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JCL

Journal of the College of Languages

Open Free Access, Peer Reviewed Research Journal

<http://jcolang.uobaghdad.edu.iq>

P-ISSN: 2074-9279

E-ISSN: 2520-3517

2020, No.(42)

Pg.1-26

Interlanguage Pragmatics of Non-Institutional Criticism: A Study of Native and Non-Native Speakers of English

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(Received on 19/9/2019 - Accepted on 17/11/2019 – Published on 1/6/2020)

Abstract

Criticism is inherently impolite and a face-threatening act generally leading to conflicts among interlocutors. It is equally challenging for both native and non-native speakers, and needs pre-planning before performing it. The current research examines the production of non-institutional criticism by Iraqi EFL university learners and American native speakers. More specifically, it explores to what extent Iraqi EFL learners and American native speakers vary in (i) performing criticism, (ii) mitigating criticism, and (iii) their pragmatic choices according to the contextual variables of power and distance. To collect data, a discourse-completion task was used to elicit written data from 20 Iraqi EFL learners and 20 American native speakers. Findings revealed that though both groups regularly used all strategy types, Iraqi EFL learners criticized differently from American speakers. When expressing criticism, Iraqi learners tended to be indirect whereas American speakers tended to be direct. In mitigating their criticism, Iraqi learners were significantly different from American speakers in their use of internal and external modifiers. Furthermore, both groups substantially varied their pragmatic choices according to context. The differences in their pragmatic performance could be attributed to a number of interplaying factors such as EFL learners' limited linguistic and pragmatic knowledge, the context of learning and L1 pragmatic transfer. Finally, a number of conclusions and pedagogical implications are presented.

Key words: Criticism, mitigating devices, pragmatic transfer, power, distance.

Introduction

In the last few decades, the field of language teaching has witnessed the emergence of the communicative teaching approach. The communicative approach views that to develop the learners' communicative competence, the context of foreign language teaching and learning is not merely teaching and learning the grammatical structures and formal features of a language, rather it should be about how to use language appropriately in real-life interactional situations. The appropriateness of language use varies from one language to another and from one culture to another. Therefore, communication breakdowns are often liable to occur in cross-cultural interactions when interactants of different linguistic backgrounds are not aware of such variable. Raising learners' awareness of the cultural values and practices of the target language is indeed crucial for efficient communication in the process of foreign and second language teaching and learning. One of the fundamental components of the communicative competence is pragmatic competence (Bachman and Palmer, 2010). Pragmatic competence is defined as "the knowledge of the linguistic resources available in a given language for realizing particular speech acts, knowledge of the sequential aspects of speech acts, and knowledge of the appropriate contextual use of the particular language's linguistic resources" (Barron, 2003, p. 10).

Since the early 1980s, pragmatic competence has been the focus of immense investigation in interlanguage pragmatics (IP) research field. Due to its significance to the context of language teaching and learning, IP research has greatly promoted the investigation of the use and development of various speech acts in the target language by L2 learners (Kasper and Rose, 2002). Earlier studies in interlanguage pragmatics have focused on the investigation of a small set of well-defined speech acts like complimenting, apologizing, requesting, thanking, and advising (Ellis, 2008). Though current interlanguage pragmatics research has paid greater attention to more complex speech acts such as reprimanding, chastising and criticizing, still these speech acts are relatively under-researched. Such speech acts are more face-threatening and might cause serious breach in cross-cultural communication, and as such they are worth investigating.

Up to date, the speech act of criticism has been investigated in a few foreign and second language contexts. The available studies are confined to a

special type of institutional criticism dealing mainly with giving critical feedbacks on peers' written works in institutional settings. Institutional criticism is expected to be relatively constructive and supportive in nature, and might involve a lower level of infringement than the more 'biting' type of criticism such as criticizing one's appearance or behavior. Criticism in various social contexts other than institutional ones may vary in role relationships (Nguyen, 2013, p. 104). Hence, the present study attempts to examine a different type of criticism, one which is performed in everyday social contexts and under-researched, by Iraqi non-native speakers of English and American native speakers. Specifically, it explores how Iraqi EFL university learners and American native speakers perform the speech act of criticizing in everyday situations. The study findings can add to the body of interlanguage pragmatics research via examining how the two groups of language speakers under investigation perform the speech act of criticizing in English.

