Awareness and Use of Politeness Strategies for Female EFL Learners at the University of Jeddah

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Abstract

This research investigates females' awareness of politeness and politeness strategies and their use of those strategies in the English department at the University of Jeddah. The researcher used a quantitative method to collect the data. A questionnaire with three sections was designed and distributed to 25 participants at the University of Jeddah. The results of the questionnaire showed that female students have awareness of the importance of politeness and its strategies. It also showed that those students have a higher tendency to use negative politeness strategies compared to the other strategies. The study concludes by suggesting that applying this study in different settings would help to gain a deeper understanding of the use of politeness strategies and would compensate for the body of knowledge.

Keywords: politeness strategies, negative politeness, positive politeness, bald on record strategies, off-record strategies

1. Introduction

1.1 Importance of Pragmatic Competence

Pragmatic competence has received attention from researchers in the last few decades. According to Fraser (1983, p. 30), pragmatic competence is defined as "the knowledge of how an addressee determines what a speaker is saying and recognizes intended illocutionary force conveyed through subtle attitudes". Thus, the lack of this knowledge may lead to miscommunication in which the speaker fails to deliver the intended message. Fraser (2010, p. 15), also discussed that "pragmatic competence" is crucial to the success of communication. However, it was not given the emphasis it deserves in teaching a second language. This explains why second-language speakers produce grammatically correct speech that fails to achieve its communicative aims (Fraser, 2010, p. 15). Similarly, Hymes (1972) stated that speaking accurately is not sufficient to achieve communicative goals. Thus, second language learners must learn how to use language appropriately. The only way to achieve pragmatic competence is through experience, which is the reason it is considered one of the most challenging aspects of language learning (Sadeghoghli & Niroomand, 2016, p. 27).

1.2 Politeness in the Eyes of Brown and Levinson

One important aspect of pragmatic competence is politeness. Sometimes questions such as *what is considered polite? And what is not?* Rise especially in cross-cultural interaction or while speaking other languages. Mills (2003) defined politeness as "the expression of the speakers' intention to mitigate face threats carried by certain face-threatening acts toward another" (p. 6). It is important to note that this research is based on the face theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) which contains three basic notions: face, face-threatening acts (FTAs), and politeness strategies. Every utterance is considered a face-threatening act (FTA), either to the negative face or to the positive face.

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), the concept of face is concerned with someone's self-image that they want to claim for themselves. They stated that every member of society has two types of face desires. The negative face is defined as the desire not to be imposed upon, intruded on, or distracted. It is also said to be "the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, and rights to non-distraction". It is accomplished by saving the interlocutor's negative 'face' by mitigating FTAs, such as advice-giving and disapproval. In addition, indicating respect for the addressee's right not to be imposed on is a way of satisfying the negative face. On the other hand, the positive face is defined as the positive and consistent image people have of themselves, and their desire for

approval, which can be achieved "through indicating similarities amongst interactants or by expressing an appreciation of the interlocutor's self-image". Thus, it is obvious that politeness is not only used to mitigate FTAs but also to satisfy the interactants' faces regardless of whether FTAs occur or not (Kitamura, 2000, p. 1).

1.3 Politeness Strategies

Brown and Levinson (1987) discussed four types of politeness strategies, which are bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record (indirect) strategies.

1.3.1 Bald on Record (Direct) Vs. Off-Record (Indirect) Strategies

Utterances that are expressed in *bold on record* strategy as in *give me a towel* do not aim to mitigate the threat on the hearer's face. According to Culpeper (1996, p. 356), a *bald on-record* politeness strategy is usually used when the threat to the hearer's face is very small, such as in "*Set down*". Moreover, it is used in some situations where interaction is characterized by power over the hearer. For instance, when a father tells his son "*Stop running*". On the other hand, the off-record strategy, as stated by Brown and Levinson (1987), is mainly based on the use of language indirectly to minimize the potential imposition on the speaker. The use of this strategy can be evident by giving hints, giving association clues, using tautologies, presupposing, using metaphors, etc.

