

APOLOGY STRATEGIES USED BY HOTEL MANAGEMENT STUDENTS IN  
RESPONSE TO CONFLICTS AND CHALLENGES

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## DEDICATION

*Every challenging work needs self-efforts as well as guidance of from a person with experience, especially those who were very close to our heart. I dedicated my humble effort to my lovely father, Abdul Latiff Janaton bin Hariri, my mother Roziah binti Abed Kadir, my sister Noor Faiqah, my brother Muhammad Izzuddin, my nephew Aryan Al-Hafiz and my late brother in-law Mohd Ashraf bin Mohd Kilau, a strong and gentle soul who taught me to trust Allah, believes in hard work and that so much could be done with less. Thank you so much for supporting and encouraging me to believe in myself.*

*Thank you Encik Hairuddin Bin Harun for being my supervisor, for the guide, understanding, and support effort to my research.*



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## ABSTRACT

Communication is deeply intertwined in the hotel industry. Besides providing services, one cannot imagine how the industry can thrive without communication as it plays a very vital in establishing and representing the success of a hotel. Therefore, a tactical approach in communication is important to prevent further complaint or guest dissatisfaction. Apology as politeness has received countless attention in speech acts research as it is essential in human interaction. Lack of apology and politeness awareness could lead to inappropriate apology and perceived as rude by the hearer. Previously published research was conducted in several areas such as hospital, novel and daily routine. As to fulfill the research gap, the researcher found out it is vital for the researcher to carry out about apology strategies in the English language used by Diploma Hotel Management students. The qualitative data were collected through a discourse completion test (DCT) consisted of three severity of offense variable (low, medium and high severity of offense) from 30 respondents who currently undergoing practical training in a hotel in Klang Valley. Respondents were given 30 minutes to complete the DCT. Apology strategies and politeness strategies were used as a framework to analyse and interpret for apology strategy and politeness strategies by using frequencies and percentage. Finding shows respondents prefer to use numbers of apology strategies instead of only use “expression of regret” apology strategies. In terms of politeness, respondents used both negative and positive politeness as to maintain harmony to the guest and results also showed the severity of offense plays an important role in the choices of apology strategies. The findings of this research might be helpful and significance to hotel industries, educators, teachers, students and those who are interested in pragmatics in general and apology act in specific.

## ABSTRAK

Komunikasi sangat penting dalam industri perhotelan. Tanpa komunikasi sudah tentu industri perhotelan tidak dapat berkembang maju kerana dalam memberikan perkhidmatan kepada pelanggan, komunikasi tidak dapat dipisahkan. Bagaimanapun cara komunikasi yang tidak sesuai boleh menyebabkan ketidakpuasan hati pelanggan. Terdapat banyak kajian yang berfokus kepada kesantunan permohonan maaf dalam komunikasi dan pengetahuan yang rendah dalam memohon maaf boleh menyebabkan kesalahan dan ditafsirkan sebagai kurang sopan oleh pendengar. Oleh kerana terdapat banyak kajian lepas yang mengkaji strategi permohonan maaf dalam pelbagai bidang seperti hospital, novel dan kehidupan seharian, pengkaji berpendapat perlu untuk mengkaji mengenai strategi kesantunan dalam Bahasa Inggeris yang digunakan oleh pelajar Diploma Pengurusan Hotel di Malaysia bagi mengisi lompong ilmu. Data dikumpulkan dengan menggunakan (DCT) yang terdiri daripada sembilan situasi dengan tiga tahap kesalahan dari 30 responden yang menjalani latihan praktikal di hotel di kawasan Lembah Klang. Responden diberi masa selama 30 minit untuk melengkapkan DCT. Strategi memohon maaf dan strategi kesantunan digunakan sebagai model bagi menganalisa dan menginterpretasi kesantunan memohon maaf dengan menggunakan frekuensi dan peratusan. Hasil dapatan menunjukkan bahawa responden cenderung melakukan gabungan strategi permohonan maaf dari hanya menggunakan satu strategi sahaja. Gabungan kesantunan negatif dan positif untuk digunakan dan juga tahap kesalahan yang berbeza mempengaruhi cara permohonan maaf responden. Penemuan penyelidikan ini dapat memberi manfaat kepada industri hotel, pendidik, guru, pelajar dan mereka yang berminat dalam pragmatik secara umum dan permohonan maaf secara spesifik.

