| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Use of Request Strategies in an Academic Setting

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| ABSTRACT

The study compares requests produced by Omani and American students. It examines the differences and similarities found in the types of requests produced in a Discourse Completion Test and the frequency of strategies employed for each speech act used. The results show that Omani students (non-native speakers) use fewer indirect request strategies in English than their American counterparts (native speakers). Linguistic differences are attributed to inadequate linguistic abilities among Omani students. This deficiency is anticipated to create problems such as the underuse of the past auxiliaries like *could* as opposed to present tense modals like *can*; the misuse of *would;* and the overuse of the lexical downgrader *please* in comparison to the underuse of external modifiers such as grounders, disarmers and sweeteners. Past auxiliaries were also found to be underused by Omanis due to the non-existence of these verbal forms in the Arabic language.

1. Introduction

This study examines communicative strategies used for requests in pragmatic situations where adjustment to power and distance variables between speaker and addressee are particularly important. Moreover, the study identifies similarities and differences in native and non-native linguistic production of the same type of illocutionary act. The comparison aims to show the many difficulties which must be confronted when conversation takes place between native and non-native language speakers (Scarcella, 1993:112). This is so even when non-natives are fluent speakers of the target language. Saving face, according to Brown and Levinson's (1978) theory, which underlies this study, presents even more problems in interactions, and there is a danger of misunderstanding intention in the use of language as an instrument when people are not fully in control of it. Dangers are much more pervasive when non-natives possess a limited level of language mastery.

The researchers know that politeness is important for anyone who wants to construct and maintain a social relationship with native speakers, and the manner of communication is indispensable. As a matter of fact, how to express politeness is culture-bound. Politeness nowadays is the focus of interest. According to Taguchi (2023), for second language students, learning pragmatics enables them to perform properly in a variety of communicative functions and engage in different social contexts.

This study aims to investigate how Foundation Programme (FP) students communicate with English-speaking teachers and to what extent they can transform their identities and culture to adopt the culture of the target language. To achieve these observes, the researchers pose the following research questions:

1.1. Research Questions

1. How do FP students communicate with the English-speaking teachers?
2. To what extent are these students able to reconstruct their identities and transform their culture to adopt the culture of the target language?

1.2. Problem Statement

Since communication between people is culturally bound, it is noticeable that foreign learners face problems when they engage in conversation with native speakers. The researchers have noticed this problem among Foundation Programme (FP) students when they talk to native speakers (teachers). Several incidents of miscommunications that occurred between non-native students and their native teachers due to linguistic barriers were reported.

2. Literature Review

Politeness is important in constructing the speech acts and pragmatics at large. The ability to formulate appropriate polite request strategies is a skill that sustains communication and increases the possibility of agreement between interlocutors. However, using these strategies is sometimes a personal choice since the speaker can choose to avoid being rude or sometimes be intentionally rude (Green 1989). In most cases, describing an FL learner as 'intentionally rude' is a quick, unfair and false judgment, considering that these skills need significant time and effort to be fully acquired and successfully used even by native speakers. Address forms, for example, whether they are formal or informal, could cause problems for second language learners to acquire because they are different from one language to another (Brown 2007). In this research, some general background of politeness and introduce Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness will be discussed. The discussion will consider another important related topic, namely face threatening acts (FTA). This is a subcomponent of politeness theory that will supply the theoretical basis of this research. We will explore the differences between native English speakers represented by the American student group and Arab speakers represented by the Omani group in using request pragmatic strategies in particular.

In his ground-breaking sociolinguistic study, Labov (1966) pointed out that speakers vary their use of language forms to some extent to adjust to the change in social context or conversation topic. This means that part of the linguistic variation is not just language-internal but speaker-internal since speakers can, to some extent, modulate their linguistic production to suit perceived social relations in different communicative situations. Labov was specifically concerned with pronunciation changes, but discursive strategies also vary because of contextual (pragmatic) factors. In communicative contexts, speakers of a given language try to strike a balance between their need to be involved with other people and their need to be independent and to deal with the risks that result from being closer to each other (Tannen 2005).

Overgeneralization is a significant factor that influences Omani students when performing pragmatic speech acts in requests. One clear example of this overgeneralization is the use of the words *teacher* and *please*. Students in the Omani context encounter pragmatic problems associated with politeness that will be investigated in this study, such as the overuse of the word *teacher*, equivalent to Arabic *ustaath* 'teacher', which is excessively employed to address academic staff or professors, leading to unforeseen pragmatic blunders.

2.1. Indirect request strategies

According to Pinker (2007:438), indirect speech acts serve to "escape embarrassment, avoid awkwardness, save face, or reduce social tension." The high level of imposition in formal requests also requires face-saving speech acts. As we will see, some of the percentual differences between the two groups could be attributed to cultural differences. As mentioned earlier, the difference in equality relations between interlocutors is expected to have an impact on the pragmatic strategies deployed in the construction of requests. Brown and Levinson (1987) point out that the degree of imposition and Distance and Power between interlocutors play a significant role in the choice of politeness strategies to be used in forming polite requests. Taguchi (2006:515) links imposition and equality in equal relationships to indirectness in politeness, claiming that "when the speech act involves a low degree of imposition and is produced for a person in an equal relationship, the degree of required indirectness is smaller." Therefore, since the degree of imposition is lower in the second group (student-to-student) of requests (#2, 4, 5, 7 and 9), students were expected to avoid using the politest forms and strategies. This is certainly the case in the answers to the questionnaire.

3. Methodology

As a result of the complexity of language interaction, Bachman and Palmer (1996) propose that language ability be measured within an interactional framework of language use. Based on their view of pragmatic knowledge, a test tool should investigate the ability of language users "to relate words, utterances, and texts to concepts, communicative goals and features of the language use setting" (p.78). Therefore, the research tool used to elicit data in this study is a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) in the form of a questionnaire that elicits requests from Omani non-native EFL students and American students of roughly the same age group who are native speakers of English.

The questionnaire included ten academic situations (see appendices G and H) requiring requests and containing different interlocutor role relationships in terms of relative social power, social distance between interlocutors, and degree of imposition, the major variables that Brown and Levinson (1987) consider. The three variables are checked by situational modulations that highlight or downplay the degree of power (P), distance (D), and rating of imposition (R).

3.1. Research Design
The general goal of this research is to investigate the use of communicative skills and intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in the Omani context. This is a broad goal that will be narrowed down to a key speech act, namely, requests. The original motivation to undertake the research comes from our experiences as language teachers and from confronting problems associated with the misuse of speech act strategies by English language students, usually as a result of a lack of awareness and transfer from L1 competence to L2. Therefore, this research is designed to investigate the phenomena of the use of Speech Acts and Request Strategies by foreign language students compared to native speakers' students. A descriptive approach is adopted, and a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data is gathered using DCT. The first step in this kind of investigation is to move at least from personal observation to intersubjectivity in an attempt to establish to what extent other language instructors were confronted with similar problems, to what extent they were aware of the lack of pragmatic competence as a source for some of these problems and to what extent pragmatic competences being integrated into their teaching (see Appendix G).

