POLITENESS IN LETTERS TO THE EDITOR IN PHILIPPINE ENGLISH, AMERICAN ENGLISH, AND SINGAPOREAN ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

Letters to the editor provide practice in the art of taking a stand and defending it in order to bring a problem or an issue to the people or institutions concerned. Using Brown and Levinson's (1987) model, this study attempts to examine the differences in politeness strategies in three different cultures. It will investigate cross-cultural differences in politeness strategies employed in writing letters to the editor in Philippine, Singaporean, and American English.

Forty-five letters to the editor written in Philippine, Singaporean, and American English, from the leading newspapers published in seven days, were analyzed in terms of organizational patterns, politeness strategies, politeness markers, and cultural influence. 'Discourse bloc' was used as a method of identifying the organization patterns and politeness strategies and markers in each of the forty-five letters.

Finally, an adaptation of Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory to a written text revealed distinct types of 'politeness phenomena' in contrastive rhetoric. This study hopes to reveal the significance in applying politeness theory not only to spoken interaction, but also to written interaction.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent work in contrastive rhetoric (Connor, 1996; Simpson, 2000, Lautamatti, 1987; Simpson, 2000; Mohamed and Omer, 2000; Ostler, 1987; Thatcher, 2000) has recognized the relationship of language and culture in the development of writing conventions and rhetorical patterns within specific discourse communities. Contrastive rhetoric is viewed not simply as an act of linguistic description, but more as linguistic explanation, attempting to answer the question, *why do members of specific discourse communities write the way they do?*

Any ethnographic study must take language into account (Bhatia 1997). Culture depends on the capacity of humans to use language for purposes of organizing social cooperation (Saville-Troike, 1982). According to the Whorfian hypothesis, as language shapes and controls the writers' thinking, it also reflects their world view. Indeed, there is a correlation between the form and content of a language and the beliefs, values, social

structure, and the needs present in the culture of its members, and all of these are reflected in their writing.

One of the important approaches to contrastive rhetoric is genre analysis (Swales, 1990). It has become one of the major influences on the current practices in the teaching and learning of language, in general, and in teaching writing, in particular. The media help to sustain the idea of teaching genre and its various forms, e.g. newspapers, by providing researchers with avenues for research possibilities. The studies of Scollon (2000) on generic variability in news stories in Chinese and English, Reynolds (1993) on illocutionary acts in Egyptian English, and Dayag (1997) on editorializing in Philippine English, have revealed important findings on the linguistic differentiation and rhetorical conventions governing news stories and editorials. In this study, the researcher attempts to demonstrate the use of contrastive rhetoric theory (CRT) in analyzing a particular genre, letters to the editor.

Letters to the editor provide practice in the art of taking a stand and defending it in order to bring a problem or an issue to the people or institutions concerned. These letters usually deal with problems - e.g. pollution, treatment of animals, traffic – that need public attention. Topics may be based on a firsthand experience or an article or letter that readers agree or disagree with.

Letters to the editor require argumentative strategies in presenting facts and opinions with the objective of conveying the message to a large audience. Linguistically speaking, letters to the editor are the *face* of a nation's politics in which the citizens and the people or institutions concerned confront each other. The writers are free to express their emotions while describing the problem. Similarly, government officials and authorities are free to answer queries or attend to the needs of the writers. Although such venue is devoid of a face-to-face interaction, letters to the editor can provide an interesting situation, since it is a setting where people of different political and social backgrounds publicly expose their *face* (Goffman, 1967) through written discourse. Unknown relations can also be difficult, and the potential for aggression (in words) is high. Still, these writers communicate to elicit a desired effect, i.e. understanding.

This study seeks to study the role of politeness in written interaction. It will examine the differences in the use of politeness strategies in three different cultures. It will also investigate cross-cultural differences in politeness strategies employed in writing letters to the editor in American, Singaporean, and Philippine English.

Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following questions:
1. Are there differences in macro-structure among letters to the editor written by American, Singaporean, and Filipino writers?
2. What politeness markers characterize such letters?
3. Who employ more politeness strategies in their letters?
4. What specific cultural influences can be observed in letters to the editor by American, Singaporean, and Filipino writers?

Aside from Scollon (2000), Reynolds (1993), and Dayag (1997), this study hopes to contribute to the growth of contrastive rhetoric in the Philippines. Valuable to the study are the following works on argumentative writing and politeness.

Ostler (1987) found similarities in the consistent use of a topic sentence between English and Arabic prose. Using T-unit and Discourse Bloc as quantitative indices, she found that both cultures have at least one discourse bloc and at least two discourse units with a minimum of A and B subdivisions. Her hypothesis that there are parallels in the use of English by American and Arabic writers has been quantitatively proven. This finding may make ESL teachers appreciate the differences in rhetoric in different cultures and learn to teach these distinctions as an aid to improving both the reading and writing skills of their students.

Kamimura and Oi's (1998) study provided an innovative approach to analyzing students' argumentative essays. Their analysis was based on two perspectives: linguistic analysis and cultural analysis. Linguistic analysis included an examination of the organizational patterns, rhetorical appeals, and diction found in the essays. On the other hand, cultural analysis using cultural tokens focused on the cultural influences reflected in the students' essays.

