Politeness In E-mails Of Arab Students In Malaysia

Zena Moayad Najeeb
zenaukm@yahoo.com
School of Language Studies and Linguistics
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

Marlyna Maros
marlyna@ukm.my
School of Language Studies and Linguistics
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

Nor Fariza Mohd Nor
fariza@ukm.my
School of Language Studies and Linguistics
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

Abstract

This study analyzes the politeness strategies found in Arab postgraduate students' e-mails to their supervisors during their period of study at Malaysian universities. Many studies have revealed that language ability, social adjustment and culture shock are the most challenging issues that are frequently encountered by the international students. Arab students who are studying in Malaysia, likewise, encounter challenges as they experience different cultures in their new environment, and in their efforts at learning English in an academic environment. Politeness tends to have various implications in cross-cultural communication. This research used quantitative and qualitative approaches to analyze eighteen e-mails that were sent by six Arab postgraduate students to their supervisors. The politeness strategies were analyzed according to Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, and the degrees of directness were categorized according to Cross Cultural Speech Act Realization Pattern (CCSARP) Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) coding scheme. The findings show that Arab students used various politeness strategies, including the use of positive and negative politeness strategies. They tended to be more direct in their requests via e-mail when communicating in English. No student used the indirect strategy. This study provides an insight into the Arab students' politeness strategies that would help to avoid misunderstanding, and misinterpretation of their e-mails, as well as to improve student's pragmatic awareness in writing e-mails in English.

Keywords: e-mails, politeness strategies, directness of requests, culture, academic environment.

ISSN: 1675-8021

Introduction

This article focuses on linguistic politeness strategies in e-mails written by Arab students to their supervisors in Malaysian universities. The numbers of Arab students enrolled in Malaysian universities has notably increased in the past decade due to the high quality of education, the international recognition of Malaysian education, reasonable and acceptable tuition fees and cost of living, stability in terms of politics, economics, safety, and low crime rates. In addition, the availability of a similar living style and the presence of a large community of Muslims (Al-Gheriani, 2009, p. 7-8) also encourage students to choose Malaysian education. Moreover, western countries have become worried about Muslims, after the 11 of September incident. Last but not least, the instability in many Arab countries like Iraq, Libya and Yemen has compelled students to leave their country, away from the riot, tensions and danger to seek higher education in Malaysia.

However, the level of illiteracy among the Arab population is only "38.5%" (UNESCO, 2003, p. 2). For example, many Arab students of English studied in poor educational environments in their country, such as "overcrowded classrooms; teacher/ student ratio, unqualified teachers, the lack of language labs" (Keblawi, 2005, p. 67). They also faced other factors such as the lack of good textbooks, the limited number of writing courses, and the outdated curriculum and teaching methodology and course materials (Keblawi, 2005).

In Arab countries where the level of illiteracy is high, English language acquisitions using a computer is no better. In a field study on the reality of information technology in Arab countries, conducted by an IT company, issued by the World Economic Forum, Davos, Switzerland, it was found that the total number of people in the Arab world who knew how to use computers, and the Internet was estimated to be about 28.5 million of the total population, 60% of whom are located in the Arab Gulf states (Hamilton, 2007). In poorer countries such as Djibouti, Sudan, and Yemen, Arab students are inexperienced in computer use and in basic computer applications.

Today e-mail, for its many advantages such as great speed, and low cost compared to other means of communication, has been widely used for advanced communication and in academia. Although it "has some elements shared with postal mail as well as with telephone conversation." (Hawisher & Selfe, 2000, p. 140), it has opened a new channel of communication between students and academic staff.

Unfortunately, many studies on email writing (Flynn & Flynn 1998; Hale & Scanlon, 1999) offer little help to students on writing e-mail messages. Likewise, ESL books on e-mail communication (Swales & Feak, 2000; Mackey, 2005) focus on the overall nature of e-mail etiquette and do not focus on specific speech act construction. Other studies on e-mail language characteristics (Crystal, 2001; Herring, 2002; Baron, 2003) have not come up with a set of linguistic and stylistic features and have regarded e-mails to be less formal than speech (Baron, 2003). However, emails appear more formal than composition (Davis & Brewer, 1997). Therefore, writing e-mails that lecturers or supervisors considered congruent, polite and appropriate is a difficult task and requires

high individual skills (Baron, 2003) as it is a written activity very similar to face-to-face communication (Lea, 1991). Students may not be aware of what impressions or impact their e-mails may leave, and cannot follow consistent "standards of appropriateness set in order to communicate successfully" (Chen, 2006, p. 36). Therefore, to compose effective e-mails for academic purposes requires much more guidance.

Although many students live in an era of technology, the internet and e-mails (Malley, 2006), the lack of a social context may lead to the neglect of certain social formalities required of e-mail writers (Sproull & Kiessler, 1986). It can also intensify the formalities (Spears & Lea, 1992) in "the creation of polite speech" (Duthler, 2006, p. 16-18). The general perception among students is that e-mails are casual in terms of the use of informal language, symbols, truncated, abbreviations and syntax. E-mails have brought professors and students to a closer contact, removing some of the traditional boundaries between students and their professors. This has caused students writing to their supervisors using the language and style meant for their friends. Students feel free to construct sentences in e-mails that they usually would not use inside their classroom. Supervisors who welcome students' academic requests and questions via e-mails, find that certain rules of etiquette have been breached. They do not feel shy when writing emails and there is no sense of respect or distance for hierarchy (Glater, 2006). Thus to achieve effective and appropriate email correspondence, linguistic proficiency is not sufficient. Students must master socio-pragmatic and sociolinguistic norms.