3.2. Data collection
The research tool used to elicit data in this research is a Discourse Completion Test (DCT), as it is discussed in Bachman and Palmer (1996). As a result of the complexity of language interaction, they claim that language ability should be measured within an interactional framework of language use. Based on their view of pragmatic knowledge, a test tool should investigate the ability of language users "to relate words, utterances, and texts to concepts, communicative goals and features of the language use setting." (p.78). Cohen (1996) adds that a DCT also allows researchers to focus on specific speech act realizations and to control the social and situational variables, which is precisely what this research aims to do, to concentrate on requests and to control their range of variation given power and distance variables. Situations are described in writing, and a space is provided for students to supply speech acts under the texts. These situations are in a mixed order in terms of relative social power, social distance and degree of imposition, so the students will not immediately identify any one factor as the object of the study. The test was conducted in one session. In order to avoid affecting the students' responses, the word 'request' was not mentioned throughout the texts in the DCT, although situations related to the same speech act were presented together. A clear instruction is given at the beginning of the questionnaire so that informants would understand exactly what to do. Please refer to the questionnaires in Appendices E and F.

3.3. The analysis of data collected
The questionnaire was administered to a group of Omani students and a group of American students. The answers that we expect native speakers of English to provide will show us the preferences that they have for realizing a request in situations among familiar equals (P) and in formal situations (D). In addition to comparing the answers of the non-native Omani students and native American students under the same circumstances, the test was expected to show whether there are any deficits in use for any strategy or whether different strategies are used to realize the acts under the same social constraints across Omani users of EFL and native speakers of English.

3.4. Participants (how and on what basis they have been selected)
Two groups of students were chosen to participate in the questionnaire: a group of EFL undergraduate university level Omani students and a group of native undergraduate university level American students. The students were mixed in terms of gender, and they were aged 20-25 in both groups. The group of Omani students was gathered from the University of Nizwa (Oman), and it was composed of a mixture of first year college students who had passed the foundation program stage of their studies at Nizwa but were still taking English courses in the College of Arts and Science and of level three of the final level at the foundation program. The group includes 14 male students and 33 female students. At the time of the study, the Omani informants were placed in an intermediate level course equivalent to the CEFR B1 level.

The American group of students, all native speakers of English, was formed by 25 informants. They were enrolled in different American universities and were all studying Arabic as a foreign language in their home institutions. The students were participating in Arabic language programs in the Nizwa area, some of them at the University of Nizwa and others, the majority, at Sultan Qaboos College for Teaching Arabic to Non-Native Speakers in Manah. Students in this program usually stay in Oman for a period of one or two months.

4. Results and discussion of results
The analysis of the data considers two major factors, social (P)ower and social (D)istance, when the speaker utters the request to the hearer. Moreover, the study concentrates on the relative frequency of production of different request forms.
4.1 *Indirect request strategies in student-to-student situations*

Naturally, the difference between the two groups in the total number of strategies used in the student-to-student situations is, to some extent, smaller than in the student-to-instructor situations. In fact, the Omanis' score is quite high in situations #5 and #7 (see Figure 1 and Appendix A). The closer results between the two groups in the second group of situations may, in fact, be related to the overuse of the ability indirect strategy with *can* by Omani students. This is by far the most common indirect strategy used by Omani students, so when natives complement it with *would* forms in higher imposition student-to-instructor situations, the Omani percentage rises; in lower imposition and more equal student-to-student situations, the usage of *would* forms decreases slightly among American students, and correspondingly the ability form counts become more similar to those of Omani students.
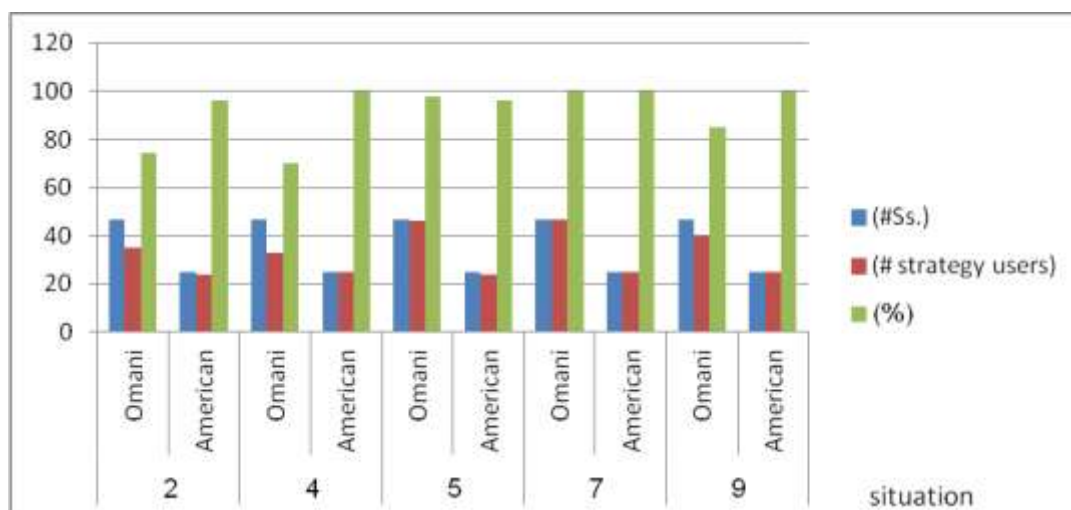

Figure 1. The total frequency of indirect request strategies in student-to-student situations.

4.2 Conventional strategies in student-to-student situations
Similar to the student-to-instructor situations data results, the query preparatory ability strategy is also widely used by students from both groups in student-to-student situations. The Omani group reached 123 tokens (52%), while the American group produced 40 (32%). This might result from the overuse of the *can* ability form by Omanis in requests where the American students alternate between *can/could* and *would*. The results of the ability strategy in both types of situations are similarly high for Omanis (see next section for further discussion). As a consequence of the overuse of *can*, the data also reveals the underuse of other strategies by Omanis: The Americans scored 16% and 27% in the willingness and suggestory strategies, respectively, while the Omanis scored 3% and 6%. As mentioned regarding the student-to-instructor group situations, the Omani students' preference for some strategies and underuse of others could be attributed to their insufficient linguistic proficiency, considering that these strategies are pragmatically demanding and require greater pragmatic skills from the students, if only because *would* forms tend to be produced at a higher level of proficiency, both pragmatic and linguistic, than the all-purpose *can*.

Figure 2 below and Appendix B show detailed results for each strategy in the student-to-student situations.
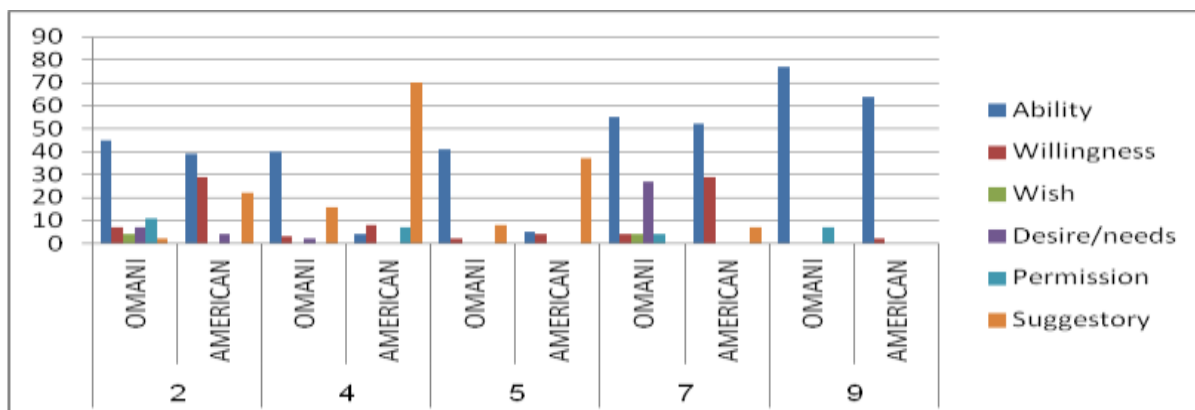

Figure 2. Conventionally indirect requests strategies in student-to-student situations.