Connor's (1987) classic work introduced a system to describe and evaluate argumentative patterns in student writing across cultures and languages. Three different text analyses were used: the argumentative text as a problem-solution structure, text as successive speech acts, and argumentative text as the medium of appeal to audience. The study revealed the strong correlation between overall composition quality and the speech act sequence. The sequence was not a sure means of success. The study also discovered that the use of narration should be taught to ESL students, for it could be an effective style in writing argumentative essays. More importantly, the study stressed the role of audience awareness as a predictor of successful argumentation.

Holmes' (1998) study was anchored on Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of politeness that stresses the role of compliments as forms of speech acts. Ethnographic approach was utilized in this study. New Zealand men and women served as subjects. Holmes based her study on a corpus of 484 naturally-occurring compliments and compliment responses. Her analysis revealed that women use compliments more frequently than men. More than an issue of gender, the present study aims at discovering compliments as a positive politeness strategy in letters to the editor.

The present study is based on Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987). Politeness illustrates a special way of taking into account the other person's feelings. *Politeness*, in a broad sense, refers to the process of satisfying the *face* wants of others but also protecting our own (Coates, 1988). *Face*, then, is the key term in understanding politeness; roughly stated, it refers to individual's self-esteem, and it "can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction (Brown and Levinson, p. 61). A person's expectations concerning his or her self- image is called *face wants*. All interactants have an interest in maintaining two types of face during interaction: *positive face* and *negative face*. Brown and Levinson (1987) define *positive face* as the consistent image people have of themselves, and their desire for approval. On the other hand, *negative face* is "the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, and rights to non-distraction" (p. 65).

Utilizing this notion of *face, politeness* is regarded as having a dual nature: *positive politeness* and *negative politeness*. *Positive politeness* is expressed by satisfying positive face in two ways: (1) by indicating similarities amongst interactants; or (2) by expressing an appreciation of the interlocutor's self-image. *Negative politeness* can also be expressed in two ways: (1) by saving the interlocutor's face (either negative or positive) by mitigating face-threatening acts (hereafter FTAs), such as advice-giving and disapproval; or (2) by satisfying negative face by indicating respect for the addressee's right not to be imposed on. In short, politeness is expressed not only to minimize FTAs, but also to satisfy interactant's face regardless of whether an FTA occurs or not.

Brown and Levinson (1987) mention that when doing an FTA, the use of the *on-record strategy* results in either lesser face redress or greater face redress (i.e. will be less face threatening) resulting in either positive or negative politeness. The lesser face redress, the more direct, clear, unambiguous, and concise a talk exchange occurs (p. 69). The *bald-on record strategy* primarily serves one purpose: to be of use for S "whenever S wants to do the FTA with maximum efficiency more than he wants to satisfy H's face (95). In other words, on-record utterances do not minimize the face threat, and examples include direct

imperatives, attention-getters (e.g. "Listen," "Look," etc), warnings (e.g. "Be careful!"), or demands.

At the opposite end of the FTA strategy spectrum is the *off-record strategy*, mainly encompassing various hints and understatements. When S wants to avoid responsibility, he or she goes off record in doing an FTA and leaving it up to H to interpret it (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 211). The off record strategy is based on violation of Grice's maxims. In giving hints and clues, S violates Relevance maxim ("What a boring movie!" –implication of "Let's leave"); in understating or overstating, S violates Quantity maxim ("I told you a thousand times"); in using metaphors, irony, rhetorical questions and contradictions, S breaks Quality maxim ("He is a real fish") (251-222); and by using indirect, vague, and ambiguous language, S also violates Manner maxim ("I'm going you-know-where").

A choice of one of the four strategies will depend on the kind of social relationship interactants have. However, in the analysis of the language used in letters to the editor, the three levels of politeness which a writer (W) uses to an addressee (H) will not be evident. These are the relative power (P) of H over S, the social distance (D) between S and H, and the ranking of the imposition (R) involved in doing the face-threatening act (FTA). This is due to the exploratory nature of the study in discovering politeness phenomena in written texts.

In the context of letters to the editor, the social and political affect will be considered instead. The presence of a large, heterogenous, mass audience is considered as a second factor of politeness. Lastly, the existence of the Letters to the Editor guidelines is of crucial importance for this study. These letters are sent by post or through e-mail with the writer's signature, name and full address. They should be brief, and they are subject to editing. Such guidelines regulate the written discourse. It is assumed that the editor decides on the FTA permitted, forbidden, and expected for publication. Hence, the writers observe politeness in their arguments in order to get their letters published and read by the public.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 The Data

Fifteen letters to the editor (or a total of 45) written in American, Singaporean, and Philippine English, were each taken from *The USA Today*, *The Straits Times*, and *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, respectively. The letters were randomly selected from each of the three newspapers regardless of length of the letters, topics, and the writers' socio-economic status, educational attainment, age, sex, and occupation. The letters were categorized according to their primary functions: (a) to give facts about a subject, (b) to propose a solution to a problem, (c) to present an opinion, (d) to support an opinion expressed by another writer, or (e) to rebut an opinion or statement by another writer.

2.2 Methods of Analysis

Unit of Analysis

The analysis conducted for this research has attempted to identify the organization patterns and the use of politeness strategies and politeness markers in each of the 45 letters. Unlike the speech act level used in Brown and Levinson (1987), the present study has used Pitkin's (1969) Discourse Bloc, as modified by Kaplan (1987), as the unit of analysis.