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## LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

### Proceedings:

- (i) Preliminary Study On Identifying Factor That Influence Job Satisfaction Among Hospitality Graduates In Hotel Industry
- (ii) Students' Feedback on Learning Skills to Enhance MUET Result
- (iii) Malaysian Public University Students' Challenging Skills to Pass Malaysian University English Test (MUET)
- (iv) When Apologizing, A Hotel Management Student Uses Politeness Strategies.
- (v) Politeness Strategies Used by Hotel Management Student in Doing Apologies.



## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Introduction

People travel for a certain reason, such as business purposes, entertainment, relaxation, visiting family and friends and others. Traveling inadvertently contributes to the growth of the destination. According to the report by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture Malaysia (2017), 26.8 million tourists have come to Malaysia in 2016 and experienced an increasing of 4.0% compared to 2015 by 25.7 million tourists. The top 10 tourist generating markets in Malaysia in 2016 were Singapore (13.3 million), Indonesia (3.1 million), China (2.1), Thailand (1.8 million), Brunei (1.4 million), India (0.64 million), South Korea (0.44 million), Philippines (0.42 million), Japan (0.41 million) and the United Kingdom (0.40 million). The Ministry of Tourism and Culture Malaysia (2017) also added tourism industry contributed eighty-two point one billion Ringgits (RM82.1b) of revenue in 2017 and targeting increase to one hundred sixty-eight billion Ringgit (RM168b) by the year of 2020.

The tourism industry is a huge category of fields within the service sector. According to Langvinienė and Daunoravičiūtė (2015) tourism industry can be classified into four (4) subsector such as accommodation service, catering service, tourism services and other hospitality service such as gambling club, spa and entertainment. However, in this research, researcher only focuses on hotel industry or accommodation. The hotel industry usually does not stands alone and associates with many types of industry such as the transportation industry, the tourism industry, and the food service industry. There are 4512 numbers of hotels registered in Malaysia with a total of 292,293 rooms (Ministry of Tourism and Culture, 2019). Hotel operators cover the range of skills and abilities from managerial, professional and

executive, technical and supervisory, clerical and related occupations, last but not least general workers. According to the report by the Department of Statistic Malaysia, in 2014 there were 112, 670 workers in the hotel industry and increased to 154,000 workers in 2017.

According to Buntat et al. (2013), to choose the appropriate employee, employers will not only be focusing on excellent academic result, but also looking for other soft skills such as the ability to communicate effectively and have good manners. Several studies have reported that one of the soft skills that required by employers is the ability to communicate politely (Williams & Williams, 2015). Seetha (2014) stated, any employers in whatever industry hoping the employees who fulfil the job vacancies must have good knowledge about the job, good attitude, good communication skills and also willing to learn new things while working. Additionally, mastering the communication skills are preferred by the employers (Hassan & Mohd, 2000). Specifically, in the hotel business context, it appears in the form of host and guests' conversation, where tourists act as guests and hotel employees act as hosts. Hosts in the hotel company must have a goal to provide satisfying and memorable experience for guests. Hence, they must not only have skills in providing services, but also must know how to communicate well and use appropriate nuances of politeness.

Expressions of politeness could be achieved by saying something that makes the addressee feels important by showing appreciation towards what the addressee has done or said or simply by not saying something that can potentially offend or humiliate the addressee (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Shukla (2009) explains the various purposes of politeness such as to develop an attractive personality, to ease business transaction and to avoid having enemies. Khair and Rohaida (2005) added, using politeness during communication may create a friendlier relationship and avoid any conflict to take place. Guest are willing to allocate certain amount of money to experience the product and services provided by the hotel. Sometimes they need some relaxation and peace of mind after hard work. Therefore, lack of politeness and apology awareness might cause frustration and avoid the guest to come again. According to Othman (2005), a language that's been used by an individual may reflect on her or his personality. Thus, hiring the best employee with good personality is a bonus to the hotel company as the employee will present the best image of the hotel.

