Abstract: The use of qualitative research in sociolinguistic studies has attracted a considerable number of sociolinguists. The studies have yielded many interesting findings that could not be found satisfactorily in the use of conventional research. This paper will present one of the studies in sociolinguistics which concerns with politeness in Indonesian context. It is suggested that the study of Asian politeness especially, is best suited in using qualitative research method than traditional research method. I will present my own experience in dealing with the problems I encountered during the process of doing the research. Among other things are the problems of looking for the purposeful sampling, the presentation of myself in the research setting, and the ethical issue of lying or not lying in interacting with the respondents.

Keywords: Qualitative, Politeness, Sociolinguistics, Sampling.

1. INTRODUCTION

The sociolinguistic studies of politeness have generated a considerable number of interesting researches. Politeness as an issue in sociolinguistic field could probably be considered as started by Brown and Levinson (1978) who wrote their frequently cited book: Politeness: Some universals in language use. As mentioned in the title of their book, the writers claimed that the language use of politeness as they proposed are believed to be universal. Therefore, they set out some formulas to generate how people in the world dealt with the principles of politeness. Many sociolinguists at that time who were mostly from the white middle class society found Brown and Levinson’s theory of politeness intriguing since they could apply the theory in their everyday life. Many other researches followed in their step and many of them were carried out by using traditional research approach.

Brown and Levinson basically define politeness as redressive action taken to counter balance the disruptive effect of face-threatening acts. They claim that politeness involves showing concern for two different kinds of face needs: negative face needs or the want not to be imposed upon, and positive face needs or the want to be liked and admired. However, when such concept of politeness was later used by other sociolinguists who are coming from non-western languages and cultures, they found that the term politeness should be defined in different ways. Igbo society, for instance, defines politeness as “a response to one’s awareness of social expectations appropriate to his/her place in society” (Nwoye, 1992, p. 312). In Chinese, “to be polite in Chinese discourse is, in many respects, to know how to attend each other’s mianzi and lian and to enact speech acts appropriate to and worthy of such an image” (Mao, 1993, p. 463). In Javanese, Errington (1988) maintains that in relatively polite speech tendencies are “toward stylistic elaboration of address styles focused on the nonlexical, grammatico-syntactic apparatus, and toward expressions of deference focused on lexemes in the domain of person” (p. 226). Meier (1995) therefore maintains that the term politeness itself carries different denotations and connotations. According to Meier, the term appropriateness is a preferable definition. Within such view, “politeness can only be judged relative to a particular context and a particular addressee’s expectations and concomitant interpretation” (p. 387). Within all these concepts of politeness, the issue of politeness speech acts has
become interesting phenomena for investigation rather than a mere issue of universal formulas of language use.

2. POLITENESS IN ASIAN CONTEXT AND ITS IMPACT ON RESEARCH

As more and more sociolinguistic studies of politeness reveal, they can be noted that in fact Asian politeness has more complicated concept unlike the western politeness which can be generated in categories as what have been postulated by Brown and Levinson. This can be caused by the different cultures of Asian people compared to the western. When Brown and Levinson’s theory is based on the ‘western’ horizontal equal relationship between the interlocutors, many Asian people look at person to person relationship as more hierarchical. Matsumoto for instance, argues that the ‘Model Person’ who possesses the attributes of positive and negative face as postulated by Brown and Levinson, focuses on the hearer’s face, and is only relevant for individuals in European and American cultures. Meanwhile, such notions cannot be considered as basic to human relations in Japanese culture. In my own study of the politeness behavior of Chinese Indonesian women, I found who, where, and what each woman was talking to are important things to be noted, while the results were difficult to generalize. Therefore the study of politeness among Asian people cannot disregard the social hierarchical relationships of the local culture, which may influence the way a person shows his/her politeness attitude to the other interlocutor. No wonder many Asian sociolinguists found that Brown and Levinson’s theory of politeness is often far from being universal when it is applied on Asian settings (Errington, 1988; Kuntjara, 2001; Matsumoto, 1988; Gu, 1990; Ide, 1989).

