Invitation Acceptance Strategies among Iraqi EFL Learners

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Abstract

The present study examines invitation acceptance strategies used by Iraqi Arab English foreign language learners. The instrument used to collect the data was an open-ended Discourse Completion Task, comprising three situations when a lower-status interlocutor accepts an invitation made by a higher-status interlocutor with close, familiar, and distant social distance. The data were coded according to Garca's (2008) and Fan Zhu's (2012) categorization of invitation acceptances strategies. The study showed that Iraqi Arab EFL Learners employed 26 types of strategies when accepting invitations, 11 additional types more than those in Fan Zhu's (2012) study. Supportive move was the most dominant strategy compared to head acts across the three levels of social distance. Also, Iraqi Arab EFL learners preferred directness rather than indirectness when accepting invitations indicating that they perceive it as a face-saving speech act. Gratitude was the most prominent strategy used across the three situations followed by direct acceptance. However, Iraqi Arab EFL learners varied their preference towards other types of strategies according to the social distance of the interlocutors. They employed solidarity as the third preferred strategy when interlocutors share close social distance. When social distance is familiar, well-wishing was the third favoured strategy, while compliment was the dominant when the social distance was distant. Some new strategies such as giving a reason for acceptance, promising to attend, contribution, praying, and honorifics employed by Iraqi Arab EFL learners were not included in Fan Zhu's (2012) classification. Pedagogically, based on the findings of this study, Iraqi EFL Educators could provide pragmatic instruction on how to successfully and appropriately perform invitation acceptance in English taking into consideration both its grammatical structure and the social and culture norms of the target language, and how people perceive this speech act in their native language, i.e., English. In turn, Iraqi Arab EFL learners can develop effective pragmatic competence.

Key Words:
 Invitation Acceptance Strategies, Iraqi Arab EFL Learner, Social Distance

استراتيجيات قبول الدعوة لدى المتعلمين العراقيين للغة الإنكليزية لغة أجنبية

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المستخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة استراتيجيات قبول الدعوة التي يستخدمها متعلمو اللغة الإنكليزية لغة أجنبية من العرب العراقيين. الأداة التي استُخدمت لجمع البيانات هي مهمة إكمال الخطاب الكتابي مفتوحة النهاية، تتألف الأداة من ثلاثة مواقف يقبل فيها محاورٍ ذو منزلة اجتماعية أدنى دعوة محاورٍ من منزلة اجتماعية أعلى، وتتنوع الصلة الاجتماعية لتشمل: قريب، ومألوف، وبعيد. حُلّلت البيانات وفقًا لتصنيف غارسيا (٢٠٠٨) وفان زو (٢٠١٢) لاستراتيجيات قبول الدعوة. أظهرت الدراسة أن متعلمي اللغة الإنكليزية كلغة أجنبية من العرب العراقيين استخدموا ستًا وعشرين استراتيجية عند قبول الدعوات، بزيادة إحدى عشرة عن تلك التي وُجدت في دراسة فان زو (٢٠١٢). كانت أفعال الكلام المكملة أو الداعمة هي المهيمنة مقارنةً بالفعل الأساسي لقبول الدعوة عبر المواقف الثلاثة للمسافة الاجتماعية. كما فضّل المتعلمون العراقيون العرب الصيغة المباشرة على الصيغة غير المباشرة عند قبول الدعوات، مما يشير إلى أنهم يعتبرون الفعل الكلامي لقبول الدعوة فعلاً يحفظ الوجه. كان الامتنان الأكثر هيمنة واستخدامًا في المواقف الثلاثة، يليه القبول المباشر. ومع ذلك، نوّع المتعلمون العراقيون العرب رغبتهم في استخدام أنواع أخرى من الاستراتيجيات وفقًا للمسافة الاجتماعية بين المتحاورين. على سبيل المثال، كان التضامن هو الاستراتيجية الثالثة المفضلة عندما كانت المسافة الاجتماعية قريبة بين المتحاورين. عندما كانت المسافة الاجتماعية مألوفة، كان تمني الخير هو المفضل، بينما كان الإطراء هو المهيمن عندما كانت المسافة الاجتماعية بعيدة بين المتحاورين. كشفت الدراسة أيضًا عن استراتيجيات جديدة استخدمها متعلمو اللغة الإنكليزية لغة ثانية من العرب العراقيين، لم تكن موجودة في تصنيف فان زو (٢٠١٢)، مثل: إعطاء سبب لقبول الدعوة، الوعد بالحضور، المساهمة، الدعاء، والألقاب التشريفية. من الناحية التربوية، وبناءً على نتائج هذه الدراسة، فبالإمكان لمدرسي اللغة الإنكليزية لغة أجنبية تقديم تعليمات تداولية حول كيفية أداء فعل الكلام لقبول الدعوة بنجاح ومناسبة باللغة الإنكليزية، مع الأخذ في الاعتبار كلاً من التركيب النحوي والأعراف الاجتماعية والثقافية للغة المستهدفة (الإنكليزية). وكيف يُستقبل الناس هذا الفعل الكلامي في لغتهم الأم. في المقابل، يستطيع متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية من العراقيين العرب تطوير كفاءتهم التداولية.

الكلمات المفتاحية :

استراتيجيات قبول الدعوة، متعلمو اللغة الإنكليزية لغة أجنبية العراقيون العرب، المسافة الاجتماعية.

1. Introduction

Language is referred to as a means of human communication used to establish social relations, transmit information, and express emotions. It is a dynamic communitive activity used to perform actions through speech acts (Austin, 1962). However, these speech acts such as compliments, apologies, requests, specifically invitation acceptances are performed differently across languages (Searle, 1969). EFL learners may face difficulties in cultivating the pragmatic aspect of communication, namely in performing and comprehending speech acts compared to native speakers who intuitively understand sociocultural variables of these speech acts. The variation in pragmatic competence between EFL learners and native speakers in performing speech acts can lead to misunderstanding or breakdowns in any possible cross-cultural communication, for cultures vary in their communication styles, norms, and values. The same speech act can be performed or realized differently across languages (Thomas, 1983). That is, performing a speech act in one language differs substantially from another, and for this reason foreign language learners face difficulties in producing cultural and contextual appropriate sensitive expressions (Al-Momani & Al-Khawaldeh, 2021).

According to Billmyer (1990), developing pragmatic competence by non-native speakers is changeling because of complexities of speech acts. The various cross- cultural realization of a speech act represents an obstacle for non-native speakers. For instance, in some cultures, using a direct strategy in performing a request is perceived as polite behaviour, but they might be considered as aggressive or impolite in others. Similarly, accepting invitations may be performed differently across cultures. For example, in some contexts a simple "yes" might be sufficient to express the speech act of accepting an invitation, while elaborate expressions of agreement and gratitude are required in others. Moreover, the social and contextual conditions that govern the expectation and appropriateness of acceptance as a speech act are different across cultures and languages. Therefore, developing pragmatic competence is essential for EFFL to avoid being impolite in certain social contexts (Bachman, 1990). Pragmatic transfer is also possible to happen in cross cultural communication as learners unconsciously transfer strategies and rules when performing speech acts from their native language to foreign language. EFL learners may use indirect or direct politeness strategies in accepting invitation, and they may transfer these politeness strategies to the target language. Therefore, misunderstanding or inappropriateness may occur in their communication with native language speakers (Al-Khatib & Al-Qahtani, 2022).

Concerning the focus of this study, accepting an invitation is a complex **speech act**, deeply influenced by specific social and cultural norms as well as politeness. An acceptance regarded appropriate and polite in one cultural might be misinterpreted and misunderstood as ambiguous, impolite, or even indirect declining in another, leading to notable pragmatic cross-cultural pragmatic failures (Thomas, 1983). Therefore, variations in pragmatic social norms present considerable and significant challenges or difficulties for EFL learners. Iraqi Arab EFL learners may face difficulties in cross cultural communication as their pragmatic conventions often vary from those with different cultures particularly in the areas regarding directness, politeness, and

self-image within social interactions. For example, in Western cultures speakers generally prefer explicit and direct acceptance emphasizing clarity and conciseness reflecting a low-context communication style (Hall, 1976). While in Eastern cultures, including Iraqi Arabic culture, people often employ direct acceptance, yet characterizing their acceptance for invitations by extensive use of mitigating politeness strategies such as gratitude, blessings, compliments, and prayers as supportive moves indicating high-context style of communication. Conversely, the sufficient employment of supportive moves may be seen unusual or less efficient for individuals in western cultures (Al-Issa, 2003).

Numerous studies have investigated the performance of speech acts by Iraqi Arab EFL learners (e.g., Al-Kaabi, 2024; Kareem et al., 2022; Fayadh, 2020), examining politeness strategies employed by Iraqi Arab EFL learners when accepting an invitation has received little interest. Therefore, this study aims to fill this research gap contributing valuable insights to develop Iraqi Arab EFL learners' pragmatic competence. These insights are essential to develop more effective EFL curricula and teaching materials that equip learners not just with linguistic knowledge, but with the necessary sociopragmatic skills for successful international communication. Understanding these strategies by comparing them to native English norms is crucial for identifying areas of potential pragmatic transfer and failure, and designing targeted pedagogical assistance. Thus, this study aims to answer the following research question: what are the strategies employed by Iraqi Arab EFL learners when they accept an invitation made by a higher status interlocutor who had a close, familiar, and distant social relation with them?

2. Acceptance as a speech act

The speech act of accepting invitation is a frequent and fundamental speech act occurring in everyday communication in all languages and societies; it is used to initiate and maintain social interpersonal relationships. It is far from a simple 'yes' but a complex speech act which is deeply rooted in the politeness system across cultures (Wierzbicka, 2003; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Leech, 1983). According to Austin's (1962) taxonomy, invitation acceptance is classified as a commissive speech act which commits the speakers to future course of actions. When individuals accept invitations, they are implicitly or explicitly committing themselves to a future action i.e. to attend the proposed event. Differences in performing speech across cultures or societies are resulted from cultural priorities of politeness strategies, directness in communication, and the way social customs play in communication (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Hall, 1976). Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) indicated that speech acts cannot be realized or performed by single utterances, they are frequently performed by semantic formulas or speech acts set comprising *head acts* and *adjuncts* or *supportive moves*. Head acts are the series of utterances or the minimal utterances that realize the illocutionary forces of speech acts. For example, in accepting invitations, utterances such as "I'd love to come," or "Yes, I will attend" are referred to as head acts. On the other hand, supportive moves are utterances that accompany head acts, and used to elaborate, mitigate, intensify, or modify them. Supportive moves can come before (pre-supportive) or after the head acts (post-supportive) and they frequently serve to enhance or mitigate politeness, save the face of both the hearer and the

speaker, or provide relevant context. Expressions of enthusiasm ("I'm really looking forward to it!"), gratitude ("Thank you for your invitation"), positive opinion ("That's a wonderful idea!"), solidarity "It's always great to spend time with you all!" are used as supportive moves, i.e., adjuncts.

