



# Sharing Background Knowledge for Polite Intercultural Interaction: Indonesian Migrant Workers in Malaysia and Their Employers - A Pragmatics Study

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**Abstract.** This study explores the role of background knowledge in facilitating polite intercultural interactions between Indonesian migrant workers and their Malaysian employers. Using a pragmatic framework, the research identifies key linguistic strategies and cultural norms that either bridge or widen the communication gap. The findings show that from the perspective of Malaysian employers, Indonesian migrant workers are perceived as significantly more pragmatically polite compared to workers from other countries. This heightened level of perceived politeness can be attributed to the shared background knowledge that Indonesian workers possess regarding language, cultural norms, rules, and beliefs, which aligns closely with those of their Malaysian employers. The linguistic affinity between Bahasa Indonesia and Bahasa Malaysia facilitates smoother communication and reduces potential misunderstandings, enabling Indonesian workers to employ politeness strategies more effectively. Additionally, the cultural and religious commonalities, predominantly Islam, further reinforce mutual understanding and respectful interactions. Consequently, Indonesian migrant workers exhibit a nuanced awareness of social etiquettes and hierarchical respect, which resonate well with the expectations of their Malaysian employers. Similarly, Indonesian workers hold a favorable impression of their Malay employers compared to employers of other ethnic backgrounds, primarily due to the shared cultural heritage. This reciprocal appreciation underscores the importance of background knowledge in fostering polite and harmonious intercultural workplace interactions.

**Keywords:** politeness, *intercultural interaction*, *Indonesian Migrant Workers*, *Malaysia*

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## 1. introduction

The migration trends between Indonesia and Malaysia have been marked by significant movement of labor, driven by economic disparities, regional proximity, and historical ties. Over the past few decades, Malaysia has become a major destination for Indonesian migrant workers, who seek employment opportunities across various sectors such as construction, domestic work, and manufacturing. According to data from the Malaysian Ministry of Human Resources, millions of Indonesian workers are legally registered and many others operate informally, contributing substantially to the Malaysian economy. The socio-economic context of these workers is characterized by diverse backgrounds, with many coming from rural areas and lacking formal education, which often necessitates their migration to urban centers for better economic prospects. This influx of migrant labor has profound implications for both nations, influencing social dynamics, labor markets, and bilateral relations (Raharto, 2002 [1]; Ford, 2006 [2]; Hugo, 2014 [3]; ILO, 2016 [4]; World Bank, 2017 [5])

In a multicultural setting such as Malaysia, intercultural communication plays a crucial role in maintaining workplace harmony and enhancing productivity. Effective communication strategies are essential in mitigating conflicts and fostering mutual respect among workers from different cultural backgrounds. For Indonesian migrant workers, the ability to navigate and adapt to the cultural and linguistic landscape of Malaysia is pivotal. Understanding the nuances of local customs, language, and social norms significantly enhances their ability to integrate and communicate effectively with their Malaysian employers and colleagues. This underscores the importance of developing intercultural competence and promoting cultural sensitivity to ensure that interactions are respectful, productive, and conducive to a harmonious work environment (Scollon, & Scollon, 2001 [6]; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012) [7].

Effective communication strategies are essential in mitigating conflicts and fostering mutual respect among workers from different cultural backgrounds. For Indonesian migrant workers, the ability to navigate and adapt to the cultural and linguistic landscape of Malaysia is pivotal. Understanding the nuances of local customs, language, and social norms significantly enhances their ability to integrate and communicate effectively with their Malaysian employers and colleagues. One key strategy in achieving this effective communication is the use of politeness in interactions. Politeness, as a communicative strategy, involves showing respect, deference, and consideration for others, which is crucial in maintaining harmonious relationships and ensuring smooth interactions in a multicultural workplace (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003 [8]; Spencer-Oatey, 2008 [9]).

To be polite in interactions with their Malaysian employers, Indonesian workers must possess and share background knowledge that encompasses cultural norms, linguistic expressions, and social etiquette. This shared background knowledge includes understanding the appropriate forms of address, the use of honorifics, and the subtleties of non-verbal communication that are culturally specific. For example, Malaysians place a high value on showing respect through formal greetings and the use

of titles, which are essential elements of politeness in the Malaysian context. Indonesian workers who are aware of these cultural expectations are better equipped to engage in interactions that their employers perceive as respectful and polite (Brown & Levinson, 1987 [10]; Kasper, 1990 [11]; House, 2006 [12]).

Furthermore, shared religious beliefs, such as Islam, play a significant role in shaping interactions. Both Indonesian and Malaysian cultures emphasize humility, patience, and the importance of maintaining harmony, which is integral to polite behavior. By aligning their actions and speech with these shared values, Indonesian migrant workers can effectively convey politeness, thereby fostering a positive and respectful working relationship with their Malaysian employers. This alignment of cultural norms and values through shared background knowledge not only facilitates polite interactions but also enhances mutual understanding and respect in the workplace.