2. Criticism and L2 Research

For many L2 learners, the development of pragmatic knowledge generally lags behind their grammatical development (Ellis, 2008). Research evidence reveals that low proficiency L2 learners use a narrow range of pragmalinguistic strategies and mitigating devices, and displays difficulty in using appropriate pragmatic strategies in accordance to the contextual constraints. Even advanced L2 learners do not acquire complete pragmatic knowledge like native speakers do. Lack of the L2 socio-pragmatic knowledge makes their pragmatic performance shows over-sensitivity to the politeness variable as their main concern is to be polite as much as possible in the target language (Edmonson & House, 1991). There are a number of intervening factors that can affect their pragmatic development. They include, for example, learners' lack of fluency in L2, incomplete L2 pragmatic knowledge, and reliance on a synergism of both L1 and L2 pragmatic competence in performing speech acts (Nguyen, 2008).

The speech act of criticizing is inherently impolite and face-threatening. It is a speech behavior commonly leading to communication conflicts among interactants. It is equally challenging for both native and non-native speakers, and such an act needs pre-planning before performing it. L2 learners are assumed to experience considerable difficulty when performing the speech

act of criticizing in the target language (Murphy & Neu, 1996). Criticism is “an illocutionary act whose illocutionary point is to give negative evaluation of the hearer’s actions, choices and products for which s/he may be held responsible. It is performed to influence the hearer’s future actions for his/her betterment as viewed by the speaker or to communicate speaker’s dissatisfaction with or dislike regarding what hearer has done but without the implicature that what the hearer has done brings undesirable consequences to the speaker” (Wierzbicka, 1987, p. 7). Similarly, Hyland (2000) defines criticism as “an expression of dissatisfaction or negative comment” (p. 44). Tracy, Dusen, and Robinson (1987) maintain that criticism is an act of “finding fault” which involves giving “a negative evaluation of a person or an act for which s/he is deemed responsible”. In the present study, criticism is defined as expressions delivered to give negative evaluations or feedback towards bad behaviors and conduct of the addressee. It is performed by the speaker as a reaction of the addressee’s bad behavior, appearance, words, choices, etc.

There is a paucity of research on the use of the face-threatening act of criticism by L2 learners. One of the earliest studies is Nguyen (2005) who found that when commenting on their peers’ written works, Vietnamese EFL learners of different proficiency levels tend to resist their peers’ criticism more often than Australian English native speakers, who are more likely to accept constructive criticism from peers. Also, learners seem to rarely hedge their criticisms. This behavior might cause learners to be perceived as assertive interlocutors, and might adversely affect their communication with the native speakers. There is little evidence of any proficiency effect on the learners’ use of criticism. This is likely because pragmatic development is limited by the EFL context, as the learners have insufficient exposure to the pragmatic norms of the target language. Moreover, there is some evidence of pragmatic transfer in the learners’ performance.

In a follow up study, Nguyen (2013) explored how L2 Asian learners of English and native speakers of New Zealand English criticize in everyday situations. Findings reveal that the L2 learners, who belong to different levels of English proficiency, criticize in significantly different ways from the native speakers. Unlike the native speakers, who make regular use of all strategies, the learners rely predominantly on direct criticism. The learners also opt out

for different reasons than the native speakers in those situations where both groups find criticizing inappropriate, and vary their pragmatic choices less considerably according to context. Furthermore, where learners use the same strategy as the native speakers, they differ greatly in their choice of mitigating devices.

In his study of institutional criticism by 40 Indonesian EFL learners, Suharno (2015) found that Indonesian university learners of English tend to employ more indirect criticism than direct one. Within indirect criticism, the strategies of negative evaluation, request for change, advice about change, and demand for change are more frequently employed over others in almost status levels. This might indicate that learners' pragmatic competence of the target language is below the developmental level expected, and this, in turn, can be attributed to the lack of access to the target language.

