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Realization of politeness strategies in EFL learners and English native speakers' complaint and request speech acts: focusing on differences by gender and level of education

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Abstract--This study aimed to identify EFL learners and English native speakers' use of politeness strategies in the compliant and request speech acts. To do so, a 50-item questionnaire was developed and given to 108 EFL learners with three different levels of education in both genders, who were selected randomly from Sheikhabaee University and the University of Isfahan. The EFL learners' request and complaint emails in three levels of education and English native speakers' emails in both genders were also gathered. The data were analyzed based on Nogami and Rinnert's (2006), and Brown and Levinson's (1987) models of complaint and request speech acts. Accordingly, the results of this study indicated that the EFL learners' perceptions in the use of request and complaints' politeness strategies were not in line with their actual performance in emails. It was also found that there were significant differences between levels and genders in request and complaint emails: because MA and BA female students and male native speakers expressed their request emails in a direct way, but male EFL students and female native speakers represented their complaints in a direct way.

Keywords--*EFL learners, Politeness strategies, Compliant, Request.*

Introduction

Language is a unique attribute that is specific to human beings; moreover, language is learnable and usable as one of the communicative intentions too (Wallman, 1992). Several scholars claim that for learning a new language, grammatical knowledge, the knowledge of pronunciation, syntax and semantics are not sufficient (Canale, 1983; Hudson, 1980; Hymes, 1972). Hence, suitable

language communication not only needs grammatical language knowledge, but also, pragmatic, socio cultural and discourse norms.

Under the components of second language acquisition in communicative competence, researchers became interested in the knowledge of pragmatics that is needed for appropriate communication (Bachman & Palmers, 1996; Canale, 1983; Crystal, 2001; Leech, 1990; Tanck, 2002; Yule, 1996).

The scholars have not agreed upon a single definition of the concept of pragmatics. Crystal (2001) and Yule (1996) state that pragmatics is the study of language for communication between speaker and hearer, speakers' choice of word, and the effect of their language use on interlocutors. Tanck (2002) claims that fluent second language speakers may still lack pragmatic competence, and they may face a problem in producing language through an inappropriate social interaction, although they have a command of grammatical rules and vocabularies.

Second language learners need to be familiar with pragmatic theories more to have a good communication with other people all over the world without misunderstanding. One of the prominent theories within pragmatics is speech act theory. Speech act knowledge is one of the key component of pragmatic competence which contributes to the proper use of language (Kasper & Roever, 2005). Speech acts can be in the form of requests, complaints, apologies, compliments, greetings, invitations, refusals, etc. Brown and Levinson (1987) claim that a speech act is a discourse in which it has a function in communication and English native speakers observe and use these speech acts unconsciously because it is part of their culture.

One of the theoretical perspectives of discourse analysis is pragmatics which contains politeness theory as one of its subcategories. According to Yule (1996), although we use language in a social interaction for communication, factors such as distance, closeness, power and politeness (face) should be considered. Scholars define politeness theory as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (Brown & Levinson 1987; Holmes, 1992; Lakoff, 1974). Moreover, Sifianou (1992) state that politeness is "a set of social values which instruct interaction in order to consider each other by satisfying shared expectation" (p. 86) in a more general term. Accordingly, this study aimed to identify the politeness strategies used by EFL learners and Native speakers in both genders.

Speakers need pragmatic knowledge in order to produce speech acts in an appropriate situation. Consequently, EFL learners need to be informed of politeness and speech act strategies in real communication. Indeed, what is important is that request speech act which is stated by Brown and Levinson (1987) as a question which the speaker tries to impose on the hearer to do the request.

Many books have been written in the field of email writing for EFL learners but offer little help to students because they focus only on the overall features of email writing and have not focused on the way students should perform speech

acts in general, and complaint and request in particular. So EFL learners' contact with their instructors in different levels may cause face loss. Since they are communicating in a foreign language in different levels of education, and they may not be aware of what impact their email may leave, they cannot communicate successfully (Chen, 2006). While a plethora of studies has been done on the complaint and request emails, little attention has been paid to the role of students' level of education, especially in the English language teaching field. So this area has been remained somehow untouched. In addition, the gender of students may also play a role in the strategy which students use in their requests and complaints in their Electronic mails. As scholars point out, men and women do not behave the same in different cultures and are different in their use of complaint and request speech acts (Mills, 2003). Hereupon, the aim of this study is to understand which complaint and request strategies are used by EFL learners in three levels and English native speakers in both genders.

