Pragmatics Skills in Intercultural Communication of Indonesian Migrant Workers in Malaysia

Djatmika Djatmika
English Literature Department, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Sebelas Maret
Kentingan, Jl. Ir Sutami No.36, Kec. Jebres, Kota Surakarta, Jawa Tengah, Indonesia 57126
djatmika@staff.uns.ac.id

Riyadi Santosa
English Literature Department, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Sebelas Maret
Kentingan, Jl. Ir Sutami No.36, Kec. Jebres, Kota Surakarta, Jawa Tengah, Indonesia 57126
riyadisantosa@staff.uns.ac.id

Agus Hari Wibowo
English Literature Department, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Sebelas Maret
Kentingan, Jl. Ir Sutami No.36, Kec. Jebres, Kota Surakarta, Jawa Tengah, Indonesia 57126
agushari67@staff.uns.ac.id

Bahtiar Mohamad
Othman Yeop Abdullah Graduate School of Business, Universiti Utara Malaysia
Sintok, 06010 Bukit Kayu Hitam, Kedah, Malaysia
mbahtiar@uum.edu.my

Abstract— **Intercultural communication between the Indonesian migrant workers and their Malaysian employers as well as their coworkers coming from other countries suggests them to have good pragmatic skills. These are important not only for the workers themselves to support the jobs but also for their employers of the workers and their business of the employers. Interviews to 12 Malaysian employers and 16 Indonesian migrant workers working in areas in Kuala Lumpur were conducted to collect information related to the pragmatic skills expected by the employers and possessed by the workers in their business as well as daily non business interaction between them. The results show that although Malay language seems similar to Indonesian language, the Indonesian workers are aware that socially and culturally their employers and the Malaysian society have different social/ cultural value and norms related to politeness. On that account, the workers tried to adapt the hosting language and culture in relation to several pragmatic behaviors such as showing politeness strategies, avoiding conflicts, showing honor or deference to their employers and local people. On the other hand, the Malaysian employers accommodated their workers' efforts in adapting the Malaysian language and culture such as hiring senior workers as translators for the new coming migrant workers, and also for complicated instructions.**

Keywords— Indonesian migrant workers; pragmatic skills; intercultural

I. INTRODUCTION

There are several types of jobs that are offered by the Malaysian government to the migrant workers, such as housemaids, caretakers, domestic workers, officers, company workers, and so on. All of these types of work, in addition to requiring work skills, also require language skills as one of the supporting qualification ((https://money.kompas.com/read/2022/03/06/163050026/bukan-cuma-pembantu-ini-ragam-pekerjaan-tki-di-luar-negeri?page=all). This is related to the fact that many workers will be involved in cross-cultural interactions. Thus, a lack of skills in work and a lack of skills in language will represent the low qualifications of the workers in the eyes of employers or their agents. Researches show that the causes of the problems for Indonesian Migrant Workers in Malaysia are due to low qualifications and there is no professional certification body that guarantees the workers' qualifications going to Malaysia (Nasirin, 2020). On that account, one of the solutions to the migrant workers' problems in Malaysia is through improving these educational qualifications and skills, job skills and cross-cultural interaction skills in Malaysian language. One of the efforts to improve the language qualifications of Indonesian

Migrant Workers is to improve their Malay politeness skills to be used in cross-cultural interactions in the workplace.

Politeness theories suggested by Brown & Levinson have been put forward by several researchers by offering alternative studies with a discursive and contextual approach (Eelen, 2002; Watts, 2003; Song, 2017). These researchers have a view of politeness that is not solely the result of each individual's passive learning process in internalizing the politeness system. social and cultural, but rather an active expression of that person's social position in relation to other people and the social world in general. Therefore, the variables of power and social distance reflect social structures and cultural norms that may differ in different cultures.

There are four politeness strategies that speakers can apply, namely bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness and off record. Each type of politeness strategy can be described as follows. Bald on Record is a politeness strategy that carries out direct, as-it is, blatant, clear and concise face-threatening acts without any effort to reduce the burden on the interlocutor. This strategy usually uses imperative sentences and is used as a manifestation of an emergency.