Handayani (2017), on the other hand, explored the criticism strategies employed by Indonesian university learners of English. He reported that there are eleven criticism strategies used by Indonesian EFL learners, namely; request of change, negative evaluation, identification of problem, advice of change, asking, demand of change, suggestion of change, consequences, disapproval, hints, and statement of difficulties. Two thirds of students use criticism inappropriately because they fail to assess appropriately the contextual variables of power, distance and the seriousness of the situation. Due to their pragmatic incompetence, they tend to be over polite, and produce inappropriate criticism.

Though the studies reviewed above provide valuable insights into the interlanguage pragmatics research of criticism, none of them have examined the two groups of language speakers under investigation, i.e., Iraqi EFL learners and native speakers of American English. Moreover, all of these studies, with the exception of Nguyen's (2013) study, have examined institutional criticism in an academic environment. It is therefore necessary to conduct more research on the pragmatic use of criticism in a non-institutional context to supplement the existing body of interlanguage pragmatic research. Accordingly, the present study attempts to fill the gap by exploring the pragmatic realization strategies of criticizing as it is used by Iraqi EFL university learners and native speakers of American English beyond institutional settings.

3. Research Questions

The present study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. In what ways do Iraqi EFL learners differ from American native speakers in performing the speech act of criticizing?
2. In what ways do Iraqi EFL learners differ from American native speakers in mitigating the speech act of criticizing?
3. To what extent do their pragmatic choices vary according to the contextual variables of power and distance?

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Participants

Twenty Iraqi EFL learners of English and twenty native speakers of American English are randomly selected to participate voluntarily in the present study. Both groups of language speakers are university undergraduate students who are studying in Baghdad University and Valparaiso University respectively. Iraqi EFL learners are English major students at the Department of English in Baghdad University, Baghdad, Iraq. On the other hand, the American university students are of different majors in Valparaiso University, Indiana, USA. Among Iraqi EFL learners, 13 are females and 7 are males. American native speakers, on the other hand, include 11 females and 9 males. None of Iraqi EFL learners have ever stayed or studied in an English-speaking country. The mean age of Iraqi EFL learners is 23.3, while the mean age of the native speakers is 22.5. Although no standardized tests are conducted to establish Iraqi EFL learners' level of English proficiency, third and fourth year English major students are generally assumed to have good mastery of English language skills. Based on an informal discussion with them, the researcher found that the level of proficiency of Iraqi EFL learners ranges between intermediate and post-intermediate. They report that they have been learning English for about 12 years in an instructional context. The American group, on the other hand, is freshmen and sophomores of different majors within humanities and social sciences. The two groups of participants are requested to complete a written discourse completion task consisting of eight situations.

4.2 Instrument

The study data are collected via written discourse completion task (DCT). Despite its drawbacks, the DCT creates model responses which are likely to occur in spontaneous speech. It also provides a large amount of stereotypical responses for a socially appropriate response within a relatively short time (Kasper & Dahl, 1991). To elicit criticism from the study participants, the DCT includes 8 situations; some of which are invented by the researcher whereas some are taken from previous research with some modification and adjustment to suit the two groups of participants. The justification for the inclusion of some situations from previous research is that these situations have been already piloted on learners from different linguistic backgrounds. Following Tracy, van Dusen & Robinson (1987), the situations are constructed on four main themes or topics of criticism, namely; appearance, skill performance, decision-making, and behavior. Those themes are the most common ones among acquaintances, friends, colleagues, and relatives. There are two situations for each topic of criticism. The situations also show different contextual variables in terms of social status/power (P) and social distance/familiarity (D). The contextual variables of power and distance are distributed evenly over the 8 situations. The description of situations is briefly illustrated in Table 1 below (See Appendix I for the situations used in the DCT).

Table 1: The description of criticism situations of the DCT.

| No. of Situation | Topic of Situation | Contextual Variables Included |
|------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------|
| Situation 1 | appearance | -P/-D |
| Situation 2 | appearance | -P/-D |
| Situation 3 | skill performance | -P/+D |
| Situation 4 | skill performance | -P/+D |
| Situation 5 | decision-making | +P/-D |
| Situation 6 | decision-making | +P/-D |
| