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**Pragmatic Competence and Politeness in Moroccan EFL
University Students' Communication: Gender and Group
Affiliation Influence**

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مقتضب

تتوخى هذه الدراسة مقارنة المهارات التداولية لمتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية ومدى تأثير النوع والوسط الثقافي في اختيار استراتيجيات التأدب والملاطفة في مؤسستين للتعليم العالي بالمغرب هما جامعة مولاي إسماعيل بمكناس وجامعة سيدي محمد ابن عبد الله بفاس. وتجدر الإشارة إلى أنه تم تجميع المعطيات الكمية للدراسة بناء على مساهمة أربعمائة من طلاب الكليتين؛ أي مائتا طالب من كل كلية. وفيما يخص المعطيات الكيفية فقد تم تجميعها بناء على ملاحظة ثمان وضعيات لغوية في كلتا الكليتين اعتمادا على تقنية المعاينة المحايدة. هذا وقد تم الاعتماد على تصميم الأساليب المختلطة من أجل جمع وتحليل وتأويل البيانات باستعمال منهجية التثليث المتزامنة كإستراتيجية للدراسة. واستعملت إحصاءات وصفية واستنتاجية لتحليل المعطيات النوعية والكيفية التي تم تجميعها من خلال الاستمارة الموزعة على الطلبة المشاركين في الدراسة، التي خلصت نتائجها إلى أن هناك علاقة جد إيجابية بين اختيار استراتيجيات التأدب وبين النوع والوسط الثقافي للمتحدث، كما انتهت إلى أن المشاركين فيها قد أبانوا عن امتلاك مهارات تداولية يمكن أن تستشف من خلال التنوع في استعمال استراتيجيات التأدب حسب متغيرات الوضعية التي هم فيها، كما خلصت الدراسة إلى أن المشاركين يميلون إلى استعمال مصطلحات وعبارات كثيرة مقتبسة من الحقل الديني الإسلامي، وأن هناك علاقة جد إيجابية بين اختيار استراتيجيات التأدب وطبيعة الخطأ المرتكب في حالة الاعتذار أو نوعية الطلب، بل وأن هذا الأخير من الممكن أن يكون مؤثرا أكثر من النوع و الانتماء الثقافي.

Abstract

This study investigates the pragmatic competence of EFL students and the impact of group affiliation and gender on the choice of politeness strategies within two Moroccan institutions in higher education: Moulay Ismail University and Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University. Data for the current study are collected from 400 respondents who have managed to answer a discourse completion test. In addition to that, 8 situations have been observed using non-participative observation in both universities. A mixed-methods design is used for the collection, the analysis and the interpretation of data with simultaneous triangulation methodology as a research strategy. The quantitative and the qualitative data gathered are described and analyzed using descriptive in addition to inferential statistics. The findings indicate that there is a strong significant correlation between group affiliation, gender and the choice of politeness strategies. They also indicate that Moroccan EFL students develop certain pragmatic competence which can be deduced through the variety of politeness strategies used in the DCT. Furthermore, this study concludes that Moroccan EFL students tend to use religious lexicon from the Islamic doctrine which characterizes the Moroccan context in terms of politeness forms. The results indicate that there is also a strong association between the choice of politeness strategies and the weight of the face threatening act, to the extent that it can be more influential than gender and group affiliation.

The present report summarizes the research process of my Ph. D. It mainly tackles the research hypotheses and questions which were adopted and set to reveal the methodology used to answer, analyze, and discuss them. This report also sheds light on the objectives of the study. It also explains the theoretical background. Most prominently, it lists the findings of the study.

1. Introduction

My dissertation flows at the river of Pragmatic competence, mainly politeness theory and the impact of gender and group affiliation on the choice of politeness strategies. It, therefore, focuses on two different speech acts namely apologizing and requesting and how politeness strategies are affected by gender and group affiliation in the Moroccan context.

1.1. Rationale of the Thesis

The motivation of this study is the need to investigate the impact of gender and group affiliation on the choice of politeness strategies among students. This study will be useful for assessing pragmatic competence of students who had some pragmatics courses. Therefore, it can be a tool for assessing the methods and techniques used by teachers to teach pragmatics and pragmatic competence at this level.

