POLITENESS IN EMAIL COMMUNICATION AMONG ARAB POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS IN A MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Computer-mediated Communication (CMC) is a common form of communication among students and lecturers at universities. This study aimed to explore politeness strategies employed by Arab students in communicating via emails with their lecturers in a public Malaysian university. The research design used in this study is qualitative where fifty emails of both male and female Arab students were collected to identify and analyze the politeness strategies, directness level, and syntactic and lexical choice. Politeness strategies are analyzed according to Brown and Levinson's (1987) notion of politeness, while Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) Cross Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) is used to analyze directness level, syntactic and lexical choice. The findings of the study reveal that female students are more aware of using the suitable strategy; they usually are more indirect in requests that contain high level of imposition, like requests for feedback. Conversely, male students always use direct strategies when they request for feedback. To reduce their force of imposition, male students resort to lexical politeness markers, such as apologies and please. The study concludes with recommendations for further related studies.

INTRODUCTION

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) which is "hyperpersonal" in nature (Walther, 1996) has gained huge importance and attracted the attention of many researchers throughout the world during the past decades (Chalak et al, 2010). E-mail as one form of CMC has been increasingly realized as a common means of communication (Chejnová, 2014) and "an ideal tool for building or maintaining social relationship" (Baron, 1998, p. 157). In the higher education context, studies on the use of e-mail focused on the features and characteristics of its interaction and

communication between students and teachers (e.g. Martin et al, 1999; Ronau and Stroble, 1999) while other comparative studies involved native and non-native speakers (Poling, 1994; Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Payne, 1997; Bloch, 2002; Biesen-bach-Lucas and Weasenforth, 2002; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005).

While email has been accepted as a common means of communication between students and their teachers or professors, there is still a growing concern regarding the inappropriate use of email among university students in communicating with their professors (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007) including impoliteness (Chen, 2006). This is attributed to the influence of technology features on students' forms of writing (Baron, 1984), the younger generation's tendency to become more stylistics (Baron, 2002), preference for being direct over being indirect (Cameron, 2003), lack of students' awareness of the impressions their emails may leave (Najeeb et al, 2012) and lack of awareness of the standards of appropriateness in successful communication (Chen, 2006).

Therefore, successful email communication for academic purposes needs further guidance (Najeeb et al, 2012). This is important especially when students coming from different cultural backgrounds as in the case of Malaysia need to communicate with their professors and lecturers. In such academic setting, communication is affected and challenged by students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds as well as the gender factor (Herring, 2000; Jessmer and Anderson, 2001). Therefore, the present study aimed to investigate the politeness strategies adopted by Arab postgraduate students in a public university in Malaysia when communicating with their lecturers via emails.

RELATED LITERATURE

Theoretical Perspective of Politeness

The investigation of the present study is based on the theoretical perspective of politeness advocated by Brown and Levinson (1978; 1987). This theory attempted to answer the question of why people while interacting and communicating do not speak in the clearest and direct manner.

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), people are often motivated to do so because of the need for gaining approval from others (positive face) and the need for remaining independent (negative face). The theorists also postulated that when a person performs a Face Threatening Act (FTA) (any utterance threatening another's face such as disagreements and criticism) while interacting, he/she must select either performing that FTA most directly and most efficiently or making attempts by which the individual mitigates the effect of the FTA on the hearer. Such mitigation strategies are labeled by Brown and Levinson (1987) as politeness strategies. As proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), politeness strategies fall two kinds: positive and negative strategies. While positive politeness strategies are described as "approach-based", which aim at satisfying the wish of the hearer or addressee, the negative strategies are described as "avoidance-based", which are usually intended by the speaker as a means of not impeding or interfering with the hearer's freedom of action. Previous studies (e.g. Lee, 2004; Chen, 2006;Duthler, 2006; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007;Bulut and Rababah,2007; Najeeb, 2012) on e-mail politeness using this theory have showed the intersection of students' CMC communication and politeness theory can provide a better understanding of how students exploit and use such tools including e-mail for communicating with their lecturers and specifically for constructing requests using politeness strategies.