This study is based on Nogami and Rinnert (2006), and Brown and Levinson's (1987) frameworks. Nogami and Rinnert (2006) developed a taxonomy of complaint strategies that consists of three categories: main component (initiator, complaint, request), level of directness (indirect, somewhat direct, very direct), and amount of mitigating. The rationale behind using these strategies is that they are the newest and the most comprehensive one that could cover and reveal the strategies which students used in their requests and complaints.

Litratue Review

Bachman (1990) specified that language competence includes organizational and pragmatics competence. Pragmatics competence, in his view, explains the relationship between language users and the context of conventional rules of language and their realization in the production.

Savignin (1972) described communicative competence as the ability to function in a truly communicative setting: a dynamic exchange in which linguistic competence must adapt itself to the total informational input, both linguistic and paralinguistic, of one or more interlocutors.

2.1 Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP)

Interlanguage research has become related with the study of second language learners' pragmatics and discourse competence. As Crystal (1997) believed, second language learners who are transferring their first language to the second one cause interference in second language and make an encountered rule. Moreover, Kasper and Rose (2002) proposed:

"As the study of second language use, interlanguage pragmatics examined how nonnative speakers comprehend and produce action in a target language." (p. 5).

Meanwhile, scholars studied the speech act performance of second language learners such as request, complaint, and apologies, that they were interested in to emphasize illocutionary and politeness dimensions; therefore, this dimension has become a focus in ILP studies (Blum-Kulka & Kasper, 1993).

2.2 Politeness Theory

Lakoff (1974) was the first person who conducted research on politeness, and his theory of politeness was upon Grice's co-operative principle and maxims of conversation.

Lakoff explained politeness by his suggested rules on a politeness model as "Be polite". It means "think what is good for others and avoid what might damage others" (p. 303).

Leech (1990) considered politeness as a communication factor and the key of why people transfer their intention indirectly. (p. 15).

Brown and Levinson presented a cohesive and comprehensive theory of politeness in which linguistic devices are a realization of specific politeness strategies. They saw strategies for being polite as examples of a complicated system of assumptions and inferences upon which humans understand and co-operate with each other. Brown and Levinson's theory rested on such notions as face, face – threatening acts and their three strategies, negative, positive and off-record politeness.

2.2.1 Face

Brown and Levinson (1987) claimed politeness theory is rooted in the notion of face;

moreover, face is the motivation behind politeness. In addition, Brown and Levinson claimed that speaking strategies in any language can be seen as ways of observing what Goffman (1963) had called face. Goffman believed that understanding face is an important constituting part in social interaction, hence; he defined face as an image "pieced together from the expressive implications of the full flow of events in an understanding" (p. 31).

2.2.2 Face Threatening Acts (FTAs)

The starting point of politeness theory was the recognition of a diffuse set of acts bears some threat to interactant's face wants, positive or negative: face threatening acts (FTAs). Brown and Levinson (1987) claimed that politeness is the interpretation of the speaker's intention to reduce Face Threats by certain FTAs toward another.

2.2.3 Positive Politeness

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), positive politeness is responsible for satisfying the hearer's need for approval and belonging; moreover, the positive politeness that is used by a speaker is accountable for satisfying hearer's positive face.

2.2.4 Negative Politeness

The second sub-category of face-saving acts is negative politeness. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), the person wants to have his freedom of action, hence; negative politeness works in such a way as to avoid or minimize the imposition of the FTA on the hearer.

2.2.5 Off-record Politeness

The third sub-category of politeness theory is off-record politeness. A communicative act is done off-record in such a way that is impossible to attribute only one clear sociable intention to that act. Off-record utterances are essentially indirect uses of language.

2.3 Speech Act Theory

This theory has been devised by Austin (1962) as the result of some philosophers as well as linguistic attention upon the importance of the uses of language. Austin (1962) was the first person who analyzed the meaning of language systematically and developed the paradigm of speech act theory. He believed that the emphasis on speech act is on the pragmatics aspects since the situation you would apply may cause misunderstanding.

