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## The Effect of Age on Iraqi EFL Learners' Use of English Politeness Formulas

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Politeness formulas, though they are very important in our daily interactions, have not been studied thoroughly by researchers, and only few papers have been written about this term. This study attempts to investigate the effect of age on the use of English politeness formulas by Iraqi EFL learners. For the sake of achieving this aim, the study hypothesizes that Iraqi EFL learners face difficulties in using English politeness formulas as an effect of the cultural differences between the two languages, and this difficulty varies according to their gender and age. A questionnaire is used to test out the hypotheses of the study which is the source of the data. In the questionnaire, (٥٠) learners from the English Department, College of Education, Tikrit University participate to achieve two tasks: a production task in which they are given situations where they have to take a role, and a recognition task in which certain situations are provided and the learners choose the correct formulas. The data collected from the questionnaire is analyzed according to Scarcella (١٩٧٩). The results of this study indicate that EFL Iraqi learners meet difficulties in using English politeness formulas as a result of the cultural differences. It is also concluded that age does not affect performance while gender does.

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تأثير العمر على استخدام متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في العراق لصيغ المدارة باللغة الإنجليزية

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### الخلاصة

الصيغ المهذبة ، على الرغم من أهميتها في تفاعلاتنا اليومية ، لم يتم دراستها بدقة من قبل الباحثين ، ولم تتم كتابة سوى عدد قليل من الأوراق حول هذا المصطلح. تحاول هذه الدراسة دراسة تأثير العمر على استخدام صيغ المدارة الإنجليزية من قبل متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. من أجل تحقيق هذا الهدف ، تفترض الدراسة أن متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية في العراق يواجهون صعوبات في

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استخدام صيغ أدب اللغة الإنجليزية كأثر للفروق الثقافية. بين اللغتين ، وهذه الصعوبة تختلف باختلاف نوع الجنس والعمر. يتم استخدام استبيان لاختبار فرضيات الاستوديوهات التي هي مصدر البيانات. في الاستبيان ، (٥٠) متعلم من قسم اللغة الإنجليزية ، كلية التربية ، جامعة تكريت يشارك في تحقيق مهمتين: مهمة الإنتاج التي يتم منحهم فيها المواقف التي يتعين عليهم فيها القيام بدور ، ومهمة الاعتراف التي مواقف معينة يتم توفير واختيار المتدربين الصيغ الصحيحة. يتم تحليل البيانات التي تم جمعها من الاستبيان وفقا لسكارسيلا (١٩٧٩). تشير نتائج هذه الدراسة إلى أن المتعلمين العراقيين في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية يواجهون صعوبات في استخدام صيغ اللطف الإنجليزية نتيجة للاختلافات الثقافية. وخلص أيضا إلى أن العمر لا يؤثر على الأداء بينما الجنس.

## ١. Introduction

Terms such as 'formulaic expressions', 'conversational routines', and 'politeness formulas' have been unclearly defined (by different authors). Authors differ in the type of items they put under such terms, for example: Tannen and Oztek (١٩٨١:٣٧) say that they are "combination, of words which have become associated in everyone's mind and are often repeated in sequence", and Powley and Syder (١٩٨٣:٢٠٥-٢٠٦) say that they are "entirely familiarly, memorized sequences 'or' habitually spoken sequences". There are clear difficulties in determining what expressions are formulaic and what are not. (Davies, ١٩٨٧:٧٥)

Richard and Schmidt (١٩٨٣:٢٢٩) define politeness formulas as sequences of words associated with particular speech acts that are saved and recalled as a unit at the time of use, rather than formed online using the full means of language grammar. It is important to note that some researchers use the terms 'formulas' and 'routines' to refer to the same phenomenon as Richard and Schmidt say that this phenomenon has been referred to be different terms including 'prefabricated routines', 'routine formulas', 'stock utterances', 'lexical phrases', 'institutionalized utterances', and 'unanalyzed chunks'. The term selected in this study will be 'politeness formulas' (henceforth PF).

## ٢. Politeness Formulas and Politeness

PFs are very important in our daily interaction as their presence makes the conversation appear more polite as Yule (٢٠٠٢:٧٧) states that if we do not use these formulas or do not observe their use in situations of interaction, then the interaction may be interpreted by the participants as being rude or impolite.

