



# Politeness and Indirect Request Speech Acts: Gender-Oriented Listening Comprehension in Asian EFL Context

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## Abstract

The aim of this study was to examine the notions of politeness and indirectness in EFL listening comprehension and whether they are gender-bound in Middle Eastern context of language learning. To this end, 40 language learners of both genders were sampled and assigned into two male and female experimental and two male and female control groups in this study. Performance data were collected with Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT) including sixteen situational scenarios to dismiss the initial differences among the participants listening comprehension for indirect request speech acts. After conducting the treatment on indirect/polite request speech acts to the experimental group, all participants performed on a test of pragmatics to assess their improvement on listening comprehension for indirect/polite speech acts. The first assumption in this study was the absence of meaningful differences between male and female EFL learner's listening comprehension of indirect/polite request speech acts which was statistically rejected in favor of the female participants' outperformance. Secondly, it was assumed no differences in the fluency of internal and external modifiers comprehension by male and female EFL learners which similarly was rejected as a result of female EFL learners' outperformance on the post-test of pragmatics. Some pedagogical implications were provided as the concluding remarks in this study.

**Keywords:** Speech Act, Indirectness, Politeness, Gender, EFL, Pragmatics

## 1 Introduction

*Interlanguage pragmatics* is defined as a research affiliation that "seeks to describe and explain learners' development and use of pragmatic knowledge" (Kasper, 1989, p.42). Therefore, contrary to cross-cultural pragmatics which is mostly concerned with the differences across language learners' pragmatic performance and native-speakers, ample research on this area takes a second language research perspective by taking accounts of those personal issues that have major influence on learners' acquisition of pragmatic factors (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999; 2001; 2002). Among those pragmatic aspects investigated in interlanguage research, second/foreign language learners' competence to comprehend and produce different language functions - or traditionally speaking, the language speech acts - has received a great deal of attention in both second (Barron, 2003) and foreign language contexts (Faerch & Kasper, 1989; Rose, 2000). Language learners' given opportunities to develop situationally appropriate requesting behaviors in the foreign language context were very limited, since their mere contact with the target language was restricted to the classroom setting.

Pragmatically appropriate request behaviors are among one of the most required speech acts when it comes to learning a foreign language. They frequently occur in almost every daily encounter. The inappropriate request speech acts conducted by the language learners can embarrass them or make them look rude or impolite to the native speakers. In some cases, even the natural steam of communication breaks down and severe misunderstanding can occur. It is also believed that native speakers usually take pragmatic lapses to be far more serious than phonological or syntactic errors (Koike, 1995). As Blum-Kulka (1991) points out, appropriate and polished requesting style is a good indicator of cultural literacy of language users. However, in order to make appropriate request speech acts and also perceive the possible illocutionary force of a spoken discourse, language learners have to acquire adequate socio-pragmatic knowledge such as the relative imposition of a speech act in the given cultural community, as well as effective pragmatic knowledge such as the directness or politeness of produced utterances in L2 in order to avoid the embarrassment of being known as rude or impolite by the native speakers.

Weydt (1983) states that "politeness is a pragmatic mechanism in which a variety of structures (including non-verbal or prosodic features) works together according to the speakers' intention to achieve smooth communication". Pragmatic competence is the only aspect of communicative competence in Bachman's (1990) model which presumes the

illocutionary competence (or the knowledge of communicative functions/speech acts and of how to carry them out) and sociolinguistic competence (or the competence of using the acquired language appropriately to the present context).

Several studies have examined the use of a wide range of politeness modifiers by language learners compared to those applied by native speakers (Economidou, 2008; 2009; Hassall, 2001; Schauer, 2004; Woodfield, 2006; Pérez i Parent, 2002; Barron, 2003 to name a few); some of them were longitudinal research studies that investigated the developing level of pragmatic knowledge of individual language learners whose language proficiency was not reported alike. Early studies on speech acts proved that speech act behaviors and realizations are to a great extent culture-specific. There are "differences in systems of conversational inference and cues for signaling speech acts which combine to form a culture's distinctive interactional style" (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989, p. 6). Therefore, language learners' gradual growth of pragmatic competence is critical to their communication success since failure to use language or interpret language in an inappropriate way to a given situation may lead to misunderstanding or a total breakdown of communication, degraded with the "stereotypical labeling of second language users as people who are insensitive, impolite, rude, or inept" (Thomas, 1983, p.157).

