Politness Strategies as Used by Iraqi Efl Undergraduate Learners

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1. Introduction

This work studies one aspect of socio linguistic competence (See Canale 1984:7); namely pragmatic competence (See 2.1 below). More specifically it attempts to identify the strategies of politeness adopted by under graduate learners of English in Iraq in expressing requests.

This study aims at verifying the hypothesis that Iraqi learners tend to employ indirect and direct strategies more than other ones for expressing requests.

This study is limited to the performance of first-year and fourth year students of the department of English, College of Education, Babylon university. The performance of the students is compared to the performance of native English speakers in Scarcella's (1979) work.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1: Communicative Competence

Hymes (1972) has introduced the term 'communicative competence', to account for native speaker's appropriate use of language. It has been defined by Janick (1979:9) as 'the proper use of linguistic code in the various social situations whose components are factors determining that use'. According to Canale (1984: 6-11) communicative competence is divided into four major components: grammatical, discourse, strategic and sociolinguistic.

It is the fourth component which is relevant to the purposes of this study. This component 'addresses the extent to which utterances are produced and understood appropriately in different sociolinguistic contexts depending on contextual factors such as status of participants, purposes of the interaction, and norms or conventions of interaction' (ibid,7).

Appropriateness of utterances includes appropriateness of meaning as well as form. The former refers to the ability to judge how proper communicative functions (e.g. apologizing, requesting and offering), attitudes (e.g. formality, politeness) and ideas are in a given situation. Whereas the latter refer to how well the verbal and/or non-verbal form that is given in a sociolinguistic context represents the given meaning (ibid).

Lakoff (1977:58) believes that sociolinguistic competence involves a sub competence , namely: pragmatic competence which has been formulated by her in the form of the following two maxims:

Be clear

Be polite

Clarity has been accounted for by Grice (1975:47) while politeness has been spelled out by Lakoff (1973: 289) into the following rules:

Don't impose;

Give options;

Make the listener feel good.

Later politeness has been defined by Hill, et al (1986: 349) as 'one of the constraints on human interaction whose purpose is to consider other's feelings, establish levels of mutual comfort and promote rapport'.

Lakoff's rules have been exploited by different scholars to design models for identifying politeness strategies. Brown and Levinson's (1979) and Leech's (1983) models are the most prominent ones in this regard. Since the former is intended to be

adopted for the analysis of data of this study, it will be discussed in detail in the following lines.

2.2: Brown and Levinson's Model

Brown and Levinson (1979) classify politeness strategies into two basic types: 'positive politeness which is used to satisfy the speakers' needs for approval and belonging, and negative politeness which functions to minimize the imposition of the face threatening act'. Face here refers to 'the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself'. (ibid., 66). The two types of strategies will be discussed in the following subsections.

2.2.1: Positive politeness strategies

a. Expressing an interest in and noticing H.

This strategy means that speaker takes notice of aspects of hearer's condition and shows that some want of the hearer's is admirable or interesting him too; or he emphasizes that both speaker and hearer share some wants. According to Scarcella (1979:277), this strategy can be taken to involve greetings. Consider the following examples:

(1): Hello

(2): What a beautiful vase this is! Where did it come from?

b. Making small talk

It is a way for softening requests as well as a mark of friendship when a speaker talks talks for a while about unrelated topics. So it is used to avoid abruptness and claim common ground with an addressee. According to Scarcella (1979:280) making small talk include the use of extended openings and closings by speakers , e.g.,

(3) Mr. Jones , Mr. Jones.

(4) Don't you think it's marvellous!?

c. Using in-group language

In-group language stresses speaker involvement with the hearer and emphasizes friendliness. It can be achieved through the use of address terms (for example: first name) and endearment (for example; pal, buddy, honey); inclusive 'we', ellipsis, and expressions such as 'you know, 'I mean', and 'you understand', as in the following examples.

