

A Study on Usage of Polite Expressions in Business English in the United States

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ABSTRACT

This study examined current usage of polite expressions in English to analyze whether polite expressions are still being used and if they function well under the current business circumstances in English-speaking countries¹ as in the past. For this purpose, a questionnaire survey was conducted at the Summit of the International Association of Administrative Professionals (IAAP) in the United States during July 2018.

The survey focused on questions similar to those appearing in the Certified Bilingual Secretaries (CBS) Primary Examination of the Japan Secretaries and Administrative Professionals Association (JSA), asking questionnaire respondents to choose more polite expressions in such situations as making an inquiry and requests, expressing disagreement, and providing advice or warning.

Key words: business communication, negative politeness, politeness out of context, Certified Bilingual Secretaries (CBS) Primary Examination

1 Introduction

The Japan Secretaries and Administrative Professionals Association (JSA) conducts the Certified Bilingual Secretaries (CBS) Primary Examination twice a year. It consists of two parts: office procedures and business English. The part on business English includes questions asking examinees to choose more polite expressions. Polite expressions are important for administrative staff to create favorable business relationships and work environments. Chiseko Kuroda, the founder of the examination, has said that although theories of politeness were not yet established at the time the examination was created in 1979, she was aware at first hand that expressions

concerning interpersonal relations were required more for the examination than general business English.

However, people around the world can now simultaneously communicate with one another through the internet and email. Consequently, there is a phenomenon that did not exist as much in the 20th century: People use simpler and more casual words and various abbreviations such as ASAP and BTW. In such efficiency-oriented circumstances, it is not clear whether polite expressions in English are still being used and if they function well in work environments in English-speaking countries as in the past.

Therefore, a questionnaire survey was conducted to examine current usage of polite expressions in business English in the United States and to evaluate whether such polite expressions are being valued and well used by business people, especially administrative staff such as administrative and executive assistants who deal with greeting and meeting clients and writing business documents as part of their job on a daily basis.

In addition, the questionnaire was divided into two parts. Part 1 consisted of questions to examine how respondents view politeness expressions, and Part 2 contained actual questions similar to those appearing in the CBS examination. This division was to evaluate whether there is any correlation between favorable views toward politeness expressions and correct answers, i.e., actual recognition of polite expressions.

2 Theoretical framework

Theories of politeness are based on pragmatics, which Leech (1983, Preface) defines as “the study of how utterances have meanings in situations.” He refers to “the study of the effective use of language in communication” as rhetoric and explains that it focuses on “a goal-oriented speech situation, in which a speaker uses language in order to produce a particular effect in the mind of an addressee.” (1983, p.15)

Regarding the definition of politeness, Leech (2014, p.3) states that being polite is “to speak or behave in such a way as to (appear to) give benefit or value not to yourself but to the other person(s), especially the person(s) you are conversing with.” He continues that “there is a reciprocal asymmetry in polite behavior between two parties ... To give high value to the other party or to attribute low value to oneself is felt to be polite.” (2014, p.6)

His Maxim of Tact refers to “some action to be performed, respectively, by the hearer or the speaker. This action may be called “A,” and may be evaluated in terms of what assumes to be its cost or benefit to a speaker or an addressee.” (Leech, 1983, p.107) He

then explains that there are two sides of the Maxim of Tact: a negative side that minimizes 'the cost to an addressee' and a positive side that maximizes 'the benefit to an addressee.' (1983, p.109) He means that "in proposing some action beneficial to an addressee, ... an imperative, which in effect does not allow an addressee to say 'No' is ... a positive polite way of making an offer: *Help yourself; Have another sandwich* etc." and that "more indirect forms ... are less polite than the most direct form." (1983, p.109) As for the negative side minimizing the cost to an addressee, he states that using more indirect expressions is more polite because it increases "the degree of optionally (sic)" on an addressee's side and reduces the force of demand from a speaker. (1983, p.107)

On the other hand, Brown and Levinson (1987, pp.87-88) first introduced the concept of 'face' as 'the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself.' The components consist of a negative face and a positive one. They define negative face as "the want of every competent adult member that his actions be unimpeded by others," and positive face as "the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others," which includes "the desire to be ratified, understood, approved of, liked or admired."

Since the expressions used for the questionnaire are related to what Leech and Brown and Levinson call the negative side minimizing the cost to an addressee and negative face respectively, only the definition of negative politeness will be examined here as follows:

Negative politeness ... is essentially avoidance-based, and realizations of negative politeness strategies consist in (sic) assurances that the speaker recognizes and respects the addressee's negative-face wants and will not (or will only minimally) interfere with the addressee's freedom of action. Hence negative politeness is characterized by self-effacement, formality and restraint, with attention to very restricted aspects of an addressee's self-image, centring (sic) on his want to be unimpeded. (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.98)

Likewise, Leech (2014, p.11) also explains the function of negative politeness as "mitigation, to reduce or lessen possible causes of offense." He continues that as the degree of politeness increases, the expression of negative value is diminished or softened, and that negative politeness "typically involves indirectness, hedging, and understatement, which are among the best-known and most-studied indicators of the polite use of language." He further states that "there is a tendency for politeness to be

associated with wordiness: the more indirect and “mitigated” a request is, the more words it is likely to contain.” (2014, p.12) As for requests, he points out that questions, modal auxiliaries, and the hypothetical past tense make them polite, and “Could you do X?” fulfills all three constituents. First, questions give an addressee the opportunity to say “no.” Second, the modal auxiliary, especially “Can” or “Could” in comparison with “Will” or “Would” asks the addressee’s “ability to comply with the request, rather than willingness, hence, ... another opportunity to refuse is offered.” Third, “the hypothetical past tense (“could” instead of “can”) places the request, ... in a possible world different from the world of reality – thereby distancing the request ... from direct imposition.” (2014, pp.13-14)

Similarly, Brown and Levinson (1987, pp. 231-232) state that “Could you do X?” “gives redress to an addressee’s negative face by explicitly expressing doubt” about “the appropriateness of a speaker’s speech act.”

The expressions used for the questions were derived from “Bilingual Office Pro’s Basics,” the official textbook for the CBS Primary Examination, published by the JSA. The questions were created based on the theory that politeness has degrees. Leech (2014, p.4) affirms that politeness has “varying gradations,” with the bottom of the scale being “nonpoliteness,” that is not polite nor impolite. (2014, p.17) Therefore, “nonpoliteness” can be called “zero politeness.” He then pinpoints as an example of zero politeness bare imperatives such as “Come here,” or “Don’t move.” (2014, p.217) He continues to explain that both speakers and addressees “routinely have to weigh degrees of politeness in everyday communication.” (2014, p.30)

Leech (2014, p.4) also states as characteristics of politeness that “politeness is not obligatory. People can be nonpolite: they normally will not behave politely unless there is a reason to be polite.” He further states that how polite one should be for a particular occasion is often recognized by society and that “how far politeness will occur, or whether it will occur at all, depends on the situation.” (2014, pp.4-5)

Regarding the validity of comparing politeness out of context, Leech (2014, p.250) finds no reason to avoid comparison, as long as politeness is pragmalinguistically discussed. Leech (2014, p.16) defines pragmalinguistic politeness as one assessed based on the meaning of the utterance out of context. It is a subdomain of politeness when politeness is considered as a linguistic phenomenon as opposed to a social or cultural phenomenon.³ It “is evaluated on a unidirectional scale registering increasing values from an assumed zero point” (2014, p.217) as mentioned above.