Previous Studies on Students' Politeness in E-Mail Communication

E-mail as a well-known medium of interpersonal communication has been investigated by many previous studies. In relation to its use among students in communicating with instructors or teachers, the results by Duthler (2006) indicated that asynchronous CMC tools such as emails play a role in facilitating socially desirable communication among students as the researcher proved that the requests made by students in emails were more polite than those produced via voicemails. This was attributed to the functions of such asynchronous CMC tools in eliminating the unnecessary cues and focusing on carefully planning, composing and editing their requests. Among these studies on students' CMC communication related to the present study are those studies which focused on politeness strategies used by non-native students of English in constructing their emails to faculty members and lectures. Interlanguage research investigating e-mail has pointed out at the difficulty faced by non-native students in selecting appropriate

strategies while communicating with faculty members. For example, Hartford and Bradovi-Harlig (1996) examined native and non-native speakers' email messages, particularly requests. The results indicated that unlike native speakers' requests, the requests by non-native speakers showed the use of fewer downgraders or mitigators, negative impact, statements of personal time needs and acknowledgement of imposition on the faculty members, thus concluding that their requests were less efficient than those of native speakers. Chen's (2001) comparison of Taiwanese and U.S. graduate students' emails that involved the openings (e.g. formal address, salutations and greetings) and closings (e.g. thanking and complimentary remarks) showed that Taiwanese students employed different strategies in constructing their emails that were culturally influenced. American students varied their tragedies based on their relation and familiarity with the addressees or professors as well as the purpose of communication.

Samar et al. (2010) compared between native speakers (Americans) and non-native speakers (Iranians) and found that American students used more communication strategies than Iranian students especially direct requests, suggestions, providing history and miscellaneous strategies. This was interpreted as the differences between the two groups in relation to their command of English and cultural differences. Chejnová (2014) reported that in communicating with their lecturer via email, students employed both direct and indirect strategies with syntactic modifications and elaboration of external modifications. Some of them also avoided using deferential forms of address, and rather they used only greetings in equalizing the power asymmetry between interactants. The researcher concluded that the use of negative strategies is expected in such setting since positive strategies may result into pragmatic failure. According to Biesenbach-Lucas (2007), non-native students demonstrated fewer resources in constructing e-polite emails to their professors than native speakers, and both chose direct strategies for requests with the lower imposition but not for requests with the highest imposition. Lee (2004) identified conventionally direct strategies, conventionally indirect strategies and requestive hints as politeness strategies used by Chinese students in e-mail requests to their teachers. They were also consistent in using these strategies when communicating with a Chinese teacher and an English teacher. They also tended to be more direct in their requests in e-mails regardless of their teachers' cultural background.

Concerning the use of politeness strategies among Arab learners of English, there are a few studies. For instance, in analyzing e-mail messages by Saudi graduate students sent to their professors, Bulut and Rababah (2007) found that students although the address terms used by the students for starting their messages were dominated by negative politeness, they tended to show a preference for positive politeness strategies in their requests. The researcher concluded such positive politeness strategies indicate that the students were more direct and explicit in writing requests to their professors. Yet, this study was exclusive to females, and it was recommended that future research would better compare between males and females in terms of their requests. Another study by Najeeb et al. (2012) found that Arab students employed a variety of both positive and negative politeness strategies with a tendency towards directness and lack of indirectness in constructing their requests via e-mail when communicating in English. The findings underlie the insufficient pragmatic knowledge among Arab students of English and the influence of their culture as evidenced by the over polite strategy. While all previous studies showed the challenges faced by non-native students of English in using politeness strategies which are mostly attributed to the culture among other factors, there are a few studies showing the possibility of socializing non-native speakers into the target culture and developing pragmalinguistic competence. For example, Chen (2006) observed this developed pragmalinguistic competence among a Taiwanese student by comparing her use of English in e-mails when she was a master's student and later when she became a doctoral student. Similarly, Bloch (2002) reported a wide variety of strategies used by non-native but advanced learners of English, thus achieving their communicative goals.

The Study

This corpus-based study employs a qualitative paradigm in its research design. The researchers first identified and approached target participants who are currently pursuing their postgraduate studies (MA and PhD programmes) in a local public university. After obtaining consent from the participants, the researchers made requests to collect sample emails that the students had sent to their lecturers. The samples received were then converted and transferred on a word document for coding and analysis.

The sample consists of fifty emails collected from postgraduate Arab students in Malaysia from different ethnicities, such as Iraqi, Jordanian, Yemeni and Libyan. The samples were categorized into male-authored and female-authored category. These students were in their initial stage of research. The majority of the students have acceptable or satisfactory proficiency in English. All of them have passed the obligatory English proficiency tests for postgraduate study, such as TOEFL or IELTS, or the English Proficiency Placement Test (EPPT) set by the institution. They are also familiar with CMC technology, although not necessarily within the academic settings.

