

## **Saudi Politeness: Request and Apology in the Context of Study and Work at King Abdulaziz University:A Pragmatic Study**

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### **Abstract**

The present study investigates the frequently used speech acts related to positive and negative politeness techniques employed in requests and apologies by faculty members at King Abdulaziz University. Social interaction on University Campus reflects Hejazi culture located in the Western Region of Saudi Arabia. The significance of the study arises from its focus on university-life interaction between faculty members as it provides an investigation of positive and negative politeness strategies. The paper tries to answer two questions: 1) Is there a relationship between the faculty's years of experience and the request strategies employed? 2) Is there a relationship between the faculty years of experience and the apology strategies used? To answer these questions, a Discourse Completion Test was developed and given to 30 faculty members. The findings of the study show that social power, which is derived from having more years of experience, affects the request and apology strategies used among Saudi female faculty members. Faculty members of an older generation tend to use syntactically more extended sentences in requests compared to their younger colleagues, to alleviate the sense of their social power and save others' sense of face. In contrast, the more youthful faculty members tended to use syntactically longer sentences in apologies compared to their older colleagues to show more respect. The study was conducted in Women Campus, and it is recommended to implement it on a larger scale with more participants to get more complete results.

*Keywords:* apology, face, mitigation, politeness strategies, softeners, syntactic down graders, request, speech acts

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## Introduction

The present study examines the relationship between the age of faculty members (age reflects years of experience and level of seniority) and the speech acts they use in forming requests and apologies. The study classifies positive and negative politeness techniques in requests and apologies occurring in social interaction among Saudi faculty members in work and study at King Abdulaziz University. The type of strategy used determines the syntactic structure of language. The objective of the study is to identify the differences between older generation faculty members and younger generation faculty members in using requests and apologies related to campus life and the work environment. The study answers the following questions: Is there a significant relationship between the age of faculty members and the syntactic structure of apologies and requests they use? There are differences in the speech acts determined by social constraints involved in the situation. For instance, requests directed to superiors may be communicated indirectly, while requests addressed to peers or colleagues might be phrased in a rather explicit language. The present study is interlingual; it deals with speech acts variations in using requests and apologies in Hejazi Arabic. Accordingly, a Discourse Completion Test was prepared in Arabic; it contained situations like those encountered in daily social interaction on Women Campus. The significance of this study is that, to the researcher's knowledge, there are no studies devoted solely to examining Hejazi Saudi female faculty use of request and apology speech acts, stating the factor of age (represented in the years of experience) as the significant indicator of the study. Moreover, the study attempts to analyze the syntactic structure of requests and apologies and reports if the participants' years of experience/age had a bearing on choosing particular syntactic down graders among older and younger generation faculty members.

## Literature Review

### *Theoretical Background*

#### *Politeness*

Politeness lies at the core of Pragmatics. Politeness strategies focus on augmenting the addressee's (positive face) and evading obligation (negative face) (Watts, 2003). Speakers and hearers should preserve one another's face and minimize the risks of face loss and embarrassment. Brown and Levinson (1978) put a scale to determine the degree of politeness carried out in a speech by a speaker in a specific situation. According to Brown and Levenson (1987), politeness strategies fall into five categories regarding speakers' choice to perform face-threatening acts (FTAs): "Bald on-record, positive politeness, off-record, and no FTA wherein the chances of face loss get minimized. shows these five categories" (p. 60). The five categories of Face-Saving Activity are shown in Figure one.

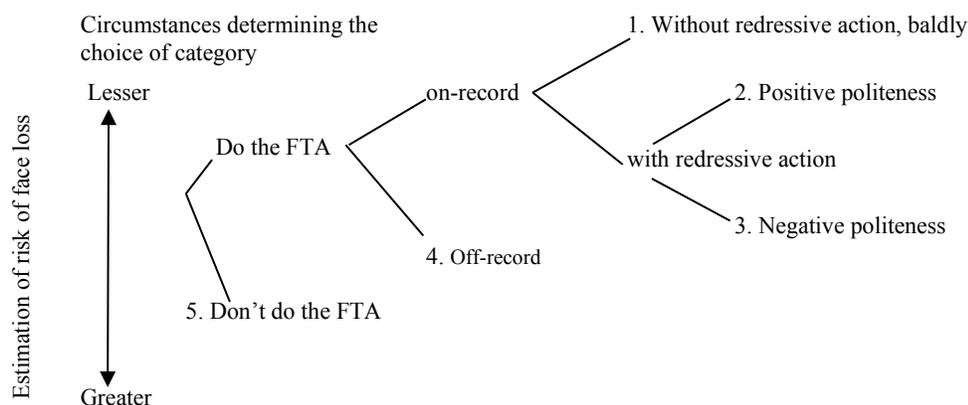


Figure 1. Brown & Levinson's (1987, p. 60) model of politeness strategies in Doing an FTA