Regarding justification for using multiple (in this case, two-way) choice questions, Leech

(2014, pp.250-251) cites his experiment asking 45 native speakers of English to judge which of three sentences was most polite or least polite with no explanation as to politeness and he explains that 89 percent of the answer was of consensus.⁴ He interprets it “when asked to grade utterances in terms politeness out of context” as the native speakers know “what they are doing.”

3 Method

A questionnaire survey was conducted at the “IAAP Summit,” a convention and educational forum held by the International Association of Administrative Professionals (IAAP) in Austin, Texas from July 28, 2018, to July 31, 2018. IAAP is a non-profit professional association in the United States serving the administrative profession and they hold the IAAP Summit once a year. The questionnaire was distributed to participants during the IAAP Summit whenever possible. (Sample pages of the questionnaire are in Appendix 1.) Due to time constraints, however, a total of only 30 survey responses were collected for evaluation.

The survey focused on questions similar to those appearing on the CBS Primary Examination, i.e., asking questionnaire respondents to choose more polite expressions in situations of making an inquiry and request, expressing disagreement, and providing advice or warning.

The questionnaire was divided into two parts. In Part 1, six statements on how survey respondents view polite expressions were listed for them to review and check any number of them as long as they agree with the statement. For example, the first statement was as follows:

() Just like humor and etiquette, polite expressions in English are important.

In Part 2, six comparative questions were given. In each question, there were two expressions, and a respondent was asked to select the one expression that was the more polite of the two in the respondent’s opinion, with the follow-up question regarding whether which of the two expressions is used in her or his office. For example, the first question was as follows:

(1) How many guests are you expecting tonight?

(2) Can you tell me how many guests you’re expecting tonight?

() (1) is more polite. Because

() (2) is more polite. Because

Which of the above expressions do you use in your office (1, 2, or both)? ()

In this study, 6 comparative questions were selected from the standpoint of why a particular expression is more polite than another, i.e., from an English structural standpoint or an expressional standpoint. The questions can be categorized into two polite methods: Four comparative questions were based on differences in sentence structure and the remaining two questions focused on differences in expressions such as euphemisms. The questions also have different objectives. One question focused on inquiries, one question focused on getting permission, two questions focused on requests, one question focused on disagreement, and the last question focused on advice.

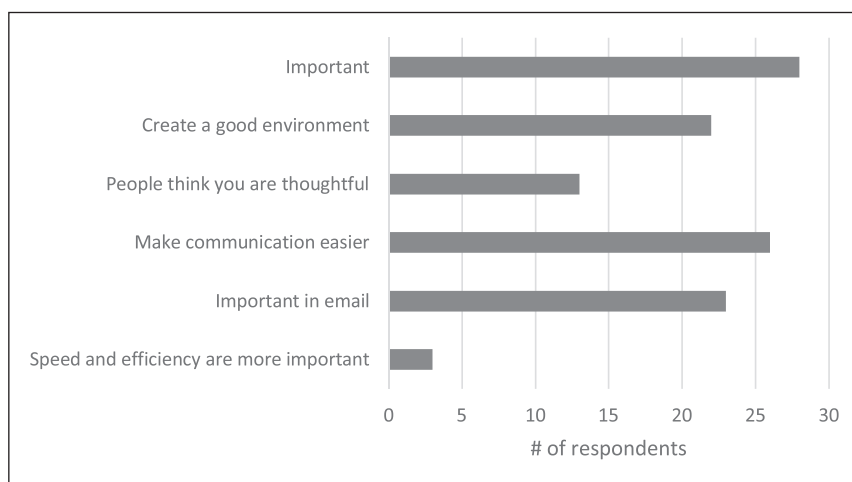
4 Survey results

4.1 Part 1

As can be seen in Chart 1, 28 respondents, or 93%, agreed with the first statement, “Just like humor and etiquette, polite expressions in English are important.” Twenty-two respondents, or 73%, agreed with the second statement, “Polite expressions help create a good business environment with a person by not being pushy.” Thirteen respondents, or 43%, agreed with the third statement, “A roundabout way of expressing something or a humble comment makes people think you are thoughtful and kind.” Twenty-six respondents, or 87%, agreed with the fourth statement, “Politeness in expressions makes communication in a business environment easier.” Twenty-three respondents, or 77%, agreed with the fifth statement, “It is important to use polite expressions in a business email message.”

Finally, only 3 respondents, or 10%, agreed with the sixth and final statement, “Speed and efficiency are more important than politeness in business email.” This result is not surprising because this statement is a counter-statement to the fifth statement. All of the 23 respondents who agreed with the fifth statement disagreed with this statement.

Chart 1 Polite Expressions



The survey revealed that 28 respondents, or 93%, of administrative staff at the IAAP Summit considered polite expressions as being important. In addition, 23 respondents, or 77%, maintained that they are important in a business email message, and 27 respondents, or 90%, disagreed that speed and efficiency are more important than politeness in terms of email messages. Likewise, 26 respondents, or 87%, recognize polite expressions as a good tool for business communication, and 22 respondents, or 73%, think that they help to create a good business environment.

The first four statements indicate the value and importance of polite expressions. Therefore, a high percentage for each statement, except for the third one, means that most respondents view politeness expressions as valuable and important.

Regarding the third statement, 17 respondents, or 57 %, did not agree that people think a speaker who expresses something in an indirect or humble way is thoughtful and kind. Leech (2014, p.12) states that although it is “a tendency, rather than a rule,” indirectness and wordiness correlate with politeness. Since most of the survey respondents chose the more roundabout (indirect) and humble (wordy in case of the survey questions) way of expressing as the results indicate below, those who did not agree with the statement may not connect indirectness and wordiness with such human characteristics as being thoughtful and kind.

4.2 Part 2

4.2.1 Politeness based on sentence structure: Indirect questions and complex sentences

The first comparative question is an inquiry:

① How many guests are you expecting tonight?

② Can you tell me how many guests you're expecting tonight?

This is a sentence structural question. ① is a direct question whereas ② is an indirect one starting with "Can."

Leech (2014, p.134) asserts that indirectness is closely connected with politeness in English because it increases "the degree of optionally (sic)," and also because it makes an illocutional force weaker and not definite. (1983, p.107) He continues to explain that "the degree of indirectness correlates with the degree to which an addressee is allowed the option of not performing the intended action," and "in this way, negative politeness (i.e., serving the avoidance of the cost to an addressee) is increased." (1983, p.108)

In case of a question starting with "Can," Leech (1983, p.120) states that "the question about an addressee's ability to do an action gives an addressee an 'out': he is able to decline to do an action on grounds of being unable to do so." "A question of ability can be denied without impoliteness" and "a speaker can save face by saying 'I was only asking about the possibility.'" (2014, pp.154-155) Hence, ② is less demanding, thus more polite and the correct answer.