4.3 Modals as modifiers in student-to-instructor situations

As mentioned in the discussion of the ability strategy, the formality of our student-to-instructor situations is dealt with by the Omani group with excessive use of the auxiliary *can* in comparison to the moderate use of *could* in the head acts of request statements. It is generally considered that the use of the modal *can* in requests is less polite than the use of the past auxiliary *could* (Searle, 1975; Biber et al., 1999; Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Wichmann, 2004; and Beiler, 2011). The same applies to *would* rather than *will*.

The Omani overuse of *can* is a significant failure of 80 instances (34%) compared to 19 by Americans (15%). As for the use of *could,* it occurs 37 times (16%) among Omanis and 24 times (19%) among Americans. The results show that while there is a clear overuse of *can*, *could* is only slightly underused. A closer look at the data reveals that the latter is mainly used by Omani females in situations #8 (recommendation letter) and #10 (extend the deadline of the project), so there might be gender-related variables at play in this lexical choice which, however, fall beyond the scope of this study. Refer to the table in Appendix C for details of the use of these verbs by the two groups in student-to-instructor situations.

The use of *can* by American students is also low, but it is important to remember that native speakers complement the ability strategy with the willingness strategy, so the relatively low use of *could* is deceptive in that the students have made use of *would* in many of the possible situations where *could* was an option. (Interestingly, as with could among the Omani females, *would* is mostly found in situation #8 among the American females.) The use of *would* is significant in our data for the two groups. The total Omani use of this auxiliary verb is only 8 items, constituting only 3% of the total of modifiers in the data and distributed in all situations except #3 (request to explain something) and in situation #6 (request a copy of an article). Unlike the data for situation #8, it is now female Omanis who never produce a request containing *would* in either situation, whereas among the Americans, both males and females use *would* in 39 instances (31%). Refer to the table in Appendix (C) for details of this verb use by the two groups in student-to-instructor situations.

As a result, the lack of use of past form modals is obvious in the Omanis' responses compared to the Americans'. Again, avoidance and low use could be attributed to the L1 absence of modal verbs, such as *could* and *would,* which would have helped students to form acceptably polite requests. An important and major problem of Arabic students that could affect their use of these modals is the lack of direct correspondence between the two forms of English and clear Arabic correlates, since both English expressions correlate with a single whole phrase in Arabic.

A similar situation is found if we look at the usage of other modal verbs like *may.* Although morphologically, the present/past distinction between *may* and *might* parallels the *can/*could distinction, the only member of the pair that can be used as a politeness element is *may* since *might* is restricted to hypothetical contexts. Even as a marker of politeness, *may* is fairly restricted in that it is almost exclusively found with the first person in requests for permission to perform an action in very formal situations. Given these limitations on the usage of *may,* it comes as a certain surprise to find that it was used 7 times by Omani students, distributed in situations #3 (request to explain something), #6 (request for a copy of an article), and #10 (request for an extension of project deadline), whereas it only appears twice in the Americans students' data (refer to Appendix C). The use of *may* in these contexts could be linked to the higher imposition level of the three requests in these situations compared to the rest, prompting Omani students to generate more polite forms of requests. However, the presence of *may* also in the student-to-student situations discussed below casts some doubts on the correct use of *may* as a very formal, polite request for permission. Another possible approach to explain the unexpectedly high occurrence of *may* in the Omani data may be related to the L1 effect of Arabic. As was the case with previously mentioned modal verbs, there is no Arabic verb expressing modal and politeness content directly equivalent to English modals. The closest Arabic expression is the complex, impersonal phrase *hal min almumkin an...* 'is there a possibility to...', which is also used in similar high imposition situations and is actually the functional equivalent not only for *may* but also for *can/could/would.* The data suggests that when faced with a one-to-four correlation between Arabic and English, Arabic intermediate students of English take *can* as a default all-purpose form for polite requests, with only occasional recourse to *could/would/may.* We will return to this issue when we discuss the occurrence of *may* as a modifier in student-to-student situations. The figure for modal modifiers can be found at the end of this section.

4.3.1 Other Internal Modifiers in student-to-instructor Situations

Only one of the other types of modifications usually isolated in the literature is sufficiently attested in the data, and only in the American group. This is the usage of long forms, discussed first in this section. Other modifiers only attested in very scarce numbers are briefly discussed at the end of this section.

Constructing effective requests may be seen to involve elaborating the speech act so that not only the mere content of the request is expressed, but also adequate attention is paid to the hearer's face and consequently to deploying intensifiers and downtoners which would then jointly help to form a polite and hopefully acceptable request. It follows from this that more articulate requests

will most likely entail the use of longer discourse, so although it is difficult to quantify this, longer requests will probably also be more elaborate and, therefore, more polite. Long forms in requests are, therefore, considered to be downgraders and are classified as syntactic downgraders in Trosborg (1995). Learners not only lack the fluency to effortlessly amplify the discourse but also lack awareness of the pragmatic mechanisms underlying request formation, which is typically not taught in the EFL curriculum. This means that learners have to rely on their L1 pragmatic resources, most likely culturally bound and unconscious and heavily constrained by their proficiency level. It comes then as no surprise that there is a significant difference in the use of long, verbally more elaborated request forms as syntactic downgraders. Although no systematic word count was made to find word averages in the requests of the two groups, the Omani answers were clearly shorter than the American requests. Of course, length itself is just an indicator, but we can also approach the analysis of the data from this perspective by checking for the presence of modifier combinations or of particularly articulate modifiers, such as the appearance of tentative embedding. Analyzing length from the perspective of these variables, we can observe that this type of syntactic modification was absent in the Omani data. This contrasts with the American data, where 'long' forms occur 10 times (3% of the modifications found in requests) in situations #3,7, 8 and 10 (refer to Appendix C).
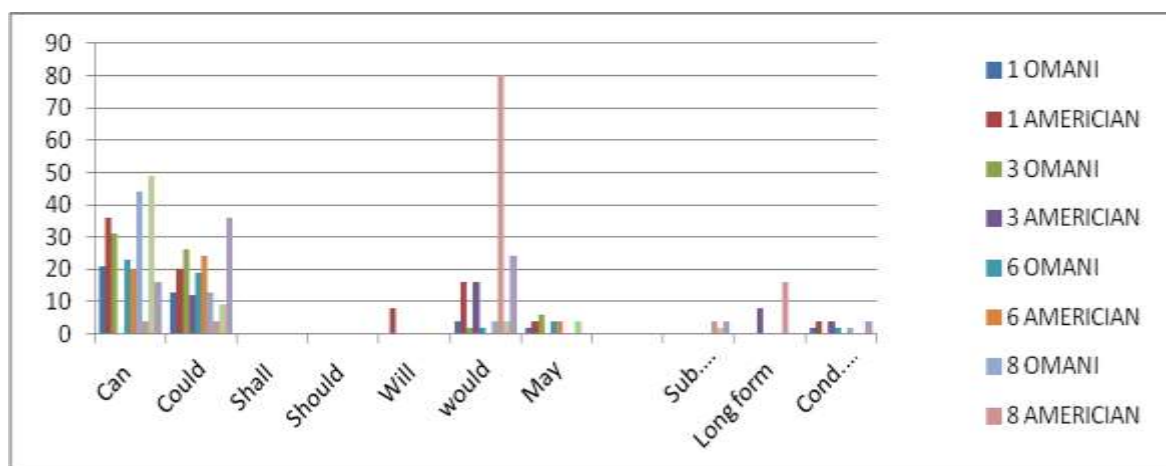

