Native speakers' assessment of (im)politeness of non-native speakers' requests

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Abstract

Inter-language pragmatics (ILP) and politeness have long been of considerable significance in language learning research. The present study investigated the notion of polite and impolite requests among Iranian EFL learners. The participants, 30 MA students of English, responded to a discourse completion task (DCT) realizing the speech act of request and the utterances were analyzed in three phases. First, the request strategies and politeness strategies were identified based on Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper's (1989b) taxonomy of request strategies and Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, respectively. Next, a sample of 149 request utterances were evaluated by two native English speakers in terms of politeness on a three-point politeness Likert scale as such: 1)Polite, 2)Partially polite and 3)Impolite. Finally, the request utterances were qualitatively analyzed. The results of the first phase indicated that the most frequent request strategies were mood-derivable, query-preparatory and strong hints and the most frequent politeness strategies negative and positive politeness. The native speakers' evaluation showed that only 21.5% (32 utterances) of the requests were rated as polite with partially polite and impolite request constituting 58% and 20.5%, respectively. The findings also demonstrated that there are both conformities to and deviations from the native speaker norms in the realization of the speech act of request by Iranian EFL learners. The study highlighted the need for instructional intervention in pragmatics in classroom settings. Furthermore, the results showed that there are serious potential of breakdowns in Iranian EFL learners' intercultural communication, hence the need for explicit teaching of pragmatics.

Keywords: impoliteness; inter-language pragmatics; native speaker evaluation; politeness; request

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1. Introduction

To one degree or another, politeness sounds a bit of an elusive term to define. Yule (1999, p. 134) highlighted this by stating the various ways in which one can think of being polite: "being tactful, modest and nice to other people" and what it means to be so. Verschueren (2003) defined politeness as "the strategies employed by language users to protect their own and their addressee's face" (p. 51). This definition obviously stresses the importance of face, the concept that is deemed to be central to the notion of politeness. Politeness is among those topics that fall under the rubric of pragmatics proper (Brinton, 2003) and is concerned with the concept of face, with damage or threat to face caused by some acts, and with the linguistic strategies employed to limit such unavoidable damage (Trappes-Lomax, 2004). What receives the most attention in the theories of politeness, as Trappes-Lomax illustrates, is "the mutual establishment and maintenance of rapport (the avoidance of threats to face)" (p. 143). Politeness forms are among the factors believed to be influential in maintaining social harmony in relationships (Olshtain & Celce-Murcia, 2003).

Politeness is a problematic notion to define which explains why there have been various perspectives on this concept. Accoding to Fraser (1990), four perspectives have been adopted with regard to politeness (Wagner, 1999): a) the conversational-contract view, b) the conversational-maxim view, c) the social-norm view and d) the face-saving view. In this regard, Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory belongs to the face-saving view in which preserving face, defined as the person's public self-image, is of central significance. Face is composed of two basic wants: the want of being approved of by other individuals the fulfilment of which appeals to the positive face or and the want of having one's thoughts and actions unimpeded by other individuals which relates negative face. Interlocutors are required to preserve or to save each other's face. Otherwise, they will in all probability sound impolite and rude or simply lacking in manners! According to this theory, individuals are required to adhere to the politeness conventions by minimizing the threat posed by the face-threatening acts (FTA), like apology, complaint and so forth, to the addressee's or speaker's face, whether negative or positive. Brown and Levinson postulated that all speech acts are face-threatening, either to H's or S's face (Terkourafi, 2004). The weightiness (W) of an FTA is assessed by use of a specific formula proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) involving three essential components: power (P), social distance (D) and the rating of the imposition (Rx) (Harris, 2007):

$$Wx = D (S, H) + P (H, S) + Rx$$
$$(S = speaker, H = hearer)$$

In this formula, P refers to the power that the hearer has over the speaker. For instance, necessarily a boss has more power relative to a worker and so does a university professor relative to a student. D relates to the distance that the interlocutors maintain from each other which can range from very high as in two strangers to very low as in two close friends. Rx refers to " the culturally and situationally specified ranking of the imposition entailed by FTAx" (Terkourafi, 2004, p. 119). These factors determine the seriousness or weightiness of an FTA and consequently the level of politeness involved. The more serious an FTA is and the more its weightiness, the higher level of the linguistic mitigation should be.

Harris (2007) argued that the relationship between politeness and power is a significantly challenging issue surrounding Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. Therefore, it sounds reasonable to maintain that to be pragmatically competent in terms of polite behavior the EFL learner should possess a full understanding of the dynamics of the power relationships among the interlocutors. According to Harris, very few studies have attempted to address the relationship between politeness and power. The present study is motivated by the paucity of research studies in this respect. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), politeness is a universal

notion and has underlying universals of usage that can be applied to different cultures (Levinson, 1997). They proposed five politeness strategies for dealing with FTAs as shown in Figure 1 below (Ogiermann, 2009, p. 12):
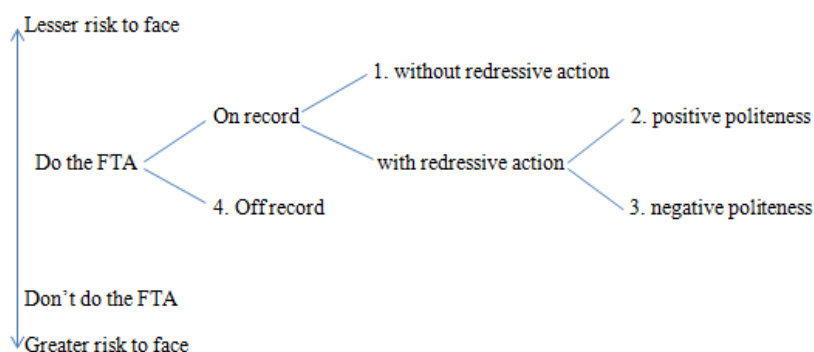

Figure 1. The Extent of Risk of the Politeness Strategies

It is worth noting that these strategies pose different degrees of risk to S's or H's face. In this figure the politeness strategies are numbered according to their amount of face-redress that is necessary for the face-threatening act to sound polite (Ogiermann, 2009). Other things being equal, therefore, the least polite politeness strategy is 'bald on record' and the most polite 'Do not do FTA'.