The consequence of this idea in doing research on politeness is that the study of Asian politeness is believed to be more appropriate when conducted using qualitative research approach than using traditional quantitative approach. Because of the intricacies of social relationships in Asia, it would be difficult to come to the real problem of how people really deal with politeness in everyday social interactions when positivistic approach to research is used. By considering the above notion of looking at the broader socio-cultural context of the research participants, and considering the complicated Javanese social structure, and the unique cultural assimilation of the Chinese Indonesians in Java with the Javanese society, I decided to use qualitative research when I wanted to study Chinese Indonesian women’s politeness behavior. So I could see the subtle factors which came up during the research process in order to get a more in-depth study of Asian women’s politeness. In fact the qualitative research I underwent for the research did give me lots of valuable experience and findings despite the fact that there were also problems to be noted. The problems I would like to present in this paper concern with the search for purposeful samples for my respondents, the presentation of myself during the field research, and the ethical problems of lying or not lying while interacting with the respondents.

3. LOOKING FOR PURPOSEFUL SAMPLES

When I decided to use two Chinese Indonesian mother-daughter pairs as the sample of my respondents, I thought that looking for four respondents would not be that difficult. The four respondents consist of one Chinese Indonesian mother with Chinese education background and her married daughter, and one Chinese Indonesian mother with Dutch education background and her married daughter as well. In the process, however, this was indeed not an easy task to do.

To get the two mother-daughter pairs I followed the snowballing method. First of all I invited students of Petra University, especially those who studied in the English Department where I taught, to participate in my research project. In the announcement I mentioned that I was looking for Chinese Indonesian mother-daughter pairs. I put their age criteria quite leniently, i.e. in their fifties or early sixties for the mothers and twenties to thirties for the daughters. I also mentioned that their participation would be made as convenient for them as possible since they would not need to leave home to participate. I also promised them that I would make the experience a worthwhile one, especially for Chinese who lived in Indonesia. Besides putting the invitation on the announcement board I also talked with several students
and colleagues about my search. At first, I expected to get five to ten students who would be interested to apply and participate. However, to my disappointment after waiting for two weeks, only one student applied and expressed her interest in participating and said that her mother was willing to participate as well.

Since I only found one pair of candidates, I called several friends and posted an announcement in several Chinese churches in Surabaya where I had access. A couple of women did call and mention their interest. To them I promised to go and visit their homes. I also visited the only student of Petra and her mother who were interested and willing to participate. Unfortunately none of them seemed to fit the kind of participants I was looking for. One mother was too old, another mother had difficulty communicating, and a daughter had a Javanese husband and lived quite far away and would be difficult to reach.

However, from my encounter with the candidates and discussions with friends and colleagues I learned that it was in fact difficult, if not impossible, to hope for a Chinese woman to apply and offer her participation in research about which she might not have any knowledge. I sensed there was some reluctance from them to apply themselves to participate since such an application could be seen as degrading themselves or could be interpreted as showing off. The fact that I also mentioned about the small remuneration I would offer for the chosen candidates could also cause them some embarrassment. They might not want to be thought as desiring the compensation if they accepted even if they might like it. Then, I thought that actually they might have expected me to come and ask them to participate instead of them coming to me. Several of my colleagues agreed with the idea and gave me more names to call and visit.

That idea inspired me to be more proactive in my search and made me change my strategy. I called some friends and asked them if they could suggest any friends that matched my criteria. They usually gave me several names including their addresses and telephone numbers. I also called some of my old friends whom I thought would match my criteria. I asked them if they would be interested in participating in my research. From about 20 names I called, only four pairs sounded promising and ready to be visited. I asked those who were reluctant to participate, to suggest other names whom I could call. Finally, I got six pairs and I visited all of them, selecting only those who showed their readiness to join the project.

From my initial conversation with the candidates during the visits I found one pair whom I felt confident could be the Chinese educated pair I was looking for. The mother was in her late fifties and had a Chinese education background. She had been living in Surabaya since she was a young teenager attending a Chinese secondary school. She followed the Chinese tradition in worshipping ancestors and spoke a mixture of Mandarin Chinese and Indonesian Malay to her family. Her second daughter was in her early twenties and was born in Surabaya. She lived with her parents and two brothers before she married. Approximately one month after her participation in my research, she married and moved from her parents’ home to live with her husband and her parents-in-law. Besides Indonesian, she spoke Chinese and English quite well. After getting acquainted with them for more than a month, I finally decided that both of them could become my respondents from the Chinese education background.