Figure 3. Syntactic Downgraders in student-to-instructor requests situations.

Figure 3 above and the table in Appendix C systematically present the percentages for all student-to-instructor situations and types of modifications in the two groups, as discussed in the previous sections. The column for the negation modification results, initially present as part of the scoring key, was subsequently deleted since no example of that strategy was found in the data.

4.4 Internal modification in student-to-student situations

The same result of overuse of *can* in the head acts indicated in the student-to-instructor formal situations is also significant in student-to-student situations. Omani students score high in its use with 89 tokens (38%), whereas American students produce only 11 items (9%). In contrast, the Omanis' use of the past auxiliaries *could* and *would* is comparatively low. Americans produce 22 instances of *could* (18%), while Omanis score 38 (16%). The American group used *would* 23 times (18%), while Omanis only scored 4 (2%). Similar results were obtained in the student-to-instructor situations described earlier, especially with regard to the overuse of *can* by Omani students. In the current situations with lower ratings of imposition, American students also used *can* more often than in the student-to-instructor situations, but still less often than *could* or *would,* resulting in a smaller percentage use than for Omanis (see Appendix D for more detailed scores). This distribution might be connected with a one-to-four relation between the Arabic language phrase conveying these meanings and the four major modals in English sentences of this type. When such relations are obtained, and before the differential aspects of the English modals are acquired by the Arabic learner, *can* is taken as a default modal corresponding to the Arabic phrase, the other three modals being used much less commonly regardless of the formality of the situation.

Note also that Americans produced more utterances with *would* than with *could*. In student-to-student situations, this might be due to the context provided by the prompts. Most of them can be interpreted as appeals for commitments from the hearer to fulfill the request, which then trigger students to use *would* in situations such as #2 (join to see an instructor) and #7 (help in studying), rather than *could,* which is mainly used to appeal for ability.

Other differences occur in the use of syntactic downgraders. Omanis use the modal *may* strategy 7 times (3% of the modifiers), whereas Americans never use it. One might consider the use of *may* as an attempt to mitigate the request, yet it is not at the same level of mitigation as the past tense modal *might* or *could*. Moreover, usage of *may* need not indicate a real control of this modal

as a mitigating modifier. In fact, it is very often used in requests with a person other than the first person, as in the following examples, from the same informant in student-to-instructor situations (1) and in student-to-student situations (2):

   1. *May you help me and explain that again for me*

   2. *May you come with me to my instructor*

We can conclude that this use of *may* is an interlanguage variant of *can* without clear connections with politeness and mitigation and, in any case, is different from native *may*.

Regarding different internal modification strategies, we only find a significant difference in the use of subjective embedding, which is quite salient among American students (12 times in situations #2 and #4, that is 10% of the internal modifiers used), while Omanis use it far less commonly (2 times in situation #5 only, reaching only 4% of internal modification tokens). It may be possible to relate the frequency rate of subjective embedding and long forms in student-to-instructor and student-to-student situations. American students use more subjective embedding and fewer long forms in the latter situation. Long forms are expected to occur more in situations with a higher rate of imposition, so their frequency declines in student-to-student situations, whereas, on the other hand, subjective embedding of the type *I think that...* can be used without restriction in a colloquial environment. Omani students only used subjective embedding, lacking the ability to use the more formal long forms, and they used it slightly more in student-to-student situations, as did the Americans (2% in situation #10 in student-to-instructor situations, and 4% in situation #5 in the student-to-student situations). Finally, with respect to conditional clause downgraders, one can observe an increase in percentages in situations with a lower level of imposition. It is not clear why this should be, nor whether this is a real correlation or just an idiosyncrasy of our data. In principle, acknowledging the existence of conditions for granting the request, usually dependent on the addressee, helps the speaker save the hearer's face in situations with higher levels of imposition.

Figure 4 below and Appendix D provide total percentage scores summarizing the use of syntactic downgraders in student-to-student situations.
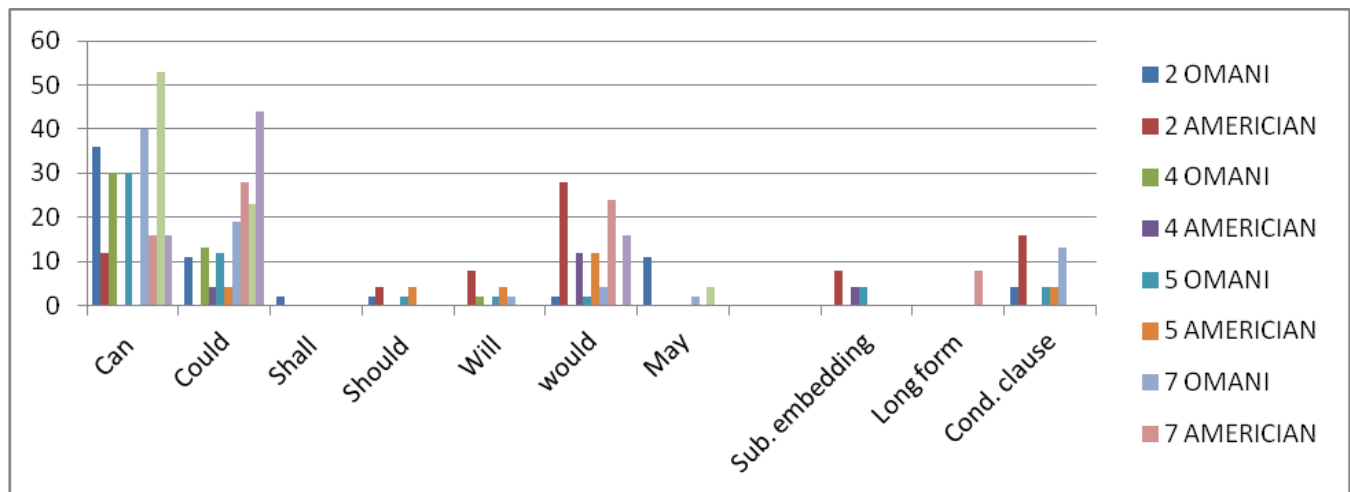

Figure 4. Syntactic Downgraders in student-to-student request situations.