According to Leech's (1983) principles of politeness, accepting invitations are generally consistent with maxims that promote politeness and maintain social harmony. However, these politeness maxims are applied, prioritized and realized differently across cultures. What can be seen as polite an appropriate politeness strategy of accepting invitation in one culture may be misunderstood or regeared impolite in another. For example, Americans use direct acceptance of invitations using a straightforward and quick "Yes, I'd love to come!" (Wolfson, 1981). In contrast, saying "no" or refusing many times first before final accepting is a common politeness strategy in many cultures. For example, for Chinese, who belong to cultures in which humility and modesty are highly valued, overly eager, direct, and immediate acceptance of invitations is considered as impolite violating the Agreement Maxim (Gu, 1990; Leech, 1983). For Iraqi Arabs, the inviter insists repeatedly until the invitee finally accepts an invitation. Meanwhile, the invitee has to employ many mitigating politeness strategies, i.e., supportive moves, before issuing his final acceptance. According to Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, by accepting invitations, the invitees save the inviters' positive face making them feeling that their effort are appreciated, and they are liked and admired. That is, invitation acceptance is regarded as a face-saving speech act. However, using politeness strategies to perform the speech act of accepting invitations are culturally specific, particularly in terms of the influence of social and cultural norms, and indirectness.

3. Literature review

Accepting invitations is one of the most frequent speech acts employed in everyday communication across all languages and cultures. However, their performance differs from one society to another, and from one culture to another depending on cultural and social norms. Therefore, numerous studies have conducted to examine the cross-cultural specific strategies employed when accepting invitations highlighting the similarities and differences between various cultures and societies. Five previous studies have been reviewed which investigate invitation acceptance realisation by non-native English speakers; invitation acceptance in a cross-cultural context, and invitation acceptance in a single culture or language.

The first study by Suzuki (2015) examines how appropriateness and politeness are controlled by native speakers of English when inviting, refusing, and accepting invitations using different types of politeness strategies. This study aims to examine invitations and their responses when performed formally and informally. The data were collected through WDCT and retrospective interviews. The participants of this study were four native English-speaking living in Uk. The study revealed that the politeness strategies when accepting invitation were various according to the social status and distance among interlocutors. The main results showed that when accepting an invitation from a boss or superior (formal context), they tended to use negative

politeness strategies to show more deference and reduce any possible imposition. However, when accepting invitations made by a close friend in informal context, the participants tended to employ more positive politeness to reinforce solidarity and maintain social relation.

A second study conducted by Al-Maliki, Dabaghi, and Amirian (2024) investigate the pragma-linguistic strategies used by Iraqi learners when accepting invitations in relation to social status, social distance, and gender. DCTs were used to collect the data including 12 situations in which the participants have to accept invitations made by interlocutors with high, equal, and lower status. The politeness strategies were codded according to Al-Khatib's (2006) classification. The main findings indicated that participants preferred to use politeness expressions such as compliment, good wishes, thanking, and appreciation before accepting invitations. Social status has also an effect on the participants' preferences for some strategies rather than others as they utilize more compliments, thanking, and appreciations when accepting invitations from higher status interlocutors to show more respect, while in accepting invitations from lower status interlocutors, such strategies were reduced. Furthermore, gender also seems to govern the participants' responses as male participants tend to use direct strategies when accepting invitations made by females. On the other hand, female participants demonstrated more politeness and femininity when accepting invitations from males using more appreciation, thanking, and expressing good wishes.

The third study by Fan Zhu (2012) examines politeness strategies employed by advanced Chinese learners of English when accepting and refusing invitations. The participants were advanced Chinese learners of English (CEL), Chinese native speakers (CHCH), and American English native speakers (AME). This study aimed to compare the use of strategies by these three groups examining the influence of social variable on their choices. The data was collected by DCT including 16 various scenarios followed by retrospective interviews to obtain deeper insights. The results demonstrated that CEL preferred to use more direct strategies in their accepting and declining invitations compared to the other two groups. However, they often provide a reason when accepting or declining an invitation. Learners' preference to give reasons when accepting or refusing invitations reflects their pragmatic transfer from their native language, i.e., Chinese. While CLE showed an ability to adjust their politeness strategies according to social status and social distance (similar to AME), their choices were not always contextually appropriate when compared to native speakers, indicating challenges in achieving full pragmatic competence.

Another study employed by Pinto's (2002) focuses on how fixed common expressions and phrases are used by native speakers of Spanish and those who learn it as a second language making comparisons with how English native speakers use language. The results showed that direct acceptance is the most preferred and dominant strategy among native English speakers primarily indicating a very straightforward approach. Conversely, direct acceptance was considerably less often among native Spanish speakers using indirect acceptance or supportive moves. Second language learners of Spanish showed more directness in their acceptance of invitations compared to native Spanish speakers but less than native English speakers. This

study demonstrates cross-cultural differences in the tendency of directness in employing politeness strategies as English speakers favoured directness compared to Spanish speakers who preferred using more indirect polite supportive moves, while Spanish second language learners' employment of directness was more than that of native speakers of Spanish, bust less than that of English native speakers.

