

THE EFFECT OF IRANIAN FEMALE EFL LEARNERS' POLITENESS STRATEGIES AWARENESS ON THEIR LETTER WRITING ABILITY

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Abstract: This research examines the effect of teaching politeness strategies based on the models proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) and Leech (1983) to intermediate English learners on their ability in writing more polite letters. The instrumentation includes an IELTS test, used as a placement test, an inventory, used to measure learners' awareness of politeness strategies, and a letter-writing test, used as a measurement of learners' ability in using politeness strategies. Among all the participants, twenty of them were put in the control group, and twenty-four of them in the experimental group, who went under the treatment. They were taught how to write politely based on the politeness strategy models proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) and Leech (1983). After the treatment, learners wrote letters to the same people with the same situations. Comparing the twenty learners in the control group with the twenty-four learners in experimental group, the researchers concluded that the treatment had a significant effect on the learners' ability in writing more polite letters. They selected to use more formal strategies with those who they saw further distance with, and more informal strategies with more intimate people. Furthermore, the answers the learners provided to the questions of the inventory offered more awareness of politeness strategies. This implies that they were more aware of various choices of polite language that were available for them to use in the given situations.

Keywords: politeness strategy, face, face threatening act

INTRODUCTION

According to Wardhaugh (2006), as we speak, we choose what to say, how to say it, and the best way to unite the *what* with the *how*. This *how* and *what* are both two important and inseparable aspects of speaking. Social relationship between the speaker and the listener determines the linguistic choices a speaker makes.

In Watts (2003: 29) words, "language and forms of language behavior are at the heart of social communication and the reproduction of

social structure. So the study of politic behavior and linguistic politeness lies at the heart of socio-communicative verbal interaction."

As Coulmas (2007) puts it, speakers have to make choices, because things may be formulated in a different way. All people have strong feelings about what they say and what they mean and they say what they believe they should, although sometimes they seem not to believe in their own words. Coulmas (2007) also believes that "sociolinguistics is the linguistics of choice", so there will

be “freedom of the will, human action and language”, and this “presupposes and agent rather than an automaton.”

What is considered polite, Gumperz (1987) suggests, may differ among various groups, situations, and individuals. If we can find a grammatical and social rule for it, according to this variation and the recurrent patterns used, we will be able to demonstrate the social nature of human language.

Brown & Levinson (1987) believe that the key problem in the area of sociolinguistics is to determine the nature and origin of the social power of linguistic forms. Some linguists see this as based on the social value of the group who use that linguistic form. Some others believe that it is the social characteristics of the participant and settings that determine the social valence of the form. They claim that linguistic form of messages should be seen as tools for doing things in order for their social values to be ascertained. Brown and Levinson introduce two important sources for the social valence of linguistic forms; first, the intrinsic potential impact that a communicative intention has on social relationships, and second, the modification of that intention by the participants in order for that to have a specific impact.

For Brown & Levinson (1987), “communicative intentions have built-in social implications, often of a threatening sort” (p. 281). These communicative intentions are constrained to pragmatic resources of the language in order to show the construction of messages. Various uses of such pragmatic resources in different situations are the special interest of sociolinguistics, and this has made Brown & Levinson’s slogan:

“Sociolinguistics should be applied pragmatics”. Nature and distribution of the constraints give the social structures its form. These constraints are more on form than on content (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Linguistic politeness involves verbal strategies to keep social interaction friction free (Nwoye, 1992).

There are many studies that touch on the issue of the relationship between politeness and other factors such as gender (see for example Gharaghani, Rasekh, Dabaghi, Tohidian, 2011, Dus and Franch, 2003, Kaul, Kurkarni, 2010, Gomez, 2000), cultural norms (see for example Le Ha, 2001, Salom & Monreal, 2009, Bargiela-Chiappini, Kádár, 2011, Song, 2012), power (Locher, 2004, Hendry, 1995, Holmes, Stubbe, 2003). In the following, some of these researches have been mentioned.

In a research done by Gharaghani, Rasekh, Dabaghi, Tohidian (2011), cross gender differences in the degree of politeness in greetings of EFL learners were examined. The results show that gender has a significant effect on the degree of formality in Persian greetings. In addition, Iranian learners transferred their Persian greeting styles into English situations. They tended their greetings to be polite, but they were inappropriate according to American norms. Generally, it seemed that they were not equipped with appropriate tools to express greeting according to the status of the interlocutors, situational context and native culture.

