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FTA and Politeness Strategies in Prospective Students' Personal Statements to Apply for A Master's Program Abroad

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Article Info

Abstract

Face threatening acts (FTAs) are sometimes unavoidable in communication. Thus, politeness strategies to soften the FTAs are needed to mitigate the risk of face loss. This study was aimed to investigate FTAs, politeness strategies and factors that influenced the choice of politeness strategies in prospective students' personal statements to apply for a master's program abroad. This research applied descriptive qualitative method. In collecting the data, the writer used documentary method to gather 11 personal statements from prospective master students. The data were analyzed based on politeness theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). The results showed that all eleven successful personal statements contained both face threatening acts and politeness strategies. The total face threatening acts found were 147 including the acts that threatened both the positive and negative face. Among all FTAs, boasting became the highest occurrence. From four strategies in doing FTAs, only positive politeness and negative politeness were used. The highest occurrence of positive politeness was being optimistic, and using hedge for negative politeness strategy. Power, distance, rank of imposition, type of FTA and gender became the factors that influenced the choice of politeness strategies.

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INTRODUCTION

Politeness is one of the important aspects of the language use in an interaction. When people interact, they use politeness strategies to soften the threat to each other's face. The present study investigates face threatening acts, politeness strategies, and factors which influenced the choice of politeness strategies in prospective students' personal statements to apply for a master's program abroad. This study is motivated by the fact that many Indonesian students decide to apply for continuing study abroad every year. Studying abroad has numerous benefits not only in educational and academic domain, but also in intercultural, social and communicative skills. Being an international student can broaden knowledge and deepen expertise in global educational settings.

One of the requirements to apply for studying abroad is personal statement. Filling out the application forms and working on the personal statements often becomes students' real difficulty. The application is extremely important because it is the initial means of communication with the prospective universities or funding parties for scholarships. Therefore, it must capture their attention. Moreover, since the personal statement is in written text, the interlocutors are invisible. This can lead into a difficult and challenging situation, especially for foreign language learners.

Bhatia (1993) in Ding (2006) states that personal statement or the graduate school application letter, as an academic promotional genre serves as one of the most important documents in the graduate school admission process. Ideally, to gain admission, personal statements need to present the highlights of self introduction, academic and professional qualifications, study plan, interests and motivation in studying in the target field, future contribution,even strengths and weaknesses. However, they also need to avoid grossly excessive self-praise and elevation. It should be designed to show the high-profiled image but without sounding too boastful.

Despite its importance, face threatening acts and politeness strategies in personal statements have received very little attention. Hence, this research aims to explore such writings within the framework of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987). Moreover, since it is the pragmatic issue that has developed in this context, the students are non native English speakers, and have no cultural experience of living in English speaking countries, it is interesting to examine whether or not the students realized face threatening acts and politeness theory in writing the personal statements.

On Politeness and Face

Goffman (1967:5) describes the concept of face as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Thomas (1995:168-169) stated that the term 'face' in the sense of 'reputation' and good name' has been used widely in phrases such as 'losing face' and 'saving face'.

Face includes two components, positive face and negative face. Positive face is the need to be liked and to maintain a positive self-image. This is the want to be desired or accepted. Negative face is the need for autonomy and for the freedom of thought or action. This is the want to be unimpeded by others (Brown and Levinson, 1987:61).

Face Threatening Acts

Face threatening acts (FTAs) can be defined as any action or utterance that threatens positive or negative face. Kedveš (2013:435) states that positive FTAs threaten face by expressing the speaker's negative evaluation of the hearer's positive face, e.g., disapproval, insults, accusations, complaints, contradictions, disagreements. Meanwhile, negative FTAs can threaten to the hearer when they place pressure on the hearer to perform or not to perform a particular action; e.g. advice, suggestions, requests, orders, reminders, warning, promise, offers, or strong feeling such as anger, compliments, and admiration.

Brown and Levinson's Politeness Strategies

Politeness strategies are developed in communication to avoid face-threatening acts in order to make the harmonious relationship between the interactants.
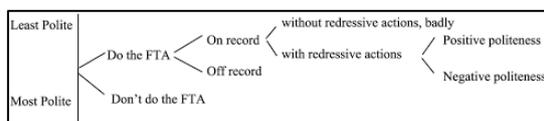

Figure 1. Brown and Levinson's Politeness Strategies

Based on the figure above, there are five main choices of politeness strategies that can be applied in communication: (1) Bald-on-Record, (2) Positive Politeness, (3) Negative Politeness, (4) Off-Record, and (5) Don't Do the FTA. The choice of the strategies depends on the risk of face loss. The more an act threatens the speaker's or the hearer's face, the more it needs a higher-numbered politeness strategy.

