excerpts from the recorded interviews.

NOTICING AND ATTENDING TO INTERVIEWER’S INTERESTS, WANTS, NEEDS OR GOODS

As mentioned earlier, interviewers seek candidates who, amongst other criteria, are able to hold a conversation, show high-levels of confidence – basically, display the abilities and knowledge that they claimed to have in their resumes. Therefore, for the candidate to demonstrate that he wants what the interviewer wants as well as to capture the interviewer’s interest, the candidate had to first, show understanding of the interviewer’s questions, then give the appropriate answers. Extract 1 is a basic example of how Candidate 3 acknowledges the interviewer’s question first, and then proceeds to give a straight-to-the-point answer.

Extract 1: C3-Turns 54-55

54	Int	= so: now i l- if you are stuck with the problem uh:: what would you do
55	C3	oh what will we do um: uh I do uh before: before cus l- customer get temper I just explain that manager have something to do uh important thing to do so: uh I would like them to: stay a while uh st l- then uh I can uh get some manager that around

Extract 2 on the other hand, is an example where the candidate failed to provide an appropriate answer. Candidate 6’s hesitation to answer the question, frequent pauses, lengthened sounds (e.g. *the:::*) and use of fillers (e.g. *uh:::*) suggest her failure to understand the question. This resulted in an unfavourable response and the interviewer’s frustration could be perceived from his frequent sighing (*°hhh*) as well as repetition of the question completed with the use of a hyperbole, ‘all your life’.

Extract 2: C6-Turns 25-27

25	Int	You <u>like</u> the audit. (0.7) Do you <u>see yourself</u> doing this:: for the next 10 years:: in your life? (0.6)
26	C6	Uh:: yes:: uh::: because uh::: (0.2) now <u>I</u> :: applying for the::: uh::: (0.5) audit (0.4) in this company::: (0.4)

27	Int	Ok::, (0.4) <u>Ya ya of course</u> this °hhh this is the <u>where</u> there is area of audit (0.4) uh::: you can (0.6) specialise in just doing audit uh:: (0.3) all(.all your life but °hhh uh::: do you see yourself vouching and:: uh::: giving green tick (0.3) all your life?=
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Additionally, Kerekes (2006, p. 31) found that trust or trustworthiness is a recurring factor that determines the success of an interview and Lipovsky (2006) suggests that volubility and informativeness are two important factors that inspire confidence and perceptions of trustworthiness. Therefore, candidates ought to volunteer additional information that are relevant to the question, for example, by elaborating instead of merely giving short answers.

Extract 3: C4-Turns 47-53

47	Int	Yes::: (0.2) like::: like what what kind of experience:::, exposure::: , (0.4) skills::: and knowledge::: that you will need::: . (1.9)
48	C4	Mmm::: =
49	Int	=The 20 <u>years:::</u> down the road you said you want to open a company that will::: (0.6)
50	C4	Leader:::ship skills::: , (0.2) management::: °hh (0.6) and then:::of course, knowledge::; (0.3) is most::: important lah::: .
51	Int	Mmm:::=
52	C4	=And then::: (.) uh::: the most important I think is::: uh::: (0.4) networking::: , (0.4)
53	Int	[Ok::: ,

In Extract 3, Candidate 4 lists several skills needed to open a company but did not elaborate or volunteer additional information, as compared to Candidate 8 in Extract 4, who provided reasons to justify her answers as well as voiced her preference.

Extract 4: C8-Turns 50-55

50	Int	=Ok. (0.4) <u>Good</u> . (0.7) °hh So (0.3) uh::: (0.5) <u>what</u> do you::: aspire yourself to be::: ? >Because I< (.) you have only been exposed::: to::: (0.3) tax::: . (0.6) What about audit::: and uh::: (0.3) accounting ? (0.5)
51	C8	°hhh >Actually< I would like to join::: audit for::: (0.2) uh::: (0.5) maybe for three years::: when I::: (.) graduate . °hh (0.6) Because::: (.) I think that audit can be one of the very (0.4) uh::: important::: experience that I can::: get (0.4) . Because through au:::- audit , I can know the structure (.) the business structure for the company , (0.5) And::: maybe through the audit I can::: >expose< myself (0.2) into::: many::: other industry. (0.3)
52	Int	Mm hmm=
53	C8	=So that uh::: (0.3) Audit >actually< is a good::: but::: (0.9) I prefer on tax more than audit. (0.4)
54	Int	[Mm:::
55	C8	But] I would like to join::: audit for a few year first to gain some >experience< then only I will shift to::: (0.3) tax. (0.5)

