An Investigation of Politeness Strategies among Iranian EFL Learners in Producing Written Requests

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ABSTRACT

Intercultural communication may be problematic in both spoken and written forms; however, informal, face-to-face oral communication may be less complicated than written because clarification and negotiation is possible. In written communication, since the contextual clues are not involved, the language should be more explicit; using a framework for politeness was first developed by Brown & Levinson (1987) who state that politeness is universal because all cultures share norms of linguistic politeness, yet it is also culturally variable since what is polite in one culture may not be judged polite in another. This study will investigate the production of politeness strategies among Iranian EFL learners; Brown and Levinson's politeness theory will be used as a framework to analyze and interpret the data. Forty letters from students at University College of Nabi Akram (UCNA) will be investigated about the effectiveness and the politeness of the language used by the students. The participant's investigation of politeness will be compared with actual linguistic features employed, including the word choice in the salutation and closing, the use of indirect language and politeness markers.

KEYWORDS: Pragmatics, Politeness, Linguistic Knowledge, Written Communication.

1- INTRODUCTION

Every culture has developed and possesses its own appropriate means of strategies and in particular politeness strategies. As different politeness strategies are used by different speech communities, misunderstanding may arise. Transferring a conventionally polite expression from a learner's native language to the target language may sometimes result in obscuring the intended meaning. Learners may fail to interpret the meaning appropriately when encountering politeness strategies unlike those of their native culture. Unintentional rudeness may possibly occur when language learners use inappropriate expressions. Therefore an understanding of how politeness strategies differ across cultures will help improve cross-cultural communication.

The need to make a request occurs very frequently in daily life especially in academic settings, and it is important for language learners know the appropriate request behavior in context.

In Oxford Dictionary, *Polite* is a way that is socially correct and shows awareness of and caring for other people's feelings. Politeness itself is socially prescribed. This does not mean, of course, that we must always be polite, for we may be quite impolite to others on occasion. However, we could not be so if there were no rules of politeness to be broken. Impoliteness depends on the existence of standards, or norms, of politeness. (Wardhaugh 1986) Thus knowing the underlying values of the target culture will improve mutual understanding of communication and it will help making social conventions more comprehensible to non-natives.

The present study scrutinizes the relationship between proficiency level and use of politeness strategies in written requests. In other words, the researcher's main concern is to find out any possible relationship between learners' proficiency level and their use of politeness strategies including: bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness and off-record strategies as well as two types of internal and external modifications. As such, the following research questions are put forward?

1- Is there any relationship between proficiency level and Iranian EFL Learners use of politeness strategies in written requests?

2- Is there any relationship between proficiency level and Iranian EFL Learners use of internal and external modifications in written requests?

Based on these research questions, the researcher hypothesizes that proficiency level will enhance the learner's use of appropriate politeness strategies and internal and external modifications. That is to say, learners with a high degree of proficiency are capable of providing appropriate politeness strategies in their requests.

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Goffman (1967) discusses politeness within the context of a general theory of behavior. He defines it as "the appreciation an individual shows to another through avoidance or presentation rituals". Brown and Levinson (1978) extend Goffman's ideas about linguistic aspects of politeness, proposing a classification of politeness strategies, including two kinds of face. Positive face indicating solidarity with the addressee's self image or face. Positive politeness shows agreement with the addressee. Negative face mitigates the speaker's imposition on the addressee and the implied threat to the addressee's face. Negative politeness in request situations include avoidance behavior when a request might violate the addressee's rights and freedom of choice.

In addition, Brown and Levinson (1978), in their model of politeness strategies, distinguish four supra-strategies of politeness, ranging from the least redressible to the most redressible actions: bald on-record directness, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record indirectness.

Bald on-record strategy:

According to Brown & Levinson (1978), bald on-record is a direct way of saying things, without any minimization to the imposition in a clear, direct, unambiguous and concise way. It is a strategy without any effect of the speaker to save or minimize the addressee's face. Bald on record is usually used only for those who have a close relationship between each other. It could be families or close friends which have known each other. This strategy makes the speaker speaks as efficient as possible in which a request clearly conveyed to the addressee. The speaker only concerns about the message conveyed and could not pay attention about the face threatening act that is potentially happening. The categories of bald or-record strategy together with an example for each of them are presented as follows:

- An emergency: Help
- Task oriented: Give money
- Request: Give me the nails
- Alerting: Careful! He is a dangerous man.

