Iraqi EFL Learners' Utilization of Politeness Strategies in Criticism

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استخدام متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL) العراقيين لاستراتيجيات اللباقة في النقد

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Abstract

Although the speech act of criticism is used often in everyday interactions, it has gotten little attention in EFL environments in comparison with other speech acts. Thus, the current study aims to fill a gap in this respect via finding: (1): Investigating the use of politeness strategies by Iraqi EFL learners while presenting their criticisms in different everyday contexts. (2): Identifying whether the gender and the educational level of the Iraqi EFL learners have a significant role in selecting a particular form of criticisms in the context of politeness strategies. Achieving these aims, a closed-ended Multiple-choice Discourse Completion Task (MDCT) was utilized to collect data from 80 Iraqi EFL students who are studying English at College of Education, University of Babylon during the academic year (2021-2022). Forty of them are fourth-year undergraduate students, and the other forty are postgraduate students enrolled in MA and Ph.D. programs. Each of these two groups is gender-balanced. After data collection, SPSS software is employed to conduct inferential and descriptive analysis. According to the findings of the study, Iraqi EFL students are aware of the politeness strategies that are implicit in the speech act of criticism. It has also been discovered that, in contrast to educational level, gender has a significant impact in selecting the most acceptable form of criticism in terms of politeness.

Keywords: EFL learners, politeness, criticism, educational status, and gender.

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الملخص

ان فعل الكلام المتمثل في النقد يستخدم كثيرا في التواصل اليومي ,الا انه لم يحظ باهتمام كبير في استخدام اللغة الانكليزية كلغة اجنبية مقارنة بأفعال الكلام الاخرى وبالتالي تهدف الدراسة الى ملأ هذه الفجوة في هذا الصدد من خلال ١: التحقيق في استخدام متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية كلغة اجنبية العراقيين لاستراتيجيات المجاملة اثناء تقديم انتقاداتهم في سياقات يومية مختلفة، ٢: تحديد فيما اذا كان الجنس والمستوى التعليمي لمتعلمي اللغة الانكليزية كلغة اجنبية العراقيين لهما دور مهم في اختيار شكل معين من الانتقادات في استراتيجيات المجاملة. ولتحقيق هذه الاهداف تم استخدام مهمة اكمال الخطاب متعددة الخيارات المغلقة (MCDT)، لجمع البيانات من ٨٠ طالبا وطالبة من كلية التربية للعلوم الانسانية –جامعة بابل للعام الدراسي (٢٠٢١– ٢٠٢٢) اربعون منهم في السنه الرابعة في مرحلة البكالوريوس واربعون اخرون من طلبة الدراسات العليا الماجستير والدكتوراه) كل من هاتين المجموعتين متوازنة من حيث الجنس وبعد جمع البيانات تم استخدام برنامج (SPSS) لإجراء التحليل الاستدلالي والوصفي ووفقا لنتائج الدراسة ,فان طلبة اللغة الانكليزية كلغة اجنبية العراقيين على دراية باستراتيجيات اللياقة الضمنية في فعل الكلام النقدي، وعلى عكس المستوى التعليمي فان الجنس له تأثير كبير في اختيار الكلمات الاكثر قبولا للنقد من حيث اللياقة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المتعلمين، اللغة الإنكليزية، الأدب، النقد، الوضع التعليمي، والجنس.

1.Introduction

It is significant to mention that speakers, in general, employ a variety of speech acts to create particular language functions. Criticizing others for their undesirable actions is one of these functions. Criticism is defined, in the literature, as the act of expressing dissatisfaction with someone and or with the way they use to do something (Tracy et.al, 1987); (, Wierzbicka, 1987) and (Nguyen, 2008) or a kind of negative assessment (Tsui ,1994) and (Hyland,2000) that speakers resort to improve their hearers' actions or behaviours (El-Dakhset.al.,2019).

