

Perceptions of Facework in International Student-International Student Advisor Interaction.

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Introduction

In communication, people in any culture wish to maintain their own face as well as a relationship of respect with others. The notion of face, however, has been conceptualized significantly differently in Western and Asian cultures. According to Goffman (1955), face is 'the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact' and 'an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes' (p.213). Similarly, Brown and Levinson (1987) define face as the public self-image that people want to claim for themselves. They contend that their concept of face is universal and further state that every individual has two kinds of face: positive and negative. Positive face is the individual's desire to be appreciated in interaction and negative face is the individual's desire for freedom of action and freedom from imposition. Nonetheless, these two definitions have been challenged and it is doubtful whether they provide an adequate basis for describing the use of linguistic expressions in facework, that is, the ways to manage or mitigate the face threats, in cultures which emphasize group identity over individual identity and for understanding Asian people's communicative behaviours (Gu, 1990; Ide, 1989; Jia, 1997-8; Matsumoto, 1988; Mao, 1994; Pham, 2008; Vilkki, 2006).

'Facework' – a term coined by Goffman – involves the strategies and actions which interlocutors use in interactions with others in order to preserve face needs. Previous studies on face and facework have examined the theoretical problem of Western explanatory biases (Arundale, 2006; Jia, 1997-8; Ting-Toomey, 1999). Some have dealt with facework in indigenous contexts such as Europe, China, Japan and South Africa (Beamer, 2003; Imahori, 2006; Jia, 1997-8; Kadt, 1998; Yabuuchi, 2004). Others have focused on social and cultural influences on facework strategies (Leichty and Applegate, 1991; Lim and Bowers, 1991; Merkin, 2006). Few studies have dealt specifically with the precise facework strategies used by intercultural interlocutors to manage face-threatening acts in their interaction in the workplaces. Interlocutors from different cultures are influenced by their own culture, and partly by the culture of their counterparts and are under pressure to achieve good relationships at work; therefore, their strategies reflect all these factors. However, though 'most workplace interaction provides evidence of mutual respect and concern for the feelings and face needs of others' (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003, p.5), there have not been many studies on facework in intercultural workplaces. Additionally, no previous study has looked into the interaction between international students and international student advisors. Thus, in this study, focus is given to the facework strategies employed in international student-international student advisor interaction, particularly by Vietnamese international students and Australian international student advisors.

Facework becomes crucial when interactions involve face-threatening acts – actions which may compromise the other person's perception or status in the interaction, even though the face-threatening action is necessary. Such cases raise key issues of the prioritizing of culturally different factors in evaluating and handling face-threatening acts, including the typically Western concern for the individual, and the equally typically Asian/Confucian concern for the group rather than the individual (Hofstede, 2001). These issues are at the centre of current research and controversy in intercultural communication studies in terms of description, analysis and theorization. We will concentrate on the speech act of request as it seems to be the most common act made by international students in their relationship with international student advisors and on the speech act of refusal since it, according to Ellis (1994), obviously constitutes a face-threatening speech act which may threaten the hearer. This threat may result in serious problems when interlocutors are not familiar with the culture in which this speech act is performed.

Studies on facework have been carried out with subjects from several Asian countries such as China and Japan (Beamer, 2003; Imahori, 2006; Jia, 1997-8; Ting-Toomey, 1999; Yabuuchi, 2004). More subjects from other Asian countries should be included in facework research in order to achieve an overall outlook of the strategies employed in intercultural contexts. In recent years, Vietnamese international students have made up a significant percentage in the total number of international students in Australia. According to the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia has become a leading destination of study and research for Vietnamese students, with up to 16,000 students enrolling in Australian education institutions in 2008 (DFAT, 2009). With the increasing number of Vietnamese students in Australian universities, embarrassing encounters in intercultural interactions between Vietnamese students and Australian advisors are inevitable. These involve various cultural conventions and different facework assumptions that are beyond interlocutors' expectations.