Meanwhile, positive politeness strategies are implemented by mitigating face-threatening acts which are carried out by focusing on the positive face of the interlocutor and intending to maximize the implications of politeness by building solidarity and intimacy between the speaker and the interlocutor. Such strategies include showing interest, approval and sympathy as well as the use of markers in group identity, and so on. On the other hand, Negative politeness strategies are executed by reducing the act of threatening face with repetition made to the negative face of the speech partner which considers indirectness, formality, and respect for the social rights of the interlocutor so that the speaker is free from burden with the intention that his actions are not constrained. In addition, Off Record is a politeness strategy used to mitigate acts of threatening face in an indirect way, for example by allowing the interlocutor to interpret an action himself.

Mastering pragmatic skills, especially those are related to the politeness strategies above is very important for anyone who interacts with someone else. Skills in using the strategies must be related to the socio-cultural background of each participant involved in an interaction. In this regard, someone who works in another country must be able to understand the socio-cultural background prevailing in that country, so that s/he can apply politeness strategies in the language of such a country correctly and acceptably. Based such a condition, this article discusses the Indonesian migrant workers' pragmatic skills in their intercultural communication in the Malaysian society.

II.   LITERATURE REVIEW

Politeness strategies are very important for maintaining interpersonal relationships between participants who are involved in an interaction. Participants who share background knowledge will easily exchange politeness strategies in their interactions, but participants with different socio-cultural backgrounds will have the potential to experience miscommunication in the interactions they do. In this regard, language politeness skills can be a form of skill needed in the concept of intercultural communication competence (ICC). There are many descriptions of ICC and this concept is further clarified as intercultural competence. Good intercultural communication competence will make an interaction run more effectively (Parks, 1994; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Several researchers have studied ICC, but they have focused more on interactions that occur with expatriate workers, businessmen, diplomats, international students, tour guides, and so on (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; Moon, 1996; Ruben; 1989; Lustig & Koester, 2010; Dalib et.al., 2017; Dian et.al., 2019). Only few focused on interactions performed by migrant workers in their workplace (Aziz et.al., 2017; Lasimbang, et.al. 2016; Merall, 2018).

Skills in applying language politeness above are important to be mastered by migrant workers in carrying out their profession in other countries. This is consistent with a research which states that migrant workers in English-speaking countries benefit from their English skills.18 This condition is more specifically experienced by migrant nurses in Finland who stated that English skills are becoming increasingly important to master in carrying out their profession in that country.19 Of course, the problem of the skills of migrant workers is not only their problem, but the intervention of their employers or their sending agents is also necessary (Cao, et.al. 2012; Fernando, et.al., 2016; Castilla, 2011; Hernandez, et.al., 2000; Jackson, et.al., 2000, Stangej, 2018; Pager & Karafin, 2009).

 Politeness in workplace in Indonesia has also been conducted by pragmatists. One of them focused on interactions between lecturers and students of a vocational school which claimed that cultural background gives rights to the lecturers to be able to execute most of their utterances in bald on record to their students. However, when they consider their students' positive as well as negative face, mitigating the face threatening acts in their interaction make work place interaction worked much better (Susanti et.al., 2020). Meanwhile, in a different work place domain, a political context suggest power, distance, and rank of imposition in determining politeness strategies performed by the candidates for commissioner of the Indonesian Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK). Such strategies can represent ten character dimensions observed from their utterances as well as politeness strategies in executing the speech acts (Wijayanti, et.al.,2022). However, no research on politeness in Indonesia was conducted to study how such politeness strategies support workers do their job in an intercultural communication. Considering this phenomenon, the state of the arts of the research is on this area. The research will explore the communication

skills of migrant workers expected by the Malaysian employers, and then teaching/ learning materials will be developed to be given to the migrant workers who want to have jobs in Malaysia. The developed learning materials can be used by the migrant worker agents to improve their communication skills in Malay language.

The interest to study intercultural interaction started several years ago. Related to this research, the study in 2019 (Dian, et.al.) investigated how Balinese tourism workers exploited their politeness to serve Japanese tourists. Different social and cultural background between the workers and the Japanese visitors sometimes results in miscommunication between them, even the workers spoke Japaontenese well. The interest went on in a research performed in 2020 (Susanti et.al.) and in 2021 (Bahtiar, et.al) as well as in 2022 (Farida et.al.) This research is following up those researches above by focusing on the Indonesian Migrant Workers' politeness in Malay Language as a part of working skills they must do for their job. The research will be performed in 2 years—the first is being focuing on the existing skills of politeness possessed by the workers (2023), and then the second will be focused on the material development to improve the workers' skill of politeness in Malay language (2024). It is expected that in 2025 a research on how the materials are applied to improve the worker politeness skills in Malay language can be conducted.