Brown & Leveson's model explains that indirectness is closer to negative politeness. Using more words before a request and an apology creates an impression that the speaker is polite. A face-threatening behavior or a nasty request could lead to a long-term tribal conflict. The concept of face is essential. Brown and Levinson (1987) emphasize that "face is something that is emotionally invested and can be lost, maintained or enhanced and must be constantly attended to" (61). Since the face is the most crucial aspect in a dialogue, ignoring this concept can result in embarrassment and humiliation. Strategies are arranged hierarchically according to what extent they threaten the listener's self-esteem. In other words, asking people to do things indirectly sounds more polite. For instance, giving suggestions or hints instead of orders (e.g., I wonder if we can print some files"). On-record FTAs fall in between these two extremes. Negative politeness is less threatening than positive politeness because the latter supposes closeness between speakers and hearers. The speaker's and hearer's power, social distance and their position in their culture are major sociological variables determining their interaction (Brown & Levenson 1987). Mazid,(2008) maintains that "determining social distance involves considering the roles people are taking in relation to one another in a particular situation, as well as how well they know each other" (p. 18).

Lakoff adds the condition of clarity to politeness. Lakoff argues that "politeness is normally more important than clarity to promote inter-personal relationships and to build rapport between people" (pp 297-298). In addition, Leech (2003) assumes a politeness principle with the conversational maxims, which is essential for interaction. Leech divides politeness principles into six interpersonal categories, which emphasize the conversational aspect in human interaction. These maxims (Tact, Generosity, Approbation, Modesty, Agreement, and Sympathy) explain the bond/relationship between face and power in daily communication; using these maxims will result in a more polite interaction between speakers and hearers.

Hence, the literature review in the present study is relevant to investigating the speech acts used in requests and apologies at work and study at King Abdulaziz University. Many previous studies investigated apologies, such as Rizk (1997), Nuredden (2008), Ajaj (2012), Citinavci (2012), and Al-Sobh (2013). Apology studies in Saudi society include Al-shalawi

(2001), Al-Ghamdi (2013), Alsulayyi (2016) and Qari (2017). Many studies on requests were performed on Saudi society, i.e. Al-Amar (2000), Aba-Alalaa (2009), Al-Oqaili & Tawalbei (2012), Aubeid (2012), Alsulami. S. Q. (2015), Al-Ageel (2016), and Qari (2017).

### ***Speech Acts of Request***

Speech acts are representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations, according to Searle (1969). Requests are among the daily usages of speech acts; communications between interlocutors usually commence with a request. Several linguistic structures can convey requests, which can be declarative, interrogatives, or imperatives. Requests are face-threatening acts; to avoid offending the listener, a speaker must adopt some strategies (Achiba, 2003). Indirectness and politeness affect face in requests speech acts. Speakers need to resort to indirectness to decrease and mitigate the threat of losing face hindering conversational interaction. Politeness is parallel to the indirectness of request.

### ***Request Categories and Strategy Classification***

Direct strategies convey only one illocutionary force or purpose, whereas indirect strategies, on the other hand, imply various meanings. Trosborg (1995) grouped the strategies used to form requests: direct, hearer-based, speaker-based, and indirect. Earlier research papers provided the base to these strategies, especially the studies of Austin (1962), Searle (1969), Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), and the experiments of Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984). Trosborg's taxonomy of request strategies will be the same model used for classifying the responses of participants in the present study. The categories range from direct to indirect, or from the least polite to the polite responses, which fall between direct and indirect strategies.

### ***Speech Acts of Apology***

Apologizing is a speech act that includes numerous methods and sub-strategies. Olshtain (1989) defines an apology as a verbal act that expresses support for the offended addressee. The speaker is willing to degrade himself to guarantee that the apologies are face-saving acts for the hearer while also being a face-threatening act. Apologies are labeled to be expressive speech acts, according to Searle (1969).

### **Methods**

The present study employs Trosborg's Taxonomy of request realization strategies (1995) to classify and analyze participants' strategies in making requests. This model has been chosen for easiness of application. Participants gave responses that were categorized according to this taxonomy. As a result, their requests were classified as direct (if they are in the form of obligations or orders), or indirect (if requests are given in the form of hints). Between these two extremes, requests can be conventionally indirect (speaker-based) or hearer-based.

