Politeness Strategies in Request E-Mails of Iraqi Undergraduate Student

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to identify the politeness strategies employed by Iraqi EFL undergraduate learners in their request emails to their lecturers during their study period in Malaysia. A content and discourse analysis approaches were conducted to quantitatively and qualitatively analyze the data. Emails were analyzed first for the level of directness following the framework proposed by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989). This contributed to assign the types of the politeness strategy used in students’ emails following Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory. The results showed that students used almost a variety of politeness strategies as they used varied levels of directness. Positive politeness strategy was the most prominent as the students mainly expressed their opinion, agreement and disagreement through their requests, which requires positive politeness to save the positive face of the addressee. The findings also showed that Iraqi undergraduate students are mitigating the possible threat to each other’s face by using expressions of positive politeness to show solidarity, like-mindedness and friendship.
1. Introduction:

Communication between lecturers and students had evolved over the years. With the advancement of technologies, various mediums are being used to communicate with one another such as text messages, voicemail messages, and emails. The use of these technologies requires English learners to use English language to communicate their ideas and demands. This is usually made through writing their comments. To communicate more appropriately and effectively, the students/learners should use number of politeness strategies that help them avoid confrontation with others and keep smooth interaction (Rahmani, Rahmany, & Sadeghi 2014).

Politeness can be defined as “the actions taken by competent speakers in a community in order to attend to possible social or interpersonal disturbance” (Meyerhoff, 2011: 85). The notion of politeness is often rooted in one’s culture and it may vary across cultures depending on how a particular society views politeness. Based on Brown and Levinsons' (1987) theory of politeness, anyone has face that can be damaged or preserved. When people interact, they use language that can be a source of threat to their faces. Face-Threatening Acts (FTA) take place when the speaker acts in opposition to the wants and desires of the other, thus damage the face of the interlocutor (speaker and hearer). To avoid FTAs, number of politeness strategies can be employed. Brown and Levinson identified these strategies employed by the speaker to satisfy the needs and wants of the hearer and speaker to maintain his or her face. Accordingly, when the mitigation is intended by the language users to avoid or minimize the obstruction of the interlocutor's freedom of action, a negative politeness strategy is used. However, when the mitigation is intended to preserve the hearer’s self-image, deference, and belonging, a positive politeness strategy is utilized. Four types of politeness strategies can be employed, First, bald On-record by using direct utterances that are not attenuated in formal context to shock or embarrasses the addressee and in an informal context to express solidarity and closeness in the relationship; second, positive politeness by using conventionally indirect utterances to reduce threat to the hearer’s positive face, third, negative politeness by using conventionally indirect utterances to reduce threat to the hearer’s negative face; fourth, bold off-record by using hints instead of direct utterances to save the negative or positive face of the interlocutor.

Past studies showed that differences exist between e-mail requests sent by native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) students to their lecturers (Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Chen 2001). Students of NS and NNS employ different politeness strategies in their e-mails. For the students to be skillful users of English, they should understand the basic rules and ethics of the English language. They should indeed have the pragmatic knowledge of the second language because it is not easy transferable from first language (L1) to second language (L2). (Kasper, 1992).

To identify the politeness strategies employed by NS and NNS of English in academic setting, Al-Qahtani (2009) conducted a study to compare the use of politeness strategies by the Saudi and British female students in offering. Fifteen written situations were designed in the forms of Discourse
Completion Tests (DCTs). By applying Brown and Levinson’s (1987) model of politeness, the spoken discourse of the Saudi and British female were analyzed qualitatively by employing a socio-pragmatic approach and quantitatively by finding the frequencies and percentages of the use of these strategies. The results showed that there were significant differences between the two groups of speakers in expressing politeness in offers. There was also a varied effect of the social determiners, power, social distance and rank on the used politeness strategies. While no effect was found for the power of the addressee, the social distance was found affecting the two groups. The British female group displayed respect to the others’ social need in privacy as being conventional indirect, whereas the Saudi female group showed higher inclination to establishing solidarity.