(5) help me with this bag here, will you $\begin{bmatrix} pal \\ son \end{bmatrix}$

(6) Give us a break. (i.e. Give me a break)

d. Showing and seeking agreement

It is represented by using such question tags as 'right?', 'okay?' and 'alright' or by repeating part or all of what the preceding speaker has said, in a conversation, as in:

(7) A: John went to London this weekend!

   B: To London

2.2.2: Negative Politeness Strategies

This type of strategies includes the following:

a. Hedging

Among the most common ways to achieve hedging is by using expressions such as 'I wonder if', 'the thing is', 'something like that', and to a lesser extent verbs such as 'believe' and 'think', as illustrated in the following example:

guess

(8) I *suppose* that Harry is coming

think

b. Indirectness

This strategy involves the use of metaphor and irony, questions about ability or willingness and expressing desires, and kinds of hints, as in:

(9) It's cold in here. (i.e. shut the windows)

(10) Can you help me with this exercise?

c. Impersonalizing

It is represented by the use of the passive and exclusive 'we' such as:

(11) These windows need to be cleaned.

(12) Can we have some sugar? (we mean I)

d. Using deferential address terms

The most common markers of this strategy are titles, (e.g. Mr, Mrs, etc.) and words such as 'sir' , as in:

(13) Mr. Jones…

(14) Hi sir.

e. Directness

This strategy is realized by the use of imperatives, performative verbs (such as: request, ask and beg), and modals preceded by 'you' in declaratives. Consider the following examples:

(15) Come alone.

(16) I request you to come alone.

(17) You should come alone.

According to Coulthard (1985:51), directness through imperatives and modals is considered as conveying the least degree of politeness. Thus, it is reserved to informal situations when talking to equals or inferiors.

3. Factors influencing the choice of strategy

The speaker's choice of the type of strategy, as Brown and Levinson (1979:76-89) assert, is influenced by three types of contextual factors: the social distance of speaker and hearer, their relative power, and the ranking of the speech act (i.e. communicative function) imposition.

Social distance is defined along the scale of familiarity and kinship. It involves the amount of experience the participants share, how many similar social characteristics (religion, sex, occupation, interest, etc.) they have and how far they are prepared to share intimacies and other factors (See also Hudson 1988: 122).

Power refers to the authority the participants enjoy in terms of their statuses and roles.

Ranking of the speech act imposition means the calculation of the weightness of the face threatening act. Thus, these three factors will be taken into account when conducting the empirical work of this study. However, the focus of the analysis of the data will mainly be on the influence of the second factor due to the limitations of such a piece of work.

4. Data Collection

In this paper, the effect of status on the use of politeness strategies adopted by undergraduate learners is examined. Twenty first-year (G1) and twenty fourth-year (G2) EFL undergraduate students in the college of Education , Babylon University are involved in this study.

The subjects are asked to participate in a three role-play situation which can be described as follows: 'You work in an office. You have invited your boss, workmate and subordinate to a dinner party at your house. She / he has accepted your invitation. How would you tell each of them to come unaccompanied by his / her spouse?' (Adopted from Scarcella 1979:277).

5. Data Analysis

The subjects' responses are analyzed in terms of those features of positive and negative politeness strategies discussed in 2.2.1 and 2.2.2. the frequencies of using each strategy are rendered into percentages. Then, the students' performance is compared with the responses of the native speakers' group (G3) in Scarcella's (1979) paper.

5.1: Positive politeness

a. Expressing an interest in and noticing H.

According to the analysis of the students' responses, G1 members rarely employ this strategy across all contexts (See Table (1) below). The frequency of using this strategy is only 5%. On the other hand, none of G2 subjects employs this strategy with superiors or subordinates. However, they use it, but with very low frequencies with equal familiars. Its use, here, is represented by greetings only and the frequency of using it amounts to only 5%. Examine the following examples:

(18) Good evening sir. I want to invite you to the party I will have today , but please come alone. (G2 student to boss).

(19) Hi. Suha. Would you mind come alone to the party today. (G1 student to workmate).