Positive politeness strategy

According to Brown & Levinson (1978), Positive politeness shows approval of the addressee and considers the addressee's wishes. It is redress directed to the addressee's positive face and his desires that his want or actions should be thought of as desirable. On the other hand, the speaker tries to be friendlier to the addressee and respect the addressee by acting or speaking about what the addressee want. Then the speaker tries to make the situation more comfortable for both of them. If often happens in social community such as groups of friends. It makes no distance between one to another in the group. The categories of positive politeness strategies together with an example for each of them are presented as follows:
- Attend to the receiver: You mush be hungry. It is a long time since breakfast, how about some lunch?
- Avoid disagreement: What a fantastic garden you have
- Assume agreement: Will you tell me about what happened to my son because you're his friend?
- Hedge opinion: You really should try harder

Negative politeness strategies:

According to Brown & Levinson (1978), Negative politeness promotes negative face and it does not impose on the addressee's freedom of choice. It is heart of respective behavior it corresponds to the rituals of avoidance. Where positive politeness is free ranging, negative politeness is specific and focused. It is redressive action addressed to the addressee's negative face The addressee wants to feel free and does not want to feel imposed by the speaker when the speaker wants to say or acts something to the addressee. The addressee wants to be respected by the speaker same as another individual. It happens in uncomfortable situation which is between the speaker and the addressee has a social distance. However, positive politeness strategy happens when the speaker and addressee has a close relationship whereas negative politeness strategy happens between a teacher with a student and a boss with his subordinates. The categories of negative politeness strategies together with an example for each of them are presented as follows:
- Be indirect: Can you please pass the salt?
- Forgiveness: I want to apologize because …
- Minimizing imposition: I just want to ask you if I could use your computer?
- Pluralized the person responsible: We forget to tell you that you needed to buy your ticket by yesterday

Off-record strategy

According to Brown & Levinson (1978), With an off-record strategy, a speaker may use an implicit manner, such as hints. Brown and Levinson claim that in off-record, the actor leave it up to the addressee to decide how to

interpret the act. The speaker just says indirectly or says something implied about what the speaker's wants that when the addressee hears that maybe do it for the speaker without feeling imposed by the speaker. The categories of off-record strategy together with an example for each of them are presented as follows:

- Give hints: I forget to bring my wallet
- Be vague: That house needs a touch of paint
- Be sarcastic or joking: He is a son of Jain Houshold.

Brown and Levinson (1978), list three sociological variables that people employ in choosing the degree of politeness to use and in calculating the amount of threat to their own face.

    A- The social distance (D)
    B- The relative power (P)
    C- The absolute ranking of imposition in the particular culture (R)

They propose the following equation for it:

W= D+P+R

    The greater the social distance between the interlocutors, the more politeness is generally expected. The greater the relative power of writers over readers, the more politeness is recommended. The heavier the imposition made on the reader, the more politeness will generally have to be used (Alan Partington 2006).

    Færch & Kasper (1989) examined requests in terms of their external and internal modifications. Internal modifications are linguistic mitigators that are meant to soften direct request, they operate at two levels: lexical and syntactic. External modification, on the other hand, is optional supportive moves that precede or follow head acts to modify them. They include reasons, preparatory, disarmers and etc. The internal modifications and the request strategies coded under it with examples of the request types, and then the external modifications and the request strategies coded under it with samples of the request types are presented as follows:

- Internal modification
    - Lexical
      A: Use of mitigators: Please do the salad, will you?
      B: Use of mental verbs: I think you can spare a few minutes to help me with my math problem.
    - Syntactic
      A: Use of conditionals: If possible, please do the shopping for me.
      B: Use of questions: Can I leave the office sooner?
- External Modification
    - Providing reason: I was sick for a few days and missed some classes, can I borrow your class notes?
    - Use of preparatory: You know how important it is for me to be punctual, I have been your student in past three years, and this is the first time I could not finish my project on time. Would you please give me three day extension?
    - Use of disarmers: Everyone is talking about your being so considerate and nice, would you please give me some more time to finish my project? I am sure you won't say no.
    - Use of precursors/ alerters: Excuse me, can you hand that parcel to me please?
    - Suggestive alternatives: Look, I am in a hurry now, do the cleaning instead of me this time. I will do your turn next week?
    - Use of positive politeness strategies: I wanted to see if I can ask a favor, I have some shopping to do. Could you do that for me? It is okay if you cannot?