2.3.1 Direct and Indirect Speech Acts

As Austin (1962) observed, the content of a locutionary act (what is said) is not always determined by what is meant by the sentence uttered. Ambiguous words or phrases need to be disambiguated, and the references of indexical and other context-sensitive expressions need to be fixed.

2.3.2 Complaint

In the classification of speech act, Austin (1962) placed complaint in the class of performative and the subclass of behabitives, which are concerned with one's attitudes and expressions of attitudes toward one's social behavior. Complaint as a speech act of politeness is used to indicate speaker's dissatisfaction of existing situations and to point out some transgression on the part of the person who performs some complainable action (Edward, 2005; Drew, 1998).

Mofidi and Shoushtari (2012) conducted a complaint study on English native speakers and EFL learners who studied English for several years in a way that the scholars given written discourse completion test and demography survey to each group to answer according to realities in order to compare the performance of native speakers and EFL learners. The result showed that there was no relationship between native speakers and EFL ones because they found out that EFL learners need sufficient skills to make a complaint in English.

2.3.3 Request

The request is considered as an illocutionary act since the speaker (requester) asks the hearer to perform an act which has a benefit for speaker. So, the speaker is imposing on the hearer to pay the cost of carrying out the request. The request may be for an object, action or service; or it can be for information.

The speaker who makes a request wants to show the direct control over the hearer's behavior hence threaten the requester negative face by indicating that the person does not intend to refrain from impeding the requester's freedom of action.

However, Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1996), Biesenbach and Weasenforth (2000), Maros, MohdNor and Najeeb (2012) in a longitudinal study on U.S native speakers and Arab,

and international second language learners observed that second language learners were faced pragmatics problems, less communication with their supervisors. Moreover, second language learners had a lot of grammatical mistakes that showed a lack of politeness, although they used over politeness.

While, Kubota (1996) and Churchill (1999) did an investigation on the use of request strategies among Japanese native speakers, Japanese English learners, American learners of Japanese, and American English speakers. The results showed that native speakers did more FTA. In contrast, American learners of Japanese soften the situation. Moreover, Japanese English learners across several proficiency levels perceived the differences in situational factors; however, they varied in this ability.

In another study, Anderson and Jessmer (2001) conducted a longitudinal study on young Japanese's perceptions on the use of politeness strategies in the request speech acts. The data demonstrated that the participants' perception had a significant drop from direct style to indirect request speech act.

In contrast with other studies, Chung (1995) conducted a cross-cultural study on the use of polite request strategies in Chinese and American English among Mandarin and Taiwanese bilingual. The findings demonstrated that social factors (power, rank, level), and cultural values play a role in the choice of request strategies. The results showed that the participants tend to use indirect request to unfamiliar addressee and more direct request to the familiar subordinates.

Francis (1997) did a study on the use of request strategies that were used by adult ESL learners in three situations (public office, private office, and ESL learners' classroom). The data were gathered through audio and videotape recording. The data were analyzed through CCSARP. The results of the study revealed they used direct request strategies in the situations, and they needed their proficiency to improve deductively. Finally, Ruzickova (2007) conducted research on the request performances of Spanish speakers. The study was done

on 402 Spanish speakers in the naturalistic situations which indicated a strong tendency toward directness.

2.3.4 Gender Differences in the Use of Speech Acts

As Mills (2003) pointed out all men and women do not behave the same in all cultures; moreover, we do not have a general rule unless in community of practice. However, influential factors in men and women's speech act production and perception should be considered. Baxter (2000) did research on performance of both genders in different speech act situations and found that females use more positive politeness strategies than males.

However, if gender was considered as an effective factor in language production in both genders, it would make the research simpler. Hence, scholars tried to find the effect of gender on different speech act's performance. They found that female speakers use positive politeness strategies more than males in context. (e.g. Baxter, 2000).

In another study on a complaint speech act, Baxter (1996) found that:

Men and women behave very differently with respect to both complaining and responding to complaints. The results demonstrated that (a) more women participated in a trouble-talk than men and (b) women were recipients of more indirect complaints because they were seen as more supportive in general than men. The gender differences emerged when dealing with responses to indirect complaints showed that men tended to offer advice while women tended to commiserate. In general, she showed that women participated more in indirect complaining than men.