Watts (٢٠٠٣: ٨٧) suggests that in our interaction we use PFs that are concerned with "utterances used in a ritual way" which means that these utterances are never omitted in a conversation. Here, he assumes that the participants have already founded their face in interaction and as such deliver utterances accordingly.

Many studies on PFs in English, Arabic and other languages have paid attention to the importance of these formulas in indicating politeness in daily interaction. Examples of these studies are the studies of Ferguson (١٩٧٦), Davies (١٩٨٧) and El-Sayed (١٩٩٠).

## ٢. The notion of Politeness Formulas

Ferguson (١٠٧٦:١٣٧) states that in spite of the universality of this phenomenon, PFs have been very little studied by linguists or anthropologists or other students of human behaviour. He defines PF as the "little snippets of ritual", used in daily communication between people, such as 'good morning', or 'thank you', or 'God bless you'. He adds that all cultures have such formulas, in spite of the fact that their nature and the occurrence of their use differ largely from one society to another.

Schlund (٢٠١٠:١-٢) defines PFs as frequent linguistic constituents that are stereotypically connected with the transmission of polite meaning. She adds that the use of politeness formulas is thought of as not being limited to their factual existence in natural speech, nor to the factual polite intents of the speakers or the addressees' inference as polite.

PFs are one of the different ways to realize politeness which help to establish a good and unconfusing relationship with the other members of a community. Such formulas are greeting, complimenting, congratulating, thanking, apologizing, etc. To express all those social events, the speaker uses what is called "ready-made" polite forms which are at the speaker's control if needed. These fixed politeness formulas are studied under what is called 'lingua-pragmatics' which is defined as the "study of fixed forms of language that have fixed socio – pragmatic values in actual verbal communication". Such forms are different from all other forms of language in their translatability, politeness and other features (Zohra, ٢٠١٢:٦٢). She adds that PFs are language – specific and culture – specific. Thus, speakers of the same community who share a similar cultural background can easily interpret and understand politeness formulas while others from other cultures face difficulty in understanding the message carried by these forms (ibid:٦٣).

Fahmi (٢٠١٣:١٦) shows that PFs are one of the few language constituents which children are trained to use, and that teachers take a great responsibility for training their students or at least familiarize them with the formulas to assure linguistic and social control of the language.

Formulas such as 'bye-bye' or 'thank you' are clearly taught by parents who can be noticed instructing and training their children to carry out the routines on the prescribed social situation, often designing the forms themselves. The acquisition of PFs usually requires the intervention of an adult to command the child to produce a structure even if the child does not realize the necessities of the social interaction, and may be unable to analyze the formula linguistically (Gleason et al., ١٩٨٤:٤٩٤).

PFs can be seen as lexically and syntactically unalterable combination of words that frequently have the importance of a sentence and are thermalized as politeness formula pragmatically (Bussmann, ١٩٩٦:٤٢٦).

Ferguson (١٩٧٦:١٤٣) states that each formula has a root-echo response and the response sometimes differs largely from one language and another. He talks about Arabic root-echo responses saying that there is a large number of adjacency pairs in Arabic in which a formula, such as greeting, compliment, or other formulas, requires a response that is derived from the initiating utterance. English, unlike Arabic, doesn't possess such a feature. He adds that in many speech communities there are generalized responses that are suitable for different initiating formulas. He gives an example from Arabic where the response 'الله يحفظك' 'God may keep you' seems to be appropriate when there is no particular response, or as an addition to another general wish with God as the subject. Ferguson gives hint to another feature in Arabic politeness formulas which is the 'same or more so' principle which is also found in the Holy Quran where Allah says:

( واذا حييتم بتحية فحيوا باحسن منها أو ردوها )

('And when you are greeted with a greeting, greet with a better than it or return it; surely Allah takes account of all thing') (Surah: An-Nisa, Verse: ٨٦). He also gives an example concerning Arabic greeting "السلام عليكم" 'Peace be upon you' and its response that follows the principle mentioned above will be "وعليكم السلام ورحمة الله" 'and upon you be peace and the mercy of Allah'.