Finally, the study by Al-Khatib (2006), explores politeness strategies and socio-pragmatic features employed by Jordanians when inviting, declining, and accepting invitations. The instrument of collecting data was DCT including various social scenarios. The results revealed a prominent use of positive politeness strategies that maintain and reinforce social relation and solidarity. The participants preferred direct strategies, frequently accompanied by enthusiastic expressions of pleasure and gratitude. The integration of formulaic or religious expressions (e.g., "Insh'Allah," "Barak Allah Feek") were used to convey commitment and sincerity. Notably, the participants' acceptance of invitations generally avoids initial ritualized hesitation or refusals as it is common in some other cultures. Furthermore, the choice of specific linguistic forms and the intensity of politeness strategies when making invitation and giving acceptance are significantly influenced by social status and social distance between individuals.

The reviewed studies showed that invitation acceptance speech acts are realised differently across cultural, social, and linguistic groups. That is, some cultures preferred directness while others favour indirectness. Gender, also significantly influences the employment of politeness strategies within a society. Furthermore, while previous studies concentrated on the social status of interlocutors, the influence of social distance in designing situations has been neglected. Therefore, this study shed lights on examining invitation acceptance strategies employed by Iraqi Arab EFL learners when accepting invitations from higher-status interlocutors who had close, familiar, and distant social distance with them. That is, the focus in this study is on the three levels of social distance.

4. Methodology

This study followed a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze data. An open-ended Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT) were employed to gather data from participants in three varied situations. Social status and distance as contextual variables are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Description of WDCT Situations

Situation of accepting an invitation	Status of inviter	Status of invitee	Distance
1. Party promotion invitation acceptance	Higher -boss	Lower-Employee	Close
2. Homemade dinner invitation acceptance	Higher -professor	Lower-Student	Familiar
3. Poetry festival invitation acceptance	Higher - professor	Lower-Student	Distant

During the second academic semester of 2025, procedures of data collection were implemented within classrooms at Karbala University. This study comprises 40 female participants aged between 22 and 23. They were Iraqi Arab EFL learners studying English as a foreign language in the English department at the fourth year of their study. The sample of this study is restricted to female participant only to avoid gender differences which significantly influence accepting invitations. Consequently, by following this methodological approach, the internal validity of the findings is enhanced. Thereby, the generalizability of the findings is restricted to the female population. The participants were provided with a full description of the three situations before filling out the WDCT, explaining the contextual settings of the three levels of social distance and social status between the interlocutors. They were given 10 minutes to complete three WDCTs giving their responses as if they were in real-life contexts accepted invitations from higher status inviters who had close, familiar, and distant social distance with them. The collected data were coded and classified mainly according to Fan Zhu's (2012) classification of the specific politeness strategies. Then, these specific strategies were coded followed García's (2008) categorization of strategies as head acts comprising direct and indirect strategies, and supportive moves. However, modifications were made to these strategies depended on the findings of the open-ended WDCT (See Appendix 1).

Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) defined head acts as "the minimal unit[s] that can realise a request; [they are] the core of the request sequence (p. 275)", and *supportive moves* as "units external to the request which modify its impact by either aggravating ... or mitigating ... its force" (p. 276). Head acts are further classified as direct or indirect, conceptualizing them as existing along a continuum of directness. (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). Table 2 showed an example of coding the specific politeness strategies employed by Iraqi Arab EFL learners.

"A million congratulations, my friend! Of course I'll come. Thank you for the invitation".

Table 2: Coding of Strategies

Utterance	García's (2008) classification	Fan Zhu's (2012) classification
1. "a million congratulations"	Supportive move	Congratulation
2." my friend!"	Supportive move	Solidarity
3. "of course I'll come"	Head act (direct)	Direct acceptance
6. "thank you for the invitation"	Supportive move	Gratitude

5. Results and Discussion

The findings of this study are presented in four subsections. The first subsection showed the total number of politeness strategies employed by Iraqi Arab EFL learners across three situations. Then, the following three sub-sections focus on how Iraqi Arab EFL learners accept invitations from higher status interlocutors with whom they had close, familiar, and distant social relation. Politeness strategies are classified as *head acts* comprising direct and indirect, and *supportive moves* according to Garca's (2008) categorization.

5.1 Overall Distribution of Learners' Invitation Acceptance Strategies

The overall results in Table 3 showed that Iraqi Arab EFL learners use specific patterns in their acceptance of invitations. A total of 347 politeness strategies were employed by Iraqi Arab EFL learners when accepting an invitation of higher status interlocutor who had close, familiar, and distant social relation with them. 26 types of politeness strategies were used across the three situations. *Head acts* which represent the core of invitation acceptance accounted for 37.75%. However, among *head acts*, direct strategies were the most prominent at 26.22% compared to indirect strategies which were used less frequently at 11.52%. This indicates that Iraqi Arab EFL learners preferred to use direct strategies when accepting invitations from higher status interlocutors across the levels of social distance. S*upportive moves* were the dominant and preferred strategy accounted for 62.24% compared to *head acts* which are used less. The dominant employment of *supportive moves* demonstrates the effect of social harmony and politeness on the Iraqi Arab EFL Learners' communication. This strongly suggests that Iraqi Arab EFL learners make a pragmatic transfer from their native language, i.e., Arabic (Kasper, 1997). In other words, as they belong to a high-context collectivist language (Hofstede, 2001; Hall, 1976), Iraqi Arabs often rely heavily on elaborate politeness formulas, implicit meanings, and shared understanding. Therefore, they preceded and/or followed their direct or indirect acceptance of invitations by sufficient number of supportive moves.