By contrast, this strategy is the principal means of expressing politeness in the performance of G3 members. The rare employment of this strategy by the learners could be attributed to learning language rules of use mainly through non-English native teachers and through textbooks which do not include such a type of strategy. (See Book VIII in NECI). In other words, these learners do not have appropriately enough contact with the target language.

Table (1): Frequencies of using the strategy of expressing an interest in and noticing H.

Subjects	To superior	To equal	To inferior
G1	5%	5%	5%
G2		5%	
G3[1]			

b. Making small talk

It is observed through the analysis that none of G1 students uses this strategy with superiors or equals, but they use it with subordinates only and the frequency of this use amounts to 10%. By contrast, G2 students show more preference to this strategy with superiors than with equals, but they reveal dispreference to it when addressing subordinates. The frequency of their use of this strategy with superiors is 25% and with equals is 10% (See Table (2) below). G1 and G2 subjects recourse to long openings mostly with superiors, shorter openings with equals and the shortest with subordinates. Consider the following the following examples:

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[1] Scarcella does not mention the percentage of using this strategy.

(20) Sir, I have a party of the birthday of my younger brother and I'd be very happy if you come. Would you let me the honour of receiving you unaccompanied by your spouse. (G2 student to a superior).

(21) Suha, you are invited to the party of my brother's birthday. Will you come alone, please? (G2 student to an equal)

(22) You can alone to the party of my brother's birthday. (G1 student to an inferior).

The EFL learners' use of long openings with superiors could be a result of the mother tongue rules of use interference. Contrarily when G3 members speak to superiors, they use short openings, such as attention getters. They reserve longer opening for equals and subordinates.

Table (2): frequencies of using small talk.

Subjects	To boss	To workmate	To clerk
G1			10%
G2	25%	10%	
G3[2]			

c. Using in-group language

The trequency of using this strategy by G2 members amounts to 45%, 15%, and 15% with equals, superiors, and subordinates respectively. Conversely, G1 learners do not use it with superiors, but they use it with equals and subordinates with a frequency amounting to 10% on each of these occasions as illustrated in Table (3) below. However, it is observed that this strategy is expressed only through the use of first names and endearments. Consider the following examples:

(23) My friend, I'd like to invite you alone to the party. (G1 student to equal).

(24) Dear Nada, if you don't mind come alone. (G2 student to an equal).

Contrarily, none of G3 members in Scarcella's (1979) data employs those means. Alternatively, native English speakers frequently appealed to expressions such as 'you know' and 'I mean', ellipsis and inclusive 'we' across all contexts (See Table (3) below). These means, as the analysis reveals, are absent from EFL subject's data. The results of the analysis of data regarding the use of in-group language are introduced by Table (3) below.

Table (3): Percentages of using in-group language.

Subjects	To boos	To workmate	To clerk
G1		10%	10%
G2		45%	15%
G3	31%	42%	22%

d. Showing and seeking agreement

The analysis of the data of this research shows that none of G1 learners uses this strategy in any context. (See Table (4)). However, it appears with low frequencies in the performance of G2 members when address equal familiars and subordinates, as manifested by the following example:

(25) Don't forget that you have to come alone.

According to Scarcella[3] G3 members randomly appeal to this strategy across all contexts.

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[2] Scarcella does not state the frequencies of using this strategy.

[3] No examples are provided by Scarcella .

a. Hedging

According to the subject's responses, this strategy is not appealed to by G1 and G2. Contrarily, G3 members use this strategy in addressing superiors with frequencies amounting to 51%, 20% with equal, and 27% with inferior. The learners' tendency in this regard could be attributed to their unfamiliarity with this strategy since they are not exposed to it in their pre-university study and no enough attention is paid to it in their university study. The results of the analysis of data regarding the use of hedging are introduced by Table (5) below.

Table (5): Frequencies of using hedging

Subjects	To boss	To equal	To clerk
G1			
G2			
G3	51%	20%	27%

b. Indirectness

Table (6) below indicates that native speakers favour in directness with superiors than with equals and subordinates. EFL learners show similar tendency.