III.   METHOD

Interviews were performed with twelve (12) Malaysian migrant employers to search their expectation on communicative skills of Indonesian migrant workers, especially on their pragmatic skills on politeness strategies they perform in Malay language. Meanwhile, a focus group discussion was conducted with fifteen (15) Indonesian migrant workers now working in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The information collected from the interviews and from the FGD were analysed to answer the questions on the employers' expectation on the workers' communicative skills in Malay language as well to answer the questions on the workers' competence of politeness skills in Malay language.

IV.   RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. *Pragmatic Skills in Intercultural Communication*

According to the Malaysian employers, the Indonesian workers to understand more quickly than other ethnic workers in Malaysia. In addition, such migrant workers are considered to understand instructions more quickly, because they understand Malay better than migrant workers from other countries. Therefore, languages in the same family and close culture with the Malaysian make it easier for the Indonesian migrant workers to do their jobs in Malaysia.

Cross-cultural interactions between hosting employers and working migrants suggest the Indonesian migrant workers to accommodate the cultural differences. Such migrant workers are considered to be quicker to adapt to the lifestyle and culture of the Malaysian people, in fact, after a long time they have Malay lifestyle. The migrant workers do not take long time to accommodate the cultural differences with their employers and the Malaysian community. This is a kind of nonverbal pragmatic politeness shown by the migrant workers in which they realize that they are workers coming from another country. Therefore, they show their respect to the hosting employers and society by doing the language and cultural adaptation. The other good pragmatic behavior of the workers in the point of view of their employers is that they do not complain much, and they are obedient. They do not want to make any face threatening acts to their employers. In addition, their politeness is proofed by their way of addressing their employers with the word *boss.*

However, when the Indonesian workers have to work in a team, the Indonesian workers cannot be in a multiethnic work team (for example with the workers from Bangladesh or from India), due to the communication factor. Misunderstandings often occur in cross-ethnic interactions within a work team which often end in conflict. This is the case that makes employers rarely create multi-ethnic work teams. In other words, even though the workers from Indonesia can easily adapt to Malaysian employers, they are less skilled at adapting culturally to workers from other countries, such as from India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh.

For most of the Malaysian employers, the level of Malaysian cultural understanding of the Indonesian migrant workers is important for them. They think that it is important to introduce the Indonesian migrant workers to Malaysian culture before they work in Malaysia. An understanding of Malaysian culture that the workers need to know includes the cultural values and norms, the ways of working, the working culture, the cultural ways of respecting clients, and so on. Based on this, they would accommodate the needs of the workers in adapting themselves to the language and the culture of Malaysian people. This in a kind of positive politeness of the employers to the migrant workers as they know the workers' needs and would accommodate them. So far, according to the Malaysian employers, the Indonesian migrant workers can interact with their employers and clients in a polite manner. They have good work skills, and the migrant workers can work together in a team.

B.   The Indonesian employees' level of knowledge about intercultural communication

The pragmatic behavior of the Indonesian workers in their interaction with their employers and other workers is governed much by their knowledge about intercultural communication. They are considered to have good knowledge by the employers. They have only a few drawbacks, for example, they tend to have difficulty in understanding complex work instructions. For an instance, the Indonesian workers who went to work in Malaysia as a housemaid and then they switched to work in the cleaning sector experienced problems in understanding more complicated work. For this problem, the employers usually appointed an Indonesian worker who has been worked in Malaysia longer as a translator for the migrant workers with communication problems. In addition, there are also employers who learned the language of workers to solve the problems like this. This case shows that there are employers who make language and cultural adaptations related to cross-cultural interactions between them and their migrant workers.

Most employers rarely found cultural conflicts in intercultural communication between them and their workers. There were only a few cases of interactions that were considered less polite. For example, the pronouns aku 'me', and kau 'you' as an addressing system between the workers and their employers are considered impolite by Malaysian employers. Such a case suggests the the employers to provide cultural understanding for the workers to understand and to adapt. They tend not to give a warning because a reprimand can lead to the disappearance of workers—they resign from their place of work if they feel uncomfortable culturally. In addition, most of the Indonesian migrant workers have language/code selection skills. They can use different languages to interact at work, and to interact outside the working hours.