Considering all the previous studies, the researcher observed that although a lot of research studies were done on complaint and request speech acts between English native speakers and EFL learners, there were still some areas that were remained open for further studies in this field. The participants were only from one gender, and their level of education were not taken into account. Moreover, in previous studies, the researchers did not compare the native speakers and EFL learners' use of speech act's strategy.

Therefore, this study sought to investigate the distribution of EFL learners and English native speakers' use of complaint and request speech acts strategy by gender and level of education. Hence, the investigator tried to contribute these gaps. In the next chapter, the methodology which was employed to perform the present study are described.

Methodology

3.1 Participants

For this study, 108 EFL learners with three different levels of education (BA, MA, and PhD, thirty-six in each) from both genders were recruited. The EFL learners

in this study were selected randomly from sophomores in BA, MA and PhD levels that were at their second semester of the program. They studied at Sheikhabaee University and the University of Isfahan. The participants age ranged from 18-24 in BA, 24-28 in MA, and 28-38 in the PhD levels. Table 3.1 indicates a summary of the participants' specification.

3.2 Instruments

3.2.1 Politeness Strategies Questionnaire

The instrument that was used in this study was a questionnaire that consisted of two sections. The first section asked for demographic information and the second section included the items which elicited the participants' perception about the strategies they used in the complaint and request speech acts.

In order to put the participants in various situations, Witten Discourse Completion Tasks (WDCT) consisting of ten items, five for request, five for complaint, were constructed. Mitchell and Rintell (1989) believe DCT was a good method in collecting speech acts studies, since it provides a large and a legitimate amount of data.

Next, the researcher distributed the WDCT among 12 participants (BA, MA, and PhD, two in each) from both genders, and she asked the participants to provide their opinions for ten situations that followed by blank rejoinders. Then, the researcher chose the most frequent items of the answered DCT as the main items of the Likert scale questionnaire in random order. Likert scale questionnaire consisted of ten situations which students had to rate according to their level of agreement from 1 to 5 (completely agreed to completely disagree). Then the experts' decisions applied in the questionnaire. After that, the researcher distributed the questionnaire among five participants of the same population as a pilot study to find the time needed for the participants to fill it and to revise the possible mistakes in spelling and structures, and to make sure of clarity of instruction before administering it to the larger population. Regarding the reliability of the questionnaire, the researcher measured the internal consistency of the questionnaire through Cronbach's Alpha using SPSS 20.

3.3 Design

This study was designed as a descriptive one. The dependent variables in this study were the participants' perception of the use of speech act's strategy and their actual use of those strategies in their emails, and the independent variables of this study were gender and level of education.

3.4 Procedure

3.4.1 Data Collection

Collecting the request and complaint speech act's strategies comprised two phases.

The first phase was collecting the participants' perception of the use of politeness strategies in request and complaint speech acts. At first, the researcher attended the sophomores' weekly classes of EFL learners at different levels of education and randomly spread the questionnaire among 108 participants at Sheikhabahae University and the University of Isfahan to fill in the questionnaire in the given time. Moreover, the researcher was available to answer any participants' questions.

The second phase was collecting the participants' performance on their request and complaint emails which they sent by them to teachers during the educational semester. The researcher asked the teachers to send their students' email in a request and complaint speech acts to the researcher.

3.4.2 Data Analysis

The data gathered through administering the questionnaire were classified according to the four types of politeness strategies, including on record, off-record, positive and negative politeness strategies which were used in request and complaint speech acts. The data were analyzed through two phases: the first phase was scoring, and the second phase was statistical procedures which are explained below.

The data gathered from the EFL learner's questionnaire was scored from one to five from strongly disagree to strongly agree, one by one. Moreover, the frequency of strategies that was counted by Native speakers and EFL learners in their request and complaint emails was identified, and the frequencies calculated.

The collected data from the questionnaire was analyzed through two-way ANOVA statistical procedure to identify the probable significant main effects between each level and gender, because there were two independent (gender and level) and two dependent variables (request and complaint speech act strategies). Moreover, the frequencies of request and complaint strategies used in the EFL learners and native speakers' actual performances were analyzed through chi-square statistical procedures in order to see if the association between genders and levels were statistically significant or not. In the next chapter, the result of the analyzed data is presented in details.