### 1.1 Language and politeness

Politeness is not a gift that human beings are born with rather being acquired through the natural process of socialization. Politeness is not a natural or congenital phenomenon predisposed in mankind but a personality trait which is socio-culturally and historically developed. The English term 'polite' dates back to the 15th century and etymologically was adopted from Late Medieval Latin *politus* meaning 'smoothed' and 'accomplished'. Thus 'politeness' was usually associated with such concepts such as 'polished' and 'refined', admiring well-behaved people. As Werkhofer (1992, p.156) explained, politeness can be seen as "the power of a symbolic medium that being used and shaped in acts of individual speakers, also represents social standards of what kind of conduct is considered just and right".

In more specific terms, politeness is a formal construction induced through social interaction which mediates between individuals and societies. An act of politeness is performed by an individual whose choices for its instrumentality and effectiveness are usually based upon collective and social norms. The natural motivation for performing such a polite act is that of structuring socially successful and appreciated interactions. Politeness can be expressed through communicative and non-communicative acts (Haverkate, 1987, p. 28).

Of different aspects of polite language speech acts such as apology, compliment, invitation, promise and the like, request function is one of the most frequent and versatile speech act in the context of formal language use. Requests are critical in foreign language learning contexts; too, since majority of language learners often see themselves in urgent need to demand another non-native or a native speaker to do something in a polite and non-obtrusive way. Request acts are used in everyday life for a large variety of purposes such as requiring information, borrowing books, ordering foods in a restaurant, or asking somebody for some favor, etc. Consequently, based on the attended context, an appropriate request with an exact amount of imposition is a necessary component to natural communication (Rasouli Khorshidi & Subbarkrishna, 2014).

According to Brown and Levinson (1989), request is usually a face-threatening act to the requiring person. In other words, if for some reasons, the interlocutor rejects to do the required act, the requiring person will be in the eminent threat of losing face. Consequently, it is extremely important to learn how to politely express a request speech act in different contexts with different people. The foreign language learners are highly recommended to acquire and retain certain linguistic and pragmatic strategies so that they can use the appropriate language in their interactions inside a context with dynamic variables (e.g., equal/higher status or high/low imposition). In other words, due to the dynamicity and fluidity in every possible situation, different request techniques are needed for a request to successfully serve the speakers (Brown & Levinson, 1989).

Among the linguistic features that can be used to contextualize request speech acts appropriately, Faerch and Kasper (1989) distinguish between internal and external modifiers. External modifiers or supportive moves are external to the head speech act. They are additional or substituted statements whose function is merely to properly support the request, to set the context, to indirectly modify the speech act illocutionary force, either by mitigation or aggravation. The examples are "Could you do me a favor?" or "I am very sorry but,...". Internal modifications, on the other hand, refer to those linguistic elements which occur within the same head act. They are linguistic or syntactic devices that are used to modulate the illocutionary force of the request and can be further subcategorized as down-graders such as "perhaps" or "just" and up-graders such as "As you know" and "Please".

Studies on language learners' pragmatic competence to employ the appropriate linguistic forms in request speech act can yield valuable insights on how well they can express themselves in, for example, a face threatening condition in the second language use. The notions of language 'indirectness' and 'politeness' play integral roles in language speakers' face negotiation and the realization of such speech acts as requests or apologies. Following Brown and Levinson's model of politeness (1989, p. 344-45), "while a request speech act is realized by means of various linguistic and meta discourse strategies such as *on record* (e.g., direct and unmitigated) or *off record* (e.g., hints, irony), a compromise may be reached by the speaker using indirect requests". According to Searle (1975, pp. 60-61), in indirect speech acts "the speaker communicates to its hearer much more than he actually verbalizes by means of relying on each other's mutual background information, both linguistic and non-linguistic, together with the rational power of inference on the part of the hearer". Therefore, in order to reduce the threats and to avoid the risk of losing positive or negative face, there is a

relative preference for indirectness on the part of the speaker when he/she is making a request to smooth down the conversational interaction. Research on various languages has reported that a higher level of indirectness may be associated to a higher level of politeness.