Tawalbeh and Al-Oqaily (2012) examined the level of directness and its relation to politeness in the speech act of requests among Saudi and American speakers. The two groups of thirty undergraduate students were selected randomly and asked to respond to a discourse completion task (DCT) included twelve written situations. The results revealed that the most prominent strategy used by the American group was the conventional indirect one. For the Saudi group, it was found that these subjects varied their request strategies according to two social determinants of power and distance. The results also revealed that selecting the directness level is cross-cultural specific. American requested in a direct way when talking to their friends; The Saudis preferred to be direct when addressing intimate persons as an expression of affiliation, closeness and group-connectedness and not considering this behavior impolite.

Previous research showed that a number of channels can be used for communication in an academic setting. These channels can range from face-to-face communications to using electronic means, such as blogs, websites, smartphones, emails, and others. The use of blogs as a channel of electronic communication was investigated by Amir, Abidin, Darus, and Ismail (2012). Abe (2011) compared the face-to-face interactions with online interactions among 77 male and female university students in Japan. Almekhlafy, Saleh, Alzubi, and Abbas (2016) examined the possibility of using WhatsApp as a learning tool by Saudi university students to learn English language in effective and freeways. Using emails can help people communicate their everyday needs and issues faster and easier. Using this type of electronic channel to communicate in academic setting was studied by Zena, Marlyna, and Nor Fariza (2012), who investigated using emails, as a channel of communication, to perform request in academic setting. This type of communication requires the sender to use appropriate politeness strategies that suit the social relationship with the recipient. The purpose of the study was on the level of directness achieved in the students’ utterances while communicating requests as well as the expressions of Arabic transferred into English while sending the emails. The researchers used a quantitative approach by which 10 Arab postgraduate students’ emails were analyzed. Brown and Levinson’s (1987) Politeness Theory and Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) were used to
underpin the framework of politeness strategies and level directness. The findings showed that bald on-record, positive politeness and negative politeness strategies were the most frequent used politeness strategies. The analysis also showed that the Arab students lack the cultural norms of the target language, which lead them to commit pragmatic errors as they translated from their native language. The researchers concluded that 50% of the Arab students preferred to be more direct in their requests. The researchers suggested that Arab learners of English need more exposure to the language which is required to give them opportunities to practice requesting in emails.

Using emails was also investigated by Amundrud (2012), who analyzed the politeness strategies used in three elicited business emails by an advanced non-native female Japanese speaker. Three speech acts were under investigation, requests, apologies, and refusals. The participant’s responses to the emails were compared to a native speaker as a control procedure. The focus of the analysis was on the types and amount of politeness following Brown and Levinson (1987), and whether these strategies conform to English-language pragmatic norms. The researcher found that when non-native speakers write emails, they use politeness patterns unique to their culture and do not conform to their native speakers’ ones. This study revealed that when non-native speakers possess higher level of language competence, the pragmatic gap becomes narrower, which is an important finding. However, the findings of this study were built on a very small number of participants, which was only one. Having a bigger sample would yield more representative and generalizable findings (Creswell 2013), which is adopted in the current study to obtain enough data to analyze politeness.

At the same year, Moayad (2012) used quantitative approach to investigate the politeness strategies in Arab postgraduate students’ e-mail requests to their lecturers during their period of study at Malaysian universities. Her study found that the Arab students used various politeness strategies and they tended to be more direct in their request via e-mail when communicating in English.

As it can be seen from reviewing the literature, using politeness strategies is important in academic setting. Moreover, achieving a lower level of directness can realize various types of politeness strategies. The review also showed that the politeness strategies were investigated in different studies using a number of communication channels. However, a study that analyses the politeness strategies used by Iraqi EFL learners when they are sending their requests to their lecturers is lacking. So, the intent of this study was to investigate the politeness strategies in requests used by undergraduate Iraqi students in their e-mails to their lecturers during their study at the University Putra Malaysia.

Using the politeness strategies in student-teacher conversations can positively affect the overall communication and help produce more effective and smooth interaction (Rahmani et al. 2014). In their academic context, the use of the politeness strategies can help Arab students communicate their ideas and demands with their classmates as well as their teachers.
successfully. Failing to employ the appropriate strategy, these students will use a language that is inexpressive and inappropriate to the social context in which it occurs (Zena et al. 2012).

