An Investigation of Iranian Advanced EFL Learners’ Application of Politeness Strategies in Disagreement between Two Genders

Ali Akbar KhomeijaniFarahani\textsuperscript{1}, Amir Parviz Molkizadeh\textsuperscript{2}

\textsuperscript{1}. Assistant Professor, Department of English, Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Tehran
\textsuperscript{2}. Department of Persian Literature and Foreign Languages, Islamic Azad University South Tehran Branch

Corresponding author email: Apmolkizadeh@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT: The main purpose of the current research project was to investigate the application of politeness strategies in disagreement by Iranian Advanced EFL learners. The other objective was to see whether male and female learners would use different politeness strategies or not. To achieve these objectives, 40 MA, EFL learners were invited to participate in the project. The participants were given a discourse completion test (DCT) designed by Umale (2011). The data obtained through this test were analyzed by the valid statistical procedures. The statistical analysis revealed that there was no significant difference between the two genders with regard to the type of politeness strategies in disagreement speech act. Based on the result of the present study, the material developers and teachers are recommended to note that male and female students use almost the same types of politeness strategies in disagreement speech acts.

Keywords: Iranian EFL learners, Politeness strategies, Brown and Levinson’s model, Gender.

INTRODUCTION

A learner of English as a foreign language (EFL) needs at least two kinds of language competence for an effective communication with native speakers of the language, namely, (linguistic competence and communicative competence. Linguistic competence, as defined by linguists, is the learner’s knowledge of the language system such as structure, vocabulary, and so on.

Communicative competence, suggested by Hymes (1972), is related to aspects rather than grammatical or linguistic knowledge, such as pragmatic competence. Hymes (1972) states that to achieve communicative goals, second language learners must learn to speak not only accurately, but also appropriately (Hymes 1972, cited in Niroomand, 2011). As we may conclude from Hymes's assertion, appropriacy is as important as accuracy for an efficient communication.

Politeness strategies which are used by EFL learners have attracted the attention of researchers in recent years.

Studies from Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) and Scollon and Scollon (1995) are among these studies. The general assumption of Brown and Levinson’ (1978) theory of politeness is that many speech acts like, requesting, criticizing, and disagreeing are intrinsically threatening to face. Some Speech acts are threatening because they do not consider the face wants of the interlocutors.

Expressing disagreement, which is unavoidable in everyday interaction, may threaten the relationship between the interlocutors and this threat to the face of interlocutor can be softened by the use of politeness strategies (Locher, 2004). So the present study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What disagreement strategies do male Iranian Advanced EFL learners employ?
2. What disagreement strategies do female Iranian Advanced EFL learners employ?
3. Is there any relationship between using politeness strategies of disagreement and gender?
**Literature Review**

Politeness is a topic that has been extensively studied in sociolinguistics and more specifically language in the workplace widely adopts (e.g., Holmes & Schnurr, 2005; Schnurr & Chan, 2009). Brown and Levinson’s model of politeness (1987) is undoubtedly one of the most well-known. The core concept of the model is face and that a rational human being is assumed to possess two aspects of face: negative face and positive face. Positive face is “the positive consistent self-image or ‘personality’ (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants” (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Negative face means “the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction, i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition” (1987). Since most speech acts are intrinsically face-threatening acts (FTAs), politeness strategies are employed to minimize face threat of FTAs: on-record with positive politeness or negative politeness, and off-record politeness (unless the speaker chooses to do the FTA bald on-record). Off-record politeness denotes the way of speaker’s doing an FTA without unequivocal imposition, i.e. to hint instead of to request. And the level of politeness is determined by three independent social factors: solidarity or social distance between interlocutors, relative status or power difference between interlocutors, and culture ranking of the imposition.

Most of the languages consist of all sorts of speech acts and of course, disagreements are not exceptions. Though people are continuously using them, the manner of disagreeing is different in different cultures and even in different genders. It is good to remember that people are not comfortable while refusing an invitation or a suggestion.

When one says ‘no’ to a request or invitation, directly or indirectly, the speech act of disagreement occurs. Since the refusals oppose the listeners, requester, or inviters’ expectations, they are considered as face-threatening act and often realized through indirect strategies.

According to Rees-Miller’s (2000), disagreement occurs when the speaker considers the proposition uttered by the prior speaker is untrue, and, thus, reacts with an utterance which propositional content or implicature is not.

Based on this definition, what speaker and hearer are arguing about is the determination of the truth condition of the semantic propositional content of the utterance. However, different studies have given different explanations to the definition of disagreement.

