The Relationship Between English Language Proficiency and Politeness in Making Requests: A Case Study of ESL Saudi Students

Abdullah Alshakhi[1]

[1] English Language Institute, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Correspondence: Abdullah Alshakhi, English Language Institute, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. E-mail: amalshaikhi1@kau.edu.sa

Abstract

The acquisition of language as well as the acquisition of social consideration, or politeness, are two sets of separate skills. However, the lack of language knowledge by an English language learner can result in social mistakes that can be perceived as impolite by native speakers. The present study aimed to explore the relationship between English language proficiency and politeness in making requests at retail shops, specifically focusing on Saudi students in the United States. There were five participants in this study: two Saudi ESL students with low English proficiency; two Saudi Ph. D. students with advanced English proficiency, and an American waiter who speaks English as a native language. The study was conducted by using a qualitative research method in two phases. The first phase included observing all participants during interaction, and the second phase included interviewing a server at one of the restaurants where the students visited. The main findings revealed that there was no strong correlation between politeness and English language proficiency in making requests. However, there were some factors found in this study that contributed to politeness level, such as intonations and the use of politeness markers.

Keywords: case study, English language proficiency, ESL, politeness, Saudi

1. Introduction

The aim of language is to understand another's message through verbal communication. People share ideas, information, and feelings when they interact (Saville-Troike & Barto, 2006). People might also have conflicts, arguments, or opposing visions (Thomas, 1983). Making requests or offers to others, however, is one of the significant aspects of languages (Hymes, 1972). Undoubtedly, every language has its own specificity in conveying meaning. Native speakers of English might differ in making a request from nonnative speakers, just as making a request in the English language is different from making one in Arabic. Therefore, people who have different linguistic abilities with a specific language may lead to a misunderstanding (Varonis & Gass, 1985). Some misunderstanding might happen owing to the different linguistic ability whenever there is an interaction between native and nonnative speakers of the language (Bolden, 2012; Hosoda, 2006; Park, 2007). For example, when there is a conversation between a native English speaker from America and nonnative English speaker from Saudi Arabia, both varying in their linguistic ability and their cultural backgrounds, do we expect them to communicate the same way American speakers do with each other? Do we also expect the same level of politeness and respect from native-to-native communication as we do between native-and-nonnative communication? In this paper, I will explore the relationship between English language proficiency and politeness in making requests for Saudi students who study in the United States.

1.1 Significance of the Study

In 2005, Saudi Arabia launched a scholarship program for its citizens. The purpose for this program is to educate Saudi students in several disciplines and enable them to acquire the English language from an English-speaking country, such as the United States, United Kingdom, or Australia. The United States has hosted the highest number of Saudi students; according to Marklein (2013), there were around 71,026 Saudi students who are enrolled in various programs in American universities.

It is worthwhile to explore these thousands of Saudi students studying in the United States regarding how they deal with common situations in which they are in constant communication with native speakers through English

at retail stores. It is also important to understand how students use English as a second language (L2) to make a request in a foreign country. While focusing on making polite requests, and how it might be associated with the level of English proficiency for Saudi students, it is significant to understand the Saudi students' use of the L2 to make a request at retail shops. Further, this study hopes to raise Saudi students' awareness about politeness when they make requests and also how to communicate properly with their servers in the ESL context.

1.2 Hypothesis

It is hypothesized that Saudi students require high mastery of English to make effective and polite requests. The variation in English language proficiency level might make students sound impolite when trying to make a request at retail stores. Based on this assumption, does students' language proficiency reflect their politeness? Do Americans who work at retail shops consider Saudi students polite when they make requests? To answer these questions, this study investigates how the level of English proficiency affects Saudi students' awareness and how they use the English language to make requests at retail shops.