METHODS

In this study, a descriptive qualitative research was used since the main purpose of the study was to analyze the face threatening acts, politeness strategies, and their factors in personal statements. Face theory and politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) was employed because this was the most appropriate design to analyze the face threatening acts and politeness strategies.

The object of study was eleven successful personal statements written by Indonesian students from many departments and universities in Indonesia in applying for a master's degree in several universities abroad in the United Kingdom, the United States, the Netherlands, Japan, Italy, and South Korea.

From eleven successful personal statements, eight of them were obtained personally by request since the writers had known the applicants, from the same almamater, Semarang State University. Meanwhile, the rest three of them were obtained from the internet where the applicants freely published them on their personal blogs after

ensuring that the personal statements were successful to apply for a master's degree.

These data were gathered and identified by choosing the sentences which contain face threatening acts, politeness strategies, and how a form is used strategically in order to achieve the students' goals. From selected sentences containing FTAs and politeness strategies, classification was made to categorize the type of FTAs, politeness strategies, and their factors.

Triangulation

According to Merriam (2002), there are some strategies which a qualitative researcher needs to be ethical and trustworthy. A technique to ensure the trustworthiness of data by employing something outside the data to investigate or to compare the data is called as triangulation.

This study was triangulated by using theory triangulation. Through this type, the researcher is going to use theoretical perspective to examine and interpret the data. The theoretical perspective is theory of face threatening acts and politeness strategies by Brown and Levinson (1987). Furthermore, two supervisors as linguistic experts were involved to re-check and analyse the triangulation of data in this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The data were gathered and then were classified from the findings comprise pseudonym, gender, department, master university, and country as illustrated in Table 1.

The above table shows that the total number of participants was eleven and all of them were Indonesian from many different educational background. There were five male students and six female students. All of them had finished undergraduate degree from many universities in Indonesia. The participants' first language of communication was Indonesian, so English was not their mother tongue. All of their personal statements was written in English and

successfully accepted in good accredited master program at several universities abroad.

Table 1. General Information about the Respondents

Pseudonym	Gender	Department	Master University
Applicant 1	Female	English Education	Kyushu University, Japan
Applicant 2	Female	English Education	FLTA, USA
Applicant 3	Male	English Education	Ohio State University, USA
Applicant 4	Female	English Education	Ohio State University, USA
Applicant 5	Male	Mathematics Education	University of Nottingham, UK
Applicant 6	Female	English Education	University of Birmingham, UK
Applicant 7	Female	English Education	Ohio State University, USA
Applicant 8	Male	Computer Engineering	Kwangwoon University, South Korea
Applicant 9	Male	English Education	Ohio State University, USA
Applicant 10	Female	French	University of Bologna, Italy
Applicant 11	Male	Forest Products Technology	Wageningen University, Netherlands

Face Threatening Acts

This study highlighted the negative and positive FTAs which damage the addressee's face, as well as the applicant depending on the interaction. Four different types of FTAs were identified altogether. The following table shows the concrete numbers of FTAs used by the applicants, divided into four types, negative to the addressee, negative to the applicant, positive to the addressee, and positive to the applicant.

The exploration of personal statements resulted in a total of 147 detected FTAs from all eleven personal statements, which indicated an average of 13,36 FTAs per personal statement. The FTAs were categorized into positive or negative and aimed towards the applicant or the addressee. The figure presented in Table 4.2 revealed that positive FTAs occurred more frequently than negative FTAs, although negative FTAs have more vast majority of type rather than positive FTA. The positive FTAs which posed a threat to the addressee is higher than positive FTAs which threaten the applicant's face.

Table 2. Types of Face Threatening Acts

Face Threatening Acts	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Negative	38	25.85
To the addressee		
Offer	1	0.68
Suggestion	3	2.04
Promise	29	19.73
To the applicant		
Expressing thanks	5	3.40
Positive	109	74.66
To the addressee		
Boasting	95	64.63
To the applicant		
Emotion leakage	6	4.08
Self humiliation	8	5.44
Total	147	100

Positive FTA which was aimed to the addressee, in this case only boasting, got the highest number (64,63%) among all FTAs. Each student has boasting expression on their personal statements. On the other hand, positive FTAs which aimed to the applicants occurred 14 times in total, including 6 statements of self humiliation and 8 statements of emotion leakage. The number of negative FTAs was less than positive FTAs. These personal statements only contained four types of negative FTAs: negative FTA to the addressee, which was promise, suggestion, offer; and negative FTA to the applicant, which was expression of thanks.

Promise

In the negative FTA, promise gets the highest number which occurred in 31 sentences. Most of them occurred in the students' promises when they plan to go to back to Indonesia to give contribution after finishing the master program. One example of the data were described below.