Studies on interlanguage pragmatics show that most second and foreign language learners are likely to make serious communicative errors, which lead to failure in expressing and understanding the intended value of utterances (Kasper, 1990; Thomas, 1983). Cohen (2008) points out that “many advanced language learners are able to utilize complex linguistic systems, but are unable to express and interpret meaning in order to perform language functions (such as apologies and requests appropriately. Neither pragmatic nor sociolinguistic skills are independent of the linguistic components of communicative competence as they convey information about the context (Delahaie, 2011). Experimental studies concerning interlanguage pragmatics suggest that the failure in the assessment of politeness parameters of a speech community may cause pragmatic failure in language learners (Locastro, 2003; Watts, 2003).

A fascinating conclusion that experimental researchers have reached is that majority of native speakers consider pragmatic errors to be much more serious than mispronunciations or syntactic errors (Thomas, 1983). Blum-Kulka (1991, p.46) points out that “requesting style is a good index of a culturally significant way of speaking. However, in order to appropriately make requests and also perceive the illocutionary force of an utterance as a request, language learners have to acquire socio-pragmatic knowledge such as the relative degree of imposition of a speech act in the target language/culture, as well as pragma-linguistic knowledge such as the degree of politeness in utterances in the target language in order to avoid being considered rude by native speakers”.

### 1.2 Gender and politeness

A multitude of studies on language and gender have been devoted to identifying and trying to explain the differences in the speech styles in men and women (see Talbot, 1998). In one of the most comprehensive bodies of evidence to date, Holmes (1995) characterizes women’s speech as more polite than men’s. For example, women intend to interrupt less in conversations and “to be more attentive listeners, and more concerned to ensure that others get a chance to contribute” than men do (Holmes, 1995, p. 67). They also interpret and use certain speech acts differently from men. For instance, not only do women use more apologies than men but their apologies serve more often than men’s “as remedies for space and talk offences – the areas of interaction where women are particularly vulnerable where they may have developed a greater sensitivity” (Holmes, 1995, p.185). Although there have been several studies on this subject matter, there is inadequate research concerned with EFL learners' problems. Furthermore, the studies conducted with the Asian EFL learners were mostly about the teaching request speech act with no focus on gender-oriented inherent differences. Secondly, the majority of research in this field was done in ESL contexts. In EFL contexts, on the other hand, teachers are to develop their students' language competence for real communication. "This means that teaching practices should pay more attention not only to the key features of English linguistic system, but also to its pragmatic norms since lack of this knowledge impedes communication" (Uso-Juan & Martinez-Flor, 2006, p.23). The current study, therefore, was aimed at investigating the existence of any meaningful difference between male and female EFL learners' use of indirect (polite) request speech acts and their frequency of internal and external modifiers while practicing listening comprehension strategies.

### 2.3 Research questions

To fulfill the purpose of this experimental study, the following research questions were raised:

*RQ1. In a polite (indirect) context of language use, is there any difference between male and female EFL learners' listening comprehension of request speech acts?*

*RQ2. In a polite (indirect) context of language use, is there any difference between the fluency of internal and external modifiers comprehension by male and female EFL learners?*

## 3 Method

### 3.1 Participants

The present study was a pretest-posttest quasi-experimental with a group of participants (n=40) selected on a convenient sampling method. They were both male and female Iranian EFL learners at a private language institute enrolled to general English classes in 2015. They were all registered as intermediate level of adult students who were later randomly placed and assigned into the experimental and the control group in this study after taking Kasper and Rover's Pragmatics Test (2005).

### 3.2 Procedure

As the treatment in this study, the experimental group received instructions on request speech acts every session for 15 minutes. The participants were exposed to audio-recorded situations of authentic English conversations. In every conversation, the most appropriate response was marked as polite and indirect speech acts by the instructor. The participants had to listen to the audios followed by a number of comprehension questions. They were encouraged to choose the best response to the pragmatic questions. As an example, in Session 2, the following recorded conversation was played.