Table 3: Overall Strategies of Accepting Higher-status Interlocutors' invitations

Strategy	Iraqi Arab EFL learners	
	No	%
Head Act	131	37.75
Direct	91	26.22
Indirect	40	11.52
Supportive moves	216	62.24
Total	**347**	**100%**

5.2 Accepting Invitation from Higher Status Interlocutors with Close Social Distance

Table 4 shows politeness strategies adopted by Iraqi Arab EFL learners when accepting invitations made by higher status interlocutor who had close social distance with them to attend the party of his promotion.

Table 4: Overall Strategies Employed in Situation 1

Strategy	Iraqi Arab EFL learners	
	No	%
Head Act	42	40
Direct	27	25.71
Indirect	15	14.28
Supportive moves	63	60
Total	**105**	**100%**

Table 4 showed the total numbers of strategies employed by Iraqi Arabic EFL learners when accepting invitations from a close higher-status interlocutor was 105 strategies involving 42

head acts and 63 *supportive moves*. Direct strategies were the dominant strategies among the *head acts* as they were used at the percentage of 25.71%, whereas the indirect ones were employed less frequently at the percentage of 14.28%. Though the high status of the inviter, the invitees tend to be direct in their acceptance to confirm their acceptance and appreciation for the invitation. However, Iraqi Arab EFL learners employ substantial *supportive moves* at the percentage of 60% before or after the *head acts* to mitigate or aggravate their acceptances. This confirms strong pragmatic transfer from their native language i.e. Arabic which is considered as a high-context collectivist language when social harmony, face-saving and elaborate politeness are highly valued. That is, they prioritize to precede or follow their direct acceptance by extensive use of supportive move based on their social and cultural norms. This in accordance with Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness system of both positive face by sustaining enthusiasm, appreciation, and solidarity, and negative face by expressing respect and deference towards the higher-status interlocutor. Moreover, the substantial use of *supportive moves* significantly reflects Leech's (1983) politeness system, specifically *approbation maxim*, i.e., maximizing praise of others.

Table 5: Specific Strategies: Higher Status and Close Distance

Invitation acceptance strategies	Iraqi Arab EFL learners	
	No	%
Head acts		
Direct		
Direct acceptance	12	11.42
Promising to attend	5	4.76
Expressing readiness	7	6.66
Acceptance intensifier	3	2.85
Indirect		
Suggestion	4	3.80
Joke	3	2.85
Future reference	4	3.80
Idiom	3	2.85
Availability	1	0.95
Supportive moves		
Checking	7	6.66
Acknowledgment	2	1.90
Positive opinion	4	3.80
Gratitude	15	14.28
Concerns	1	0.95
Offer	1	0.95
Contribution	3	2.85
Well-wishing	5	4.76
Solidarity	8	7.61
Reciprocate	3	2.85
Counter invitation	2	1.90
Compliment	4	3.80
Giving a reason for acceptance	3	2.85
Praying	5	4.76
Overall Total	**105**	**100%**

As shown in Table 5, Iraq Arab learners employed 23 types of strategies divided into 9 *head acts* and 14 *supportive moves* in accepting invitations from close higher-status person. *Gratitude* was the most prominent strategy at the percentage 14.28%. The prominent employment of *gratitude* by Iraqi Arab EFL learners when accepting invitations reflects a pragmatic transfer from their native language based on their social and cultural norms (Kasper, 1997). Expressing gratitude in Iraqi Arab culture is highly influenced by Islamic teachings as *gratitude* is not only considered as a social nicety but as a religious obligation and a moral. The hospitality is also of great effect on the participants' use of this strategy as Iraqi Arabs highly appreciate invitations as one of the most important signals of generosity. Consequently, the prominent expressions of gratitude employed by the invitee to reciprocate and acknowledge this generosity, and as an essential way of maintaining social harmony. This is in line with Brown & Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, in which appreciation serves as a positive politeness strategy to strengthen social relations. This finding also confirms the adherence to Leech's (1983) politeness maxims, specifically *tact approbation* maximizing approval and praise towards the inviter. The second preferred strategy by Iraqi Arab EFL learners was *direct acceptance* at the percentage of 11.42%. This preference emphasizes efficiency and clarity**,** and unambiguous way of participation leaving no confusion about the intention of learners to attend the event i.e. invitation (Leech, 1983). The participants try to be clear in giving their acceptance to avoid misunderstanding, and to confirm their acceptances in a straight way. However, they extended their use of supportive moves through *gratitude* to keep high level of social harmony and politeness as it is seen as a polite way of appreciation in Iraqi Arab Culture (Kasper, 1997). The direct acceptance, followed or preceded by extensive use politeness strategies, functions as a "bald-on-record with redress" strategy (Brown & Levinson, 1987), balancing the use of face-saving strategies and clarity, i.e., directness. Other prominent strategies were *solidarity* at the percentage 7.61%, followed by *expressing readiness* and *checking* at quite same percentage accounted for 6.66 %, and *promising to attend, praying, and well-wishing* at exactly the same use of 4.76%. Importantly, some strategies such as *promising to attend, giving a reason for acceptance, praying,* and *contribution* were employed by Iraqi Arab EFL learners at the percentage of 3.80% and less were new strategies which have not been used in Fan Zhu's (2012) classification.