Statement of the Problem

The challenges that the Arab students face when writing in English during their studies in Malaysia are related to their lack of fluency in English and the ignorance of cultural norms. Therefore, they transfer their own style of Arabic writing when communicating in English. Some Arab countries are not aware of the sociolinguistic and pragmatics norms of the email writing. While certain ways of expressions would be acceptable in the Arabic language, they may be considered as impolite or unacceptable by their Malaysian supervisors communicating in English.

Politeness strategies may differ and vary from one culture to another (Hawisher & Selfe, 2000) and all cultures communicate politeness in terms of linguistic or non linguistic perspectives (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Social traditions may also influence the use of various politeness strategies in every society. These politeness strategies could be received and understood differently from the speaker's intention according to the hearers' personal and cultural expectations. Furthermore, Hazidi (2002, p. 2) argues that "(it is true that we are human beings and therefore, share the same senses however we are also thinking human beings which have similar mental faculties, particularly the ability to perceive, interpret and categorize independently thereby giving us the ability to ascribe different values and / or meaning to similar even identical stimuli". So by imposing or applying concepts onto people of other cultures, as it is done by some Western psychologists and anthropologists, even linguists (see Lakoff 1990), they are also denying the possibility that people of other cultures make sense of their world in different ways simply because they choose to react to the same stimuli in different ways which is

entirely possible based on the premise that all human beings share the same mental capacity which includes the ability to interpret and creativity". E-mail correspondence between different cultures may lead to "face loss" according to Brown and Levinson (1978, p. 66). Unless the sender is aware of these facts, e-mail correspondence amongst different cultures may be problematic. In addition, students need to take into consideration that sending e-mails to their supervisors is not the same as sending email to their colleagues. When writing to their supervisors, students should consider "power" and "distance", which means the existence of a gap in status and the nature of the relationship between students and supervisors. This research analyzes the politeness strategies found in Arab postgraduate students' e-mails to their supervisors. It also aims at addressing the challenges faced by these students and to offer suggestions for appropriate solutions.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are:

a) To identify the politeness strategies in requests used by Arab students in their e-mails to the lecturers in Malaysian universities.

b) To investigate the requests strategies, the types of requests and the degree of directness that Arab students prefer or used in their email correspondence to the academic staff.

c) To investigate any use of Arabic expressions transferred into English in Arab students' e-mails.

d) To examine the perception of the academic staff toward the Arab students' e-mail language with respect to the politeness theory.

Research Questions

a) What are the politeness strategies in requests used by Arab students in their e-mails to the lecturers in Malaysian Universities?

b) What are the types of request strategies and the degree of directness in requests used by the Arab postgraduate students in their e-mails to the academic staff?

c) What are the Arabic expressions transferred into English used by the Arab students' e-mails to the academic staff in Malaysian universities?

d) How do the academic staff perceive the Arab students' email language with respect to the politeness theory?

Significance of the Study

This study focuses on Arab students' e-mail writing. It seeks to contribute to enhancing Malaysian academics' understanding of the method of writing and the request strategies used by Arab students as a result of their culture, and thereby promote a better understanding of Arab students in Malaysia. At the same time, Arab students might benefit from instruction in writing email based on the results of this study.

While there are studies on e-mails of students in other cultures, there seems to be no literature available on politeness in Arab students' e-mails. This represents a gap in the literature which clearly needs to be filled, as e-mail has become the main means of communication between students and lecturers.

Literature Review

This section focuses on literature related to politeness theories, politeness strategies and request strategies. This section will cover the following areas:

a) Politeness theory and strategies;
b) Request strategy due to Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) framework 'CCSARP';
c) Olshtain and Cohen's (1983) model for analyzing the pragmatic transfer in L2; and
d) Literature related to e-mail writing from the perspective of linguistic politeness.

Politeness theories

Politeness theory was formulated by Brown and Levinson (1978). It addresses the affront to face posed by face-threatening acts to addressees. Politeness "helps us to achieve effective social living" (Watts & Ehlich, 1992, p. 2). Politeness is a pervasive phenomenon in all communities. It became the major component of a "dominant ideological discourse in Britain in the eighteenth century" (Watts, 2003, p. 40). Fraser (1975, p.13) sees politeness as "a property associated with an utterance in which, according to the hearer, the speaker has neither exceeded any rights nor failed to fulfil any obligations". Ferguson (1976, p. 138) defines politeness as formulas in terms of "interpersonal rituals". The social relationships outlined through history in near Eastern and later European societies show the manner in which the forms of politeness gradually evolved in specific conditions (Watts & Ehlich, 2005).

One main theoretical approache in the area of politeness studies is the traditional views of the classical theories by Lakoff (1973), Leech (1983), Grice (1989) and Brown & Levinson (1978). After Brown & Levinson developed the linguistic politeness theory, many scholars like Eelen (2001), Mills (2003), Watts (2003) and Locher (2004) criticized the traditional theories as they were dissatisfied with what they called the politeness (1) rationalist approach, where polite behavior as first-order politeness was considered as socially appropriate behaviour. They argued that politeness cannot be achieved by using linguistic devices or particular strategies - they found the necessity to shift away from the

speakers. Therefore, they created second-order politeness and moved towards politeness (2) where the role of the addressee was increased significantly. Politeness (2) was defined as a face-constituting linguistic behaviour, a "mutually cooperative behaviour, considerateness for others, polished behaviour" (Watts, 2003, p. 17). Politic behaviour in second-order politeness is interpersonal politeness. Politeness was shifted from its old field of 'linguistic pragmatics' to the area of 'interactional sociolinguistics'. The possibility of maintaining a distinction between politeness (1) and politeness (2) was apparently impractical, doubtful and may be too intricate (Mills, 2003); the distinction is "seldom maintained consistently" (Eelen, 2001, p. 48). However, modern politeness theories are still under constant criticism and challenged in terms of its credibility - at least on its applied and practical level.

