

GENDER BASED VARIATION IN EMPLOYING SUGGESTION STRATEGIES
BY IRAQI EFL LEARNERS

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*To whom it may concern
To whom it may concern
To the gentle touch on face
To the first and last in turn
To whom I owe the grace*

*To the breath that gives life
To the who I call wife*

Mushtaq A. Sharqawi



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ABSTRACT

As the speech act of suggestion pragmatically conveys the intention behind its utterance rather than its mere structure, suggestions are crucial to EFL learners to master to communicate their ideas. Since the inception of the speech act theory, scholars have reported incomplete or impolite use of different speech acts, including suggestions from different regional contexts. These ill-mannered suggestions were due to the EFL learners' modest knowledge of the suggestion structures, directness principles, or potential politeness. However, attempts to deal with suggestions from their three linguistic levels in terms of gender remained scant. The study, thus, was set to determine (i) gender variation in suggestion strategies in terms of structure, directness, and politeness, (ii) the common suggestion formula employed by the EFL learners, (iii) the directness of suggestions by the learners, and finally (iv) the learners' consideration to politeness. The study randomly sampled 52 male and 52 female fourth-year students from the English Language Department at the University of Qadisiyah. Written Discourse Completion Task and Multiple-choice Discourse Completion Task were used to collect data. The data were analysed using the SPSS software in addition to MS Excel 2016. The findings revealed that the female achieved higher scores than the male. As for structure, it was found that the female varied from the male at some strategies and it was evident that the EFL learners used the formula 'I suggest...' more frequently than other formulas. As for the directness, it was uncovered that the male was more direct than the female. However, the learners tended towards conventionalized indirect suggestions. In terms of politeness, no statistical variations exhibited between the male and female in terms of who is more polite. As a whole, the majority of the learners' suggestions tended to be polite. The study provides a novel insight about the learners' current state of pragmatic knowledge, and by exploring suggestions using two piloted instruments makes the study a reliable measure of the learners' suggestion-specific pragmatic competence. This descriptive study is projected to be a comprehensive approach contributing to the Iraqi EFL context by dealing with suggestions from two detailed perspectives: (i) gender



variations and (ii) EFL learners' performance. Being descriptive, the study acts as an informative statement to the learners, gender interested personnel, syllabus designers, and teachers who are suggested to rethink the teachability of suggestion strategies in the secondary schools and higher institutes. For better performance, as the study recommends, EFL learners need to be exposed to oral suggestion-in-context means to help identify their verbal knowledge of suggestions at the structure, directness and politeness level.



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ABSTRAK

Oleh kerana tindakan ucapan secara pragmatik menyampaikan maksud di sebalik ucapannya daripada strukturnya, cadangan sangat penting bagi pelajar EFL untuk menguasai dalam menyampaikan idea mereka. Sejak dari awal pengenalan teori pertuturan, para sarjana telah melaporkan penggunaan ucapan yang tidak lengkap atau tidak sopan, termasuk cadangan dari pelbagai konteks wilayah. Cadangan tidak sopan ini disebabkan oleh pengetahuan sederhana pelajar EFL mengenai struktur cadangan, prinsip ketulusan, atau kesopanan yang berpotensi. Walau bagaimanapun, usaha untuk menangani cadangan dari tiga tahap linguistik mereka dari segi jantina masih kurang. Oleh itu, kajian ini ditetapkan untuk menentukan (i) pengaruh jantina terhadap strategi cadangan dari segi struktur, ketulusan, dan kesopanan, (ii) formula cadangan umum yang digunapakai oleh para pelajar, (iii) ketulusan cadangan oleh pelajar, dan akhirnya (iv) pertimbangan pelajar terhadap kesopanan. Kajian ini mengambil sampel secara rawak 52 pelajar lelaki dan 52 pelajar perempuan tahun keempat dari Jabatan Bahasa Inggeris di Universiti Qadisiyah. Tugas Penyelesaian Wacana Bertulis dan Tugas Penyelesaian Wacana Pelbagai Pilihan digunakan untuk mengumpulkan data. Data dianalisis menggunakan perisian SPSS selain MS Excel 2016. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa pelajar perempuan memperoleh skor yang lebih baik daripada pelajar lelaki. Bagi struktur, didapati bahawa pelajar perempuan berbeza dengan pelajar lelaki dalam beberapa strategi dan terbukti bahawa pelajar EFL menggunakan formula 'Saya cadangkan...' lebih banyak daripada formula lain. Berkenaan ketulusan, tidak boleh disimpulkan bahawa pelajar lelaki lebih tulus daripada pelajar perempuan. Walau bagaimanapun, para pelajar cenderung kepada cadangan tidak langsung secara konvensional. Dari segi kesopanan, tidak ada variasi statistik yang ditunjukkan antara pelajar lelaki dan pelajar perempuan dari segi siapa yang lebih sopan. Tetapi secara keseluruhan, sebahagian besar cadangan para pelajar cenderung kepada sopan. Kajian ini memberikan gambaran baru mengenai pengetahuan pragmatik semasa pelajar, dan dengan meneroka cadangan menggunakan dua instrumen perintis menjadikan kajian ini dapat dipercayai sebagai ukuran kompetensi