The survey results and the actual usage of the expressions in the office are shown in Chart 2 and Chart 3 respectively.

Chart 2 Survey Results

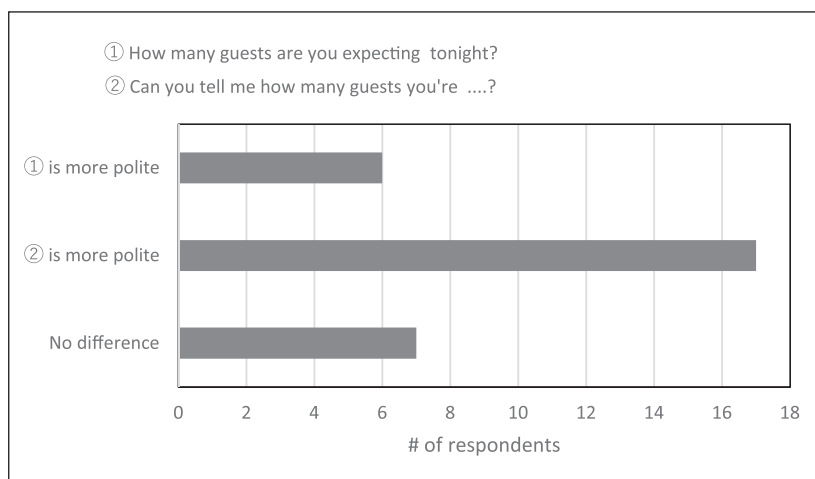


Chart 3 Actual Usage

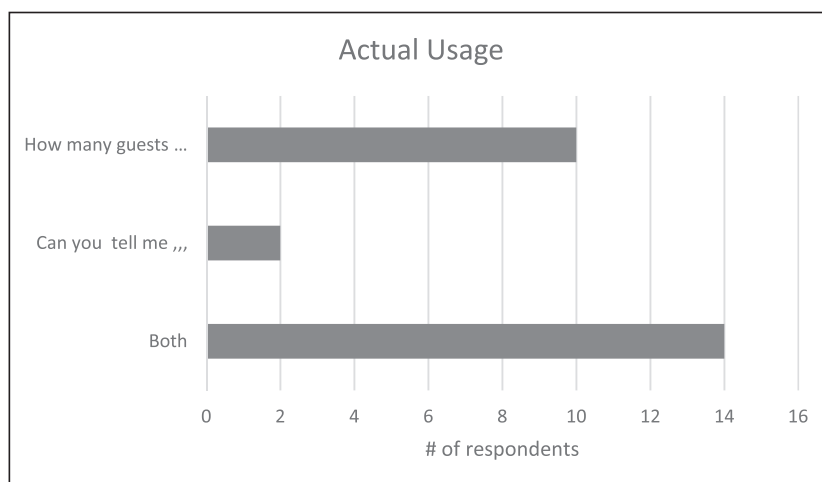


Chart 2 shows that 17 respondents, or 57%, chose the correct answer ②. Six respondents, or 20%, however, chose the wrong answer and 7 respondents, or 23%, did not think there was any difference in politeness.

As for the reasons given by some of the respondents who chose the correct answer, they can be divided into three categories (All the comments are given in Appendix 2):

- 1) Less demanding (8 comments)
- 2) Not direct (2 comments)
- 3) Better explanation (1 comment)

Since 17 respondents, or 57%, chose the correct answer and the above reasons for that especially “less demanding” and “not direct” are correct ones, the sentence structural difference of these inquiries seems accepted by most of American business society.

The actual usage of expressions in the office today, however, reflected that the less polite expression, a direct question in this case, was more common. Chart 3 shows which expression is actually used in offices. Fourteen respondents, or 47%, answered both, while 10 respondents, or 33%, use ① and only 2 respondents, or 7%, use ②. The other 4 respondents, or 13%, did not respond to this question. Comparing Chart 3 with Chart 2, almost opposite results can be observed in their politeness knowledge and usage, i.e., while most respondents understand that ② is more polite than ①, in their office they use ② less than ①. The reason for this can be assumed from a respondent’s comment, “It depends on who I’m speaking with.” Therefore, it is very understandable that ① must be largely used among colleagues.

Regarding the reasons for choosing the wrong answer ①, there were comments such

as “It’s clear, concise and polite,” “It is more efficient - less words,” and “It sounds more natural.” These comments have little relationship with politeness, but it should be noted that some administrative personnel have these views. They may be a result of the efficiency-oriented trend, but the results of this research are unable to determine that. It is also not coincidental that a respondent who commented “It is more efficient - less words” also agreed in the first part that “speed and efficiency are more important than politeness in business email.”

The second comparative question concerns getting permission from the respondent:

① Can I revise the paragraph just slightly?

② Do you mind if I revise the paragraph just slightly?

This is also a sentence structural question. Although a sentence asking an addressee’s ability to do as in case ① gives an addressee an option to say “no,” which means politeness, ① is a simple sentence with one subject and one verb. In comparison, ② is a complex sentence, containing one main clause and one or more [one in this case] subordinate clauses. (Oxford Dictionary, 2015) Consequently, ② has more words than a simple sentence, and “there is a tendency for politeness to be associated with wordiness.” (Leech, 2014, p.12)

In regard to “Do you mind” as a start of the main clause in ②, Leech (2014, p.166) affirms that since the word “mind” means “to object to something,” it is a device that makes a request more polite by granting an addressee greater optionality. Therefore, ② is more polite and the correct answer.

The survey results and the actual usage of the expressions in the office are shown in Chart 4 and Chart 5 respectively.

