

Recognizing suggestions by Iraqi English as a Foreign Language Learners: a politeness perspective

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ABSTRACT – Although the speech act of suggestion is used commonly in English as a foreign language (EFL) learners’ interactions, however, no attention was given to suggestions by scholars when compared to other speech acts. Thus, the purpose of the study is twofold: (1) to explore suggestions (politeness aspects) recognized by Iraqi EFL learners and (2) to examine relation between learners’ language proficiency levels and the types of suggestion in terms of politeness. Two highlighted results are: (1) learners were aware of the politeness aspects of suggestions and (2) no relation found existed between the learners’ proficiency and the politeness of suggestions.

1. INTRODUCTION

From a pragmatic perspective, language is expressed solely by means of speech acts like request, warnings, apologies, commands, blames, suggestions, etc. Suggestions, based on Searle and Austin’s taxonomies, belong to set of speech acts called ‘directives’; the acts in which the speaker aims to have the hearer does something. So, the speaker mildly dictates the hearer to perform an action. Although the action is dedicated to the benefit of the hearer, however, speech act theorists regard suggestion as a face-threatening act [1]. From a politeness perspective, due to the amount of imposition exercised by the suggestion maker on the addressee, suggestions should be mitigated (made politely) in order to reduce the amount of imposition [2]. Thus, the purpose of the study is to investigate the learners’ consideration of politeness when making suggestions to people with different social status (SS) and social distance (SD). To this end the researchers raised two quantitative research questions: (1) In terms of politeness, what is the common suggestion used by the Iraqi EFL learners? and (2) Is there any relation between the learners’ language proficiency level and politeness of suggestions?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Participants and Sampling

The targeted respondents of the study were 104 fourth-year Iraqi EFL learners of the English Language Department at Al-Qadisiyah University.

2.2 Language Proficiency Level.

The language proficiency levels were obtained from the English Language Department. The language proficiency levels represented the learners’ averages of the final scored marks of the last three years of their study. The obtained proficiency levels are shown in Figure 1.

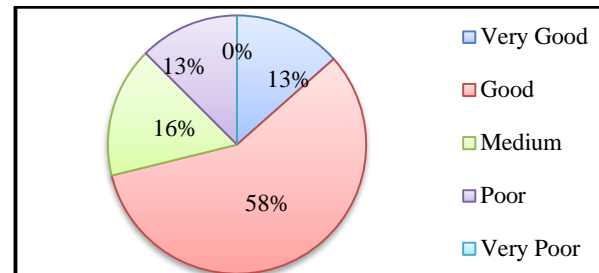


Figure 1 Percentages of the learners’ proficiency levels.

2.3 Instrument and Coding

The tool used was the Multiple-choice Discourse Completion Task (MDCT). It comprised 12 situations simulating everyday encounters. Every situation represented a social scenario where the social status (SS) and social distance (SD) were both considered so that the learner can be aware of. There were three types of suggestions for the participant to choose: the first is a direct suggestion (DiSg), the second is a conventionally indirect suggestion (CInSg), and the third is an indirect suggestion (InSg). Martinez-Flor (2005) [3] proposed a model inclusive of all possible suggestions which can be made in English. The model comprises three types of suggestions: (1) DiSg whose structures are characterized by the use of the verbs ‘I suggest’, ‘I recommend...’ and ‘I propose...’, or by the nouns ‘The/My suggestion...’, and ‘The/My proposition...’ (2) CInSg whose structures are characterized by the use of ‘Let’s...’, ‘Why not/don’t...?’, ‘How/what about...?’, and conditional forms such as ‘If I were you I ...’. Some expressions when used with direct suggestions they change them into conventionally indirect ones. These are called redressive actions like: ‘Well’, ‘Okay’, ‘perhaps’...etc. (3) InSg characterized by the use of a hint such as ‘I have heard that ...’ or the use of impersonal forms such as ‘It might/would be better for you to...’. In terms of directness, every suggestion carries a certain degree of politeness as shown in the following table.

Table 1 Relations between directness and politeness.

Type of suggestion	Politeness
DiSg	Generally impolite
CInSg	Generally less polite
InSg	Generally polite

These relationships vary depending on the speaker and listener SS and SD. Table 2 shows all the situations with their social scenarios and the coding in MDCT.

Table 2 MDCT situations and the coding of politeness.

