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ابحاث المؤتمر العلمي الدولي الرابع المشترك الثاني

”المستجدات الحديثة في التعليم العالي في ظل التعليم الالكتروني“

(المجلد الثاني) 17-16 كانون الاول 2020



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## A Pragmatic Analysis of Gratitude Strategies among Iraqi ESL Learners with Reference to Gender

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### Abstract

Gratitude is a speech act frequently used by communicators in their exchanges. This study aims to investigate the use of gratitude expressions by Iraqi ESL learners in Malaysia. It also shows the pragmatic behaviour that Iraqi males and females prefer to use in their interaction with other people of diverse social status and distance. To this end, 30 participants divided equally into 15 males and 15 females have participated in this study. Cheng's (2005) coding scheme of gratitude expressions is adapted to code the data of this study. The findings uncover that Iraqi males and females use the same categories of gratitude to express their thankfulness to the receiver for the favour they ask for. They only differ in terms of the frequency of strategies, yet it is statistically insignificant. Finally, this study provides some pedagogical implications for ESL or EFL teachers and learners.

Key words: Speech acts, gratitude, Iraqis, ESL context, gender.



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تحليل تداولي لستراتيجيات الامتحان بين المتعلمين العراقيين للغة الانجليزية لغة ثانية

من قبل

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المستخلص

الامتحان فعل كلام يستعمل في كثير من الاحيان من أشخاص متواصلين في تبادلهم. تهدف هذه الدراسة الى تحري استعمال تعابير الامتحان من قبل متعلمين عراقيين للغة الانجليزية لغة ثانية في ماليزيا. تظهر أيضا هذه الدراسة السلوك التداولي الذي يفضله الذكور والاناث في تفاعلهم مع أشخاص مختلفين عنهم في المكانة الاجتماعية والمسافة. لتحقيق هذا الهدف شارك ثلاثون مشاركا مقسمون بالتساوي الى خمسة عشر ذكر وخمس عشرة انثى. عُدل موديل الترميز لجينك (2005) الخاص بتعابير الامتحان لترميز بيانات هذه الدراسة. كشفت النتائج أن ذكور واناث العراقيين يستعملون نفس تصنيفات الامتحان للتعبير عن شكرهم للمتلقى على الخدمة التي طلبوها. وأنهم لا يختلفون إلا من حيث تكرار الاستراتيجيات ومع ذلك فهي غير دالة احصائيا. وأخيرا وفرت هذه الدراسة بعض المضامين التربوية لمعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية ومتعلميها لغة ثانية او أجنبية الكلمات المفتاحية: أفعال الكلام , الامتحان , عراقيون , سياق كلام اللغة الانجليزية لغة ثانية , الجنس.

## 1. Introduction

ESL learners still commit mistakes when they communicate with foreigners in their context although they are good at English structures. The mistakes they commit are related to the violation of certain social assumptions or values of interpersonal relationship (Lihuis & Jianbin, 2010). Speech act is one of the main parts of pragmatics and individuals do not only use utterances in their interaction but also perform actions via these utterances. Gratitude is one of the speech acts that it is frequently used in interpersonal exchanges and it is important to know how to perceive and produce it appropriately in the second language context. Failure to do so can lead to misunderstanding or miscommunication. The linguistic strategies utilised to express gratitude are language and cultural specific and some diversities occur due to such factors as age, gender, status, distance, etc. Thus, the present study investigates the linguistic strategies of



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gratitude in accordance with their social values by Iraqi ESL learners and it also shows the tendency of Iraqi males and females in performing such strategies in an ESL context.

## 2. Theoretical Background

Speech acts are utterances (such as request, refusal, apology, thanking, ... etc) performed by all individuals in different cultures. These utterances are realized differently from one culture to another and cause difficulties in the interactions among interlocutors who have diverse norms or values (Gass and Neu 2006). The philosopher John Austin (1962) developed the theory of speech act to illustrate how certain utterances function within natural language. He explained how utterances are used not only to provide information but rather to fulfill actions. One of the speech acts is gratitude which is often performed in interpersonal relationships among language users. It is experienced once someone receives something useful. It can be defined as a sense of appreciation and gladness due to receiving a tangible advantage or a moment of amicable delight (Emmons, 2004). Besides, it is the positive sentiment someone feels when s/he receives something valuable from another person intentionally (McCullough and Tsang, 2004; McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, and Larson, 2001).