The researcher has reviewed some of the earlier theories which have been developed over the past years, for example, Lakoff's (1973) conversational-maxim approach and Grice's (1975) conversational maxims, as well as its evolution. In the search of theories that can be applied to the requirements of this research and to provide answers to the research questions, the following is a review of the classical politeness theories

Brown and Levinson (1987) politeness theory

This theory was offered by Goffman (1963) and it was based on the notions of 'face' in his work 'On Face-Work'. Face-Threatening Acts (FTA) can be defined as acts that inherently damage the face of the addressee or the speaker by acting in opposition to the wants and desires of the other (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In this theory, two main types of face that are universally recognized in human cultures are the positive and negative faces. Negative face is threatened, when an individual does not intend to avoid the obstruction of his interlocutor's freedom of action. Positive politeness is used to satisfy the speaker's need for approval and belonging, while the main goal of negative politeness is to minimize the imposition of a face-threatening act. FTAs are inevitable in terms of conversations in social interaction. Although these acts are verbal, they can also be expressed or conveyed through tone and inflections or in non-verbal forms of communication. Not only that there must be at least one of these acts associated with an utterance, but it is also possible to have multiple acts working within a single utterance (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

For negative Face Threatening Acts, Brown and Levinson (1987) state that negative face is threatened when an individual does not avoid or intends to avoid the obstruction of his interlocutor's freedom of action. Because of negative face, the speaker or hearer will have trouble in communication which results in the submission of will to the other and the constriction of communication. When negative face is threatened on the hearer and the speaker, as explained in the section that follows, freedom of choice and action is obstructed.

a) Damage to the Hearer: Through the form of orders, requests, suggestions, advice, threats.

b) Damage to the Speaker: An act or communication that shows the speaker is under the power of the hearer; expressing compliments and thanks, accepting thanks or saying 'excuse me'.

In the case of positive Face Threatening Acts, the speaker or hearer does not care about the other person's needs or feelings. Damage to the hearer or speaker could result from positive face threatening acts. Therefore, when a person is obligated to be apart from a group of people, their well-being is dealt with less care and threatens positive face.

a) Damage to the Hearer: An act that shows the speakers' expressions toward the hearer's positive face. The speaker expresses his willingness to disregard the emotion of well-being to the hearer.

b) Damage to the Speaker: An act that shows the speaker is unable to control himself and that would call for the need of apology and regret for doing an act.

Politeness strategies

According to Brown and Levinson (1978), politeness strategies are used to save the hearer's face when face-threatening acts are desired or necessary. These strategies are:

a) Bald On-record: Does not usually seek to minimize threat to the hearer's face, this strategy shocks or embarrasses the addressee, and it is mostly used when the speaker has a close relationship with the hearer such as a family member or close friends. Such examples can be seen in instances of urgency: 'Watch out!' or 'Be careful!' In instances of efficiency: 'Hear me out'.
b) Positive Politeness: Attempts to reduce threat to the hearer's positive face and to ensure that the hearer is comfortable, such as: prevent disagreement and jokes, be optimistic, use of solidarity, make a promise, listen and attend to the hearers' needs and wants.
c) Negative Politeness: This is usually oriented from the hearer's negative face. Negative face is the desire to remain autonomous so the speaker is more apt to include an out for the listener, through distancing styles like apologies (Mills, 2003). For example: be pessimistic, be indirect, decrease the imposition, use hedges or questions, apologize and use the plural forms of pronouns.
d) Indirect Strategy: This strategy uses connotations instead of direct requests. For example, a speaker might say 'wow, it's cold here', which would imply to the listener to take an action, such as increasing the temperature of the heater in the room, without directly asking him/her to do so.

Criticism of Brown and Levinson's (1978) politeness theory

Many researchers have challenged this politeness theory. In a review of Chinese pragmatics scholars and pragmatic maxims Gu (1990), provided reliable critiques to Brown and Levinson's theory (1987). The main criticism is that Brown & Levinson's theory presumes a characteristic concept of face, which is inappropriate to cultures with wider values. Brown and Levinson's (1978) theory shows the importance of in-group

interests over individual wants. Individuals' use of language is prejudiced by pragmatic maxims. The validity of Brown and Levinson's notion of negative face in cultures was questioned by many critics where the freedom of thought appears and action is established by the social status that the individual has within the group

The following are some criticisms by other scholars:

a) The claim to the theory as a universal theory was criticized (Vilkki, 2006) as the theory was based on three languages: English, Tamil and Tzeltal.

b) Scholars from Islamic countries, African and Asian cultures have criticized the individualistic explanation of 'face' and the validity of the 'negative face' concept in that theory (Nwoye, 1992; Ide, 1993).

c) "The setting out the choices open to the speakers, …before they can arrive at the appropriate utterances to frame the FTA" (Watts, 2003, p. 88). This means that Brown and Levinson's theory excludes the opportunity of using two or more strategies by the speaker at the same time.

d) Mao (1994) and Lim (1994) and other Chinese scholars, assumed that an individualistic concept of face is not appropriate to other cultures with wider values as it emphasized the significance of in-group well-being over a person's needs.

e) The notion of Japanese face according to Takano (2005) does not engage only with relations with other cultures, but also the privileges of an individual.

In spite of the criticisms to Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1978, 1987), it still proves to be relevant in providing practical details and steps that would enable the researcher to analyze politeness strategies used in students' e-mails. Moreover, this theory is adopted for this study because it is universally valid.

Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) framework

Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) in their Cross Cultural Speech Acts Realization Project (CCSARP) analysis of requests and apologies in many languages and cultures investigated the existence of universal pragmatic principles in speech act realization and its universal specifications. They analysed the speech acts of requests and apologies in British English, Hebrew, American English, Australian English Danish, Canadian French and German. These languages share certain conventions of use, while differing in definite modes of realization. These speech acts are generally described in terms of feature elements, such as the use of hedges or supportive moves to modulate the impact of the speech act or the use of conditionals. Therefore, the focus on the differences between direct requests, which have been said to play a central role in certain languages and conventionally indirect requests, which are the most frequent request type in English, is quite vital to achieve politeness in any cross-cultural communication.

According to Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) in the CCSARP, there are three types of request strategies: a) directness level, b) internal modification such as 'down graders and up graders' and c) external modification such as 'grounders and disarmers'. The varying degrees of directness of request strategies were categorized into a nine-point scale which

begins from the most direct: 'mood derivables', to the most indirect: 'mild hints'. Thus, this framework can be adapted to measure directness.

Biesenbach (2007) study on students' emails requests to professors

Biesenbach (2007) examined graduate students' email requests sent by non-native and native speakers of English to professors at Georgetown University in several semesters. She investigated emails' effects on student-professor interaction on language use and pragmatic differences according to Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) speech act framework. The results showed that despite similar strategies used, students' preference for different types of politeness devices was dependent on the degree of linguistic flexibility and ability to use idiomatic expressions. Native speakers evidenced larger resources in constructing polite emails to their professors than nonnative speakers.

Pragmatic transfer

Olshtain and Cohen (1983) in there model of pragmatic transfer; studied two groups of Hebrew learners; native speakers of English and native speakers of Russian. These two groups' responses in eight apology situations were compared with those of native speakers of Hebrew, to find out the amount and type of transfer in the speech act. They found the following deviations as a result of inappropriate application of society and cultural rules:

a) The learner might deviate from the accepted norm when choosing a semantic formula for a specific situation.
b) The learner might choose a combination of semantic formulas which is inappropriate for a specific situation.
c) The learner might perform the speech at a level of intensity inappropriate in relation to a particular offence (Olshtain and Cohen, 1983, p. 237).

Theoretical Framework

While Brown and Levinson's (1978) Politeness Theory is used to determine the politeness strategies adopted by the students in their emails, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) framework is used to identify the request strategies and the degree of directness in requests. Figures 1 and 2 show the theoretical frameworks of these two approaches.