The other pair from the Dutch education background was not found as fast and as easily found as the Chinese education background mother. Among the last five pairs I visited, I only found one mother who was in her mid sixties and had a Dutch education background. However, during the first conversation, she was not very cooperative and made a lot of apologies and excuses that she might not be able to see me very often due to her frequent travels to other towns. Her daughter also made several excuses as she might not have much time to see me due to her work in another town outside Surabaya. The other four pairs did not really match as the mothers did not have either a Chinese or Dutch education background. The mothers could be categorized as peranakan Chinese, who had abandoned most of their Chinese traditions and language. Being not able to find any mother from the Dutch education background, I tried to evaluate my search and looked for some other possible candidates with Dutch background.

From my early talk with other persons who refused to participate I found that almost all of the mother who had a Dutch education background were in their sixties and seventies. This is likely to be true due to the fact that all Dutch schools in Indonesia were closed in 1943, when Japan occupied Indonesia.
Therefore, those who were still alive would have been in their sixties and older now. Meanwhile, more of the younger mothers who were in their fifties could still have received their Chinese education since the Chinese schools in Indonesia were closed down much later, i.e. in 1957 up to the mid sixties.

I started to search again to find a mother participant who had a Dutch education background, yet was not too old, and could communicate clearly. I started with the search of the mother participant first before the daughter since I believe that looking for a Dutch educated mother was more difficult to find. After asking several friends I was finally introduced to two mothers who were both in their early sixties. These women were still active and had a few years of Dutch education before their schools were closed. Apparently one of them had only one daughter and she had not married. Hence the other mother was my only chance.

My first call to the only possible mother candidate of a Dutch background did give a positive response. She sounded quite enthusiastic to receive me at her home and talk more about my project. So I went to visit her in her home. She proved to be an open and friendly woman. She was in her mid sixties and had been living in Surabaya since her marriage in 1955. She lived with her sick husband and a couple of house helpers, while her daughter, who was a notary, lived close to her home with her husband and two small sons. My coming to her home seemed to make her feel honored as she thought that somebody was still interested in knowing about her life. The meeting also served as a pleasant occasion for her as she could not meet friends quite often due to her husband's illness.

The Dutch educated mother spoke Indonesian with an Eastern Javanese accent when I met her. She spoke a mixture of Dutch and Indonesian Malay to her husband. Later however, she still wondered if as a participant she could meet my expectation. She even offered to help me look for another Dutch educated mother if I still needed one. I told her that having a highly educated participant was not my top preference and in fact I appreciated her openness and would talk with her daughter first before I decided whether I needed to change the participant or not.

When I called the daughter, who was a busy career woman at work in her office, she was expecting my call because her mother had discussed the study with her. She said she was busy but quite willing to participate. When I visited her office I tried to find out her daily schedule. She said that she had very little time even for her family after going home from her office. Yet she said she would welcome me if the time would fit her schedule. In fact, she said, she hoped that her acquaintance with me would be like a nice interlude amidst her busy days. For some time I hesitated to go to her home due to her tight schedule and I was reluctant to interfere in her private time with her family in the evening. Finally, I was able to have a real visit and talk with her in a more relaxed atmosphere after she moved to her mother's home after the death of her father. That was the time when I felt more certain that I had finally found my suitable candidates.

After about two months of searching for suitable participants for my research, and my acquaintance with the four of them for some time, I finally decided that I would choose the four of them as my participants. For a couple of weeks following the decision however, I still spent some time with each of them to get acquainted further and to give me more confidence about my choice. After a couple of observations and informal conversations with each of them, I finally decided to proceed and have them as my participants for my research project. I could then ask them to sign the voluntary consent form.

Hence, looking for the purposeful samples for a qualitative research is not an easy job. I really had to spend a lot of time, look for different strategies, meet many people, and for some time I even felt very frustrated when after a month I still could not find any suitable candidates. Once I felt confident with the candidates, I still worried sometimes that any one of them would quit in the middle of the research. However, everything was running as planned and I felt glad and satisfied to have them as my respondents. In fact, all the difficulties and procedure in looking for the right samples could be considered as a preliminary exercise in my study of politeness. I learned how to be more sensitive in detecting what was considered polite or less polite by some Chinese Indonesian women in Surabaya.