5.3 Accepting Invitation from Higher Status Interlocutors with Familiar Social Distance

Table 6 summarizes the number of strategies employed by Iraqi Arab EFL learners when accepting invitations from an interlocutor with higher status and familiar social distance who invited them to celebrate his promotion party.

Table 6: Overall Strategies Employed in Situation 2

Strategy	Iraqi Arab EFL learners	
	NO	%
Head Act	49	38.88
Direct	34	26.98
Indirect	15	11.90
Supportive moves	**77**	61.11
Total	**١٢٦**	**100%**

The results in Table 6 shows that Iraqi Arab EFL learners employed 126 strategies comprising 49 *head acts* and 77 *supportive moves*. The results indicate that the total number of strategies in this situation is more than that used in Situation 1 regarding both *head acts* and *supportive moves*. This may belong to the influence of the social distance and social status among interlocutors. The participants tended to use more politeness strategies to keep both the negative and positive face of the inviter by being more respectful and polite. That is, they try to keep deference and social harmony at the same time. Substantial employment of supportive moves indicates the influence of the higher status of the inviter, i.e., being a supervisor and having the authority over the students. However, similar to the first situation, they appeared to prefer direct strategies as the core of expressing their acceptances, i.e. head acts, at the percentage of 26.98% compared to indirect ones which employed at 11.50%. Similarly, they accompany their direct and indirect acceptances by sufficient employment of supportive moves employed either before or after issuing their acceptance of invitation as a polite way of mitigating or aggravating the illocutionary force of the speech act of acceptance. They want both to maintain social harmony, and to show social deference to the inviter.

Table 7: Specific Strategies: Higher Status and Familiar distance

Invitation acceptance strategies (2)	Iraqi Arab EFL learners	
	No	%
Head acts		
Direct		
Direct acceptance	20	15.87
Promising to attend	3	2.38
Expressing readiness	8	6.34
Acceptance intensifier	3	2.38
Indirect		
Suggestion	3	2.38
Future reference	6	4.76
Idiom	5	3.96
Availability	1	0.79
Supportive moves		

Acknowledgment	2	1.58
Positive opinion	5	3.96
Gratitude	22	17.46
Concerns	5	3.96
Offer	2	1.58
Contribution	3	2.38
Well-wishing	9	7.14
Solidarity	3	2.38
Reciprocate	2	1.58
Lacking necessity	4	3.17
Compliment	7	5.55
Giving a reason for acceptance	4	3.17
Praying	6	4.76
Honorifics	3	2.38
Overall Total	**126**	**100%**

Table 7 demonstrates that Iraqi Arab EFL learners employed 22 types of strategies divided into 8 head acts and 14 supportive moves when accepting invitations from a familiar higher-status inviter. Similar to the first situation, Table 7 shows that Iraqi Arab EFL learners tended to use *gratitude* substantially at the percentage of 17.46% as the dominant politeness strategy when accepting a supervisor's invitation who has familiar social relation with them. This conforms to Brown and Levinson's view of saving the inviter's positive face of being appreciated and valued. With reference to Leech's Maxims, this finding is in line with *approbation maxim* when the students maximize praise for their supervisor by acknowledge his invitation and showing appreciation and approval.

The second favoured strategy was *direct accepting* at the percentage of 15.87% representing an unambiguous and clear acceptance. The performance of direct acceptance fulfills the main communicative goal successfully and efficiently. By using *gratitude* as the most preferred strategy followed by direct acceptance indicates the balance between politeness and directness. That is, despite the inviter's authority as a supervisor, they tended be direct in their acceptance for invitations; however, direct acceptance is mitigated by supportive moves, particularly through *gratitude*. The third prominent strategies were *well-wishing* at 7.14%, followed by expressing readiness at 6.34%, and compliment at 5.55%. According to Brown & Levinson (1987), *well-wishing, expressing readiness*, and *compliments* serve as positive politeness strategies. Consequently, they save the supervisor's "positive face" by showing admiration, enthusiasm, and concern. Elaborately, *well-wishing* directly embodies Leech's (1983) *maxim of sympathy* as it minimizes antipathy and maximizes sympathy towards others. While by *expressing readiness*, individuals convey willingness to cooperate, enthusiasm, and a positive opinion towards the shared request or activity. Moreover, *compliments* are paralleled with Leech's (1983) *maxim of approbation* when maximizing praise and minimizing dispraise of others. As in Situation 1, strategies such as *promising to attend, compliment, giving a reason for acceptance, praying,* and *honorifics* were not included in Fan Zhu's (2012) categorization.

5.4 Accepting Invitation from Higher Status Interlocutors with Distant Social Distance

Table 8 summarizes Iraqi Arab EFL learners' politeness strategies used when accepting invitations from higher status interlocutor with distant social distance who invites them to a poetry festival.