Chart 4 Survey Results

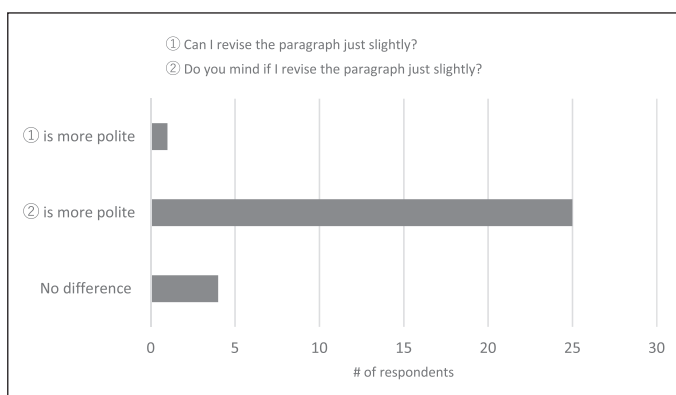


Chart 5 Actual Usage

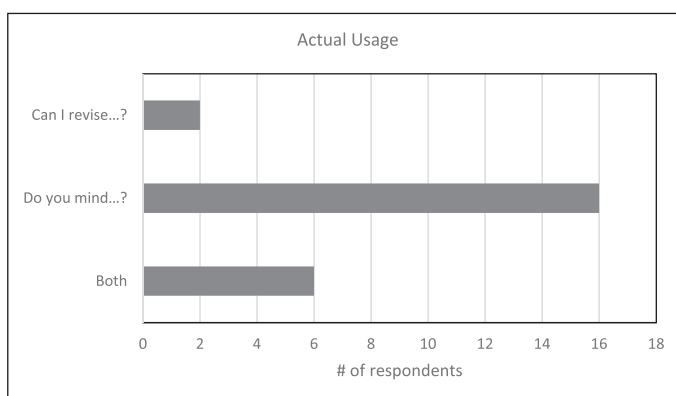


Chart 4 clearly shows that the sentence structural difference of this question was generally accepted by administrative staff. Twenty-five respondents, or 83%, chose the correct answer. One respondent, or 3%, chose the wrong answer and 4 respondents, or 13%, did not think there was any difference in politeness.

The reasons why the respondents chose ② can be divided into the following three categories (All comments are given in Appendix 3):

- 1) It is asking permission, not assuming. (14 respondents)
- 2) It sounds nicer or considerate. (2 respondents)
- 3) It is phrased as a favor. (1 respondent)

Therefore, not only the sentence structure of a complex sentence but also starting with the words “Do you mind” led respondents to accept ② as asking, not assuming. No reason was given by respondents who chose either ① or both.

Regarding the actual usage of these sentences, Chart 5 shows that the majority (17

respondents, or 63% excluding no responses) chose ② as well, while only 2 respondents, or 7% excluding no responses, chose ① and 7 respondents, or 26% excluding no responses, chose both. There was 1 respondent who answered “Neither,” and 3 respondents did not respond to this question. Charts 4 and 5 indicate similar results. Unlike the first question, the more polite expression, a complex sentence in this case, of the second question is not only generally recognized but also used in the office on a regular basis.

4.2.2 Politeness based on sentence structure: The subjunctive

The third comparative question in Part 2 is a request:

① Do you mind sending us your annual report?

② I would be grateful if you could send us your annual report.

Brown and Levinson (1987, p.92) include orders and requests in face threatening acts, “acts that predicate some future act A of an addressee, and in so doing put some pressure on an addressee to do (or refrain from doing) the act A.” They continue that “any rational agent will seek to avoid these face-threatening acts, or will employ certain strategies to minimize the threat.” (1987, p.96)

Leech (2014, p.135) also states that regarding requests “there is no clear-cut boundary between order/commands and requests, but rather a continuous scale of optionality, leading from the ‘no option given’ of a pure command toward progressively greater and greater choice allowed to an addressee” of a request.

This question is again asking a difference based on sentence structure. It is true that “Do you mind” in the second comparative question reappeared in ① and that means this is a polite request as previously mentioned. Nonetheless, the sentence has a simple structure, whereas ② is a complex sentence using the subjunctive past tense. The complex and thus wordier sentence tends to be more polite as in the previous question.

Regarding the subjunctive past tense, Leech (2014, p.163) explains in regard to an almost identical sentence “We’d appreciate it if X,” that “the hypothetical mood of the main clause diplomatically” leaves the addressee “the choice wide open” while “promising a reward of gratitude if the action is performed.” Thus, since the subjunctive past tense in ② gives an addressee a variety of response choices, including saying “no” or saying “yes” and receiving “a reward of gratitude” from the speaker, ② is more polite than ①.

The survey results and the actual usage of the expressions in the office are shown in

Chart 6 and Chart 7 respectively.

Chart 6 Survey Results

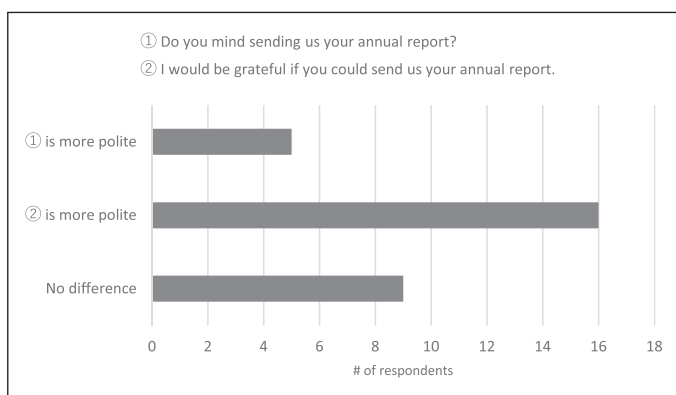


Chart 7 Actual Usage

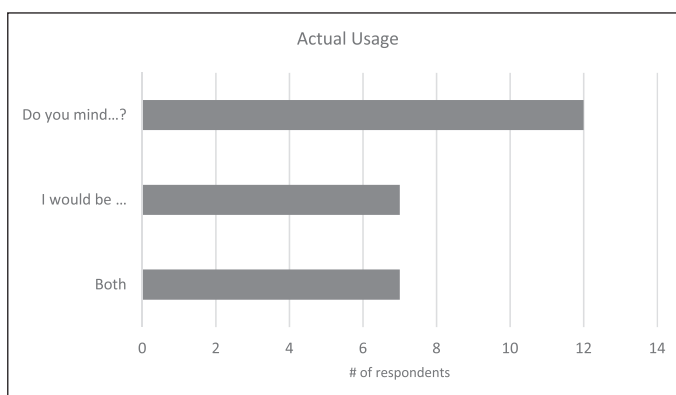


Chart 6 shows the survey results. Whereas 16 respondents, or 53%, correctly chose ②, 5 respondents, or 17%, chose ① and 9 respondents, or 30%, chose both. This finding also indicates the majority of administrative personnel accept that a complex sentence in the subjunctive past tense is more polite than a simple sentence that is not subjunctive. The reasons for the correct choice of ② can be categorized into the following (All comments are given in Appendix 4):

- 1) It makes the request more reasonable. (5 respondents)
- 2) It adds a feeling of humanity. (1 respondent)
- 3) It is phrased as a favor. (1 respondent)
- 4) It sounds nicer. (1 respondent)
- 5) It gives a sense of urgency. (1 respondent)

All the above reasons seem to indicate that as a request, ② is easier to accept due to its structure and choice of words and tense. No reason was mentioned for choosing ① or “both.”

Regarding actual usage in the office, as Chart 7 shows, ① was chosen by 12 respondents, or 40%, and ② and “both” were chosen by 7 respondents, or 23%, respectively. Four respondents did not answer the question.

The results are not proportionate to the question results in Chart 6, and no comments were given for each choice. Therefore, as in the first question, it can be concluded that while most respondents understand that ② is more polite than ①, in an office environment, they use ① more than ②, or they use both expressions. Leech (2014, p.163) explains that expressions that begin with “I’d be grateful …” and “I’d appreciate it if …” are “ceremonious requests” that “are rare in everyday speech: their formality is more suited to official or business letters.” Therefore, the respondents who assume business conversations may have chosen ①, while the respondents who consider written communication may have chosen ②. In conversations with colleagues, it is easy to understand that ① is more frequently used as in the first comparative question.

The fourth comparative question in Part 2 is also a request:

① I’d like you to get more information regarding this matter, please.

② Could you get more information regarding this matter?

This question is again asking about a difference based on sentence structure. In ① the phrase “I’d like you to” is added to an imperative, making it an indirect and therefore polite request. Leech (2014, p. 150) states that “the hypothetical statement *I would like (you) to* is somewhat less impositive (sic) [compulsory] than “*I want you to*,” “because *would* places the action in the realm of unreal events, so that it is semantically distanced from reality.” Therefore, *I’d like (you) to* is more polite than *I want (you) to*, even though “the hypothetical meaning of *would* is weakened through pragmaticalization.”

In comparison, ② starts with “Could” in the subjunctive past tense followed by “you” as the subject. As stated in the Introduction, Leech, Brown and Levinson all agree that the sentence is polite with a question form, a modal auxiliary and the hypothetical past tense of “Could.” ② satisfies all these conditions. Leech (2014, p.135) explains that a favorite device that a speaker uses to give an addressee an opportunity for noncompliance to a request is “rendering a request in the form of a yes-no question … even though a speaker’s main goal in making the request is to gain compliance.”

As for the subjunctive past tense “Could,” he states that a speaker “expresses the belief that the action is unlikely to be performed – allowing an addressee an opportunity ... for noncompliance.” (2014, p.168) In other words, this means that the request signifies “a hypothetical action by an addressee, and so in reply, an addressee can in theory give a positive reply to the question without committing himself to anything in the real world.” (Leech, 1983, p.121) Therefore, ② is more polite than ①.

The survey results and the actual usage of the expressions in the office are shown in Charts 8 and 9 respectively.

Chart 8 Survey Results

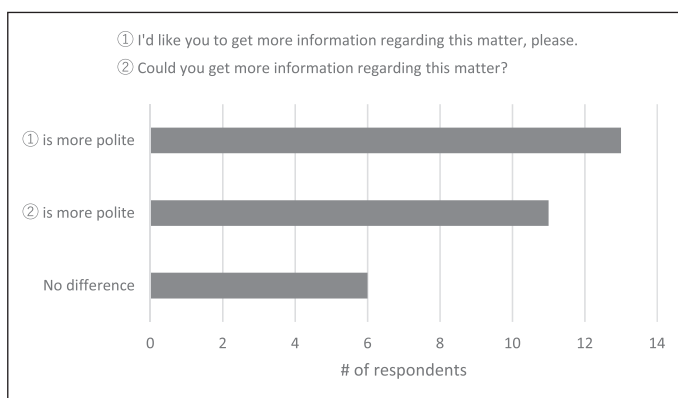


Chart 9 Actual Usage

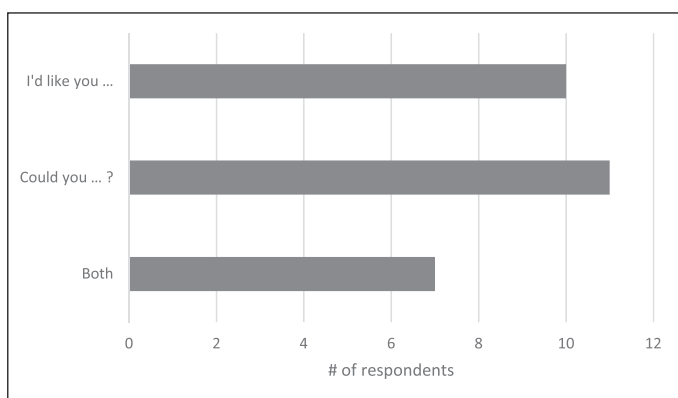


Chart 8 shows the results of the survey: Thirteen respondents, or 43%, think ① is more polite. Eleven respondents, or 37%, think ② is more polite and the remaining 6 respondents, or 20%, do not think there is any difference in politeness. This was the first discrepancy

in results as far as the correct answer is concerned. Therefore, comments from the respondents were examined to determine the discrepancy.

First, the following are summarized comments from respondents who correctly chose ② (All comments are given in Appendix 5):

- 1) ② is not demanding but asking for permission. (6 respondents)
- 2) ② sounds nicer / polite. (2 respondents)

Also, the following are the reasons respondents chose ① (All the comments are given in Appendix 6):

- 1) It is more of a statement, not a request. (2 respondents)
- 2) This relays the importance of the request. (2 respondents)
- 3) “Please” is used. (1 respondent)

The first reason from two respondents indicates that respondents recognized that a request should not be directly presented as a request. The second one, however, contradicts Leech’s theory that negative politeness typically involves indirectness, hedging, and understatement (2014, p.11) and Brown and Levinson’s theory that negative politeness strategies consist of assurances that the speaker recognizes and respects the addressee’s negative-face wants and will not (or will only minimally) interfere with the addressee’s freedom of action. (1987, p.98) As for the third reason, adding only the word “please” should not be considered as being more polite, except for comparison with a pure imperative such as “Sit down.”

This question is rather difficult because both expressions contain polite expressions, so respondents need to consider the degree of politeness. One respondent who chose ① wrote that the combination of the two would be appropriate though she did not elaborate. The point is, therefore, which is more polite, and the responses show that there are differences in opinion among native speakers regarding the fourth question.

As shown in Chart 9, both expressions are equally used in American offices, with 10 respondents choosing ①, 11 respondents choosing ② and 7 respondents choosing both. Again, the result shows that American office workers accept that both expressions are suitable for office usage.

4.2.3 Politeness based on expressions: Euphemisms

The fifth comparative question in Part 2 concerns expressing an opinion:

- ① I don’t think so.
- ② I have a different view.

In contrast to the previous four questions, this question is asking about a difference in

politeness based on a euphemism, “an indirect word or phrase that people often use to refer to something embarrassing or unpleasant, sometimes to make it seem more acceptable than it really is.” (Oxford Dictionary, 2015) ① directly expresses a disagreement. On the other hand, ② states that while the speaker recognizes the addressee’s view, the speaker has another. The indirect expression makes a disagreement more acceptable.

The survey results and the actual usage of the expressions in the office are shown in Charts 10 and 11 respectively.