Discourse Bloc is a term used to describe a "context," an extended unit of discourse larger than a sentence (Pitkin in Ostler, 1987).

A discourse bloc is that unit which recognizes that several ideas are related to each other at two levels, syntactically and semantically (Ostler, 1987). Syntactically, they are related through superordination, coordination, and subordination. Semantically, they are related through anaphoric, cataphoric, and endophoric reference (Halliday and Hasan 1976, cited in Ostler, 1987). A discourse bloc consists of related units called discourse units. They are related semantically and syntactically to the discourse bloc and may or may not be equivalent to sentences (Ostler, 1987).

The discourse bloc as a quantitative index is effective in showing the relationships among ideas syntactically and semantically. Two purposes are served by the use of such method: On the one hand, it is an attempt to identify adequately the units of realization of FTAs and politeness strategies in the text, taking into account the generic structure of letters to the editor. On the other hand, this method also tries to study politeness phenomena in relation to textual organization, becoming thus a tool of quantitative analysis to seek the relationship between the textual units and the frequency of FTAs and politeness strategies.

Fig. 1 shows a sample letter to the editor presented in Discourse Bloc form.

Fig. 1. Sample Letter in American English in Discourse Bloc Form

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DB *The writer incorrectly characterizes anti-sweatshop activists as pushing
    "feel good measures for themselves.

  A. As he points out, these activists seek working conditions, not the withdrawal of
      Western companies caught using factories with labor abuses.

 DU 1. *Many anti-sweatshop groups work with counterparts in developing
countries to institute rehabilitation and education program for children removed from abusive
labor situations.

A. Such programs can improve these children's future prospects and skills.

DU 2. *Some companies do react to "bad PR" by mechanizing or pulling out.
  A. That does not mean the alternative is for Western companies to perpetuate in
      developing countries the labor and human rights abuses that long time agobecame
      unacceptable for workers in the United States and Europe.
DU 3. *The point is not to call for more sweatshop jobs in developing countries.
  A. It is to make companies take some responsibility for the conditions under which
      their highly profitable merchandise is manufactured.
DU 4. A. This is a long-term process, but
      B. it must start somewhere.

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        *DB = Discourse Bloc; DU= Discourse Unit

Organizational Patterns

After all letters were analyzed according to Discourse Bloc, blocks of sentences were classified according to the following units: Reference (R), Background Information (BI), Problem (P), Evaluation (E), and Call for Action (CA). The following are the definitions of each unit:

In Reference, the writer points to the previous article by using a direct statement, as in the following example:

> *I refer to the letter, "Location-based services: Protect users' privacy" (ST, June 26), by Mr. Ngiam Shih Tung* (S3).

> *This has reference to the letter last June 29, 2002 titled "Marijuana industry flourishing in Kalinga"* (P9).

The Background Information is the unit where the writer gives introductory comments about a topic.

> *The article about outlawing the Pledge of Allegiance made me angry ("Court Ruling on the Pledge ignites furor," News)* (A7).

> *The article, "Son jailed for life for slashing mum" (ST, June 29), which speaks about "epilepsy defence", has done little to improve the image of people with seizure disorders that is generally held by the public* (S4).

> *I am reacting to recent articles urging Environment Secretary Heherson Alvarez to follow the example of Transportation Secretary Pantaleon Alvarez who resigned and chose not to face his detractors at the Commission of Appointments* (P1).

The Problem refers to the main point of the letter. This is an issue raised by the writer.

> *We have problems well beyond the scope of the golf scores of CEOs (Many CEOs bend the rules (of golf): 82% admit being less than honest on their scorecards, survey says," Cover Story, News)* (A5).

> *For a contract to be legally binding there must be elements of offer, acceptance, consideration and intent. Silence does not man consent unless there is a prior agreement* (S1).

> *... I don't contradict her medical evaluation but, are there no other reasons to be considered aside from that?* (P2).

In Evaluation, the writer discusses the problem by providing supporting details. In this unit, the readers get more enlightened by the facts and opinions presented by the writer. In evaluating, the writer gives his subjective assessment of the issue.

> *Mainstream films do too much simplifying and could never do justice to something as complicated as an entire religion. Many Americans do not understand the intricacies of the Islamic religion. The vast majority of people who practice Islam are peaceful and vehemently denounce terrorism* (A11).

> *With this procedure in place, I am sure that even if the customers' computers had been compromised, the hacker would not have been able to conduct the transfer as the bank's backend system has control over this* (S6).

What we witness day in and day out are endless congressional investigations "in aid of legislation" amounting to nothing but media exposure for the investigators, obviously to keep their names in the public mind for the next elections (P7).

It is in the Call for Action where the writer can do more than gripe. The writer tries to come up with a solution to the problem.

Why don't we encourage more students to pursue these avenues instead of being critical of those who do? (A13).

Perhaps the respective insurers should review the appointment of their "quality" workshops instead (S7).

Wage increase will always depend on productivity. Labor expense is only one of the many important requirements to run a business. Let labor and management join hands in improving production (P5).