Table (6): Frequencies of using indirectness

Subjects	To boos	To equal	To clerk
G1	80%	70%	25%
G2	75%	25%	15%
G3	52%	30%	17%

The examples below illustrate the extent to which indirectness
varies according to each situation:

(26) Would you mind if you come alone. (G1 student to a superior)

(27) Will you come alone.   (G2 student to an equal)

c. Directness

As illustrated in Table (9) below, EFL subjects use this strategy more frequently than native speakers do. However, native speakers use declarative statements only to equal familiars, G1 and G2 learners use it with superiors, and equals. They mainly use imperatives with subordinates. It is also observed that the learners recourse to other features of politeness to indicate that they intend to issue a request.

These features are refered to as 'pres to directives'. (Cf. Scarcella 1979: 284) They include devices such as 'please', 'I am sorry'. Consider the following examples:

(28) I'm sorry to say you have to come . (to equal).

(29) Excuse me, come alone.

(30) Come alone, please.

Table (7): Frequencies of using directness

Subjects	To boss	To equal	To clerk
G1	25%	30%	70%
G2	5%	65%	75%
G3	52%	30%	17%

d. Impersonalizing

G3 members employ this strategy most often with the superiors and least often with the subordinates. (See Table (8) below) EFL learners, on the other hand, rarely, if not, employ this strategy. As a matter of fact, most striking among the features distinguishing second language from first language responses is the overwhelming use of the pronoun 'I' and 'you' and of scarce use of passive.

Examine the following examples:

(31) I want you to come alone .   (G1 student to a superior).

(32) I invite you alone.   (G2 student to an equal)

(33) you are invited to my party.   (G2 student to an inferior)

Table (8) : The frequencies of using impersonalizing

Subjects	To boss	To workmate	To clerk
G1			5%
G2			15%
G3	46%	34%	23%

e. Using deferential address terms

The students' emploument of this strategy is limited to the use of 'sir' in situations where they address superiors. In other situations the subjects show no preference towards any other means included in this strategy as illustrated by the following examples:
(34) Hi sir. I want to invite you alone to the partyu. (G1 student to a superior).
(35) Hi my boss, I want you to come alone . (G1 student to a superiors)
(36) Sir, come alone , please   (G2 student to a superiors)

By contrast, this strategy appears more frequently in the performance of G3 members across contexts. Table (9) below introduces the results of the analysis of data concerning the use of deferential address terms.

Table (9): The frequencies of using deferential address terms.

Subjects	To boos	To workmate	To clerk
G1	20%		
G2	45%		
G3[4]			

6. Conclusions and recommendations

6.1: Conclusions

The results of the data analysis conducted by this work indicate that Iraqi undergraduate EFL learners tend to appeal basically to negative politeness strategies when they express requests. However, these results show that the hypothesis adopted by this work is partially verified since the learners prefer indirectness almost equally well with directness in performing requests. They keep the former for addressing superiors and reserve the latter for situations in which their partners are either equals or inferiors.

Though this behavior might give the impression that the learners are sensitive to the contextual factors governing the way of issuing the request, yet it is not

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[4] Scarcella does not mention the frequencies of using this strategy

appropriate enough when compared to the performance of the native English speakers.

To stress their tentativeness, the learners tend to accompany their behavior towards superiors with the use of deferential address terms.

As for the use of positive politeness strategies, the learners show very limited preference to them. In fact, these strategies appear in their behavior in low frequencies only when they address equals or superiors. In the former occasion they tends to use in-group language but they prefer small talk, which is reflected by the behavior of G2 only , in the latter one.

6.2 : Recommendations

On the basis of the gaps which have appeared in the student's performance, the following recommendations are thought to be useful:

(1) The textbooks, i.e. Books I-VIII should include information about the contextual factors.

(2) Students should be involved in interactional activities which necessitate varying the choice of the type of the strategies.

(3) More attention should be given by teachers to their students' appropriate use of the language in the classroom encounters, because this will increase the learners' awareness of this aspect of language learning.

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