A multitude of studies on language and gender have been devoted to identifying, and trying to explain, differences in the speech styles of men and women. One of the main differences has been found in the area of linguistic politeness (e.g. Zimmerman and West 1975; Fishman 1978, 1980; Tannen 1984, 1990) on language and gender over the past three decades, according to which women are more likely than men to express positive politeness and to use mitigating strategies to avoid or minimize threatening their interlocutors’ face. For example, women tend to interrupt less in conversation and “to be more attentive listeners, concerned to ensure others get a chance to contribute” than men (Holmes, 1995). Bayles (2009) studied the relationship between small talk and gender.

She questioned accuracy of the stereotypical association of small talk with women speech. Bayles started with an examination of politeness, in particular the model devised by Brown and Levinson (1987), and then turned to examining small talk in terms of both its link to gender and its importance socially and professionally. She regarded approaches to language and gender such as the difference approach evident in the work of Deborah Tannen (1991) and Janet Holmes (1995). Bayles stated:

In my research reading I have observed the problems with making gender based generalizations, and have thus come to the conclusion that theoretically we cannot draw solid conclusions about the different ways men and women speak. Instead we should view gender as a performance, and small talk as a form of gendered discourse which has been stereotypically associated with women by society. Individuals can thus make their own choice whether or not to linguistically enact these gender stereotypes.

In the case of using disagreement strategies and gender, few studies have been done to investigate whether gender may influence the application of these strategies or not.

Helga Vanda Koczogh (2011) explored gender differences strategies employed by speakers of Hungarian. Vanda's study was a twofold research. First, he investigated the attitude of Hungarian speakers toward the speech of men and women and second, he examined the probable impact that gender differences may have on the preferred disagreement strategies and linguistic markers used by Hungarian speakers. In the first section of the study, Vanda gave a short description of his attitude test and presented the result. He investigated the perception of people’s speech of men and women. The result showed that men (4.09) were judged as slightly more polite than women (3.94), though the difference was not statistically significant.
The second section of Vanda's research was devoted to the understanding of any probable impact of gender on using disagreement strategies by native Hungarian speakers. In conclusion, Vanda suggested that the women participants in his study in general used a higher number of disagreements than men. However, no statistically significant gender difference was found in his data in the use of softened, strengthened and neither softened nor strengthened disagreement strategies in terms of their frequency. His results support previous findings about the claim that men use jokes much more frequently than women do. However, his findings do not confirm claims about women’s. None of the results of the studies we stated above were in accordance with feminist approaches to the relationship between gender and linguistic politeness. In Iran, there is no research which directly explores the relatedness of the gender of the speaker to his application of politeness strategies in disagreement. Regarding the gender as a crucial factor in sociolinguistics the researcher wants to find which of the two theories best describes the disagreeing strategies used by Iranian male or female advanced EFL learners: a feministic view, or a rather flexible approach. He wants to understand whether gender can cause differences in the way Iranian advanced EFL learners use disagreement strategies or other factors are more important than it for this type of application.

**METHODOLOGY**

As we observed in chapter 2, studies conducted to investigate the relationship between gender differences and using disagreement strategies, showed that gender is not a crucial factor in applying different disagreement strategies. To investigate Iranian advanced EFL learners’ application of politeness strategies in disagreement regarding their gender, a discourse completion test was given to the participants in two different groups: (male and female.) They were requested to write their natural responses to 12 scenarios representing the speech act of disagreement. The discourse completion test was borrowed from a study by Jaishree Umale.

The current research project was conducted in Tehran, Iran. Altogether, 40 MA students in English major who were born in Iran and have never stayed in English-speaking countries, including 20 females and 20 males, filled in the English version of the Discourse Completion Test (DCT). The participants’ age ranged from 23 to 30. They were students of Islamic Azad University, South Tehran branch. Because they were MA students, we assumed that their English knowledge level is advanced.

One main instrument that was used for collecting data for this study was a discourse completion test designed by Jaishree Umale, (2011). It consisted of a role-play written questionnaire with twelve scenarios. Scenarios were categorized into three requests, three suggestions, three invitations, and three offers. One of each group required a refusal to an equal status person, a higher status person, and a lower status person.

Regarding the nature of the research questions and hypotheses, this study is descriptive in methodology and has ex post facto design since the researcher does not have control over the selection and manipulation of the independent variable. This is why the researcher looks at the type and degree of relationship between the two variables (gender and kinds of disagreement strategies). Also, this study is both qualitative and quantitative.