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As criticism is a sensitive activity that exists in every aspect of human communication (Tracy et.al.,1987), criticizers must assess their relationships with their addressee(s) in advance to avoid possible conflicts between them (Tang,2016); and (Lin,2020) and. The current study has been conducted to fill a gap in this respect. The study aims at (1). Investigating the use of politeness strategies by Iraqi EFL learners while presenting their criticisms in different everyday contexts. (2) Identifying whether the gender and the educational level of the Iraqi EFL learners have a significant role in selecting a particular form of criticisms in the context of politeness strategies. The current study tries to find answers to the following questions:

1. What is the most common politeness strategy utilized by Iraqi EFL learners while presenting their criticisms at the global level and each level of relationship between the criticizers and their addressee(s)?
2. Does the gender of the Iraqi EFL learners have a significant role in selecting a particular form of criticisms in terms of politeness strategies?
3. Does the educational level of the Iraqi EFL learners have a significant role in selecting a particular form of criticisms in terms of politeness strategies?

2. Literature review
2.1. General background

A considerable amount of literature has been devoted to the study of the speech act of criticism, but a few of them have focused on its use by EFL learners. Starting with Nguyen (2005) and Nguyen (2008) who investigated how Vietnamese EFL learners produce and respond to criticism compared with English native speakers. Her data were collected from 36 Vietnamese EFL learners and 24 native speakers of Australian English via engaging them in criticising their peers' writings. They were guided to base their criticism on three main criteria: the organizational structure of the writing, its grammatical structure, and its quality The study focused on examining the strategies used by the subjects to express direct criticism (negative evaluation, disapproval, expression of disagreement,

statement of the problem, statement of difficulty, and consequences) and those that are used to express indirect criticism (correction, indicating standard, demand for change, request for change, advice about change, suggestion for change, expression of uncertainty, asking/presupposing, and other hints). In addition, Nguyen (2005) compared the use of mitigating devices such as steers, sweeteners, disarmers, grounders, down toners, and cajolers as used by her participants while producing their criticism to each other. The results showed substantial differences between the Vietnamese EFL learners and the English native speakers when it came to their preference for realising strategies, semantic formulas, and mitigating devices.

(Nguyen,2013) modified her previous model to compare the use of only four criticizing strategies (namely: straightforward criticisms, demands for change, suggestions, and opt-outs) by Vietnamese EFL learners but in institutional situations other than criticising their peers' writings. The results demonstrate that the learners' criticism differs greatly from that of English native speakers. Unlike native English speakers who employ a variety of techniques, Vietnamese EFL leaners rely heavily on direct criticism. With regard to mitigating devices, the two groups revealed a wide range of variances as well.

In a similar vein, Abdullah (2013) compared the realization of producing criticism and responding to it by Egyptian EFL learners with American native speakers. The data were then measured on the basis of the employment of semantic formulae, modifiers, and the quantity of speech employed. As a result of his research, he was able to identify significant parallels and contrasts between the American and Egyptian realisations of the two speech acts in concern.

Utilising Nguyen's (2005and 2008) earlier framework, Zhu (2018) compared the proficiency level of English in using the speech act of criticism by Chinese EFL learners across both production and perception levels. The findings of this study demonstrate that the proficiency level does have an impact on the learners' performance: the link is not only

positive and negative, but also it varies depending on the semantic formulae or modifiers used in the sentences.

Thus, the review of relevant literature demonstrates unequivocally that the speech act of criticism in an EFL context is still under-researched, and the researchers were unable to locate any study that investigated politeness strategies used by EFL learners while practising criticism in various everyday situations. More particularly, the current study draws on the face-saving perspective in Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework of politeness strategies to investigate the politeness of criticism as used by Iraqi EFL learners with particular reference to their genders and language proficiency. Hence, the sections below will be devoted to present an account of the relationship between politeness and the speech act of criticism.

2.1. Politeness and criticism

Brown and Levinson (1987) adopt Coffman's concept of "face" which can stated as the public picture of oneself that each member of a community aspires to project. The concept of face was divided into: positive and negative. Positive face indicates people's desire to be adored and preserve a positive social image whereas negative face represents people's wish to be appreciated and free of intrusion. Any attempt to harm or breach the privacy of another "face-threatening act" (henceforth FTA) will be the result. According to the authors (Brown and Levinson ,1987) speakers can avoid or mitigate the harm that FTA may do by employing one or more of four universal super-strategies: bald on-record politeness, on-record positive politeness, on-record negative politeness, or off-record politeness. Mubarak and Rhaif, (2021) state that these strategies can be viewed as means to soften the potential behaviours that might lead to damage the public face of our interlocutors. In this classification, the strategies for being polite were classified according to the extent to which the speakers and listeners reduce the threat and save their public images when they converse

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According to Brown and Levinson (1987) , two primary factors influence speakers to adopt one of the four politeness methods: payoffs and the circumstances. The first is related to the payoffs or benefits a speaker will get when using a particular strategy. The second is concerned with the social variables that control the situation in which the speaker and the hearer are engaged. These variables include the social distance between the speaker and the hearer, their relative power, and the absolute ranking of imposition. According to Renkema and Schubert (2018), speakers need to use these three parameters to measure the weight of their relationship with their addressees prior to express their messages or thoughts towards them.

In accordance with Brown and Levinson's (1987) view, the speech act of criticism, impedes the positive face of the addressee(s) by depriving them of their right to be valued (Tsui, 1994). Riekkinen (2009) assures that criticism is a form of FTA as it reflects negative opinion of the person on the receiving end. Thus, such potentially humiliating aspect of criticism obligates the criticizers to weigh the potential harm their words will cause before encoding their messages, taking into account their social distance with their addressee (s), their relative powers, and the absolute ranking of the situation in which they are engaged (Tang, 2016). And (Lin, 2020).

For this study, the researcher employed Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework of politeness strategies in which is based on the basic premise that communication is inherently "face-threatening" and that it is required to maintain either positive and /or negative face of the participants .The researcher is particularly concerned with the model's assumption that speakers go through a number of evaluative procedures in order to determine the weight of a particular face-threatening behavior while selecting a particular politeness strategy.

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3. Research Methodology
3.1 Participants

For the purpose of the study, a total of 80 Iraqi EFL learners of English are randomly selected to participate voluntarily in the present study from the department of English at the University of Babylon - Iraq. Forty of them are selected to represent undergraduate Iraqi EFL learners (fourth year students) and another forty to represent the postgraduates (M.A and Ph. D candidates). The educational level here is taken to represent the level of proficiency in English. Furthermore, each of these groups are selected to be gender-balanced i.e., half of each sub-group are selected to represent Iraqi EFL female learners and the other half to represent the males. At the outset of the test, the researcher provided the participant a brief introductory about the nature of the test and asked to participate freely without mentioning their names on the test form. In addition, their consent to participate in the test was taken as well .(see the test in the attached file https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ET3_qigVGXEQBJ-pBM3ffmyrqaJQPMCH/view?usp=sharing)

3.2 Data collection

The data of this study were collected through constructing a Closed Multiple-choice Discourse Completion Task (MDCT) consisting of 12 items (see the attached file https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ET3_qigVGXEQBJ-pBM3ffmyrqaJQPMCH/view?usp=sharing).

For each item, four choices of criticism have been set. The themes of each two situations were selected to represent different social variables of the assumed relationship between the criticizers and their recipients as shown in table (1).

Table 1: The social variables of the situation of criticism in the MDCT

Situation No.	Social status		Social distance
	Criticizer	Receipt	
1 &2	high	low	high
3&4	high	low	low
5&6	low	high	high
7&8	low	high	low
9&10	equal	equal	high
11&12	equal	equal	low

3 .3 Data coding

Data were coded based on Brown and Levenson's (1987) framework of politeness where various strategies for encoding face-threatening behaviours are considered. Four criticism choices have been set in the respective order from the most direct to the least direct: bald-on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record politeness. Each of these super strategies is realised by various sub-strategies. Moreover, the criticism choices were coded to fit the situations in which they are set and formulated in accordance with the semantic items and syntactic patterns of criticism proposed by Holmes (1995).