pragmatik khusus cadangan para pelajar. Kajian deskriptif ini diproeksikan sebagai pendekatan komprehensif yang menyumbang kepada konteks EFL Iraq dengan menangani cadangan dari dua perspektif terperinci: (i) variasi jantina dan (ii) prestasi pelajar EFL. Dari sudut deskriptif, kajian ini bertindak sebagai penyataan maklumat kepada para pelajar sendiri, personel yang berminat dengan kajian jantina, perancang silibus, dan para guru yang disarankan untuk memikirkan semula kemampuan mengajar semua strategi cadangan di sekolah menengah dan institut pengajian tinggi. Untuk prestasi yang lebih baik, seperti yang dicadangkan oleh kajian semasa ini, pelajar EFL perlu diberi pendedahan terhadap cara lisan dalam konteks untuk membantu mengenal pasti pengetahuan lisan mereka dalam membuat dan mengenali cadangan-cadangan pada tahap struktur, ketulusan dan kesopanan.



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BORS	-	Bald-On-Record Strategy
CISS	-	Conventionalized Indirect Suggestion Strategy
DCT	-	Discourse Completion Task
ODCT	-	Oral Discourse Completion Task
DSS	-	Direct Suggestion Strategy
EFL	-	English as a Foreign Language
ESL	-	English as a Second Language
FS	-	Fair Strategy
FSA	-	Face-saving Act
FTA	-	Face-threatening Act
H	-	Hypothesis
H ₀	-	Null Hypothesis
H ₁	-	Research Hypothesis
IA	-	Illocutionary Act
IS	-	Impolite Suggestion strategy
ISS	-	Indirect Suggestion Strategy
L1	-	First Language
L2	-	Second Language
LA	-	Locutionary Act
MDCT	-	Multiple-choice Discourse Completion Task
MOE	-	Ministry of Education
MOHESR	-	Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research
OFRS	-	Off-Record Strategy
ORS	-	On-Record Strategy
PA	-	Perlocutionary Act



PS	-	Polite Strategy
RA	-	Redressive Actions
RQ	-	Research Question
RS	-	Rude Strategy
SA	-	Speech Act
SAT	-	Speech Act Theory
SC	-	Strategy with Condition
SD	-	Social Distance
SH	-	Strategy with Hint
SI	-	Strategy with Imperatives
SIF	-	Strategy with Impersonal Forms
SIS	-	Strategy with Interrogative structures
SL	-	Strategy with 'Let's'
SN	-	Strategy with Noun of Suggestion
SNI	-	Strategy with Negative Imperatives
SP	-	Strategy with Performatives
SPP	-	Strategy with Possibility or Probability
SS	-	Social Status
SSWH	-	Strategy with 'Should', 'Would' or 'Had better'
SVN	-	Strategy with the Verb 'Need'
UK	-	United Kingdom
UNESCO	-	The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
US	-	United States
UTHM	-	Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia
VPS	-	Very Polite Strategy
WDCT	-	Written Discourse Completion Task



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THE STUDY

This study is a structural and pragmatic approach to examine how gender-based EFL learners employ suggestion strategies at the production and recognition levels. Six research papers and two conference presentations accompanied this study.