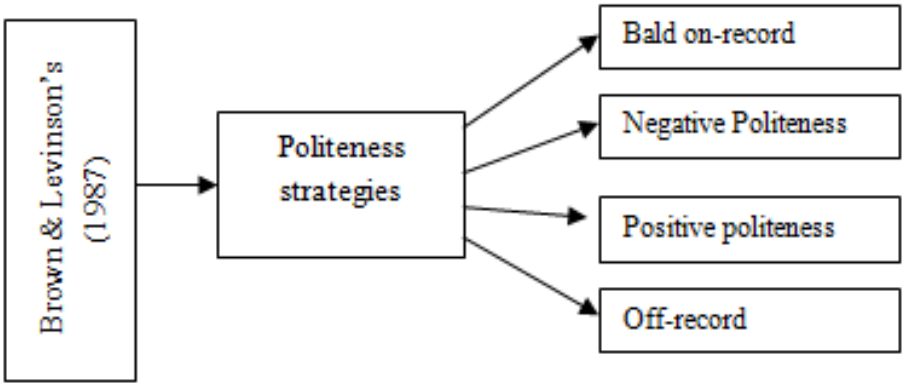

Figure 1: Brown and Levinson (1978) politeness strategies

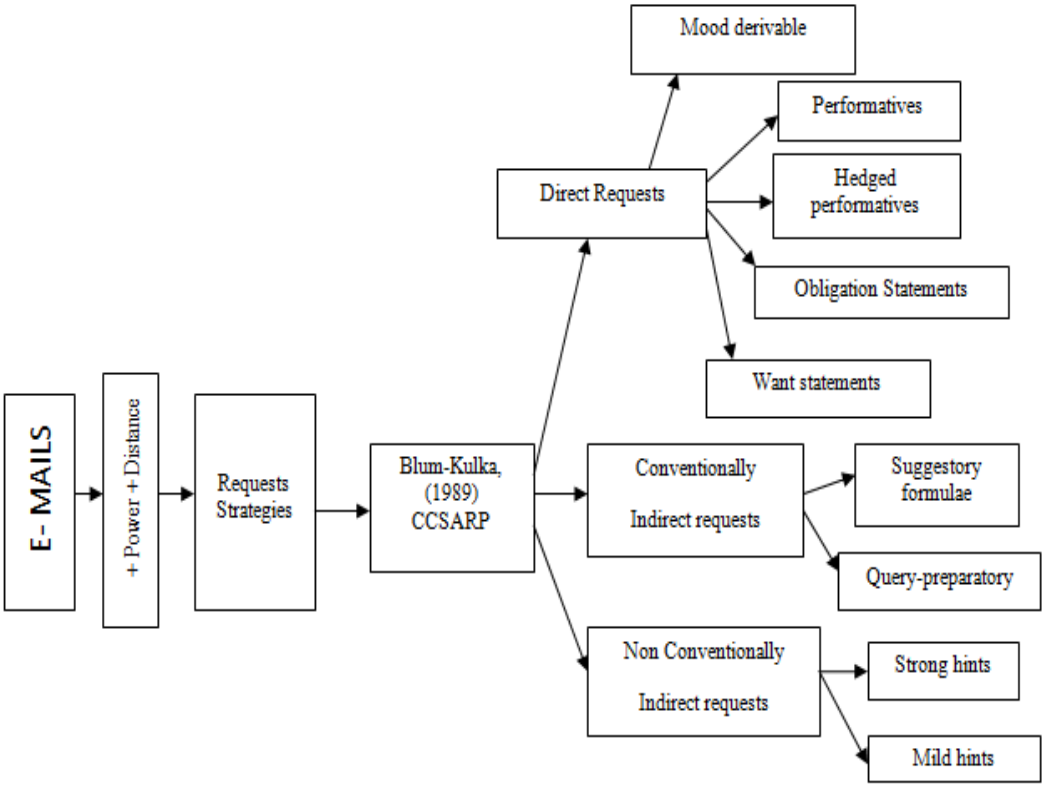

Figure 2: Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) framework

Discourse structure of e-mail communication

Regarding the framework proposed by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), the discourse analysis of e-mail's structure will be according to the e-mail's subject line, openers, body text, and closing remarks. This is shown in Figure 3:

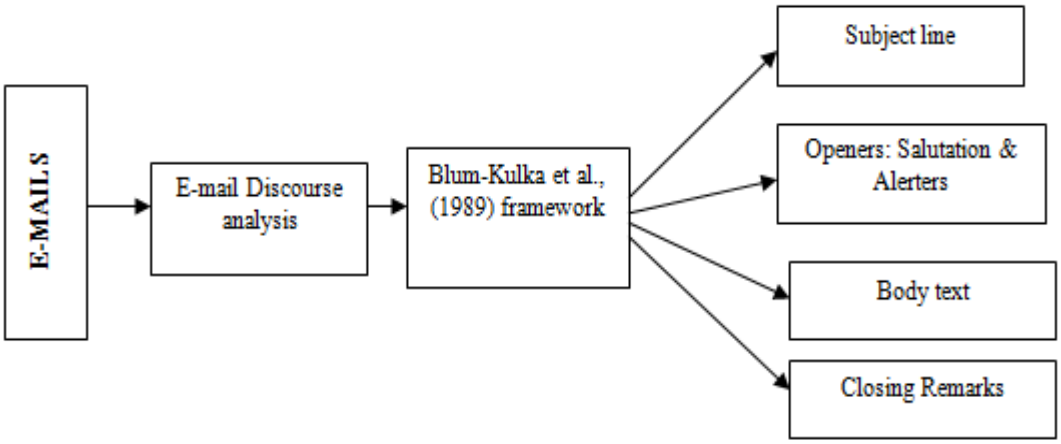

Figure 3: Framework for email analysis , Blum-Kulka et al., (1989)

Pragmatic transfer in L2:

This study will also use Olshtain and Cohen's (1983) model (Figure 4) to investigate the pragmatic transfer in L2 spoken discourse in the analysis of the e-mail structure.

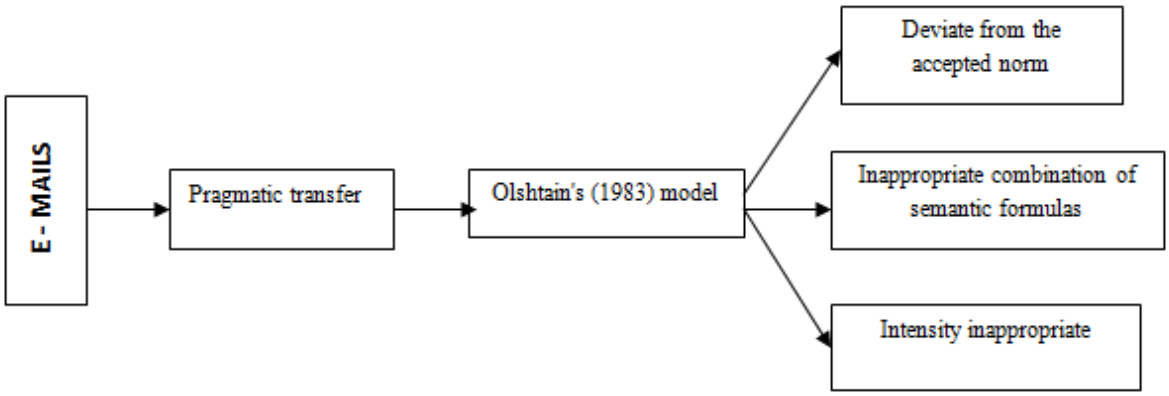

Figure 4: Olshtain and Cohen's (1983) model for pragmatic transfer in L2

Methodology

The methodology adopted Brown and Levinson's (1978) politeness theory to examine the polite strategies and the request strategies were categorized according to Blum-Kulka and

Olshtain (1984) framework (CCSARP). Instances of the Arabic expressions transferred into English were noted, according to Olshtain and Cohen's (1983) model. Furthermore, the e-mail structure, including grammatical and spelling errors, was analyzed according to Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) framework.

Data collection

Twenty e-mails were collected from ten Arab postgraduate students; two from each participant. The emails were sent to the supervisors in two Malaysian universities; National University of Malaysia (UKM) and University Science Islam of Malaysia (USIM). The participants were made of 60% males and 40% females, aged between 27 to 37 years, studying Law, Science and English Studies at these universities.

Data analysis

Using a quantitative approach, each e-mail was examined and analysed through four frameworks as follows:

Identify and categorize the politeness strategies in each e-mail send by the students; according to the four strategies formulated by Brown and Levinson's (1978) in their politeness theory. The researcher investigated the use of indirect language and the use of apologies by students. The findings will answer the first research question: what are the politeness strategies in requests used by Arab students.