1.3.2 Positive Politeness Vs. Negative Politeness Strategies

Brown and Levinson (1987) stated that positive politeness strategies are used to reduce the threat to the hearer's positive face. This can be achieved through some strategies such as noticing and attending to the hearer, the use of exaggeration in intonation, expressing interest to the hearer, using in-group identity markers, etc. (Brown & Levinson, 1987). On the other hand, Adel et al. (2016) conducted a study on 14 Iranian students to analyze their use of politeness strategies which he defined negative strategies as "the avoidance of imposition on the hearer and can be considered as the desire to remain autonomous using distancing styles like using modal verbs or hesitation, apologizing for imposition, asking questions, or asking for permission to ask a question" This type of strategy can be achieved by being indirect, using questions and hedges, being pessimistic (i.e., being pessimistic whether the hearer wants to do what we ask or not), minimizing the imposition, being deferent to the hearer, using apologies. The findings of this study have shown that Iranian learners frequently used positive strategies as signs of a psychologically close relationship, reciprocity, and friendship in a group (Adel et al., 2016, p. 50).

Another study was conducted by Azwan (2018) on 25 Ambonese participants to determine their use of politeness strategies of refusal used in refusing requests by recording the participants' conversations in different situations. The results of the study indicated that Ambonese people are more likely to use more than two or three strategies in refusing requests. Their use of politeness strategies was evident while interacting with strangers. For instance, expressing gratitude combined with addressing form, reason, and offering new solutions (Azwan, 2018, p. 5).

Based on the discussion above, the present study aims to investigate the most used politeness strategies that female EFL learners at the University of Jeddah prefer to use in different situations and to gain information about students' awareness of the importance of those strategies. Thus, the following questions are investigated:

1) Are female EFL learners at The University of Jeddah aware of the importance of politeness and politeness strategies while engaging in different interactions?

2) What are the most frequent politeness strategies that female EFL learners at The University of Jeddah prefer to use in different interactions?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Participants of this study were female EFL learners at the University of Jeddah who have attended English classes in the English department. They were 25 Saudi females with ages ranging from 19 to around 24 years old. Some of them were from the age range between 19 to 20 years old (N=5), 21 to 22 years old students (N=4), 23 to 24 years old students (N=10), and above 24 years old students (N=6). Participants were chosen from different levels of education in university, some of them were freshmen, juniors, seniors, or graduates. Despite their different levels of education, participants were supposed to be on closely similar proficiency levels. Thus, they were from pre-intermediate to upper-intermediate proficiency levels of English to be able to provide the required data. Therefore, participants were asked to provide the researcher with the scores of any proficiency test they have performed earlier, such as IELTS, TOEFL, or STEP.

2.2 Instrument

This study aimed to investigate the most frequent politeness strategies that female students prefer to use in

different situations and to gain information about students' awareness of the importance of those strategies. Therefore, it is important to note that this study is based on a quantitative research method. Thus, it involved designing a questionnaire that consisted of three sections to gain insights and opinions and draw conclusions about politeness strategies. The first section was designed to collect some personal details, such as names, ages, levels of education, and e-mail. It is important to note that providing names was optional. E-mail addresses were also optional if the participants want to receive a copy of the research. The second section, which included seven items was intended to gather general information and opinions about politeness strategies. In this section, participants were supposed to determine to what extent they agree or disagree with a certain statement as described on a Likert scale of strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree as follows: See Appendix A for the full questionnaire.

As a student, you think politeness strategies must be taught from the early stages of learning a second language to avoid misunderstanding and conflicts.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

The third section involved seven situations in which the participants were supposed to choose the most polite response to a situation in their opinion. Each situation is followed by four choices in addition to one choice that carries the possibility to write students' answers. Each choice represents one of the four politeness strategies. While the first choice represents off-record answers, the second choice stands for on-record answers. The third and fourth choices represented positive and negative politeness as follows: See Appendix A.

Situation 7.

