# Investigating The Implementation Of Indirect Communication Strategy Among Practical Training Students In The Workplace Context

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## ABSTRACT

*In the working environment, communication is one of the most important aspects in transferring information between employees and superiors and also between the employees themselves. The qualitative study was conducted in order to identify the reasons why the practical training students implement indirect communication as one of the communication strategies in the workplace. The research can further clarify the correct time and occasion concerning the use indirectness in daily communication. The methods used were analysing audio recordings of conversation that occurred in a corporate working environment. The recordings were then orthographically transcribed in order to identify the elements of indirectness in the speeches based on the thematic analysis approach. The data collected revealed that indirectness has taken place between superiors and subordinates and also among the subordinates when they were making request, responding to request, rejecting request, giving orders, complaining and making jokes. Indirectness also occurred in accordance to the reasons of saving owns face, offering help, avoiding conflict, delivering short message, asking about something to a stranger, avoiding from harming faces, voicing out disappointment, reducing the risk of offence and avoiding harm in relationship.*

*Therefore, the occurrence of indirectness is a good method to maintain relationship and avoid conflict especially in the professional working context.*

## 1.0 Introduction

In any working environment, communication is a vital aspect in maintaining harmony and peace among co-workers. In an office, we will have to deal with all sorts of people who are older and younger, or people with lots of experience, people who are new at work and many other attributes. Other than that, we also have to consider our method of communication with the co-workers, the supervisees and even with the superiors. In order for an organization to get things done and run their business, communication is one of the most significant aspects that need to be highlighted (Nor Azni Abdullah, 2010). According to Kierkegaard (as cited in Turnbull, 2009) indirect communication, strategy can be described as a 'vehicle' to carry ambiguous information among the speakers involved. Turnbull (2009) also mentioned that indirect communication is another sphere of ambiguity in delivering messages which involves the use of language and level the of the interlocutors' literacy. Such assumption pointed out by Turnbull (2009) correlates with the importance of speakers' and receivers' understanding in regards to the representation of the ambiguous message. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (seventh edition) also defines the term indirect as avoiding from saying something in a clear and obvious way.

The same situation of excessive use of indirectness can also occur in the workplace environment. Technically, the over-use of indirectness can also reduce the company's profit. Superiors tend to disguise the message in order to save the employee's face. According to Yule (1996), the term "face" can be defined as the public self-image of a person. According to Fung (2009), power distance plays a major role in determining the degree of indirectness use by a worker. In a corporate setting, especially in a meeting, the functions of indirectness are determined by the goal of the meeting and business relationships between the participants of the meeting (Fung, 2009). Participants in a meeting that have less power in the hierarchy tend to apply indirect communication in order to express their disagreement, thoughts or even complains. Nevertheless, in certain serious events such as negotiation that involve monetary issues, the superiors tend to use indirectness in order to get more support in his views. In communication, using indirect strategy might leave room for the imagination to grow. Brenner (2006) mentioned that when people receive incomplete information, they tend to make up things that they do not know. An incorrect message can cause delay to the project, or it can increase costs through reworking, confusion, unnecessary

work, conflict and delay. This is because the incomplete message might be ignored or misinterpreted by the employees.

This study has two main objectives:

- To identify when practical students use the indirectness strategy in conversations among themselves and also with their superiors.
- To determine what are the themes that can be derived from the conversations among the practical students and also with their superiors.

This study has two main research questions:

- When do the practical students use the indirectness strategy in conversations among themselves and with their superiors?
- What are the themes that can be derived from the conversations among the practical students and with their superiors?

## 2.0 Materials and Method

The researcher has decided to utilize the phenomenological approach in the process of analysing the data. Merriam (1998) mentioned that phenomenology is a qualitative research, which concentrates more on the essence or the basic structure of the phenomenon. Therefore, the data analysed were derived from the informants and the investigator's first-hand experience (Merriam, 1998). The study was conducted in an advertisement company that offered internship for students who are seeking for industrial experience in the professional corporate setting. The company is located in Damansara Perdana, Petaling Jaya, Selangor. The recording process were conducted based on the availability of the practical training students. Such step was taken due to the company's policy that the staff regardless of permanent or internship posts would be asked to go out and meet their clients for marketing purposes. Before the recording process can be conducted, the researcher had to clarify the purpose of the research with the organization and informants involve in order to avoid any ethical issues from ascending.

2.1 Researcher as the Instrument

According to Merriam (1998), the second characteristic of a qualitative research is the primary instrument for the research is the researcher. This is because the researcher will be moderating and facilitating the data collection process throughout the study.

2.1.1 Data Gathering and Analysis

Recordings of several conversations were done throughout the research process. These conversations were recorded during lunch hour, working hour and at the end of the working hour. Such casual talks involved topics both related and unrelated to work. Eight informants were involved in the audio recording procedure. The conversations between the practical students were recorded using the researcher's laptop recording feature and a MP3 recording device. The recordings were then orthographically transcribed and analyse using the thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis is a qualitative approach that can help the researcher to identify sets of themes within any sets of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher has incorporated the six approaches listed by Braun and Clarke (2006) which are: 1) Becoming familiar with the data 2) Generating initial codes 3) Searching for themes 4) Reviewing themes 5) Defining and refining themes 6) Producing the report.