The politeness differential implied in the 1st versus 2nd person perspective can be clearly observed in our data, in which it is also possible to check for frequency of use of the 1st and 2nd person in the head act of requests formed by the two target groups. Omani students used 1st person in the 10 situations 80 times (34%), whereas Americans used it 71 times (57%). The American percentage of use is higher, perhaps because of a certain emphasis on directness and independence in that culture. The Omani students' score in using the 2nd person is correspondingly higher, reaching 101 tokens and 43%, which nearly doubles the Americans' figures (45 instances and 23%). In finding a possible explanation for these figures, we can resort again to the idea of 'eastern' cultural indirectness (Hall, 1976). From this perspective, it would be possible to attribute this attitude to the difference and categorization of cultures in which Arabic culture is regarded as high-context and less direct, while American culture is regarded as low-context and more direct.

4.5 Lexical/phrasal downgrader modifiers
The data in the present study seems to show that Omani students overuse *please* as a lexical downgrader compared to the Americans. This differs from the relative frequency of use of other consultative devices, as we will see later. The use of *please* in the

Omanis' responses as non-native speakers can be regarded as a way to strengthen their speech act to be conceived only as a request (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Students identify this word as the ready-use easy marker that automatically turns the utterance into a polite request over all other politeness markers we are discussing. This notion is confirmed by Soler, Flor and Jorda (2005) who also note that this politeness marker requires less pragmalinguistic competence than other strategies such as downtoning. The Omani students' tendency to use this marker leads them to overuse it, sometimes attaching it to every single request utterance. This result, therefore, confirms what some other studies found on the use of this marker, such as in Færch & Kasper (1989), House (1989) and Barron (2003). Economidou-Kogetsidis (2009) states that these examples of overuse were seen as a result of the marker's double function as an illocutionary force indicator and transparent mitigator. The following Omani examples show the double function of this lexical marker as an illocutionary force indicator (1) and as transparent mitigator (2):

 (1) *Please Waleed, try to come to me at 2 pm. I need you.*

 (2) *Please Fatima, if you don't mind I would like you to help me.*

Notice that the use of *please* as a mitigation device is a more advanced and native-like strategy. It is more advanced than the self-evident illocutionary marking that we can find in (1), where *please* is overtly and almost single-handedly making the utterance a polite request as opposed to an order. On the other hand, in (2), this word forms part of a series of ingratiating devices along with, *if you don't mind,* and *I would like*. It is understandable then that in our data *please* is used by Americans less often and mostly as a mitigator, as illustrated in the following examples:

(3) *Can I please receive an extension?*

(4) *Professor, will you please go over the lesson I missed during your office hours?*

Notice also that American students use *please* following the subjects rather than at the very beginning of the utterance. The latter placement is cogent and consistent with its illocutionary force function. The request is immediately identified as such at the beginning of the utterance. The frequency of the Omani group's use of *please* as a lexical downgrader is 62% (147 instances), while the American group's score is far lower, with 9 instances (7%). Figure 5 below shows the frequency of use of *please* as a downgrader across all 10 situations by both groups of students.
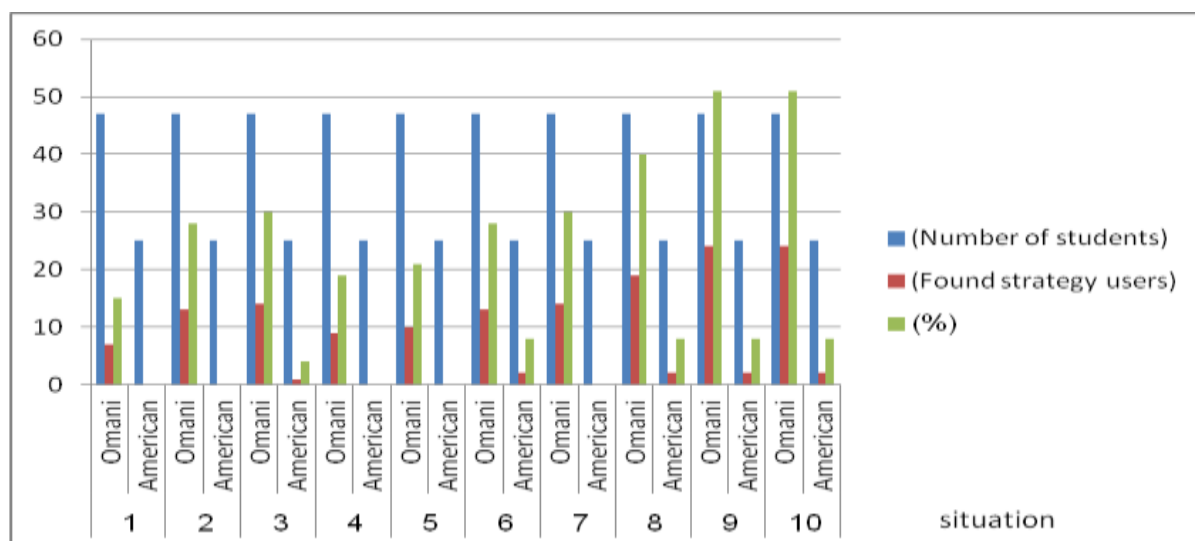

Figure 5. Frequency of Lexical/Phrasal downgraders (*Please*) in request situations 1-10.

Frequency figures are actually reversed in the use of consultative device markers in the data, that is, expressions which explicitly look for the hearer's consent. Examples that occurred in the students' data of the use of consultative devices are as follows:

4. *Excuse me, would you mind to discuss with me about the test?* (Omani)
5. *Please Fatima, if you don't mind I would like you to help me.* (Omani)
6. *Prof. Simona, would it be possible to see you later today to go over the information I missed in class yesterday?* (American)
7. *Peter, would you like to take a coffee break? I need break from this.* (American)

American students chose to use the consultative device statistically more frequently than Omani students. This result is compatible with what other studies reveal about non-native speakers of English with respect to the use of this downgrader device (Kasper,