Politeness Markers

The next phase of analysis was to distinguish the types of diction used in American, Singaporean, and Philippine letters. For the present study, the researcher examined the different types of lexical expressions and particles used in the letters. When such expressions strengthened the idea, they were classified as positive politeness markers. On the other hand, when those expressions weakened the effect of the ideas, they were classified as negative politeness markers.

Table 5 (p. 30) shows the politeness markers evident in the letters.

Face Threatening Acts and Politeness Strategies

The analysis of the FTAs and politeness strategies was carried out at the level of discourse blocs. For this section, the researcher preferred the term *move* to refer to both discourse bloc and discourse units since for each move (DB or DU), it is evident that a discourse act is recognized when the writer affirms or disproves (threatens) an idea expressed in the letters to the editor.

Table 6, 7 and 8 show the number and frequency of FTAs and politeness strategies per turn in each text. The following illustrations exemplify the analysis of FTAs and politeness strategies in letters to the editor in American, Singaporean, and Philippine English.

Text A15 is entitled "A wake-up call for Arab states" (*USA Today*, July 5, 2002). It is a reaction to the report "UN wake-up call for Arab societies" (*USA Today*, News, July 2):

There are four moves in this text: One Discourse Bloc and three Discourse Units. In the Discourse Bloc, the writer commends the action of the United Nations against terrorism: (DB* *It is to be roundly applauded that the United Nations is bringing out a new report on the state of Arab society.*) Here, the writer expresses his approval of the step taken by the United Nations. The expression 'roundly applauded' projects a positive appeal. Hence, based on this bloc or move, one can posit that the DB expresses positive politeness.

In the second move the writer changes her tone. As evident in the Discourse Unit (DU *What took so long?*), the writer assumes a position to allow him to discuss relevant points regarding such a delayed act. This can also be classified as an off-record politeness since the writer uses an understatement. Moving on, this FTA is also evident in the two subdivisions of the Discourse Unit (A. *If one could have been done in the decades since the*

25

oil bonanza... it is disgraceful that the medieval and even feudal regimes in those parts of the world did nothing to change the status quo. B. It is to them in their marble halls and palaces that Arab anger should be directed.)

In the third move more accusations are made: (DU *III. *Secretary –general Kofi Annan should not be seen to drop the ball on this. A. He should be convening meetings with leaders of Arab states and pounding the table to get his message across and get something done.*). Notice that the writer is imposing on somebody who is considered an authority. This is a clear example of a bald-on record in an FTA situation. One can note the Power (P) of a writer over reader. The medium is effective since the Distance (D) between the writer and reader is so remote; hence, the writer can say whatever he/she wants.

However, in the fourth move, the writer leads to her point: the DU *IV. *Who would not benefit?* This is a big turn from the FTA since the writer uses another positive politeness strategy by stating the advantages people (the Arab nation in particular) will get if the previous suggestions will be carried out.

The first text gives us an idea of how discourse acts in a text can be identified through Discourse Bloc. It also provides us with a rough step of analyzing letters by working within the framework of the Politeness Theory.

The second text (S6) is a letter written in Singaporean English entitled, "Bank could have prevented unauthorised transfers" (*The Straits Times*, July 2, 2002).

The first move is an assertion of the writer's rights. Though this may come out too strong, the writer intends to gain the public's approval especially those who know banking. Hence, it can serve as a negative politeness strategy. (*I believe that to transfer funds to a third-party POSB/DBS account, one has to make an application online...*)

The second move, being a subdivision of the first move, adds information to the former, with *In addition, the transfer cannot take place at the same time as the application.* This is a clear example of a negative politeness characterized by restraint. Indeed, the formality that goes with the explanation signifies a point being driven.

The third move (*With this procedure in place, I am sure that even if the customers, had been compromised, the hacker would not have been able to conduct the transfer as the bank's backend system has control over this*) supports the previous points raised. Notice the marked significance of distance since the writer's approach signifies the writer's freedom from imposition.

The fourth move, *Thus, I am very doubtful about DBS' claims over the integrity of its system,* is a very serious FTA in the letter. The writer expresses doubt on fund transfers as approved by authorities. At this point, the writer has already established the ground concerning the issue. This FTA calls for an investigation on the matter or abolition of the seemingly erroneous system of banking policy.

The third text (P8) is a letter written in Philippine English entitled, "Another disappointing appointment" (*Philippine Daily Inquirer*, July 2, 2002)

This is a text with eleven moves. The Discourse Bloc has three subdivisions; Discourse Unit I has two; Discourse Unit II has three, and two more major Discourse Units. The DB reads: *So Hermogenes Ebdane is going to be the next head of the PNP?* The first move is a request for information, and simultaneously an FTA against the government for the subject's appointment. The second move is an overstatement, *We can all sleep well especially the members of kidnap gangs.*

The second move is an accusation over the credibility and capacity of the subject. The succeeding moves are consistent in painting an image of the subject as well as in justifying the wrong decision of the government to assign the highest position in the police organization to someone who, in the writer's opinion, is incapable of handling peace and order in the country.

The whole point is even synthesized in the third move with one line, *What a farce!* But the writer knows the rules of journalism; thus, the discourse, though dominated by FTAs, is still acceptable. Again, the position the writer has taken gives him the opportunity to be aggressive and assertive of his rights in terms of Power, Distance, and Rank of imposition.