Previous research on politeness strategies investigated the politeness phenomenon among the Arab speakers of English by collecting the data from face-to-face interactions (Abe 2011), via discourse completion tests (Al-Qahtani 2009; Al-Shboul et al. 2012; Tawalbeh & Al-Oqaily 2012), emails (Amundrud 2012; Zena et al. 2012), and blogs (Amir et al. 2012). These studies arrived at a mutual agreement that Arab learners produce politeness patterns that are inappropriate to the social contexts. For example, Aldhulaee (2011) compared the politeness strategies employed through the use of hedges, which are lexical devices used to mitigate the force of speech acts to express politeness, between a group of Iraqi Arabic native speakers and a group of Australian English native speakers. The findings showed that there was significant divergence between the two groups of subjects in expressing politeness. The Arab group was found producing politeness patterns that were inappropriate to the social contexts.

The intent of this study is to analyze the messages communicated by a group of Iraqi EFL learners during their e-mail communication with their lecturers. The discourse analysis will include determining on the politeness strategies employed by these learners that reflect their social context. The findings are hoped to add to the literature of discourse studies in relation to politeness, and using emails as a tool of communication in academic setting.

2. Methodology:

This study aims to investigate the politeness strategies used by a group of Iraqi EFL learners during their emails to their lecturers in Malaysia. For the purpose of Analysis, this study adopts a descriptive design that employs a pragmatic discourse analysis approach to the students’ emails (see Figure 1 below). The focus of analysis will be on the level of directness achieved in the communicated messages following Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) three levels of directness in speech, direct, conventionally indirect, and indirect, and their effect on the achieved politeness interpretation. For the classification of the politeness strategies, Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness model will be used. Accordingly, four politeness strategies will be under investigation, bald on-record (direct), positive politeness (conventionally indirect), negative politeness (conventionally indirect), and off-record politeness (indirect).
2.1. Data Collection and Sample Size:

After getting permission from selected students, twenty-five emails were collected from twenty-five Iraqi undergraduate students in University Putra Malaysia (UPM), 15 females and 10 males, ranging in age between 19-24 years, studying in different faculties in UPM: modern language and communication, engineering, economics and management, and human ecology.

3. Data Analysis:

To analyze the data and to answer the questions of this study, the students’ emails were keyed into Microsoft Excel 2010 worksheet. A content analysis approach was conducted. Emails were analyzed first for the level of directness (direct, conventionally indirect, and indirect) in each utterance. This contributed to assign the types of the politeness strategy. This was accompanied by calculating the frequency of the level of directness, and politeness strategies. Once the descriptive analysis and findings achieved a qualitative discourse analysis to explain the politeness strategies used by students were explained by giving examples extracted from the actual emails of the students. As it has been said earlier, the analysis used Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness framework and level of directness following Blum-Kulka et al. (1989).

4. Findings and Discussion:

4.1. Politeness Strategies:

Since higher levels of politeness is realized when the utterances are more indirect, it was important to analyze first the level of directness in the students’ emails before determining on the politeness strategies employed by these students. The following are the results and the related discussion.

4.1.1. Level of Directness:

The analysis of the students’ comments showed that three types of directness; direct, indirect, and conventionally indirect used by the students (See Table 1). The conventionally indirect strategy was the most prominent with 95 tokens and frequency of 45%. This was achieved mainly by using a number of linguistic modifiers that carries the meanings of uncertainty (e.g., may, I think, it depends, etc.), complimentisers and approval word (e.g., Yes, I agree with you, Ok, yes right, Yea that's right, etc.), or certain qualifications (e.g., some, somehow, a little bit, etc.). According to Fraser (2010) and Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) the use of these words and expressions can make the spoken utterances indirect, thus express politeness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Directness</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conventionally indirect</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>213</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.1.2. Types and Frequency of Politeness Strategies

In a consistency with the politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), the analysis of the students’ emails showed that the students employed
three strategies that can be considered polite (See Figure 2). The most frequent one was the positive politeness strategy (62%) which attempts to reduce the threat to the hearer’s positive face, for example, “I would like to ask for your permission to please open my SMP registration.” (E: 1). Additionally, they used 30% negative politeness strategies which is usually oriented at the hearer’s negative face, for example, “I would like to apologize because late to send my assignment to you.” (E: 4). At a lower frequency, 8% used “Bald-on record” strategy, a strategy which does not seek to minimize the threat to the hearer’s face, for example, “Can you tell me when you are free?” (E: 15). Lastly, no indirect strategy (off-record) was found in any of the students’ e-mails.