2. Literature Review

Brown and Levinson (1978) and Levinson, Brown, Levinson, and Levinson (1987) introduced Politeness Theory as an expansion of Goffman (1967) Face-to-Face Theory. Politeness can be defined as the attempt to create social harmony through using polite communication methods. Politeness strategies include positive politeness, negative politeness, bald on record, off record, and withhold. These strategies, according to Brown and Levinson (1978) and Levinson et al. (1987), are based on many factors, such as power relations and social distance. According to Brown and Levinson (1978), politeness is a unique practice that defines people in their social and cultural practices. For instance, Arabic speakers are different in expressing their politeness from English language speakers, owing to social, cultural, and linguistic constraints. Therefore, linguistic ability plays an important role in applying politeness factors in speech, especially during a conversation between a native and nonnative English speaker. Accordingly, linguistic ability is associated with producing and comprehending some speech acts, such as requests (Hassall, 2003; Jiang, 2006; Marti, 2006). Gordon and Lakoff (1971) mentioned that requests have specific conversational rules to which interlocutors should adhere. Moreover, Bardovi-Harlig (1999) stated that reaching a high competence in a second language does not necessarily lead to a great grasp of the pragmatics specifications of the language. For example, Sattar, Lah, and Suleiman (2009) examined the case of Iraqi graduate students who have high English proficiency. The result concluded that those students could not make appropriate requests although they were graduate-level proficient students. However, in another study, Alaoui (2011) investigated Moroccan students with high English-speaking proficiency, where he reported that the Moroccan students tried to show how polite they were by using the language carefully. They also avoided face threatening and imposing on the hearer.

Tawalbeh and Al-Oqaily (2012) conducted a comparative study between American and Saudi students in terms of making requests. The study revealed that American students preferred indirectness most of the time while Saudi students used directness and indirectness depending on the context. In the same Saudi context, Al-Ammar (2000) conducted a study on linguistic strategies when making requests in Arabic and English by Saudi female students who studied English at a Saudi Arabian university. Forty-five female participants took a "Discourse Completion Test", and the results showed that the participants used directness in requests when there was a decrease in the social distance and power. Furthermore, Umar and Majeed (2006) compared two groups, native Arabic speakers and native English language speakers and how they make requests using the English language; both groups were graduate students majoring in English. The researcher found that both groups used similar indirect strategies while making requests.

However, the literature lacks research studies about Saudi students who study abroad, and how their English language levels might affect their politeness when making requests. Consequently, it is worthwhile to investigate the relationship between English language proficiency and politeness of Saudi students studying in the United States. This study aims to answer these questions: (1) Does the level of English proficiency affect the politeness awareness of Saudi students when they make requests at retail shops? (2) To what extent are Saudi students conscious of politeness when speaking English?

3. Methodology

The study utilized qualitative research tools: interviews and observation. The data were collected in two phases: (1) observing the interaction of all participants (the two ESL students, the two Ph.D. students, and the waiter), and (2) interviewing the waiter twice.

3.1 Participants

In order to obtain relevant and usable data, five participants took part in this study. Four of the participants were from Saudi Arabia currently studying at a university in the United States. These four participants differed in their level English language proficiency; I chose two students who were studying ESL courses level with low English competence, and two students from a doctoral program with high English proficiency. As for the remaining participant (a waiter), he was an American working at a retail shop (IHOP). For further details about the participants' background information, see Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' background

Participant	Nationality	Age	Gender	Native Language	English Proficiency	Length of Stay in USA
Ahmed	Saudi	20	Male	Arabic	Level 3 in a 7-level scale ESL institute	1 year
Basim	Saudi	20	Male	Arabic	Level 3 in a 7-level scale ESL institute	1 year
Shadi	Saudi	36	Male	Arabic	Advanced, 2nd year, Ph.D. in English	3 years
Anas	Saudi	40	Male	Arabic	Advanced, 3rd year, Ph.D. in English	3 years
Waiter	American	26	Male	English	Native	26 years

In order to minimize the Hawthorne effect, which is any attempt by the participants which might produces a positive result (trying to be politer) since they knew they are being recorded (McCarney et al., 2007). This was addressed by the fact that the observer being a person the participants were familiar with as well as the fact that the observer was as unobtrusive as possible while the conversations were being recorded.

3.2 Data Collection Procedure

After obtaining the participants' permission, I arranged the meeting time and place. The observation of the two ESL students and the two doctoral students took place at IHOP, a restaurant in Cordova, Tennessee. The waiter was interviewed at the restaurant after the two observations were completed. The observations and the interviews took place from 2 to 5 p.m. on Tuesday and Wednesday. The restaurant was not busy during these times, which was based on the information that I obtained from the restaurant management. This helped me to collect the data in quiet settings, uninterrupted by distractions such as many customers and busy waiters. The first phase took place on Tuesday where I observed the interaction between the two ESL students and the waiter while making requests. After that, I interviewed the waiter for their interpretation of the events. The second phase took place on Wednesday, where I observed the conversation between the two doctoral students and the waiter. Then, I interviewed the same waiter after the doctoral participants left the restaurant, looking for comparisons and contrasts between the two groups of participants from the waiter's point of view. All the conversations during the observations and the interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed for analysis (See Appendix A for specific transcription conventions.)

4. Results and Discussion

In this section, I discuss the relationship between politeness in making requests and English proficiency levels. In order to obtain a more diverse and holistic exploration of the data, I will discuss four sections concerning different perspectives and themes that emerged during the data analysis. These four sections are as follows: (1) the two ESL participants, (2) the two Ph.D. participants, (3) the interviews with the waiter, and (4) the perspectives from the observer.

4.1 The Two ESL Participants

Based on the four interactions between the waiter and the two ESL participants, two themes were discovered and will be discussed in this section: (1) the shift of language forms in ordering meals and (2) the use of "thank you" to show appreciation.

(1) The shift of language forms in ordering meals. The two ESL students used short phrases to make their drink requests in their first interaction with the waiter. For instance:

1) Waiter: So, are you guys ready to order?

2) Basim: Aah, for me, I just wanna a drink.

3) Waiter: Is, what you want to drink?

4) Basim: Sweet tea.

5) Waiter: Sweet tea?

6) Basim: Yeah.

7) Waiter: Ok. I'm gonna go ahead and get you that.

8) Waiter: And for you?

9) Ahmed: Like, lemonade.

10) Waiter: Lemonade?

11) Ahmed: Ahaa.

Regarding Basim's request "for me, I just wanna a drink." it seemed that he was not certain what to order in the very beginning, but later he made a request by uttering "sweet tea". Similarly, when asked by the waiter about a drink order, Ahmed simply said "like, lemonade." Both of their first interactions in ordering drinks with the waiter were made in short phrases. The use of short phrases can be considered as direct commands that may contribute to decreasing the level of politeness because there was not any politeness marker or the use of modal verbs such as "can", "could", or "may". However, later in the second interaction with the waiter, both ESL students shifted their use of short phrases into questions. For instance, Basim made a request to the waiter after he listened to the long conversation between the waiter and Ahmed. It seemed that Basim did not expect to order a meal, but Basim changed his mind and ordered a berry waffle by uttering: "can I have this one, berry berry?" However, Basim was polite in this request with the presence of the modal verb "can" (Carrell & Konneker, 1981).

Similar to Basim, the second participant, Ahmed, revealed a higher level of uncertainty in making an order. Ahmed revealed his uncertainty of what he wanted in the beginning, but later he provided new information to the waiter that he wanted something sweet. Moreover, instead of completing the order by indicating what dessert he wanted, Ahmed allowed the waiter to take over the floor and recommend some options. The waiter provided the first option followed by an "ok" response from Ahmed. The waiter then proposed his personal favorite dessert as a second option, but Ahmed just responded with a short word "alright". The waiter then tried his third attempt, and the response from Ahmed was "yeah, and?" This word "and" with a raising tone can be interpreted as an impolite discourse that implied a negative connotation for the waiter's ineffective suggestions. Finally, the waiter suggested one last option "you just could get pancakes with strawberries on top," and Ahmed seemed to be pleased by this choice. So, Ahmed showed his agreement to this option by suggesting, "and some chocolate on top too?" This sentence can be seen as Ahmed's shift from short phrases toward making an order using questions. Again, Ahmed later requested his meal by using the modal verb, "Can I have it?" In this sense, the use of questions can be regarded as one of the polite ways in making requests. This goes in line with Blum-Kulka (1989) statement on the importance of indirect discourse. Overall, the shift of the requesting discourse from short phrases to questions implies that there was no strong correlation between these two ESL students' low English proficiency and their politeness in ordering meals.

