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Vous ou tu?: Towards Understanding the Politeness Concept in French

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Abstract

Politeness strategies in French have a primary goal of establishing and maintaining good social relationships between fellow members of the community. They are determined based on the principles of *savoir vivre*, literally translated as the knowledge of living, and *savoir faire*, the ability to say or do the right thing. In general, students taking French face difficulty in understanding the use of the pronoun *Vous* and *Tu*. This indicates that they do not master the concept of politeness in this language. Many studies have been made on this issue but none was done among students in Malaysia. In this study conducted among UKM students, questionnaire was distributed to identify the existing problem and intervention strategies, such as the use of flashcards and oral drills in role-plays were carried out. Implications derived from this study on the teaching and learning of the French language is that researchers are able to identify strategies to address the problems faced by students and to come up with a method that can be used in teaching to facilitate students' understanding of the concept. Once this concept is clearly understood, this in turn will boost students' confidence to converse in French.

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1. Introduction

Apart from the grammar system, every language in this world has its own politeness strategy and they differ according to the civilisation and the culture of its speaker. Politeness does not only come in the form of the carefully selected words used by the speaker but also in his action and manners.

The term politeness appears to be relatively omnipresent in all languages and cultures but it is rather difficult to give it an exact definition as Watts (2003) stated in the preface of his book *Politeness*; "writing an introduction to politeness is like being in mortal combat with a many-headed hydra. You've barely severed one head when a few more grow in its place". Watts also wrote that the term politeness derives from the Latin word *politus* which brings the meaning of 'polished'. In French, the noun *la politesse* and the adjective *poli* also derives from the same Latin word. The origin of the term politeness reflects on the meaning that the word is supposed to represent, a person with a polished or a good manner. According to Brown and Levinson (1978), all cultures in this world have somewhat common norms in linguistic politeness but at the same time these norms vary according to the different culture. What is considered polite and acceptable in one culture may be considered impolite and unacceptable in another culture.

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In learning a language, especially a foreign language, the ability to master the concept of politeness is essential in order for the learner to be able to function well in the language learnt. It is vital for the learner to be able to know how to formulate a sentence correctly and, most importantly, acceptable by a native speaker. Formulating a sentence correctly includes the fundamental knowledge of using the politeness strategies.

1.1 *The teaching of French Language Course in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)*

French is among the eight foreign languages taught in UKM. It is taught as either an elective course or as a guided-elective course. The Foreign Language and Translation Unit offers four different levels of this course;

- 1.1.1 SKVA3413 – Basic French I. This course is the most basic French language course offered in UKM and is opened to all students. No prior knowledge needed.
- 1.1.2 SKVA3423 – Basic French II. This second level is offered to students who have done and passed the Basic French I course.
- 1.1.3 SKVA3433 – Intermediate French I. This is the third level and is offered to students who have done and passed the Basic French II course.
- 1.1.4 SKVA3443 – Intermediate French II. This is the fourth level of French course and the highest taught in UKM. It is offered to students who have done and passed the Intermediate French I course.

As an elective course, French is offered to all students of UKM, regardless of their semester and year of studies, their major or the faculty they are from. For students taking French as an elective course, they have the choice of taking one level or up to four levels. Previously, French is also offered as a guided-elective course to students majoring in International Relations from the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities. These students have to complete at least three levels of French before they can graduate.

Currently the teaching and learning process of French in UKM is based on the textbook *Tapis Volant 1* for level 1 and 2 and *Tapis Volant 2* for level 3 and 4. These textbooks are designed mainly for the use of students in the Asia Pacific region but can easily be adapted to the students in UKM as the explanations are given in English. In these textbooks, the difference between the second person pronouns *Tu* and *Vous* is explained as ‘There are two words for *you* in French: *tu* and *vous*. Use *tu* for a person you know well, another student your age, a younger child or an animal. Use *vous* when you are talking to an adult you don’t know very well or to more than one person.’ (Zemiro & Chamberlain 2002). This is the rule of thumb that the students memorize from the beginning of their experience in learning French. According to Dimachki & Hmed (2002), the use of proper pronouns in verbal interactions is crucial because a person could be taken for being rude if he chooses the wrong pronoun while interacting with another person. Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1992) states that there are two meanings of these pronouns; the first one is the pronouns per se and the second meaning represents the social relationship value that exists between the speaker and the listener.

The French pronouns *tu* and *vous* both mean *you*. The choice of *tu* or *vous* depends on the person being addressed, taking into account the number of people, their age, social status etc. A general rule is *tu* is used when addressing a single person consisting of someone we are familiar with whereas *vous* is used with strangers or someone we respect as *vous* conveys formality. A conversation between a student and his teacher would consist of the use of the pronoun *vous* whereas a conversation between a child and his mother would use the pronoun *tu*.

2. Problem Statement This research was motivated by the frustration felt by the teachers of French in UKM, having to teach the language in a non-native environment and witnessing the inability of the students to master the simple concept of politeness in French albeit the many hours of explanations and exercises done. Based on the syllabus, the students are taught the basics of the politeness principles in French and they would usually memorise these basics without fully grasping the concept. Among the general principles of politeness that they learned are the use of

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