Biesenbach-Lucas (2007), in his research on e-politeness among native and non-native speakers of English, found that native speakers demonstrate more politeness strategies in their messages to their professors than non-native speakers. Native and non-native speakers preferred different politeness

devices for their requests. This can be due to the fact that non-native speakers are not taught enough of politeness strategies in order to use in their messages. He shows that students use more direct strategies for lower imposition requests- i.e. for making appointments and asking for feedback on their work, in contrast with higher imposition requests such as extension of the deadlines. This suggests that students are aware of situational factors and do not consider all email requests of faculty equal. Also, they used more politeness devices with direct request strategies and fewer politeness strategies with indirect request strategies.

Dus and Franch (2003) investigated Spanish and British undergraduates' perceptions of appropriate requests in different situations in terms of gender and politeness. On the whole, no significant differences were found in males and females use of alerters (formal/informal attention getters and greetings, naming strategies and terms of endearment). However, there were some differences in cross-gender speech in particular situations such as opening elements, which were used more by females than males. Also, men used more attention getters than women. Spanish participants frequently used involvement strategies which confirm that Spanish is a "positively politeness-oriented culture". Male and female British participants used similar number of alerters. The difference was in the type of alerters males and females used. British females used twice as many thanking responses as males, and so they were considered as showing deference more than males. As a conclusion, this research questions the stereotypical correlation between males and impoliteness and females and

politeness. Both males and females showed politeness in their speech and the difference was in situations where solidarity and deference was considered. Gender cannot be an independent variable in determining language use.

Le Ha (2001) studied how Vietnamese culturally situated notions of polite forms influence English writing styles of four Vietnamese postgraduate students who were studying in Australian universities. It was found that cultural differences as well as socio-political factors and educational factors were the reasons influencing how students write. In his paper, he suggested that Australian academics make students with different backgrounds aware of how they were expected to write based on Australian socio-political practices. He found that as soon as the students were aware of this, they were able to adjust.

Chen (1999) has studied self-politeness in contrast to other-oriented politeness. By self-politeness, he means the cases in communication where the speaker's need to protect his own face influences what she says and how she says it. "Self" does not only refer to the speaker herself, but to those aligned with her such as her family, friends, colleagues, clients, and even her profession. Likewise, "other" refers to not only the hearer but also those aligned with the hearer. He states that in the studies on politeness the researcher includes self-politeness in addition to other-oriented politeness and this is because the face of the speaker is as vulnerable as the face of the hearer.

Fukushima and Iwana (1985: 12) studied Japanese students to see whether they use politeness strategies

while speaking English and how much they are successful in using them. They concluded that "a better understanding of politeness features in English will help EFL students to communicate more effectively as competent speakers".

Different aspects of letter writing has been discussed and taught to students in writing classes. However, there seems to be a lack of attention to the sociolinguistics aspects of letter writing (Schmidt, 1993; Rose & Kasper, 2001), including politeness strategies use. Learners are supposed to have already acquired politeness strategies sociolinguistically; however, most second language learners are not sufficiently exposed to the related contexts in order to acquire those strategies.

This research seeks to contribute to the field of second language writing. It aims at testing students' politeness strategy use in letter writing. Having analyzed the data, the results can be applied to explore learners' problematic areas of politeness strategy use.

METHOD

The study used a quasi-experimental design to examine politeness strategies awareness of Iranian higher-intermediate female students and their ability in letter writing. This study focused on a randomly selected population of 75 learners of upper-intermediate level studying English in two English Schools in Mashhad, Iran. As the participants were chosen among the learners of two different English institutes, they were studying different upper-intermediate books. Thirty-eight of them were studying the upper-intermediate book *American English File 4* (by Oxenden &

Latham-Koenig, 2008, Oxford University Press), and the other thirty-seven were studying *Passages 1* (by Richards & Sandy, second edition, 2008, Cambridge University Press). All of them were female students in an age range of 17-25.

The researchers in this study investigated the effect of politeness strategies awareness of Iranian higher-intermediate female students on their letter writing ability. They were asked to write a letter to four people: their friend, their teacher, an unknown English-speaking person, and an unknown Persian-speaking person, all of whom were supposed to be females. There were 24 learners in the experimental group and 20 in the control group.

The learners were homogenized using an IELTS test as the placement test. Among all of the 75 learners who took the test, 48 learners got the band score of 6 or above and were chosen for the study. Before the treatment, both control group and experimental group were given an inventory to test their awareness of politeness strategies, and a letter-writing test in order to test their current ability in the performance of politeness strategies use in letter writing.

The participants filled out the inventory, which checked their awareness of politeness strategies. It was designed based on the criteria used in the study as politeness strategies awareness. In the letter-writing test, they faced four different situations. In the first situation, participants were asked to write a letter to one of their female friends and ask for help with their English language proficiency. In the second letter, they wrote to their female teacher and requested her to

help them with their reading skill improvement. The third situation was writing a letter to a female university student studying in Harvard University, whom they did not know; someone they have never seen, talked or written to. They asked her for information about the university she is studying at. In the last situation, participants wrote a letter to the supervisor of an institute to ask for some information about the job vacancies.