1.1 Background

Ellis (2012) defines requests as "attempts on the part of the speaker to get the hearer to perform or to stop performing some kind of action in the interests of the speaker" (p. 172). According to Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989b), requests are 'inherently imposing' and performing them requires considerable 'face-work' and subsequently a high level of sociolinguistic competence (Ellis, 2012). Therefore, L2 learners' ability to distinguish between polite and less polite or impolite requests has remained a major focus of inquiry (Ellis, 2012). Research has also confirmed that advanced learners have few problems identifying and employing polite requests. A number of request strategies have been identified in the SLA literature. Table 1 below provides the taxonomy of request strategies as outlined by Blum-Kulka, et al. (as cited in Ellis, 2012, p. 173).

Table 1

Taxonomy of Request Strategies

Level of directness	Strategy	Semantic formulas
Direct	1 Mood-derivable	You shut up.
	2 Performative	I am telling you to shut up.
	3 Hedged performative	I would like to ask you to shut up.
	4 Locution-derivable	I want you to shut up.
Conventionally indirect	5 Suggestory formula	Let's play a game.
	6 Query-preparatory	Can you draw a horse for me?
Non-conventionally indirect	7 Strong hint	This game is boring.
	8 Mild hint	We've been playing this game for over an hour.

Requests have received particular attention in the SLA research because of their importance in social life, the threat they expose and so forth. Blum-Kulka (1987) investigated the relationship between indirectness and politeness. The findings of this study were astounding: politeness cannot be achieved by adherence to either total indirectness or directness but it can be achieved through a balance of these two. Blum-Kulka argued that in the case of requests, politeness can be obtained by employing conventional indirectness. The way native speakers of English acquire the pragmatics of other foreign languages has occupied a large area of research too. Byon (2004) scrutinized the requests of fifty females American learners of Korean as a foreign language. His findings gave strong evidence to pragmatic transfer and the Americans' perception of Korean as a hierarchical system

Materials used in pragmatics teaching have also been an area of enquiry. As an investigation of the degree of authenticity in the input presented to EFL learners, Guerra and Flor (2003) compared the use of request strategies in films and EFL textbooks. They stated that a lack of pragmatic competence can be attributed to the fact that EFL learners are not exposed to authentic materials, leading to the learners' inadequate pragmatic competence in the target language. The problem was that the requests were found to be decontextualized and thus pragmatically inappropriate. These findings are in line with those of another study of the evaluation of four coursebooks in Turkey in terms of appropriacy which lent evidence to the lack of appropriate pragmatic presentation in the materials (Delen & Tavil, 2010). In a more recent study, Alemi and Razzaghi (2013) investigated politeness markers in ESP business textbooks. They found that the intended textbook contained inadequate politeness markers and was liable to pose the ESP students to "serious difficulties in developing a comprehensive communicative competence in the business setting" (p. 109).

The study of 9 Saudi female students communicating with their male professors online showed that in this asymmetrical power relationship the students relied on negative politeness in address terms and positive politeness in requests (Bulut & Rabab'ah, 2007). The study of politeness in request has also attracted the researchers' attention. Alfattah's (2009) study of politeness in the request strategies of Yemeni EFL learners indicated that, apart from the fact that they relied on the strategies of query-preparatory, mood-derivable and want/need statements to request, politeness markers like please, sorry, pardon and excuse me accompanied the requests. The external modifications that the requests of Spanish EFL learners undergo were studied by Martínez-Flor (2009). She scrutinized the role of 'please' used by Spanish learners as a mitigating device to redress requests. The findings indicated that they used this device only at the end of the request move which, Martínez-Flor suggested, can be changed by exposing the learners to rich sources of pragmatic input such as film scenes. In another study of Arabic learners, Al-Marrani and Sazalie (2010) investigated female Yemeni learners' polite request strategies to fathom out that direct and conventionally indirect request strategies were mostly realized by use of mood derivable and want statements and query preparatory, respectively.

Alaoui (2011) examined the realization of the politeness principle in English and Moroccan Arabic in the speech acts of requests, offers and thanks. Her study revealed that while politeness is realized mainly through lexical downgraders in Moroccan Arabic, it is displayed in English by use of syntactic downgraders. In a more recent comparative study, the request strategies of Libyan and Malay postgraduate students were examined to reveal that there were cross-cultural differences in the use of request strategies and the internal as well as external modifications of requests (Youssef, 2012). In a comparative cross-cultural study, the request strategies of 96 Iranian EFL learners were compared with those of 10 Australian native speakers of English. The results demonstrated that while native speakers were balanced in their use of direct or indirect request strategies, Iranian EFL learners with lower linguistic proficiency overused direct strategies and underused the indirect ones and those with higher linguistic proficiency overused indirect strategies and underused the direct ones (Jalilifar, Hashemian & Tabatabaee, 2011). Ahangari and Shoghli's (2011) investigation of request strategies in a comparative study of Iranian EFL learners and Canadians demonstrated that both groups used conventionally indirect strategies realized through query-preparatory. Iranian EFL learners displayed overuse of indirect strategies, though.