Content analysis was conducted to identify the politeness markers in the email data based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory to investigate politeness strategies adopted by the participants. First, the data was examined based on the four levels of face-threatening acts (FTAs) to identify instances adhering to or violating the FTAs. Each instance was coded accordingly the coding system (Table1). Next, to analyze the level of directness in the email requests, the Cross Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) framework (Blum-Kulka et al, 1989) was employed. The qualitative data was also quantified to show the strategies used by male and female Arab students in their emails to their Malaysian lecturers.

Table 1. Coding categories of politeness strategies

No.	FTA	
1.	Bald on record	Less polite
2.	Positive politeness	
3.	Negative politeness	↕
4.	Off-record	
		More polite

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the four politeness strategies adopted by both male and female Arab students in their email communication with the Malaysian lecturers (Table 2) are discussed as follows:

Table 2. Percentage of the Use of Politeness strategies among male and female Arab students

Politeness strategies	Male	Female
Bald on-record	36%	12%
Positive politeness	64%	84%
Negative politeness	40%	48%
Off-record	16%	44%

The overall analysis of the data showed that there are three common types of request as evident in all the sample emails:

a. Request for information: Requests for information about marks, classes, and supervision.
b. Request for appointment: Requests for face-to-face appointments with the teachers.
c. Request for feedback: Requests for feedback on works in progress.

Bald on-Record Strategy

A total of 36%of male students' emails contain bald on-record strategy, as compared to 12% of the female students' emails. Male students seem to prefer to make direct requests for teachers to understand what the student wants. However, this strategy is considered as the least polite strategy (Brown and Levinson, 1987) for the high degree of potential FTAs it contains (See Table 1). To go "on-record" means phrasing the FTAs as such that the sender's intentions remain unambiguous. To do it "baldly" entails phrasing the FTAs in straightforward terms with no attempt to soften the face-threatening thrust. When this strategy is used, the hearer's face is neglected because the speaker performs the request baldly to send a strong and straightforward message to the hearer, with the intention that the hearer must comply to the speaker's wants. Furthermore, one can choose bald on-record strategy in certain situations. For examples, if both speaker and hearer agree that face wants should be sacrificed in favor of personal interests; when the cost of FTAs is estimated to be very low; or when the speaker has power over the hearer (Brown and Levinson, 1987). This confirms the result reported by Najeeb et al. (2012) showing that when this bald on-record strategy was employed by Arab students in their emails to the lecturer, it indicated that the sender did not seem to seek to minimize the threat to the hearer's face. The study also found that male students used this strategy only in the request for feedback,

which suggests a great imposition on the teacher, while female students used it for different types of request. This is reflected in the following samples:

Sample 1: (Email 12m)*
Dear doctor; how are you? Hoping everything is okay.
This is discussing of the conditional sentences.
Please doctor tell me your suggestion and your advice.
I sent you a literature review about my term paper and you didn't reply me.
Thank you

Sample 2: (Email 15f)
Asalamualekm , Prof
I'm a master student , you told me I can take my project in Topology , so when can I meet you to discuss about the topic .
Regards,

*The number in all the sample emails refers to the respondent. *m* indicates male respondent and *f* represents female respondent.

The two emails above illustrate the use of direct request when asking for suggestions and advice, and more specific details such as appropriate time for meeting and discussion from the lecturers. The direct requests as shown in sample 1 and 2 might be seen as risky as they explicitly threatens the teacher's face, and thus lessen the cooperation between the student and the teacher, who may not want to comply to the requests. Such result corroborates those results of previous studies in general regarding the direct requests (Chen, 2001; Samar et al, 2010;Chejnová, 2014). In particular the result by Najeeb et al. (2012) that Arab student' requests reflected a higher level of directness, thus indicating their preference to be more direct. This directness seems to be influenced by the Arab students' cultural background that tends to be more directness-oriented. This was even reported by Lee (2004) among Chinese students as their e-mail requests to their teachers showed a higher tendency towards directness.

According to Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) CCSARP framework, there are two sub-types of requests that fall under this direct strategy, namely imperatives and direct questions. Imperatives are used for different illocutionary acts when the speaker considers the message intended to be conveyed. They are used to form clauses that served as commands, offers, advices and requests. The same utterance may create many types of illocutionary force. Hence, it is difficult to

differentiate between commands, requests and offers, unless there are certain features that serve as linguistic markers for each.