Out of the ten FTAs, only one strategy, an off-record strategy, becomes evident with the line, *Hermogenes Ebdane is another great GMA appointee.* In Grice's Maxim of Quality, this is a violation of the rule when the writer uses metaphors, rhetorical question, irony, and contradictions (Grice, 1975).

The analysis of the texts has stressed the role of politeness as a linguistic means used by senders of letters to the editor to produce FTAs in the process of conveying the message.

Cultural Influences

The final phase included the cultural influences on writing. To determine the cultural influences in them, letters included in the corpus were classified according to their primary functions: (a) to give facts about a subject, (b) to propose a solution to a problem, (c) to present an opinion, (d) to support an opinion expressed by another writer, and e) to rebut an opinion or statement made by another writer. In this way, cultural influences were manifested by discovering the functions of each culture's letters to the editor.

In addition, cultural influences on writing were analyzed in the light of three other factors: organizational development, politeness markers, and politeness strategies, as explained above.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 The Organizational Pattern of Letters to the Editor

Table 1 shows the number of occurrences of the five organizational units found in the letters to the editor written in American, Singaporean, and Philippine English.

Table 1. The number of occurrences of five organizational units

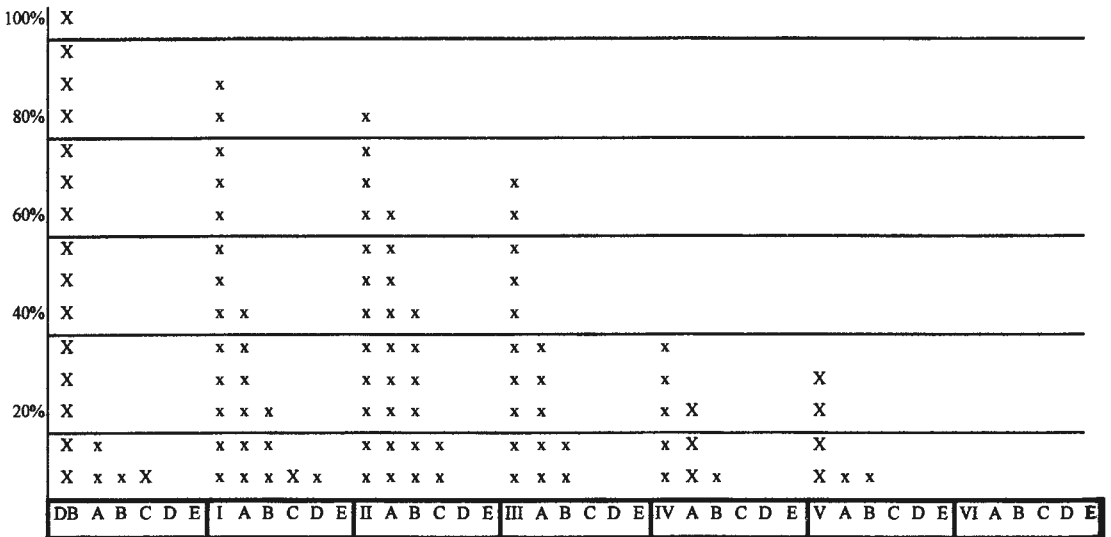| Groups	Organizational Unit					
	R	BI	P	E	CA	Total
American	1	9	15	14	9	48
Singaporean	14	14	15	15	7	65
Philippine	2	14	15	15	6	52

It is interesting to note that a certain pattern is evident when the three cultures are studied. One major feature of letters to the editor is their reference to the issue or article from the news stories previously discussed or published. All of the three cultures referred to the previous articles. However, the three groups varied in styles in the way they referred to

the "I refer…" phrase. The American and Filipino writers incorporated their Reference in their Background Information. Since letters to the editor deal with issues and problems in society, it is expected that all three groups focus on the problems being raised. Just like any other themes, letters to the editor require elaboration of topics by providing facts and figures as supporting details. Letters to the editor possess the characteristic of urgency which calls for the letters' immediate action. The American writers put stress on the unit Call for Action and they want to see immediate resolution to their problems. Other styles of ending letters to the editor include conditions, declarations, and questions.

The histograms below showing the Discourse Blocs in letters to the editor indicate the distribution of discourse units beyond the sentence level. The Discourse Bloc is an effective extra-sentential measure of moves in the letters.

Table 2. The American corpus

```
100%| X
     | X
     | X          x
 80% | X          x               x
     | X          x               x
     | X          x               x              x
 60% | X          x               x  x           x
     | X          x               x  x           x
     | X          x               x  x           x
 40% | X          x  x            x  x  x         x
     | X          x  x            x  x  x         x  x            x
     | X          x  x            x  x  x         x  x            x                      X
 20% | X          x  x  x         x  x  x         x  x            x  X                   X
     | X  x       x  x  x         x  x  x  x      x  x  x         x  X                   X
     | X  x  x  X x  x  x  X  x   x  x  x  x      x  x  x         x  X  x       X  x  x
     |DB A B C D E  I A B C D E   II A B C D E   III A B C D E   IV A B C D E  V A B C D E   VI A B C D E
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28

Table 3. The Singaporean corpus

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100%| X              x
    | X              x
    | X              x x x
 80%| X              x x x          x
    | X              x x x          x
    | X              x x x          x
 60%| X              x x x          x
    | X              x x x          x x
    | X              x x x x        x x              x
 40%| X              x x x x        x x              x        X
    | X              x x x x        x x x            x        X
 20%| X              x x x x        x x x            x        X X          X x
    | X              x x x x x      x x x x          x x      X X          X x X x        x
    | X              x x x x x X x x x x x X x x x    X X x    X x X x        x x
    |DB A B C D E|I A B C D E|II A B C D E|III A B C D E|IV A B C D E|V A B C D E|VI A B C D E|
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Table 4. The Philippine corpus