According to Babakus et al. (2003), receive complaints is a normal situation in the service industry. According to Trosborg (1995), the complaint is a speech act which people express their negative feeling because of displeasure or annoyance as a reaction to past or ongoing action. An apology and correcting the problem is usually necessary in order to make the service recovery. Apologies as politeness strategies or devices (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Holmes, 1990) are keys for remediation of restoration and the wrongdoing of one's relationship between the apologizer and apologizee. It is important to note that the hotel industry has the highest potential in receiving complaints because of the business nature that need host and guest to interact during providing and consuming the product or services. Therefore, it is imperative that making apologies reflect politeness of internationally accepted standards and quality.

According to Denghua et al. (2016), by saying sorry alone is not enough, companies should do effective apology as to gain consumer forgiveness and start the reconciliation process. Moreover, apology is variously defined. According to Collins Cobuild Advanced Dictionary (2009), an apology is "a word or a statement that a person says or writes to show or tell someone for doing something wrong or causing a problem". Tedeschi and Norman (1985) define apology as a confession of responsibility and normally accompanied by regret for the harm happened. According to Holmes (1990), an apology is not only being done in remedying offences, but also for improvement of relationships and restoration. Winch (2011), describe that apology is an art, which apologies may produce a positive or negative outcome depending on how one crafts it. However, in certain situation, due to an ineffective and poor strategy of service recovery, it may let down the customer for the second time (Lewis and McCann, 2004). Therefore, working with words to solve conflict can bring another conflict because of wrongly chosen words (Piyanoot, 2015).

Hence, politeness among adolescents who are later will enter the workforce industry are vital accordance with the National Education Philosophy that produces physically, spiritually and intellectually balanced people. Furthermore, the importance of politeness is also clearly expressed in the fifth Principles of the State "Kesopanan Dan Kesusilaan" or in English as "Courtesy and Morality".

## 1.2 Background of the Study

Communication is deeply intertwined in the hotel industry. Besides providing services, one cannot imagine how the industry can thrive without communication as it plays a very vital role in establishing and representing the success of the hotel. There are so many situations that need the hosts to communicate with the guest such as handling complaints, handling requests, handling disagreement and assisting guests to feel relax and comfortable.

As previously mention, tourism industries in Malaysia received millions of tourists from all over the world; therefore, the ability of using English appropriately is very important. According to Blue and Harun (2003), the frontline staff (as hosts) in the hotel industry must be competent to communicate in English. The usage of the English language by the hospitality and tourism practitioners plays an important role in satisfying customers' needs. This is supported by Kuo (2007) in her journal stated that American travellers stressed elements such as have adequate command of English as the one factor of satisfactions. So, mastering the English will actually help mastering soft skills in the workplace. This is because people do judge others by the way of speaking. Beside of mastering the English language, courtesy or politeness is the main aspect of customer satisfaction, according to Kyriakidou and Gore (2005), during transmitting information to the guest, the host must do in a way that complies with politeness.

However, poor staff attitude or inappropriate ways of communication may lead to complaint and guest dissatisfaction. In this research, the researcher chose TripAdvisor as the platform towards understanding online review about a hotel. TripAdvisor has been considered as one of the most noticeable online review sites for hotels (Torres et al., 2015). TripAdvisor (2013) allows customers to share their experiences and this information takes into account for the rankings. According to Levy et al. (2013), TripAdvisor is the world's largest and most popular travel site for the authors obtained customers' reviews. The obtained data on complaints about employee rudeness given in Table 1.1 show clearly the number of complaints increased from 2012 to 2019 with totaled 28 complained. From this evidence, the researcher may interpret that politeness gained increasing important as serious focus and practice in Malaysia.