You came across your teacher in the hallway, and she asked you to help her to carry the projector to another building, you would say:

a. "I do not have time"
b. "I have to beat the clock!"
c. "I would be happy to help, but my class starts soon"
d. "I am very sorry, I have a class now, but I can help after that"

Other: ………………………………………………………………

2.3 Procedure

Participants were given clear instructions on how to answer the questionnaire just before they start. They also were provided with informed consent to sign in which the confidentiality of their information and voluntary participation is highlighted. In the beginning, they were told repeatedly that this study is voluntary and that they have every right to withdraw at any time. Also, they were told that filling out the questionnaire will take 7 to 10 minutes maximum. After that, they were asked to fill in their personal details (e.g., level of education, age, etc). Then, they were told that the questionnaire consists of three sections in which they are supposed to fill out their personal details and answer the questions of the study.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed manually using Microsoft Excel to calculate percentages, mean, and standard deviation. In addition to presenting the collected data in graphs and tables (See Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1. Mean and Standard Deviation

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Situation 1	2.44	2.03
Situation 2	2.76	2.26
Situation 3	2.36	1.918
Situation 4	2.72	2.366
Situation 5	2.52	2.059
Situation 6	3	2.56
Situation 7	2.6	2.90

Table 2. Percentage of the Use of Politeness Strategies (%)

	Bald on record	Off-record	Positive Politeness	Negative Politeness
Situation 1	4	4	28	64
Situation 2	0	4	68	28
Situation 3	0	12	12	76
Situation 4	0	32	12	56
Situation 5	0	4	48	44
Situation 6	8	4	68	20
Situation 7	4	4	44	48

3. Results

In this section, the findings of the study will be presented and discussed. In this study, the researcher aimed to investigate the most used politeness strategies that Saudi female students prefer to use in different situations besides gaining general information about students' awareness of the importance of those strategies.

3.1 Students' Awareness of Politeness and Politeness Strategies

This section of the questionnaire consisted of 7 statements in which the participants had to rate on a Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The purpose of this section was to gain general information about Saudi female students' awareness of politeness.

The findings of statement 1 have shown that the respondents with a percentage of 100% agreed that politeness plays a significant role in most formal interactions.

In statement 2, the responses have shown that 72% of the responses strongly agree that politeness strategies must be taught from the beginning of a second language learning journey. The rest of the responses also agree with this statement with a percentage of 28%. None of the participants strongly disagree nor disagree with the statement.

The results of statement 3 showed some variety among the participants (See Figure 1). The majority of the responses with a percentage of 48% have shown that the participants strongly agree that interacting with people for the first time needs to be direct and straightforward (M=3.28). In addition, participants who agreed with this statement represented 32% of the total. However, the rest of the participants disagreed with this statement with a percentage of 20% and (SD=2.97).
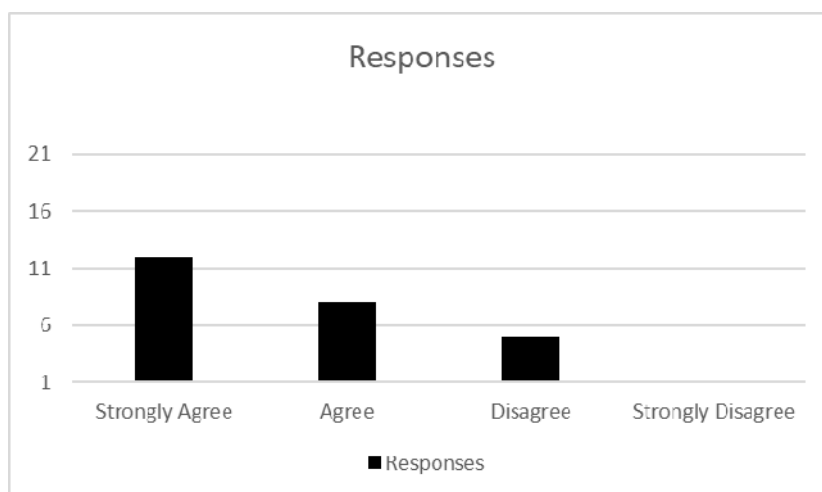

Figure 1. Shows whether people prefer to be direct while interacting for the first time or not

The findings of statement 4 have shown that 88% strongly agree and agree on the importance of being indirect in some situations.

Results of statement 5 showed that 68% of the participants either strongly agree or agree that being direct while asking for something in formal situations is impolite behavior. From this point of view, this can be found especially in power relations interactions. For example, while asking your teacher to explain a certain point in

the class, it is better to say, "I am sorry, but can you explain that point again?" instead of "Explain it again!" which can be considered impolite. However, 32% of the participants (SD=2.5), disagree with this statement.

The findings of statement 6 have shown that 76% of respondents believed that being indirect is the best way to refuse in interactions. Especially those interactions that involve power relations, such as those with managers, instructors, etc. In comparison, the rest of the respondents disagreed with this statement showing that the best way to refuse is to be direct. Those respondents represented 34% of the participants with a standard deviation of 2.65 (SD=2.65).

In statement 7. 88% of the respondents with (M=3.8) strongly agreed with using "Can you lend me a pen, please?" instead of using the statement that involves the use of an *off-record* strategy in requests.

3.2 The Frequent Use of Politeness Strategies by Saudi Female Students

In this section, the participants were provided with 7 situations. In which the respondents have chosen one answer of four. Some of them also wrote their answers. The purpose of this section is to gain information about the most used politeness strategies that Saudi female students prefer to use in different situations. In this section, the researcher answered the second question of this study.

- Situation 1

In dealing with this situation, the respondents used negative politeness to ask for what they needed. Such responses represented 64% of the total responses. On the other hand, 28% of the respondents (SD=2.03) preferred to use a positive politeness strategy that started with "Hey buddy", in which the respondent tried to show some kind of bonding before a request. The rest of the responses represented 8% of the total responses in which respondents preferred to be indirect and for those who provided their answers, such as "Hey, could I borrow a pen please, I forgot to bring mine". Another provided answer was "May I borrow your pen plz".

- Situation 2

In this situation, the respondent is supposed to refuse the teacher's offer to represent the class. The findings of this situation have shown that 68% of the respondents preferred to use positive politeness to turn down an offer. The rest of the respondents 28% believed that the best way to turn down an offer is to apologize, which indicates the use of the negative politeness strategy. However, 4% of the responses used the direct *off-record* strategy, which may be seen as impolite behavior because of the power inconsistency in such situations.

- Situation 3

The findings of this situation showed that 76% of the respondents used negative politeness to get some help. On the other hand, 12% chose to use an indirect way to ask for help (*off-record* strategy). Some of the participants with a percentage of 12% preferred to use a positive politeness strategy by providing a reason to help as in "I am transporting your papers".

- Situation 4

The results of this situation revealed that 56% of the respondents used negative politeness strategies to ask to turn the AC off. Some of the respondents also provided their answers, such as "Can we turn off the AC for a little bit, please?" which is also considered under the category of negative politeness. Interestingly, 32% of the respondents preferred to be indirect, so they used off-record strategies to imply that they were cold by saying "it is freezing in here" (See Figure 2).
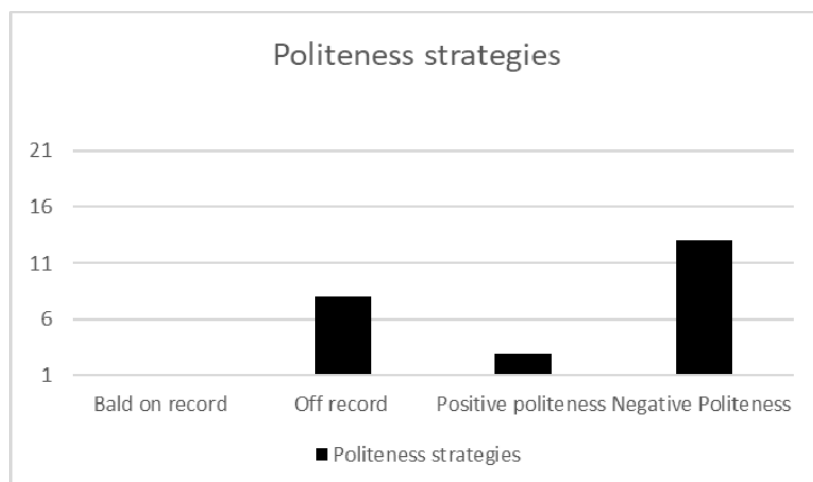
Figure 2. The Use of Politeness Strategies

- Situation 5

This situation involves a power inconsistency, in which the student is asking the teacher to explain an equation. The results of the responses to this situation were interesting somehow. While 48% of the respondents preferred to use positive politeness strategies by showing interest in what the teacher mistakenly explained first and asking the teacher to explain the equation afterward, 44% of the respondents believed that the best way to deal with this situation and redress the FTA is to use negative politeness strategies. It is also important to note that 4% of the responses showed that the perfect way to deal with this situation is to stay silent. They provided answers like "I'm not gonna say anything". This kind of behavior may shut down the communication between the teacher and students and create barriers that can be harmful to the students' communication skills.