**Data Collection Procedure**

Prior to the actual data collection, the situations in the original studies were radically modified and adapted to suit the Iranian context. The modified form of the (DCT) was given to two professors for validation. Their suggestions and observations were well taken into consideration in designing the final form of the (DCT). For further validation, the (DCT) was piloted on six subjects, similar to the main group, not included in the sample to see if the language is comprehensible for EFL learners, and based on their opinion a few changes were made.

Because the participants were MA students, the researcher assumed that their English knowledge level is advanced. Therefore, none of the English proficiency tests was given to the participants. A discourse completion test was given to 55 MA students of Islamic Azad University, South Tehran branch. The important point that needs to be mentioned here is that while 55 students were asked to fill the questionnaire, about 47 questionnaires were returned, and out of 47, 40 questionnaires were analyzed as they included complete responses. The participants were then divided into two groups: (20 females and 20 males.) The subjects were given enough time to write their answers to each of the scenarios. Since the participants were advanced EFL learners, there was no need to the researcher's availability during the questionnaire administration for providing assistance.

The participants' responses were analyzed in three steps. First, invalid responses were discarded and the total number of valid responses was determined. In the second step, when identifying the utterances of disagreement from the responses, the taxonomy from Muntigl and Turnbull (1998), which recognizes five types of disagreement: irrelevancy claim, challenge, contradiction and counterclaim and contradiction followed by counterclaim was applied.
In this step, the actual disagreement realizations were analyzed. First, the occurrences of the features in questions were counted for male and female learners and subsequently they were compared. Second, possible relationships between gender and disagreement realizations were analyzed.

Muntigl and Turnbull (1995) identify four types: Irrelevancy Claims (IC), Challenges (CH), Contradictions (CT) and Counterclaims (CC). They define them as follows. Irrelevancy claims are “meta-dispute acts that comment on the conversational interactions”. They show that a previous claim is not relevant to the discussion of the topic at hand. These are marked by words and expressions like 'It doesn't matter'; 'You're straying off the topic’ and 'It is nothing to do with it'. In uttering them, speakers seem to be questioning or undermining their interlocutors’ previous claims by stating that their claims are not relevant to the discussion at hand.

Challenges have typically the syntactic form of interrogative with question particles such as when, what, who, why, where and how. These are statements in which an interlocutor disagrees with prior turn. This type does not make aspecific claim (e.g. why or like who); it implicates that the addressee cannot provide evidence for his claim.

Challenges imply that the addressee cannot provide evidence for his/her claim. By posing a threat to the positive face of the interlocutor, challenges might be considered as impolite.

In Contradictions, “a speaker contradicts by uttering the negated proposition expressed by the previous claim”. These are often marked by negative particles like no or not as in (No, I don’t), indicating that the contradiction of the prior claim is true. As Brown and Levinson (1987) assert in their seminal paper, these acts make the hearer appear to be “wrong or misguided or unreasonable about some issue, such wrongness being associated with disapproval.”

Sometimes instead of having negative contradiction markers, contradictions will have “positive contradiction markers” like, yes or yeah which in contrast to the negated claim, state positive statements.

With counterclaims, speakers propose an alternative claim that does not directly contradict or challenge others’ claim. Further negotiation of the previous claim is provided by them. They tend to be preceded by pauses, prefaces, and mitigating devices (e.g. maybe your right, but). The strategies of avoiding explicit disagreement such as using positive markers, partial agreement or hedges can indicate indirectness and being polite in the speech act of disagreement. Muntigl and Turnbull (1998) propose that there exist a fifth type in which disagreement type is the combination of contradictions followed by counterclaims.

In the next step, the taxonomy of politeness strategies for disagreement developed by Brown and Levinson was employed for counting and analyzing the politeness strategies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To answer the first research question of this study which asked what disagreement strategies male Iranian Advanced EFL learners employ, the responses of male participants were analyzed. The results are set forth in the table 4.1. The review of Table 4.1 reveals that male Iranian advanced EFL learners employ all five kinds of strategies but with different frequencies. The most frequent one was counterclaims with the frequency of 54% of all answers by 20 male participants. The second most used kind of disagreement strategy for males was contradictions with occurrence 31%. The third one was contradictions followed by counterclaims with 10% of the answers. Finally, the challenges and irrelevancy claims were the least commonly used ones with 2.5 % for each.

To answer the second research question of this study which asked what disagreement strategies female Iranian advanced EFL learners employ, the responses of female participants were analyzed. The results are demonstrated in Table 4.2. As observable in Table 4.2, female Iranian advanced EFL learners employ counterclaims mostly with the frequency of 57% of all answers by 20 female participants. The second most used kind of disagreement strategy for females is contradictions with incidence of 27%. The third one was contradictions followed by counterclaims with 13% of the answers. And finally, the challenges and irrelevancy claims were the least frequently used disagreement strategies with occurrence of 1.7% and 1.3 % respectively.