The data showed that only male students use imperatives in their requests. The results indicated that 28%of the male students used imperatives in their requests, while none of the female students used this strategy. The data further showed that male students used imperatives only in the request for feedback, which suggests a great imposition on the hearer, i.e., the receiver of the email, the teacher. In sample 1, the student used an imperative clause, "*tell me your suggestion and your advice*" when he asked for feedback. In addition, to show how urgent the request was, he also reminded his teacher that he had sent him/her his work earlier but there was no reply from the teacher. According to Downing and Locke (2002), there are some factors that can show the differences between commands and other directives, such as the power of the sender and the receiver, who benefits from the directive, and the politeness factor. Since the teacher is positioned as someone who has more power over the student and the student has the benefit from the request, the latter would often opt for mitigating the forces of the request by selecting polite words or expression to minimize the effect of the imperatives. Consider the following sample:

Sample 3: (Emails 2m)
AlssalamoAlekom Prof.
I did the modifications in literature review, Please, check it in attached file.
Thanks

In this email, the absence of politeness formula makes the structure of the sentence appears as a command. To avoid this confusion, the student used some techniques to perform his request with minimal imposition. He used an in-group marker"*AlssalamoAlekom*"to show solidarity that he has shared with his teacher. The use of the marker indicates and acknowledges that the teacher and the student both belong to the same linguistic or religious group. Furthermore, the sender showed his respect by addressing the teacher with his title "*Prof*" which immediately establishes the distance between them. He also used the word *please* to alleviate the force of his imposition. In short, sample 3 illustrated a process in which the student had modified the construction of his sentence to be as a request rather than a command by applying appropriate markers of politeness. Both male and female students used direct WH-questions to make requests in different ways.

The finding suggested that direct questions are used only in requests for appointment. 8% of the requests made by the male participants and 12% from the female participants were performed by using direct and non-polar questions as shown in the following samples:

Sample 4: (Email 15m)
SorryDr
I'm interest in X's thesis/ from Iraq
<u>*what time I can come to borrow it?*</u>
Thank you

Sample 5: (Email 11f)
AlsalamAlekom Prof.
I rewrite the paper by Latex and do what you ask me to do, but I cannot find an example. <u>When</u>
<u>*can I see you?*</u>
Yours

In sample 4 and 5, the marker of politeness was absence. Instead, participant 15m used an apologizing expression, "sorry" at the beginning of his email to mitigate the intrusion of his message. On the other hand, participant 11f employed an in-group marker, "*AlsalamAlekom*" to achieve similar effect in her request. The discussion above showed bald on-record strategy is used by both male and female students although in different ratios. A higher ratio of imperative requests is shown in emails composed by the male students as compared to those from the female students. Moreover, the use of direct questions among the female students is also lower than their counterparts.

A total of 36%of male students' emails contain bald on-record strategy, as compared to 12% of the female students' emails. Male students seem to prefer to make direct requests for teachers to understand what the student wants. However, this strategy is considered as the least polite strategy (Brown and Levinson, 1987) for the high degree of potential FTAs it contains (See Table 1). To go "on-record" means phrasing the FTAs as such that the sender's intentions remain unambiguous. To do it "baldly" entails phrasing the FTAs in straightforward terms with no attempt to soften the face-threatening thrust. When this strategy is used, the hearer's face is neglected because the speaker performs the request baldly to send a strong and straightforward message to the hearer, with the intention that the hearer must comply to the speaker's wants. Furthermore, one can choose bald on-record strategy in certain situations. For examples, if both

speaker and hearer agree that face wants should be sacrificed in favour of personal interests; when the cost of FTAs is estimated to be very low; or when the speaker has power over the hearer (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

Positive Politeness

The data revealed that positive politeness strategy is used by both male and female students, but with a higher ratio among the former. 64% of male students' emails and 84% of female students' emails constituted the positive politeness strategy. The students used these techniques and expressions to intensify teachers' interest. This can be performed by using the plural pronoun we to show solidarity with their teachers, or by using in-group identity markers. Students used positive politeness strategies in situations that require low imposition, such as requests for information or appointment as in sample 6 and 7.