Chart 10 Survey Results

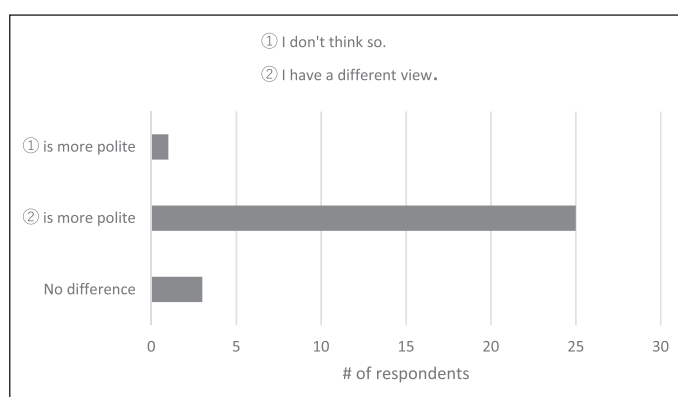
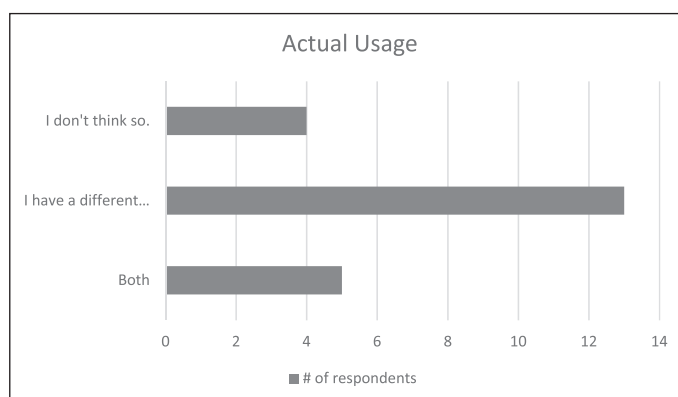


Chart 11 Actual Usage



The results in Chart 10 clearly show that the respondents agree that the indirect expression is more polite.

Twenty-six respondents, or 87%, answered that ② is more polite, while 1 respondent, or 3%, answered ① is more polite and 3 respondents, or 10%, answered that there was no

difference in politeness. The reasons for ② include some precise answers to a euphemism (All comments are given in Appendix 7):

1) ② expresses a difference in opinion while it respects the other person's view. (8 respondents)

2) ② sounds nicer / polite. (7 respondents)

As for actual usage in the office, Chart 11 shows that 13 respondents, or 59% excluding no-responses, chose ②. Four respondents or 18% excluding no-responses, chose ① and 5 respondents, or 23% excluding no-responses, chose both, while 8 respondents did not respond to this question. The research was unable to interpret the reason for the no responses.

The sixth and last comparative question in Part 2 concerns giving advice or a warning:

① You should not leave your luggage unattended.

② It might not be a good idea to leave your luggage unattended.

Just like the fifth question, this one also asks about a difference in politeness based on a euphemism. While ① directly warns the addressee not to leave her/his luggage, ② indirectly suggests that it is not a good idea by using an auxiliary "might." Leech (1983, p.140) says that giving advice itself may be judged to be an imposition "because it takes for granted that a speaker is superior in knowledge, or experience, or judgement, etc. to an addressee." Therefore, the ways to mitigate or understate advice must be polite. Leech (1983, p.136) explains that "reluctance to criticize" shows "institutionalized forms of understatement." To prove how "might" in ② can indicate reluctance to criticize, Leech (2014, p.151) states that 'might' as well as 'may' or 'can' can be used to remove a directive tone because it is like "a democratic imperative – that is, a directive appearing not to impose but just to suggest what is to be done" [or not to be done in this case]. Therefore, ② is more polite and the correct answer.

The survey results and the actual usage of the expressions in the office are shown in Charts 12 and 13 respectively.

Chart 12 Survey Results

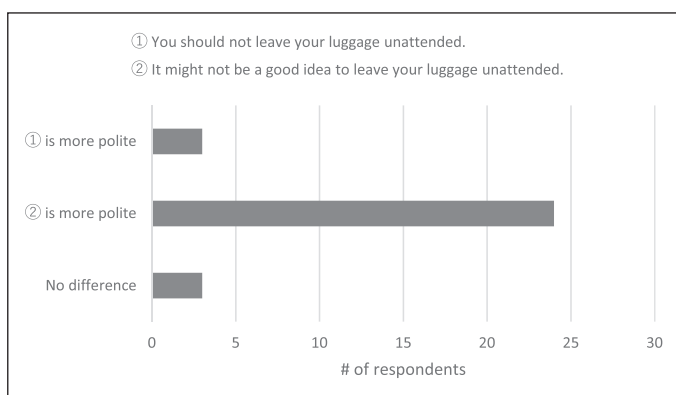


Chart 13 Actual Usage

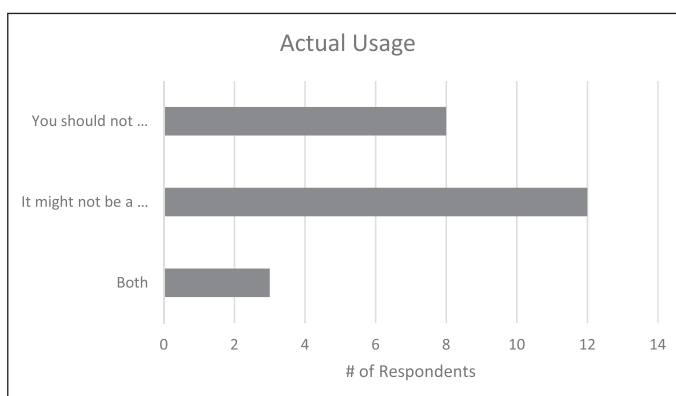


Chart 12 shows that 24 respondents, or 80%, correctly chose the answer. Three respondents, or 10%, chose ① and the 3 other respondents, also 10%, thought there was no difference in politeness. The reason given for selecting ② by 10 respondents was that it presents a softer or nicer suggestion rather than a request, a similar statement to Leech's above. (All comments are given in Appendix 8.) This indicates that the euphemism in this question is well accepted by American businesspeople.

Regarding actual usage of these sentences, Chart 13 shows that the direct warning in ① is used by 8 respondents, or 35% excluding no response, whereas the expression with "might" is used by 12 respondents, or 52% excluding no response. Three respondents, or 13% excluding no response, said both expressions are used in their office. The remaining 7 respondents did not answer the question, which, again, the research was unable to interpret. Furthermore, due to the limitation of a comparative study without context, the research was unable to determine in what situations people use the direct

warning in ①.

In conclusion, Table 1 shows the number of respondents for the number of correct⁵ answers in Part 1 and Part 2, respectively. There was no respondent who had no correct answer in each part.

Table 1 Number of Correct Answers

Number of Correct Answers in Part 1	6 (Perfect score)				5					
Number of Correct Answers in Part 2	6 (Perfect score)	5	4	3	6 (Perfect Score)	5	4	3	2	1
Number of Respondents	2 (respondents)	3	3	1	1	1	1	3	1	1

Number of Correct Answers in Part 1	4			3					2
Number of Correct Answers in Part 2	6 (Perfect score)	5	2	6 (Perfect Score)	5	4	3	2	3
Number of Respondents	1 (respondent)	3	3	1	1	1	1	1	1

The table shows that there were a total of 9 respondents who checked the first 5 statements and left the last statement unchecked in Part 1 of the questionnaire. For the purpose of the research, those answers are captioned as “pro-politeness” answers. The 9 respondents can be considered as people who view politeness expressions as important and valuable. Likewise, there are 5 respondents who correctly answered all 6 questions in Part 2. It can be deduced that they understand what polite expressions are in terms of sentence structure as well as a selection of words or phrases.