This article discusses the intricate relationship between sharing background knowledge and possessing the skills to demonstrate politeness within intercultural interactions, specifically focusing on Indonesian migrant workers and their Malaysian employers. It explores how shared cultural and linguistic knowledge serves as a foundational element for polite and effective communication in a multicultural workplace setting. Politeness in communication is not merely a superficial display of manners but a deeply rooted practice that reflects mutual respect, understanding, and the ability to navigate social hierarchies and cultural expectations.

## **2. Literature Review**

Sharing background knowledge refers to the mutual understanding of cultural, social, and contextual information that individuals bring into an interaction, encompassing language, customs, values, norms, and life experiences. In intercultural communication, this concept is crucial for bridging cultural gaps and ensuring effective interactions (Djatmika, 2006)[13]. It enhances understanding and clarity by reducing the risk of miscommunication, as shared knowledge of cultural references and contextual cues allows messages to be interpreted accurately. Building trust and rapport becomes easier when individuals show respect and consideration for each other's cultural backgrounds, essential in professional settings like those between Indonesian migrant workers and their Malaysian employers. This shared understanding also facilitates the effective use of positive politeness strategies, as individuals can tailor their communication to align with the cultural norms of politeness and respect. Additionally, it reduces anxiety and uncertainty in unfamiliar cultural settings, helping individuals feel more confident and comfortable. Promoting cooperative and collaborative relationships is another key benefit, as mutual understanding encourages teamwork and support. Furthermore, sharing background knowledge enhances empathy and mutual respect by fostering appreciation of cultural differences. For Indonesian migrant workers and their Malaysian employers, this mutual understanding is vital for creating a respectful and harmonious working relationship.

Meanwhile, Brown and Levinson's theory of positive politeness encompasses 15 superstrategies designed to enhance the listener's positive face, fostering respect, appreciation, and camaraderie in interactions. These strategies include noticing and attending to the listener's interests, wants, and needs, thereby showing attentiveness and concern. Exaggerating interest, approval, or sympathy towards the listener emphasizes positive feelings and appreciation. Intensifying interest in the conversation by sharing relevant personal experiences makes interactions more engaging. Using in-group markers such as slang or cultural references creates a sense of camaraderie and mutual identity. Seeking agreement and avoiding disagreement help build solidarity and maintain harmony, while presupposing, raising, or asserting common ground highlights shared experiences and values, fostering connection.

Additionally, using humor through jokes can lighten the mood and build a friendly atmosphere. Demonstrating knowledge of and concern for the listener's wants shows that they are valued. Making offers or promises that benefit the listener conveys a willingness to contribute to their well-being. Expressing optimism about shared activities or future interactions promotes a hopeful and collaborative spirit. Including both the speaker and listener in activities through inclusive language encourages cooperation and partnership. Providing reasons for actions or requests, and seeking the listener's reasons, shows respect for their perspective and fosters understanding. Highlighting reciprocal benefits and mutual obligations underscores a balanced and cooperative relationship. Finally, giving gifts, whether tangible items or emotional support, demonstrates generosity and goodwill, further enhancing the listener's sense of being valued and respected. By utilizing these strategies, speakers can effectively meet the listener's positive face needs, leading to more harmonious and productive interactions (Brown & Levinson, 1987)[10].

Sharing background knowledge can significantly help speakers in selecting appropriate positive politeness strategies. When speakers have a deep understanding of each other's cultural, social, and linguistic contexts, they are better equipped to choose strategies that resonate positively with their listeners. For instance, if an Indonesian migrant worker is aware of the Malaysian cultural emphasis on respect for authority and hierarchy, they might use honorifics and respectful forms of address more effectively, thus employing the strategy of noticing and attending to the listener's needs (S1). Similarly, understanding the shared cultural references and in-group markers (S4) allows speakers to create a sense of belonging and solidarity, which is crucial for building rapport and trust. This shared background knowledge helps speakers to avoid potential pitfalls in communication, such as using humor or jokes (S8) that might be culturally insensitive or misunderstood. It also enables them to intensify interest (S3) and seek agreement (S5) on culturally significant topics, making the interaction more engaging and harmonious. In summary, shared background knowledge provides the essential context for selecting and effectively implementing positive politeness strategies, leading to more respectful, empathetic, and successful intercultural interactions.

### 3. Method

To investigate the relationship between sharing background knowledge and exhibiting politeness within intercultural interactions between Indonesian migrant workers and their Malaysian employers, a qualitative research design was employed. Data were collected through a combination of interviews and focus group discussions to capture a comprehensive understanding of the expectations and experiences of both parties involved. Firstly, in-depth interviews were conducted with six Malaysian employers. These interviews aimed to gather detailed insights into the employers' expectations regarding the Indonesian migrant workers' understanding of Malaysian social and cultural backgrounds. The interview questions were designed to explore the employers' perceptions of politeness, key cultural norms, and the specific areas where they believe Indonesian workers should have background knowledge to facilitate respectful and effective communication. Secondly, focus group discussions were held with fifteen Indonesian migrant workers. These discussions provided a platform for the workers to express their expectations concerning their Malaysian employers' understanding of Indonesian social and cultural backgrounds. The focus group setting allowed for interactive discussions, enabling participants to share their experiences, challenges, and suggestions for improving intercultural interactions in the workplace. The discussion topics included cultural practices, language use, social etiquette, and religious values that are important to the Indonesian workers.

### 4. Result and Discussion

Positive politeness strategies play a crucial role in performing intercultural interactions, as they help bridge cultural gaps and foster harmonious relationships. These strategies, which include noticing and attending to the listener's (H) interests, wants, and needs, as well as exaggerating interest, approval, and sympathy, are essential in creating a sense of empathy and understanding. By intensifying interest in the listener and using in-group markers, speakers (S) can build rapport and a sense of belonging, which is vital in multicultural settings.

Seeking agreement and avoiding disagreement are strategies that help maintain a positive atmosphere, reducing the likelihood of conflicts and misunderstandings. Presupposing, raising, or asserting common ground, and making jokes are effective in creating a shared cultural space where both parties feel comfortable and valued. Moreover, asserting or presupposing knowledge of and concern for the listener's wants demonstrates a deep level of engagement and respect, which is appreciated in intercultural exchanges.

Offering promises and being optimistic can reassure the listener and create a cooperative and forward-looking interaction. Including both the speaker and listener in activities fosters a sense of collaboration and mutual involvement. Giving or asking for reasons shows respect for the listener's perspective and encourages open dialogue. Assuming or asserting reciprocity, such as the "scratch my back" approach, highlights



understandin g																				
The workers are better in using Malay	--	--	--	√	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
The workers behave like Malay	--	--	--	√	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
The workers are good in accommodating cultural differences	--	--	--	√	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
The workers seldom complain, better in work	--	--	--	--	--	√	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
The workers are more independent, more mobile	√	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
The workers are cleaner, better body odor	√	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
The workers are better working skills and can work in team	--	√	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
The workers need to be introduced with Malay culture prior the departure	--	--	--	√	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
The workers are good communication skills	--	√	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
The workers are more respectful/ addressing with boss and kak	--	√	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

Notes:

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|---|---|
| S1: Notice, attend to H (his interest, his wants, needs, goods) | S9: Assert or presuppose S's knowledge of and concern for H's wants |
| S2: Exaggerate (interest, approval, sympathy with H)            | S10: Offer, promise   |
| S3: Intensify interest to H                                     | S11: Be optimistic  |
| S4: Use in group markers  | S12: Include both S and H in the activity                           |
| S5: Seek agreement  | S13: Give or ask for reasons  |
| S6: Avoid disagreement  | S14: Assume or assert reciprocity (scratch my back)                 |
| S7: Presuppose/raise/ assert common ground                      | S15: Give gifts to H (goods, sympathy, understanding, cooperation)  |
| S8: Joke  |   |







The employers ask the workers not to resign/ not to leave them.	--	--	--	√	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
The workers are treated as family members.	--	--	--	√	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

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Table 2 illustrates the views and attitudes of Indonesian migrant workers towards their Malaysian employers, highlighting the relationship between shared background knowledge and the use of positive politeness strategies. The workers perceive that employers who engage in cultural and language adaptation, such as speaking Indonesian well and having similar cultural backgrounds, effectively use in-group markers (S4), fostering a sense of belonging and mutual respect. Employers who provide cultural understanding during conflicts exhibit the strategy of avoiding disagreement (S6), helping to maintain a harmonious workplace.

Furthermore, the workers appreciate when the employers are aware of their educational levels and demonstrate a willingness to be cooperative, aligning with the strategy of noticing and attending to the workers' needs and wants (S1). The employers who express happiness when the workers adapt culturally, and those who treat the workers as family members, also use in-group markers (S4), reinforcing a supportive and inclusive environment.

The table also shows that the employers who want to learn Malay with their workers represent the strategy of including both the speaker and hearer in the activity (S12), promoting shared learning experiences and cooperation. The workers who avoid conflicts with their employers and monitor their attitudes in interactions demonstrate the strategy of avoiding disagreement (S6), which helps to minimize tensions. Additionally, the workers note that employers who appreciate explanations when mistakes are made and who ask workers not to resign or leave them employ strategies such as giving or asking for reasons (S13) and offering promises (S10), respectively.

Overall, this table highlights how the recognition and implementation of positive politeness strategies by Malaysian employers contribute to better intercultural understanding and more effective communication with the Indonesian migrant workers, thereby fostering a positive and respectful work environment.

## 5. Conclusion

The findings suggest that shared background knowledge significantly enhances the effectiveness of positive politeness strategies in intercultural interactions. Employers and workers who understand and respect each other's cultural and linguistic contexts are better equipped to employ these strategies, leading to more harmonious and productive relationships. The emphasis on mutual respect, understanding, and the ability to navigate cultural differences is critical for successful communication and cooperation in multicultural settings.

The data also indicate that both parties value and recognize the importance of cultural adaptation and shared experiences. This mutual effort in understanding and integrating into each other's cultural frameworks not only reduces the potential for conflict but also strengthens the bonds between employers and workers, creating a more supportive and efficient work environment. Therefore, fostering intercultural competence through training and continuous cultural exchange is essential for enhancing workplace dynamics and ensuring respectful and effective communication.

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