![Politeness Strategies](image)

**Figure 2: Types and Frequencies of the politeness strategies used in the students’ emails**

4.1.2.1. Positive Politeness Strategies:

The most frequent strategies used by the students in this study was positive politeness (62%). According to Brown & Levinson (1987), this strategy is identified when the speaker seeks to satisfy the positive face of the hearer, so the latter’s desire of his or her self-image is kept intact. It can be also realized when the speaker had the desire to show deference or respect to the hearer. In employing this strategy by the students in the present study, it was found that they had a keen desire to respect their addressee and maintain their self-image. For this purpose, the students employed a number of sub-strategies of positive politeness, such as offer, promise, be optimistic, give (or ask for) reason, and use of group identity markers. The following sub-stages explain each positive politeness strategy with example.

**Offer, Promise:**

In order to redress the potential threat of some FTAS, speaker (S) may choose to stress his cooperation with the hearer (H) in another way. He may, that is, claim that (within a certain sphere of relevance) whatever (H) wants, (S) wants for him and will help to obtain offers and promises which are the natural outcome of choosing this strategy; even if they are false. They demonstrated (S’s) good intentions in satisfying (H’s) positive-face wants. This can be in the form of offers, promises, or suggestions.
Example: “I promise u that I will do better if there is a chance given to me” (E: 3).

Example: “Is it possible for me to repair my current marks for my attendance?” (E: 11).

Be Optimistic:
The other side of the coin, the point of view that is associated with cooperative strategy, is when S needs H to do something and expresses his request in a way that he/she assumes H wants it and will help him to obtain in them.

Example: “Hope u would check my 2nd Journal” (E: 4).

Example: “I hope you can kindly open up the registration for us ASAP for future conveniences” (E: 18).

Give (Or Ask For) Reason:
(S) tries to involve the (H) in his / her reasoning process so that the suggestion will be seen as a mutual decision.

Example: “I am asking when can I meet you as I’ve tried calling you through your office but I couldn’t reach you” (E: 7).

Example: “I am writing this email to you to check for when will you be available for our small appointment” (E: 17).

Use In Group Identity Markers:
Include other people in one’s own group through the use of in-group identity markers and informal terms of address.

Example: “This is our group’s slides for the presentation and as a group leader I want to know if we can postpone our presentation to next week” (E. 8).

4. 1. 2. 2. Negative Politeness Strategies:
In the second position of frequency came the negative politeness strategy (30%). This low occurrence of this strategy is because the emails have nothing to do with actions, which are in the core of the negative politeness strategy. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), negative politeness strategy is much related to the restrictions imposed on the hearer’s freedom of actions. In some occasions, students were required to be pessimistic, minimize the imposition, beg forgiveness, or apologize. These kinds of directives (Searle 1976), were communicated in conventionally indirect manner. It is achieved by reducing the imposition level of the directives using number of strategies, such as being conventionally indirect, using distancing technique, using hedges, including both speaker and hearer, minimize imposition, and asking indirect questions. Similar to the positive politeness findings, some of these strategies are also borrowed from the strategies used to express
positive politeness. The analysis showed that the students used four sub-categories of negative politeness strategy namely: (1) **minimizing the imposition** (based on utilizing expressions that are to minimize the size of the FTA), e.g., *Can you please check our poster whether or not it is correct or not especially the ones written in Spanish before we print it?* (E: 14), (2) **be pessimistic**, which is based on minimizing the imposition by the implication that the speaker does not expect a positive outcome, e.g., *“I got a B- for … And this causes me to be terminated”* (E: 25), (3) **apologize**, e.g., *“I would like to apologize because late send my assignment to u”* (E: 4) and (4) **beg for forgiveness**, e.g., *“I am begging for ur concern as I really need to go to the next semester”* (E: 3).