(2) The use of "thank you". As mentioned previously, there are four Interactions between the waiter and these two ESL participants. In the first interaction with the waiter, both participants did not use the phrase "thank you" or "thanks" at all when orders were made for beverages. The use of "thank you" was not used until the second interaction with the waiter when he finished taking the orders from both participants and reassured whether the two ESL students completed their orders or not: "anything else for you guys?" The third interaction also presented the use of appreciation since the waiter brought the meals that these two participants ordered. Also, during the third interaction, the waiter asked the two participants: "anything else for you guys?" Again, these two participants used the phrased "thanks" here to respond to this question. As for the fourth interaction, the waiter proposed the question again to check on his customers: "Do you need anything? Any refills?" Basim turned down the offer by saying, "no, thank you," whereas, Ahmed responded with a positive answer: "yes, please." It is significant to note that this was the very first and only "please" in the conversations between these two ESL participants and the waiter. The ESL students used what Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) called the "politeness marker", such as "please" or "thank you". Therefore, the ESL students were aware of the politeness issue, and they used polite language although their language ability was not considered high.

Moreover, there were only two situations in which these two ESL participants used the phrases "thanks" and "thank you" to show their appreciation. First, when the meals were served by the waiter, the two participants showed their appreciation by saying "thank you". Secondly, there were seven questions proposed by the waiter to the two ESL participants. Three responses from the ESL students out of seven indicated that when they were offered a service, such as "anything else for you guys?", "any refills?", or "do you guys need anything else?", they replied with "No. Thank you" or "No, thanks". Therefore, it can be interpreted that the two ESL participants

mitigated the decline of the offered service by adding the politeness marker "thank you" after the "no" in order to show their gratitude and appreciation to their server.

On the contrary, the other four responses in which the two participants did not reject the service show the lack of the use of the politeness marker "thank you" for instance, "are you guys ready to order?" and "ahh, for me, I just wanna a drink" or "do you guys need few minutes to look at the menu?" and "hmm, yeah, maybe." As a result, this may represent that the use of "thank you" or "thanks" is used in certain situations or scenarios for lower intermediate English learners. Though these two ESL participants only used appreciation phrases in these two situations, it did not indicate that these two participants were not polite to their waiter due to their low English proficiency level.

4.2 The Two Ph.D. Participants

There are five interactions between the waiter and these two Ph.D. participants based on the data. Two themes were found and will be discussed: (1) the presence of code-switching and (2) social interactions.

(1) The presence of code-switching. Both Ph.D. participants code-switched frequently, in two of the five interactions that took place. Both of them code-switched to Arabic twice; for example, here is the first instance of code-switching:

12) Shadi: I just saw cheesecake in the menu, I dunno where is it now? (Talking to the researcher in Arabic)

13) Shadi: Yeah, Banana cheesecake (Talking to the waiter in English).

14) Waiter: All right.

15) Shadi: It looks yummy (Talking to the researcher and Anas in Arabic).

16) Anas: Let me see, this is what we used to order (Talking to Shadi in Arabic).

17) Waiter: Do you want the ice cream on it?

18) Shadi: Please.

19) Anas: Your order is great. I love it (Talking to Shadi in Arabic).

20) Waiter: Do you need anything? (Talking to Anas).

21) Anas: No. Thanks.

Before Shadi code-switched to Arabic, the waiter was talking to the researcher, finishing up taking their orders. Knowing that the waiter would then ask the researcher or Anas for their order, Shadi jumped into the conversation by code-switching to Arabic in line 13. It seemed that Shadi was looking for help from the researcher to locate the cheesecake he wanted to order. Then, in line 15, Shadi code-switched back to English to make his order to the waiter. This shift of languages from Arabic to English can be interpreted as a way to avoid losing face by asking the waiter about the cheesecake he wanted, so Shadi instead asked the researcher in Arabic so that the waiter would not understand. As for Shadi's second instance of code-switching in line 18, he revealed his inner thought about the banana cheesecake he ordered. The use of Arabic in this sentence implies the separation of expressing his personal thoughts and ordering meals.

Similar to Shadi, Anas code-switched two times in Arabic to express his personal ideas or thoughts. For example, in line 19, Anas responded to Shadi's comment on his own order. The phrase "this is what we used to order" indicated the close relationship between Anas and Shadi, and that this was not their first visit to this restaurant together. Again, Anas's second code-switching showed his response toward Shadi's order of banana cheesecake. This revealed their close friendship and Anas's approval on the choice. Not knowing any of the Arabic conversations, the waiter then asked Anas for his order. Anas code-switched back to English so that the waiter could understand. This shift between languages is the same with Shadi's code-switching: the difference between ordering meals with the waiter and expressing personal ideas or thoughts with friends. Therefore, for these two participants, the use of code-switching may be considered a way to interact with different people from different communities of practice, such as the American waiter or Saudi friends. Nevertheless, the viewpoints toward the use of code-switching in relation to politeness vary from person to another. I will discuss this point from the stance of the waiter and the observer's later in the paper.