4. Data Analysis and discussion of Results

Version 26.0 of the IBM SPSS was employed to quantify the subjects' answers. First, Cronbach's alpha was used to examine the internal consistency of the test. Second, Levene's statistics was employed to measure the homogeneity of the data. Third, descriptive statistics were called upon to state the frequencies, means, and percentages of the data. Finally, Linear Regression was adopted to check the correlation in using the politeness strategies in terms of gender and educational level of the subjects.

Responding to the MDCT appears to have been simple for the students, as they merely select the suitable choice, they thought suit the situation. The total number of responses is 80 (participants) x 12

(situations), or 960, due to the learners' full participation. Due to the learners' requirement to select the proper option from four options, all of these responses have been considered as valid. It is vital to examine the value of Cronbach's alpha before conducting any content analysis. The SPSS statistics shows that Cronbach's alpha is 0. 723, emphasizing the internal unity of the questionnaire items. Then, using SPSS, Levene's statistics of variance homogeneity was conducted to determine if the intended sample is truly homogenous in nature.

Table 2: Levene's Test for Equality of Variances

Qs	Variance in gender		Variance in educational level	
	F	Sig.	F	Sig.
Q1	0.197	0.658	3.232	0.069
Q2	3.419	0.07	1.136	0.29
Q3	2.159	0.146	0.231	0.632
Q4	0.68	0.412	0.941	0.335
Q5	0.003	0.953	0.061	0.806
Q6	0.983	0.325	1.69	0.197
Q7	0.023	0.881	6.786	0.011
Q8	0.163	0.687	2.179	0.144
Q9	0.783	0.379	3.212	0.063
Q10	3.389	0.069	0.751	0.389
Q11	3.934	0.051	0.258	0.613
Q12	1.045	0.31	0.228	0.634

The significant level of Levene's homogeneity test is displayed in the "Sig" column of the table. It is conducted for all the 12 questions was > 0.05, indicating that the assumption of homogeneity of variance was valid.

The descriptive analysis in Table 2 below reveals that Iraqi EFL learners rely heavily on positive and negative politeness strategies with respective percentages 43.85% and 32.29%, when presenting their criticisms. One sample t- test shows their preference to these strategies is significant with a level of significance of 0.047 which is < 0.05.

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(Table 2) Overall use of politeness strategies.

Politeness strategies	Freq.	Percentage	Mean	Std. Deviation
Bald-on record	111	11.56%	9.25	4.43386
Positive politeness	421	43.85%	35.0833	9.63383
Negative politeness	310	32.29%	25.8333	7.28427
Off-record politeness	118	12.29%	9.8333	7.0946

The following descending ranking of politeness strategies used by Iraqi EFL learners in response to criticisms can be determined by considering the means: (1) positive politeness, (2) negative politeness, (3) off-record politeness, and (4) bald-on record. The standard deviation values indicate that no value outweigh its corresponding mean value. This indicates that the income learners' performance is reliable. As such, the learners were conscious of their responses and that means they were not given by chance.

Moreover, the analysis in Table 3 below indicates that Iraqi EFL learners prefer using positive politeness strategies with a percentage of 55.00% over other strategies in the first two situations (1&2). In these two situations, the criticism goes from high social status to low social status with a high social distance between the criticizers and their assumed addressees. For the next two situations (3&4) where the criticism goes in the same direction of the first two but the social distance between the assumed participants is low, the preference was on the employment of negative politeness.

(Table 3) The distribution of politeness strategies in terms of social situations.