#### ٤. Politeness Formulas in Language Teaching and Learning

Aijmer (١٩٩٦:٢٨-٢٩) considers PFs as pragmatic entities that are taught and practised without any indication for grammar. He says that course-books and syllabuses contain a number of lists of formulas to be taught. He adds that there are several reasons for the importance of teaching PFs. One of these reasons is that formulas are directly connected with function and they can be taught as units regardless of grammar. And learning formulas is achieved through memorization and imitation especially at the initial stage of language learning.

Davies (١٩٨٧:٧٦) gives other reasons for the usefulness of having a knowledge of PFs to a learner of a specific language. First, a familiarity with the form of PFs can be accomplished through memorization without cognitive difficulty since they can be learned as indivisible and fixed units. Second, the recurrence of the use of these formulas. The learner who memorizes some essential formulas for greeting, apologizing and so on will find these formulas extremely useful as they can be used in so numerous common situations.

Richards and Schmidt (١٩٨٣:١١٤) mention that PFs as being widely applicable and easy to be learnt can be exploited by a witty learner to make other people think that the learner has a fluency which he doesn't really have.

Yorio (١٩٨٠:٥٣) says that since PFs are culture-specific and because their formal and situational description is complex, they are difficult to teach. The reason behind this is that language learners may use PFs in ways which distorts from the native norm or in a way which causes misunderstanding.

## •. Methods

### A. Subject

This study involves (٥٠) EFL undergraduate ٤<sup>th</sup> year students chosen randomly from the department of English, the college of education for humanities, university of Tikrit. This sample consists of (٢٥) male students aged between ٢٠-٢٠, and (٢٥) female student aged between ١٩-٢٦.

### B. The Questionnaire

The questionnaire includes two parts . The first part is at the production level that contains six situations which are designed to bring to light information concerning the ability of learners to issue politeness formulas in different situations.

As for the second part, the recognition level, it contains eight situations. The situations are designed to shed light on the learner's ability to distinguish or recognize the suitable formula for different situations. The students are asked to read the situations and choose the suitable formula.

The situations of this questionnaire are based on 'age' as a variable, i.e., the situation test out the influence of age on the performance of the learners.

### C. Administration of the Test

The importance and aim of the questionnaire are given in advance at the beginning of the test. Students are given instructions in English and Arabic and are asked to

answer the questions seriously. The questions raised by the students during the test are answered, and clarifications are presented. The testees are asked to write their responses on the questionnaire papers to save time.

### ٦. Analysis of the Data

In the production level we have two participants. One is the subject him/herself whose age is ranged from (١٩-٣٠) years and the other is either a child or an older person who is proposed in the situation. The situations are the following.

١. S → ٦ years old child
٢. S → Little brother
٣. S → A friend's son
٤. S → aunt
٥. S → School children
٦. S → An old man

The performance of the learners in the previously mentioned situations is presented in the following table:

**Table (١) The Performance of the Subjects in the Situations ١,٢,٣,٤,٥ and ٦ from the Production Level.**

Sit, No.	Performance of females	Performance of males
١	٧٢ %	١٠٠ %
٢	٣٦ %	٩٤ %
٣	٢٠ %	٤٠ %
٤	٤٠ %	٣٦ %
٥	٣٦ %	٤٤ %
٦	١٦ %	٥٢ %

In this table, one can see that the testees performance in situation (١), which is a greeting situation, is better than other situations i.e., leave-taking, welcoming, congratulating and condolence.

The successful performance in this situation can be said to be the result of the daily use of greeting formula by the students at university as well as other places. As it is known that Iraqi EFI learners begin to use some formulas of English from the first year of their study.

On the other hand, their performance in the congratulation formula (Situation ٣) is very low, as it is obvious. And it has been discovered while checking the answers of the students that a number of students do not write anything for this situation, and some others wrote incorreced expressions which cannot be considered as formulas. Only a small number of them write the appropriate formula for this situation of congratulation.

Talking about the condolence formula (Situation ٦), it is important to point out that a great number of students only know the standard formula of giving condolence which is "I am sorry" as it is used in a very large number of situations regardless of whether the situation is formal or informal.