- Situation 6

In this situation, the findings have shown that most of the respondents with a percentage of 68% used positive politeness strategies. However, 20% of the participants still think the best way to respond in this situation is to use negative politeness strategies.

- Situation 7

In this situation, the results showed that respondents either chose positive politeness strategies or negative politeness strategies in close percentages. 48% of the responses supported the results above and proved that Saudi female students realize that negative politeness is the most appropriate way in refusals.

4. Discussion

The first research question examined if female EFL learners at The University of Jeddah are aware of the importance of politeness and politeness strategies in different interactions. The inferential statistics of the first section of the questionnaire show that females have a considerable amount of awareness. As a result of this awareness, the participants can differentiate when and where to use each strategy. However, the participants' answers showed some varieties in responding to some statements such as in statement 3. The results indicated that this difference among responses may be due to personal preferences, that is, some participants think that directly treating people using off-record strategies for the first time may impact maintaining social relationships. Those who either strongly agreed or agreed to statement 3 are more likely to avoid conflicts or misunderstandings that may affect their face in such interactions.

Overall, female EFL learners at The University of Jeddah are aware of the importance of being polite in almost every situation that may occur. Taking into consideration that none of the participants have shown any odd reaction or any percentages of using off-record strategies that sometimes might be considered as the least favorable form of politeness strategies, especially in power inconsistency interactions. This was clear in the results of statement 7 in which the responses indicated that female students at the University of Jeddah are more likely to avoid direct requests.

The second research question observed if females at The University of Jeddah prefer to use certain politeness strategies. The results indicated that females have a high tendency to use negative politeness strategies,

especially in requests. Those results were supported by Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory, in which they stated that negative politeness is the most favorable form of politeness because it is considered the most polite strategy among the rest. The results also showed that participants preferred to use one politeness strategy in refusals unlike the results of Azwan (2018) on the Ambonese students who stated that Ambonenses are more likely to combine more than two or three strategies in refusals. Those differences in how people from different geographical places react to a situation are primarily due to the different cultural and linguistic backgrounds people belong to. In other words, what is considered polite in Saudi Arabia is not necessarily polite in other countries, and so on.

The results of the second research question also implied that the participants showed the ability to reduce FTAs using politeness strategies based on the situation itself. Take situation 7 as a great example. Although apologizing is considered polite (negative politeness strategy), participants preferred to show interest in the birthday party first (positive politeness strategy) and apologize for not attending. Those who used positive politeness to save the hearer's face are more likely to maintain relationships. This fact is supported by Brown and Levinson (1987) who discussed that positive politeness strategies are used among people who are in close relationships or those who are willing to bond.

In conclusion, based on the results discussed above, the present study investigated the use of politeness strategies for Saudi female Students at the University of Jeddah. The results of the study revealed that most of the females showed a high tendency to use negative politeness strategies in either requests or refusals. In addition, the results also have shown a high degree of awareness to use negative politeness strategies because it is considered the most polite form in those situations. The results also revealed that female students can differentiate between situations in which it is better to use either negative or positive strategies.

Based on the conclusion above, the researcher would like to provide future studies with the following suggestions. It is important to note that the use of politeness strategies may differ in many places around the world, so the researcher hopes to see resembling studies in different settings to find out if the findings are confirmed or disconfirmed.

As with all studies, there are a few limitations in this investigation. One limitation of this study is the lack of qualitative data that allows the participants to provide more concise data that can be beneficial to the body of knowledge. Another limitation of this study is the number of participants, that is, the more participants enroll in a study the more a researcher can draw general conclusions about a certain behavior. In the future, it would be more fruitful to see similar studies in different countries with more participants.