The treatment took eight sessions of about 30 minutes. All that was taught was based on the politeness strategy models of Brown and Levinson (1987) and Leech (1983). The first session learners were introduced to what would happen in the course. The inventory and the letter-writing test were given to the learners in this session. During sessions 2-7 learners got familiar with the politeness strategies based on Brown and Levinson's and Leech's models. There were some exercises designed by the researchers in order for the learners to practice the new strategy they had just learned. In the last session, the participants filled in the inventory again to be checked for any rise in the awareness of politeness strategy use. In addition, the same writing test was given to the learners in order to see whether there was any improvement in the use of politeness strategies in their letters after comparing them to the letters they had written before the treatment.

At the same time, the participants in the control group were attending their English classes, being taught the usual materials of their book, without receiving any additional treatment on polite language.

The participants' pre-tests and post-tests were analyzed by two raters

in terms of politeness strategies they had applied in each situation and then scored. The scores of the two groups, control group and experimental group, were compared to see if the two groups had performed in the same way before the experimental group had undergone the treatment. Meanwhile, the scores of the participants in each group before and after the treatment were compared to seek any improvement as a result of receiving the treatment in the experimental group and the lack of the treatment in the control group.

On the one hand, the letter writing tests were scored based on the criteria used in scoring writing section of IELTS test. On the other hand, to measure and score the use of politeness strategies in the participants' writing tests, the frameworks based on the "matrix criteria of politeness strategy" by Brown and Levinson (1987) and the Politeness maxims of Leech (1983) were used.

Furthermore, the inventories answered by the participants are scored and compared in the same way that the letter writing tests were compared.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to decide whether the treatment has improved the participants' awareness of politeness strategies, politeness questionnaire results are analyzed in this part. The questionnaires learners in both control and experimental groups had filled in and those completed after the treatment were compared to observe any improvement of the learners' awareness of different politeness strategies.

As Table 1 reveals, the results of the questionnaire in pretest for the control (=59.7000) and experimental (=59.5833) group confirm that there is no significant

difference between the participant's scores in politeness awareness in control and experimental groups in the pretest phase. In other words, the participants in

both groups were in the same level of awareness of politeness strategies before the treatment of the study.

Table 1. *Pre-test and post-test results of politeness awareness questionnaire*

	Groups		P-value
	Control	Experimental	
No.	20	24	
Pre-test scores	59.7000	59.5833	.961
Post-test scores	59.8500	75.3333	.0001

According to table 1, in the significant level of %5, there was a significant difference in the participants' scores in control (=59.8500) and experimental (=75.3333) groups in post-test of politeness strategies awareness, and this means that the treatment has improved participants' awareness of politeness strategies. The raise of the participants' scores in the post-test letter-writing tests can prove this result.

In order to confirm the findings of the questionnaire, the researchers provided seven open-ended questions at the end of the inventory. These questions were designed to elicit responses that showed the participants' level of awareness of polite language. The responses the participants made before and after the treatment revealed that the treatment had had a significant effect on the awareness and hence the use of politeness strategies by them, which confirmed the findings of the whole survey. After the treatment, the participants tended to use more and a wider variety of politeness strategies in the responses they made to the open-ended questions.

In the following, the first question of the qualitative part of the questionnaire is brought as an example, along with the replies the learners

tended to give before and after the treatment:

What phrases or words do you use when you want to speak or write politely in English?

- Replies before the treatment: please, could you, can you.
- Replies after the treatment: please, could you, can you, I'm sorry to bother you, you must forgive me, I wonder if I could

As the learners' replies in this example show, before the treatment, they had in mind just three of politeness strategies, but after the treatment, they showed awareness of more choices of polite language. In order to explore any effects of the treatment on participants' ability in politeness strategies use, the results of letter-writing tests were analyzed.

Learners' letter-writing papers in both control and experimental groups were corrected and scored by two raters with a focus on general appropriateness of cohesion and coherence and politeness strategies use. The pre-test scores of both groups as well as their scores of post-test were compared to find out whether the treatment had had an effect on learners' ability in using politeness strategies. Table 3.2 summarizes the scores of learners in control (N=20) and experimental (N=24) groups in both pre-test and post-test of

letter-writing. P-values are also shown in this table.

As the results of Table 2 shows, there is no significant difference between the participants' letter-writing

test scores in pretest in control (=22.3500) and experimental (=24.4500) group, which confirms the homogeneity of the participants before the treatment.