**3.0 Data analysis**

3.1 Functional categories

In order to analyse the data, a total of six patterns or functional categories were taken into consideration namely making a request, giving order, responding to request, complaining, rejecting a request and making jokes. These patterns were analysed based on the orthographic transcription from the recorded conversations. These patterns help the researcher to identify when the practical students use the indirectness strategy in conversations among themselves and with their superiors.

Table 1: Functional categories

| FUNCTIONAL CATEGORIES | RECORDED CONVERSATIONS |
|---|---|
| Making a request | Conversation 1, conversation 2, conversation 3, conversation 6 |
| Giving order | Conversation 6 |
| Responding to request | Conversation 1, conversation 2, conversation 4, conversation 6 |
| Complaining | Conversation 5, conversation 6 |
| Rejecting a request | Conversation 2 |

3.1.1 Development of themes

Indirectness also occurred in accordance to the reasons of saving owns face, offering help, avoiding conflict, delivering short message, asking about something to a stranger, avoiding from harming faces, voicing out disappointment and avoiding harm in relationship.

Table 2: Development of themes

| RECORDED CONVERSATIONS | THEMES |
|---|---|
| Conversation 1 | Saving owns face, offering help |
| Conversation 2 | Avoiding conflict |
| Conversation 3 | Asking about something to a stranger |
| Conversation 4 | Delivering short message |
| Conversation 5 | Voicing out disappointment, avoiding from harming faces |
| Conversation 6 | Avoiding harm in relationship |

In making a request, an interlocutor might want to prevent himself from losing his face in front of his colleague. Indirect communication strategy is an option that can really help to deliver the request without harassing anybody's feeling. Indirectness essentially will involve politeness strategies. According to Tsuda (1993), politeness strategies are implemented in order to save other people's faces. Face is clearly defined as individuals' self-esteem. Politeness strategies uses are determine by three factors that are power distance, social distance and rank of impositions. In making a request, especially to a superior, subordinates must try to distance themselves and try to protect both faces. The rank of imposition also determine the level of indirectness apply in such conversations. According to Fung L (2009), higher ranking participants tend to use indirect strategy when the discussion involve critical moments such as negotiation in business and also issues relating to the use of money. Higher-ranking participants will also apply indirectness in order to gain support from other participants. Indirectness can make the person looks approachable and help to gain trust from the others. Other than that, in responding to a request, superiors also try to avoid conflict by rejecting the request (if rejected) in a more acceptable manner. Therefore, superiors applied indirect communication strategy to avoid harm in both faces and to retain respect from the subordinates. Although both of the speakers might have a huge gap of social distance, there is still

respect in both ways' speeches. This can help to avoid conflict and miscommunication from both parties. According to Brenner (2006), "Indirect communications are veiled, ambiguous, and excessively diplomatic." In certain situations, a worker who have to deal with his customer through phone calls must use proper statements to avoid from losing the customer's interest in listening to the worker's explanation, especially in promoting the company's product or services. The worker must also know how avoid from confrontation that can cause harm and conflict to his face and the customer's face as well. With proper words and tones, it is possibly for a worker to attract more customers or clients to be loyal to his company's product or services. Implementing indirectness in our communication can contribute towards the increasing of costs (Brenner, 2006). Sometimes, the intended message is not successfully delivered to the exact target. In this case, the message may be ignored because it does not clearly mention the intended receiver. If this happens, the speaker may increase costs through reworking, taking a longer time, causing delays and conflicts within the organization (Brenner, 2006). In delivering complain, especially when you are a worker and the message was delivered to your colleagues, you must use a more indirect approach to avoid harm and conflict in your relationship. When we want to convey a statement, especially between critics and superiors, we need to be indirect to avoid further harm to the relationships. Indirect communication strategy can provide a suitable "cover" for our actual statement (Brenner, 2006). Malaysian workers do not like to be ordered by a person with the same social status, as he is (another worker). Indirect approach can help to solve this problem and avoid conflict from happening.  The second use of indirectness is to mitigate the risk of offence (Brenner, 2006). When an interlocutor intend to give out orders or ask something from a person with the same social status as he is, he will try to avoid losing his colleague's face in front of the others. In a short period of relationship, both parties tend to be indirect in order to avoid harm to the new relationship that was established in only 1 month. In that case, to avoid conflict, an interlocutor also can reject a request or say "no" in an indirect manner that can be accepted by his colleague

**4.0 Conclusion**

This study has shown that indirectness occur between superiors and subordinates and between the subordinates when they are making a request, responding to request, rejecting a request, giving orders and complaining. Indirectness also occurred in accordance to the reasons of saving owns face, offering help, avoiding conflict, delivering short message, asking about something to a stranger, avoiding from harming faces, voicing out disappointment and avoiding harm in relationship. The results of the study indicated that social distance, power distance and rank of imposition determine the degree of indirectness in the subordinate's speech with superior and among themselves.

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