C.   The Indonesian Migrant Workers' Pragmatic Skill as Intercultural Competence

The Focus Group Discussion which was held on 25 June 2023 involving 16 Indonesian migrant workers produced the following information. The first information relates to the background of their arrival to Malaysia. There are several reasons behind their departure to work in Malaysia, i.e. the future of their children, and their low level of education which has bigger opportunity to get a job with better salary than the same job in their home country. In general, the background to their departure to work in Malaysia is economic factors.

Meanwhile, prior to their departure, the workers had an overview of Malaysia's diverse culture. Some felt that the Malay language was difficult to understand during their early arrival. There are several geographic dialects of the Malaysian language. There are certain dialects, such as the Malaysian language spoken in the All Star area whose pronunciation is very different from the Malaysian spoken in Kuala Lumpur. Another aspect of language that becomes a problem for workers is the difference in meaning of the Malaysian vocabulary which also exists in Indonesian. For example, the word *dijemput* means 'being invited' in Malaysian, whereas in Indonesian this word means 'being picked up'. Another example is the word *percuma* which means 'for free' in the Malay language, but this means 'useless' in Indonesian. Many other words have the same case as the two words above. In addition, the workers at the beginning time in Malaysia did not understand many terms or food names in the Malaysian language, for example *TO, TO ice*, and so on.

In the interactions that occurred early in their presence in the country, the Indonesian migrant workers found it difficult to choose the Malay addressing systems. When a gentleman should be addressed with tuan 'master' or bapak 'mister', or when a gentlewoman should be addressed with puan 'lady' or ibu 'misses' confuse the workers in the first time they were in the country. For these communication difficulties, the workers stated that most of them needed at least 3 months to be able to adapt to their employers and/or the society in which they live. The adaptation process can be carried out with the help of other workers who have lived longer in Malaysia and or with the help of their employers. This information about the adaptation process is in line with the information provided by their employers—that the workers tend to adapt the language and culture to the employers or local people, although there are also employers who carry out the language and culture adaptation process for their workers.

To support their work, the Indonesian migrant workers carried out several cultural adaptation processes such as praying in congregation to the mosque for male workers, speaking Malay to their employers and local people, avoiding to make noise at work or at home, speaking politely (such as choosing to greet employers with *boss*, avoiding conflicts in interactions, and so on). In addition, the workers feel the need to pay attention to and improve politeness both verbally and non-verbally, such as shaking hands and kissing hands, frequent thaking, apologizing, and most importantly maintaining honesty. Should a conflict happen between an Indonesian worker with other workers, s/he would be back down. For example, for the cleaning workers in a hospital, if there is miscommunication between them with their superiors or other hospital staff, they tend to give in. On the other hand, if an employer makes a mistake, then the workers are expected to point out the employer's mistake without abandoning good manners. All these strategies represent verbal and nonverbal pragmatic skills performed by the workers in their intercultural communication with their employers, with their co-workers, as well as with local people in the Malaysian society.

The Indonesian migrant workers' perception toward themselves compared to the workers from other countries turned out to be the same as the perception of their employers towards them. The stigma they have is that the

Indonesian workers understand instructions more easily, they can speak Malay language more fluent, they are diligent, and they can work in a team.

V.   CONCLUSION

The Malaysian employers have positive perception towards their migrant workers coming from Indonesia compared to those coming from the other countries. They claimed that the Indonesian migrant workers are considered to be more diligent, better in adapting the Malaysian language and culture. However, the migrant workers cannot work in a team with the workers coming from other countries such as India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh due to communication skills. Some suggestions given by the workers for the other Indonesian migrants going to work in Malaysia are their preparation for work skills that can be obtained from *Bengkel Latihan Kerja Indonesia* (Skill Workshop for Workers) to learn various skills, including language skills. Prospective workers are expected to be able to learn the Malaysian language fluently, listen carefully to the words of the employers or local people because the dialects of the Malay language are various, and be able to follow the rules of working legally to avoid legal problems. In addition, pragmatic skills are needed to communicate with their employers, with their co-workers, both the workers from Indonesia and the workers from other countries, such as from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and the Philippines. The most important thing to remember is to try to avoid conflicts with both the employers and other workers. The Indonesian migrant workers remind them that they are in Malaysia to work, and they should always remember that they are migrant workers.

VI. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

VII. REFERENCES

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