The present study focused on the sociolinguistic development of Iranian EFL learners in request by scrutinizing the extent to which request strategies are polite using native speakers' assessment as the point of departure. Therefore, the study is innovative in its use of native speaker assessment as the criterion, accompanied by rich qualitative analysis, to base the request utterances on. Investigating the politeness realizations can be of significance importance in predicting the difficulties with which language learners will most probably be faced and therefore will enable language teachers to eliminate these pragmatic difficulties that impede intercultural communication.

1.2 Research questions

The study therefore attempts to find answers to the following research questions:

➢ Q1: What are the request strategies and politeness strategies used the most frequently by Iranian EFL learners in request?
➢ Q2: Is there any significant difference between male and female Iranian EFL learners in the use of request strategies and politeness strategies in request?
➢ Q3: How do the native English speakers perceive Iranian EFL learners' request utterances on the three-point Likert scale of politeness?
➢ Q4: What are the elements of politeness and impoliteness in the way Iranian EFL learners try to perform the speech act in question?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The sample of the study consisted of 30 post-graduate students of English, 15 females and 15 males. The participants all majored in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), either students of MA or holders of MA in TEFL, and their age ranged from 23 to 31. Since MA Examination held in Iran includes various parts like grammar, vocabulary, reading and cloze test and the students pass advanced writing course in both BA and MA tertiary levels, the participants were supposed to have attained a high level of academic proficiency. Furthermore, almost all of them comprised of teachers of English in various language institutes, public or private, with various years of teaching experience from 2 to 10 years. Therefore, they were supposed to have been exposed to the English language, and subsequently to the English culture, fully enough to be able to function in the target culture. It is worth mentioning that almost all of the participants came from the same language background with Persian being their first language.

2.2 Instruments

Discourse Completion Task (DCT)

Research on the L2 pragmatic aspects of language in general and politeness in particular has witnessed an extensive use of Discourse Completion Tasks (DCT), along with other methods of data collection (Al-Qahtani, 2009; Kasper & Dahl, 1991). As one of the most frequently used data collection instruments, DCTs have numerous advantages. DCTs have been the dominant tool of data collection in research on the pragmatic abilities, particularly in eliciting data when such commonly studied speech acts as requests and apologies have been concerned (Chaudron, 2005). In addition to the fact that DCTs are easy to administer, manipulating factors like age differences and status differences between interlocutors is also feasible (Mackey & Gass, 2005).

The DCT employed for the present study was adopted from Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984). It consisted of 6 situations for the three power status levels of high, low and equal, Table 2 summarizes the information on the situations of the DCT. The present DCT, or modified versions of it, had already been employed in numerous previous studies and had proved a useful data collection tool in this regard.

Table 2

The Variables Underlying the Construction of Request Situations

No.	Situations	Power
1	Asking one's test score	(-P) Low-High
2	Borrowing lecture notes	(=P) Equals
3	Cleaning up the pantry	(=P) Equals
4	Asking the time	(+P) High-Low
5	Borrowing a reference book	(-P) Low-High
6	Borrowing a pen	(+P) High-Low

Inter-rater reliability

"To make valid inferences from the text, it is important that the classification procedure be reliable in the sense of being consistent: different people should code the same text in the same way" (Weber cited in Al-Qahtani, 2009, p. 84). The process of data analysis in this study included an evaluation of the participants' responses by two native English speakers who rated the responses on a three-point Likert scale of politeness as such: 1) Polite, 2) Partially polite or 3) Impolite. The total number of request utterances was 180, 148 of which were presented to two native speakers for assessment. This sample constituted 82.2% of the total number of the request utterances, hence the adequacy of the sample. The assessment by the native speakers indicated an average agreement of %82. Reasonably a perfectly reliable Inter-rater coding will be 1 while a totally unreliable coding approaches 0. An inter-rater reliability of 82%, presented in Table 3, is therefore considered high. Another point that needs to be raised is the fact that the native speakers did not need to be experts in any specialized field such as applied linguistics or pragmatics because what was required was an understanding of the social norms, patterns and etiquette of the English culture not specialized knowledge in a specialized discipline.

Table 3

Pearson Correlation of Native Speaker Assessment

		Rater1	Rater2
	Pearson Correlation	1	.818**
Rater1	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	149	149
	Pearson Correlation	.818**	1
Rater2	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	149	149

Note. **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

2.3 Procedure and data analysis

Having been collected, the data were analyzed according to the taxonomy of request strategies. Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory was utilized so that the researcher could code the politeness strategies employed in the data. Descriptive statistics are commonly used in speech act research and were thus utilized in this study. Chi-square analysis, using the SPSS, was used to explore if there was any significant relationship between gender and the use of request strategies and politeness strategies in request.

3. Results

3.1 Findings of the study

The current study aimed at investigating the degree of politeness of Iranian EFL learners' request strategies by means of NS evaluation. To better clarify the results, the request strategies are first presented followed by the frequency counts of politeness strategies, both of which were addressed in the first research question, and finally by the NS assessment and a qualitative discussion of the request utterances drawing on the previous studies. Table 4 summarizes the request strategies employed by the participants.

