

Hospitality Students' Pragmatic Competence in Apology

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ABSTRACT

When dealing with guests' complaints using English language, hospitality frontliners at hotels in Indonesia will also rely on their pragmatic competence to satisfy the guests. This research is aimed at analyzing the strategies used by hospitality students in handling guests' complaints especially in terms of apologizing and whether there is a significant difference between those with part-time job experience and those without the experience. The study utilized quantitative method by collecting responses ($n = 22$) using Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT). Using the categorization of apology strategies (Cohen, 1986), the results show that the most frequently used strategies are expressing apology and offering repairs. Other strategies such as admitting responsibility and explaining are used much less frequently, while promise of forbearance was never used. Furthermore, after performing t -test, the 13 participants who took part-time jobs ($M = 1.76$, $SD = 0.25$) compared to the nine participants in the control group ($M = 1.38$, $SD = 0.33$) demonstrated significantly better at using strategies in apology for handling complaints, $t(14) = 2.87$, $p = .01$.

Keywords: apology; WDCT; hospitality; complaints; pragmatic

1. INTRODUCTION

As the most used international language in the hospitality industry, English mastery has been the focus for most hospitality workers. In Indonesia, where English is used widely as a foreign language, the international language has become a lingua franca among hospitality workers. However, despite the mastery, some users still rely on their mother tongue's norms to produce meaning.

In producing meaning, learners must master pragmatic competence. Pragmatics is 'the study of how-to-say-what-to-whom-when' (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013). In the study of second or foreign language acquisition, especially in the hospitality industry, where an encounter with foreign guests is frequent, English language pragmatic competence of these workers in Indonesian hospitality industry has not been sufficient (Amin, 2017).

Some studies have specifically analyzed pragmatics competence in the context of English as a Foreign language, especially hospitality. Sirikhan and Prapphal (2011) conducted research that assesses pragmatic competence in the context of hotel pragmatic competence. This study shows that students produce pragmatic failures, which can be seen as ineffectiveness or impoliteness by the guests. Similarly, still in Thailand's tourism context, another study focusing on speech act requests at hotel front desk service shows that after

YouTube Intervention Teaching Method, participants become better at pragmatics competence (Omanee & Krishnasamy, 2019).

However, this type of study is still rare in the Indonesian context. Only a few studies have focused on pragmatic competence in hospitality. One study in Indonesia conducted by Joselina (2020) found that hospitality students at the university level still lack the proper English pragmatic competence in apologizing. Most of them rely on saying an apology and giving the repair to fix the mistakes. In another study regarding handling complaints using a series of Discourse Completion Tasks, it was also found that students were still inadequate in giving written responses to guests' complaints (Mayanto, 2016.)

To fill in the gap in the literature regarding hospitality students' pragmatic competence in apologizing during handling guests' complaints, especially in the front office department's job, this study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the apology strategies in handling guests' complaints performed by hospitality students in the written discourse completion task?
2. Is there any difference between the hospitality students with part-time job experience and those without experience when dealing with guests' complaints in the written discourse completion task?

In hospitality, English is taught as ESP (English for Specific Purposes). Therefore, the language functions will be adjusted according to the needs of the hospitality and tourism industry. In the hotel industry, communication skills are essential for Front Office agents because they encounter guests more frequently than other departments. Furthermore, Blum-Kulka (1982) mentioned that effective language communication would need linguistic knowledge, such as grammar or vocabulary, and the ability to distinguish which utterance is appropriate to deliver during specific contexts.

Politeness is crucial in hospitality as the primary revenue stems from guest-staff relations. Therefore, the staff's communication skills to communicate politely to the guests must be addressed. Blue and Harun (2003) even highlighted that the relationship between the guests and staff should be positive as it promotes business opportunity. They also suggested that human resources managers, academics, and trainers in hospitality should give more attention to training in communication skills.

In this industry, grammatical accuracy and fluency are not the only competence these front office agents need to master; they also need to master pragmatic competence (Vandermeeren, 2005). For these language learners in the hospitality sector and those who work at front desks, handling guests' complaints is one of the job descriptions. In one study that has been replicated several times, Cohen et al. (1986) found key strategies of apology performed by both native and non-native English speakers. The strategies are (1) expression of apology; (2) explanation; (3) responsibility; (4) repair; and (5) promise of forbearance. However, there can be modifications to the main strategies, such as minimizing offense or even denying responsibility. In the hospitality industry, frontliners should have the skills to "properly accept the process, and react to complaints" (Ogbeide et al., 2017). Furthermore, to address the complaint properly, hotel staffs sometimes offer compensation in monetary, replacement, or reparation, and an official apology accompanied by gifts or extra service, as categorized by Meffert and Bruhn (2009) in Ogbeide et al. (2017).

