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MALAYSIANS POLITENESS: MODERN SOCIETY IN THE MAKING

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Malaysians Politeness: Modern Society In The Making

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ABSTRACT

The importance of politeness issues has been a growing concern globally. Branding certain society with negative images on politeness can stir up mix reaction and prejudice analysis. For some people, it seems fair enough to analyze a society's politeness solely from accidentals generalizations. As we move towards a developed nation, the politeness issues should not be left unattended. Unfortunately, not many people realize the importance of educating our society to achieve certain standard of politeness in order to live in conducive and unthreatening environment. This paper will try to uncover the awareness of Malaysians towards politeness and compare it to non-Malaysians counterpart. The scope of the study will focus on the politeness gestures and communications displayed by front office personnel, since they are considered the little ambassadors that represent the image of Malaysians. This ethnographic study hopefully will unravel the truth about politeness in Malaysian society and serve as a guide to conduct ourselves with dignity and move forward toward modernization.

INTRODUCTION

Modern society has evolved as a result of knowledge transmitting from past experiences and by observing and studying on how a society develops. In the West, the modern society that they have savors nowadays is a result of successful past experiences. Some countries have to go through bitter experiences to become modern, some has to go through revolution or even wars to mature into a modern society.

Most people always associate modernity with "newness" and "progress" that had happened in society. The "newness" and "progress" is not only related to the state-of-the-art development but also the "newness" and "progress" from the behavioral and spiritual development of the nation. How can the behavioral and spiritual development of a nation be translated into being a modern society?

Modernization is often translated into the existences of magnificent buildings and monuments that captures and create “ooh” and “aah” of the people around the world. However, that is not the only criteria that should be considered in the making of modern society. The 7th challenge in Malaysian Vision 2020 emphasizes on the need of a caring society and caring culture. How can we create a caring society and a caring culture? Caring society and caring culture can only be cultivated by its people. Malaysians need to be educated on politeness and awareness on politeness should be inculcated in all Malaysians.

BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

How the Malaysians view the world is not as important as how the world view Malaysians. After 50 years of independence, shouldn't we have a mature society that is kind, generous, showing politeness and respect for others? As a society well known for its courtesy, we may feel so comfortable, and slowly forgetting that we are actually becoming the opposite and this has becoming prevalent nowadays. Malaysia's renowned politician and the second Deputy Prime Minister, Tun Dr. Ismail once said:

As a small nation, our strength lies not in material things, but in the moral character and purposes of our people.

(Malaysia at 50: Achievements and Aspirations)

For a modern society to achieve an outstanding status, the behavior and attitude of its people need to be at a remarkable level. Still, behavioral modification is a difficult area to pursue. Malaysia is regarded as one of the countries that is lacking social politeness when dealing with mass public. Most Malaysian will probably disagree with a statement especially when it came from a survey done by Reader Digest Global Courtesy Test in June 2006. Malaysia was at number 33 out of 35 countries being surveyed. However, it actually makes us realized that we are not creating the right image for a modern society.

STATEMENT OF A PROBLEM

Politeness has become a global concern nowadays. However, some people might say that it is an unattended issue since many Malaysian especially the city folks fail to display politeness in their behaviors (Reader Digest, July 2006). Sense of awareness on politeness should not be neglected. As a country that put emphasis on hospitality and good conduct, we should take Tun Dr. Ismail words into consideration, to create a modern society through the politeness displayed by its people.

OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

This study on politeness is aimed to achieve certain objectives which are:

1. To investigate the contextual meaning of politeness.
2. To identify significant criteria for polite communication.
3. To educate society on the importance of politeness.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Research questions help researcher to focus on the area of study by asking questions such as:

1. What is the contextual meaning of politeness?
2. What are the significant criteria for polite communication?
3. How should society be educated on the importance of politeness?

SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH

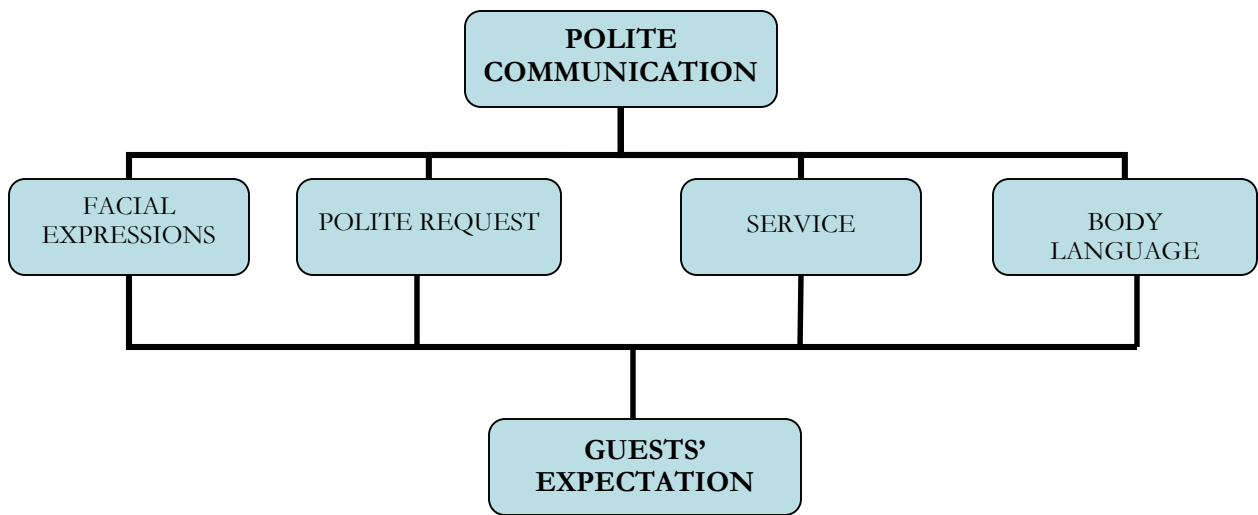
For this study, the targeted area of interest is the front office department in hotels around Malaysia. The subjects of the study are the front office personnel. Front office personnel are chosen as subjects of study based on these few reasons, perceptions and expectations:

1. Front office personnel are regarded as the little ambassadors of Malaysia.
2. Front office personnel repeatedly deal with public; both local and international.
3. Front Office is regarded as the heart of the hotel since its present the image of the hotel.
4. The results of the study can enhance the front office personnel professionals' image in the eye of the public.

LIMITATION OF THE RESEARCH

The unwillingness of hotel proprietor and hotel management to get involved in the research creates a limitation to collect the data. Most of them are afraid that this will directly expose their weaknesses to the potential customers. Therefore, the researchers intention to undergone a study on politeness was always being declined.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



This conceptual framework shows that polite communication can be translated into different criteria such as facial expressions (smile, eye contact), polite request (greetings, asking), body language (gestures, postures) and service (promptness, informing). In the end, the guests' should benefit from the polite communication displayed by front office personnel.

LITERATURE

Definition of Politeness

Politeness deals with how people display polite and impolite behavior. According to Webster dictionary, it is the refinement of manners, courteous behavior and urbanity. Politeness signifies the ease and gracefulness of manners, connecting with a desire to please others. Politeness is usually shown in receiving and entertaining others, and is a union of dignified complaisance and kindness.

Politeness is closely related to hospitality business that requires every employee to display warmth and courtesy to the guest they serve and make them feel comfortable with their stay in the hotel.

Politeness is best expressed as the practical application of good manners or etiquette. It is a culturally defined phenomenon and in some cases, what is considered polite in one culture can often be considered rude or simply strange in another.

The goal of politeness is to make all parties relaxed and comfortable with one another. Sociolinguistics Brown and Levinson (1987) identified two kinds of politeness, deriving from the Erving Goffman's concept of face which are:

1. Negative politeness – making a request less offending and indirect, such as “If you don’t mind..... ”or “If it isn’t too much trouble.....” In a way, it respects a person’s right to act freely.
2. Positive politeness – seeks to establish a positive relationship between parties and respects a person’s need to be liked and understood. Example, “Can you pass me the salt?” It articulates an awareness of the other person’s values, which fulfills the person’s desire to be accepted.

The Global Dimension of Cultural Communication Skills

As many organizations become global, the issue of politeness has become quite an issue to be fuss about. As for hotel organization, interpersonal communication skills are much sought after its employee. The difference between a three star and five star hotels lies in the service rendered by its employee. A good and courteous service will imprint lasting positive impressions and uplift the hotel image.

Hotel personnel need to ensure that they are polite enough to be able to communicate both to local and foreign guests. Therefore, polite communication is a must and should be highlighted in every hotel organizations.

Different cultures practice different kind of communication. What is considered normal and accepted in one culture might not be tolerated or can be considered vulgar in other cultures. Culture is a reflection of the values and traditions of a society, in effect “the way we do things around here.” (Cartwright, 2002).

Hotel organizations are becoming global and some have major networks all over the world. It will be a helpful advice for hotel managements to train their personnel especially those who work in the front office department to be aware of the global dimension of cultural communication. The danger of generalizing and stereotyping is that they can create tension in communication. Listed below are some of the actions and gestures of cultural communication skill that should be taken into serious consideration for a polite communication to occur.