Hopefully, after I finished studying in the United States, I will make some improvements in English teaching in my country and make a contribution to the development of the nation as well.

In the datum, Applicant 3 hoped and promised that after finishing his study in the United States, he will make better improvements for his nation, Indonesia. This is very important since many funding parties presuppose their applicants to go back to their countries after finishing the program.

Expressing Thanks

Expressing thanks is instrinsically face threatening because it can threaten the addresor's negative face, i.e. freedom of action and freedom of imposition. The example of expressing thanks was found four times in the data of some applicant's personal statements. One of them is detailed as follow.

Thank you for considering my candidacy for the master's degree program in TEFL in University of Birmingham.

Some applicants expressed their thankful expressions to the admission committee of the university or funding parties once in their personal statement, as written by Applicant 6 above. The expression of thanks implied that he was hopeful that the personal statements and the application would be considered to be accepted.

Boasting

Boasting becomes the highest FTA might becaused that personal statements should give good first impression and self-image. All of the students boast on their personal statements.

In 2012, for instance, I was the winner of Scientific Writing Competition in Central Java, Second winner of outstanding student competition in

Mathematics Department and finalist of national essay competition in Surakarta.

Boasting was mostly done by applicants in showing their activities which were relevant to their goals of study and working experience, their good GPA, strong motivation and life goal, and academic background and achievements such as aforementioned by Applicant 5. All these expressions were used to show off their strength, skills, and desire to be accepted in the prospective universities or to be funded by scholarship.

Politeness Strategies

Besides face threatening acts, this study also investigated the use of politeness strategies in the data. From 4 possible strategies in doing FTAs as stated by Brown and Levinson (1987:69), only two of them were found in this study, i.e. positive politeness and negative politeness. The frequency of politeness strategies is shown on the table below.

Table 3. The Frequency of Politeness Strategies

No	Politeness Strategy	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Bald-on-Record	0	0,00
2	**Positive Politeness**	**148**	**80,87**
	(1) Exaggerate sympathy	2	1,17
	(2) Intensify interest to the addressee	44	25,73
	(3) Presuppose, raise, assert common ground	26	15,20
	(4) Assume, assert reciprocity	3	1,75
	(5) Be optimistic	62	36,26
	(6) Give reason	11	6,43
3	**Negative Politeness**	**35**	**19,13**
	(1) Use question, hedge	29	16,96
	(2) Be pessimistic	1	0,58
	(3) Give deference	5	2,92
4	Off-Record	0	0,00
Total		**183**	**100**

From the table, there was no bald-on-record either off-record strategies found in the personal statements, hence, this study focused only to the positive and negative politeness strategies. There were 183 sentences containing politeness strategies on the personal statements for total positive and negative politeness, 148 positive politeness and 35 negative politeness.

Be Optimistic

Be optimistic became the highest positive politeness among the other politeness strategies. It occurred in each personal statement since every student used it with the hope that their application would be accepted by the prospective universities and funding parties.

I'm sure by participating in Master CLE Erasmus Mundus Scholarship Program I will earn more knowledge and valuable experience, and at the same time share it with other people for a better future of us all.

The aforementioned datum was taken from Applicant 10's personal statement in being optimistic that her participation in the master program would be valuable knowledge and experience for better future.

Use Question, Hedge

Hedge means word or phrase that modifies the degree of membership of a predicate or noun phrase in a set of sentence.

I think I have carefully planned my study program in Japan.

As shown in the above sentences written by the applicants, this group of pragmatic markers was oriented towards the addressee. By using the subjectivity markers, such *I think*, the applicant softened the content of the sentence and indicated that the message should be viewed by the addressee just as the applicant's personal view.

Factors Influencing the Choice of Politeness Strategies

Brown and Levinson (1987:228) argued there are three social determinants when choosing the politeness strategies to hinder the threat. They are Power (P), Distance (D) and Rank of imposition (R). The combination of these three valueswill indicate the importance of the FTAs, which in succession have an impact on the strategy which is employed.

Power

It was clearly found that all applicants had lower level of power than the addressee. Seeing from the power and the role-set in the

relationship, the applicant had less power because the addressee was the one who would consider the status of the applicants, whether they would accept or reject them for a master's program.

Dear Dr. R (abbreviated)

By giving deference with full academic honorific title, Applicant 3 showed more polite way in writing their personal statements to the addressee. Since the applicant essentially stood lower than the addressee in social and hierarchical position, it was expected that the applicants had reason to be more polite, and the addressee was less. One of the proof was by giving deference to the addressee, which meant that the addressee had higher social status than the applicants.