    Concerning various aspects of requests, many studies have thus far been conducted by researchers in various languages. As such, the current study addresses the requests of Iranian EFL learners. It attempts to investigate the types of the politeness strategies employed by Iranian EFL Learners in producing written requests. The corpus of the study has been analyzed in terms of internal and external modifications to arrive at the conclusions of the study. The framework proposed by Færch and Kasper (1989) is used to inform data tabulation and analysis.

2- METHODOLOGY

2.1- Participants:
    The current research was conducted at University College of Nabi Akram, in Tabriz, Iran. Altogether 50 English Major College Students, who were born in Iran and have never stayed in English Speaking countries, including 38 females and 12 males, filled with the English version of the Discourse Completion Test (DCT) based on Blum- Kulka (1989) (Appendix A). The participants' age ranged from 19 to 24, they were from different regions of Iran. They were divided into two groups representing 25 intermediate and 25 upper-intermediate EFL learners.

2.2- Design:
    The approach used in this study was survey-based. In order to investigate the politeness strategies in the production of written requests, the participants in two groups were given DCT which consisted of three scenarios.

The questionnaire used here presented a brief description of certain situations, which specified the setting, the social distance between the parties and their status relative to each other. The responses of the students were compared with Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies.

2.3- Instruments:

To collect data for this study, "Demographic Survey" and a "Discourse Completion Test" (DCT) were used. In the "Demographic survey", the subjects were requested to give basic information such as age, gender, level of education and first language. The learners were further asked to give information about their English learning environment. Length of period of English Study. The DCT is a form of questionnaire describing some natural situations to which the respondents were expected to react. In this case, the DCT consists of three scenarios, in which the subjects are asked to write their natural written request to each situation.

2.4- Data Collection Procedure:

Prior to the actual data collection, the scenarios in Blum-Kulka were adapted to suit the Iranian context. The modified form of DCT is given to two professors for validation. Their suggestions well take into consideration in designing the final form of the DCT. For further validation, the DCT was piloted on five students, similar to the main group, not included in the sample to see the language was comprehensible for EFL Learners and based on their opinions, a few changes were made. After this stage, the sophomore students who have passed the letter writing course were considered as upper-intermediate and the freshman students who have not passed the letter writing course were considered as intermediate. A DCT was administered to the selected students in two different groups in their classes at University College of Nabi Akram, Tabriz. The data were collected by means of this questionnaire that was administered to about 50 EFL learners. The important point that needs to be mentioned here is that while fifty students were asked to do the questionnaire, about 40 questionnaires were analyzed as they included incomplete/ misunderstood responses. Selection of request situations in DCT was based on the academic environment. The DCT consists of three scenarios. The participants were asked to produce written requests for a given context of each situation in DCT. These contexts were selected as they will think to occur frequently in academic settings. The students in both groups were given enough time to write their answers to each situation.

3- DATA ANALYSIS

The participants' responses were analyzed in several steps. First, invalid responses were discarded and the total number of valid responses was determined. In the second step, when identifying the responses of requests, the politeness strategies of Brown & Levinson which has four types of bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness and off-record strategies were applied. At this stage, the responses were analyzed and put under each category. The frequency and percentage of each strategy was measured for intermediate and upper intermediate learners by SPSS and subsequently they were compared. Second the possible relationship between proficiency level and the used request strategies were analyzed. In the next step, the external and internal modifications of Færch & Kasper (1989) were identified and applied. In this stage, the responses were put under each category and the frequency and percentage of each one were measured for intermediate and upper intermediate learners by SPSS and subsequently they were compared.

4- RESULTS & DISCUSSION

In this part, the findings of the study will be presented and discussed. The responses of both intermediate and upper intermediate subjects will be compared and discussed separately for each situation. Using Brown & Levinson (1987) definitions and politeness strategies, it was found that the politeness strategy is more likely to constitute a threat to the addresses face. Since different politeness strategies are used by different cultures around the world. The questionnaire describes situations that students in an Iranian college, or university setting may encounter and seek to elicit responses to such situations. The data including responses to the three request situations given in the questionnaire (DCT) consist of three scenarios in which the subjects are expected to request from two higher status and from one peer. Situation 1 and 2 involved professors and student who represent varying degrees of distance and power, while situation 3 includes interaction between two peers.

4-1-Types of politeness strategies

In order to identify the type and frequency of politeness strategy made by Iranian EFL Learners across two different proficiency levels, using the politeness strategy of Brown & Levinson (1987) which recognizes four types of politeness strategies: bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record, the data were analyzed for intermediate and upper intermediate learners. This analysis involved both qualitative and quantitative,

independent examination of each response to the three situations, frequency of occurrence of these ones as used by intermediate and upper intermediate learners for each situation.

Situation 1:

In this situation which contains certain kinds of formality and power inconsistency, there needs to use negative strategy regarding the Brown and Levinson's politeness model. As it can be seen in table 1, among intermediate learners although 60% of the learners used negative politeness, other strategies were used like positive politeness and off-record strategies, each are 30% and 10% respectively. In table 2, among upper intermediate learners, it can be seen that 90% of the learners used negative politeness strategy and only 5% used bald on record and 5% used positive politeness. This shows that increasing the proficiency level lead to choosing the most appropriate politeness strategy in this situation.

Table 1: Politeness Request strategies used among Intermediate learners' in situation 1

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Positive	6	30.0	30.0	30.0
	Negative	12	60.0	60.0	90.0
	Off-record	2	10.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table 2: Politeness Request strategies used among Upper Intermediate learners' in situation 1

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Bald on	1	5.0	5.0	5.0
	Positive	1	5.0	5.0	10.0
	Negative	18	90.0	90.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

As it can be seen in table 3, among intermediate learners, 75% used internal modifications and 25% used external modification, while as it can be seen in table 4 these are 35% and 65% respectively . This shows that in a situation which has power inconsistency, increasing the proficiency level of the learners will lead to more external modifications and the learners understood that they should give some reasons for their requests to prevent the face threatening act and achieving better response by the addressee.

Table 3: Internal & external modifications used among intermediate learners' in situation 1

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Internal	15	75.0	75.0	75.0
	External	5	25.0	25.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table 4: Internal & external modifications used among upper intermediate learners

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Internal	7	35.0	35.0	35.0
	External	13	65.0	65.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Situation 2:

This situation too contains certain kinds of formality and power inconsistence. As it can be seen in table 5, among intermediate learners, 20% used bald on record, 25% used positive politeness, 50% used negative politeness and 5% used off-record strategies in their requests. While among upper intermediate learners, as it can be seen in table 6, the use of negative politeness was increased and 5% used positive politeness, 80% used negative politeness and 15% used off-record politeness. This shows that like in situation 1, since there is power inconsistency, the most appropriate request strategy to use is negative politeness that increasing the proficiency level from intermediate to upper intermediate leads to more use of negative politeness.

Table 5: Politeness request strategies used among intermediate learners in situation 2

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Bald on	4	20.0	20.0	20.0
	Positive	5	25.0	25.0	45.0
	Negative	10	50.0	50.0	95.0

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	Off-record	1	5.0	5.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table 6: Politeness request strategies used among upper intermediate learners in situation 2

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	Positive	1	5.0	5.0	5.0
Valid	Negative	16	80.0	80.0	85.0
	Off-record	3	15.0	15.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

As it can be seen in table 7, among intermediate learners, 70% used internal modification and 30% used external modification in their requests, while among upper intermediate learners, 40% used internal modification and 60% used external modifications. This shows that like situation 1, since there is a power inconsistency, increasing the proficiency level from intermediate to upper intermediate, leads to more use of external modification and learners understood that they should give reasons for their requests to achieve better response by the addressee.