Sample 6: (Email: 25m)
Maafkansaya (I'm sorry)
Dr.
Please I want your approval for this article
To implement my critical review
Sorry to take from your time.

Sample 7: (Email: 17f)
Second: I have 3 structures with Dr. X (UPM) which is V1, V5 and L8.
Can we request from him?.
Thanks

A speaker can redress the force of potential FTAs by showing the desire to agree or to avoid disagreement (Brown and Levinson, 1987). The speaker can pretend that he or she agrees with the hearer by making the disagreement less blatant and by avoiding from giving direct answers. For instance, the speaker can use expressions such as "yes, but…", or "so" and "then" to avoid damaging the hearer's face.   The data showed a low ratio of students used these strategies to communicate with their lecturers.

Sample 8: Email 20m
I did the modifications in literature review, And all of this just to show you my works and what you asked me ..i know it's not exactly related to the format of XYZ . But later after finish my thesis , I'll rewrite it again with XYZ format and I'll reduce all the scanning figures. .... Please, check the modifications in attached file.

In sample 8, three pragmatic functions were expected when 20m used the strategy of avoiding disagreement. First, the student wanted to avoid direct confrontation with the supervisor by admitting that his work is "*not exactly related to the format of XYZ*". Second, this strategy serves as a communicative facilitator to alleviate any possible conflict that might occur between the student and the supervisor. 20m assumed that his teacher would ask him about "*the format of UKM*", so he made it clear that he was aware of his mistake, hoping that his teacher would not raise this as an issue. Lastly, the strategy of avoiding disagreement is closely related to self-politeness in which it serves as an apology or a confession of not able to fulfill the requirement or task as needed. Only male students used this strategy as reflected in the data analysis. Both speaker and hearer in a communicative event can redress threats on hearer's face by employing the inclusive term "*we/us*" in the request. Sample 9 illustrates this:

Sample 9: Email 4m
Good evening prof
 I have request I had problem with the title I chose I feel it is a little far from the point we looking for so I have new title and new outline if u do not mind so Iinform you and ask you to accept the change. Thank so much prof and sorry for Inconvenience.

In this email, 4m involved his teacher in a decision making process by saying that he had decided to change the title of his research as the original title was "*...a little far from the point we are looking for*". By doing so he was attempting to build a common ground with his teacher, hoping that the latter would review the new outline and approve the new title. The same strategy was employed by 17fwhen she said "*Can we request from him?*" in sample 7. She wanted her teacher to share her concerns in this case so that they could take necessary action together (sending requests to Dr X).

In many languages, honorifics are employed to signal social deference and respect. To perform positive or negative politeness in email communication with the Malaysian lecturers, the

majority of the students draw on honorifics, such as "*Dr.*", and "*Prof.*" in their emails to assure their teachers' faces are preserved, and to maintain their social distance.

In a communicative event, first name is often used to acknowledge speaker's identity and to determine the interpersonal relationship between the speaker and the hearer. To perform positive politeness, some students used the first name of their teachers with appropriate honorifics to demonstrate solidarity and to lessen the social distance between them. It was found that there are more female students who address their lecturers with their first name as compared to the male students.

It was also found that some students used in-group identity markers in their messages to show solidarity and to lessen the social distance with the teachers. Some of the words include expressions in the Malay language such as "*terima kasih*", "*Selamat hariraya*" and "*maafkan saya*" which means "*thank you*", "*Happy Eid*" and "*excuse me*" respectively, and cultural expressions that are used by Muslim community in general, such as "*InshaAllah*" ("*God willing*") and "*AssalmuAlikum*" ("*peace be upon you*").

Sample 10: Email 10m
AssalamuAlaikum Prof.
Dear Prof .
I did what you asked me , about the comparison tables with many researchers .And I did the review for water footprint at palm oil mill and reduce the water consumptions and POME volume, .. You can find the modifications in attached file.
Prof , since you told me the objective in this thesis . So, can I start with Lab activities now?
Terima kasih

In sample 10, 10m used two in-group identity markers, "*AssalamuAlaikum*" and "*Terima kasih*" when communicating with his lecturer. The data showed that female students used in-group language markers more frequently (64%) than the male students did (32%). Thus, such above positive politeness strategies also found in previous studies by Najeeb et al. (2012) which indicated that the use of positive politeness was intended by Arab students to reduce the threat to the hearer's positive face and as a means to enhance the professor's face (Chen, 2001). Yet, these two studies did not address positive politeness strategies in details. This also plays a role in evaluating that such requests are polite by the hearer (Jessmer and Anderson, 2001).