```
100%| X              x
    | X              x              x              x
    | X              x              x              x
 80%| X              x X            x              x
    | X              x X            x x            x
    | X              x X            x x            x
 60%| X              x X            x x            x x
    | X              x X            x x x          x x
    | X              x X x          x x x          x x
 40%| X              x X x x        x x x          x x        X
    | X  x           x X x x        x x x          x x        X
    | X  x           x X x x x x    x x x          x x        X X
 20%| X  x           x X x x x x x x x x          x x x      X X          X
    | X  x           x X x x x x x x x x x        x x x      X X          X x x
    | X  x x X       x X x x x x x x x x x        x x x      X X x        X x x        x
    |DB A B C D E|I A B C D E|II A B C D E|III A B C D E|IV A B C D E|V A B C D E|VI A B C D E|
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The above histograms show consistent use of Discourse Bloc with the possibility of having one subtopic. Since these are only short letters, a subdivision of Discourse Bloc can be very minimal as clearly illustrated by Singaporean writers.   It is also clear that a Discourse Bloc may have two Discourse Units with A and B subdivisions. Worth noting is the 20% margin of Philippine writers over American and Singaporean letters having a third subdivision. Hence, a typical pattern of a letter to the editor can be represented as:

29

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Discourse Bloc  DB
Discourse Unit  IA
                B
Discourse Unit  IIA
                B
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The histograms show that the Singaporean writers begin with some type of formulaic statement, whereas the American and Philippine letters do not. In addition, while American and Singapore samples have fewer subdivisions, i.e. no more than two subdivisions, the Philippine corpus has almost 90% potential third subdivision, 40% fourth, 20% fifth, and 10% sixth subdivisions. Singaporeans are very consistent, with less than 40% in its third subdivision.

Hence, it appears that Background Information, Problem, and Evaluation are obligatory units in letters to the editor, while Reference and Call for Action are optional units.

3.2 Politeness Markers

Table 5 shows the commonly used politeness markers by the American, Singaporean, and Philippine writers.

Table 5. Commonly used politeness markers

American English	Singaporean English	Philippine English
should	would	ought
must	must	may
I agree	I believe	I doubt
maybe	thank you	I think
apparently	unless	thank you
so	perhaps	I hail
of course	quite	I hope
thank you	little	Please
		should
		would
		undoubtedly
		quite
		so

Politeness markers in this context refer to particles and expressions which either strengthen or weaken the force of speech. Common among these groups are modal auxiliaries *should, must,* and *would.* These markers may be used as positive or negative politeness strategies to serve some specific purpose. *I think, maybe,* and *perhaps* are preferred to mitigate their tones. Similarly, expressions like *I believe, I doubt, I agree, I think, I hope,* and *I hail* heighten their emotional affect. Particles such as *so, quite, little* are also used as intensifiers helpful in identifying politeness strategy. The expression *thank you* has appeared in the three groups. This, undoubtedly, acts as politeness marker across cultures.

3.3 Face-Threatening Acts and Politeness Strategies

Tables 6 to 8 list the 45 texts with the number of moves per text (see column 2 of the Table). Columns 3 and 4 show the number of FTAs and politeness strategies in each text. The figures are very different across texts because their lengths vary. This is the reason why there is a need to calculate the frequency of FTAs and politeness strategies per move, dividing for each text the number of FTAs by the number of moves (columns 5 and 6 of the Table). The last line of the Table shows the total number of FTAs and moves, and the average frequency of FTAs and politeness strategies per move.

Table 6. Number and frequency of FTAs and politeness strategies in American letters

Text	Moves	FTAs	Strategies	FTAs/Move	Stat/Move
1	9	5	4	0.56	0.44
2	10	6	4	0.60	0.40
3	4	1	2	0.25	0.50
4	1	1	0	1.00	0.00
5	6	4	1	0.67	0.17
6	2	1	1	0.50	0.50
7	8	5	2	0.63	0.25
8	12	2	5	0.17	0.42
9	7	5	1	0.71	0.14
10	6	2	5	0.33	0.83
11	9	5	3	0.56	0.33
12	5	2	2	0.40	0.40
13	4	2	3	0.50	0.75
14	17	2	10	0.12	0.59
15	4	3	3	0.75	0.75
Total	**104**	**46**	**46**	**7.73**	**6.48**

As Table 6 indicates, in American letters, all texts contain a minimal number of FTAs produced by the writers. Text 9 is prominent, with five FTAs in its seven turns. The same is true in text 15 with three FTAs in four moves. Other texts show more than one FTA per move (Texts 2, 10, and 13). All in all, the total average per turn is 7.73. Considering that the average length of a move is 20, then there is roughly one FTA for every 20 words, a manifestation of a high frequency of production of FTAs. Note that even in one move, there is one FTA. This shows the nature of letters to the editor as a face-threatening act.