It is important to remember that the purpose of an interview is for the interviewer to get to know the candidate better (beyond what is stated in the resume) in order for him or her to assess whether or not the candidate meets the company's needs. Therefore by being voluble and informative in their response, candidates are essentially meeting the interviewer's wants and needs, thus employing a form of positive politeness strategy.

According to Brown and Levinson's (1999) framework on positive politeness, one should avoid disagreements during an interaction. However in view of the strategy of attending to the interviewer's wants, needs, and interest, disagreements (or answering in the negative form) could be manoeuvred into a form of positive politeness strategy, provided the disagreement is well-argued or justified. Take Extract 5 as an example:

Extract 5: C8-Turns 58-69

58	Int	Mm hm:: ok. What d - (.) what do you aspire to be in:: like 20 years down the road in your life? (0.5)
59	C8	20 years::: , =
60	Int	=Ya 43::, 44:: (0.7)
61	C8	Um::: (0.4) I think:: I'm going to have my own:: business. (0.4) Maybe:: uh:: I will open up a restaurant , (0.4) and::: (1.5) uh::: I think:: that is a:: (1.1) kind of uh::: (0.3) um::: (0.8) how to say (1.4) Business like uh::: (0.5) I <u>wish</u> ::: that I can:: have my:: own:: business:: so that I can::: uh::: (1.2) no need to::: (.) like:: uh::: work for people lah. (0.3)
62	Int	Mm:: =
63	C8	=Uh uh uh:: (0.5)
64	Int	°hh Don't you think:: you can:: >actually< uh::: (1.7) just go and:: uh::: straight away open your own business:: without >actually having< to join:: °hh a company like this::: ? (0.2)
65	C8	No I think the experience is very important. (0.2) So:: uh:: in order to open up a::: (.) new business (0.2) I must have:: many:: friends:: (0.2) , many networking:: , (0.2) . So that:: I think:: (0.3) uh::: for the:: this maybe (.) 20 years time:: , I can::: (0.4) uh::: get some::: (0.4) from outside. For example when I <u>join</u> a company:: I know:: a few:: friends::, I know many people::, °hh I know the client::, (0.3) so that:: when I open up a business:: is more easy for me to:: (0.5) run that business. (0.2)
66	Int	Ok. (0.3)
67	C8	Mm:: (0.3)
68	Int	Ok (0.2) that's good. (0.2) >So do you::< °hh (0.6) you have::: (.) you have >actually< (0.4) thought :: about it ah::: (0.2)

When asked about her career plans 20 years down the road, Candidate 8 mentioned her interest in starting her own business, which prompted the interviewer to question the necessity for her to join the corporate world. Candidate 8 directly disagreed without hesitation, but proceeded to give her reasons for doing so, and further elaborated her opinion by providing an example. As a result, she managed to portray herself as a person who has given much thought about her future, and in turn 68, we see that the interviewer seemed pleased with her response.

Thus, by disagreeing or negating, candidates are given an opportunity to voice their opinions and perspectives; showing that they are able to think critically, of sound reasoning, mature, and able to articulate thoughts clearly (Gradmalaysia.com) – all of which are important criteria that employers seek when interviewing candidates today. Hence in this case, disagreements can be viewed as a powerful positive politeness strategy.

PRESUPPOSING/RAISING/ASSERTING COMMON GROUNDS TO ESTABLISH SOLIDARITY

Kerekes (2006) suggests that in employment interviews, trust is dependent on factors such as solidarity as well as similarity between the interviewer and interviewee, and this solidarity can be developed/co-constructed during the interview process. Moreover, when rapport and solidarity is established, the interviewer tends to be more lenient with or even overlooks problems that arise in the interview as well as constructs better impressions of the interviewee and this could lead to success in the interview (Kerekes 2007, p. 1962).