Table 1.1: Number of Complaints on Rudeness of Hotel Hosts in Malaysia Taken from TripAdvisor from 2012-2019

Number of Complaints on Rudeness of Hotel Hosts in Malaysia								
2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
2	1	0	4	4	1	4	12	28

Source: TripAdvisor (tripadvisor.com.my)

From the table given, it shows that the number of complaints of rudeness increases starting from 2012 until 2019. According to Azhari (2015) he concluded that there are two problems related, first the employees have problems with attitude itself and second is employees is not competent in communicate in English, sometimes choosing wrong words and simply translate from mother tongue into English language that led to rudeness although the employees did not mean to. In other words, people who master in grammar and vocabulary, still has the potential to communicate culturally appropriate.

Regarding this, Paramasivam and Mohamed Nor (2013) stated that it is hard for foreign language speakers to choose appropriate strategies of speech act. Not only Malaysian, Thai people working in the tourism industry also rated using inappropriate words in speaking as the most serious problem (Prachanant, 2012). There are several factors that lead to the breakdown of communication between English practiced as a second language and a native English speaker.

First, Malaysia is a multicultural country. There are three main ethnic such as Malay, Chinese and Indian plus numerous numbers of small ethnic such as Punjabi, and also Sabah and Sarawak ethnic. The national language in Malaysia is Bahasa Malaysia or also known as Bahasa Melayu and other vernacular languages and dialect such as Tamil, Mandarin. Usually, English language practiced as a second language in Malaysia which may influence by their native language (Yule, 1996).

The second factor is pragmatic which concern with appropriateness and politeness. Employees may seem impolite to customers even when they don't mean it due to pragmatic competence failure. Pragmatic competence has been conceptualized by many scholars. According to Wolfson (1989) pragmatic competence is about comprehend and produce a socially appropriate language function in discourse. According to Kasper and Rose (2002), pragmatic is the study of communicative action in its sociocultural context. Pragmatic is about language in use. To ensure pragmatic competence, English as second language learners should need to acquire

not only linguistic rules, but also sociolinguistics rules of language use to perform the speech act appropriately. Pragmatic is divided into two parts; pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics. Pragmalinguistics is about the appropriateness of form and sociopragmatics is appropriateness of meaning in social contexts (Leech, 1983). However, English learners often tend to transfer their native language pragmatic strategies to the target language (Olshtain & Cohen, 1989). According to Syarifuddin (2017), learning target language knowledge itself cannot guarantee success in real life communication in the target culture. Learners must learn pragmatic competence of the target language which later able to choose appropriate language in different context (Hymes, 1972). Therefore, it is necessary for the English learners to be properly taught about pragmatic rules about other language. If not, English learners will tend to transfer their native language pragmatic strategies in the target language. This has been supported by El Samaty, (2005) where English learners are likely to transfer their own language rules in the English language production. Even the most basic greeting can lead to cultural misunderstanding. For example, if a Malay speaker are not aware the differences in greeting expressions for native English. Malay might tend to say “Where are you going?” were actually in Malay is “Hendak ke mana tu?”, the addressee may assume the addresser is imposing the addressee freedom where actually the Malay try to be friendly. Hence this will lead to miscommunication between the two speakers.

Third, according to Aizat (2015), it has been found that the curriculum and syllabi in the Malaysian primary, secondary and tertiary education levels as well as professional training did not provide comprehensive coverage of the criteria for politeness. He added the Malaysian Ministry of Human Resources (MOHR) slightly highlights the very basic features of politeness such as ‘please’ and ‘sorry’. However, according to Aizat (2015), he found out that using apology taxonomies and politeness strategies, curriculum in Malaysia did not provide comprehensive coverage about it. Dubey-Jhaveri (2019) also added, it is difficult for us Malaysian to learn English social norms because we are surrounded by our own native language culture and lack of opportunities to socialize in English. College and universities should alert to the problem arise. As according to Abdullah (2007), in order for the student to compete with others in the industry, students must be prepared to meet the industry requirement. According to Yamao et al. (2013) and Owen et al. (2011),



education provided by any institution must link with the real situations of communication in order to help in developing student careers.

In the hotel context, according to Barbara and Pamela (2004), the highly interaction between hosts and guests sometimes may cause service failure to occur. Chua, Othman, Boo, Abkarim, & Ramachandran (2010), service failures may occur because of service, facilities, employees' behaviour, product, and the process of delivery or any combination of them. Besides, Bitner, Booms, and Stanfield-Tetreault (1999) added, sometimes service failure arises from spontaneous employees' action. Dutta et al. (2007) explained in hotels and restaurants, service failures are mainly because of unfriendly staff, slow or unavailable services and incorrect billing. In a study of Chung & Hoffman (1998), missing reservation and undelivered promises are situations of service failure. Lewis and McCann (2004) revealed that almost 62% of the respondents ranked slow restaurant service as the commonest service failure encountered followed by inefficient staff (60.3%) and slow check-in /out (50.5%). A guest who is facing service failure usually dissatisfied and want the actions of responsible by making a complaint (Lai, Yu, & Kuo, 2010). As the problems occurred, host need to take action as to fix back the problem and not only by apology.

Apologies received huge attention in pragmatic research as politeness is essential in human interaction. Politeness might differ across culture. In intercultural communication, lack of apology awareness, could lead to offense both in producing the appropriate apology and perceiving the intended meaning from the speaker. According to Ellis (1994), English language learners experience difficulty in making apology. Therefore, there researcher has chosen to carry out research on apology strategies in Malaysian hotel context.

### **1.3 Problem of Statement**

Efficient communication, especially in the hospitality industry may consider as necessary in order to establish good relationship. It is important to note that the hotel industry has the highest potential in receiving complaints because of the business nature that need host and guest to interact during providing and consuming the

product and services. Therefore, it is imperative that making apologies reflect politeness of internationally accepted standards and quality.

However, English language learner perceived apology as a complex interaction. Dincer and Alrawadieh (2017) pointed out in his research that the hotel service staff choose a wrong phrase while communicating with guests that may fall into less polite. Worst, working with words to solve conflict can bring another conflict because of wrongly chosen words (Rattananukool, 2015). Learning vocabulary and grammar of English language is not enough. Educator should increase the awareness of differences existing in making speech of act among learner native language and English language. Many studies have shown that even proficient English learner still unable to produce language that is socially and culturally appropriate. (Shamsudin, 2020; Syarifuddin, 2017; Hwang, 2008). Also, various factors such as gender, status, age, severity of offense influence production of apology of English learners.

The discussion in the previous sections, highlight the necessary for the English learners to be properly taught about pragmatic rules about other language. According to Azhari (2015), the English curriculum and syllabi in the Malaysian primary, secondary and tertiary education levels as well as professional training did not provide comprehensive coverage of the criteria for politeness. He added the Malaysian Ministry of Human Resources (MOHR) slightly highlights the very basic features of politeness such as 'please' and 'sorry'. Dubey-Jhaveri (2019) also added, it is difficult for us Malaysian to learn English social norms because we are surrounded by our own native language culture and lack of opportunities to socialize in English. According to Syarifuddin (2017), learning target language knowledge itself cannot guarantee success in real life communication in the target culture. Learners must learn pragmatic competence of the target language which in result will enable them to appropriate language in different context. If not, English learners will tend to transfer their native language pragmatic strategies in the target language.

Although politeness is a universal value, it is uttered in diverse ways across different nations. Expressions, words, or even body language signals that acceptable in a given society, might be considered rude or insulting in other society. There was a study conducted which resulted with a finding that Malaysian rarely apologize when mistakes happened and spoke in harsh manners with customers. (Rosli, 2009). Robert and Yasumi (2014) states that Malaysian is the most reluctant to apologize



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