Table 7: Internal and external modifications used among intermediate learners in situation 2

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	Internal	14	70.0	70.0	70.0
Valid	External	6	30.0	30.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table 8: Internal and external modification used among upper intermediate learners in situation 2

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	Internal	8	40.0	40.0	40.0
Valid	External	12	60.0	60.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Situation 3:

This situation is a peer interaction between two students at the same sex. Since there is not power inconsistency, the best politeness strategy regarding the model proposed by Brown & Levinson is positive politeness, as it can be seen in table 9, among intermediate learners, 25% used bald on-record strategy, 10% used positive politeness, 50% used negative politeness and 15% used off-record strategy. This shows that the learners prefer to use more negative politeness strategy to avoid face threatening act, because they are not aware of the most appropriate politeness strategy among peers. On the other hand, as it can be seen in table 10, among upper intermediate learners, 5% used bald on record, 70% used positive politeness and 25% percent used negative politeness. This shows that increasing the proficiency level lead to choosing the most appropriate politeness strategy in this peer interaction.

Table 9: Politeness request strategies used among intermediate learners in situation 3

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	Bald on	5	25.0	25.0	25.0
	Positive	2	10.0	10.0	35.0
Valid	Negative	10	50.0	50.0	85.0
	Off-record	3	15.0	15.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table 10: Politeness request strategies used among upper intermediate learners in situation 3

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	Bald on	1	5.0	5.0	5.0
Valid	Positive	14	70.0	70.0	75.0
	Negative	5	25.0	25.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Regarding internal and external modification, it can be seen in table 11 that among intermediate learners, 85% used internal modification and 15% used external modifications. Considering that this situation is a peer interaction,

there is no need for giving reason for a addressee who is at the same power as the speaker, so when learners increase their proficiency level from intermediate to upper intermediate, they became aware of it and as it can be seen in table 12, among upper intermediate learners, 55% used internal and 45% used external modifications in their requests.

Table 11: Internal and external modifications used among intermediate learners in situation 3

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Internal	17	85.0	85.0	85.0
	External	3	15.0	15.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table 12: Internal and external modifications used among upper intermediate learners in situation 3

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Internal	11	55.0	55.0	55.0
	External	9	45.0	45.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

5- Conclusion

This study was designed to address the important issues of appropriate politeness strategies use and the power relations in written requests across different proficiency levels as used by Iranian EFL learners in order to determine whether and to what extent choice of appropriate politeness strategies and written requests by Iranian EFL learners differs in relation to people with different power status. The present study suggested a mutual relation between uses of a particular kind of politeness strategies based on Brown & Levinson's framework and external and internal modifications based of Færch & Kasper in requests of people with different power status. It revealed that increasing the proficiency level of the learners lead to the use of appropriate politeness strategies and appropriate external and internal modifications in written requests regarding the power status among the speaker and addressee.

Finally, it is hoped that research in second language politeness strategies, will enable us to incorporate effective methods of teaching politeness strategies in the EFL classrooms.

Acknowledgment

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Appendix A

Questionnaire

Dear Respondent,

This study is data-based; therefore, your help is required. You are kindly requested to complete this questionnaire. This will help analyze the written requests of Iranian EFL Learners and yield fruitful findings.

Your responses will be used for academic purposes only.

I would appreciate if you could complete this questionnaire as soon as possible. Thank you for your assistance and cooperation.

Please provide the following information about yourself.

1- Age: ☐   11328
2- Sex: Male ☐   Female ☐
3- University Level: Freshman ☐ Sophomore ☐ Junior ☐ Senior ☐
4- Have you ever visited any English speaking country? Yes   No ☐
5- Have you ever visited any country where English is used as a second language? Yes ☐ No ☐
6- Have you ever studied in a private English language institute? Yes ☐ No ☐
7- Have you ever formally studied letter writing? Yes ☐ No ☐

Now, please read the scenarios in Page 2 carefully and write your answers for each one in the space provided. Thank you very much indeed!

1- You failed to complete your homework assignment in due date because you were sick for a few days. You want to ask your teacher for some extensions. How would you ask him/her?
2- You gave midterm exam last week. You want to request your teacher to give your midterm result. How would you ask him/her?
3- You missed Today's Grammer Class, you decide to ask one of your classmates to lend his/her notes. The classmate is of the same sex as you are. How would you ask him/her.