1981; House and Kasper, 1987; Færch & Kasper, 1989; and Ogiermann, 2009). The latter adds that it is a negative politeness strategy, and the preference for it among English speakers is normal and culture-specific. Economidou-Kogetsidis (2009) also attributes this choice by British English speakers (who can perhaps be assumed to be comparable to the American subjects of this study) to a cultural perspective, as their culture is characterized by a negative politeness orientation favoring tact, individuality and avoiding impositions. Thus, by using consultative modifiers like *would you mind...*, the speaker consults with the hearer regarding her/his willingness to carry out the request, therefore avoiding imposition and acknowledging her/his face. The American group data shows that their total frequency of use of this device is 42 (34%), with the highest score in situations #3 (request to explain something), #8 (recommendation letter) and #10 (extend the deadline of the project). In contrast, the Omanis' score is only 6 (3%). Figure 6 below shows the percentage frequency of the consultative device distribution among American and Omani students in all situations.
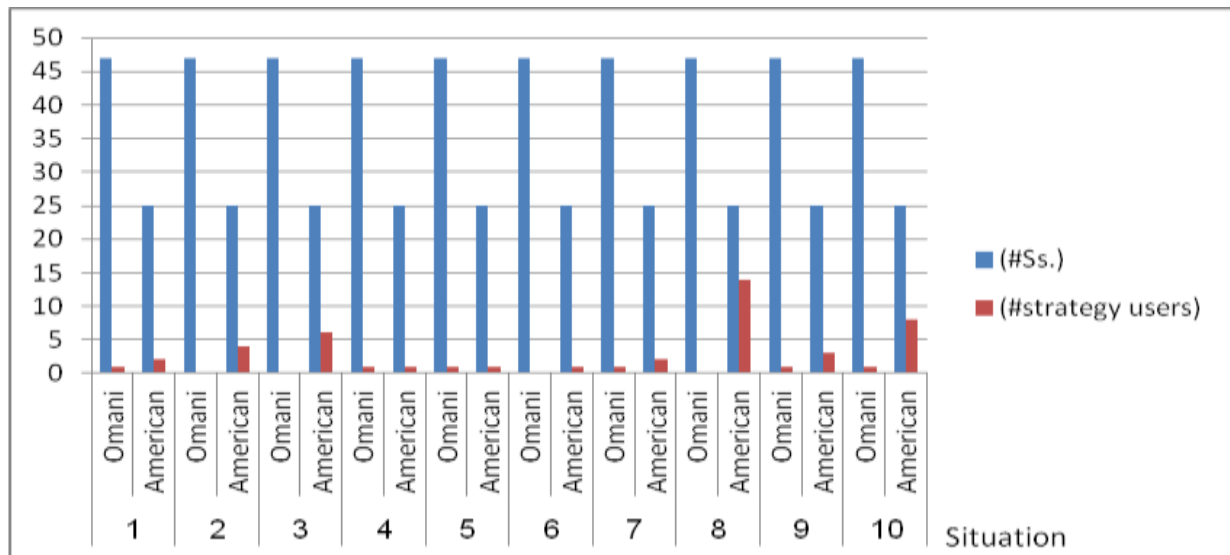

Figure 6. Frequency of Consultative Device (CD) in request situations 1-10

5. Limitations

Turning now to the limitations of this study, there are some factors which can be considered to have a direct effect on our findings. An important one in a study that, although qualitative in nature, relies on quantitative facts is the number of participants. The small n-size of completed questionnaires filtered for completeness and appropriateness from both groups has no doubt affected the richness of the elicited data. Further screenings were conducted on a relatively low number of questionnaires that were distributed. In this way, many questionnaires were excluded from the data, especially of Omani participants, mostly because they were either partly answered or because the informants did not address the questions correctly. It may be assumed that excluded questionnaires came from informants with lower proficiency levels so that, had they been included, language mastery problems would have been more prominent. It is, however, a truism that lower level students will present severe language proficiency problems.

There is also an unequal number of genders in the data, especially in the Omani group. The number of male participants is much lower than the number of female students, who are overrepresented in the data. This is one of the reasons for the decision to avoid considering gender variables among the factors that differentiate the two target groups. The lack of gender balance in the informant sample simply reflects the gender composition of the University of Nizwa student population, where females, representing some 80% of the students, outnumber male students in all fields of study. In some cases, gender differences have been commented upon, always bearing in mind the imbalance in the gender composition of the groups and the possible effect that it may have on the data collected. Observed gender differences have, therefore, not been the primary focus of this study and will be pursued in further work.

In addition, the limited number of American students who were available to participate has restricted our options in terms of the number of participants. The students who collaborated in the study were originally a group of American students participating in an exchange program, and they came from universities scattered across different parts of the US. Although they are likely representing one context, one culture, and their native language is English, they are representing a country that is known to possess an inordinate amount of cultural diversity resulting from the structure of its communities, which are largely composed of immigrants. Therefore, such cultural variety might not be sufficiently reflected in the image projected by this specific group of

students. We have been referring both to *Omanis* and to *Americans* and if in and of itself this is a gross generalization, it may be even more so in the case of the latter.

A final issue that should be considered when we draw conclusions from the data is to what extent one may draw valid generalizations from the results. The study targeted one specific academic context within a larger Arab and Omani context, and it would be unrealistic to automatically generalize the conclusion from the specific situation they apply to all similar contexts. From a broader perspective, it is true that Arabs share the same language and the same culture. However, there are other customs and practices that differentiate one Arabic context from another. Given the gender imbalance in the sample, it is conceivable that the overrepresentation of female informants may have had some impact on some of the resulting data. At the same time, cases where gender differences were observed, would have to be more directly assessed since even though the results for females may be considered to be reliable, the small size of the male informant population may also have produced results that are not wholly significant.

6. Conclusions

The data from this study confirm that Omani students (non-native speakers) use fewer indirect request strategies in English than their American counterparts (native speakers). Linguistic differences originated from insufficient linguistic abilities among Omani students. This deficiency can be assumed to be responsible for problems such as the underuse of the past auxiliaries like *could* as opposed to present tense modals like *can*, the misuse of *would,* and the overuse of the lexical downgrader *please* in comparison to the underuse of external modifiers such as grounders, disarmers and sweeteners. Past auxiliaries were also found to be underused by Omanis, which is a problem that is shared with other Arab learners due to the non-existence of these verbal forms in the Arabic language. The expression of politeness in Arabic is usually formed by adding adjuncts to the modal expression, which remains unchanged. Formal teaching and learning of requests usually begin with simple, almost formulaic use of the present tense ability marker as a politeness element, with the past tense adding further politeness. The use of tense for politeness gradience and the use of a modal element itself is not transferable from Arabic, and students often limit their repertoire to the simple-present form. More complex forms to modulate requests, such as the speaker orientation of expressions like *can/could I borrow*, as opposed to the speaker orientation of *can/could you lend me* expressions, are also missing from Omani students' skills. This subtle type of modulation requires a good command of the language, and it may well be that mastery of this pragmatic proficiency is beyond non-native intermediate learners of English.

Apart from the influence of linguistic proficiency in a narrow sense, cultural and sociopragmatic factors also play an important role in the formation of requests. Such factors are apparent in this study, particularly in the relative prominence of strategies in different types of situations. In general terms, an important cultural factor that differentiates request formations by the two groups is the fact that Arabic culture is categorized within the group of 'high-context' cultures that rely heavily on the hearer to interpret the meaning of implicit utterances. An important sociopragmatic factor is the particular social prestige and authority of teachers in the Omani context. A consequence of this is that the term address *teacher,* indicating a public recognition of authority, is overused in the academic context in the Omani group. It seems that there has been an automatic transfer of the use of this word by Arab learners from early general school settings into the second language classroom of an academic university setting. The American group did not use this term of address, and, lacking the cultural prestige associations of the expression, its common use in their primary education contexts makes it pragmatically inappropriate in a higher education environment.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.
Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Total frequency of indirect requests strategies in student-to-student situations.

Situation	Group	Number of students	Found strategy users	%
2	Omani	47	35	74
	American	25	24	96
4	Omani	47	33	70
	American	25	25	100
5	Omani	47	46	98
	American	25	24	96
7	Omani	47	47	100
	American	25	25	100
9	Omani	47	40	85
	American	25	25	100

Appendix B: Conventionally indirect strategies in student-to-student situations.