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Appendix A

A Questionnaire on politeness strategies used by female students at the University of Jeddah.

Thank you very much for your participation. Your time and efforts in providing the information are highly appreciated.

The questionnaire consists of two sections. Each section consists of 7 questions. In answering the questions, choose the answer that seems correct to you. Put in mind that there are no correct or wrong answers. You can use your own answers in section 2 when needed.

Section 1 Personal Details:

Name_____ (optional)

Age_____

Level of Education_____

E-mail_____ (Optional)

Section 2:

1- Politeness is a crucial part of formal interaction.

- Strongly Agree

- Agree

- Disagree

- Strongly disagree

2- As a student, you think politeness strategies must be taught from the early stages of learning a second language to avoid misunderstanding and conflicts.

- Strongly Agree

- Agree

- Disagree

- Strongly disagree

3- When interacting with people for the first time, you think it is better to be direct and straight to the point.

- Strongly Agree

- Agree

- Disagree

- Strongly disagree

4- Sometimes, it is better to be indirect to be considered a polite person in some situations.

- Strongly Agree

- Agree

- Disagree

- Strongly disagree

5- In asking about something in formal situations, directness can be considered an impolite behavior.

- Strongly Agree

- Agree

- Disagree

- Strongly disagree

6- Your boss at work asked you to take your colleague's duties for a week. The best way to refuse is to be indirect.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

7- In requests, you would say something like " can you lend me a pen, please?" Instead of "give me a pen".

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Section 3:

In this section, choose the most appropriate answer in your opinion. You can use your own answers when needed.

Situation 1:

You forgot your pen and you need to borrow one from your classmate, you would say:

   a. "Give me a pen"
   b. "Oh, I forgot to bring my pen"
   c. "Hey, buddy, I would appreciate it if you would let me use your pen"
   d. "I am sorry to bother you, but can I ask you for a pen or something?"
   e. Other: ………………………………………………………………

Situation 2:

Your teacher has recommended you to be the class leader to represent your class in front of the student government, you would say:

   a. "No"
   b. "That is not my type of activity"
   c. "I really appreciate your recommendation, but I already belong to another club"
   d. "I am very sorry but I cannot. I will find another student though"
   e. Other: ………………………………………………………………

Situation 3:

You are carrying a heavy stack of papers and you want your colleague to open the door for you, you would say:

   a. "Open the door for me"
   b. "The door is blocking my way."
   c. "I am transporting your papers, help me with the door, can you?"
   d. "Would you mind opening the door for me?"
   e. Other: ………………………………………………………………

Situation 4:

You are in a class and you feel cold, you want your teacher to turn off the AC, you would say:

   a. "Turn off the AC"
   b. "It is freezing in here"
   c. "Mind if we turn off the AC?"
   d. "Would you mind if we turn off the AC"
   e. Other: ………………………………………………………………

Situation 5:

You are taking a math class and you asked the teacher to explain an equation. The teacher said O.K and she

started to explain an equation that is not what you asked her about, you would say:

    a.   "It is the wrong equation"

    b.   "Now she is explaining something else" (Sarcastic)

    c.   "Excuse me, I would like to hear the explanation, but I would be glad if you could explain equation 1 because it is the equation I asked for"

    d.   "I am sorry to disturb you but I think you are explaining something other than what I asked for, can you check?"

    e.   Other: ………………………………………………………………

Situation 6:

Your friend has invited you to her birthday party. Unfortunately, you cannot go, you would say:

    a.   "I cannot come to your party"

    b.   "I have so much to do"

    c.   "I would be happy to celebrate your birthday, but I still have to submit my paper by the weekend"

    d.   "I am very sorry I cannot come to your party because I have to work on my paper"

    e.   Other: ………………………………………………………………

Situation 7:

You came across your teacher in the hallway, and she asked you to help her to carry the projector to another building, you would say:

    e.   "I do not have time"

    f.   "I have to beat the clock!"

    g.   "I would be happy to help, but my class starts soon"

    h.   "I am very sorry, I have a class now, but I can help after that"

    i.   Other: ………………………………………………………………