Table 4 shows that the first three most frequently used request strategies by the participants are mood-derivable, encoded mainly in the form of imperative, query-preparatory and strong hints. Males used 33 request strategies and females 28, accounting for 52.4% and 45.9%, respectively. Both genders used the same types of strategies except for two strategies, 'Suggestory formula' and 'mild hint', the first of which was used only by females and the second only by males. Two strategies were not employed by either gender: 'performative' and 'hedged performative'. In this part, the frequency counts of the politeness strategies employed in the data by the participants across power and gender are presented.

Table 4

Raw Frequency and Percentage of Request Strategies across Gender

Level of directness	Request strategy	Group				Total	
		Male		Female			
		No.	Percent	No.	Percent	No.	Percent
Direct	1 Mood-derivable	13	21.3	9	14.7	22	36.1
	2 Performative	0	0	0	0	0	0
	3 Hedged performative	0	0	0	0	0	0
	4 Locution-derivable	1	1.6	0	0	1	1.6
Conventionally indirect	5 Suggestory formula	0	0	3	4.9	3	4.9
	6 Query-preparatory	8	13.1	8	13.1	16	26.2
Non-conventionally indirect	7 Strong hint	8	13.1	8	13.1	16	26.2
	8 Mild hint	3	4.9	0	0	3	4.9
Total		33	52.4	28	45.9	61	100

Table 5

Frequency of Politeness Strategies across Power Status and Gender in Request

Power	BOR		PSP		NGP		OFR		Do not do FTA	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
-P (S>H; Sit # 1 & 5)	0	0	2	15	60	56	0	2	0	0
=P (S=H; Sit # 2 & 3)	2	1	13	18	24	28	8	5	0	0
+P (S<H; Sit # 4 & 6)	2	0	5	11	22	25	1	0	0	0
Total	4	1	20	44	106	109	9	7	0	0

Note. Sit= Situation; M= Male; F= Female; BOR: bald on record; PSP: positive politeness; NGP: negative politeness; OFR: off record.

As can be seen in Table 5, 300 politeness strategies were used in total. The most frequent strategy was negative politeness (71.7%). Following negative politeness came positive politeness strategy (21.3%). Finally, bald on record and off record politeness strategies accounted for 1.7% and 5.3% of the total number of politeness strategies whereas do not do FTA was not used at all. Concerning gender, males' and females' total politeness strategy use distributions were 139 (46.3%) and 161 (53.7%), respectively. Normally, both males and females favored negative politeness. Furthermore, while males employed bald on record politeness more than females did, females utilized positive politeness more than males.

An important point is that raised by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) regarding the perspective in which a request can be realized. They stated that the realizations of requests can include references to the requestor ('I' the speaker) the requestee ('you' the hearer) or the action that is to be performed. The requesters have a variety of ways to choose the request perspective from. The difference between '*Could I …*' and '*Could you …*' lies in their perspectives: the former is 'speaker oriented' and emphasizes the role of the speaker while the latter is 'hearer oriented' and stresses the role of the addressee. The two other request perspectives are 'speaker and hearer oriented' and 'Impersonal' as exemplified in '*Could we please end this game?*' and '*Is it possible to end this game*', respectively. Request perspective analysis results in this regard are presented in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2 indicates that Iranian EFL learners rely mainly on the hearer oriented perspective to make a request (52%). Following this perspective, speaker oriented and impersonal, accounting for 28% and 18.8% of the total perspectives, are the most frequent perspectives employed. Finally, speaker-hearer oriented perspectives perspective was used only in 1.1% of the occasions.
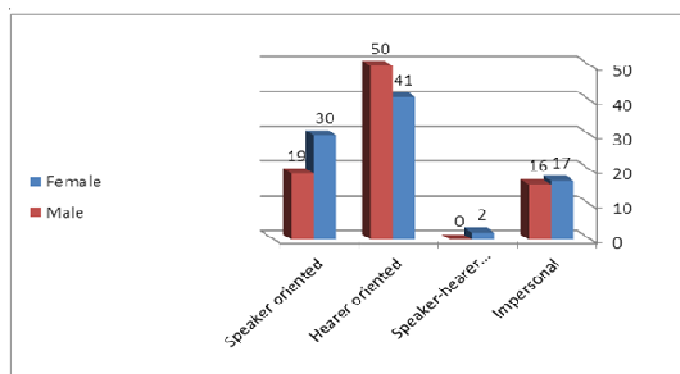
Figure 2. Frequency of Request Perspectives across Gender

The role of gender in the use of request strategies and politeness strategies in request, examined in the second research question, was also explored in this study. A chi-square analysis, shown in Table 6, was run which showed no significant difference between males and females in their use of request strategies, $X^2 (5, 61) = 7.367$, $p= .195$.

Table 6

Chi-square Analysis of the Role of Gender in the Use of Request Strategies

Value	df	Sig.
Chi-square	5	.19

Note. N= 61   *p*< .05   Critical Value: 11.07

Unlike the use of request strategies, the chi-square analysis demonstrated that gender had a significant effect on the use of politeness strategies by the participants when requesting ($X^2 (3, 300) = 9.53$, $p= .023$).