Results and Discussion

To ensure whether the data were normally distributed, the researcher presented the results of one-sample Kolmogorov Smirnov test. The result showed the questionnaires were distributed normally among students.

According to results, there was no significant main effect for gender. However, there was significant effect for educational levels in complaint speech act. In contrast, there was no significant interaction for level*gender in complaint speech act. Further, the result of post-hoc Scheffe test reported that there were significant main effects between BA-MA and BA-PhD, and vice versa for levels of education in the complaint speech act.

In addition, there was no significant main effect for gender. Even so, there was a significant main effect for level of education in the sums of the first items in complaint speech act. There was no significant interaction for gender* level. Furthermore, the result of post-hoc Scheffe test demonstrated that there were significant main effects between BA-MA and BA-PhD, and vice versa for levels of education in the complaint speech act.

While, there was a significant main effect for level of education in the complaint speech act. There was a significant interaction for gender*level. Comparing the result of the post- hoc Scheffe test in complaint speech act illustrated that there were significant main effects between BA-MA and BA-PhD, and vice versa in the sums of second items.

Moreover, there was significant main effect for gender. In addition, there was significant main effect for level of education. Besides, the obtained results of Mean demonstrated that there were significant interactions between male learners at PhD level and BA female students in the mitigation complaint strategies (*Mean=20.38*). The result of post-hoc Scheffe test indicated that there were significant main effects between BA-MA, BA-PhD, and vice versa in the sums of third items in the complaint speech act.

Comparing the results of EFL learners' questionnaires and emails in request strategies indicated that there were significant main effects between EFL learners' questionnaire in request strategies 7 negative and 10 off-record in three levels. Moreover, there were significant main effects between request strategies 1 positive and 3 negative in male PhD levels in the questionnaire. Additionally, the result of EFL learners and native speakers in both genders demonstrated that the association between them was statistically significant.

The result of complaint strategies indicated that there were significant main effects for EFL learners of three levels in four complaint questionnaire and there were significant interactions for mitigation complaint strategy of male EFL learners at PhD levels and BA female students. Furthermore, the results of EFL learners and native speakers in both genders illustrated there was a significant association between them in complaint emails.

Collecting the EFL learners' perception through the questionnaire in the complaint strategies by level and gender in one hand, demonstrated that there were significant main effects between BA-MA, and BA-PhD levels in "initiator", "somewhat direct" and "very direct" complaint strategies. On the contrary, there were significant interactions between PhD male and BA female students in "mitigation" complaint strategy. In addition, there were no significant main effects between level and gender in "indirect" complaint strategy.

Collecting the actual performance of EFL learners and native speakers in the use of complaint strategies through email displayed that the performances of female EFL learners and female native speakers were absent in "initiator" complaint strategy. Nevertheless, the initiator complaint strategy was used the most by male native speakers in their complaint emails. "Somewhat direct" complaint strategy was used the most by male English native speakers while the performance of PhD

EFL learners in this strategy was absent, and the performances of BA and MA learners in both genders were the same in their complaint emails to an instructor. Furthermore, the performance of female EFL learners at BA level was absent in their complaint emails. The findings indicated that female English native speaker was used “very direct” complaint strategy the most in their complaint emails (56.2%) while; BA male students used this strategy in their complaint emails more. Indeed, the performance of PhD female students was absent in the use of this strategy. In the end, “indirect” complaint strategy was used the most by male native speakers in their complaint emails and the performances of BA and MA students in both genders, and PhD females were absent in their complaint emails.

On the other hand, collecting the EFL learners’ perception through the questionnaire in both genders demonstrated that there were significant effects between all three levels in “impersonalized” and “using rhetoric questions” request strategies.

Nonetheless, collecting the actual performance of EFL learners and English native speakers on the use of request strategies through emails illustrated that there were significant associations between them in level and gender.

The findings of this study are discussed in the two following sections: complaint speech act and request speech act.