In investigate the request strategies and the degree of directness in each e-mail, each request in the e-mail was compared to the CCSARP coding scheme of Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) to determine if request strategies can be categorized as: direct requests, conventionally indirect requests or non-conventionally indirect requests. The findings will answer the second research question: what are the types of request strategies Arab postgraduate students' use in their e-mails to the academic staff? And what are the levels of directness in requests do they prefer?

For the pragmatic transfer in L2 spoken discourse using Olshtain and Cohen's (1983) model, the presence of Arabic expressions translated into English and possible deviations in the following three forms; deviations from the accepted norm when choosing a semantic formula for a specific situation, choosing a combination of semantic formulas which are inappropriate for a specific situation, and performing the speech act at a level of intensity inappropriate to a particular offense will be studied. The analyzed data will answer the third research question: what are the Arabic expressions transferred into English used by the Arab students' e-mails to the academic staff in Malaysian universities?

A discourse analysis of each e-mail using Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) framework to analyze the content of each e-mail in terms of the subject line, opening remarks, body text and the closing remarks will also be used. The politeness statements found in each e-

mail were investigated, categorized, labelled and tabulated according to the sequence of appearance which will answer the fourth research question: how do the academic staff perceive the Arab students' email language?

Findings and Discussion

The politeness strategies used by students were "Bald on-record", "Positive Politeness" and "Negative Politeness" (see Table 1). 18.18% used the first strategy which does not seek to minimize the threat to the hearer's face, for example, "*Can i have appointment to see you?"* (E-mail No. 2). Secondly, the subjects used 50% "Positive Politeness". A strategy that attempts to reduce the threat to the hearer's positive face, for example, "*Can you check the last draft of Questionnaire because i will print it out tomorrow."* (E-mail No. 3). Thirdly, 22.73% used "Negative Politeness. A strategy which is usually oriented at the hearer's negative face, for example, "*please, kindly, doctor this is my wor*k" and *"i am sorry being late to send this e-mail"* (E-mail No. 6).

Although no indirect strategy was found in any of the e-mail, the students used an "over politeness" strategy. "Over-politeness" was used when the Arab students wanted to be very polite and to show extra respect. This was constructed by having long e-mail introductions, for instance, asking about the supervisor's health and well-being before going to the purpose of the e-mail. This in fact takes up the supervisor's time having to read the introduction in order to get to the point. Thus by being "over polite", it has turn out to be impolite. The following are a few examples:

Example 1

[> *Good evening doctor*
> *i hope you are okay and doing well ..*
> *please kindly, this is seminar 1 and 2 ,,,*
> *i made a change on some points, however i am not finish every thing particularly seminar 2*] (E-mail No. 5)

Example 2

[>*First, I apologize for any inconvenience or disturbance I've made for*
>*I really misunderstood you. Second, thanks a lot for your concern*
>*when you called me that made me relieve. Upon your request, I*
>*attached with this e-mail my powerpoint presentation*] (E-mail No. 15)

"Over-politeness" came as a result of the direct transfer of expressions from the Arab culture and traditions to English language. When two Arabs meet, they usually ask each other a lot of questions after the greeting. This can be expected as a manifestation of respect and appreciation. Arabs ask about the family even if they do not know or have never met the family before.

Table 1: Politeness strategies

Politeness Strategies	**Numbers**	**Percentage**
Bald On-record	4	18.18%
Positive Politeness	11	50%
Negative Politeness	5	22.73%
Off-record	0	0%
Over politeness	2	9.09%

Table 1 shows that majority of the Arab students (68.18%) used positive politeness and Bald on-record in their e-mails to the supervisors while 9.09% of the students used "over politeness" strategy, which indicates that students had not acquired adequate pragmatic linguistic knowledge since they did not seek to minimize the threat to their supervisors.

In terms of request strategies and degrees of directness in requests, the students used "direct requests", "conventionally indirect requests", and "non-conventionally indirect requests" (see Table 2).

The total percentage of direct requests was 50% made up of 'hedged performatives' (40%), and 'want statements' (10%). Conventionally indirect requests, on the other hand, consisted of 'query preparatory' (30%) while 20% were non- conventionally indirect requests; 5% 'Strong hints' and 15% 'Mild hints'. This small percentage (20%) means that the students preferred to be more direct in their requests.

Table 2: Type of requests

Requests	**Description**	**Percentage**	**Example/Comment**
Direct requests	Hedged performatives	40%	Represent speeches in which naming of the illocutionary force is amended by hedging expressions. i.e. *"I would like to ask you about the Quiz in reading theory and practice class,"* (E-mail No. 8).
Direct requests	Want statement	10%	The students want or desire that the hearer fulfills or completes the act. Like*: "I want you to write review for this article and critique It"* (E-mail No.7).

Table 2 (continuation)

Conventionally indirect requests	Query preparatory	30%	Statements having reference to preparatory conditions: "*Could you please give us more time till we are supposed to finalize them?"* (E-mail No. 11).
Non-conventionally indirect requests	Strong hints Mild hints	5% 15%	Statements consisting of partial reference to object or element needed. For example: "*i shall put the frame work of comparative literature on both of them after i receive your comments doctor."* (E-mail No. 5). Sentences that makes no reference to the request properly but are interpretable. i.e. "*i have written a review but it was wrong.*" (E-mail No. 7).

The levels of requests, according to Table 2, reflect high levels of directness distributed among three categories, which indicate that the Arab students preferred to be more direct in their requests (50%) while non-conventionally indirect requests were at 20%.