*Salesperson: Next please!*

*Janet: Hello. Can I have some aspirin please?*

*Salesperson: 50 or 100?*

*Janet: Excuse me?*

*Salesperson: Do you want a bottle of 50 aspirin or 100?*

*Janet: Oh, fifty's fine, thanks.*

1. Where did this conversation possibly happen?
2. Was Janet the only customer?
  
3. Which sentence is more polite?
  - a. Mister, this headache is killing me!
  - b. Give me some aspirin, Mister.
  - c. Can I have some aspirin, please?
  
4. What did Janet mean by saying "Excuse me"?
  - a. She didn't hear the salesperson.
  - b. She didn't know much about the aspirin.
  - c. She made a mistake with the price of aspirins.

The treatment lasted for 10 sessions (5 weeks) for the experimental group. Meanwhile, the control group received no similar instructions except for listening to their assigned listening tapes followed by class coral repetition and practice. Both groups' performance on a final listening comprehension test ended this experiment.

#### 4 Results and discussion

Both experimental and control groups took part in English Preliminary Test (EPT) to eliminate their initial differences in language proficiency before the experiment started. As a post-test, a test of English pragmatics (Soleimani, 2011) was given to both groups to measure their listening comprehension improvement as long as their understanding on the natural language use was concerned. The descriptive statistics for the two groups of Experimental and Control performance on Placement test is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for EPT

Gender		Statistic	Std. Error
female	Mean	18.25	.956
	Std. Deviation	4.27	
	Minimum	11.00	
	Maximum	25.00	
	Skewness	-.402	.512
	Kurtosis	-.910	.992
	male	Mean	14.75
Std. Deviation		3.44	
Minimum		13.00	
Maximum		18.00	
Skewness		.603	.512
Kurtosis		2.49	.992

As it can be seen in Table 1, the mean scores for female participants in both groups is much higher than for males, while as the measures of standard deviations show, male participants show less variance than females in both groups. The statistical results on the test of English Pragmatics (Soleimani, 2011) came up with a different pattern, as they are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Post-test

Gender		Statistic	Std. Error
female	Mean	12.00	.538
	Std. Deviation	2.40	
	Minimum	8.00	
	Maximum	15.00	
	Skewness	-.277	.512
	Kurtosis	-1.311	.992
male	Mean	9.95	.859
	Std. Deviation	3.84	
	Minimum	2.00	
	Maximum	15.00	
	Skewness	-.748	.512
	Kurtosis	-.134	.992

As it can be seen in Table 2, the mean score for female participants is still higher than that of male participants; however, receiving instructions on English pragmatics relatively decreased the variance in female students' performance on Post-test as. In order to the research question 1, the researcher ran a Two Way Repeated Measure (RM) ANOVA between the experimental and control groups' scores on Pre- and Post-tests. The formulated null hypothesis was that the female and male participants in both groups performed comparatively similar on both Pre and Posttests, so that no significant differences would exist between them

Table 3. Two Way Repeated Measures ANOVA

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared	Noncent. Parameter	Observed Power <sup>b</sup>
Corrected Model	222.075 <sup>a</sup>	3	74.025	12.636	.000	.513	37.908	.999
Intercept	4818.025	1	4818.025	822.422	.000	.958	822.422	1.000
Gender	42.025	1	42.025	7.174	.011	.166	7.174	.741
Group	156.025	1	156.025	26.633	.000	.425	26.633	.999
Gender * Group	24.025	1	24.025	4.101	.030	.102	4.101	.504
Error	210.900	36	5.858					
Total	5251.000	40						
Corrected Total	432.975	39						

As Table 3 shows, the index of  $F_{(Gender)}=7.174$ , significant at  $p\text{-value}=.011<.05$ , which indicates that the male and female participants performed differently on Pre- and Post-tests both in experimental and control groups. To study the presence of the interaction between the two independent variables in this study (i.e., receiving instructions to indirect/polite request acts, and gender), the index of  $F_{(Gender * Group)}=4.101$ , significant at  $p\text{-value}=.030<.05$  proves that there is a noticeable interaction between these two variables. The descriptive statistics also supported the upcoming results in Table 3.