(2) Social interactions. There were two occasions where social interactions with the waiter occurred. The conversation below between these two participants and the waiter was very brief and short. The waiter came over to the table to check on his customers by asking them "are you guys doing ok?" Instead of responding in a more traditional way, such as "yes, we are okay" or "great, thanks", Shadi uttered "we are waiting" with a sarcastic tone, and it brought laugher to all interlocutors, including the waiter, the researcher, and Anas. Due to

the use of this sarcasm, this may have alleviated the waiting time or the pressure from the waiter to deliver meals quickly. The following is the exact interaction:

22) Waiter: Are you guys doing ok?

23) Shadi: We are waiting.

24) Waiter, Anas, Researcher: Hahah.

25) Waiter: It's like three more minutes.

26) Shadi: Ok.

Additionally, in another interaction, the waiter stopped by to hand over the check. Shadi initiated a social conversation with the waiter by asking him where he was from and when he was going back to visit his family. Moreover, Shadi joked about going with the waiter to his hometown, and this statement made all of the interlocutors burst into laughter. Then, Anas joined this conversation by saying "take all of us with you, ok?" Despite the fact that the waiter knew this was just a teasing request, he still responded to it by agreeing to take them. This demonstrates a friendly and witty social interaction between the waiter and these two Ph.D. participants. This conversation seemed delightful and relaxing as shown in the interaction below:

27) Shadi: Where are you from? (Talking to the waiter).

28) Waiter: Oh, I'm from Colombia.

29) Shadi: When are you going to Colombia?

30) Waiter: Ah, I was gonna go visit my mother this winter, but I don't think I will

31) make it.

32) Shadi: I would like to go with you.

33) Anas: Hahah

34) Waiter: Yeah, It's beautiful there. I used to live like by the beach

35) Shadi, Anas: Oh

36) Researcher: Is it safe there?

37) Waiter: Yes, yes.

38) Anas: Take all of us with you, ok?

39) Waiter: Sure. Hahah.

Even though there was no strong connection between politeness and social interaction in this case, it indicated the positive influence of social interactions on creating a pleasant and relaxing atmosphere with the waiter.

4.3 The Interviews with the Waiter

In this section, the two interviews with the waiter and four themes discovered will be discussed: (1) the difference between the two ESL participants, (2) social conversation as a way of showing politeness, (3) code-switching and politeness, and (4) foreign customers versus American customers.

(1) The difference between the two ESL participants. During the first interview with the waiter, he revealed his opinions about the two ESL customers. Based on his statement, Ahmed was polite and kind overall, whereas, Basim was more direct in the beginning and then became nicer later on when making requests. Here is part of the first interview with the waiter:

40) Researcher: How did you find the interaction with (0.1) the two guys here?

41) Waiter: Aaah, it was great, you know, especially the young man (Ahmed), aah,

42) whenever he started out, he speaks pretty polite, you know, hmm

43) Researcher: So, did you feel offended in anyway ahhh in your interaction

44) with them?

45) Waiter: No, no, no, not at all. It was like (0.1) When he (Ahmed) asks for

46) stuff, he did it in like, in a kind way.

47) Researcher: Yeah.

48) Waiter: And the older guy (Basim), aaah, when he started out like, the first

49) thing he asked for, when he asked for the sweet tea whatever, he was kind of,

50) you know (0.2) a little DIRECT, you know, but after that he got well, he was

51) nice after that.

Emphasizing the word "DIRECT" in line 50 implies the possibility that the waiter might have felt offended in the beginning with Basim. That is to say, using a less direct tone of language may contribute to the sense of politeness. Blum-Kulka (1989) indicated the importance of the conventional indirectness strategy in making requests. For instance, "can I have a cup of sweet tea?" instead of just saying "sweet tea." This is what was missing in Basim's order when he merely said, "sweet tea." Moreover, intonation plays a vital part in considering politeness. Basim's intonation (as the arrows represent) dropped as he spoke with a falling tone, which implies that he was not interested in communicating with the waiter. In other words, the falling tone could be one of the factors that made Basim, in the waiter's opinion, too direct. Take this interaction as an example:

52) Waiter: So, are you guys ready to order?

53) Basim: ↓Aah, for me, I just wanna a drink.

54) Waiter: Is, what you want to drink?

55) Basim: ↓Sweet tea.

56) Waiter: Sweet tea?

57) Basim: ↓Yeah.

(2) Social conversation as a way of showing politeness. In the second interview with the waiter, he revealed that there was no difference between the two groups (the ESL students and the Ph.D. students) in terms of politeness. Moreover, the waiter said that Shadi was the politest among the four participants: "I would say especially the gentleman with glasses (Shadi) was way politer than all the other three." He later compared Shadi with the other Ph.D. student, Anas, stating that, "the guy who didn't eat today (Anas), he was of course polite, but he just didn't talk that much." This comparison between these two Ph.D. students on the concept of being talkative (according to the waiter) implies that Shadi is the politest customer due to his social conversation with the waiter. Therefore, in this view, socializing with the waiter could be seen as a way of being polite.

(3) Code-switching and politeness. The waiter discussed the issue of his feelings toward the use of code-switching during the interaction with two Ph.D. customers. This excerpt is presented as follows:

58) Researcher: So did you feel offended by that when they talked in their first

59) language not in English while you were waiting to take their order?

60) Waiter: No, not at all, I mean, no just if you're speaking your native language.

61) that's understandable, and you know, I would wait for the conversation to be

62) over, I wouldn't interrupt at all, you know, But I wasn't offended at all. But I

63) mean some people could be offended you know, because sometimes you

64) would think aah, they are talking bad about you, but that's not the case.

65) Researcher: Aaah.

66) Waiter: That's always not the case, but some people might think that way.

As shown from the excerpt above, the waiter revealed that he did not feel offended by the use of code-switching. However, he raised a fair concern, that other servers may feel offended when encountering the use of code-switching by bilingual customers. Despite the fact that the waiter showed his disapproval of considering code-switching as impoliteness, this is only based on his personal understanding and perspective. Therefore, there is more space to discuss this topic of whether the use of code-switching is impolite or not.

(4) Foreign customers vs. American customers. Although this is not the main topic of this study, the waiter touched upon this comparison between foreign and American customers in both interviews. This is an interesting issue to explore, so I will report the statement from the waiter's point of view on this topic. The waiter confessed in the first interview, "Sometimes Americans are rude, RUDER," further said, "It is horrible sometimes." Also, the second interview with him touched on the same idea: "And like I said the other day, sometimes foreign customers are politer than customers from America." The purpose of showing this excerpt here is just to report the waiter's perspective, not to make any generalization by saying American customers are all rude compared to foreign customers.

4.4 Perspectives from the Observer

In this section I will present my comments as an observer of the two interactions and the two interviews. First of all, I will note that the two ESL students were not familiar with this restaurant menu and the setting. This was their first visit to IHOP, and I came to know this information from the participants during the interaction. Contrarily, the two Ph.D. students were regular customers to this restaurant, giving them more experience with the menu and setting. Take part of the excerpt from the doctoral students' interaction with the waiter as an example:

67) Shadi: Yeah, Banana cheesecake? (Talking to the waiter in English).

68) Waiter: All right.

69) Shadi: It looks yummy (Talking to me and to Anas in Arabic).

70) Anas: Let me see (looking at the menu), aaah, this is what we used to order.

71) (Talking to Shadi in Arabic).

Second of all, my relationships with the two groups of participants were different in terms of friendship: I had known the doctoral students for three months and we have hung out several times, while it was my first time meeting the ESL students that day at IHOP. Thus, in my point of view, the ESL students were trying their best to be as polite as possible in order to leave a good impression in their first meeting with me. Therefore, the ESL students talked to me in Arabic when the waiter was not around our table; however, whenever the waiter came to check on our table or to take an order, Basim and Ahmed always talked in English or remained silent until the waiter left because they might have wanted to represent themselves as polite people. As for the doctoral students, they might have felt more comfortable going out to eat with me, and, therefore, they were using their native language even in the presence of the waiter. Personally, I did not find this kind of behavior as polite, although that the waiter said that the code-switching was "understandable" and he was "not offended". On the contrary, the waiter also mentioned that "some people could be offended", but not him because, for the waiter, when customers speak their first language in his presence, he will always assume that they are discussing the food menu. However, Heller (1988) indicated that it is inappropriate to speak in a foreign language around people who do not speak that language because it creates tension. Therefore, in this point, and in my opinion, the advanced English-speaking students were not as socially considerate when compared to the ESL students. In all, this means that the level of English proficiency does not affect politeness because there was not enough evidence to claim that low English proficiency levels influenced the politeness level and awareness of poor English speakers.

Despite the fact that the data do not show a strong connection between politeness and language proficiency, based on the two distinct groups of participants from the study, both the age and the length of stay in the United States could be potential factors regarding the notion of politeness. The four participants (described in Table 1) were divided into two groups: ESL and Ph.D. students. The two ESL students were both 20 years old, whereas the two Ph.D. were 36 and 40 years old. Also, the length of the stay in the United States shows that both Ph.D. students have two more years of experience in America than the two ESL students. That is to say, these two differences could be seen as another factor impacting politeness, which is worthy of future research.

Before the interviews and the observations were conducted, I had an assumption that lower English proficiency would lead to being less polite. However, after a thorough investigation of the data, I found that the two ESL students and the two doctoral students were all polite in requesting their meals. They were aware of using the appropriate phases, which showed their politeness during most of their interactions with the waiter. It is also important to note that the waiter indicated "And like I said the other day, sometimes foreign customers are politer than customers from America." Additionally, he said "if they don't know how to say something, they just point at the picture." In other words, even if second language speakers cannot express what they want properly, they could just point to the picture. When I asked the waiter whether he found the Saudi customers generally polite or not, he replied, "yeah, they are always polite." Similarly, and based on my observation, I found that ESL students with lower level in English were not hindered by their linguistic ability to show respect and be polite while ordering meals and making requests at the restaurant.

5. Conclusion

In order to explore the notion of politeness and its relation to English language proficiency, I conducted a qualitative study with five participants at an IHOP restaurant. The data included two observations with two groups of Saudi students and two interviews with one American waiter. Based on the findings, there was no strong correlation between politeness and English language proficiency levels. However, the result showed that

intonation could be a vital factor on the notion of politeness. In this sense, speech with a low and flat tone can entail a sense of indifference and unfriendliness to the hearer. Moreover, the study results suggested that the use of politeness markers is important in determining politeness level, such as "thank you" and "please". Other than the use of politeness markers, the data from this study also showed that the use of modal verb questions could be used as an indirect way to show politeness.

In addition, the two Ph.D. students in this study with advanced English proficiency code-switched between English and Arabic depending on who their interlocutors were. The waiter revealed his opinion on this use (presence of code-switching) and did not see it as impolite. This data showed the need to discuss and explore this concern and whether or not the use of code-switching is considered impolite. Last but not least, the result of this study also presented that social interactions can be seen as a way to increase politeness level. In other words, being interactive with the waiter through proper social talks or jokes might create a friendly and welcoming atmosphere for the waiter, which may contribute to the politeness level.

6. Recommendations for Future Studies

Aware of the limitations of this study, there are some suggestions for future research. First, I propose the use of larger samples using the same framework of this study in order to gain more data, making the results more reliable and conclusive. Secondly, the Saudi participants who took part in my study were all males. It would be interesting to use female Saudi students as participants to explore their English proficiency and its correlation to the notion of politeness. With this, the two studies could then be compared by the factor of gender. Thirdly, in this study, I focused on Saudi students, but other researchers from different cultural backgrounds or ethnicities may conduct studies in their own contexts looking at the notion of politeness. Additionally, age can be a different factor when investigating politeness level since age is an important social variable. Last, the length of stay in the United States can be seen as another factor to explore and whether or not it contributes to politeness level.

References

Al-Ammar, M. (2000). *The linguistic strategies and realizations of request behavior in spoken English and Arabic among Saudi female English Majors at Riyadh college of Arts*. Unpublished MA Thesis. Riyadh: King Saud University.

Alaoui, S. M. (2011). Politeness principle: A comparative study of English and Moroccan Arabic requests, offers and thanks. *European Journal of Social Sciences*, *20*(1), 7–15.

Bardovi‑Harlig, K. (1999). Exploring the interlanguage of interlanguage pragmatics: A research agenda for acquisitional pragmatics. *Language Learning*, *49*(4), 677–713. https://doi.org/10.1111/0023-8333.00105

Blum-Kulka, S. (1989). Playing it safe: The role of conventionality in indirectness. In S. Blum-Kulka, J. House & G. Kasper (Eds.), *Cross-cultural pragmatics: Requests and apologies* (pp. 37–70). Norwood, NJ: Ablex Pub. Corp.