Table 7

Chi-square Analysis of the Role of Gender in the Use of Politeness Strategies in Request

Value	df	Sig.
Chi-square	3	.023

Note. N= 300   *p*< .05   Critical Value: 7.81

Native speakers' evaluation of request utterances in terms of politeness was another aspect of the study which was examined in the third research question. The number of the request utterances totaled 180. A number of 149 utterances were selected for native speaker assessment of politeness on a three-point Likert scale of politeness. The results are offered in Figure 3. As shown in this figure, the assessment indicated that (32) 21.5% of the requests were rated as polite. Partially polite and impolite requests constituted 87 (58.4%) and 30 (20.1%) utterances, respectively.
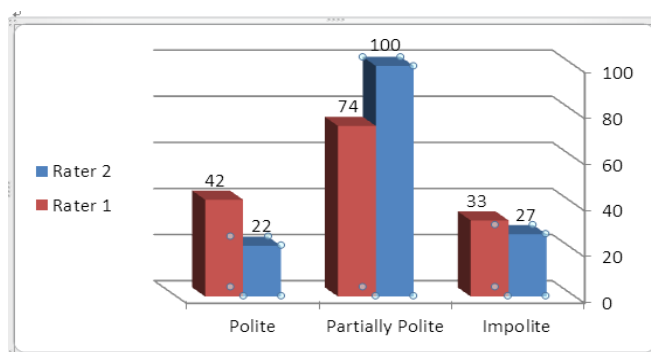

Figure 3. NSs' Assessment of the Degree of Politeness of the Request Utterances (N=149)

4. Discussion

4.1 Use of Request Strategies and Politeness Strategies

A request functions as a linguistic device to get someone do or stop doing something. Requesting requires that EFL learners be highly pragmatically competent to be able to avoid pragmatic failure. Requesting is classified into the speech act category of directives (Schmidt & Richards, 1980). Table 4 summarized the results of request strategy use. It is obvious that the participants have followed certain patterns and structures to realize the speech act of request. The first three most frequent request strategies were *mood-derivable*, *query-preparatory* and *strong hints*. The roots of these forms of requests, particularly mood-derivable and query-preparatory in which such structures as 'Could/Can I …', 'Could/Can you …' and imperatives were used extensively, can be easily traced back to the high school textbooks of English domestically produced in Iran and taught nationwide. These textbooks contain a large number of such structures especially in the beginning stages of English language teaching. These findings are in line with Byon (2004), Alfattah (2009), Al-Marrani and Sazalie (2010), Ahangari and Shoghli (2011), Jalilifar (2009) and Jalilifar *et al*. (2011).

The findings are, nevertheless, partly inconsistent with Al-Marrani and Sazalie (2010) and Ahangari and Shoghli (2011) in that Yemeni EFL learners of the former study and Iranian EFL learners of the latter study and did not use strong hints at all. The analysis of the directness level of the request strategies showed that over 60 per cent of the requests were indirect. This finding is a fortunate sign of pragmatic development among Iranian EFL learners. Werkhofer (2005, p. 163) noted, both those requests that are expressed in the form of commands and those in the form of indirect requests are identical in 'illocutionary force', the act of requesting, providing the following examples, of which the first is most likely to cause threat to H's face while the second is likely to be deemed polite by H:

(1) Pass me the salt.
(2) Can you pass me the salt?

As a result, since the majority of the requests by the participants were indirect, either conventionally indirect or non-conventionally indirect, one can argue that Iranian EFL learners are paragmalinguistically competent but this does not suffice as they should also be socio-pragmatically able to use those strategies on appropriate occasions. Fitzer (2007) also stated that indirect questions used to realize requests are more appropriate in the Anglo-American context.

The results of the politeness strategy use in request with relative power in focus were summarized in Table 5. Negative politeness strategies were the most frequent strategy employed with positive politeness strategies coming second. The findings of this study are not in line with those of Bulut and Rabab'ah (2007) who investigated how Saudi females interacted with their lecturers. They found that positive politeness strategies were employed most frequently with negative politeness strategies coming second. Concerning the use of positive politeness strategies, it was found that these were employed between equal interlocutors, suggesting that equal interlocutors wish more to increase solidarity and eschew power.

Consistent with Alfattah (2009), the results demonstrated that males and females did not differ considerably with regard to their use of negative politeness strategies. Females, however, as was the case with apologies, tended to employ more strategies that preserved the interlocutor's positive face by approving of the interlocutor. The participants also did not opt for Do not do FTA strategy, reflecting their tendency towards communication by performing the request. Viewed from this aspect, the results support those of Alfattah (2009) whose data indicated that opting for not doing the speech act was also favored among Yemeni EFL learners although very minimally. On the contrary, Iranian EFL learners may have perceived this strategy as an extremely impolite one that has to be avoided at all costs.

4.2 Qualitative Analysis of (Im)politeness of Request Strategies

In this part, examples of polite and impolite requests as rated by the native speakers are provided and qualitatively analyzed in detail.