Table 8: Overall Strategies Employed in Situation 3

Strategy	Iraqi Arab EFL learners	
	NO	%
Head Act	40	34.48
Direct	30	25.86
Indirect	10	8.62
Supportive moves	76	65.51
Total	**116**	**100%**

The results in Table 8 indicate the Iraqi Arab EFL learners sustain their preferences for sufficient employment of *supportive moves* compared to *head acts* as in previous situation when accepting invitations from higher status interlocutors with familiar and close distance. Supportive moves mitigate directness in accepting invitations and serve as a powerful positive politeness strategy, explicitly affirming the invitation's desirability and the inviter's good intentions (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Additionally, Iraqi Arab EFL learners maintain their tendency for *direct strategies* as in Situation 1 and Situation 2. Despite the fact that Iraqi Arabs, typically prefer indirectness to show respect and maintain harmony in their daily interaction, specifically towards persons of higher status (Al-Hindawi & Al-Mufarji, 2018), the results showed that Iraqi Arab EFL learners preferred direct strategies in accepting invitations from individuals who are superiors in status. They used direct acceptance sufficiently at 25.86%, while indirect acceptance is employed at 8.62%. The tendency towards directness because it provides unambiguous clarity, which can be seen as respectful and efficient for a higher-status inviter's time. Accordingly, they perceive invitation acceptance as face-saving speech act.

Table 9: Specific Strategies: Higher Status and Distant Distance

Invitation acceptance strategies	Iraqi Arab EFL learners	
	No	%
Head acts		
Direct		
Direct acceptance	20	17.24
Promising to Attend	4	3.44
Expressing readiness	4	3.44
Acceptance intensifier	2	1.72
Indirect		
Future reference	4	3.44
Conditional acceptance	6	5.17
Supportive moves		
Checking	6	5.17
Positive opinion	9	7.75
Gratitude	21	18.10
Concerns	4	3.44
Well-wishing	9	7.75

Lacking necessity	3	2.58
Compliment	10	8.62
Giving a reason for Acceptance	1	0.86
Praying	6	5.17
Honorifics	7	6.03
Overall Total	**116**	**100%**

Table 9 reveals that Iraqi Arab EFL learners employed 16 types of strategies including 6 head acts and 10 supportive moves. As in the previous two situations, Iraqi Arab EFL learners maintain their preference for employing *gratitude* as the most prominent politeness strategy at the percentage of 18.10%. They also sustain their dominant use of *direct acceptance* as the second preferred strategy accounting for 17.24%. Accepting invitations can be immediately and clearly interpreted as polite way of showing deference to the inviters' position and time, implying that their invitations are important and readily accepted (Al-Hindawi & Al-Mufarji, 2018; Hofstede et al., 2010). As positive politeness compliment was the third preferred strategy employed at 8.62%, followed by *positive opinion* and *well-wishing* at exactly the same rate of 7.75%, *honorifics* at 6.03%, *conditional acceptance, praying,* and *checking* at exactly the same percentage accounting for 5.17%. Strategies such as *promising to attend, expressing readiness, acceptance intensifier, future reference, concerns, lacking necessity, giving a reason for acceptance w*ere used at 3.44% and less. Importantly, *conditional acceptance* was a new strategy which was not used at Fan Zhu's (2012) classification or any other reviewed studies. Notably, *honorifics* appeared to be used frequently when the social distance is distant; however, this use was reduced at familiar, and have not been used when the social distance is close. This significantly reflects the influence of social distance on Iraqi Arab EFL learners. More elaborately, they avoided to use *honorifics* to show solidarity and closeness when accepting invitations made by close higher-status interlocutor. While they tended to employ *honorifics* when the interlocutor had familiar distance and higher status to show a high position and authority, they significantly increased their tendency for this *strategy* when accepting invitations from a distant higher-status interlocutor to reveal more formality and respect.

6. Conclusion

The overall results showed that Iraqi Arab EFL learners employed (26) types of strategies in accepting invitations across the three levels of social distance, i.e., close, familiar, and distant. It also revealed that *supportive moves* were employed substantially compared to *head acts* across the three situations. This reflects Iraqi Arab EFL learners' pragmatic transfer from their native language in which providing more supportive moves is seen as a way of showing respect and appreciation for the inviter. That is, they provided more effort to enhance the inviters' positive face through using sufficient politeness strategies, i.e., supportive moves. Across the three levels of social distance, Iraqi Arab EFL learners also showed their preferences for *direct acceptance* for higher status interlocutors' invitations with close social relation. This demonstrates that Iraqi Arab EFL learners see or perceive the speech act of accepting invitation as a face-saving speech act. This is in contrast with both Brown and Levinson's (1987) and Leech's (1983) claim that performing speech act politely can be achieved through indirect

strategies as they considered indirectness as a primary strategy of politeness. In other words, Iraqi Arab EFL learners' tendency towards directness when accepting invitations reflects the fact that directness and indirectness are culturally specific and based on how people perceived and performed speech acts differently across cultures.

With reference to the specific strategies, the results indicate that *gratitude* classified as *supportive move* was the most dominant strategy across the three situations. Moreover, as a *head act*, *direct acceptance* was the second preferred strategy across the three situations. This conforms to the study conducted by Al-Khatib (2006), who examines politeness strategies and socio-pragmatic features employed by Jordanians when inviting, declining, and accepting invitations.