Polar Interrogatives

Positive and negative politeness can be achieved by using polar interrogatives (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Sample 11 and 12 demonstrate the use of modals, namely "*do*" and "*can*" to make positive requests.

Sample 11: (Email: 13m)
AlssalamoAlekom ,
Please Prof. , <u>Do you have any thesis from previous students related to my topic ?</u> I want to
know how can I make this review ..And there is no details about that in the guide of XYZ.
I'm master student by course work and this is the first time for me to do this.
Thanks

Sample 12: (Email: 19f)
All the best for you
and<u>cani know the result that you will get after you finish the research</u>
regards,

The students also used alternatives to reduce FTAs by giving their teachers suggestions and options.

Sample 13: Email 20m
Dear doctor.
Firstly, sorry doctor I think, I mistake in your email.
i searched a lot and Ifound a lot of subjects that near to my topic.
Please doctor give me your advices and suggestions. <u>can you give me the suitable topic near to</u>
<u>my topic or can i complete in the same topic.?</u>I am very confuse about it.
Thank you very much

Moreover, students used hedged request to minimize the FTAs imposed on their teachers. They used imperatives or direct questions preceded by an excuse or an option so that the teacher would comply with the student's request. Overall, both male and female students used this strategy, although with a rather low percentage (4% of each group).

Sample 14: Email 1m
Dear Dr.
Sorry for not writing to you as Iwas busy with the data collection and data analysis.
I would like to see you to discuss some issues regards chapter four as I did not finish it yet
<u>When you have free time, please inform me</u>
Regards,

Sample 15: Email 16f
Salam Dr,
Attached is inorganic paper (only EPR part is not complete).
<u>If Dr. is not busy tomorrow can I make an appointment after 3:00 pm</u>
Thanks

From the previous studies, the studies by Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) and Chejnová (2014) included analysis of interrogative forms not as a syntactic modification, but at the levels of directness.

Expectation Statement

The data showed that 8% of the male and female students used expectation statement to perform direct request strategies respectively. Sample 16 and 17 are examples of expectation statement which are made by using words that suggest anticipation, such as "*hope*" and "*wish*".

Sample 16: Email 8m
Furthermore, I came many times to your office to meet you but nobody there during the recent three days. <u>Hope you accept my request and tell me the time I can meet you in the faculty.</u>

Sample 17: Email 13f
AlsalamAlekom Prof. S
Hopefully you are OK. I attach the letter that they asked me to do and also the pdf because I changed a horizontal line for small fractional terms to the solidus (/) as they want<u>. I hope you can see it and tell me if it is ok or no?</u>

Want Statement

Want statements are classified under the direct strategy of request. According to Blum-Kulka et al. (1989: 279), a *want statement* "expresses the speaker's desire that the event denoted in the proposition come about." Lubecka (2000: 109) stated that *Want Statements* "assist the speaker in

asserting those desires whose fulfillment depends on the hearer's decision." In general, such request involves the use of the verbs such as "*need*", and *"want"*.

In the data want statements are recognized by two expressions, namely "*I want*" and "*I would like to*", which constitutes a higher FTAs for the former and lower for the latter. The data showed that 28% of male students used want statements with the "*I want*" expression, while only 8% of female students used the "*I would like to*" expression to make their requests to the lecturers.

Sample 18: Email 13m
AlssalamoAlekom ,
Please Prof. , Do you have any thesis from previous students related to my topic ?I want to
know how can I make this review .. And there is no detail about that in the guide of XYZ.
I'm master student by course work and this is the first time for me to do this.
Thanks

Sample 19: Email 4f
Good afternoon dr,
 I'm a student in current issues in language studies. I would like to ask you what day the course
will start,on Tuesday or Friday?
 regards

The above results concerning the expectation and want statements confirm those results found in previous studies (e.g. Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007;Chejnová, 2014). These studies categorized expectation and want statements as the most direct strategies when analyzing students' requests in e-mails.

Negative Politeness

Leech (1983) stated that negative politeness is used to minimize the cost of particular impolite illocution. Negative politeness strategy is directed towards hearer's negative face and it is a form of "avoidance-based" (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 129) strategy.