Apology responses were analyzed using Olshtain's and Cohen's classification of apology strategies. It consists of five major parts: An expression of apology, an explanation of the excuse, an acknowledgment of the responsibility, an offer of repair (which is always voluntarily done), and a promise of not repeating the mistake.

The Discourse Completion Test (DCT) link was distributed among faculty via WhatsApp. The DCT had ten questions; participants required about ten minutes to write the

answers. Participants were told to write the first answer or response that came to their minds. Apology responses were classified and analyzed according to apology strategies that Olshtain and Cohen (1983) created. Request strategies were classified according to Trosborg (1995).

### **Participants**

The sample in this study consisted of 30 Saudi female faculty members teaching at King Abdulaziz University who belong to the Women Campus. The sample subjects live in the Region of Mekkah, the heart of Hejazi culture. They have work experience ranging from three to over twenty-five years. The study was conducted in May 2021 before summer vacation. The sample contained both newly appointed and instructors, with expertise reaching 25 years. Also, the sample included various academic ranks: instructors, lecturers, assistant professors, and associate professors. The study investigates the element of years of experience (which is a status indicator) and its effect on selecting the politeness strategies used in requests and apologies used among faculty members on Women Campus. The following chart represents the range of years of experience, which is an indicator of the age participants had.

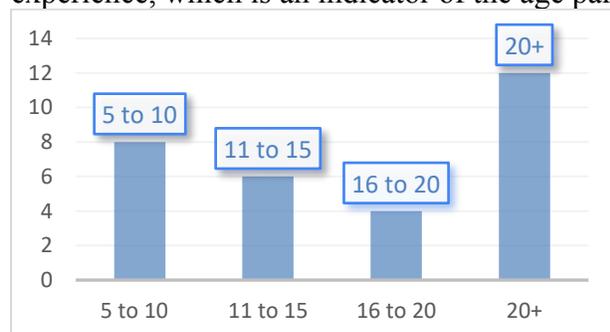


Figure 2. Participants' years of experience

Participants received a WhatsApp message containing a link to answer the Discourse Completion Test (DCT). Among the 40 Faculty members who received the link, only 30 responded and agreed to participate in the study. The participants were given specific instructions to write down the first thought that came to their minds and to use colloquial everyday Arabic employed in real-life social interactions on campus.

### **Research Instruments**

A Discourse Completion Test (DCT) was prepared to investigate how Saudi female faculty make requests and apologies in their native Hegazi dialect. The DCT tool is well-known for its high reliability, according to Yamashita, (1996). In addition, it is a "production questionnaire" since it reveals participants' pragmatic competence in a real-life context. In building up the questions of the DCT, the researcher benefited from the design of similar DCTs created by Blum-Kulka (1982), Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1986), Cetinavci (2012), Alzebaree and Yavuz (2017), and Qari (2017).

The DCT was created to reflect real situations occurring on campus; it introduced realistic incidents in an open-ended format. The first five situations of the DCT prompted requests and the last five elicited apologies. The setting and context of each discourse sequence were explained in each situation. Also, there was a clarification of the distance and power between the interlocutors. Participants were required to fill the blank slot after each written

situation; they had to state the answers usually given in similar real-life situations. Participants needed about ten minutes to write their responses to the DCT situations.

**Procedures**

After designing the DCT, two colleagues revised and proofread its content and language. Then, the researcher created a google form of the DCT and sent its link via WhatsApp and email to 45 participants because it was quarantine time; face-to-face meetings were not possible. Responses were received from 30 participants only. There was a prerequisite that all the participating faculty members to be of Saudi nationality, specifically from the Region of Mekkah. In addition, the DCT form contained a part collecting the participants’ data (years of experience, age ...etc.). The reason for investigating the years of experience factor is that it indicates participants’ ages, and their status in the educational institute.