This study aims to investigate the facework strategies employed by interlocutors in the intercultural context, that is, Vietnamese international students and Australian international student advisors, in performing the face-threatening acts of request and refusal. It will also examine the interlocutors' conceptualization of facework and their reflections on the effectiveness of the strategies employed.

Specifically, the study poses and attempts to answer the following research questions:

- What facework strategies are used by Vietnamese international students when making a request and by Australian advisors when responding to or refusing the request?
- How do cultural dimensions such as power distance and collectivism/individualism affect the interlocutors' use of facework strategies?
- How do the interlocutors perceive the influence of their own cultural values on their strategies?
- How do the interlocutors consider their counterparts' cultural difference in their strategies?

The study findings will provide significant implications for not only intercultural communication researchers but also people working in the intercultural environment such as international student advisors and learning advisors. They will also shed light on questions of methodology in dealing with the analysis of face-threatening acts, and on theoretical issues in intercultural communication.

While the concept of face and the concern over face may be ubiquitous, how a person conceptualizes face and manages facework strategies is significantly affected by the cultural context (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003; Tracy, 1990). In other words, cultural factors exert a direct influence on people's facework strategy choices. To the Vietnamese people, the notion of face is always present in their mind (Tran, 1994; Tran, 2001). Expressions containing the word 'face' are mentioned quite frequently in most communication contexts and this works as a reminder of face in what they do or say. On the other hand, Australian people do not usually mention 'face', but actually have a similar concern of maintaining their face. Examining the different cultural dimensions affecting their facework may, therefore, help expose the discrepancies that need to be taken into consideration in the context of intercultural communication.

The central concern of this initial study is to observe the perceptions of face and facework of Australian international student advisors and Vietnamese international students and to explore the factors that affect their dynamic perceptions. It does not yet try to analyse specific strategies nor does it describe how face is managed in the interaction. Instead, by reflecting on and analysing four frequently occurring scenarios which were designed for a pilot study, the researchers plan to examine the perceptions of facework from the perspective of the insiders in order to sketch a general picture of how Vietnamese international students and Australian international student advisors perceive facework and their own interaction in this intercultural context. In particular, the scenarios were scrutinised through role play and retrospective interpretation done by a Vietnamese international student and an Australian international student advisor at the University of Queensland and analysed in the light of two of Hofstede's cultural dimensions: individualism-collectivism and power distance, to reveal how the interlocutors perceive face and its influential factors.

Individualism-Collectivism

Fundamentally, individualism refers to the tendency of emphasising individual identity over group identity, individual rights over group obligations, and individual achievements over group concerns. On the other hand, collectivism refers to the tendency of being more concerned with group identity over individual identity, group obligations over individual rights, and in-group-oriented concerns over individual wants and desires (Hofstede, 1997; Triandis, 1995). In interpersonal interaction, individualism is conveyed by the use of direct verbal assertions and upfront emotional expressions. Collectivism, in contrast, is expressed through the use of indirect verbal expressions

and discreet emotional disclosures in communication process. Most individualist cultures are found in Western Europe and North America whereas collectivist cultures are found in Asia, South America and Southern Europe (Hofstede, 2001). In this vein, Australia is considered an individualist society while Vietnam a collectivist one.

In general, as required by their role and since they are fully aware of the difficulties and anxiety that international students are experiencing, Australian international student advisors often communicate and behave in a gentle and empathetic way, trying to reduce the students' anxiety or to help the student find a feasible solution to their problem. In most situations, the advisors are able to understand the students' behaviour and reaction thanks to their knowledge of cultural differences. For example, in scenario 1, a Vietnamese international student who is overwhelmed with many problems decides on asking for help with the most practical problem, 'applying for accommodation', and uses other problems (difficulty in understanding Australian speech, feeling shy of her own English ability) as intensifying reasons for seeking help from the international student advisor while hardly going into details of the emotional problem of feeling isolated and homesick (for detailed scenario, see Appendix). This is because Vietnamese people are used to hiding their emotional feelings. It is a cultural expectation that Vietnamese people should solve emotional problems by themselves and they may feel shame at the thought that they cannot control their own emotions. Through their experience of supporting Vietnamese students, the international student advisors have come to recognise that Vietnamese students often try to seek help for practical problems, prioritizing these problems over emotional ones as they usually manage to control their own emotional trouble.