Similarly, columns 4 and 6 of Table 6 show the number of politeness strategies per text and per move (6.48 average on every 20 words), which indicates a high frequency of politeness strategies. This seems to be in accordance with the rules set by the editorial board. Since all letters are subject to editing, it is assumed that some expressions are toned down for publication purposes. The high frequency of both of FTAs and politeness strategies perhaps follows the norms of the Press Code of Ethics.

Table 7 shows data involving Singaporean letters to the editor.

Table 7. Number and frequency of FTAs and politeness strategies in Singaporean letters

Text	Moves	FTAs	Strategies	FTAs/Move	Stat/Move
1	7	1	6	0.14	0.86
2	13	5	5	0.38	0.38
3	8	1	5	0.13	0.63
4	10	2	7	0.20	0.70
5	5	3	2	0.60	0.40
6	4	1	3	0.25	0.75
7	8	4	4	0.50	0.50
8	9	3	3	0.33	0.33
9	5	2	1	0.40	0.20
10	17	5	8	0.29	0.47
11	5	3	1	0.60	0.20
12	6	3	3	0.50	0.50
13	9	5	4	0.56	0.44
14	13	3	5	0.23	0.38
15	4	2	2	0.50	0.50
Total	**123**	**43**	**59**	**5.62**	**7.25**

Table 7 shows that, in Singaporean letters, texts 5 and 11 are aggressive with three FTAs in five moves (average of 0.60). These are followed by Text 13 with 0.56%. Texts 7, 12 and 15 show equal number of FTAs and politeness strategies. Of great interest are texts with low frequency of FTAs; these are Texts 1, 3, and 4, with 0.14 %, 0.13%, and 0.20%, respectively. These figures show a low average of FTAs produced in their letters.

In terms of politeness strategies, Text 1 shows high frequency of politeness strategies, with 0.86% employed in writing letters to the editor. This is followed by Text 6, with three politeness strategies out of four moves (or 0.75 %). Similarly, Texts 6, 4, and 3 show high percentage of politeness strategies in their letters. On the average of 20 words, there can only be one FTA for the whole 20 words.

The above results seem to be in keeping with the observations made in the organizational pattern of letters to the editor. That is, with respect to the Singaporean data, their almost formulaic Reference, the presence of Discourse Bloc without a single subdivision, and the fewer words per move, match the results found in FTAs and politeness strategies.

Data pertaining to Philippine letters to the editor are shown in Table 8.

**Table 8. Number and frequency of FTAs and politeness strategies
in Philippine letters**

Text	Moves	FTAs	Strategies	FTAs/Move	Stat/Move
1	10	4	4	0.40	0.40
2	7	4	2	0.57	0.29
3	18	6	8	0.33	0.44
4	8	6	1	0.75	0.13
5	9	1	7	0.11	0.78
6	5	4	1	0.80	0.20
7	11	8	3	0.73	0.27
8	11	10	1	0.91	0.09
9	15	5	8	0.33	0.53
10	12	2	9	0.17	0.75
11	5	2	2	0.40	0.40
12	5	0	4	0.00	0.80
13	13	3	8	0.23	0.62
14	7	4	3	0.57	0.43
15	13	4	7	0.31	0.54
Total	**149**	**63**	**68**	**6.61**	**6.66**

By comparing the data in Table 8 with those in the previous tables, it may be safe to say that Philippine letters contain the highest numbers of moves. Text 3 has 18 moves. Text 8 is especially aggressive with 10 FTAs in its 11 moves. An average of 0.91% is the highest record posted. Texts 6, 7, and 4 follow, with more than four FTAs per turn. Text 10 shows the lowest production of FTAs with 0.17% (only two FTAs in 12 moves). The rest of the texts, except Text 12, have at least two FTAs per move. On the other hand, Text 12 has the highest frequency of politeness strategies (0.80%). This is followed by Texts 5, 10, and 13. Since Text 8 produced most FTAs, it therefore obtained the lowest number of politeness strategies (0.09%).

The different tables present the distinct features of each group. Letters to the editor in Philippine English have the highest number of moves, followed by letters written in Singaporean English and American English. Similarly, letters in Philippine English have the highest number of FTAs produced, followed by letters in Singaporean and American English. In terms of politeness strategies, letters in Singaporean English top the list, followed by American and Philippine English.

3.4 Cultural Influences

Why do people write letters to the editor? The primary functions of letters to the editor will help in analyzing the cultural influences of these letters on writing. Table 8 shows the percentage allotted to each function.

Table 9. Primary functions of letters to the editor

Categories	American English	Singaporean English	Philippine English
a. To give facts about a subject	22.22%	4.44%	6.67%
b. To propose a solution to a problem	4.44%	6.67%	11.11%
c. To present an opinion	8.89%	11.11%	6.67%
d. To support an opinion expressed by another writer	4.44%	2.22%	4.44%
e. To rebut an opinion or statement made by another writer	13.33%	8.89%	4.44%

Based on Table 9, letters written in American English primarily function to give facts about a subject. Most of these letters clarify points by providing the readers with well-researched facts and credible sources. Perhaps the writers believe that the opinion section of a newspaper provides them with a venue to present details beyond the knowledge and realm of experience of the writers of the previous article. In contrast, letters in Philippine English hardly show evidence of elaborate discussion and presentation of facts. In contrast, there is a tendency for letters in Singaporean English to be opinion-oriented, perhaps a manifestation of their cultural pluralism (Lim-Keak, 1985). The Singaporeans' cultural roots lead them to appreciate the existing diverse cultures in their community and promote national integration through the implementation of a policy of cultural accommodation or multiculturalism as it is known in Singapore (Lim-Keak, 1985, p. 125). This characteristic typical of Singaporean citizens supports the tendency to express their opinion for the common good.