4. THE PRESENTATION OF MYSELF
One of the things a qualitative researcher needs to prepare before starting his/her field research is in the presentation of the self when meeting the respondent. What clothes to wear, what to say, and what language one has to use when meeting the respondent. Since the Chinese educated mother owned a food stall, I would usually wear my casual dress so that I could also help them with cooking and other jobs. I had to make sure that my outfit would not disturb my work and I would not look different from the rest of them. Meanwhile as I came to meet the Dutch educated mother I would wear a neat dress because the mother usually looked neat and clean. Thus I had to present myself as close as those in the house, so that I could be quickly accepted in the house and would not look like a total stranger.

As the primary data collector, I also look at myself as in between both pairs in terms of their daily language use. I had a mother who had a Dutch education background and my late father had a Chinese education background. I attended a Chinese elementary school and was still able to communicate in broken Chinese and understand most of Chinese daily conversation. I also learned a few Dutch words from my mother and my husband who had Dutch education parents.

This condition was a real advantage for me in doing my research. I often talked with the Chinese educated mother using my broken Chinese. To the Dutch educated mother, I would also use a few Dutch words. I found my use of the foreign language gave a positive impression, especially to the mothers. At first they all spoke with me in Indonesian. However, when I tried to speak a few words in their language, the Chinese mother started to use some Chinese and the Dutch mother used some Dutch.

My being a Chinese Indonesia woman myself has helped me to be able to make my presence not as conspicuous and threatening as an outsider might. It did not arouse any strong prejudice either. This helped me to be able to arrive at better emotional understanding and to comprehend them more easily. However, I was also aware that such a condition could also cause me to overlook some details that I might have taken for granted.

Some qualitative studies on Javanese such as the ones on Javanese women and politeness conducted by Smith-Hefner (1988), on kinship and socialization in the Javanese family by Geertz (1961), or on the Javanese etiquette by Errington (1988), were approached through a foreigner’s eyes and point of view. As foreigners they might be more critical in looking at other people’s interactional behavior which was different from their own, but they might lack the sensitivity of perceiving Javanese people’s subtle intention which often characterized Javanese speech style. Hence, each researcher’s personal identity might have his/her own strengths and weaknesses. Bearing that in mind, I believe the shortcoming of overlooking some details should be taken more as a caution in doing the research than a shortcoming.

5. Lying or not lying in interacting with the respondents

Qualitative researchers who study human subjects often ponder over the dilemma of wanting to give full information to subjects but at the same time not contaminating their research by informing subjects too specifically about the research question to be studied. Mason (in Silverman, 2001) suggests that one way to confront this problem is to try to clarify the intentions by consulting the ethical guidelines. The guidelines usually stress the importance of ‘informed consent.’

In my own study, when I had to deal with informing my subjects about the topic of my research, I was facing this kind of dilemma. On one hand, ethically I was not supposed to lie to my subject that I was coming to do a research, on the other hand, if I had to tell them that my research was on the topic of women and politeness, I would put myself in a disadvantage as I felt sure that my subjects would feel awkward in my presence. That might cause them to act unnaturally in my presence for fear I might notice the way they behaved and talked. Therefore to tell them the truth about my primary intention in my study did not sound wise enough and it would certainly jeopardize my research itself.

To solve the problem, I needed to use some strategy where I would tell them the truth about my research but at the same time I had to conceal the main questions I was looking for in the research. So when I first came to one of my subjects’ home. I told the mother that I was doing a research on the daily language of some Chinese Indonesian women. I also asked for her permission to use her as one of my subjects, where I could visit several times. I just wanted to make sure that if she accepted my invitation
for participating in the research, she knew that I would come to her home quite often. I was hoping that with this brief information I had made my intention open for her to decide whether she wanted to participate or not and I made her know the consequence of it as well.