Moreover, the advisors notice that allowing a safe and respectful space for the student to express their concern or ask their question in a style that is comfortable to them is a vital quality in dealing with the indirect communication style of Vietnamese students. Tran (2001) points out that the habit of 'beating about the bush' is employed as a way to enhance or to avoid any risk to individual face in the Vietnamese interaction process. This communication style may be confusing for Australian international student advisors as they are unable to know for sure what the students really want. The advisor must use gentle questioning while respecting the facework strategies of the student to gather enough information in order to respond appropriately. For example, in scenario 2, a Vietnamese student wants the advisor to write a support letter for her boyfriend to apply for a visitor's visa (for detailed scenario, see Appendix). However, as cohabitation is looked down upon in Vietnam and Vietnamese people do not feel very comfortable if others know that they are living with a person of the other sex without being married; this damages the face of not only themselves but their family as well. So she makes her request very tentatively, gives only vague details and keeps hedging by adding more requests to make sure the advisor will not know their real relationship unless absolutely necessary. The advisors are usually sensitive enough to avoid pointing out or mentioning directly that relationship so as not to make the student lose face. The indirect communication can be seen in the way the student avoids answering directly or speaks in a circular fashion, asking a question at a certain level and then going deeper and deeper.

International student advisor (ISA): How are you today?

Vietnamese international student (VIS): Fine, thanks. I would like you to help with a recommendation letter so that my friend can apply for a visa to visit me. The visa officers in my country require him to have such a letter to complete the visa application procedure if he wants to come here to visit me.

ISA: Ok, how long does he plan to visit you for?

VIS: He would like to visit a lot of places in Brisbane and all over Australia. He'd like to make the most of this chance. Is it ok for him to get a visa for a long time, say, the whole time I'm studying here?

ISA: And he is your friend?

VIS: Yeah yeah.

ISA: We can provide a letter of support for family and relatives and sometimes close friends to visit if their main purpose is to visit you here. (...). The fact sheet I'll give you also outlines other documentation that you can provide for your friend so that he can complete his visa application.

VIS: In fact, I stay here for a long time, so is it ok for my friend to come here for a long time, the same period of time that I am studying here?

ISA: Uhm hmm, how long might that be?

VIS: Uhm, is it ok for him to stay here with me for the whole time I'm studying?

ISA: Well it depends on how long his visa is for. (...) it's up to the Department of Immigration to decide what length of visa he will be granted.

VIS: So in the recommendation letter, you cannot tell the Department of Immigration how long you would like to apply?

ISA: Yes, he can say that in his application and you can also put that in your letter. (...). But he needs to be aware that he won't be allowed to work, so he has to show that he has finance available to support himself during that time.

VIS: Is that ok for you to write us a letter to the Immigration Department telling them that he would like to stay here for a long time, the same time while I'm studying here and after some time visiting me and other places in Australia, he would like to apply for a course to study here?

ISA: Yes, I can put that in my letter, but that doesn't mean that he'll be granted a long visa. (...)

VIS: Is there anything different between my relationships with him that influence his visa length, like he's my very close friend or just a normal friend?

ISA: If he's your close friend and his purpose is to come and visit you, I'm able to write a letter to support you. In terms of the decision of the Department of Immigration on his visa, I don't know, I can't comment on that.