Finally, the number of correct answers in Part 1 and Part 2 from each respondent were examined in order to determine if there was any correlation between the answers in the two parts⁶. The result was obtained as follows:

Table 2 Correlation Between Answers in Part 1 and Part 2

	Number of Correct Answers in Part 1	Number of Correct Answers in Part 2
Number of Correct Answers in Part 1	1	
Number of Correct Answers in Part 2	0.189673179	1

Correlation coefficients from 0 to 0.2 are generally considered as having almost no correlation (Uchida, 2019, p.131). The result indicates that respondents who correctly answered in Part 1 did not necessarily answer correctly in Part 2 and vice versa. Although questions in Part 1 ask respondents how they view polite expressions, Part 2 gives them comparisons between two expressions out of context. Therefore, this discrepancy can be attributed to difficulties of the comparison between two expressions in Part 2. Even though there was an overall consensus of a high percentage “as to which item was more polite than the other” in previous research by Leech (2014, p.250), his experiment presented a much easier question. (cf. Note 4) Conversely, Part 2 of the questionnaire requires respondents to have much more knowledge of what politeness expressions are. In fact, the reasons some respondents selected ①, the wrong answer, often contradict politeness theories.

On the other hand, from Part 1 it can be concluded that the majority of respondents regard politeness expressions as valuable and important despite the fact that some of them do not understand which expression is more polite. In addition, it is noteworthy that 3 respondents who checked the last statement in Part 1 of the questionnaire, “Speed and efficiency are more important than politeness in business email,” also checked 3 other pro-politeness statements. In other words, they value politeness expressions though speed and efficiency are more important to them. There was no respondent who checked only the last statement in Part 1. Therefore, it is clear that all the respondents value politeness expressions at least to a certain extent.

The average percentage of correct answers in Part 1 is 66% and the average percentage of the office usage of correct expressions is 41%. The actual usage in the first question, however, can be excluded from the calculation. As mentioned above, when talking with a colleague, respondents probably use a direct expression of ①. Likewise, the actual usage in the third question can be excluded from the calculation because, as

mentioned above, “I would be grateful” is rare in everyday speech and more suitable for letters. Excluding the results for the two questions, the average percentage of office usage of correct expressions would be 53%.

Consequently, the findings can be taken as evidence that polite expressions are currently acknowledged, used and functioning in offices in the United States, notwithstanding some inconsistency in answers in Part 1 and Part 2.

5 Conclusion

A total of 30 respondents answered the questionnaire prepared for the IAAP Summit, a convention and educational forum of the International Association of Administrative Professionals in the United States held in July 2018. Although the sample number is small due to time constraints, the 30 respondents were exactly those wanted for the survey: people working in administrative fields in the United States, regardless of their employer’s line of business and industry. Attendance at the IAAP Summit enabled the collection of such preferred sample responses. The objective of the survey was to examine whether polite expressions are still being used and if they function well in work environments in English-speaking countries as in the past. The overall survey results from the 30 administrative staff, despite a few discrepancies, support this hypothesis. Polite expressions are well recognized, used and functioning in work environments in the United States.

In the survey results of Part 1, 93% of respondents agreed to a statement that just like humor and etiquette, polite expressions in English are important. Similarly, 87% also agreed that politeness in expressions makes communication in a business environment easier. Furthermore, 90% disagreed that speed and efficiency are more important than politeness in business email.

The only statement that most respondents did not agree on was that a roundabout way of expressing something or a humble comment makes people think you are thoughtful and kind. As explained previously, respondents who disagreed with the statement may not connect a roundabout and humble comment, which usually means being indirect and wordy, with such human characteristics as being thoughtful and kind.

In the survey results for Part 2, which asked respondents to choose more polite expressions in various situations, most respondents chose the correct answer for all of the questions except one, the fourth question:

① I’d like you to get more information regarding this matter, please.

② Could you get more information regarding this matter?

As previously mentioned, there were differences in opinion in the fourth question regarding the degree of politeness since both expressions contain politeness factors.

Regarding actual usage of expressions in the office, if the first and third questions are excluded from the calculation as explained above, the average percentage of actual usage of correct answers would be 53%.

The first and third questions respectively are as follows:

The first question

① How many guests are you expecting tonight?

② Can you tell me how many guests you're expecting tonight?

The third question

① Do you mind sending us your annual report?

② I would be grateful if you could send us your annual report.

Nevertheless, more than 50% of the respondents answered that they use the correct expressions half of the time in the office, i.e., expressions in the second, fifth and sixth questions.

These questions were what Leech calls pragmalinguistically examined, i.e., without context. In an actual office, however, such situations as who to talk with and whether something is spoken or written may matter. Leech (1983, p.126) pinpoints the cost of an action to an addressee, the social distance of an addressee from a speaker, and the authoritative status of an addressee with respect to a speaker as parameters influencing the amount of tact. Further research might also produce another cause of this difference, whether it is due to a type of industry or an organizational or employee structure and culture. Therefore, it can be concluded that although respondents were well aware of more polite expressions, they may have selected the less polite expression of ① or both in an actual office environment or situation.

This study also noted that there is inconsistency as to the answers in Parts 1 and 2 by each respondent, i.e., those who positively view polite expressions, such as being important and valuable, do not necessarily select correct answers on the basis of the degree of politeness. However, Part 1 requires their ideas whereas Part 2 may need their knowledge and education. Notwithstanding such inconsistency, the results show that politeness is well acknowledged, used and functioning in American office settings.

It should be noted that a small number of samples (30 responses) means that it cannot be confirmed if all administrative staff in the United States hold the same views and opinions as the questionnaire respondents. The findings of this study are limited to the

survey results obtained from administrative personnel who attended the IAAP Summit.

Acknowledgement

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The author also wishes to thank all the respondents who took time to fill out the questionnaire during the IAAP Summit in July 2018.

Notes

1. English-speaking countries, in this case, are countries whose first language is English. Therefore, citizens in those countries are native speakers of English.
2. Leech and Brown and Levinson often use these two abbreviations: “s” and “h (or H),” meaning a speaker or writer and a hearer, reader or addressee, respectively. Leech also uses “O” which means an “other person other than a speaker” and “A” meaning an action. To avoid repeatedly changing them in parentheses, “s” is automatically changed to “a speaker,” and “h” or “H” is changed to “an addressee” in this paper. “O” also changes to “an addressee” because “O” referred to by Leech in this paper always means an addressee. “A” is automatically changed to “an action.”
3. On the other hand, Leech defines sociopragmatic politeness as “a matter of judging politeness in context,” which depends “not just on the words used and their meanings but also on the context ... in which they are used.” (2014, p.17)
4. Leech presents the following three statements as an example of one of seven tables used in a questionnaire:
Just hold the line, will you?
Could you possibly hold the line for a minute?
Would you hold the line a minute? (2014, p.251)
5. There are no right or wrong questions in Part 1. Nonetheless, for the purpose of this research, a respondent who checked the first five statements and left the sixth statement unchecked is considered one who, in terms of politeness view, correctly responded to all six statements.
6. The correlation coefficient was obtained from the list of each respondent’s number of correct answers in Part 1 and Part 2 respectively.