However, both mothers did not seem to take the brief information readily. One said that she was afraid that her language was not good enough. To her, I then had to explain again that what I was looking for in her language use was not on whether she spoke in good or bad language, but I was particularly interested in listening to how she talked with others in her everyday language, not in her orderly language. Without revealing the real problem of my research, I convinced her of her role and told her of her right to withdraw from her participation in case she did not feel comfortable with my presence and questions. After some more clarification she finally said that she would try with her excuse of her bad language again. Another subject I visited in the first meeting also did not readily accept the invitation. I used the same brief information about my intention for my research as I said to the first woman. This time, she did not make any excuse with her language, but with her low education background. She wondered if her low education background would fit with my study. She even offered me to look for another subject for my research whom she thought was more educated than herself. To such reaction, I would again explain to her that I was not looking for one who had high education background, but for one who was open and could work together with me. I also reminded her of my frequent visits and her right to withdraw from her participation if she found she did not like what I did.

Like what Silverman suggested, clarification of the researcher’s intention and the subject’s right is very important. Without revealing the specific details of the research problem and questions, a research could still work on the ethical guideline. It is therefore a matter of how to be smart and honest.

Another interesting experience about such problem was when I was looking for some data on how these women express their gratitude. It is important to note that for many Indonesians as well as Chinese who live in Indonesia, expressing gratitude is not a common way to do (Kuntjara, 2003). People use a number of ways to show gratitude besides saying ‘terima kasih’ [thank you], which is not often expressed easily. Among other ways could be just a moment of silence, a refusal, an excuse, and a set of questions. Therefore, I often had difficulty to get the data. To solve the problem, I often planned my visit with a presentation of a small gift, such as some snacks or fruits when I arrived. The presentation of such gifts would certainly give me chances to notice their ways of expressing gratitude. Although my respondents might not notice my real intention of such action, I did have some guilty feeling inside. Such action could perhaps be considered as camouflaging myself for the sake of obtaining research data. Yet, I found such action could still be tolerated in the sense that giving gifts for many Indonesians are common deeds, as long as the gift is quite modest and done as a token of friendliness.

I believe those who are undergoing qualitative research will one way or another encounter such difficult situations when one has to use strategies to obtain the data. It is important that we check our own conscience whether the action we carry out could still be tolerable and would not harm the respondents.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The study of the politeness of Asian people has been an attempt to add to the growing number of the sociolinguistic studies of politeness in non-English languages. Since the concept of politeness in Asia can be considered as the core issue in the daily communication of most Asian peoples, the study I have conducted may contribute to a wider and more in depth understanding of the politeness behaviors. The data that I have collected and discussed have also been a unique contribution to an ethnographic sociolinguistic study of the politeness patterns of a female language. Compared to the study conducted by C. Geertz (1960), H. Geertz (1961), Errington (1988, 1998), or Smith-Hefner (1988) on Javanese language, my study has taken a different perspective in which my being Chinese Indonesian woman myself, like the participants’ background, allowed me, as a participant observer, to put myself inside them. This study can therefore be considered more as an insider account of each of the participants in their politeness behaviors. Such opportunities should also be considered as a valuable opportunity in doing research that not many researchers would carry out.
However, doing a qualitative research can be exciting, emotional and also frustrating and time consuming. My first search of getting suitable participants for this research apparently needed a longer time than I expected. There were more mother candidates who felt reluctant to participate and thought they were incapable of providing the data to my inquiry. Hence to each of them I had to explain how the research was going to be conducted before they made a decision. The search for four participants which I had thought would be fast and simple, turned up to be quite complicated and forced me to think and evaluate the strategies I used to come up with intended samples.

Although the fact that I am a Chinese Indonesian woman myself can be considered a positive asset, which permitted me to enter the participants’ settings without being too conspicuous, I still needed time to adjust myself to the new settings. Making my presence as natural as possible while doing my observation took some adjusting time, as I balance my need to act naturally with the need to be alert and focused.

Doing qualitative research is also like establishing new friendship that needs to be maintained. Since qualitative research includes the realistic dimensions of people’s lives that may touch us emotionally and personally, it is of utmost important that we do a qualitative research ethically. What to tell and what not to tell often need our ethical decision. The issue is often how to be smart and act honestly and wisely.

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