The student asks and tries to probe to see if she can ask more in the next requests. Starting with, 'I have a friend who would like to visit me' and when the advisor offers to write a support letter, she continues adding more requests in an indirect way. As can be noticed in this scenario, the student does not mention the duration of time immediately, but says 'my friend wants to come here to visit me and many places in Australia'. Obviously, to visit many places in Australia requires a lot of time. The student keeps asking whether her friend can get a visa to stay here for all the time she is studying and when being answered it depends on the Department of Immigration, she turns to ask if the intensity or closeness of their relationship can make any difference. That is an example of the indirect way Vietnamese students communicate and try to protect their face: adding more and more in continuous questions; if there is something not favourable enough, they will stop there, not releasing more information that may threaten their face.

Nonetheless, the advisors have seen many Vietnamese students coming to the service with an extremely direct nature of communication. They are surprised and perplexed by very direct requests like 'This is my problem and what I want, please provide it' or 'My friend has this, please do the same for me'. Moreover, while chatting with the students before going to the point, 'How are you?', 'How are you settling in the first semester?', 'How are you enjoying life?', 'How are you going with your assignment?' they notice that the students do not really want to engage in the chat but quickly get to the real point of the business. This might appear completely opposite with the indirect communication style that is often observed in the group of Vietnamese students. One explanation for this is the students push the stereotype to the extreme; they learn that Australian people are direct in communication and tend to behave similarly. They may also be afraid that the consultation time is limited and wish to get their problems solved first hand. Another possible explanation is that the students are aware that their spoken English is not good enough so they prepare their requests very carefully in advance and stick to their pre-planned requests, trying to avoid getting involved in what they have yet to prepare, in case their speech sounds ludicrous. The advisors' caring attitudes and attentive questions which can be perceived as an efficient way to accommodate the students and to secure them a face safe environment are, in fact, highly valued by these students when they leave feeling well supported.

Both the indirect habit of communication and the direct manner due to careful preparation with which Vietnamese students communicate may indicate their positive face of wishing to be appreciated in interaction. Furthermore, since the interdependent construal of the self rather than the independent one tends to predominate in a Confucian-oriented culture (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Vu, 2002), the Vietnamese face assumes both personal self-esteem and group self-esteem. The Vietnamese students often take for granted their responsibility to achieve high study results as a way to maintain or enhance their own face and that of their family as well as that of the whole Vietnamese international student cohort they belong to. In most consultations with the advisors, Vietnamese students often show their profound concerns about their study being affected by the problems they have been coping with.

Power Distance

In his study of international differences in work-related values, Hofstede (1980) identifies a correspondence between his two cultural dimensions of individualism-collectivism and power distance. Power distance is 'defined as the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally' (Hofstede, 1997, p.28). Most individualist countries tend to score low on power distance scale and most collectivist countries tend to have higher scores. In high power distance cultures, inequality is more tolerated and high-status people receive significantly more respect than those of lower status. On the other hand, the status gaps are likely to be smaller and fairly less deference is given to people of high status in individualist cultures. The two ends of this cultural dimension can be seen in the two cultures in this study with Australian at the low power distance end and Vietnamese at the high power distance end.

The relationship between an international student and an international student advisor is of help-seeker and help-giver nature; therefore, most Vietnamese students hold in their mind a high esteem toward the advisor they are contacting and appear very polite and respectful. However, advisors notice some Vietnamese students who are maturely aged and who hold senior positions in their country tend to have a courteous but demanding behaviour. These students from the Vietnamese high power distance culture possessing a socially granted authority, as Hofstede (2001) explains, tend to emphasise their referent power in all interactions.