Situation	MDCT Scenarios	DiSg	CInSg	InSg
1&2	SS & SD are equal	ImSg	FaSg	PoSg
3&4	- SS to + SS + SD	RuSg	FaSg	PoSg
5&6	+ SS to - SS + SD	ImSg	FaSg	PoSg
7&8	- SS to + SS - SD	ImSg	FaSg	PoSg
9&10	equal SSs - SD	FaSg	PoSg	VPoSg
11&12	+ SS to - SS - SD	FaSg	PoSg	VPoSg

+ = higher, - = lower, ImSg = impolite suggestion, RuSg = rude suggestion, FaSg = fair suggestion, PoSg = polite suggestion, VPoSg = very polite suggestion

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

When responding to the MDCT, it seems that the learners found it easy to only tick the appropriate choice they thought it fitted the situation. Due to full response by the learners, so the total is 104 (participants) x 12 (situations) = 1248 answers. The Levene's test of homogeneity of variances was performed via SPSS and represented visually in the figure below.

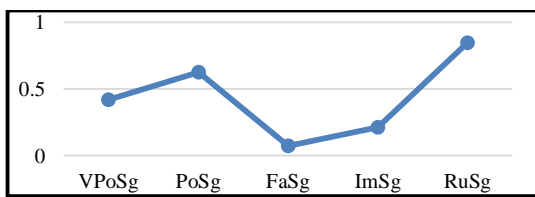


Figure 2 Levene's test of homogeneity of variances.

The figure shows that no value is less than 0.05 (Alpha level) which means that the sample is homogenous and fell within normal distribution. In terms of the content of answers, the descriptive analysis shows that the learners' least used suggestions were RuSg while the majority were PoSg as shown in Figure 3.

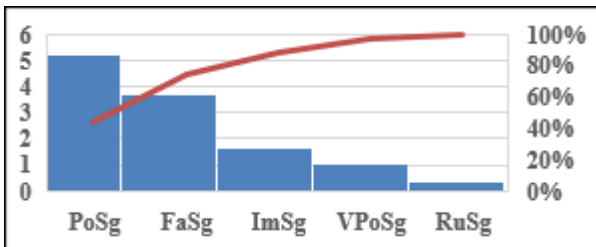


Figure 3 Types of suggestions in terms of politeness.

According to Figure 3, we can prioritize suggestions in the following descending order in terms of their means: (1) PoSg, (2) FaSg, (3) ImSg, (4) VPoSg, and (5) RuSg. In order to know if the learners were generally polite or impolite, we need to organize the results into two zones: (a) polite zone and (b) impolite zone. To do this, we go to Figure 3 and we move the means of VPoSgs and PoSgs to the polite zone and move the means of ImSgs and RuSgs to the 'impolite zone.

Table 4 Polite and impolite zones.

Polite zone	Impolite zone
1.08 + 5.23 = 6.31	1.63 + 0.39 = 2.02
generally polite suggestions	generally impolite suggestions

Accordingly, Iraqi EFL learners tend to use more polite than impolite suggestions. This means that Iraqi EFL learners tend to be polite when making suggestions to

people with higher SS. In order to know how every level dealt with the type of suggestions in terms of politeness, the proficiency levels of the learners and their related suggestions are combined in Table 7 in percentages.

Table 5 Proficiency levels and types of suggestions.

Proficiency Level	Politeness of Suggestion				
	VPoSg	PoSg	FaSg	ImSg	RuSg
Very Good	1.1%	5.7%	3.9%	2.1%	0.5%
Good	4.7%	25%	18.2%	7.8%	1.7%
Medium	1.6%	7.1%	4.7%	2.5%	0.6%
Poor	1.5%	5.7%	3.8%	1.1%	0.3%
Very Poor	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Thus, the learners with 'good' level have overused all types of suggestions when compared with other groups. Preliminarily speaking, with this complicated use of suggestions among the proficiency levels, it can be assumed that the types of suggestions used do not confine to the proficiency level. But this remains a mere assumption until an inferential statistical test confirms. To this end a statistical test on SPSS is set on Chi-Square test of independence; a test used to explore if there is a relationship between proficiency levels and the types of suggestions in terms of politeness. Plugging in the necessary data into the Chi-square window, SPSS generated the following excerpt.

Table 6 Chi-square test of independence.

Items	Value	df	C
Pearson Chi-Square	9.531 ^a	12	0.657
Likelihood Ratio	9.452	12	0.664
Linear-by-Linear Association	5.506	1	0.019
N of Valid Cases		1248	

The critical value 0.657 > 0.05. This means there is no statistically significant relationship between the learners' levels of proficiency and the politeness of suggestions. So, the use of five types of suggestions are not governed by the proficiency level and the learners act out, nearly, in the same manner. It also means that there is no effect by the proficiency levels on the politeness of suggestions.

4. CONCLUSION

Quantitative data analysis has revealed that Iraqi EFL learners pay attention to SS and SD of the addressees when recognizing suggestions. This means that they are aware of the politeness aspects inherent in the speech act suggestion. With respect to proficiency level, it was unveiled that no relationship exists between the learners' proficiency level and the types of suggestion in terms of politeness.

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