Based on Austin's (1962) theory, the “functional units in communication” have locutionary act (the literal purpose of the act), illocutionary act (the social purpose of the act), and perlocutionary act (the result of the act in a given context). Under Searle's taxonomy of speech acts, thanking is an illocutionary act. It is used by a speaker due to a past act used by a hearer and benefits the speaker. Thus, s/he feels grateful and expresses a statement of gratitude (Eisenstein and Bodman, 1986).

The use of expressions of gratitude differs from one culture to another. A case in point is that expression of gratitude *thank you* which is commonly used in American English whereas it is more formal marker in British English (Hymes, 1972). Hence, expression of gratitude such as *thank you* is problematic for native and non-native speakers and second language learners should be acquainted with the way of using such an expression in the target setting (Eisenstein and



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Bodman, 1986, 1993). In this vein, Cheng (2005) states that the issue is when and how gratitude is used as a proper reply to the social situation. Eisenstein and Bodman (1993) emphasize that when gratitude functions appropriately, it can create moods of solidarity among exchanges and preserve social consistency and relationship in the society. When someone produces gratitude improperly, undesirable social consequences could be occurred for speakers' relationships, leading to annoyance and dissatisfaction (Eisenstein and Bodman, 1986).

However, this study is based on Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) theory of politeness by which face is the central concept of it. According to these scholars, face can be maintained or lost and should be attended to in communication. That is, all members of a community take care of their face and the self-image they show to other people who have comparable face as assumed by the members. Brown and Levinson provide a set of tools to demonstrate the behaviors in which interlocutors handle a range of diverse speech actions across a range of diverse cultures (Watts, 2003). Besides, there are 'positive face' and 'negative face'. The former is known as a desire to be appreciated while the latter is identified as the wish to have freedom from imposition (Brown and Levinson, 1978).

Likewise, Song (2012) shows that Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness is mainly based on three common claims in communicative actions. First, they (1978) consider that all members in any community have face as self-esteem. Second, they suppose that all communicative acts potentially threaten the speaker's face. Third, individuals of a community would utilise diverse linguistic strategies to soften the influence of these threats. The use of a range of strategies is the major purpose of politeness in order to reduce face-threatening acts and confirm harmonious interaction. Brown and Levinson (1978) recognize the politeness strategies toward positive face that show awareness and solidarity and the politeness strategies toward negative face that preserve an esteemed distance.

Despite the issue that gratitude is a face-enhancing act (Leech, 1983), it is also considered a face-threatening act by Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory. Brown and Levinson (1987, p.



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67) consider speech act of thanking as being a threat to the interlocutors' negative face because the latter "accepts a debt, humbles his own face". Yet, other scholars follow face-saving act consider this speech act as recognition of the addressee's image and improvement of his/her negative face. For example, Okamoto and Robinson (1997) discuss that gratitude differs based on the degree of imposition on the addressee in that if it is greater on the giver, the more appropriate gratitude formulas would be used.

Furthermore, expressions of gratitude are contextually sensitive to such social variables as age, gender, imposition degree, status and distance to maintain politeness values. In this vein, previous studies uncover that males and females resort to diverse politeness strategies when using different communicative acts (Garcia, 1996). The linguistic strategies are affected by the perceived conventions between men and women (Mills, 2000). In this regard, Gracia (1996) discusses that the diverse ways males and females approach communications decide distinct gender-related frames of involvement and accordingly the diverse strategies they perform.

However, research on the speech act of gratitude can be classified into interlanguage pragmatics and cross-cultural pragmatics. This speech act has been studied on native and non-native speakers of English in diverse cultures such as Kurdish (Yusefi, Gowhary, Azizifar, and Esmaili, 2015), Persian and Malay (Farina and Abdul Sattar, 2015), Persian and English (Yoosefvand and Rasekh, 2014), Vietnamese (Pham, 2013), Spanish and German (Siebold, 2012), Chinese, Persian, and English (Pishghadam and Zarei, 2011), and Japanese (Long, 2010). Despite the issue that many studies have focused on various speech acts, little research is conducted on expressions of gratitude, more particularly on Iraqi ESL learners. The current study contributes to the body of research via examining a new ESL context not investigated before. It fills a gap in pragmatics literature by examining Iraqi male and female ESL learners when expressing gratitude. Accordingly, this study seeks answers to the following research questions:

1. How do Iraqi ESL university learners produce the speech act of gratitude in terms of head acts?



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2. What politeness strategies of gratitude do Iraqi male and female ESL university learners prefer to use?