Moreover, being aware of power-unequal relationships in which Vietnamese international students are involved and experience problems such as husband-wife, lecturer-student can bring about a clearer picture for advisors to provide

assistance. For instance, in scenario 3, a Vietnamese PhD student asks to help with a loan (see Appendix). Her worries about financial problems can be perceived as the tip of an iceberg as she is extremely perplexed with her intense relationship with her husband who finds it hard to get a job and to struggle with life in Australia. As a rule, an implicit consent in Vietnamese culture that assigns the husband a higher status in the spousal relationship, at least on the social surface, makes it much more difficult for the student to cope with her problem and to maintain face. It might be very difficult for her to reveal that her husband was unable to find a job to solve the family's financial problem as this revelation is regarded as causing her husband to lose face. In the consultation with the advisor, the Vietnamese student tends to assume her role as a responsible wife, mother and researcher – these roles apparently give her a considerable status and power to talk about her financial worries and her commitment to repay the loan with confidence. Likewise, in scenario 4, the concern of losing face with the lecturer that the Vietnamese student shows in her consultation with the advisor can illustrate how power distance influences the student's thinking and this certainly affects her facework strategy to some extent. Though with a valid medical certificate, the student is completely eligible to request an assignment extension, she keeps considering what she should do so as not to leave a bad image, or an inaccurate impression, with the lecturer (see Appendix for detailed scenario).

(...)

VIS: So you think it's just normal to ask for an extension in this situation and it will not leave any bad impression at all.

ISA: Yeah, I think if you've got the evidence and you don't do this every time you have an assignment. (...) I'll bring you a letter of support.

VIS: So you can help me to write such a letter?

ISA: Yeah, I can write you a support letter or I can an email directly to your lecturer. It's up to you if you like to approach your lecturer yourself and take along my support letter or I can email the lecturer and you can go and speak to him.

VIS: I think it's better for me now as I figure out what I should do.

(...)

The Vietnamese student can only feel quite relieved when the advisor offers to write a letter of support or email the lecturer as she assumes that the advisor has similar power to the lecturer and the advisor's support is significant to help her maintain the image of an academically competent student.

As members of a low power distance culture, Australian international student advisors may find Vietnamese students' concerns strange and not serious. If they simply advise students not to worry without thoughtful and caring explanation, their assistance may not be of real help.

Conclusion

Though the scenarios selected are not comprehensive, they do expose the conceptualization of Vietnamese international students and international student advisors about face/facework and its influential cultural factors. Ostensibly conflicting use of very indirect and direct requests by Vietnamese students as well as their anxiety and worry can be explained through an understanding of their conception of face and facework. Australian advisors' experience of students' behaviours expose their consciousness of face and facework; obviously, their working attitudes can be enhanced by more thorough awareness of these cultural concepts. Without a doubt, realising their differences and understanding them with reference to the concept of face may help both advisors and students to ease the path from conceptualization to operationalization and thereby communicate with each other more confidently and comfortably.

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Appendix

Scenario 1

A Vietnamese student arrived in Brisbane, Australia two weeks ago and is feeling overwhelmed. She has made six applications for accommodation though has not yet been successful. This is the first time she has been away from Vietnam and her family for a long period and she is finding everything very strange and confusing. She is also having trouble understanding Australians when they speak and is beginning to feel anxious about how she will cope with understanding her lecturers. She also feels shy when speaking in English and so far, has found it hard to make friends. She finds herself crying at night and wondering how she will face the next day.

She comes to the student support services and wants the international student advisor (ISA) to help her by applying for her accommodation on her behalf.

Scenario 2

A single Vietnamese student would like to bring her boyfriend to Australia. She is going to see an ISA and ask for a recommendation letter to apply for his visa. Since she does not have any marriage certificate and cohabitation is not encouraged among Vietnamese people, she needs to make a very convincing request.

Scenario 3

A PhD student's husband and baby have joined her in Brisbane. She is working long hours and has just secured a place in a childcare centre for her baby. She is very worried about her financial straits as her husband had planned to work here though has not yet been able to find a job. Her husband is getting frustrated and their relationship has become strained. She would like the ISA to help her get a loan.

Scenario 4

A student has been very unwell this semester and was admitted to hospital for a week. Her housemates have been helping her at home and a friend in her class has given her the lecture notes. She is worried that she will not be able to meet an assignment deadline though feels afraid to ask the lecturer for an extension. She is concerned the lecturer may think she has been lazy. She would like the ISA to help with the deadline extension.

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