Starting from the conviction that pragmatic competence is an interdisciplinary field in the sense that it relies on many other fields of study, the researcher is motivated by the fact that pragmatic competence and its impact on

learners has not been in focus in higher education in the Moroccan university; therefore, its role and relationship with learning has mostly been theoretical and has not been applied to an academic context like Morocco. Hence, within such a new context where the role of pragmatic competence has not gained enough attention, the contribution of this dissertation is that it will measure the relationship between pragmatic competence, group affiliation and gender in the choice of politeness strategies to find out whether they impact the selection of adequate politeness strategies in the Moroccan context or not.

The findings of this study can be a plus to the literature in the field of pragmatic competence, precisely the theory of politeness and its applicability to the Moroccan context with regard to gender and group affiliation. Politeness is a foster for effective human communication by which people sustain and consolidate their social relationships. This, in fact, would leave a space for this research to measure the impact of gender and group affiliation along with other variables on the choice of politeness forms in the Moroccan context.

1.2. Research Questions

So as to attain the goals set for this dissertation, three research questions were addressed. They are listed as follows:

- ✓ To what extent Moroccan EFL university students are contextually aware and able to use their pragmatic competence?

- ✓ To what extent gender impacts the choice of linguistic politeness by Moroccan EFL university students?
- ✓ To what extent group affiliation impacts the choice of politeness strategies by Moroccan EFL university students?

1.3. Research Hypotheses

The present research targets studying the relationship between politeness strategies, gender and group affiliation by testing the following hypotheses:

1. Moroccan EFL university students are equipped with sufficient pragmatic competence that enables them to deal with different linguistic situations.
2. There is a predictive relationship between gender and the choice of politeness strategies by Moroccan EFL university students.
3. There is a predictive link between the choice of politeness strategies by Moroccan EFL university students and group affiliation.

1.4. Objectives of the Thesis

The objective of this research is to grasp the pragmatic competence of Moroccan university students and to measure the impact of gender and group affiliation variables on the choice of politeness strategies by these students. The research will make it clear whether gender and group affiliation are impactful variables in the choice of politeness formulas. Differently put, the results of the

current research will enable readers get deeper insights into the kind of influence gender and cultural background of student can have, in a way or another, on choosing adequate politeness strategies in making two different speech acts namely requesting and apologizing.

Bearing in mind all the aspects mentioned above, the main objective is to get clear ideas about the pragmatic competence of Moroccan EFL university students and their ability to respond to different linguistic scenarios. The current research will attempt to accomplish the following aims:

- ✓ To assess the pragmatic competence of Moroccan EFL university students.
- ✓ To find out whether pragmatic competence contributes to minimizing communication breakdown and maximizing mutual understanding between the interlocutors.
- ✓ To measure the impact of gender and group affiliation on the choice of politeness strategies.

1.5. The Structure of the Thesis

The following dissertation comprises four parts. Part one is devoted to the general introduction in which the background of the research variables are introduced. Then, it addresses the rationale for conducting such a piece of research in this field, the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the research hypotheses, the research questions and the significance of the study.

Part two deals with the review of the literature. This chapter is divided into six sections that provide an overview of the literature related to the present study. The first section outlines the general theoretical framework of the study which is human communication as a starting point for constituting pragmatic competence. The second section presents pragmatic competence. The third section sheds light on the speech act theory and speech act taxonomy. For a deep understanding of politeness as a major constituent of pragmatic competence, the fourth section is devoted to a discussion of the work of Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness along with some reactions and critiques of what might be shortcomings of this theory (see Mills ,2003).

This section also assigns considerable attention to the two major types of politeness, namely positive politeness and negative politeness in relation to culture, so as to question the universalism of politeness as a theory. Additionally, the notion of face by Goffman (1967) which is the basis for this theory is investigated in relation to culture. Politeness strategies that are used to soften face threatening acts are also under investigation along with socio-cultural variables that may affect their choice such as gender and group affiliation.

Finally, this section is concluded with a brief discussion on politeness and nonverbal behavior and politeness and stereotypes. The fifth section of this chapter addresses issues related to language, gender and politeness. Besides, more focus is on politeness in relation to gender and group affiliation as two

major factors affecting the choice of politeness strategies by participants. Moreover, it, more specifically, addresses politeness in the Arab context wherein this study lies.