However, Iraqi Arab EFL learners show different style in their tendency for some specific politeness strategies according the different social distance of the interlocutors. They employ *solidarity* as the third favoured strategy to show more closeness and harmony when accepting invitations from close higher-status interlocutor indicating the reinforcement of the close relation through this strategy. Other dominant strategies were *checking, expressing redness, promising to attend, and promising*. In the familiar social distance situation, *well-wishing* was the third favoured strategy followed by *expressing readiness,* and *compliment*. While in accepting invitations from distant hinger-status interlocutor, the third frequent strategy was *compliment* followed by *well-wishing, positive opinion,* and *honorifics*.

Importantly, Iraqi Arab EFL use more *honorifics* in accepting invitations form distant higher-status interlocutor to avoid offense and show more respect and formality. That is, when the relationships are intimate and familiar among interlocutors, the use honorifics as a formal marker of deference is reduced or become less necessary. This fact is confirmed when Iraqi Arab EFL learners reduced their use of *honorifics* when accepting invitations made by a familiar higher-status interlocutor, and entirely never employed when accepting invitations from a close higher-status interlocutor.

Some strategies including *promising to attend, contribution, giving reason for acceptance, praying,* and *honorifics* employed by Arab Iraqi Arab EFL learners were not used in Fan Zhu's (2012) classification or any other reviewed studies. However, strategies *such as compliment, acceptance intensifier, reciprocate, counter invitation,* and *lacking necessity* employed by Arab Iraqi Arab EFL learners were used in the reviewed study of Pinto's (2002) study; however, they were not included in Fan Zhu's (2012) classification. Additionally, *postponement* which was included in Fan Zhu (2012), was not used by Iraqi Arab EFL learners at all.

Finally, despite the importance of findings of this study, its findings cannot be generalized since many factors including gender, formality, age, and region have not been included. They may influence the learners' choices of the politeness strategies employed in accepting invitations. Therefore, future studies are suggested to consternate on such cultural and demographic

variables to offer broader understanding on how such speech act performed in relation to these variables.

7. Limitations, Suggestions, and Pedagogical Implications

This study has some key limitations. First, it is limited to the investigation of the speech act of accepting invitations among Iraqi Arab EFL learners. However, the realization of this speech acts is perceived differently by people who have different social and cultural norms. Second, the focus is on one level of social status, i.e., higher status, excluding equal and lower levels. Moreover, social variables such as weight of accepting invitations, region, gender, formality, and age have not been included in this study. These variables of significant and great influence on peoples' performance when accepting invitations, specifically when those people speak different languages, and belong to different cultures and societies. Therefore, the focus of future studies should be on such effective and important social variables. Third, this study limited to WDCT in collecting data. Consequently, the use of other instruments for collecting real-life natural data such as role play or real-life conversations or interviews could help in understanding how accepting invitations are perceived and realized in real-world contexts. This study may have some beneficial pedagogical implications, particularly for teaching invitation acceptance speech act. Iraqi EFL Educators, based on the findings of this study, could provide pragmatic instruction on how to successfully and appropriately perform accepting speech act of invitations in English. This could be achieved depending not only on the grammatical structure of expressing this speech act, but also on emphasizing the influence of the social and culture norms of the target language, and how people perceived this speech acts in their native language, i.e., English. Employing examples of real-life conversational situations or role-play scenarios when accepting invitations at classrooms develop the pragmatic competence of Iraqi Arab EFF learners. To increase the pragmatic awareness of learners of English as a second or foreign language, it is suggested that they should be exposed to educational videos that reflects diverse and authentic examples of accepting invitations in various communication events in real-life world focusing on both grammatical rules and social and cultural norms of native language, consequently, reinforcing their ability to perform speech acts, particularly invitation acceptance, in a proper and successful approach. Thereby, this reduces any misunderstanding in any possible interactions with native speakers of English.

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Appendix 1

Modified Categorization of Strategies Proposed by Fan Zhu (2012)
Head acts
1. Direct
1.   Direct Acceptance: "Yes, I'll definitely be there!"
2.   Promising to Attend: I promise to come"
3.   Expressing Readiness: "I'm on standby, ready to go"
4.   Acceptance Intensifier: "Definitely!"
2. Indirect
5.   Suggestion: "Why don't we meet a bit earlier?"
6.   Joke: "Only if there's cake! Haha, just kidding, I'll be there."
7.   Future Reference: "Looking forward to seeing you there."
8.   Postponement: "Let me check my calendar and get back to you."
9.   Idiom: "Only the stingy can disappoint the generous"
10. Availability: " I'm free on Saturday."
Supportive moves
11. Checking: "What time should I be there?"
12. Acknowledgment: "That's lovely of you to invite me"
13. Positive opinion: "That's a wonderful idea!"
14. Gratitude: "Thank you so much for the invitation!"
15. Concerns: "I hope I won't be too much trouble"
16. Offer/: "Let me know if I can help with anything"
17. Contribution: "I'll bring the cake"
18. Well-Wishing: "Wishing you all the best for the celebration, I'll be there!"
19. Solidarity: "It's always great to spend time with you all!"
20. Reciprocate: "Next time lunch is on me."
21. Counter Invitation: "Let me pay for the drinks at the party."
22. Lacking necessity: " You really didn't have to"
23. Compliment: "You are a very generous and kind person"
24. Giving a reason for acceptance: "I've really been wanting to try that restaurant!"
25. Praying: "May God bless you for this invitation!"
26. Honorifics: "doctor", "professors"
27-Conditional acceptance: "I will come if I finish my work"