This thesis comprises five chapters. Chapter 1 provides the background about Iraqi EFL learners' status, their local setting, the education system, basic needs, and their soft skills. The background also extends to introduce speech act strategies under the speech act theory and then moves to the speech act of suggestion, its strategies, and the problems underlying these strategies in terms of structure, directness, and politeness. In response to these problems, the chapter discusses the aim the study that was set forth along with the problem-based hypotheses and research questions as well as their corresponding objectives which guided the study. The discussion continues to mention the scope and the significance of the study and finally ends with the operational definitions of terms.

Chapter 2 starts with a detailed discussion on the broader pragmatic perspective under which the theory of speech act and the speech act of suggestion are both indexed. The chapter defines the structural and pragmatic strategies of suggestions, i.e., the formal, directness, and politeness aspects of suggestions. Due to being a face-threatening act, the directness principles and politeness aspects inherent in suggestions are discussed with reference to their felicity conditions and the determining context. After studying nearly 85 research papers and theses on speech acts in general, the researcher was able to prepare and publish his first Scopus journal paper "*Analyzing the Speech Act of Disagreement Produced by Iraqi EFL Learners: A Gender Study*". Subsequently, in order to highlight the research gap and the modern trends, a topic-based systematic literature review dealing with various speech acts was performed. In this regard, extracts of this review were first presented in 'The 1st International ASEAN English Language Teaching (ASEAN-ELT) Conference 2018'. A review paper was later published as "*Speech Acts and Their Underlying Strategies by EFL Learners and Non- Learners: A Systematic Literature Review*." Chapter 2 also includes



a review on the speech act of suggestion in which the methodologies, regional context and aspects of suggestion are critically discussed. Finally, the chapter presents the theoretical framework which links the existing theory with the current models in question.

Chapter 3 starts with the research design and the philosophical doctrine adopted in the methodology followed by the population, the sample size, and the sampling techniques. The data collection instruments, their rationale, validity and reliability are elaborated with reference to the pilot study “*Analyzing Gender Effect on the Speech Act of Suggestion: A Pilot Study.*” Research ethics are considered and stated too. A discussion on the process of collecting data and the scoring scheme of the learners’ marks are also elaborated. The structural and pragmatic models of analysis in addition to the statistical tools used are elaborated.

Chapter 4 reveals the results. It is divided into three main sections: structure, directness, and politeness perspectives. In order to ensure the power of analyses and generalizability of results, rigorous descriptive statistics were first performed to obtain preliminary knowledge about the flow and the tendency of data. The descriptive statistics are followed by more sophisticated inferential statistics which help decide the final results in terms of the statistical significance. Each result is critically discussed with reference to the related studies and the reflections the researcher’s philosophy as well. Major parts of the results about politeness were presented as a poster in the ‘Innovative Teaching & Learning Research Day 2019’ (InTReD 19)’ and the poster was recognized with the Best Poster Award. The poster was later published as part of an e-book chapter in the conference website under the title “*Recognizing Suggestions by Iraqi EFL Learners: A Politeness Perspective.*” Another paper based on the research findings, dealing with the structure and perspective of suggestion entitled “*Making Suggestions: A Perspective of Perspectives*” has been published in a Scopus indexed journal. The last Scopus paper regarding the outcomes of directness and politeness entitled “*Iraqi EFL Learners’ Recognition of Politeness in the Speech Act of Suggestion*” has been published. The publication of these papers in Scopus indexed journals tends to validate the research findings and their contributions to the body of knowledge.

Chapter 5 brings the thesis to a closure where the findings are discussed in detail. In every section, the findings related to structure, directness, and politeness are discussed in terms of gender followed by EFL learners in general. After that, the



implications, novelty and contributions are addressed accordingly. The limitations of the study are clearly stated and recommendations for future researches are proposed too. In conclusion, the thesis ends with final remarks.



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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In many occasions, a person encounters a situation in which s/he either makes or receives suggestions. To make a suggestion is to propose an idea on what should be done at the time of speaking or at least to be considered for the future. Many people consider a suggestion as a type of panel from which they can benefit to improve their decisions and behaviour. For instance, PhD supervisors make suggestions to their students on what and how research should be.

However, making a suggestion to someone is not always an easy task in the English language, because some people may not want to be told what to do. Moreover, suggestions can even interfere with someone's personal world and in this case, in order to produce polite suggestions, they need to be mitigated using specific forms or ways (strategies). The strategies for making suggestions typically vary not only from person to person but according to gender as well, and this is what the current study is set to explore.