Positive politeness strategies such as presupposing/raising/asserting common grounds as well as using in-group identity markers can be employed by candidates to establish solidarity with the interviewer. All the respondents in this study attempted to assert common grounds and use in-group identity markers by incorporating technical jargons or discipline-related knowledge and skills in their responses, for example, in Extract 6.

Extract 6: C4-Turns 15-26

15	Int	Ok: . (3.5) <u>Tell</u> me: some of your experience: when you were: in: (0.8) this: uh: companies: . (0.2) ↑What: what did you do: , and what did you learn: ↓ . from: (.) that exposure that you have: . (0.4)
16	C4	Uh: ↓initially: ↑ I enter: the PBS: Management Consultants: , °hh They take me: (0.2) , teach me: uh taught me how to: °hh input: the data: , (0.6) from: the: (0.2) paper work: , to (.)into: the: (.) accountings: uh: (0.2) computerised system: , (.)
17	Int	Ok: . (0.2)
18	C4	and then: um: (0.2) I: learn: UBS system : in: the: (0.3) PBS: Management Consultants:=
19	Int	=Ok.
20	C4	And then: uh: when I go: to the: (0.3) audit: year uh: Adrian Yeo and Co: (0.4)
21	Int	Ok: . (.)
22	C4	Ah: . (0.2) The: (0.5) the: uh: (0.6) ((tsk)) let me able: to: use the (.) uh: UBS: uh: when I learn: in the: (0.4)
23	Int	Ah: ok so you were starting to use: the UBS already: [at Adrian:]
24	C4	Ya:] (0.4) Ah: when enter the Adrian Yeo and Co: . I le - (0.3) I learn: the: (0.5) audit express system : ↑when: I: in: school: ↓ (0.5)
25	Int	[Ok: .
26	C4	That's why:] I: know how to use: (0.2) in: Adrian Yeo and Co: (0.2) so it's a: advanced for me: <u>lah</u> : >actually: < . =

When asked about her working experience, Candidate 4 highlighted her knowledge of the 'UBS system' and 'audit express system' in the auditing field and this caught the attention of the interviewer (turn 23). Not only that, Candidate 4 also continued to assert common ground by referring to her working place 'Adrian Yeo and Co.' when discussing her ambitions, as shown in Extract 7.

Extract 7: C4-Turns 42-46

42	C4	°hh I plan to: uh: open a: audit firm: (0.5)
43	Int	Mm [hmm: ok: .
44	C4	Like um:] (0.4) my: (0.2) boss , (0.3) Adrian Yeo and Co: =
45	Int	=Mm hm: (0.2)
46	C4	Ah: (0.2) . They: developed their own: company: successfully °hh so: I: want: (0.8) take an: example from: them: (0.2)

Essentially, positive politeness strategies are acts carried out to reciprocate the attention and interest of the other person as well as to claim some form of similarity with the other person. Candidates in employment interviews may not be able to identify what the common grounds are at the start of the interview, however, they could be alert and observant of topics or information that catches the attention and interest of the interviewer; then draw from these common grounds, as exemplified in Extract 8.

Extract 8: C6-Turns 71-92

71	Int	↑No It: ↓It's interesting you work in a shopping mall: and: you still want to <u>go</u> back to shopping malls:, ya (0.5) it's quite interesting. (0.4) Uh: =
72	C6	= Sometime - Sometimes uh: (0.4) in IKEA: °hhhh (0.2) I: lot of stress al - also: . (0.3)
73	Int	Uh huh=
74	C6	= uh: work as cashier: , cause °hh uh: (0.5) in IKEA: (.) every: (0.2) everyday: uh: (0.4) the: (0.4) plastic <u>bag</u> is twe - twenty cents. (0.4)
75	Int	[Yes
76	C6	Need] to uh: pay , so: ev - (0.2) every customer: (.) keep [asking:
77	Int	They:] [they: complain about:
78	C6	Ah: why why:] [ha ah
79	Int	Why] should they: =
80	C6	=Because uh: in other: other shopping mall:, it's uh only Saturday:, (1.0) uh: =