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Participants

The researcher has selected 30 participants to participate in this study. They are Iraqis international students enrolled in diverse postgraduate programs (such as Physics, Biology, Computer Sciences, Management, Pharmacy, Engineering, Humanities, and Education) at Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia. These respondents are 15 males and 15 females and their average age is 32.5. All of them are native speakers of Iraqi-Arabic and they have been in Malaysia from 6 months to one year. The detailed instructions are provided by the researcher about the tasks. The participants are given 30 minutes to answer the issues of the tasks. In addition, they are asked to write down what they would like to say in each situation.

#### 3.2 Instruments

A background questionnaire is given to the participants to provide their personal information. Besides, Cheng's (2005) DCT is adopted to elicit responses from the participants. It includes 5 situations (refer to Appendix A) which are socially and culturally specific in the participants' setting. Two social variables (relative power and social distance) are considered in each situation as illustrated in Table 1. In addition, a structured-interview is conducted on another day to support the analysis of data. The two instruments have been piloted by 10 participants to confirm validity and reliability.



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Table 1: Description of the DCT situations

Situations	Social Distance	Social Status	Description of the situation
S1	D+	P=	<i>Student- classmate</i> A classmate helps you pick up your papers and notes.
S2	D-	P+	<i>Student – professor</i> Keep the book for a few more days.
S3	D+	P=	<i>Student-student</i> Ask for fixing the computer.
S4	D+	P+	<i>Student- professor</i> Ask for an extension.
S5	D-	P=	<i>Student- close friend</i> Lend a book.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

After collecting the data, the participants' utterances are coded qualitatively based on Cheng's (2005) coding scheme which is adapted to include 9 strategies. These involve: *thanking, appreciation, positive feelings, apology, recognition of imposition, repayment, other strategies, alerters, and wishes*. The last strategy *wishes* has not been revealed before and it is added to the coding scheme. Two inter-raters have participated in coding the data to confirm the reliability of data analysis. Quantitatively, the data are analysed via Chi-square test to show if there is any statistically significant differences between the two genders under study in the use of gratitude strategies.

## 4. Results and Discussion



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Table 2 reports that Iraqi ESL learners use different strategies of gratitude in diverse situations. Overall, results show that these learners use *thanking* as the most often used strategy. The frequency pattern of gratitude strategies produced by these learners is as follows: *thanking* (36.43%), *positive feelings* (18.95%), *alerters* (11.15%), *wishes* (7.80%), *apology* (7.43%), *recognition of imposition* (7.1%), *repayment* (6.69%), *appreciation* (2.60%), and *other strategies* (1.85%).

**Table 2: Frequency & Percentage of Gratitude Strategies by Iraqi ESL Learners**

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Thanking	98	36.43%
Appreciation	7	2.60%
Positive feelings	51	18.95%
Apology	20	7.43%
Recognition of imposition	19	7.1%
Repayment	18	6.69%
Other strategies	5	1.85%
Alerters	30	11.15%
Wishes	21	7.80%
Total	269	

In addition, Table 3 illustrates that *thanking* and *positive feelings* are the most frequently used strategies by males and females. Iraqi males also resort to *alerters*, *recognition of imposition*, *wishes*, *repayment*, *apology*, *appreciation*, and *other strategies* respectively. As for Iraqi females, they tend to use *alerters*, *apology*, *wishes*, *repayment*, *recognition of imposition*, *appreciation*, and *other strategies* respectively. However, Table 4 displays that there is no





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statistically significant differences between Iraqi males and Iraqi females in the use of gratitude strategies across situation.