Part three is devoted to chapter two that is concerned with the methodology adopted to accomplish the objectives set for this research. The chapter includes some theoretical issues related to the research design and method, data collection procedure and data analysis instruments. Part four is concerned with chapter three that of data description and analysis. The chapter introduces the results of the quantitative and the qualitative data and the implications. The fifth part is dedicated to chapter four that presents the discussion and the interpretation of the results. The sixth part in this dissertation is the general conclusion which provides a general summary of the study and its limitations.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework chapter is devoted to clearing the ground of what has been reviewed about the variables in this study: politeness, group affiliation, gender and language. Many scholars in the field of pragmatic competence have defined politeness as an independent variable with the impact it has on the other dependent variables such as gender and group affiliation. The review of the literature is critical in the sense that many different definitions and studies are debated from different angles in the field of pragmatic competence.

3. Methodology

The methodology chapter introduces a comprehensive description and discussion of the methodology employed in the current study in which the impact of gender and group affiliation on the choice of politeness strategies is in the center. This chapter sheds light on methodological issues adopted at every stage of the current study. It targets setting the methodological foundation for the present study. It presents the research hypotheses, questions, problem and aims. It also describes data collection techniques and instruments, sampling procedures and data analyses employed. It also presents and states the rationale and importance of the study. Additionally, it highlights and reflects upon the methodological issues this study tackles, specifically mixed-methods approach, validity and reliability, representativeness of the sample.

4. Research Findings

As for the findings of the research, they can be summarised into the following:

Concerning research question 1 related to the pragmatic competence of Moroccan EFL students in the sample, it has been found that students use different politeness strategies while responding to the discourse completion test's situations. The strategies vary from one situation to another depending on the specificities of each situation such as power, distance, social ranking, age and gender of the speaker/hearer.

The pragmatic competence of the respondents can be also deciphered from the use of direct and indirect strategies accordingly with the variables of each situation. Moreover, students used some culture-specific markers of politeness in the Moroccan context such as the religious lexicon which denotes their awareness of the usefulness of those markers.

Concerning research question 2 related to the impact of gender on the choice of politeness strategies, it has been concluded, from both the discourse completion test and the observation, that gender is an impactful factor in the choice of politeness strategies. Differently put, in nine apology strategies and in all request strategies, the P-value was less than 0.5 which is the average value to be significant. This means that gender in all those situations was an influential variable that pushed the speakers to use specific politeness strategies. As to the observation, it has been noted that the speakers and the hearers differ in their use of politeness strategies while making the same speech act depending on the gender of the hearer.

As to research question 3 related to the impact of group affiliation on the choice of politeness strategies is concerned, it has been found out that there is a significant relationship between group affiliation and the choice of politeness strategies, which means that group affiliation is an influential variable in the choice of politeness strategies by students.

As far as the hypotheses are concerned, the results listed in Chapter three, (data analysis and interpretation) for both quantitative and qualitative data

findings, reveal that the first hypothesis: “Moroccan EFL university students possess sufficient pragmatic competence that enables them to deal with different linguistic situations” has been confirmed by the fact that Moroccan EFL university students used appropriate politeness strategies to cope with different linguistic situations given in the discourse completion test.

The second hypothesis: “There is a predictive relationship between gender and the choice of politeness strategies by Moroccan EFL university students”, which has been tested through the DCT and the observation, has been stressed by the findings of the thematic analysis of the observation and the Chi-squared test run for each situation. The last hypothesis: “There is a predictive link between the choice of politeness strategies by Moroccan EFL university students and group affiliation” has also been confirmed by the findings of both the Chi-squared test and thematic analysis.

This research is divided into four major chapters. Chapter one is divided into six sections that provide an overview of the literature related to the present study. The first section outlines the general theoretical framework of the study which is human communication as a starting point for constituting pragmatic competence. The second section presents pragmatic competence. The third section sheds light on the speech act theory and speech act taxonomy. For a deep understanding of politeness as a major constituent of pragmatic competence, the fourth section is devoted to a discussion of the work of Brown and Levinson’s

(1987) theory of politeness along with some reactions and critiques of what might be shortcomings of this theory (see Mills, 2003).

5. Contribution

A basic application of this study is that it enlarges the scope of thinking about politeness phenomenon in the Moroccan context. By investigating the pragmatic competence of Moroccan EFL students, this study has shed light on one of the fundamental components of pragmatic competence which is politeness in relation to gender and group affiliation. Deep than that, this study gives a detailed description to the politeness strategies Moroccan EFL students use to perform requests and apologies in different contexts.

Additionally, this study offers an empirical understanding of the politeness strategies used by students and of the intersection between the communicative behaviour and linguistic, cultural, religious and gender background of the interlocutors. This is said, the outcome of this study can provide a better understanding to the ways Moroccan EFL students adapt to their culture and religion while performing a specific speech act.