81	Int	=Depends:: ah:: It:: (0.3) different companies [will will use
82	C6	Ah:::]
83	Int	Different (0.2) methods and ways:: and:: (0.3)
84	C6	so I need to:: [uh::]
85	Int	I don't::]
86	C6	[polite is:: it::
87	Int	I don't::] I don't pay:: for the shopping bag (.)But I will go to the boxes and get a boxes and=
88	C6	=Mm::: the trolley uh::=
89	Int	=The trolley uh:: and put everything inside (0.5)°hhh because I support (.) the green:: earth:: . (0.5)
90	C6	Yes::
91	Int	↑That's:: [good::↓
92	Int	=Ya:: (0.8) that's good so these are some of the:: °hhhh uh interesting things that you have learnt:: ya?(0.7) (...)

Prior to turn 71 in Extract 8, Candidate 6 shared her experience working in IKEA (home furnishing mall) which drew the interest of the interviewer who also happens to shop frequently at the same mall. In turn 72, we find Candidate 6 drawing on this common ground and raises the topic of IKEA once again, despite the fact that in turn 71, the interviewer was merely making a comment, which doesn't necessitate a response from the candidate. Candidate 6's attempt was picked up by the interviewer, and from turns 72-89, we find that the formal interview session has temporarily morphed into a less formal conversation on a personal topic. This is similar to what Kerekes (2007, p. 1962) identified as “chit-chat...talk that did not pertain to the job interview itself, and was, unnecessary in conveying job-interview-related information”. Features of co-construction such as over-lapping turns, infrequent pauses and frequent latching were found suggesting signs of budding solidarity (Kerekes 2007).

NEGATIVE POLITENESS STRATEGIES

Negative politeness strategies are employed when the interviewer's negative face is threatened and one of the most common threats performed by interview candidates is making clarification or repetition requests. Based on Brown & Levinson's (1999, p. 324) framework, clarification requests during interviews can be considered a threat to the negative face because the interviewer is asked to do something for the candidate, hence impeding on his freedom. Kerekes (2007, p. 1964) found that candidates frequently had to ask the interviewer for clarification and their technique range from recast to overt admissions of not understanding. Similarly, recasts and overt admissions were also identified in our study. When instances of clarification requests were examined, negative politeness strategies such as hedging, impersonalizing and apologizing were identified.

Extract 9: C2-Turns 74-80

74	C2	Ok:: . (1.3) So:: um:: (1.3) ((tsk)) uh:: (0.4) uh (0.2) can you:: uh repeat the question:: ? =
75	Int	=What will be:: (0.3) ah:: (0.4) one of the biggest challenge:: when you join:: an organisation:: (0.2) like us:: (.) meaning that:: (0.3) <u>what</u> (.) <u>kind</u> of difficulties:: you will have to cope:: with:: . (0.8)
76	C2	Oh:: (1.5) ok:: . (1.1) Um:: uh:: (0.5) [First::
77	Int	You have] mentioned:: that one area:: would:: be:: (0.3) you are <u>willing::</u> to move:: (0.3) from your:: uh:: uh:: area:: in Machang in:: in:: in:: Kelantan (0.6) to:: be here:: . (0.3) What would be uh:: other things:: that you think:: you will be:: (0.5) finding that:: (0.8) difficult to cope:: . (0.7)
78	C2	Oh:: (2.4)sorry:: I don't have any idea hhhh (0.3)
79	Int	Like for example:: (0.2) uh::: you will >probably< have to::: (0.3) uh::: (0.3) read a lot:: more::: (0.6)
80	C2	[Yes::::

As seen in Extract 9, Candidate 2 formed his request using the second person pronoun ‘you’, thus directly indebted the interviewer to do as requested. However, he redressed his direct request by “hedging on the illocutionary force” (Brown & Levinson 1999, p. 328) using a repetition of fillers as well as pauses (turn 74).

Extract 10: C4-Turns 49-54

49	Int	<u>True</u> (0.4) What do you think it will take (0.6) to.... (0.8) <u>open</u> a <u>firm</u> like Adrian Yeo and Company... (0.6)
50	C4	Sorry? (0.2)
51	Int	<u>What</u> do you think it will take (0.8) for you... (0.5) to open... a company like Adrian Yeo and Company... (1.5)
52	C4	Mmm..... (1.0)my career... is it: (0.6)
53	Int	Yes..... (0.2) like... like what what kind of experience..., exposure..., (0.4) skills... and knowledge... that you will need... (1.9)
54	C4	Leadership skills..., (0.2) management... °hh (0.6) and then...:of course, knowledge; (0.3) is most... important lah...

In Extract 10, we find an indirect request or recast in turn 50 and turn 52. Candidate 4 did not explicitly request the interviewer to repeat or clarify his question, however, the apology (turn 50) and the question asked (turn 52) shared similar perlocutionary effect as a direct request, which prompted, the interviewer to respond by providing the expected repetition and clarification. It is important to note that the clarification request was not made using the second person pronoun ‘you’ (impersonalised) thus the interviewer was distanced from being the doer. In so doing, the interviewer was given a “face-saving line of escape, permitting him to feel that his response is not coerced” (Brown & Levinson, 1999 p. 328). Recasting of clarification requests was frequently present in our data, either in the form of questions, or statements, as shown in Extract 11.

Extract 11: C7-Turns 44-49

44	Int	What is your career aspiration... (0.3) in this... ? (0.4)
45	C7	Ca:reer aspiration... (0.2)
46	Int	What do you <u>aspire</u> ... to be... in 20 years time . (0.6)
47	C7	[Uh:]
48	Int	What do you] see... yourself as... (0.4)
49	C7	Mm..... (0.5) I see... myself... as... I mean... (0.8) uhm... in... five years time... , (0.8) I... (0.4) would (0.4) uh... would (0.3) <u>want</u> to be... like a... I mean... , (0.6) in a managerial... level... , (.) to see myself in a... (0.4) in... °hhhh in a... in an... <u>established</u> firm... (0.4)

There were also instances when the candidate would make a direct request without any form of redress (Extract 12). Even though this request was also impersonalized, the phrase ‘come again’ may still be construed as a direct request due to its “conventionalized indirectness” (Brown & Levinson 1999, p. 329).

Extract 12: C7-Turns 68-70

68	Int	<u>What</u> do you think... you will need... (.) between... <u>now</u> ... and then... ? (1.1)
69	C7	Come again... ?=
70	Int	=What would you... (.) what do you think you will need... between now... (0.3) and 20 years later... ?=
71	C7	=Money... , first is money... . and then experiences... , my networkings... , my friends... , °hhh=

An interesting observation, however, is that the candidates did not always acknowledge the interviewer’s act of clarification or repetition. Considering the fact that the candidates are threatening the face of the interviewer by making a request for clarification or

repetition, it would be expected that after incurring a debt with the interviewer, the candidates would either offer their apologies or thanks. In Extract 9 turn 76, we find Candidate 2 responding with only a filler ‘oh’ followed by ‘ok’, which seem to show that he had understood the question but did not acknowledge the interviewer’s assistance. In Extract 12-T71 and Extract 10 turn 54, there was also no form of thanks, apology or acknowledgement; instead, the candidates went straight to providing their response, oblivious to the threats done to the interviewer’s negative face. From the data it appears that there were no occurrence of off-record and bald-on-record strategies, while strategies found as described above were significant and based on these findings some implications could be drawn out and will be discussed in the following section.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study have raised important pedagogical implications which further solidify the need to teach politeness strategies as part of interview skills. Firstly, we found that most of the time, candidates were able to understand and provide appropriate responses to the questions posed by the interviewers, showing the use of the positive politeness strategy of noticing and attending to the interviewer’s wants and needs. However, some candidates were lacking in volunteering additional information about themselves. Moreover, we posit that while avoiding disagreement is a form of positive politeness strategy according to Brown and Levinson (1999), disagreements and negations can actually be used to create favourable impressions based on information that are ‘given-off’ (Goffman 1959) instead of relying only on information that is ‘given’.

Similarly as Scheuer (2001) points out, interviewers are also more concerned about how the candidates ‘perform’ rather than ‘inform’. Lipovsky (2006, p. 1149) also highlights that “more than the information per se, the way it is presented influences the interviewers’ appraisal of candidates, that is, the candidates’ performance or negotiating of their expertise plays a significant role in the interviewers’ impression of them”. Nonetheless, this strategy was less frequently employed throughout our data and this could be due to lack of awareness and technique on how to use disagreements as an opportunity to flaunt their strength. Thus, this is an area which could be incorporated during the teaching of interview skills whereby learners are made aware that disagreements and negations may not necessarily bring negative effects but can be employed as a strategy to ‘anoint’ the interviewer’s positive face.