Blum-Kulka, S., & Olshtain, E. (1984). Requests and apologies: A cross-cultural study of speech act realization patterns (CCSARP). *Applied Linguistics*, *5*(3), 196–213. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/5.3.196

Bolden, G. B. (2012). Across languages and cultures: Brokering problems of understanding in conversational repair. *Language in Society*, *41*(1), 97–121. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404511000923

Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1978). Universals in language usage: Politeness phenomena. In N. G. Esther (Eds.), *Questions and politeness: Strategies in social interaction* (pp. 56–311). Cambridge University Press.

Carrell, P. L., & Konneker, B. H. (1981). Politeness: Comparing native and nonnative judgments. *Language Learning*, *31*(1), 17–30. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-1770.1981.tb01370.x

Goffman, E. (1967). Interaction ritual: essays on face-to-face interaction. *American Journal of Sociology*.

Gordon, D., & Lakoff, G. (1971). *Conversational postulates*. The Seventh Regional Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society, 63–84. Chicago, IL: Chicago Linguistic Society.

Hassall, T. (2003). Requests by Australian learners of Indonesian. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *35*(12), 1903–1928. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166(03)00115-2

Heller, M. (1988). Strategic ambiguity: Codeswitching in the management of conflict. In M. Heller (Eds.), *Codeswitching: Anthropological and Sociolinguistic Perspectives* (pp. 77–96). https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110849615.77

Hosoda, Y. (2006). Repair and relevance of differential language expertise in second language conversations. *Applied Linguistics*, *27*(1), 25–50. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/ami022

Hymes, D. (1972). On communicative competence. *Sociolinguistics*, January, 269–293.

Jiang, X. (2006). Suggestions: What should ESL students know? *System*, *34*(1), 36–54. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2005.02.003

Levinson, P., Brown, P., Levinson, S. C., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage* (Vol. 4). Cambridge university press.

Marklein, M. B. (2013). Saudi students flood US colleges for English lessons. *USA Today*. Retrieved January 15, 2013, from http://www.usatoday.com/story/new/nation/2013/01/11/saudistudents-english-class/1827465

Marti, L. (2006). Indirectness and politeness in Turkish-German bilingual and Turkish monolingual requests. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *38*(11), 1836–1869. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2005.05.009

McCarney, R., Warner, J., Iliffe, S., Van Haselen, R., Griffin, M., & Fisher, P. (2007). The Hawthorne Effect: a randomised, controlled trial. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, *7*(1), 30. https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2288-7-30

Park, J.-E. (2007). Co-construction of nonnative speaker identity in cross-cultural interaction. *Applied Linguistics*, *28*(3), 339–360. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amm001

Sattar, H., Lah, S. C., & Suleiman, R. R. R. (2009). Iraqi postgraduates' production and perception of requests: A pilot study. *International Journal of Language, Society and Culture*, *29*, 56–70.

Saville-Troike, M., & Barto, K. (2006). Introducing second language acquisition. In M. Saville-Troike (Ed.), *Cambridge Introductions to Language and Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tawalbeh, A., & Al-Oqaily, E. (2012). In-directness and politeness in American English and Saudi Arabic requests: A cross-cultural comparison. *Asian Social Science*, *8*(10), 85. https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v8n10p85

Thomas, J. (1983). Cross-cultural pragmatic failure. *Applied Linguistics*, *4*(2), 91–112. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/4.2.91

Umar, A., & Majeed, A.-T. (2006). The speech act of complaint as realized by advanced Sudanese learners of English. *Journal of Educational & Social Sciences & Humanities*, *18*(2), 8–40.

Varonis, E. M., & Gass, S. M. (1985). Miscommunication in native/nonnative conversation. *Language in Society*, *14*(3), 327–343. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404500011295

Appendix A.

Transcription Conventions

Symbols	Descriptions
(0.1)	An interval between utterances (1 tenth in this case)
( )	Additional comments from the transcriber
Hahah	Laughter
Words in Capital Letters	Shows emphasis
Underlined Words	Translated from Arabic to English
↓	Falling intonation

Copyrights