Sit # 1 (+P; Speaker < Hearer)

You want to ask your Professor what your test score is

Polite requests

1. Female speaker: *I would be truly grateful if you could let me know my test score.*

2. Female speaker: *I wonder whether you could do me a favor. I'm really anxious about my mark and I would really appreciate it if you could possibly inform me about it.*

3. Female speaker: *Sorry sir. May I ask my test score?*

4. Male speaker: *Would you please tell me my score if possible?*

5. Male speaker: *Excuse me for taking your time. I wanted to know what my score is.*

6. Male speaker: *Excuse me sir. I was wondering if you could tell me about my score.*

One of the strategies of negative politeness is hedging defined as "a linguistic avoidance of full commitment or precision" (Bloor & Bloor, 2007, p. 103). In examples 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6 above, the speakers have removed much of the force of the requests by use of hedges such as *I would*, *possibly*, *if possible*, *may*, *could*, etc. In the first example, the speaker has provided a relatively long introduction on her request to soften its force. The use of the modal *could* and *would* in examples 1, 2, 4 and 6 makes it clear to H that his/her freedom of action is not limited and that s/he can choose not to comply with the request. According to Holmes (2003), the speaker's use of hedged syntactic structure in 2 has softened the face-threatening dimension of the request to a large extent. In addition, by using the honorific *Sir* in examples 3 and 6 the speaker has not only shown deference to S but also has maintained the social distance with the university professor who has more relative power compared to H.

Levinson (1997) deemed such requests polite since they have been accompanied by what have been labeled mitigators or arbitrary politeness markers. In addition, examples 2, 3, 5 and 6 brim with another feature: they contain pre-requests, here in the form of apologies (examples 3, 5 and 6), which have served as preludes to the requests. Apologizing is a negative politeness strategy threatening S's negative face. For instance, S expresses regret in 3 and requests forgiveness in 5 and 6. According to Allami and Naeimi (2011), the participants have clearly followed the norms of their L1 (Persian) and their first culture by apologizing prior to requesting, hence the occurrence of pragmatic transfer in these requests. In 5 S has admitted the impingement (here, taking H's time) as well. The fact that the requests in some of these examples (1, 2 and 6) have been made using conditional sentences can be taken as a negative politeness strategy, too. Levinson (1997) declares that different degrees of respect can be expressed by choosing certain expressions; Of the following examples, B, compared with A, is more polite because of the use of hedging, a negative politeness strategy:

A) I want to see you for a moment

B) I wondered if I could possibly see you for a moment (p. 43).

Obviously, B's utterance minimizes the threat to the hearer's face to a considerable degree by being indirect, a feature of polite requests. The indirectness and hedging in this utterance serve as linguistic devices employed to mitigate the threat of the request. On the contrary, A's request is much more direct than B's and will presumably run the risk of being interpreted as an impolite request. In conclusion, all the requests above have been accompanied by different strategies of negative politeness including hedging and apologizing. The use of

negative politeness in the requests is not consistent with Bulut and Rabab'ah's (2007) results who found that Saudi students tended to use positive politeness strategies when requesting. However, the use of negative politeness in address terms of the requests above is in keeping with their findings.

Impolite requests

1. Female speaker: *Excuse me sir, did you correct the papers? Would you please tell me what score I get? When are you going to return the papers sir?*

2. Female speaker: *Excuse me! Did you correct our papers?*

3. Female speaker: *How was my score?*

4. Male speaker: *What about the results, sir?*

5. Male speaker: *Could you tell me what my mark is?*

6. Male speaker: *Excuse me, sir! I wonder if you have checked my paper yet.*

In request 1, S has violated the maxim of quantity to a high degree in that the request is considerably verbose. In request 2, although the speaker, in an attempt to minimize the imposition of the request, has apologized at the beginning of her request, the fact that the request has been uttered too indirectly makes it impolite in the eyes of the hearer. Requests 3, 4 and 5 all lack what Levinson (1997) termed *pre-requests*. In requesting, the speaker can, or had better, provide a prelude to the request serving as a turn-taking strategy. Levinson's (p. 358) own example of pre- request is as follows:

A: Hullo I was wondering whether you were intending to go to Popper's talk this afternoon

B: Not today I'm afraid I can't really make it to this one

A: Ah okay

B: You wanted me to record it didn't you heh!

A: Yeah heheh

B: Heheh no I'm sorry about that, …

Regarding request 6, the point that is worth consideration is the fact that most people, when receiving a request, listen for the word 'please' which is "the most obvious example of a politeness marker in English" (Alemi & Razzaghi, 2013, p. 113). 'Please' is a keyword trigger for submission. Also, the receiver of the request will subconsciously listen to the inquisitor to see if he/she is being presumptuous in his/her question. A common feature in almost all the *impolite* requests above is the lack of use of such mitigators as 'please'. Furthermore, requests that were uttered in the form of yes/no questions were deemed more polite by the native speakers than requests in which the speaker had assumed that the hearer will comply with the request. For example, of the following requests, A's request was considered to be polite and B's impolite:

A. *Excuse me sir. I was wondering if you could tell me about my score.*

B. *Excuse me sir, how was my performance?*

Sit # 4 (+P; Speaker > Hearer)

You are a teacher and you ask a student sitting at the front the time.

Polite requests

In this situation, 4, where S was superior to H all the responses were rated as either partially polite or impolite by the native speakers. Some of these responses included:

1. Female speaker: *What's the time?*

2. Female speaker: *Dear, what time is it?*

3. Female speaker: *Can I have the time?*

4. Male speaker: *Can you tell me the time?*

5. Male speaker: *What time is it?*

6. Male speaker: *Dear Ali! Do you have a watch?*

Almost all of the above requests have in common the feature that they lack a prelude to the request, for instance in the form of an apology (Sorry), an establishment of common ground (for example, use of first names), etc. Despite this shortcoming, they are not fairly impolite since they have been redressed in one way or another. First, all of these responses are indirect. The speakers have employed indirect questions in all the requests, a hint in 6 and a speaker oriented perspective in 3. These have served as politeness strategies in these responses. A politeness marker absent from these request utterances is 'please', resulting in the raters assessing these requests not as polite but partially polite.

