SPEECH ACT OF COMPLAINTS AMONG LOW ENGLISH PROFICIENCY
SPEAKERS

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To my beloved parents, husband and daughter
for their Love, Prayer and Support

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"In the name of ALLAH, the Most Gracious and Most Merciful"

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ABSTRACT

Speech act of complaint is one of the face threatening acts (FTA). In Malaysian Polytechnic syllabus, one of the skills tested in English course is on the speech act of complaint. Teachers realize that students have difficulties when performing the act of complaint based on the assessment given to them in their English class. The study of the speech act of complaints has been done by many researchers, however, in Malaysian context they are very limited studies among low English proficiency speakers. The study aims to investigate the complaint strategies employed by low English proficiency speakers (both male and female) as well as the politeness strategies adopted by using the politeness theory of Brown and Levinson (1987). 80 Malay Polytechnic students equally both male and female respondents were selected to be the respondents. The instrument used was Discourse Completion Test (DCT) containing five different scenarios of making complaints ranging from different level of power differences. The students' responses on complaints scenarios were then coded in terms of seven major categories: expression of annoyance, interrogation, explicit complaint, accusation, justification and request for repair. The result indicated that the highest number of frequency for complaint strategies employed by low proficiency speakers is request for repair and the least was expression of annoyance. Generally, low English proficiency speakers seemed to adopt negative politeness and the study identified that there was no significant difference between male and female in their preference of complaints strategies and politeness strategies. Due to the limited English proficiency of the speakers, this study found that learners were not able to make appropriate complaints. Low English proficiency speakers preferred to initiate complaints explicitly regardless of different power relation. The study has its implication towards teaching speech acts where exposure should be given to the learners in terms of phrases and clauses in a variety of complaint scenarios depending on the different power relation in order to help learners to make an appropriate complaint in the target language.

ABSTRAK

Lakuan bahasa komplen merupakan satu pertuturan yang bersifat mengugut air muka. Di politeknik, salah satu perkara yang dinilai di dalam silibus Bahasa Inggeris Komunikasi adalah berkenaan dengan lakuan bahasa komplen dan guru mendapati bahawa pelajar masih mempunyai masalah untuk menyampaikan bahasa lakuan komplen dengan betul. Kajian mengenai lakuan bahasa komplen telah banyak dijalankan namun di Malaysia, kajian ini kurang dilaksanakan khususnya terhadap pelajar Melayu yang mempunyai yang mempunyai penguasaan Bahasa Inggeris yang lemah. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengenalpasti jenis-jenis strategi lakuan bahasa komplen dan konsep kesantunan mengikut teori Brown dan Levinson (1987) yang digunakan oleh pelajar lelaki dan perempuan yang lemah penguasaan Bahasa Inggeris. Seramai 80 orang pelajar dipilih sebagai sampel kajian. Data diperolehi melalui jawapan pelajar terhadap lima jenis komplen menggunakan ujian selesai wacana (*Discourse Completion Test*) yang di kategorikan mengikut perbezaan kuasa relative. Jawapan pelajar kemudiannya di analisa berdasarkan kepada tujuh jenis lakuan bahasa komplen; ungkapan kegusaran, soal siasat, aduan yang jelas, tuduhan, justifikasi, dan permintaan untuk pembaikan. Secara keseluruhannya, permintaan untuk pembaikan menunjukkan kekerapan yang paling tinggi dan ungkapan kegusaran adalah merupakan kekerapan yang paling rendah. Selain itu pelajar juga memilih kesantunan negatif dan kajian menunjukkan tiada sebarang perbezaan jantina terhadap pemilihan jenis strategi lakuan bahasa komplen dan kesantunan. Oleh kerana pelajar mempunyai penguasaan Bahasa Inggeris yang lemah, kajian ini mendapati bahawa pelajar tidak dapat menggunakan lakuan bahasa komplen dengan betul yang mana pelajar memilih untuk memulakan komplen dengan menggunakan strategi aduan yang jelas tanpa mengira perbezaan kuasa relatif. Kajian ini member implikasi terhadap pengajaran lakuan baahasa yang mane guru harus mendedahkan kepada pelajar jenis-jenis frasa yang sesuai untuk lakuan bahasa komplen berdasarkan kepada pelbagai contoh senario komplen untuk membantu pelajar menggunakan lakuan bahasa komplen yang betul dalam Bahasa Inggeris.

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INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

Learning a language is more than just understanding the rules of grammar but it includes the understanding of the use of the language as well. According to Tanck (2002), speakers who seem fluent in the foreign language using good grammar may still lack of pragmatic competence if they do not know how to produce the language correctly both culturally and socially. This is further supported by Kasper (1997) in Umar (2006) affirms that linguistic and pragmatic should be learned and developed systematically.