The aim of the current study is to investigate the role of gender in the production and recognition of suggestion strategies by the Iraqi EFL learners. This study belongs to the area of pragmatics; a branch of linguistics in which words are not only taken for what they conventionally mean, but how they are actually operated by the user to mean.

Within the field of pragmatics, the researcher prioritises the need for this study based on his assessment of the previous studies conducted on the Iraqi EFL learners. By exploring the suggestion strategies of the Iraqi English learners at both the production and recognition level, the study is intended to evaluate part of the learners' pragmatic competence in making and using suggestion strategies.



1.1 Background

Besides the two Iraqi dominant languages; Arabic and Kurdish, English is considered a foreign language (Ahmed & Hassoon, 2017). Under the instruction of the Ministry of Education (MOE), the teaching of English begins at the primary level and continues to the secondary level. As a whole, students receive English instructions for eleven years in their school time. English is taught as a compulsory subject with a minimum of five hours a week as instructed by the MOE.

The body that is highly associated with EFL is the higher education that is run solely by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MOHESR). It is the only government administrative agency that is in charge of supervising Iraqi higher education inside the country and abroad. The beginning of higher education in Iraq has come into being with the establishment of the School of Law, currently known as the College of Law in 1909. Later, the school constituted a base prompting the establishment of the University of Baghdad in 1957 with several colleges including the College of Arts where EFL is taught, especially at the English Language Departments. After that, five higher institutes were founded among which is the Language Institute. This means that EFL was paid a good amount of heed since the very beginning of the higher institutes. In order to meet the growing requirements of the demanding state of affairs, the number of the universities and institutes, including EFL-interested departments, has remarkably increased accordingly, however, not sufficiently. Currently, there are thirty-five state universities, three hundred seventy-eight state colleges, twenty-eight state institutes, and sixty-six private colleges. These institutions are distributed geographically among the eighteen provinces. Besides the private and specialized institutes, EFL, as an end in itself, is offered in every state university. EFL is offered by two types of colleges; (1) Colleges of Education through English Language Departments which are tasked with producing secondary school English teachers and (2) Colleges of Art through Language Departments which are tasked with producing qualified speakers of English or through Translation Departments which are tasked with producing translators. Despite these various EFL courses the above mentioned two departments offer, the overall language ability is below the expectations and this incompetency in EFL is attributed to issues like lack of language laboratory instruments, lack of classrooms and buildings against the high number of students, weak planning between the MOHESR and the job market, lack of



academic staff, old textbooks, poor libraries, and outdated teaching methods (Abbood, 2016).

The MOHESR is also in charge of the sponsorship of students pursuing their bachelor, master, PhD, and post PhD studies overseas. As an attempt to improve the EFL quality at all levels, a new condition was set by the ministry providing that students, especially of the English language, are encouraged to pursue their higher studies in English-speaking countries namely the USA, UK, Australia, and India. According to statistics by the Iraqi Directorate of Scholarships and Cultural Relations, there are about 22,992 overseas students of different disciplines, 40% of whom are under full scholarships and the rest 60% are under paid sponsorships. About 84% of these students are studying in English-speaking countries (The Directorate of Scholarships and Cultural Relations, 2019)

EFL-interested personnel are aware of all forms of EFL instructions in higher institutions are inevitable to standardize the education process to cope with modern advancements and to ensure accessibility to different resources of all topics. Therefore, having EFL skills becomes a requirement for all students in general. Moreover, scholars of different disciplines have been recently instructed to write their academic papers in English, not in Arabic except when the study is about the Arabic language. Although the use of English as a medium was prescribed by the MOHESR, the institutions preserve some flexibility in complying with these ministerial measures. An example of these institutions is Qadisiyah University (the target site of the current study).

In addition to the governmental bodies like state universities, much support to the EFL learning has been granted by international bodies like American and British embassies, UNESCO, and British Council especially to the university faculties majoring in EFL such as faculties of education, translation, and arts. The programs offered by these bodies targeted the development of speaking skills rather than writing skills.

In the last thirty years, the history of EFL in Iraq can be summarized as before and after 2003. Before 2003, the English language was restricted by the government to university settings and some special governmental facilities, described and treated as the 'language of enemies', mainly referring to the USA and UK policymakers (Saeed, 2015). The government even banned the market products marked with English



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