**Results**

The results answered the research questions. The first research question: Is there a relationship between faculty members’ years of experience and the request strategies they produce? The results of the DCT contained a total number of 300 responses (150 requests and 150 apologies since each one of the 30 faculty members has written five requests and five apologies). The first part of the DCT had five situations that required writing requests. The responses contained 14 (10%) indirect requests, 30 (21%) conventionally indirect (speaker-based) requests, (62%) conventionally indirect (hearer-based) and only ten (7%) direct performative requests. This means 83% of the responses are indirect. This result reflects faculty members’ use of negative politeness strategies to save the hearer’s face. Comparing responses to the faculty members’ ages showed that older faculty use more indirect requests than younger faculty. The reason behind that could be their desire to mitigate the social power acquired from their status as seniors. Table three explains in detail the distribution of responses:

Table 1. Applying Taxonomy of request realization strategies

	Categories	Request strategies	Examples	Situation 1	Situation 2	Situation 3	Situation 4	Situation 5	Total	
1	Indirect	Hints	Statement	2	2	2	2	6	14	14
2	Conventionally indirect (Speaker-based)	Wishes	I would like to ...	0	2	2	8	0	12	30
		Desires/needs	I want/need to...	6	2	10	0	0	18	
3	Conventionally indirect (hearer-based)	Ability	Can/could you ...	10	6	4	0	8	28	88
		Willingness	Would you...?	8	8	2	6	6	30	
		Permission	May I...?	0	2	8	10	0	20	
		Suggestory formula	How about...?	4	0	2	4	0	10	
4	Direct	Elliptical phrase	Your book.	0	0	0	0	0	0	10
		Performative	I ask you to ...	0	0	0	0	10	10	
		imperatives	Lend me your book.	0	0	0	0	0	0	

Note 1. Adapted from Trosborg (1995, p. 219)

To provide a visual representation of results, Figure two shows the ratio of each strategy used: Most requests were hearer-based (62%). Then, speaker-based (21%) came second in rank. The indirect request strategies and hints represented (10%) and (7%) respectively. Direct requests were used with students to highlight the elements of social power to maintain

discipline:

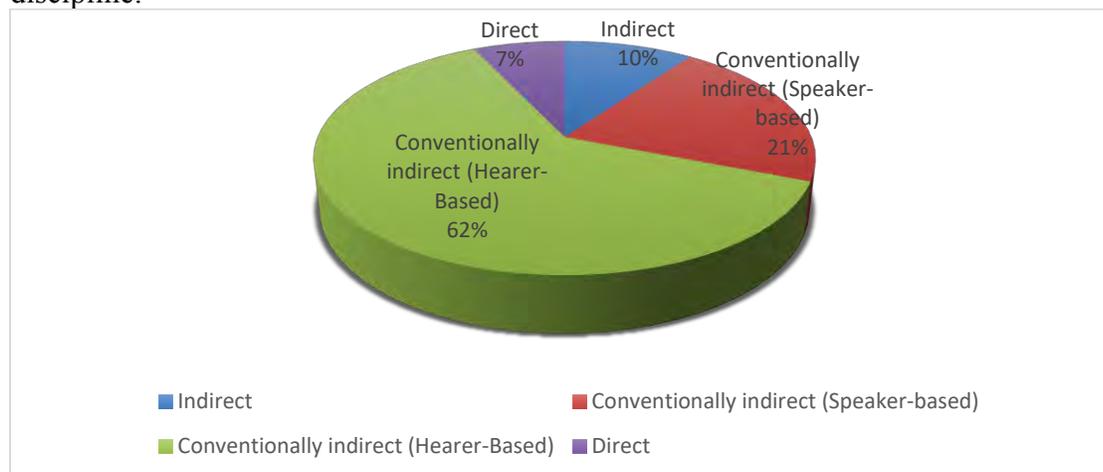


Figure 3. Participants' use of request realization strategies

In direct requests, participants tended to employ indirect strategies. Direct methods (i.e., imperatives) were not used by anyone because they have negative implications in Hejazi culture.

The second research question: Is there a relationship between faculty members years of experience and the apology strategies they produce? Analyzing participants' responses shows that they used more than one apology in the meantime: younger faculty members tended to employ more extended syntactic formulas in their apologies compared to their older colleagues. For example, an apology statement could be accompanied by a justification and confession of responsibility or an offer of repair. Table four demonstrates in detail the exact distribution of the used strategies.