In the context of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), explicit instructions accompanied by audiovisual materials that introduce speech acts in the correct sociopragmatic features for face threatening speech acts such as refusal and apology had a positive impact compared to those with implicit instruction for Iranian students (Derakhshan & Shakki, 2019). Furthermore, in a study regarding apology responses conducted in Pakistan, it was

found that there were pragmatics transfer from L1 to L2, which suggests that EFL learners still need to learn improve their sociopragmatic competence (Saleem et al., 2021).

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research was conducted in a private university located in Jakarta, Indonesia. The study participants were 20 young adults aged 19-22 who majored in the hospitality business program. There are 17 female and 5 male students who participated in this study. These students have completed their first internship, so they have some first-hand experience with guest encounters and the industry.

The research instrument utilized in this study was the Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT). This instrument was used several times in other research studies (Afzali & Rezapoorian, 2014; Joselina, 2020; Mayanto, 2016; Sirikhan & Prapphal, 2011). The test was designed to draw responses likely to occur with Front Office agents in hotels. Aufa (2012) mentioned that WDCT could be used to measure L2 learners' pragmatic competence. In addition, with its practicability, it is effective to collect data from several respondents simultaneously. Although Yamashita (1996) mentioned that it might lack the authenticity that reflects real-life situations, it remains effective in gathering large samples quickly.

The instrument was typed into Google Forms, and the link was distributed to the students' group chat. Those who were willing to participate clicked the link and responded to it. Two cases simulate a situation where a guest complains to the front office agents of a hotel, and the respondents should respond as if they were the front office agents handling the complaints. The two situation cases are described in Table 1.

Table 1. Cases used in the WDCT distributed

Situation Number	Case Description
1	The guest called and asked for a towel. You promised to send the towel to the room, but you forgot. Then, the guest called again and said, "I don't know whom I should ask. I called almost an hour ago." How would you respond?
2	You received a phone call from the guest room. The guest informed you that there is no hot water in the bathroom even though she has left the water running for about ten minutes. The guest said, "This is a marvelous hotel, but there is no hot water." How would you respond?

The collected data was then analyzed using score criteria adapted from Communicative Ability Scales developed by Cohen (1994) as cited in Khamyod and Aksornjarung (2011), as shown in Table 2. Two raters check the responses from the students, and then the scores' average is calculated.

Table 2. Scales used to score respondents' responses to WDCT

Score	Description
0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No Answer • Wrong answers • Answers irrelevant to the given situation • Answers which do not convey a speaker's attention at all or change a speaker's intention
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acceptable answers which contain one or more of the following characteristics, but can still convey the speaker's correct meaning and

	<p>intention</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Too much or little information • Grammatical or lexical errors impairing but not preventing the interlocutor understanding the meaning or intention of the utterance • Too polite or rude linguistic expression
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appropriate answers which fully convey a speaker's correct meaning and intention and contain the following characteristics: • Proper amount of information • Grammatical and lexical correctness or minor errors which do not affect the interlocutor's ability to understand the meaning or intention of the utterance • Polite linguistic expression

Not only that, but the raters also categorized the expressions into components of apology used by Cohen et al. (1986). These are (1) expression of apology; (2) explanation; (3) responsibility; (4) repair; and (5) promise of forbearance. Subsequently, each component was calculated to analyze the frequency of each component.

RESULTS

1. The apology strategies performed by the hospitality students

The raters detected the components used by the respondents, as shown in Table 3. The result of WDCT shows that most of the respondents use expressions of apology (e.g., "I am sorry," "I apologize," "I am very sorry," "We apologize," or "We do apologize," "Truly sorry," etc.) and repair (e.g., "we will send the engineering team," "We will be sending our technician," "I will deliver the towel right away," "We will deliver the item in less than five minutes," etc.).

The results also show that in Situation Cases 1 and 2, no respondents used the promise of forbearance. While for the repair component, there are 20 and 21 occurrences for Situation Cases 1 and 2, respectively. For the explanation strategy, only one respondent used it in Situation Case 1, while two used it in Situation Case 2. Lastly, for admitting responsibility, the table shows that only two respondents used it in Situation Case 1, and one respondent used it in Situation Case 2.

Table 3. Frequency of components used in apology strategies

Strategy Components	Situation Case 1 (n=22)	Situation Case 2 (n=22)
Expression of apology	21	17
Explanation	1	2
Responsibility	2	1
Repair	20	21
Promise of forbearance	0	0

Respondents also mentioned several compensations when offering repair, as shown in Table 4. The results show that the most used type of compensation is a formal apology accompanied by gifts. Some students rely on using formal apologies accompanied by giving extra services, such as extra amenities or complimentary dinners. Such findings occurred in Situation Case 1 by Respondent 3, that provided additional comment, "Later, give them some room amenities for apologies," or like Respondent 7, that commented, "Give them extra service," and Respondent 6 that mentioned, "I would also give complimentary or special amenities as an apology."

In Situation Case 2, Respondent 7 added, "I would offer cocktails or dinner," and Respondent 9 commented, "I'd check with the manager if there are other rooms for the guest to move," which indicates replacement, and Respondent 4 that added, "Maybe we can give them some spa voucher."