Situation	Group	Ability	Willingness	Wish	Desire/needs	Permission	Suggestory
2	OMANI	45	7	4	7	11	2
	AMERICAN	39	29	0	4	0	22
4	OMANI	40	3	0	2	0	16
	AMERICAN	4	8	0	0	7	70
5	OMANI	41	2	0	0	0	8
	AMERICAN	5	4	0	0	0	37
7	OMANI	55	4	4	27	4	0
	AMERICAN	52	29	0	0	0	7
9	OMANI	77	0	0	0	7	0
	AMERICAN	64	2	0	0	0	0

Appendix C: Syntactic Downgraders student-to-instructor situations.

Situation	Group	Can	Could	Shall	Should	Will	Would	May	Subjective Embedding	Long form	Cond. clause
1	OMANI	21	13	0	0	0	4	2	0	0	2
	AMERICAN	36	20	0	0	8	16	4	0	0	4
3	OMANI	31	26	0	0	0	2	6	0	0	0
	AMERICAN	0	12	0	0	0	16	0	0	8	4
6	OMANI	23	19	0	0	0	2	4	0	0	2
	AMERICAN	20	24	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0
8	OMANI	44	13	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	2
	AMERICAN	4	4	0	0	0	80	0	4	16	0
10	OMANI	49	9	0	0	0	4	4	2	0	0
	AMERICAN	16	36	0	0	0	24	0	4	0	4

Appendix D: Syntactic Downgraders in student-to-student situations.

Situation	Group	Can	Could	Shall	Should	Will	Would	May	Sub. Embedding	Long form	Cond. clause
2	OMANI	36	11	2	2	0	2	11	0	0	4
	AMERICAN	12	0	0	4	8	28	0	8	0	16
4	OMANI	30	13	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
	AMERICAN	0	4	0	0	0	12	0	4	0	0
5	OMANI	30	12	0	2	2	2	0	4	0	4
	AMERICAN	0	4	0	4	4	12	0	0	0	4
7	OMANI	40	19	0	0	2	4	2	0	0	13
	AMERICAN	16	28	0	0	0	24	0	0	8	0
9	OMANI	53	23	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0
	AMERICAN	16	44	0	0	0	16	0	0	0	0

Appendix E: Omani student questionnaire.

Dear student,

Thank you for participating in this study that investigates the skills involved in Pragmatics. Your input will be a great help. All information you will provide will be dealt with confidentiality and will be used only of research purposes.

عزيزي الطالب،

شكرا على مشاركتك في هذه الدراسة التي تبحث في العلاقة بين اللغة والمواقف التي يتم فيها استخدامها في الحوار المباشر بين الاشخاص. جميع المعلومات التي ستشارك بها سوف تحاط بالسرية التامة وسوف تستخدم للأغراض البحثية فقط لا غير.

    A. Personal information

1. Nationality:_____.

2. How long have you been learning at the University of Nizwa? (tick one)
   1. ❍ 1-2 Semesters
   2. ❍ 3-4 semesters
   3. ❍ 1-2 years
   4. ❍ More than 3 years

3. Age (tick one)
   1. ❍ 18-20   2. ❍ 21-30   3. ❍ Over 30

4. Gender (tick one)
   1. ❍ Male   2. ❍ Female

    A. Imagine yourself in the following situations. <u>Write</u> exactly what you will <u>say</u>.

1. You notice that your marks in the mid-term test are low and you want to discuss them with your instructor, Betsy, later in her office hours. What do you say to her?

   _____

2. You and your colleague, Waleed, are working on a class project. You have arranged an appointment to see your instructor today at 2 pm to discuss your proposal for your project and you want John to go with you. What do you say to him?

   _____

3. You did not attend the class yesterday because you were sick and you have a sick note for being absent. There was something important that the instructor, Simona, explained while you were absent and you want her to explain it again for you. What do you say to her?

   _____

4. You and your colleague, Salim, have been studying for two hours. You feel tired and want to take a coffee break. What do you say to him?

   _____

5. Your instructor asked you and your colleague, Hassan, whom you have just met for the first time, to choose an interesting topic for your presentation. He suggests a topic you don't like. What do you say to him?

   _____

6. At the end of a lecture, your instructor, Dennis, hands out an article to read for tomorrow's class. There were not enough copies. You want to ask for a copy for yourself. What do you say to him?

_____

7. While preparing for an exam you need some help. You have a good relationship with one of your classmates, Fatma, whom you think would help you. You call her to arrange to meet. What do you say to her?

_____

8. Your university is introducing a new activity for the students. To participate in one of these activities you need a recommendation letter from your instructor. You go to your instructor, Jessica, to ask for a letter. What do you say to her?

_____

9. While discussing a hot topic in class with your teacher, one of your classmates, Ali, gives his opinion, but you couldn't hear what he said. You turn to him and ask him to repeat what he just said. What do you say to him?

_____

10. Your instructor, Dr Brown, gives the deadline for the semester project. You want him to extend it and give you some more time. What do you say to him?

_____

Appendix F: American student questionnaire.
Dear student,

Thank you for participating in this study that investigates the Pragmatic skills used by native speakers of English in academic formal situations. Your input will be a great help. All information you will provide will be dealt with confidentiality and will be used only of research purposes.

a. Personal information

1. Nationality:_____.

2. University/college/Institution: _____.

3. How long have you been learning at the University level? (tick one)
   1. ❍ 1-2 Semesters
   2. ❍ 3-4 semesters
   3. ❍ 1-2 years
   4. ❍ More than 3 years
   5. ❍ Not applicable

4. Age (tick one)
   2. ❍ 18-20   2. ❍ 21-30   3. ❍ Over 30

5. Gender (tick one)
   2. ❍ Male   2. ❍ Female

A.   Imagine yourself in the following situations. <u>Write</u> exactly what you will <u>say</u>.

1.   You notice that your marks in the mid-term test are low and you want to discuss them with your instructor, Betsy, later in her office hours. What do you say to her?

_____

2.   You and your colleague, John, are working on a class project. You have arranged an appointment to see your instructor today at 2 pm to discuss your proposal for your project and you want John to go with you. What do you say to him?

_____

3.   You did not attend the class yesterday because you were sick and you have a sick note for being absent. There was something important that the instructor, Simona, explained while you were absent and you want her to explain it again for you. What do you say to her?

_____

4.   You and your colleague, Peter, have been studying for two hours. You feel tired and want to take a coffee break. What do you say to him?

_____

5.   Your instructor asked you and your colleague, Ray, whom you have just met for the first time, to choose an interesting topic for your presentation. He suggests a topic you don't like. What do you say to him?

_____

6.   At the end of a lecture, your instructor, Dennis, hands out an article to read for tomorrow's class. There were not enough copies. You want to ask for a copy for yourself. What do you say to him?

_____

7.   While preparing for an exam you need some help. You have a good relationship with one of your classmates, Farah, whom you think would help you. You call her to arrange to meet. What do you say to her?