**Table 3: Frequency & Percentage of Gratitude Strategies by Iraqi Males & Females**

Strategy	Males (Frequency & Percentage)	Females (Frequency & Percentage)
Thanking	51 (37.5%)	47 (35.34%)
Appreciation	4 (2.94%)	3 (2.25%)
Positive feelings	24 (17.65%)	27 (20.30%)
Apology	7 (5.14%)	13 (9.77%)
Recognition of imposition	12 (8.82%)	7 (5.26%)
Repayment	8 (5.88%)	10 (7.51%)
Other strategies	2 (1.47%)	3 (2.25%)
Alerters	17 (12.5%)	13 (9.8%)
Wishes	11 (8.1%)	10 (7.52%)
Total	136	133





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**Table 4: Frequency, Percentage, & Chi-square Result of Gratitude Strategies by Iraqi Males & Females**

Gratitude Strategies	Males (Frequency & Percentage)	Females (Frequency & Percentage)	$\chi^2$
	136 (50.56%)	133 (49.44%)	0.943*

\*  $p < 0.05$

Based on the results and the interview, Iraqi males and females prefer to use *thanking* and *positive feelings* to express their gratitude to the receiver because they use such strategies in their Iraqi culture. These learners express their gratitude by *thanking* when they really feel grateful to receive the favour they ask for. Iraq is considered as a super-nonegalitarian community and any person can depend on another person to impose and ask for help. In other words, when the degree of imposition is high, the more appropriate strategies are used and thus the strategy of *positive feelings* is used to reduce the imposition on the receiver.

Besides, both genders highlight that the degrees of social status and social distance are significant to favour the receiver. This is consistent with Eelen (2001) who illustrates that Brown and Levinson's (1987) power and distance ratios are the diversity parameters in that diverse power or rapport may lead to a diverse level of politeness expression. The social awareness of power and distance ratios among interlocutors might change based on the cultural variation. This is due to the issue that respect, honor, and dignity create the statuses of the communicators with regard to one another which can be revealed via adherence to the values of behaviour based on the hearer's age, status, and position and speaker's relationship (Koutlaki, 2002).

Iraqi ESL learners mitigate their utterances by using alerters such as attention getter, title, and name. They tend to use address terms such as Prof. Dr. Ms. particularly in situations 2 and 4 where the interaction between the student and the professor. The latter is usually used by both



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genders to show respect because they recognize his/her status and the imposed distance. In Malaysia the professor has authority and is highly respected and both genders consider that and try to select the proper pragmatic behaviour in their exchanges with him/her.

Iraqi learners also sue *wishes* to express their gratitude to the interlocutor. This is due to fact that they are used to use such a form in their Iraqi culture. They resort to *wishes* which include reference to religious belief in order to wish or pray for the receiver as a way to show gratefulness. Moreover, both genders resort to *apology* to show their gratitude because it is a norm in the Iraqi culture to mitigate the gratitude expressions via such a strategy. An apology is used to mitigate the face-threatening act of gratitude particularly when speaking with an interlocutor of high authority or when communicating with strangers abroad. However, other strategies such as *recognition of imposition, repayment, appreciation, and other strategies* are also used by the learners to show gratefulness or thanking.

Furthermore, it is also uncovered that Iraqi ESL learners do not use the head acts of gratitude only once in their responses, but rather multiple head acts are also used throughout their interaction. This is due to the issue that these learners realize gratitude by more than one head act and thus they like to strengthen their multiple-headed acts to arrive at the successful communication. For example, *Thanks a lot (thanking). I appreciate it (appreciation) and I'm so grateful for your help (positive feeling)*. However, here are some gratitude expressions used by Iraqi ESL learners in the different situations based on Cheng's (2005) coding scheme:



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1. Thanking:

(a) by using the word thank, e.g.,

*Thank you. / Thanks a lot/ Thank you very much.*

(b) by thanking and stating the favor, e.g., *Thank you for the favour/ Thank you for your help.*

(c) by thanking and mentioning the imposition caused by the favor, e.g.,

*Thanks for letting me borrow it extra days.*

2. Appreciation:

(a) by using the word *appreciate* without elaboration, e.g., *I appreciate it.*

(b) by using the word *appreciate* and mentioning the imposition caused by the favor, e.g., *I appreciate your efforts and time you spent to me.*

3. Positive feelings:

(a) by expressing a positive reaction to the favor giver (hearer), e.g., *I'm so grateful for your help.*

(b) by expressing a positive reaction to the object of the favor, e.g., *This reference is basically helpful.*

4. Apology:

(a) by using only apologizing words (i.e., *sorry* or *apologize*), e.g., *I'm sorry.*

(b) by using apologizing words (i.e., *sorry* or *apologize*) and stating the favor or the fact, e.g., *I'm really sorry for the problem.*

(c) by using apologizing words (i.e., *sorry* or *apologize*) and mentioning the imposition caused by the favor, e.g., *I feel not good that this subject took your whole day!*