### 4. 1. 2. 3. Bald-On-Record:

The third politeness strategy employed in this study was Bald-on-record strategy, which occurred the least frequent (8%). According to Brown and Levinson (1987), this strategy is realized when the speaker does not give much options to the hearer in a way that his self-image and actions are restricted. In this study, the student showed disagreement in some cases. All these disagreements were communicated directly using expressions like *I don’t think, I know but, and I can’t*. Other expressions that attenuate their expressions to save their addressees’ positive face were not employed, thus a bald on-record politeness strategy was used. Notice how the student in the following example used the disagreement marker ‘I don’t think’ explicitly without any attenuation and also without paying any consideration to the self-image of his lecturer. In other words, the student did not attempt to avoid disagreement in any way or he did not seek agreement as well. This strategy by the student is considered bald–on record politeness strategy.

**Example:**

“Regarding your inquiry, *I don’t think I can do on the same cases as* ------- “(E: 22).

“I can’t meet you this week as I have three assignments to finish” (E: 19).

Also, the following examples show the student’s use of direct, straight speech without trying to use any mitigation expressions to protect the self-image of his addressee:

**Example:**

“I was told that you are my advisor and *I need to see you at least once or twice for each semester*” (E: 10).

**Example:**

“Whenver you are free do let me know and *I will come to see you*” (E: 2).

### 4. 2. How Does the Use of The Politeness Strategies Help the Students Communicate Their Opinions?

As it was clearly presented early, the Iraqi students in this study used varied linguistic devices and strategies to show cooperation, mutual understanding with their lecturers. Although there were some exceptional cases in which students were more direct to achieve their personal agenda of imposing opinion and persuasion, they demonstrated their abilities to
maintain each other (students & lecturers) negative and positive faces. This was achieved mainly by the use of the politeness strategies, which helped the students to communicate their opinions and other needs and demands, in smoother and more effective ways. See how in the Example, one of the students achieved his purpose of convincing his group member of his opinion just because he employed a positive politeness strategy. In this example, the student is concluding about whether to study abroad or in a home university. The student notes that it is a wish of any student to study abroad. Although this is a kind of overgeneralization, the students used a number of politeness strategies to elicit the agreement from the other group members and keep the communication running smoothly without confrontation. He first used the collective noun “all of us”. The use of this pronoun was to say ‘what I am going to propose is a shared preference, not only my preference’. The student also used the causality device ‘because of’ to make this preference a logical consequence of truth. Again, he used the collective pronoun ‘we’ to include the group members in the same preference. Similarly, he used the collective possessive pronoun ‘our’ to say that the need for improving English is a common need. Using these positive politeness strategies were received positively by the addressee and that was clear in lecturer’s answer when he responded by using the intensifier ‘of course’ along with the agreement marker ‘yes’.

Example:

“All of us prefer to study abroad because we won both the new knowledge and improve our speaking in English” (E: 22).

Yes of course (lecturer’s answer to the email).

From the example above, it is clear that using the politeness strategies can be effective in student-lecturer discussion. They indicate openness to other’ opinions, maintain solidarity in the relationships, and reinforce mutual understanding and respect.

4.3. Conclusion:

This study aimed to count the politeness strategies employed by Iraqi EFL learners during their email communication with their lecturers. The results showed that these students used almost a variety of these strategies as they used varied levels of directness. Hoping positive politeness strategy was the most prominent as the students mainly expressed their opinion, agreement and disagreement through their requests, which requires positive politeness to save the positive face of the addresseees. However, other politeness strategies, such negative politeness and bald on-record were also present in the data. Moreover, it can be concluded from the findings in this study that the Iraqi students tend to be direct in certain contexts in which they possibly would reinforce their identity as trusted resources of information and who have the knowledge about the world, and in other contexts they tend to be indirect by using conventional way of expressing directness or hints. The latter is likely used by the students to achieve the same purpose of convincing the other parties without much confrontation. The findings also showed that Iraqi undergraduate students are mitigating the possible threat to each other’s
face by using expressions of positive politeness to show solidarity, like-mindedness and friendship. Thus, the use of positive politeness strategies helps to create a highly sociable environment which, in turn, will result in the emergence of a sound social space characterized by effective working relationships, strong group cohesiveness, trust, respect, belonging, satisfaction, and a strong sense of community. However, they sometimes avoid using them not to be rude to each other’s, but to achieve more personal agendas of persuasion and showing self-assurance. The findings in this study refute some other findings that claimed that Arab learners of English has limited linguistic repertoire and awareness, such the findings which showed that the Arab group was found producing politeness patterns that were inappropriate to the social contexts.
References