Secondly, we have also identified that by raising and asserting common grounds, candidates are able to highlight similarities and establish solidarity with the interview and this strategy could lead to perceptions of trustworthiness (Kerekes 2006, 2007). While we found that most of the candidates often used technical jargons and discipline-related knowledge and skills in their responses (especially when talking about their internship experience), we suggest that the ‘common grounds’ may also include other non-discipline related topics which draws the interviewer’s attention. By drawing on the similar IKEA experience (Extract 8), the candidate was able to establish “chit-chat” with the interviewer. Kerekes (2007, p.1962) argues that chit-chats could “establish friendly and easy rapport between the interlocutors” as well as “lessen the hierarchical nature of the gatekeeping encounter” and this feature was only present in successful interviews. In this case, Kerekes’ argument seems to be proven true, judging from the interviewer’s responses earlier in Extract 2 as compared to those in Extract 8. So for this to be possible, candidates would have to be more observant and take note of what catches the interviewer’s interest during the interview (positive politeness strategy) then capitalize on the observed grounds. Thus, learners need to be made aware that participation in employment interviews is not a passive affair where they sit and

merely answer questions like in an oral test, but is more like a conversation, where meaning is constructed based on the cooperation and active participation from all the interlocutors.

Thirdly, we identified that candidates may not be able to avoid threatening the negative face of the interviewer (in our case, by requesting for clarification or repetition). However, learners can be taught strategies to either soften the threat, or to pay deference for the incurred debt. From our data, we found that candidates employed various strategies to reduce the ‘directive’ effects of their request, hence, an indication that they are aware of the imposition incurred on the interviewer. However, they seem to be lacking in what to do after the threat has been made, especially if no redress was used prior to the threat. Learners should be made aware that when the interviewer provides clarification or repeats his question, he is in fact putting aside his ‘face’, and is in a sense, “giving gifts” to the candidate in the form of cooperation (Jaworski & Coupland 1999, p. 334). Since face-work is based on the assumption that all participants in the interaction would cooperate and reciprocate in similar face-saving manner (Goffman 1999), it is then important for learners to learn and employ politeness strategies to make amends for the threat that has been made in order to maintain a positive impression.

CONCLUSION

One limitation of this study is that these candidates may not have been consciously using the identified politeness strategies for impression management purposes. As this study was a small-scale exploratory study on this issue, candidates’ intentions were not confirmed via interviews and as such, future studies ought to examine the candidates’ own reflection of their performance during the interview in order to obtain a more triangulated perspective of politeness strategies in job interviews. Nonetheless from this study, we observed that the candidates are able to display well-mannered behaviour during the interview such as greeting and thanking the interviewer. However, considering the heightened competitiveness among graduates in the Malaysian employment market, learners (and teachers alike) may need to explore the face-related concept of politeness and politeness strategies to enhance their impression management as well as increase their performance and marketability during job interviews.

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ENDNOTES

¹ According to Malaysian Examinations Council (2006, p. 11), a student with a Band 3 MUET score is considered a “modest user” – one who is fairly fluent but with many grammatical errors yet is fairly able to understand and function in the language. A student with a Band 4 MUET score is considered a “satisfactory user” – one who is generally fluent with only some grammatical errors, and has a satisfactory understanding and ability to function the language.

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APPENDIX

The transcription system used here is adapted from the Gail Jefferson system (Jefferson 2004).

- [Marks overlapping utterances.
- = Indicates the break and subsequent continuation of a single utterance.
- (.) A short untimed pause or gap within or between utterances.
- : Colons mark the extension of a sound or syllable it follows. The more colons, the longer the sound stretch.
- ↑ Marks a rising intonation.
- ↓ Marks a falling intonation.
- word Underlining marks a word or passage said with emphasis.
- °word° Degree signs mark a passage that is said more quietly than surrounding talk.
- hhh Audible outbreaths including laughter.
- °hh Audible inhalation