Pragmatic competence is defined as the ability to perform language function appropriately in any social context. A failure in pragmatic competency can cause communication breakdown or is likely to be considered as being rude or unfriendly. When learning a second language, non-native speakers would find that pragmatic competency is actually difficult to master due to many reasons: namely the L1 interference, not having enough exposure and resources on the target language, thus

making it extra difficult for learners who have low English proficiency level. In general, second language learners start learning the target language when they already mastered their L1. This has caused L2 learners to be unable to communicate effectively and end up translating the target language from their L1. At this point, learners do not only perform a linguistic failure but also the pragmatic failure. Luo and Goa (2011) states that when speakers make grammatical mistakes, it means that they speak badly, and if the speakers do not speak appropriately it means that they behave badly. Therefore, pragmatic competency is very important for L2 learners in order to have a successful communication.

One of the pragmatic issues commonly discussed by many researchers is the study of the speech act among non-native speakers. In fact, speech act theory has been introduced in many English modules in order to equip learners with pragmatic competency. Speech act is one of the theories in pragmatic that help learners to understand and use the language appropriately. The performing of speech act considers few aspects such as the hearer, the relationship with the hearer, the purpose, the topic, sociolinguistic differences and so on. The knowledge of speech acts enable learners to understand the different functions of language in everyday communication.

Making complaints is one of the many speech acts that exist in daily communication. Like other speech acts, complaint occurs in all languages. It is a minimal unit of linguistic that contains a set of utterances to express dissatisfaction and unhappy feeling that seek for remediation. Speech act of complaint is an important aspect in communication and one needs to know how to do complaints in order to save the face of the hearer. Many have found that making complaint is difficult in second language. Even for proficient speakers, making complaint is also difficult as it is face threatening act and even more difficult if the speakers have low proficiency level. One would prefer to suffer in silence rather than making a complaint because they are

normally concerned on 'face' of the hearer especially in a situation where there is power differences between them.

1.1 Background of the Study

The difficulty of L2 learners when performing appropriate act of complaint is an interesting issue in pragmatics. L2 learners need to learn the appropriate way of making complaints in order to have a successful communication with other party. Speech act of complaints is one of the pragmatic lessons taught in the module offered to Polytechnic Students. As the goal of polytechnic education is to produce semi-professional workers who have the ability to communicate in the target language effectively, one of the skills emphasized in communicative English module is the performing of a role play of making and handling complaint. The implementation of this topic is due to the fact that speech act of complaints is very important to semi-professional workers who must have the ability to communicate effectively especially when they communicate with their superior and perhaps most likely handling or making complaints would be one in the job. Despite this being heavily emphasized, students still have problems in understanding the topic itself and they face with many challenges in completing the assessment given to them.

The assessment given English class requires the students to prepare a role play of making and handling complaints. Generally, teachers found that students have a hard time preparing for the task, they do not have ideas on how to make proper complaints, and have problems in using the appropriate strategies of making and handling complaints. Other than that, students also do not use proper appropriate language expressions of making complaints that could save the face of the hearer.

The problems faced by the students in making appropriate complaints are due to many reasons: they do not have adequate exposure to the language; the content in communicative English 2 module does not provide enough input on strategies of making complaints. Students also lack practice in using the language in real life communication due to their low English proficiency level. Concerning the difficulties of making proper complaints among learners, a group of low proficiency students taking Communicative English 2 were selected to be the respondents of the study in order to identify the strategies that the students employed in making complaint as well as the politeness strategies that could be used in complaints without 'losing face'.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The study is conducted due to the difficulties that students face when performing the act of complaint based on the assessment given to them in their English class. Most of the students have a hard time completing the assessment on the role play of making complaints; they lack ideas and are not able to make and respond to the act of complaining linguistically and pragmatically. Many students normally use direct complaint because they do not know the appropriate way of making complaints and even worst, they do not have the language to make a proper complaint.

Besides, the syllabus does not prepare the students with the appropriate strategies of making complaints. The students are not adequately prepared with the linguistic facilities as well as the appropriate language expressions of making or handling complaints. Students find it difficult to learn because the teaching of language pragmatics is not handled very carefully and the learners are not prepared with enough

pragmatic making/responding to complaints. Therefore, we could see a huge gap in teaching and learning on how to make and handle complaints.

Moreover, the low proficiency level of students is one of the factors of the failure in making proper complaints. This is due to the fact that learning the speech acts is difficult for second language learners and the difficulty is compounded by the low proficiency level of English. The lack of English proficiency resulted in limited or inappropriate lexical choices used in making and handling complaint and even some of the language structures are directly translated from their L1.

The respondents of this study are categorized as low English proficiency level because majority of those registered in polytechnic scored C, D, and E for their SPM English results. Table 1.1 shows the English SPM results for the semester intake 2012/2013.