To investigate the research question 2, the researchers' initial assumption was that after receiving instructions on indirect/polite request speech acts, there is no meaningful difference in the fluency of the internal and external modifiers comprehension by male and female EFL learners. To testify the null hypothesis 2, the researchers exclusively focused on the performance of the male and female participants in the experimental group on Pre- and Post-tests to study the possible significant differences in their performance. Therefore, an Independent Samples T-Test was run.

Table 4. Independent Samples T-test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Post test	Equal variances assumed	2.985	.092	2.021	38	.030	2.050	1.014	-.003	4.103
	Equal variances not assumed			2.021	31.9	.032	2.050	1.014	-.016	4.116

As Table 4 suggests, male and female participants in experimental group performed differently on Posttest. The measure of  $t(38)=2.021$ , significant at  $p\text{-value}=.03<.05$  when the equal variances among the male and female participants are assumed statistically proves it. To measure the power of the test and the size of the intervention effect, Eta squared was measured and reported as .097, as an accountable effect size.

### 5. Conclusion and implications

The purpose of this study was to examine the moderating role of gender in EFL learners' listening comprehension influenced by intervening instructions to indirect/polite request speech acts. Several research finding indicate that in ordinary contexts of language use, women tend to interrupt less and incline to be more attentive listeners than men. Sex differences and politeness, however, is a complicated issue that varies within cultures and many other factors like discourse topics, social status, power relation, personality types, educational background and age play important roles.

Holmes (1995) based her research on Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of positive and negative face threatening acts to conclude that women use more positively orientated polite acts and men more negatively orientated politeness, and suggests that women and men have different perceptions of what politeness is and how language is used for expressing politeness. Men use language as a tool to give and obtain information (also referred to as the referential function of language), while women use language as a means of keeping in touch (also known as the social function of language). As politeness is included into the social function of language, it seems that women act politer than men.

Holmes suggested two speech acts of compliments and apologies coral to the definition of politeness. Accordingly, women pay and receive more compliments regarding them as positive and effective politeness devices. Men tend to consider compliments as less positive than women do, and often see them as face threatening or at least not as unambiguous in intentions. Holmes (1995) suggests that the discrepancies in male-male and female-female complimentary language may be due to differences in their perceptions concerning the purpose of compliments. Women have demonstrated relative advantage over men in tests of listening, speaking, sentence complexity, analogy, vocabulary, spelling and comprehension of both written and spoken material. In a more recent study, Saito (2010) explored seven Japanese workplace superiors' use of directive speech acts. His findings reveal that the gender of the speaker, in addition to various contextual factors, plays a significant role in choice of directive forms, and that actual practice is not always consistent with gender stereotypes.

The current researchers' obtained results are indisputable in the sense that the instructions to politeness and indirectness strategies have positive influences on EFL learners' effective language use, in general and on female EFL learners in particular. The positive impact of coaching to politeness and indirectness strategies on EFL learners' listening comprehension is promising as it enhances EFL learners' pragmatic competence and situational awareness. Their sensitivity to the context of language use has a direct and positive impact on interpreting the received messages and reciprocating appropriate responses. Moreover, the indirectness strategies enable the individuals to easily understand the situations and activate their prior linguistic and world knowledge in order to successfully communicate their intentions. Teaching to these strategies, therefore, encourages language learners to organize and formulate their own thoughts and speculations as well as and improve their capabilities in learning and accomplishing listening comprehension tasks. They are also effective instruments in motivating them to think more deeply and critically about their potential of listening ability. Further analysis of the participants' performance on indirect request speech acts in this study also suggests that conventional indirectness is the most preferred strategy for requesting in Asian culture and especially in women's communities. Therefore, instructions to politeness/indirectness will appeal most female students as an extensively meaningful input that can be incorporated into more appropriate and context-wise language production.

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