Table 2. Classification of participants' use of apology strategies

	Apology strategy	Example	Situation					Total No. of strategies		
			Situation 1	Situation 2	Situation 3	Situation 4	Situation 5			
1	Expression of apology	An expression of regret	I'm sorry	18	6	14	6	18	62	160
		An offer of apology	Excuse me	4	14	24	24	8	74	
		A request for forgiveness	Forgive me	14	0	6	2	2	24	
2	Explanation or account of the situation	(e.g., I forgot)	I forgot	16	28	24	30	28	126	126
3	Acknowledgment of responsibility	Accepting the blame	It's my mistake	12	0	24	0	0	36	140
		Expressing self-deficiency	I was absent-minded	2	0	16	16	18	52	
		Recognizing the other person as a deserving apology	You're right	6	0	0	0	0	6	
		Expressing lack of intent	I did not do it on purpose	14	0	0	14	18	46	
4	An offer of repair		I'll clean the desk	8	8	22	14	10	62	62
5	Promise of forbearance		This is the last time	0	0	0	20	10	30	30

Note 2. Adapted from Cohen, Olshtain & Rosenstein (1985, p.8)

The expression of apology contained three sub-strategies: showing regret, an offer of apology and asking for forgiveness –160 responses reflected in the percentage of (22%). There were 126 (27%) responses containing explanations or justification of the apology. The acknowledgment of responsibilities is evident in 140 responses (31%). Then, the offer of repair got 62 answers (13%). The responses which provide a promise of forbearance received a percentage of (7%) representing 30 responses.



Figure 4. Distribution of apology strategies

Participants, according to Figure four, employ more strategies at a time and resort to using more extended syntactic formulas of apology. The results support the hypothesis that negative politeness strategies are highly utilized. The high ratio of indirectness reflects a high level of negative politeness in the Hejazi culture represented in on-campus interaction. Social power is minimized in apology patterns. The older faculty members are aware of their status; they are already warranted. Younger faculty members use more than one strategy to create solid and effective apologies. Perhaps this is a way to compensate for the difference in social power.

## Discussion

### Requests

Arabic language is not as rich in modals as English is. As a natural compensation, there is an obvious use of intensifiers (e.g., very, really ...etc.) and religious softeners (e.g., prayers of good wishes). While investigating the aspects of social power among teachers, it was noted that participants use rather indirect language with their superiors (heads) and students. However, they might use rather direct strategies with their peers. It goes with the social norms of the Arabic culture to be even gentler with those who have less power (e.g., younger colleagues).

For instance, in a request situation which faculty members had to answer, one of the participants mentions softening expressions like) beautiful ladies, speak in a lower tone, please يا لوسم صبحي غزي ذاتي يا بيت (لجوات وطوا الصوت من فضلكم). (Could you please, dear ones, speak quietly. It is a request alleviated by a softener (dear ones). Also, 95% of the requests were mitigated by religious softeners like prayers: (May Allah grant you happiness (اللله يسعدك) May Allah reward you (اللله يجزاك). Employing conditionals helps listeners save their face and allow an option of refusal to the hearer (e.g., If you could- if possible- if it is OK-. إذا ممكن ليقدر يلو. م.م. Social power in that context stems from a speaker's ability to save face. It is essential not to

embarrass the addressee. Faculty members of older age tend to use more extended sentences in requests as they use more semantically compound structures. For example, one of the participants wrote the following request: )May Allah grant you happiness. I know I am asking for a lot. But I had an emergency. If it is not going to bother you, could you please replace me in class tomorrow? (هل العيس عدك صييتي. عرافة راح نقول على كيبس عودي ظرف طارئ وإذا طهي لقال فة أعتاج في كنت غطي The more indirect the response is, the more extended the sentences are. Most of the participants employed more than one strategy to form their requests.

### Apology

The second part of the DCT had five apology situations. Most of the answers to these five DCT questions, which the 30 teachers have given, contained the words )I am sorry (أعذر--أسفة) with intensifiers meaning (very/really sorry (مررة أسفة جدا. Sentences usually start with the apology formula. Then, excuses or explanations are provided later. The results are in concordance with Alsulayyi (2016) when it comes to taking responsibility and promise of repair. All the responses related to apology contained Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID) such as (I am sorry, I beg your pardon, I apologize, forgive me...etc.).

Data analysis has also shown that faculty members with younger age tend to use more extended sentences (e. g. longer semantic formulas) while apologizing. For instance, in one of the situations, a participant says: (Dear ones, I apologize to you. I swear I forgot about it. I am sorry. Really, it didn't come to my mind (أعذر بكم عني زبني، طولاً مرقسريت. أسف قبس من جد راح عن بيلدي. Really, it didn't come to my mind). Apologies contained both explanations and excuses simultaneously. All the participants offered to provide repair or compensation, or redress. Also, all forms of apology were accompanied by one or more strategies: explaining (e.g., my brother tore your book apart); stating responsibility for the mistake (e. g., It's my mistake/fault); pledging or promising forbearance (e. g., This will not happen again).