_____

8.   Your university is introducing a new activity for the students. To participate in one of these activities you need a recommendation letter from your teacher. You go to your instructor, Jessica, to ask for a letter. What do you say to her?

_____

9.   While discussing a hot topic in class with your teacher, one of your classmates, Ali, gives his opinion, but you couldn't hear what he said. You turn to him and ask him to repeat what he just said. What do you say to him?

_____

10.   Your instructor, Dr Brown, gives the deadline for the semester project. You want him to extend it and give you some more time. What do you say to him?

_____

Appendix G: Explanatory questionnaire to FI UoN English instructors

University of Nizwa

Dear teachers,

Thank you for taking part in this questionnaire that investigates "Pragmatics[1]" (1). I am requesting your cooperation to answer the questions in this questionnaire, which focuses on "Pragmatic Competences" (2) of our students in the FI.

In many contexts of EFL/ESL, Omani context in not an exception, teachers find significant numbers of students who are still experience some difficulties in interpreting the intended meanings of verbal and non-verbal acts in real communications and fall into the "Pragmatic failure" trap even when they reach a high level of language proficiency.

In the following I provide some examples that are categorized as pragmatic failures from everyday classroom communication in the Omani context. They will also give you a clearer idea of the focus of this questionnaire:

Verbal utterances
Students are failing to understand and apply the "power" and "distance" rules:

- When they want to show extra respect to the teacher by asking about teacher's health, well being, family, children and many times personal or general life news. All these speech acts uttered at once right at the beginning of a conversation with the teacher who might consider it as a break of privacy; whereas for Omanis it is a normal everyday lengthy speech acts to start a friendly conversation between people. Failing to do this in Omani context sometimes leads to being accused of disrespect to your interlocutor.

- In western culture the following requests by Omani students might sound rude: imagine a student knocking at your office door and says "*teacher, I want my mark*" or "*excuse me, I want a book*". Both the word "*teacher* and the phrase "*excuse me*" in Arabic carry strong respect meanings but students do not know that they could also carry other meanings in English if they are said in such ways.

Other statements

- You get into your class and your students are waiting for your arrival. It is the summer in Oman and the class is warm. You want one of the students to turn on the AC because they are closer than you to the unit and you say to them "it is hot in here!" meaning "Please, one of you turn on the AC". However, your students did not respond in action!!!

Non verbal acts
The following might be categorized under cultural misconceptions by teachers:

- Students refuse to be paired reading aloud a dialogue with opposite classmate from opposite sex, especially if it is a female student. Schools in Oman separate students according to gender from grade 5 up to grade 12 (the highest level at high school)

- Students refuse to stand in front of the class and give a short talk about "*Halloween*". They are not familiar to such situation as they have completed their high school in different cultural environments and Oman is rich with its diversity.

Dear teachers, your answers will provide me with valuable information on teaching pragmatics in the Omani context. All information you will provide will be dealt with confidentiality and will be used only of research purposes.

Ahmed Al-Rahbi

---

1. Pragmatics "the study of communication action in its sociocultural context"
2. Pragmatic competence can be interpreted as the competence to employ language for appropriate communication, which can be simplified as the two major aspects of expression and comprehension (He Ziran, 1997)

_____

5. Name: _____

6. Nationality:_____

7. Mother tongue:_____

8. How long have you been teaching in Oman? (circle one)
   1.   1-2 Semester   2. 3-4 semesters   3. 1-2 years   4. 3 years or more

9. Age (circle one)

   3.   25-30   2. 30-35   3. 35-40   4. 40-50   5. 50-60

10. Gender (circle one)

   3.   Male
   4.   Female

4. Teaching level (circle one)

   1. Level 1

   2. Level 2

   3. Level 3

   4. Other duties: (e.g. level coordinator): _____

11. How long have you taught EFL/ESL so far? (circle one)

1.   1-2 years
2.   3-4 years
3.   5-6 years
4.   more than 6 years

12. Do you speak any other languages? (circle one)
   1.   yes
   2.   no

   3.   If yes, which one(s)? _____

13. Have you taken ESL Methodology courses related to teaching (Pragmatic Competence) particularly **Politeness** aspect of Pragmatic (*Apology, Respect* and *Refusal*)? If yes, please list anything (course activities, lectures, readings, etc.) that you can remember
    _____

14. Have you ever lived in a foreign country? (circle one)
   1.   yes
   2.   no
15. If yes, which one(s)?

16. Have you noticed whether your way of saying things has created some misunderstanding as to your real intentions, desires, needs, etc?

_____
_____

17. How have your studies, your language learning experience(s), including living in another country affect the way you teach? i.e. Do you teach things like how to apologize, how to refuse, how to contradict, how to help addressee keep face, etc.?

_____

_____

18. During your teaching experience in Oman, list or describe any pragmatic problems of **Politeness** (*Request, Refusal* and *Apology*) whether it is spoken or acts you have experienced that you can remember. e.g. when you say "sorry" for sharing sympathy, where your students might take the meaning literally, which is not the same in Arabic *or* saying "excuse me" when sneeze which also your students think it is no need to excuse as it is a natural behavior.

_____

_____

19. How frequently such above mentioned errors occur with your Omani students that you can link to pragmatic knowledge? (circle one)

1. Always   2. Frequently   3. Sometimes   4. Never   5. I don't know   6. No answer

20. I believe these Pragmatic problems are due to: (circle one)
    1. Lack of culture knowledge
    2. Lack of Pragmatic knowledge
    3. Literal translation from L1 to L2
    4. All above
    5. Other(s) (please mention!)_____
    6. I don't know
    7. No answer
21. I feel comfortable to use pragmatic concepts with my students because they can understand me. (circle one)
1. Strongly agree   2. Agree   3. Disagree   4. Strongly disagree   5. I don't know   6. No answer
22. Do you think that Omani students have difficulty to distinguish the *social distance* between speaker and listener when performing **politeness** utterances and being able to cope with it following the (pragmatic) expectations and uses of the culture of the other language? e.g. *family* or *friend* Vs *stranger*
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. I don't know
    4. No answer

23. If your answer is *yes*, please provide an example from your experience with Omani students.

_____

_____

24. Do you think that Omani students have difficulty to distinguish the *power relation* between speaker and listener when performing **politeness** utterances and being able to cope with it following the (pragmatic) expectations and uses of the culture of the other language?
    e.g. *classmate* Vs *teacher* (circle one)

    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. I don't know
    4. No answer

25. If your answer is *yes*, please provide an example from your experience with Omani students.

_____

_____

26. I teach pragmatics because it is: (you can circle more than one)
1. Important for my students   2. Part of the textbook that I use and I have to cover it   3. I'm quite confident on teaching pragmatics   4. Does not take much time from me   5. I don't know   6. No answer

27. I don't teach pragmatics because it is: (you can circle more than one)

1. It is not my interest   2. Focusing on other aspects of the language is more important than pragmatics   3. Hard for the level of my students   4. Time consuming and not part of curricular goals   5. I don't know   6. No answer

28. If you have been given the chance to explicit teaching concepts of pragmatics (Politeness) and you are also supported with the necessary teaching materials, will you teach it them?

1. Yes   2. No   3. I don't know   4. No answer

Many thanks for your contribution

Any further comments or suggestion will be most welcomed through:

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