Impolite requests

1. Female speaker: [I won't say anything. Just pointing to my wrist or his wrist watch and try to have nonverbal communication.]

2. Male speaker: *Tell me the time!*

The nonverbal communication in 1 is inappropriate here as it might imply to the addressee that the request is not even worth verbalization. The request for time in 2 has been made using a bald on record strategy with no redress. The use of imperatives in requests is considered impolite in English (Schiffrin, 2005). On that account, the male speaker's request in 2 which is clearly curt is downright impolite and obviously inappropriate. In fact, as Ige (2007) argued, this request resembles more a 'command' than a request.

Sit # 6 (+P; Speaker > Hearer)

You are a teacher and you want to borrow a pen from a student.

Polite requests

1. Female speaker: *Would you please give me your pen?*

2. Female speaker: *Would you please give me your pen a moment?*

3. Female speaker: *Dear, give me your pen please!*

4. Female speaker: *Sara, give me a pen, please.*

5. Male speaker: *Could you give me a pen, please?*

6. Male speaker: *Can you give me your pen please? I want to write a note.*

7. Male speaker: *May I borrow your pen please?*

The common feature of all the above requests is the use of the downgrader please. As a recent phenomenon in English, please have been closely associated with polite requests (Wichmann, 2004). Although this politeness marker can occur as a formulaic response, in the above examples the speakers have employed it as a mitigator to soften the inherent force of the requests. In the above examples, the use of please is particularly useful in requests that have been performed using the imperative form since requests expressed in the interrogative form already possess other politeness markers such as modals (here would, could, can, may) which are negative politeness markers. These subjunctives express S's pessimism about H's ability or willingness to comply with the request and consequently give H freedom of action. The indirectness of these requests has added to their degree of politeness. In conclusion, please removes the constraint imposed on the hearer's negative face and thus is a necessary politeness marker in requests. Another feature of the above requests is the use of in-group markers (dear and first name, Sara, in examples 3 and 4) which appeal to H's positive face. Furthermore, examples 1, 2, 5, 6 and 7 are of the conventionally indirect type (here query preparatory) which is the least indirect request strategy, hence the politeness of these requests (Lin, 2009). Also, according to Fetzer (2007), such indirect questions are more appropriate in the Anglo-American context.

Furthermore, in 2, S has minimized the imposition (asking for a pen) by use of the phrase 'a moment'. This is a negative politeness strategy, too. In general, the above requests are polite since the powerful interlocutors (the speakers) have employed polite request strategies appropriately towards the powerless interlocutors (the hearers). The general mood in these requests is that of solidarity and not of power, a fact that has made them sound polite.

Impolite requests

1. Female speaker: *I need a pen.*

3. Female speaker: *A pen please.*

4. Male speaker: *A blue pen please.*

5. Male speaker: *Don't you need the pen? Give it to me.*

6. Male speaker: *Got an extra pen, mate?*

The common feature of the impolite requests above by which the addressees have been accosted is that they are considerably short. Willis (2003) eloquently warns that "In English there is a broad generalisation that longer is politer". Willis exemplifies this generalization in this way:

Open the door.

Please, open the door.

Would you open the door, please.

Please, would you mind opening the door? (p. 19-20).

Willis further stipulates that "Politeness is achieved by the length of the request" (p. 20). Therefore, the impoliteness of the above requests can be adequately accounted for on the basis of their shortness. Another point to be raised about these requests is that they have not been redressed or mitigated by use of mitigating devices.

Sit # 3 (+P; Speaker = Hearer)

You are a student at the hostel and you ask your roommate to clean up the pantry because s/he has left in a mess the night before.

Polite requests

1. Female speaker: *Please clean up the pantry if you can.*

2. Female speaker: *Atena, I'm sorry but don't you think the room is so untidy and needs to be cleaned up? Although It's your turn to clean the room but if you are busy, don't worry I can do it instead of you.*

3. Female speaker: *Because you and I are the only ones living in the room, we need to clean the room ourselves.*

4. Male speaker: *Would you mind please cleaning the mess up?*

5. Male speaker: You know, you have something important to do in the pantry.

In a study of the use of 'please' in Spanish learners' requests, Martínez-Flor (2009) argued that "[…] "*please*" *has been assumed to be the most transparent politeness marker that serves to soften the imposition entailed by the request speech act*" (p. 43). In the same vein, requests 1 and 4 above have been externally modified using the common mitigating device of 'please'. The use of positive politeness strategies such as in-group markers or first name in 2, Athena, establishing and emphasizing commonality as in 3 and use of a hint as in 5 as an off-record politeness strategy are what has made these requests sound polite between the equal interlocutors.

Impolite requests

1. Female speaker: *Don't you want to clean it up? I cannot stay here anymore! It is intolerable!*

2. Female speaker: *Hey dude! Why don't you want to be more organized? What are all these around the room?*

3. Female speaker: *Don't you intend to clean up the mess?*

4. Female speaker: *The pantry is very dirty!!!*

5. Male speaker: *Dude, keeping the room clean is not that hard, is it?*

6. Male speaker: *When do you want to clean the pantry?*

7. Male speaker: *Oh, come on! I can't believe you messed up everything again. Please tidy up the room.*

8. Male speaker: *Hey, you have made a mess! Do the cleaning!*

To elucidate the impoliteness of the above requests we need to reiterate what Blum-Kulka (1987) discussed about polite requests. Blum-Kulka argued that both hints in which off-record politeness is used and direct requests in which bald on record politeness is employed are potential to be perceived as impolite when requesting. Therefore, a balance needs to be achieved by interlocutors. Blum-Kulka believed that it is possible to achieve this balance and consequently politeness in requests by using conventional indirectness. On that account, examples 4, 5 and 8 are impolite because they are hints, adhering to total indirectness. Requests 7 and 8, on the other hand, employ direct strategies which entail bald on record politeness. Regarding requests 1, 2, 3 and 6, possibly the tone of the speaker in these requests has made them sound impolite.

Elements of Politeness and Impoliteness in Request Utterances -

The last research question dealt with the factors that contributed to the politeness and impoliteness in the request utterances of the participants. To sound polite, the participants utilized certain politeness markers, devices, syntactic structures, etc in the semantic formulas they uttered in requesting. One strategy was the use of indirect request instead of direct ones in a way that Overall, 62% of the request utterances were indirect. The influences of high school textbooks were also at work. For instance, in the case of requests, in Iranian English textbooks, which are among the first sources of input that Iranian EFL learners are exposed to, imperatives and structures with '*Can/Could I …?*' abound and interestingly enough, these were found to be overly used by the participants. This shows that textbook designers are required to pay more attention to the pragmatic content of the textbooks. Next, the participants made extensive use of such honorifics *sir*, *madam*, *professor* or in-group markers and first names like *pal*, *mate*, *Atena*, *Ayda*, *Ali*, etc. The use of honorifics serves as a technique that fosters effective communication by preserving the addressee's negative face and creating power through

maximizing the social distance between the interlocutors and in-group markers and first names maintain the addressee's positive face and create solidarity through minimizing the social distance.

The present study also investigated the elements or factors which resulted in the impoliteness of the utterances. One salient feature was the length of the semantic formulae. This was self-evident in the fact that the utterances that were rated as impolite by the native speakers were too short, abrupt and terse or too long and verbose. For instance, consider the following utterances which were rated as impolite.

A) *I do not think it is possible. You'd better learn to depend on yourself. You know, I really care more about your life.*

B) *I can manage it myself.*

The next factor, as the qualitative analysis revealed, was the fact that some essential politeness markers were absent from the participants' impolite utterances particularly when the addressee was a subordinate, that is to say, the participants' responses were most inappropriate when they were superior to the addressee. This can be due to the fact that they transferred their first culture norms to English, resulting in the raters failing to perceive such utterances as impolite or as only partially polite. The following utterances, for example, do not contain any mitigator to soften the FTA:

A) Student to his/her professor: *The book is with Mr. X, he should bring it back to you.*

B) Professor asking a student the time: *Tell me the time!*

C) Professor's refusal to comply with the student's request: *I know what I'm doing.*

Besides, The request perspective analysis, presented in Figure 2, indicated that over half of the request strategies had been realized using the speaker oriented perspective which is potential to make the requests sound impolite, if not impolite downright.

5. Conclusion and implications

The present study investigated the sociolinguistic development of Iranian EFL learners by touching upon the concept of politeness in their requests through native speaker evaluation. The findings demonstrated that Iranian EFL learners rely on positive and negative politeness when requesting. Regarding the appropriacy of language, NS assessment showed that most of the requests could not be labeled 'polite' or 'impolite' but 'partially polite'. The qualitative analysis revealed that the major elements that contributed to the politeness of the requests were: level of directness, use of certain semantic formulas, honorifics and in-group markers and lack of pre-requests.

On the other hand, elements that caused impoliteness were found to be verbosity or shortness of semantic formulas and total absence of politeness markers and mitigators and pre-requests. The results indicated that there existed both conformities to and deviations from native speaker norms in Iranian EFL learners' requestive behavior in English, with the latter being potential to lead to serious breakdowns in intercultural communication.

By examining language appropriacy as well as inappropriacy in social milieu, the study contributes to our understanding of inter-language pragmatics (ILP). It highlights the need for the special attention that needs to be paid to the social aspects of language use in language teaching, a fact that seems to be highly neglected in language classrooms. Lastly, and perhaps more importantly, the results of the study imply that the language learners are expected to adhere to what turned out to be the elements of politeness such as apologizing and admitting impingement prior to requesting and to avoid the elements of impoliteness, for instance, lack of mitigation even where the addressee is of lower status.

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Appendix

Discourse Completion Task for Request

Please read the following **request situations** carefully and reply to them as realistically and honestly as possible. Please imagine that you are one of the interactants. How do you ask or request in the following situations? You can write whatever you think is appropriate.

Age:

Gender: Male ☐ Female ☐

Your native language:

Situation 1: You want to ask your Professor what your test score is.

You: ....

Professor: I'm going to return the papers to you before the lesson ends.

Situation 2: You want to ask your classmate to lend you some (lecture) notes.

You: ....

Your classmate: Sure, but you need to return them to me next week.

Situation 3: You are a student at the hostel and you ask your roommate to clean up the pantry because s/he has left in a mess the night before.

You: ....

Your roommate: I'll be cleaning it up very soon.

Situation 4: You are a teacher and you ask a student sitting at the front the time.

You: ....

Student: Ten past three.

Situation 5: You are a university student and you want to borrow a reference book from a professor.

You: ....

Professor: Sure.

Situation 6: You are a teacher and you want to borrow a pen from a student.

You: ....

Student: Here it is.