In this study, male students used negative politeness strategies in 40% of their emails, while female students used them in 48% of their emails. The main difference between male and female students is that female students used this strategy more syntactically, while male students

used it more lexically. For instances, female student used modal auxiliary such as "could" and "may" to make their requests, while male students resorted to apologies and hedges. Female students also used negative politeness more commonly in requests for feedback to mitigate the imposition of their requests. To satisfy the teachers' negative face, the study found that the students used various strategies, such as apologizing, showing respect, and being conventionally indirect, to achieve such purpose. By doing so, the teachers who had received requests from the students might not feel overly obliged to fulfill those requests as the level of imposition was minimal.

The most straightforward approach to make a request is by using a direct strategy to convey an intention as clear as possible. However, due to the power differences between the students and the teachers and the social need for courtesy, many of the students would choose to avoid direct strategies and opt for indirect strategies.

Conventionally indirect strategy can be performed by certain linguistic expressions in a speech community (Ruzickova, 2007). The data showed that students used modal verbs such as "*could*" "*would*" and "*may*" (refer to sample 20 and 21) in their interrogative form to make their requests. The female students used this strategy more frequently than the male students. It was found that this strategy occurred in 36% of female's emails, and 12% in those composed by the male students.

Sample 20: Email 7m
Greetings
I already get your information; <u>May I know this is for became new committee or participant for the workshop?</u>

Sample 21: Email 7f
Dear Dr,
Assalamualaikum
Sorry, I do not have her mobile number.
<u>Could you please give her mobile number or email address?</u>
Thanks

Male and female students differed in using modal verbs in their email requests. Only female students used "would" in its interrogative form to make a request (sample 22), while none of the male students use it to make a request.

Sample 22: Email 21f
Hello
dear Dr. the attachment file contain the answer of two questions <u>would you please check it</u>.
best regards

It was found that male students conventionally used indirect strategy in requests for information which suggest low imposition, while female students used this strategy in all kinds of request seeking for information, appointment and feedback. As this strategy is required in situations where the distance between the interlocutors is high, the cooperation between the teacher and the student is highly expected. In terms of pragmatic behavior, the analysis showed that the politeness marker "*please*" always co-occurs with the modal "*could*" in samples across both genders. In contrast, the use of "*please*" with the modal "*may*" was absence.

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), apologizing is one of the ways to reduce the impact of FTAs. Apology can be achieved in many ways. For example, the speaker can show his or her unwillingness to invade the hearer's territory, or to control his or her freedom of action. Furthermore, the speaker may confess his or her intention to violate the hearer's negative face, and then ask for forgiveness or provide reasons for doing an FTA.

The findings indicated that both genders also differed in the use of linguistic mitigating devices such as the use of "*sorry*". The word "*sorry*" was found in 28% of the male students' emails, and in 8% of the female students' emails. Sample 23 showed the use of "sorry" in an in the opening and closing of the email.

Sample 23: Email 3m
Dear Prof,
<u>I am sorry</u> because an inconvenience, I only could send you a message like this.
I want to ask about a proposal that I gave to Prof. I just want to say to Prof, that the proposal must be submitted on September 8th, 2010.
So that, I hope I could fixed or make a corrections of proposal that Prof already checked, before that due date, Prof.
Thank you very much for Prof's attention. <u>I am sorry</u> for any inconvenience, Prof.
Best regards,

In sample 24, a female student used the intensifier "*so*" to show the intensity of her apology.
Sample 24: Email 14f
AlsalamAlikum Dr.
I am your student in abstract Algebra course.
I checked my quiz paper when I got back home. My mark was 47,<u>so sorry</u> it is not the mark I told you in the class

The analysis further revealed that some students would provide reasons after apologizing, and showed they are ready for an offer to repair, such as in sample 25.

Sample 25: Email 6m
hello
<u>sorry</u> for late to reply your email <u>the reason i had to do things out side Kuala Lumpur</u>
any way i like to confirm the workshop
<u>i will come in the time when u inform me</u> thanks
best wishes

In this sample, the student first apologized for being late to reply the email from his lecturer. Then he explained the reason why he could not reply on time. After that, the student suggested an action to repair the damage that might result from his mistake. He promised his teacher that he would come in if the lecturer informs him to do so.

Hedges can affect the utterance and modify the illocutionary force and this can be achieved when the speaker shows his commitment towards his words. They can also serve to make "cooperation, informativeness, truthfulness, relevance and clarity which on many occasions need to be softened for reason of face" (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 146).A hedge can serve as a device that suggests that the hearer might be agreeable over the FTAs imposed on him. However, the speaker should not make such assumption in a communication process.