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Appendices

Appendix 1.

Although the selection numbers 1 and 2 are in parentheses in the actual questionnaire,, they have been changed to ① and ② in order not to be confused with the reference page numbers in parentheses in this paper.

Thank you for answering this questionnaire. I am conducting research on the politeness of English expressions. Your answers will be valuable and used only for a research purpose.

1. Please check(✓) all that you agree with.

- () Just like humor and etiquette, polite expressions in English are important.
- () Polite expressions help create a good business environment with a person by not being pushy.
- () A roundabout way of expressing something or a humble comment makes people think you are thoughtful and kind.
- () Politeness in expressions makes communication in a business environment easier.
- () It is important to use polite expressions in a business email message.
- () Speed and efficiency are more important than politeness in business email.

2. Please check(✓) one expression that you think is more polite than the other and also answer the question.

(1) How many guests are you expecting tonight?

(2) Can you tell me how many guests you're expecting tonight?

- () (1) is more polite. Because ()
- () (2) is more polite. Because ()
- () No difference in politeness

Which of the above expressions do you use in your office? (1, 2, or both)? ()

(1) Can I revise the paragraph just slightly?

(2) Do you mind if I revise the paragraph just slightly?

- () (1) is more polite. Because ()
- () (2) is more polite. Because ()
- () No difference in politeness

Which of the above expressions do you use in your office? ()

(1) Do you mind sending us your annual report?

(2) I would be grateful if you could send us your annual report.

() (1) is more polite. Because)

() (2) is more polite. Because)

() No difference in politeness

Which of the above expressions do you use in your office? ()

(1) I'd like you to get more information regarding this matter, please.

(2) Could you get more information regarding this matter?

() (1) is more polite. Because)

() (2) is more polite. Because)

() No difference in politeness.

Which of the above expressions do you use in your office? ()

(1) I don't think so.

(2) I have a different view.

() (1) is more polite. Because)

() (2) is more polite. Because)

() No difference in politeness

Which of the above expressions do you use in your office? ()

(1) You should not leave your luggage unattended.

(2) It might not be a good idea to leave your luggage unattended.

() (1) is more polite. Because)

() (2) is more polite. Because)

() No difference in politeness

Which of the above expressions do you use in your office? ()

Thank you again for your help!

Appendix 2.

All of the reasons for choosing the correct answer

② in the first question of Part 2:

1) Less demanding:

- It sounds less demanding.
- It's not assuming.
- It gives the responder (sic) the option of providing a response.
- You are asking a question to see if it is acceptable to ask this personal question.
- It asks as a question.
- It is not pushy.
- It does not presume the individual will answer.
- It's inviting someone to share information rather than demanding.

2) Not direct

- It's not to the point / direct.
- You're politely asking them vs direct.

3) Better explanation

- It explains why you are asking the question better.

Appendix 3

All the reasons for choosing the correct answer ② in the second question in Part 2:

1) It is asking permission, not assuming.

- An admin. assit (sic) has to ask.
- You're asking and not assuming. (3 same comments)
- It requests 'permission' to revise.
- It's asking permission. (2 same comments)
- It is not assumptive.
- It asks for permission while acknowledging the other person's work and feelings.
- You are asking to not offend.
- It is not your thoughts it's someone elses' (sic)
- You are checking to see if it is OK for you to make a revision.
- Always ask "Do you mind if I" when you're going to provide feedback of any kind. A person may not be looking for feedback and may take offense to the idea of someone imposing their opinions without permission.
- You want the person's okay to proceed with changing something the other person owns.

2) It sounds nicer or considerate.

- It sounds nicer.
- It feels less pushy, more considerate.

3) It is phrased as a favor.

- It is phrased as a favor.

Appendix 4

All the reasons for choosing the correct answer ② in the third structural question in Part 2:

1) It makes the request more reasonable.

- Makes a request more reasonable.
- ① Do you mind is sort of offensive.
- It shows appreciation.
- You're telling them you'd appreciate a copy.
- Polite.

2) It adds a feeling of humanity.

- It adds feeling (sic) / humanity.

3) It is phrased as a favor.

- It is phrased as a favor.

4) It sounds nicer.

- It sounds nicer.

5) It gives a sense of urgency.

- Gives a sense of urgency.

The following comment cannot be categorized into the above appropriate reasons:

- It has nothing to do with the report itself but rather you sending it.

Appendix 5

All the reasons for choosing the correct answer ② in the fourth structural question in Part 2:

1) ② is not demanding but asking for permission.

- ① is more of a request.
- Ask as a question.
- It's engaging, not authoritative.
- It asks for permission rather than stating the request.
- You are not demanding the information; you are asking instead.
- You are not telling them to get information.

2) ② sounds nicer / polite.

- Sounds nicer.
- Polite

The following comment cannot be categorized into the above appropriate reasons:

- To the point.

Appendix 6

All the reasons for choosing the wrong answer ① in the fourth structural question in Part 2:

1) It is more of a statement, not a request.

- It doesn't sound demanding.
- ① is more of a statement and not a request. I think the combination of the two would be appropriate.

2) This relays the importance of the request.

- This relays the importance of the request.
- Choice is important.

3) "Please" is used.

- Please(sic) is used.

Appendix 7

All the reasons for choosing the correct answer ② in the fifth question in Part 2:

1) ② expresses a difference in opinion while it respects the other person's view.

- It doesn't put the other person on defense.
- It shows respect of the other individual's view.
- Not so short and shows you have an opinion.
- It expresses a difference in opinion without making the other person feel they are wrong.
- You show that their view is their opinion and you have a different one.
- Everyone is entitled to his/her view.
- Invites conversation and doesn't shut the other person down.
- You're letting them know why.

2) ② sounds nicer / polite.

- Sounds nicer.
- Polite. (2 respondents)
- This is more polite and not aggressive.
- It's not dismissive.
- You are not being abrupt.

- Wording is more polite than saying I don't think so.

Appendix 8

All the reasons for choosing the correct answer ② in the sixth question in Part 2:

1) ② represents a softer or nicer suggestion, rather than a request.

- Sounds nicer.
- It gives them choice (sic).
- Polite.
- It provides information without sounding like you're giving a "command."
- This thought doesn't come across as pushing or aggressive.
- ① sounds bossy.
- Less direct.
- It presents as (sic) a softer suggestion.
- It (sic) the person's choice.
- it suggestions (sic) rather than states.

The following comments cannot be categorized as appropriate reasons:

- You are telling them why instead of coming off the wrong way.
- It is proper.
- You are expressing a different opinion nicely.