Thirdly, pragmatic errors found in students' e-mails could have resulted from the use of Arabic expressions translated into English as effects of learners' L1 onto L2. This seems to indicate the Arab students lack the cultural norms of the target language.

Table 3: Pragmatic errors as identified in the e-mail content

Pragmatic errors	Interference from L1: Deviation from accepted form A level of intensity inappropriate in relation to a particular offence	55% 45%	The direct translation of Arabic sentences into English. i.e. "*please if any thing could be done i am ready,* (E-mail No. 4). *This is equivalent to English: "please let me know if there's anything i can do".* Like: "*I tried to catch you",* (E-mail No.14).

As for pragmatic errors, e-mails that contain interference from L1 were at 55% while 45% of the e-mails contained terms that are pragmatically ill-formed, for example, the use of 'party' for 'function', the use of 'please kindly doctor', as well as some unacceptable variants such as: 'I want you to write review for this article and critique it', or addressing the supervisor as in 'I tried to catch you'.

Fourthly, the analysis of the e-mail content shows the lack of language proficiency in e-mail writing because spelling mistakes were at 45% (see Table 4). In any professional correspondence, spelling errors are unacceptable. Despite the fact that the computer would have indicated the misspelled words by red squiggly lines, yet the student did not take heed and had sent the email off without correcting the errors. Furthermore, grammatical mistakes and informal sentences were at 30% and 25% respectively. This type of e-mails' correspondence between the student and the supervisor requires a more formal tone, but poor language and spelling implicate politeness or a lack of politeness.

Table 4: Analyses of e-mail content

E-mail Structure	**Description**	**Percentage**	**Example/Comment**
Subject line	Acceptable	50%	Subjects were written: i.e. ***"Subject:*** *Article review"* (E-mail No. 7).
	Improper	35%	Written Improperly; too long or inaccurate: "***Subject:*** *[SKBI6133JAN2010] Please Dr. ss Could you please give us more time till the end of April?"* (E-mail No. 10).
	With no subject	15%	E-mail with no subject line. (E-mail No. 6).
The opening remarks	Proper	35%	Acceptable opening remarks
	Improper	65%	Informal sequences: "*Good evening*" (E-mail No. 4).
Body texts	Spelling errors	45%	Many types of spelling errors were found. For example, *i* , *any thing* (E-mail No. 4).
	Grammatical mistakes	30%	i.e. "*to postponed it,"* (E-mail No. 8).
	Informal sentences	25%	i.e.: ""*I would like to take consultation*"(E-mail No. 9).
The closing remarks	Complete	40%	Perfect closing remarks
	Incomplete	45%	Either no greetings or absence of sender's name
	Improper	15%	The use of informal closing remarks: "*Your faithful forever",* (E-mail No. 16).

Conclusion

This article is a new contribution in the area of the Arab pragmalinguistic. It deals with intercultural experiences of Arab students in Malaysia, who encounter intercultural language and communication challenges, especially in terms of e-mail writing during their study at Malaysian universities.

The findings show that these students had not acquired enough pragmalinguistic knowledge. Emails were influenced by the mode of phone message writing style. Some expressions used in e-mails between students and supervisors were unacceptable because of the pragmatic transfer of the Arabic writing. In terms of the request strategies, the results proved that 50% of the Arab students preferred to be more direct in their requests while non- conventionally indirect requests were at 20%. Furthermore, the Arab students used direct strategies 50% of the time in both 'hedge performatives' (40%) and 'want statements' (10%).

One of the most interesting findings is a new strategy used by the Arabs, which the researcher called 'over politeness strategy'. This strategy is due to the influence of Arabic expressions norms originated from the Arab culture. It is a strategy that had been justified in the Arabic language and culture. But, it does not work well for the Malaysian culture. One of the recommendations that can be offered here to help Arab students in Malaysia overcome these challenges is provide compulsory 'e-mail awareness-raising instruction' at the beginning of their studies at Malaysian universities, possibly in their English Language course. Students need to analyze e-mail samples, examine actual request examples, to see whether they are appropriate or not. This will provide them with the necessary expertise to discuss the reasons for pragmatic success and failure. Students need to focus on the actual request language and on understanding the way it differs. Finally, students need practice in e-mail writing and skills in making request to supervisors.

References

Al-Gheriani, A. (2009). Arab postgraduate students studying in Malaysia: The current situation and a mechanism to resolve obstacles. *Proceedings of the International Workshop on The Management of International Students*, International Islamic University Malaysia IIUM. Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

Baron, N. S. (2003). Why e-mail looks like speech: Proofreading, pedagogy and public face. In J. Aitchison, & D. M. Lewis (Eds.), *New media language* (pp. 85-94). New York: Routledge.

Biesenbach-Lucas, S. (2007). Students writing emails to faculty: An examination of e-politeness among native and non-native speakers of English. *Language Learning & Technology*, *11*(2), 59-81.

Blum-Kulka, S., House, J., & Kasper, G. (1989). Cross-cultural pragmatics: Requests and apologies. Norwood: N.J. Ablex.

Blum-Kulka, S., & Olshtain, E. (1984). Requests and apologies: A cross cultural study of speech act realization patterns (CCSARP). *Applied Linguistics*, *5* (3), 196-214.

Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1978). Universals in language usage: Politeness phenomena. In E. N. Goody (Ed.), *Questions and politeness: Strategies in social interaction* (pp. 56- 311). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chen, E. (2006). The development of e-mail literacy: From writing to peers to writing to authority figures. *Language Learning & Technology*, *10*(2), 35-55.

Crystal, D. (2001). *Language and the internet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Davis, B., & Brewer, J. (1997). *Electronic discourse*. Albany, NY: State University of New York.