The performances of EFL learners and English native speakers in their emails indicated that only male native speakers used address terms and greeting at the beginning of their emails, not EFL learners. Meanwhile, the actual performances of the participants in their real emails informed us “somewhat direct” complaint strategy was used by BA and MA students the same, and it did not use by PhD students any more. It shows that PhD students are aware about complaint rules and tries to save the face of their instructors in their communication emails. Nonetheless, the indirect complaint strategy which was used more by male native speakers than female ones shows male did FTA. However, by looking at male EFL learners at BA levels and female native speaker’s frequencies, it shows that very direct complaint strategy is used the most by EFL learners and native speakers to instructors. Hence, this study supported Cameron (2003) who asserts email makes communication from indirect to direct way. Moreover, this study supports Chen (2006) ideas about using direct strategies by participants indicated that they were not aware about email etiquette and needed to deductively be instructed. The obtained findings also supported Mofidi and Shoushtari (2012), and Umar (2006) who believed EFL learners student needed sufficient skills to make a complaint because as it was shown in BA and MA EFL students, they made complaint emails in a direct way which shows they were not aware complaint etiquette.

However, the results of PhD students illustrated that, they were more knowledgeable about writing complaint emails to a faculty member who is in higher ranks. In contrast, the obtained findings rejected Mofidi and Shoushtari (2012), and Umar (2006) who claim that only EFL students use direct complaint strategy in their emails.

Likewise, the obtained findings rejected Chen, Chen and Chang (2011) who believed EFL learners, and native speakers prefer to complain indirectly. Although they were used written discourse completion test for collecting the data, the actual performance of the participants reported that female native speakers and male BA students tend to use direct complaint strategy in their complaint emails. Moreover, it shows EFL learners were not aware about complaint speech act's etiquette to use in their communication through emails. Hence, the reason for rejecting this opinion is maybe because of their role play discourse completion task methodology use.

Regarding the EFL learners' perceptions of the strategies they use in request speech act, the findings indicated that there were significant main effects between BA, MA, and PhD levels in "impersonalized" and "using rhetoric questions" request strategies. The EFL learners' actual performances illustrated that "go on-record as incurring a debt" request strategy was used by female EFL students at BA and MA levels, and native speakers the most through their emails to a chancellor which shows they speak directly. In contrast, the native speakers' frequencies of "using rhetorical question" strategy demonstrated that this strategy was used by male native speakers in their request emails the most which represented that they tried to communicate indirectly. Indeed, female students at BA and MA levels used "using rhetorical question" request strategy in their emails more which shows that they tried to do a face-saving act to instructors.

Accordingly, the obtained findings rejected Baxter (2000) who claimed positive speech act strategies was used the most by female students because the gathered request speech act strategies illustrated the PhD male students were the only students who were trying to express their request positively in their communication emails. The obtained findings also rejected Kubota (1996), and Churchill (1999) who believed native speakers do FTA more than EFL learners, because not only native speakers, but also EFL learners did FTA the same in their actual performances in this study. The obtained findings showed using direct request strategies depends highly on the cultural situation and the social factors, and the proficiency level of the students. Because each of the mentioned factors may influence on the type of the strategies the EFL learners use in their requests and complaints.

Conclusion

Since the aim of this study was to identify which complaint and request strategies were used among EFL learners in three levels and English native speakers in both genders, the 50 items Likert scale questionnaire in ten situations was administered to EFL learners at different levels. Moreover, actual performances of EFL learners in three levels and gender and English native speakers in both genders which were sent to an instructor were collected. Notwithstanding, a lot of studies have been done on the complaint and request speech acts of EFL learners and native speakers, the most important differences are that EFL learners' complaint and request emails in three levels are in contrast with their perceptions. Additionally, BA and MA female students, and male native speakers were tended to use direct request strategy in their emails. However, EFL male

students and female native speakers assert direct complaint strategies in their emails.

According to the findings, the obtained findings rejected the claim that the male and females' actual performances were the same in the complaint and request speech acts (Shams, 1997). Because EFL learners and native speakers' males and females act differently in two different situations, and this finding support Mills (2003) who pointed out all men and women did not behave the same in all cultures. The obtained findings supported Brown and Levinson (1987) who claimed politeness was latent in a face; because politeness needs a face-saving act that EFL students and native speakers do FTA by expressing their complaint and request directly in their emails.

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