The data showed that students used only "weak" hedges, and it was more common among male students than female students. This is attributable to the fact that male students used more direct strategies in their email requests. Therefore, they needed to soften the illocutionary force by using hedges. In addition, students used hedges only in the requests for information which involve a low imposition. This can be seen in sample 23. The student, 6m, used two hedges (*only and just*) in an email request for information.

Thus, the negative strategies identified in this study support what was reported by previous researchers especially among non-native English speaking students (Lee, 2004; Chen, 2006; Bulut and Rababah, 2007; Chejnová, 2014).

Off-Record

Off-record strategy is a type of non-conventional indirect strategy that often involves the use of hints. It represents the last level of directness in the CCSARP taxonomy, comprising the most indirect strategy. Giving hints is considered as a problematic strategy as "the interpretation of hints is secured neither by directness nor by conventionality" (Weizman, 1989, p. 74). When a speaker gives a hint, it is unclear that he needs something from the hearer, and thus leaving his request under the risk of being ignored. The lack of clarity in the messages allows the speaker to deny his intention of making a request. Simultaneously, the hearer might ignore the request by pretending that he or she misunderstands the intention.

In this study, off-record strategy was more common among female students who used it in 44% of their emails, while male students used it only in 16% of their emails. It was found that female students used this strategy more frequently in requests for feedback, which involve high level of imposition. Female students might try to avoid direct confrontations with their teachers by using the off-record strategy. However, the ambiguity in their messages might cause misunderstanding in a communicative process. The data showed that the lack of clarity in email requests makes the interpretation of such requests unpredictable, although in some academic contexts, hints could be less ambiguous as the students and the teachers often communicate within specific contexts with purposes or intentions which are mutually shared. Emails

composed by the female students contained more hints (36%) as compared to those from the male students (16%). Consider the following example:

Sample 26: Email 1f
Salam Dear Dr.
The attached files are ch4 and 5.
TQ
Regards

In this example, the student 1f, sent her teacher two chapters of her research thesis without indicating what needs to be done in return. In this case, 1f assumed that the context speaks for itself, that the lecturer would and should go through those files and provide feedback accordingly. With the knowledge and understanding of what needs to be carried out in such context, the hints given by the students in her email are therefore not difficult to be interpreted.

The data showed that female students made requests by giving mild hints in 8% of their emails, while none of the male students opted for this strategy. Consider the following example:

Sample 24: Email 14f
AlsalamAlikum Dr.
I am your student in abstract Algebra course.
I checked my quiz paper when I got back home. My mark was 47, so sorry *it is not the mark I told you in the class*

The hint in sample 24 was ambiguous and suggested more than one interpretation. The student might be asking his teacher to correct her mark, and it could also be an apology for misunderstanding. It seemed that this student was writing to her teacher for the first time as she introduced herself at the beginning of her email. Her hint might be ignored since the shared knowledge between her and her teacher via email was inadequate. Thus, this off-record politeness strategy that represents the lowest level of strategy directness was also reported by Bulut and Rababah (2007) in their analysis of Saudi female students' requests.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the politeness phenomena among Arab postgraduate students while communicating with their Malaysian lecturers via emails. The investigation focused on a range of politeness devices, such as politeness strategies, directness level, syntactic and lexical choice to shed lights on the current knowledge on how Arab students communicate via emails in a foreign academic setting where English is widely used. The findings might assist higher education gatekeepers to understand the social-cultural and linguistic differences of the Arab postgraduate students in Malaysia, and to enhance their netiquette on email communication accordingly. Understanding Arab students' adjustment issues especially in communication and more so communication in the virtual space has global implications for intercultural education. Although the findings were comparable with findings of some previous studies, it should be noted there are also differences which could be attributed to the different taxonomies used by researchers in analyzing politeness strategies, the different cultural backgrounds since most above studies focused on non-native students of English who come from cultural backgrounds different from Arab students except the studies by Bulut and Rababah (2007) and Najeeb et al. (2012) in addition to the different contexts. Future research should also focus on e-mail requests and politeness strategies by including more international students from different backgrounds in the context of the current study as to allow for better understanding of the role of different cultural backgrounds in students' construction of requests when they communicate with their lecturers or instructors.

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