Qs	bald-on		positive		negative		off-record	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
1&2	16	10.00%	88	55.00%	40	25.00%	16	10.00%
3 & 4	19	11.88%	61	38.13%	72	45.00%	8	5.00%
5&6	21	13.13%	57	35.63%	39	24.38%	43	26.88%
7 &8	21	13.13%	73	45.63%	48	30.00%	18	11.25%
9 &10	13	8.13%	90	56.25%	49	30.63%	8	5.00%
11 &12	21	13.13%	52	32.50%	62	38.75%	25	15.63%

With regard to the situations 5&6 where the criticizers have a lower social status than their assumed addressee(s) with high social distance, the preference is on the positive politeness 35.63%. The same tendency appears in the situations 7&8 where there is a lower social distance but with a percentage of 45.63% which is higher than in situation 5&6 where the social distance is high, indicating that the Iraqi EFL learners are aware of increasing their solidarity in such situations. The same preference is considerably increased in situations 9 &10 as the positive politeness records 56.25% in the sense the participants are in equal social status and high social distance. Finally, the Iraqi EFL learners show their preferences to use negative politeness strategy in situations 11 &12 where the presumed participants are family members who have equal social status and low social distance. This might indicate that the learners are aware of the social variables and intend to show some respect to their family members in prioritize the negative politeness strategy over other strategies.

In terms of gender, the analysis in Table (4) below indicates that the male Iraqi EFL learners utilize positive politeness and bald-on record politeness strategies more than females with the respective values of significance 0.022 and 0.002. On the contrast, the females show their tendency to employ negative politeness and off-record politeness strategies more than the males with the significance values 0.036 and 0.009, respectively. The inferential analysis of one-way Anova confirms that the significance values of all these tendencies are much smaller than the level

of significance (0.05). This indicates that the gender of the Iraqi EFL learners is highly effective in selecting the appropriate politeness strategies in the case of criticizing others for doing undesirable behaviors. Furthermore, these results also confirm that the Iraqi EFL learners are conscious of the pragmatic meaning of their use of the criticism speech act.

(Table 4) The distribution of politeness strategies in terms of gender.

Strategies	Male		Female		Df1	Df2	F	Sign.
	Freq.	Percentage	Freq.	Percentage				
Bald-on politeness	79	16.46%	32	6.67%	1	22	12.083	0.002
Positive politeness	247	51.46%	174	36.25%	1	22	6.092	0.022
Negative politeness	125	26.04%	185	38.54%	1	22	4.971	0.036
Off-record politeness	29	6.04%	89	18.54%	1	22	8.337	0.009

In terms of educational level, the analysis in Table 5 below indicates that the undergraduate Iraqi EFL learners utilize and bald-on record politeness strategies more than postgraduates with the respective values of significance 0.866 and 0.128. On the other hand, the postgraduates show their tendency to employ negative politeness and off-record politeness strategies more than the undergraduates with the significance values 0.139 and 0.714, respectively. The inferential analysis of one-way Anova demonstrates that the significance values of all these tendencies are much bigger than the level of significance (0.05). This means that the educational level of the Iraqi EFL learners is not effective in selecting the appropriate politeness strategies when using criticism.

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(Table 5) The distribution of politeness strategies in terms of educational level.

Strategies	Undergraduate		Postgraduate				F	Sign.
	Freq.	Percentage	Freq.	Percentage				
Bald-on politeness	69	14.68%	42	8.75%	1	22	2.503	0.128
Positive politeness	217	46.17%	204	42.50%	1	22	0.029	0.866
Negative politeness	128	27.23%	172	35.83%	1	22	2.359	0.139
Off-record politeness	56	11.91%	62	12.92%	1	22	0.137	0.714

5. Conclusion

It has been discovered through quantitative data analysis that Iraqi EFL learners consider their position in society and the social distance between themselves and the addressees when presenting criticism at all the socially varied situations. This indicates that they are conscious of the politeness strategies that are implicit in the criticism of speech acts. When it comes to using the speech act of criticism, there is a substantial correlation between their gender and their preferences for politeness strategies in their speech. In terms of educational level, it was discovered that there is no significant relationship between the learners' educational level and their performance. That is, in terms of politeness strategies, it makes no difference whether they were undergraduate or postgraduate students in considering the appropriate form of criticism to deliver.

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