Distance

Between the applicants and addressee, it was found that the social distance (D) was high, because they were not closely related. Even they were strangers. The applicants used formal language, which implied high distance between them and the addressee, because the applicants did not know the addressee well and mostly did not know him or her at all.

Rank of Imposition

Furthermore, seeing from the ranking of imposition, the topic stated in the personal statements was complicated. Therefore, the FTA given to the addressees might be great, because the ranking of imposition was great since it was used to apply for a master's program abroad and scholarship. The applicants imposed on the addressee much in order to be accepted in the prospective universities, so they used very polite strategies in uttering their meanings. Since all the applicants implicitly requested to be accepted in the prospective universities or funding parties, the weight of the imposition was almost the same.

Type of FTA

Besides power, distance and rank of imposition, it was found that there was another factor which could be added, i.e. type of FTA.

Type of FTA also influenced the choice of politeness strategy. For example, in doing boasting, many applicants mostly combined it with two politeness strategies, intensify interest to the addressee and be optimistic. Although there were other politeness strategies combined with this type of FTA, both politeness strategies were mostly used. To get a clear picture of this matter, Table 3 showed the most frequent combination for each FTA in the data.

Table 4. Combination between Type of FTA and Politeness Strategies

FTA	Politeness Strategies	Frequency
Boasting	Be Optimistic	19
Emotion Leakage	Be Optimistic	2
Self Humiliation	Be Optimistic	3
Offer	Assume/Assert Reciprocity	1
Suggestion	Presuppose, raise, assert common ground	2
Promise	Be Optimistic	17
Expressing Thanks	Be Optimistic	4

Combination of FTA boasting and politeness strategy be optimistic occurred the most frequent compared to other combination. It happened in 19 combinations wrote by the applicants in their personal statements. One of the example was given by Applicant 9 as shown in datum below.

Specifically,I do really hope that the presence of several international accepted professionals in the field of English Language Teaching offered by Ohio State University can help me in pursuing the dream I have I hope this letter of intent supports my application to Ohio State University and demonstrates that I am a passionate student who will learn at my fullest-capacity.

In his first sentence, he showed his optimism by hoping that his prospective major offered by the university could help him in pursuing his dream. Later, he followed it by being boasting in stating that he was a passionate student who would learn hard.

Gender

Lakoff (1975) agreed that women are generally more polite and women's language as powerless. She listed a number of attributes of women's language, including the politeness tokens hedges and tag questions.This present study looked at individual gender of each applicant inwriting to addressees whose gender were mostly unknown.
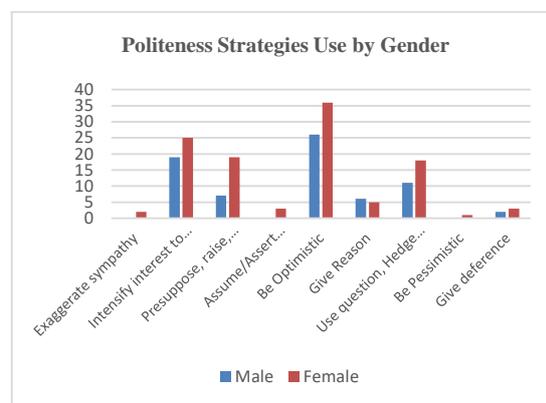

Figure2. Politeness Strategies Use by Gender

The following figure shows that female in this study were more polite than male, 112 to 71 for the total of positive and negative politeness strategies. The total number of each gender participated in this study was different, 6 women and 5 men. However, this did not lead to miscalculation since the difference between them is relatively high. The result above is possibly supportive of Lakoff's claim that women are more polite than men. However, more work is needed to further test this possible trend since different languages realize their politeness systems differently (Amundrud, 2012:185).

CONCLUSION

All eleven successful personal statements contained both face threatening acts and politeness strategies as proposed by Brown and Levinson. The total face threatening acts found were 147 sentences including the acts which

threatened both the positive and negative face. Acts that threatened positive face were boasting, self-humiliation, and emotion leakage. Meanwhile the acts that threatened negative face were in the form of offer, suggestion, promise, and expressing thanks.

In mitigating the FTAs, students also implemented some politeness strategies in the personal statements. From four strategies in doing FTAs as proposed by Brown and Levinson, only two of them were used, positive politeness and negative politeness. Meanwhile, both bald-on-record and off-record strategies were not found at all. There were 183 sentences containing politeness strategies on the personal statements.

There were five factors which influenced the choice of politeness strategies: power, distance, rank of imposition, type of FTA and gender. All applicants had lower level of power than the addressee, high social distance and rank of imposition type of FTA was also considered in choosing politeness strategies, for example boasting and promise were combined with be optimistic. It also can be concluded that women are more polite than men for each politeness strategies.

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