Table 4. *Types of compensations offered by the respondent*

Types of Compensations	Case 1 (n=22)	Case 2 (n=22)
Monetary compensation	-	-
Replacement or reparation	-	3 (move or upgrade the room)
Formal apology with present to demonstrate appreciation	6 (extra amenities or complimentary service)	4 (extra amenities or complimentary service)

2. The difference between the students with and without part-time experience

In WDCT results based on the scores of communicative scales (Cohen 1994, in Khamyod and Aksornjarung, 2011), the students who took part-time jobs (n=13) had the average score of 1.8 in Situation Case 1, while the average score of those without part-time experience was 1.3. In Situation Case 2, the students who took part-time jobs scored higher with 1.69, while those without part time experience had the average score of 1.44.

Furthermore, it is also important to look at how they performed differently in terms of strategies. Those with part-time job experience also utilized explanation component (Respondent 15, "Ask for pardon and explain") in their apology strategies. The results also show that there were students that explicitly owned the responsibility for the guest's complaints by admitting that the service failure is the hotel's fault.

To calculate the difference between the students with and without part-time experience, a two-tailed independent samples t-test was conducted. The 13 participants who took part-time jobs ($M = 1.76$, $SD = 0.25$) compared to the nine participants in the control group ($M = 1.38$, $SD = 0.33$) demonstrated significantly better at using strategies in apology for handling complaints, $t(14) = 2.87$, $p = .01$.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

From these results, it can be deduced that respondents did not utilize all components of apology strategies theorized by Cohen (1994) in Khamyod and Aksornjarung (2011). However, all respondents (n=22) performed the two major strategies in apologizing, which include stating apology and offering repair.

Furthermore, some respondents also resorted to compensation, especially those with part-time job experience. Those who never took part-time jobs may never encounter such difficulties, so they only used apology and repair. It is also worth to dig deeper in the future research whether those with part-time jobs understand that the 'survival of business' depends on the prompt response to the complaints and admitting the faults. The strategy to offer compensation is also closely related to the objective of winning back the customer and eventually to retain business. However, in the real industry it all goes back to every business owner or the standard procedures in responding to complaints. It is also worth to note that customers nowadays can 'go online' and share their experience after a service failure, which may create bad image and harm future business prospects if not handled properly (Akarsu et al., 2022).

It is also worth to highlight that the difference between students with and without part-time job experience begs for a better instruction in pragmatic competence, especially apologizing. Future research may dig deeper regarding explicit instructions in classes

(Derakhshan & Eslami, 2015). It is also possible to look at how textbooks bring pragmatics materials for learners (Limberg, 2016), especially in hospitality industry, where such studies are still rare. Explicit instructions such as suggested by Derakhshan and Shakki (2019) for those still lacking pragmatic competence in apology strategies may also be beneficial for students without part-time job experience.

In addition, as suggested in a previous study conducted by Lin and Tseng (2020) for Taiwanese students experiencing overseas internship, it is also important to pay attention to improving oral skills rather than reading and writing skills for these hospitality students. By improving the focus of English course syllabus, students will be much more prepared to face the real encounter with customers.

CONCLUSION

The significant difference of strategies utilized by students—with part-time job experience and those without—show that real industry experience matters. More exposure to the industry and guest encounters has the role of improving the pragmatic strategies. This may include the on-the-job training that is administered by the university or any other experiences that the students seek by themselves. University and schools that prepare the future hospitality individuals should invest in building English language classroom instructions and materials that also incorporate pragmatic competence in different speech acts that are closely related to the industry, such as apologizing and requesting.

Hospitality and tourism business rely heavily on customers' satisfaction. Therefore, future hospitality workers whose job descriptions also use English as a foreign language or lingua franca should have the competency to handle the complaints promptly and with proper linguistic expressions and strategies. Hotel managements, especially the training department, need to invest on communicative competence of the frontliners. English pragmatic competence in performing specific speech act such as in apology should be one of the main materials in communication training, which eventually compliment the standard procedure that every establishment usually has.

This study still has some limitations that can be addressed by future studies. The first is that the sample size is still small, which may limit the generalizability of the study. Future research may fill this gap by adding more participants so it will represent the whole population of hospitality students in certain areas. Another point is that this study has not categorized the differences of those who have part-time job experience in hotel, café, or restaurants because different types of service would require different strategies in handling complaints and offering apology. This gap can be addressed by future research by using more respondents or even measuring the pragmatic competence of actual hospitality workers in hotels, restaurants, or cafés. The differences between business establishments in using pragmatic strategies and which compensation types that are used frequently may be areas of interest for any future researchers who wish to dig deeper in English pragmatic competence in hospitality. Finally, as English is used as lingua franca in most of business establishments in hospitality industry in Indonesia and Asia in general, it is also worth to delve into how much mother tongue interferes the pragmatic competence when dealing with guests' complaints.

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