Table 2. *Pre-test and post-test scores of letter-writing of control and experimental groups*

	Groups		P-value
	Control	Experimental	
No.	20	24	
Pre-test score	22.3500	23.0417	.253
Post-test score	24.4500	31.2500	.0001

Using T-Test method, the participants' letter-writing scores in post-test in both control (= 24.4500) and experimental (=31.2500) groups are compared, and it can be seen that in the significant level of %5, there is a significant difference in the scores of the control and experimental groups. As it was already stated, in evaluating the letters, a part of the score was given to the correct use of politeness strategies. In addition, as the p-value was smaller than 0.5 (0.0001) for the post-test of letter-writing, the first null hypothesis

was rejected and it was confirmed that the treatment on the experimental group has had a significant effect on the participant's ability in using politeness strategies in writing letters.

The pre-test and post-test given to both control and experimental groups required learners to write letters to a close friend and to a teacher. Afterwards, they were corrected by two raters and scored to investigate any effect of the treatment on the learners in experimental group. The scores are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. *Pre-test and post-test results of letter-writing to a teacher and a friend*

	Groups		P-value
	Control	Experimental	
No.	20	24	
Pre-test scores	11.2000	11.5833	.389
Post-test scores	13.4500	15.7500	.0001

Here, the T-Test is about the scores of letter-writing to a close friend and a teacher in the pretest phase for both control and experimental groups.

According to table 3, there is no significant difference between the scores obtained by participants in experimental (=11.5833) and control (=11.2000) groups in the pretest in writing a letter to a close friend and to a teacher.

In addition, as illustrated in Table 3, p-value = 0.0001, which means in the

significant level of %5, there is a significant difference between the scores of control (=13.4500) and experimental (=15.7500) groups in post-test of letter-writing to a close friend and a teacher. Therefore, because of the raise of their scores as well as the p-value being smaller than 0.5 (0.0001) for the post-test of letter-writing, the second null hypothesis was rejected and it can be concluded that the treatment has improved the participants' ability in using politeness strategies use in

writing letters to a close friend and a teacher.

The next T-Test is for the participants in both control and experimental group writing to an unknown native speaker of English and an unknown native speaker of Persian in the pre-test and post-test phase, the

results of which are shown in Table 3.4. Learners' scores in both pre-test and post-test were determined by two raters and were compared for any improvement in the learners' ability in experimental group in using politeness strategies in letter-writing.

Table 4. *Pre-test and post-test results of letter-writing to an unknown native speaker of English and to an unknown native speaker of Persian*

	Groups		P-value
	Control	Experimental	
No.	20	24	
Pre-test scores	11.2000	11.3750	.654
Post-test scores	11.2000	15.6667	.0001

As table 4 illustrates, there is no significant difference between the scores of control (=11.2000) and experimental (=11.3750) groups in pretest letter-writing to a native speaker of English and a native speaker of Persian, as the p-value= .654.

The results shown in table 3.4 also suggest that there is a significant difference in the scores obtained by the participants in control (=11.2000) and experimental (=15.6667) groups in post-test letter writing to a native speaker of English and a native speaker of Persian. . In addition, as the p-value was smaller than 0.5 (0.0001) for the post-test of letter-writing, the third null hypothesis was rejected. Therefore, it can be concluded that the treatment had improved the ability of the participants to use politeness strategies while writing a letter to an unknown native speaker of Persian and an unknown native speaker of English.

Results of both the inventory and the letter-writing test revealed in the previous part determined that the mentioned null hypotheses of the study were rejected. This means that the treatment had improved the

participants' scores in post-test letter-writing test, which means they used correct and enough of politeness strategies in their letters. Furthermore, the results of the inventory indicated that the participants' awareness of the study had improved by going under the treatment.

CONCLUSION

As observed by the obtained results, the treatment, i.e. teaching learners what strategies they can use to seem more polite culturally (and globally), had a significant effect on their behavior. The answers the learners provided to the questions of the inventory offered more awareness of politeness strategies. This implies that they were more aware of various choices of polite language that were available for them to use in the given situations. They tended to use a more variety of replying politely to those situations, whereas they used to pick up more or less the same way of responding.

Furthermore, the letter-writing post-tests suggested that the participants' ability in using politeness

strategies had improved to a great degree and they used more polite language. Learners were taught that not every strategy was appropriate for every situation. The result of teaching them this point was noticeably seen in the post-test they were given, as they had a tendency to use a strategy they already knew for nearly all the situations they were given in the pre-test phase. They selected to use more formal strategies with those who they saw further distance with, and more informal strategies with more intimate people.

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