To answer the third question of this study which questioned whether there is any relationship between using politeness strategies of disagreement and gender, the participants’ responses to all 12 scenarios were analyzed through running cross tabulation. The results of descriptive statistics for total scenarios are laid out in the Table 4.3. The results in Table 4.3 reflect that contradictions were used by male learners with the frequency of 31%, and with occurrence of 27% by female ones. Male learners applied counterclaims with the frequency of 54%, and female ones used it with frequency of 57%. Challenges were applied by male learners with the frequency of 2.5%, and with 1.7% by female ones. Male learners used irrelevancy claims with the frequency of 2.5%, but female ones used it with frequency of 1.3%. Contradictions followed by counterclaims were utilized by male learners with the frequency of 10%, and with 13% by female ones.
This study was conducted to investigate the Iranian advanced EFL learner's application of politeness strategies in disagreement between two genders. Due to the certain kind of formality which exists between the interlocutors, almost all the scenarios can be looked at as almost the same. In all of these contexts, the speaker should disagree with a person. In response to almost all scenarios, counterclaims occurred most frequently. These are implicit without directly disagreeing with a person. Majority of the subjects preferred performing the FTA off record, i.e., indirectly by the use of partial agreement and positive remarks to mitigate their disagreement. Off-Record Indirect politeness strategy outlined by Brown and Levinson (1987) uses indirect language and removes the speaker from the potential to being imposed. These are the tendency to agree and save the hearer's positive face by “claim[ing] common ground"(Brown & Levinson, 1987). By Brown and Levinson's term, disagreement, inherently threaten either the hearer's or the speaker's face-wants, and that politeness is involved in redressing those face threatening acts. This is in line with the findings of Pearson (1986) and Beebe and Takahashi (1989) that native speaker's strategies for expression of disagreement are generally characterized by mitigation, that is, by means to reduce the directness of the disagreement and with it the strength of the FTA.

Furthermore, the results showed that male and female participants of this study used all kinds of strategies nearly the same. Male and female participants applied contradiction with frequency of 31% and 27% , counterclaims with frequency of 54% and 57%, challenges with frequency of 2.5 and 1.7, irrelevancy claims with frequency of 2.5 and 1.3, and finally contradictions followed by counterclaims with frequency of 10% and 13% respectively. These findings lend support to Okamoto’s (2002, p.102) view that "gender cannot be isolated as an independent variable for determining language use, and other variables need to be considered as simultaneously relevant". Gender and politeness researchers should pay greater attention to intra-gender and inter-gender similarities in strategic discourse, as our data has revealed, there are many interesting patterns that, whilst traditionally ascribed to either male or female speech style / politeness, are used by both groups.

CONCLUSION

The data in this study, showed no highly statistical differences between using politeness strategies in disagreement and gender. It revealed that gender is not a determining factor for being polite. This study confirmed the previous studies done by Sara mills, Helga Vanda, and others which suggested that no direct relationships exist between the gender and politeness, and rejected the feministic view toward gender and politeness.

REFERENCES

Nirroomand M. 2011. An Investigation of Iranian EFL learners’ use of politeness strategies and power relations in disagreement across different proficiency levels. English Language Teaching. 4, (4) 2-11.
Table 4.1. Frequencies of Disagreement Strategies which Male Iranian Advanced EFL Learners Employ

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Disagreement Strategy</th>
<th>Frequency (in Percentage)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Contradictions</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Counterclaims</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Challenges</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Irrelevancy claims</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Contradictions followed by Counterclaims</td>
<td>10%</td>
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</tbody>
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Table 4.2. Frequencies of Disagreement Strategies which Female Iranian Advanced EFL learners Employ

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>27%</td>
</tr>
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<td>2 Counterclaims</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
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<td>3 Challenges</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Irrelevancy Claims</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 Contradictions followed by Counterclaims</td>
<td>13%</td>
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</tbody>
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Table 4.3. Comparison of Male and Female Learners in terms of Using Disagreement Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Disagreement Strategy</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Frequency (in Percentage)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Contradictions</td>
<td>Males</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Females</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Counterclaims</td>
<td>Males</td>
<td>54%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Females</td>
<td>57%</td>
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<td>Males</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Females</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 Irrelevancy claims</td>
<td>Males</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Females</td>
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