In contrast to Singaporean letters, American and Philippine letters are on equal footing when it comes to supporting an opinion expressed by another writer. The figures reveal yet another cultural influence on American and Philippine writing. Both cultures have an open line of communication as they affirm their fellow citizen's opinion or argument. It is very easy for both cultures to commend and appreciate the little things done by their countrymen. Although more scientific studies are needed to justify the point, a look at these letters signify the intention of both groups to participate in social action. If it can be said that the Philippines possesses high-contact level of relations, the same may hold true for the American group.

Additionally, Table 9 reveals that letters to the editor in American English also function to rebut an opinion or statement made by another writer. As they all know how to appreciate and accept other people's opinion, they do not let ambiguous propositions pass without scrutiny and investigation. These writers tend to emphasize the importance of their claim and these are evident in their diction when writing a genre like letters to the editor. All this may be explained by a typical American's propensity to be direct in communicating with other people.

Apart from viewing cultural influences in terms of functions fulfilled by letters to the editor, they can be seen in the light of the modified extra-organizational elements discussed earlier and synthesized below.

The analysis of the organizational pattern of letters to the editor in American, Singaporean, and Philippine English, shows consistency with slight modification in the

organizational units evident in such letters. All writers emphasize Background Information, Problem, and Evaluation. Though it is evident that the Singaporean and Philippine samples tend to concentrate on structure, such adherence is relevant to their socioliterate readers typical of the kinds of readers the Americans write to in their own context.

The Discourse Bloc reveals the parallel points in writing. The study has shown the consistent and uniform use of Discourse Bloc and Discourse Units by these writers. Amazing is the fact that even if the findings reveal that one culture tends to have more than one subdivision of units, there is an attempt to reduce it as shown by a small percentage of that feature.

There is no clear-cut list of politeness markers in the letters to the editor. However, culture shapes the writer's use of diction necessary to weaken or strengthen his idea. In the study, these purposes are served since the analysis bears the significance of looking into the politeness phenomena in written texts. For instance, letters in Philippine English use more politeness markers in their letters. Such findings do not necessarily indicate that letters in Philippine English are more polite. They use more politeness markers to help them convey the message more effectively and because their culture expects them to reflect their politeness in letters.

Finally, the use of politeness strategies in letters to the editor by the three groups proves that the genre also creates a venue for them to use such strategies to be able to conform to the norms of writing. It is not the conventions that rule them; rather, it is the appropriateness and the need for them to communicate with the intended audience at a proper forum, that motivate them to employ those strategies. Genre analysis is the study of situated linguistic behavior in institutionalized academic or professional settings (Bhatia, 1993). Letters to the editor are one genre provided for the writers to show genuine interest in the use of language to achieve communicative goals.

4. INSIGHTS

More than just a comparison of politeness in letters to the editor in American, Singaporean, and Philippine English, the study attempted to describe and justify the cross-cultural differences in the writers' use of politeness strategies in American, Singaporean, and Philippine English. The analysis showed that letters to the editor can be considered a face-threatening genre, with a high frequency of FTAs, counterbalanced by a high production of politeness strategies. It also focused on discovering politeness phenomena in written interaction and found that in a written text, writers design their own FTAs and do the counterchecking by producing politeness strategies. In addition, writers abide by the rules and standards in writing letters to the editor. Hence, the assumption that writers use politeness strategies to get their articles published and be read by the public may be correct.

The present study also attests to cultural influences on politeness strategies in writing letters to the editor. It has revealed the Singaporean writers' use of standard form of reference, the American writers' direct opposition to other writer's opinion, and the Filipinos' penchant to use politeness markers and politeness strategies.

What these findings seem to say is that rather than abstracting a principle of the "linear" development of English prose (Kaplan, 1966) as a pedagogic principle, contrastive rhetoric is more useful as a consciousness-raising device for students. Teachers can discuss what they have observed about texts in different cultures and have students discover whether research findings hold true in their experience of their L1 texts by considering the context of situation and context of culture (Kachru, 1999).

Finally, writing letters to the editor can be a good practice for argumentative writing. Students can be encouraged to write about problems in their community or country.

By explicit instruction on the form and content of letters to the editor, teachers can enhance their students' potentials by accommodating to more kinds of rhetorical patterns as reflected in students' writing. Teachers should recognize, value, and foster the alternative rhetorics that ESL students bring to the English language classroom. Findings from the present study suggest that we should not teach students to reproduce in a mechanical fashion our preferred vehicle of understanding. Recognition of the complexity of composing may mean that no single theory of writing can be developed or it may mean that a variety of theories need to be developed to support and inform diverse pedagogical approaches.

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