Table 1.1: Students' SPM English results intake 2012/2013

RESULT (GRADE)	NUMBER OF STUDENTS
A+	1
A	28
A-	49
B+	87
B	148
C+	209
C	190
D	520
E	234
F	10
TOTAL	**1476**

(Source: Students Affair Department of Politeknik Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah)

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to conduct a discourse based analysis of one of the speech acts being covered in the English module for low English proficiency speakers, which is the speech act of complaints. The study looks at the complaint strategies and politeness strategies employed by the students and the challenges that they face when given the situation that demand them to make complaints. Another purpose of this study is to look at the gender differences between male and female when making complaints.

1.4 Objective of the Study

The study aims to look at;

1) The strategies employed by the low English proficiency speakers when making complaints.
2) The politeness strategies adopted by the low English proficiency speakers in making complaints.
3) The difference between male and female students when making complaints.

1.5 Research Questions

This study is intended to answer the following questions;

1) What are the strategies commonly employed by the low English proficiency students when performing complaints?
2) What are the politeness strategies adopted by the low English proficiency students (positive/negative politeness/ bald on record)?
3) How do male and female students differ when making complaints?

1.6 Significant of the Study

The significant of the study is to help the students to understand the use of speech act of complaints in their communication. Students should know the appropriate way of making complaints, how to handle complaints and the politeness strategies that can be used in order to remain polite. The study is specifically discussed on speech act of complaint because making complaint is one of the skills tested to polytechnic students in order to prepare them with complaint strategies that could be used in the industry.

Other than that, this study is conducted as I realized that there are very limited studies done on the speech act of complaints generally in Malaysia and specifically on low English proficiency speakers. Most of the studies were conducted on speakers from other countries such as China, Turkey, Japan, and America and the focus of the studies were more on comparing the speech act of complaints between native and non-native

speakers. Therefore, I think this study is significant in our education system as it helps us to discover the complaint strategies employed by low English proficiency speakers in their daily communication and the politeness strategies that could be used to mitigate the face threatening act.

1.7 Scope of the Study

The scope of study looks at the nature of low English proficiency speakers when making complaints. Respondents are selected among semester three students taking Communicative English 2 at the polytechnic level. The respondents are directly involved in this study to give their responses based on the complaint scenarios in order to identify the strategies employed as well as the politeness strategies the students adopt in making complaints.

1.8 Limitation of the Study

The limitations of the study are obviously on the respondents and the instrument used in this study. The study is only conducted to Malay native speakers of Polytechnic and it does not involve other races such as Chinese and Indian. It is because the majority of the students in Politeknik Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah (POLISAS) are Malay and it is a bit difficult to involve other races as they are in the minority in most of the classes. Moreover, this study does not compare culture, therefore selecting all Malay

speakers are considered the best way and therefore the discussion will only relate to students coming from the same cultural background.

Other than that, due to the low English proficiency level of the students, Discourse Completion Task (DCT) is used as an instrument in this study instead of using more authentic data such as natural occurring or Oral DCT. It is because, based on the observation, low English proficiency students prefer to express their responses in written form as they are afraid to speak up.

Besides, the limitation of the study lies in the difficulty of getting sources available on the previous study on the speech act of complaints that mainly discussed on the low English proficiency speakers. It is because the literatures available mostly focused on comparative studies between native and non native speakers in making complaints from different cultures.

1.9 Definition of Term

The definitions of terms are based on the area focused in this study. Basically the terms of speech act, speech act of complaints, politeness strategies and discourse completion task (DCT) are generally used in this study.

1.9.1 Speech Act

Speech act is a minimal functional unit in communication. It is an act that a speaker performs when making utterances for example apology, request, complaint, and complement and so on. Speech act theory was first introduced by Austin (1962) and later developed by Searle (1975).

1.9.2 Speech Act of Complaint

Speech act of complaint is the act of expressing dissatisfaction, displeasure and annoyance that has affected the speaker unfavorably. Speech act of complaint is categorized as expressive as it deals with speaker's feeling of dissatisfaction or disappointment.

1.9.3 Politeness Strategies

Politeness strategies are the strategies used by the speakers to mitigate or save the hearers' face when faced with threatening acts. Politeness theory was formulated by Brown & Levinson (1978) who discuss the politeness concepts of positive and negative politeness, bald and record and indirect off record strategies. Positive politeness occurs when the speakers want to lessen the threat to hearer's positive face while negative

politeness refers to one's freedom to act. In bald on record, there is usually no attempt to lessen the threat to the hearer's face even when faced with face threatening acts.

1.9.4 Discourse Completion Task

Discourse Completion Task is a tool use in pragmatic study. A discourse completion task contains scripted dialogue representing a few scenarios, or a short prompt describing the situation and setting. DCT initially used by Blum-Kulka (1982) in the study of speech act between native and non native speakers.

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