- ☐ Standing with one’s back to somebody is very rude in Arab culture.
- ☐ Gesturing is a common and integral part of communication in Latin and Arab cultures.
- ☐ In the Far East, the handling over of business cards is a formal event to be treated with courtesy – the cards should be studied.
- ☐ Japanese language contains more nuances than English.
- ☐ A direct approach in Japan and Far East may be considered rude.
- ☐ People from the Eastern countries may say things indirectly because they don’t want to appear rude by saying no.
- ☐ Northern Europeans and North Americans prefer a direct, business-like approach to communicate.

Hotel Front Office Operations

The Front Office Department is considered the public face of a hotel. It is the first place that guests will go to and greetings are mostly likely to take place in this section.

It also provides assistance to guests during their stays, completes their accommodation, food and beverage, accounts and receives payment from guests.

It is the centre of all activities. The department is headed by front office manager and many important functions like receiving the guests, making room reservations, handling correspondence, preparing bills and keeping accounts of the guest services are handled here.

Front office department is the face of a hotel. The first people to welcome guests in a hotel are the personnel from the front office. The front office manager supervises the work of the receptionists, information clerk, reservation clerk and other service personnel like bell captain, bell boy and doorman. The bell boy assists the guests with the baggage to check in to the room. The bell captain supervises the work of the bell boys. The information clerk delivers the telephone messages to the guests through the bell captain. Front office managers coordinate reservations and room assignments, as well as train and direct the hotel's front desk staff (Bardi, 1996).

Front office personnel deals directly with guests the most compared to other department in the hotel. Therefore, personality, attitude and communication skills are important as a license to success in the department. Knowledge in complimentary salutations is important. Proper salutation encourages polite communication. Other attitudes that will create polite communication among front office personnel are helpfulness, friendliness, diplomacy, initiative, pleasantness and tactful in handling conflict.

Malaysian Politeness

In the effort of making Malaysia stand out in the eyes of the world, the modernization of attitude of its public should be taken under consideration. With that concept in mind, the government has taken some initiative in introducing the Courtesy Campaign and Good Values on March 20th 2006. The campaign is initiated and organized by the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage (Utusan Malaysia, 21st March, 2006). The campaign will commence for five consecutive years until 2010.

The National ideology (Rukunegara) of Malaysia also stated and emphasized on the Courtesy and Morality (Kesopanan dan Kesusilaan) of its people. The traditional and contemporary values should come hand in hand in the development of a modern society.

Campaigns are hoped to create awareness in the issue of politeness. One of the Malaysian government's campaigns for a polite society is the launching of slogan "Budi Bahasa, Amalan Hidup Kita" (Courtesy is our way of life). Advertisement through television is one way of campaigning for politeness. For an example, for this particular campaign, there was an advertisement showing a man who is not willing to give his seat in a train (LRT) to an older woman. Worst still, he is sitting on the reserved seat for older folk, handicapped and

pregnant women. The scene raised many eyebrows from onlookers on the train and also emotionally captured public awareness on the importance of being polite.

There is also a public advertisement that addresses mass public about the importance of smiling. Yet, with the attempts to create a polite and loving society, there is still a big gap between being polite in one occasion and rude in the blink of an eye. For instance, Malaysian is praised for delivering one of the best hospitality services and yet being criticized for having some bad drivers on the road.

METHODOLOGY

Type of Research

This research on front office politeness is an ethnographic study which emphasizes on micro level analysis. Educational researchers have used the term ethnography to refer to any qualitative study (Bilken, 1992). This ethnographic research is being conducted in natural setting environment. Researchers will go to the selected hotel and observe the interaction of the front office personnel. It is done covertly (covert research) which means, data were collected without the subjects' knowledge.

Sampling

Hotels are clustered into region (Central, Southern, Northern and Eastern). Most hotels selected are city hotels ranging from 3 stars to 5 stars. Convenience type of sampling is used. Convenience sampling is sometimes called the grab or opportunity sampling. This is the method of choosing items arbitrarily and in an unstructured manner from the frame (Sampling Statistics, 2007).

Instruments

Observation during fieldwork is used as the main data collection. Researchers will only be the observers and do not participate in the activities at the setting. However, in some cases researchers will also act as participant observers that deal with the front office personnel directly. Structured interviews are given to hotel guest as the secondary data for this research.

Expectations

The polite communication displayed by front office personnel in hotel is expected to be high. The significant criteria for polite communication in front office department will show which type of polite communication is being valued most by front office personnel. The significant criteria for polite communication will act as a guideline to conduct research on politeness and is also a strength that should be emphasized in Malaysian hospitality. In order to achieve a modern society status, the research on Malaysian politeness should be vastly extended to other organizational setting as well.

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