



اَوْنَرُتْسِيْقِي تِيْكُوْلُوْجِي مَارَا
UNIVERSITI
TEKNOLOGI
MARA



BULETIN APB

EDISI 16

Jun 2026

AKADEMI PENGAJIAN BAHASA
UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA
CAWANGAN NEGERI SEMBILAN
KAMPUS SEREMBAN

Comparing Alerters in English and Malay Workplace Requests

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In the modern professional landscape, making a request is a complex social act that requires more than clear instructions. In the Malaysian workplace, where English and Malay often coexist, the way colleagues ask for assistance reveals significant cultural differences. A key element of these requests is the use of alerters - linguistic devices placed at the start of an interaction to capture the listener's attention and establish a social relationship. While English-language requests among colleagues often use alerters to promote efficiency and equality, Malay-language requests use them to signal respect and maintain social harmony. This essay examines these differences, focusing on how peer-to-peer requests are structured through various politeness strategies.

English Requests: Efficiency and Attention-Getting

In English workplace communication, which is typically viewed as "low-context", requests are designed to be functional and time-sensitive. In this context, alerters primarily serve to grab attention and establish a friendly, collaborative tone. Most English-speaking professionals frequently use "first-name alerters" to initiate a request among peers.



- **Attention-getter:** A colleague might begin with "Hi, Sarah" or "Excuse me, David", followed immediately by the request. This minimizes the time spent on social preliminaries.
- **Conditional Structures:** According to Idris and Ismail (2023), once attention is secured, the request usually follows a direct path, using modal verbs such as "Could you..." or "Would you mind...".
- **Title/Role:** In professional English contexts, using a title such as "Professor" or "Doctor" to address someone is a common way to draw attention by emphasizing their professional role. This practice is common in goal-driven professional environments, where it optimizes operational efficiency and preserves the distinct boundaries of functional roles.

Malay Requests: Phatic Communication and Social Alignment

In contrast to English, Malay workplace requests follow a "high-context" model in which the relationship between colleagues takes precedence over the task itself. This approach prioritizes social harmony to avoid appearing overly demanding. Central to this dynamic is the use of "alerters," which play a crucial sociolinguistic role by capturing the listener's attention prior to issuing a request. The specific form of these alerters is determined by social variables such as age, status, and professional distance. This aligns with Purdy's (2023) concept of phatic communication, which focuses on sustaining social bonds through routine interactions such as greetings or small talk, to ensure the request is well received.

- **Honorific Alerters:** Even among colleagues of similar age, Malay speakers may use titles such as "*Encik*" (Mister) or "*Cik*" (Miss) as alerters to maintain professional distance and show respect.
- **The Apology Alerters:** It is common for a Malay request to begin with an apology, such as "*Minta maaf mengganggu*" (Sorry for disturbing). This alerter acknowledges that the request intrudes on the colleague's autonomy.
- **Greetings:** According to Maros and Halim (2018), initiating a request with "*Hai*" or "*Selamat pagi*" instead of a direct command helps preserve a colleague's "face." This polite approach ensures tasks are completed while maintaining a harmonious office atmosphere.

The Impact of Pragmatic Differences

The intersection of these two distinct styles often leads to "pragmatic failure" in multicultural teams. An English speaker might view the long, apologetic alerters of a Malay colleague as a sign of hesitation or lack of confidence. Conversely, a Malay colleague might perceive the brief, first-name alerters of an English speaker as rude or overly aggressive. However, many Malaysian professionals now demonstrate "intercultural competence" by blending these styles. They may use English modal verbs for clarity while retaining Malay-style alerters to show respect. This hybrid approach enables colleagues to balance the Task (T) with the Relationship (R), ensuring the workplace remains both productive and harmonious. Mastering the function of these attention-getting devices is crucial for anyone working in a diverse professional setting.

In conclusion, the way colleagues make requests at work is heavily influenced by their diverse cultural, social, and linguistic backgrounds. English requests rely on direct alerters to ensure efficiency, whereas Malay requests use softened alerters to preserve social dignity and kindness. These differences are not merely stylistic; they reflect different ways of valuing time, hierarchy, and peer relationships. By recognising the importance of alerters in these two languages, professionals can better navigate the social nuances of the Malaysian office. Ultimately, the most effective workplace communication occurs when colleagues understand the cultural "cues" behind the request, enabling them to get the job done while keeping the professional bond intact.

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