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(d) by expressing embarrassment, e.g., *It's very embarrassing.*

5. Recognition of imposition:

(a) by acknowledging the imposition, e.g., *I know that you were not allowed to give me extra time!*

(b) by stating the need for the favor, e.g., *I really try not to ask for extra time, but believe me this time I do need it!*

(c) by diminishing the need for the favor, e.g., *you don't have to!*

6. Repayment:

(a) by offering or promising service, money, food or goods, e.g., *Can I buy invite you to dinner in my house?*

(b) by indicating his/her indebtedness, e.g., *I owe you one.*

(c) by promising future self-restraint or self-improvement, e.g., *I promise not to do it again.*

7. Others expressions that do not belong to the above strategies are categorized as other strategies:

(a) here statement, e.g., *Here you are.*

(b) small talk, e.g., *my name is Ali, what's your name?*

(c) leave-taking, e.g., *Have a nice night!*

(d) joking, e.g., *You will pay it next time.*

8. Alerters:

(a) Attention getter, e.g., *hello, good evening, good morning, alsalam alykum.*

(b) Title, e.g., *Professor, Dr., Ms. Mr.*

(e) Name (including first names, surnames or endearment terms English), e.g., *Mohdi, Muhammad, Nazq, Nor...etc.*

9. Wishes:

*May Allah bless you.*

*May Allah protect you.*

*God blessing.*

*All the best.*

## 5. Conclusion



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The present study aims to investigate the use of gratitude expressions by Iraqi ESL learners in an ESL context. It also aims to show the pragmatic behaviour of Iraqi males and females when they express their gratitude for the favour they ask for. This study unveils that both genders use the same categories of gratitude, but they only differ in terms of the frequency of strategies although it is statistically insignificant. *Thanking* and *positive feelings* are the most frequently used strategies by these learners in an ESL context.

Finally, this study provides ESL or EFL teachers and learners with the gratitude expressions and the way males and females produce them in an ESL context. This helps them to be aware of the gratitude linguistic forms with regard to their social values. ESL or EFL teachers should not overlook the social aspects of language and should be acquainted with the communicative needs of the learners. That is, these teachers should also teach their ESL or EFL learners the linguistic aspects that are related to the social values in order to become successful second language speakers.

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(المجلد الثاني) 17-16 كانون الاول 2020



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#### Appendix A: DCT

The following questionnaire contains 5 situations. All situations take place in Malaysia. Please read the situations and write in the space provided what you would say in each situation. Respond as you would in an actual conversation.

1. You and your classmate, whom you don't know very well, are walking to class. You accidentally drop your papers and notes, which scatter all over the middle of a busy hallway. Your classmate helps you pick up your papers and notes. When your classmate gives the papers and notes to you, what would you say?

YOU:

2. You are writing a term paper for one of your courses. For this paper, you borrow a book from Professor Smith, whom you know very well. You are supposed to return the book to Professor Smith tomorrow. However, you need to keep it for another 2-3 days to complete your paper. So you ask Professor Smith if you can keep the book for a few more days, and he/she agrees. When you return the book to Professor Smith, what would you say?

YOU:

3. You are having trouble with your computer; it keeps crashing. You know someone at school who knows a lot about computers and you ask the person to help you even though the two of you are not close friends. The person hesitates because he/she is very busy, but then agrees to help you, and ends up spending the whole afternoon fixing your computer. After the computer is fixed, what would you say?

YOU:

4. You are writing a term paper for one of your courses. You are working hard on the paper, but you have to stop because you also have to study for final exams in your other courses. The paper is due tomorrow, and you need a few more days to finish it. You decide to ask Professor Brown, whom you don't know very well, for an extension. Professor Brown hesitates because it won't be fair to other students in the class, but then he/she agrees to give you an extension. A few days later, when you turn in the paper, what would you say to Professor Brown?

YOU:

5. You ask your close friend, who is in the same field of study, to lend you books you can make copies. Your friend agrees to lend you the books. When you return them, what would you say?

YOU:

Thank you for filling out this questionnaire!

#### About the author:

Dr. Shurooq Abboodi Ali is an assistant professor at College of Arts, University of Baghdad. She got PhD in Applied Linguistics from University Sains Malaysia, Malaysia. She has a number of published papers nationally and internationally. Her research interests are in the areas of pragmatics and discourse analysis