Duthler, K. W. (2006). The politeness of requests made via e-mail and voice-mail: Support for the hyperpersonal model. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *11,* 500- 512.

Eelen, G. (2001). *A critique of politeness theories*. Manchester: St Jerome Publishing Press.

Ferguson, C. A. (1976). The structure and use of politeness formulas. *Language in Society*, *5* (2), 137-151.

Fraser, B. (1975). Hedged performatives. In Cole, P & Morgan, J. (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics* (pp. 44-68). New York: Academic Press.

Flynn, N., & Flynn, T. (1998). *Writing effective e-mail*. Menlo Park: CA: Crisp

Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Glater, J. D. (2006, February 21). To: Professor @University.edu subject: Why it's all about me. *The New York Times*. (Online). Retrieved 2 March 2006, from http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/21/education/21professors.html?pagewanted=all

Grice, P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In Cole, P., and Morgan, J. (Eds), *Speech Acts* (pp. 41-58). New York: Academic Press

Grice, P. (1989). *Studies in the way of words.* Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Gu, Yueguo. (1990). Politeness phenomena in modern Chinese. *Journal of Pragmatics, 14* (2), 237-257.

Hale, C., & Scanlon, J. (1999). *Wired style: Principles of English usage in the digital age.* New York: Broadway Books.

Hamilton, B. A. (2007). *A field study about the reality of information and communication technology in the Arab countries*. Report issued by the World Economic Forum, the Swiss city of Davo (Online). Retrieved 2 March 2006, from http://www.scribd.com/doc/6293586/World-Economic-Forum-Annual-Report-20062007

Hawisher, G. E., & Selfe, C. L. (2000). *Global literacies and the world-wide web*. London: Routledge.

Hazidi Haji Abdul Hamid. (2002). Similar words, different meanings: A natural semantic metalanguage exploration of cultural differences. *GEMA Online™ Journal of Language Studies*, *2*(1), 1-13.

Herring, S. C. (2002). Computer-mediated communication on the Internet. *Annual Review of Information, Science and Technology*, *36,* 109-168.

Ide, S. (1993). Linguistic politeness, III: Linguistic politeness and universality. *Multilingua, 12* (1), 223–248.

Keblawi, F. (2005). Demotivation among Arab learners of English. *Proceedings of the Second International online conference on second and foreign language teaching and research*, United States, 49-78. (Online) Retrieved 2 March 2006, from http://www.readingmatrix.com/conference/pp/proceedings2005/keblawi.pdf

Lakoff, R. (1973). The Logic of Politeness: or minding your P's and Q's. *CLS*, *9,* 292-305.

Lea, M. (1991). Rationalist assumptions in cross-media comparisons of computer-mediated communication. *Behaviour & Information Technology, 10* (2), 153-172

Leech, G. (1983). *Principles of pragmatics*. London: Essex: Longman.

Lim, Tae-Seop. (1994). Facework and interpersonal relationships. In S. Ting-Toomey (Ed.), *The challenge of facework: Cross-cultural and interpersonal issues* (pp. 209-222). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Locher, M. (2004). *Power and politeness in action: Disagreements in oral communication*. Berlin: Mouton.

Mackey, D. (2005). *Send me a message: A step-by-step approach to business and professional writing*. New York: McGraw Hill.

Malley, S. B. (2006). Whose digital literacy it is, anyway? *Essential Teacher*, *3*(2), 50-52.

Mills, S. (2003). *Gender and politeness.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mao, L. R. (1994). Beyond politeness theory: 'Face' revisited and renewed. *Journal of Pragmatics, 21* (5), 451-468.

Nwoye, O. G. (1992). Linguistic politeness and socio-cultural variations of the notion of face. *Journal of Pragmatics, 18* (4), 309–328.

Olshtain, E. & Cohen, A. (1983). Apology: A speech act set. In N. Wolfson, & E. Judd (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics and language acquisition* (pp. 18-36). Rowley.MA: Newbury House.

Spears, R., & Lea, M. (1992). Social influence and the influence of the "social" in computer-mediated communication. In M. Lea (Ed.), *Contexts of computer-mediated communication* (pp. 30-65). London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Sproull, L., & Kiessler, S. (1986). Reducing social context clues: Electronic mail in organizational communication. *Management Science*, *32*(11), 1492-1512.

Swales, J. M., & Feak, C. B. (2000). *English in today's research world: A writing guide*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Takano, S. (2005) Re-examining linguistic power: strategic uses of directives by professional Japanese women in positions of authority and leadership. *Journal of Pragmatics, 37*(5), 633–666.

UNESCO. (2003). Literacy: a UNESCO Perspective (Online). Retrieved 2 March 2006, from http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001318/131817eo.pdf

Vilkki, L. (2006). Politeness, face and facework: Current issues. *Journal of Linguistics*, *19,* 322-332.

Watts, T. J, & Ehlich, K. (1992). *Politeness in language: Studies in its history, thoughts and practice*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Watts, R. (2003). *Politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Watts, R., & Ehilch, K. (2005) Politeness in language studies in its history: Theory and practice. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyer.

About the authors

Zena Moayad Najeeb is a doctoral candidate at the School of Language Studies & Linguistics, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. She obtained her Master's degree in linguistics from Universiti Malaya and a bachelor degree in English Language at University of Baghdad.

Marlyna Maros (Ph.D) is associate professor at the School of Language Studies & Linguistics, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Nor Fariza Mohd. Nor (Ph.D) is a senior lecturer at the School of Language Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Her areas of interest are Discourse Analysis in language learning and teaching, in workplace context and in ICT.

ISSN: 1675-8021