Based on the Discourse Completion Test data, the elicited responses of participants were analyzed, bearing in mind the social power aspect represented by the years of experience. The findings go in agreement with Cetinavici's study (2012). The apologetic and request speech conform to many shared realization patterns. Apology and request are shaped by the social and interpersonal atmosphere involved in a particular situation. Giving excuses, explanations, justifications, reasons, and pretexts are always associated with apologies (Benoit, 1997). The most common method utilized by Arabs, according to Al-Zumor (2003), was taking on responsibility. The present research results concord with Qari's (2017), who concludes that IFIDs and taking responsibility were the most widely used methods of apologizing. The results are similar to Altayari's (2017) results, which proved that IFID were the most used strategies. She concluded that showing regret is more essential than asking for forgiveness among Saudi men and women. In addition, the present results agree with Alageel (2016), who studied requests and apologies in Pidgin Arabic.

The research significance arises from its realistic explanation of social power between faculty members and their peers, superiors, and inferiors in daily exchange on campus. It is essential to grasp the social and cultural background of Hegazi culture and its keen respect of face which is very sensitive. Politeness strategies are strictly followed among faculty members in their social interaction with peers and students on women campus. It is recommended to

investigate the aspects of social power in the interaction of faculty members on Men Campus, too, to form a complete evaluation of gender and social power elements (represented in the years of experience in this study).

### Conclusion

The present study attempted to answer two questions: 1) Is there a relationship between the faculty members' years of experience and the request strategies employed? 2) Is there a relationship between the faculty members' years of experience and the apology strategies used? The study is a recent account of how social power, represented in the years of experience, shows itself in employing indirect strategies of politeness. Syntactic down graders (especially the embedded 'if' clause) characterize requests. Additionally, extended syntactic formulas (the use of two or three request or apology expressions) were employed to add emphasis and save face among interlocutors. The study fills a gap in literature because, to the researcher's knowledge, it is the first study to be fully dedicated to investigating request and apology among Saudi female faculty in the Hejazi region, bearing in consideration the elements of social power and distance together with the factors of age and experience of the participating faculty members. Faculty members are more apt to use negative indirect politeness techniques in requests and apologies because the culture of Hejaz -and Saudi Arabia in general- is known for its tolerance and commitment to the religious teachings; in this place of the world indirectness conveys a great deal of respect which is shown in using indirect politeness strategies. Faculty members of older age used syntactically more extended sentences in requests to alleviate the impact of their social power (power is mainly derived from old age and long work experience; both necessitate respect from younger generation faculty members) and save others' (younger faculty members) face and dignity. Faculty members of younger age tended to employ syntactically more extended apologies. The study has been conducted at Women Campus. It is recommended to implement it on a larger scale to include other campuses and universities.

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**Appendices**  
**Appendix A**  
**Faculty Discourse Completion Test**

**Personal Information:**

**Residence:** in Jeddah

Outside Jeddah

**Age:** 20-29  30-39

40-49

50-60

**Years of experience:** Less than five

5-10  11-15

16-20

20+

**Part A: Request**

1. You have personal circumstances which require your absence from work for two days. You must find someone to replace you. You ask your colleague to replace you, saying:

(\_\_\_\_\_.)

2. You face a problem while printing an urgent file. You need to go to a neighboring office, and you know for sure that your colleague is very busy. You will ask her to print the file for you saying:

(\_\_\_\_\_.)

3. Your colleague has prepared an excellent PowerPoint presentation, and you inform her that it will be helpful if it is used in your class. You tell her:

(\_\_\_\_\_.)

4. After reaching campus, you discover that you have no money. You ask your colleague to lend you a hundred Riyals. You say:

(\_\_\_\_\_.)

5. Some students are chatting in a loud voice in front of your office, which is disturbing you. You want them to keep quiet, you say:

(\_\_\_\_\_.)

**Part B: Apology**

6. When you were at your colleague's office, you accidentally spilled coffee on her desk. You apologize, saying:

(\_\_\_\_\_.)

7. You promised your colleague that you would replace her when she is absent. But, for unexpected circumstances, you cannot accomplish your promise. You apologize, saying:

(\_\_\_\_\_.)

8. You borrowed a book from your colleague. But you lost it. You apologize, saying:

(\_\_\_\_\_.)

9. You had an agreement with your students to offer them an extra class before the final exam. But you had other work responsibilities and you forgot to give that class. You apologize to your students, saying:

(\_\_\_\_\_.)

10. You have an important meeting with your coordinator, but you forgot it. Later she asks you about the reason for not coming. You apologize, saying:

(\_\_\_\_\_.)