As for other situations ٢, ٣ and ٥, which are situations of leave-taking and welcoming, it can be noticed that the performance of the subjects is low expect for the welcoming situation (٤) answered by females. The performance of the female in situation (٤) is very low. Concerning the recognition level, the situations are the following:

١. S → a little child
٢. S → an old women of ٥٠ years
٣. S → a friend's little girl
٤. S → a neighbor's son
٥. S → an old women of ٦٠ years
٦. S → an old man of ٥٧ years
٧. S → his/her daughter's little friend
٨. S → an old women of ٤٥ years

The performance of the learners in the previously mentioned situations is presented in the following table:

**Table (٢) The Performance of the Subject in the Situation ١,٢,٣,٤,٥,٦,٧ and ٨ from the Recognition Level.**

Sit, No.	Performance of females	Performance of males
١	٨٠ %	٩٢ %
٢	٦٠ %	٦٠ %
٣	٨٠ %	٩٢ %
٤	٧٢ %	٩٦ %
٥	٩٤ %	٩٨ %
٦	٦٤ %	٩٦ %
٧	٨٤ %	٨٤ %
٨	٨٤ %	٨٨ %

As it was mentioned before, the performance of the learners in this level is high, as it can be noticed. The situation in which the responses are appropriate and get the highest score, for both males and females, is situation (١) which is a greeting situation, as it was noticed in the production level and this can be a proof of the learner's mastery of greeting formulas in English.

The table reveals that in situation (٥), a congratulating situation, the performance of the testees is relatively low as compared to their performance in other situations. The reason may be that they don't understand the meaning and the function of each formula of congratulating. For example, in situation (٥) they are asked to choose the appropriate congratulating expression for an old woman who is happy to be a grandmother for the first time. Many of the learners choose the expression "well done" which is completely inappropriate in such situation.

Concerning the other situations, the learners performance can be said to be high as they choose the most standard expressions which are appropriate mostly in all situations.

#### ٧. Comparison between the Performance of Males and Females

The following table presents the degree of performance for both males and females at the two levels of the questionnaire.

**Table (٣) The Performance of Males and Females at the Production Level.**

Sit, No.	Performance of Females	Performance of Males
١	٤٢٪	٥٨٪
٢	٤٥٪	٥٥٪
٣	٣٣٪	٦٧٪
٤	٤٢٪	٥٨٪
٥	٤٥٪	٥٥٪
٦	٢٤٪	٧٦٪

**Table (٤) The Performance of Male and Female at the Recognition Level.**

Sit, No.	Performance of Females	Performance of Males
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١	٤٧٪	٥٣٪
٢	٥٠٪	٥٠٪
٣	٤٧٪	٥٣٪
٤	٤٣٪	٥٧٪
٥	٤٨٪	٥٢٪
٦	٤٠٪	٦٠٪
٧	٥٠٪	٥٠٪
٨	٤٩٪	٥١٪

In general, it is obvious from the table that the great majority of the situations of the test are answered more appropriately by males than females.

This may be attributed to the fact that female are more polite than males and they, females, tend to use more polite expressions. Although in many situations formality is needed to make appropriate communication, many other situations need informality and using formal expressions may appear to be odd.

Despite what have mentioned earlier, there are few cases of resemblance in performance of males and females in the situations (٢) and (٧) where both of them have ٥٠٪ in these two situations. This similarity may be a matter of chance sines the majority of males surpassed females in the test.

#### **٨. Discussion of the Results**

The analysis of the data of this research indicates that politeness formulas have low level of performance on the test, which may denote that learners do not master PFs because most of the learners do not study the PFs of English language. Besides, the socio-cultural norms are different in Arabic and English which may make it difficult to be captured by Iraqi students.

It can be said that the performance of males is better than females, and this may be the result of the females being more polite than males and use more formal expressions which is not always appropriate in many situations.

When comparing the performance of the subjects from both genders in the two levels of performance, it is seen that their performance at the recognition level is better than

that at the production level, this can lead us to say that Iraqi EFL learners have a low efficiency in the use of English PFs.

Generally speaking,, it noticed, from the responses of the subjects, that informal forms are used more than the formal ones.

## 9. Conclusions

From the analysis of the data of this study, it has been concluded that:

١. In general, the performance of the learners at the recognition level is better than that at the production level concerning the use of PFs.
٢. As far as gender is concerned, the performance of the males is better than the female's performance.
٣. Iraqi EFL learners face difficulties in using English PF as a result of the cultural differences between the two languages.
٤. It is found out that age does not affect performance, and it can be said that there is no relation between age and performance.
٥. In some cases, the subjects were ignorant of how to use politeness formulas, i.e. they do not know how to make a greeting, leave-taking, congratulation, welcoming or give condolence, and this may result from the textbooks' inadequacy to present the important PFs, or this may be attributed to the low interest of the learners in learning English language adequately.

## ١٠. Appendix - The Test

### A. Production level

Give the appropriate formula for each of the following:

١. You are visiting your co-worker's family who invited you to dinner and when you reaches his/her house, his/her little son (٦ years old) opens the door. How will greet him?
٢. It is the first day of school for your little brother in the first class and he is a little afraid of attending the school. You decide to accompany him to school. After you take him, how will make a leave – taking to him?
٣. Your son and his friends, who are good chess players, participates in an international chess competition and they are the last competitors and your son's friend wins the prize. How will you congratulate him?
٤. Your aunt is living abroad since you were an infant and she finally decides to make a visit and see you; you were very excited to meet her. How will you welcome her?

- . There is a recreational trip for an intermediate school to the museum you are working in. The children arrives at the section in which you are a worker. How will you welcome them?
- ٦. There is a park in your neighborhood which you visit every Friday. Every time you go there, you see two old couples sitting together joyfully. But one Friday, you notice that the old man is sitting alone, so you are curious about him and ask him about the reason. You discover that his wife has passed away three days ago. How will you offer condolences to him?

### **B. Recognition level**

Choose the appropriate formula for each of the following:

- ١. Sitting in the zoo and eating ice-cream, a little child, whome you do not know, runs towards you. The child is ◦ years old. He came to you smiling as if he wants to sit with you and share you your ice-cream. You will greet him saying : (Hi, What's up, How do you do, Hi there)
- ٢. You are in the bus. A stranger is sitting beside you. She is an old women of ◦٠ year old. You both chat together all the way. You reach your point and have to get out of the bus. For leave- taking , you say : (Bye, Good bye, Take care, See you later)
- ٣. You are in one of your friend's home. Your friend has a little sweet girl. You get close to her and spend some good time with her. You want to leave and feel that she is sad for your leaving. In this situation , you say: (Bye-Bye, Good bye, See you soon, Take care)
- ٤. It is the graduation party of your neighbor's son. You are invited. You are close to his father, but you don't know his son well. You congratulate him (The son) saying: (Congrats, Well done, Good for you, I'd like to offer my congratulations)
- . On a bus, you are sitting beside an old woman (٦٠ years old). She looks happy. You smile at her and ask her about the reason. She excitedly says, "My daughter had a son yesterday and I came from another city to see her. I am very happy and excited for finally being a grandmother!" You congratulate her saying : (Congratulations, Well done, I'm very happy for you, Good for you)
- ٦. You have a very big ground at your home. Today, you notice that the grass needs cutting. You call a company to send you a mower. After hours, the mower comes. He is an old man of ◦٧ years old. You welcome him saying : (Welcome, We're looking forward to having you again as our guest, Nice to see you, Pleasure to meet you)
- ٧. You have a little girl. She gets a new friend. Her friend is a ◦ years old girl. She invites her to her home to introduce her to you and to play together. You meet the little friend of

your girl and welcome her saying: (We're looking forward to having you again as our guest, Pleasure to meet you, Welcome, Nice to meet you)

٨. In the zoo, you meet a ٤٠ years old woman while you both are watching your kids enjoying the day. She is there with her two kids. You do not know her and it has been just a coincidence for you both to chat. Suddenly, she receives a call and starts crying. You find that she has just found out that her dad passed away. You offer condolences to her saying : (Our deepest condolences to you, So sorry, Sorry for your loss, My sincere sympathies to you and your family)

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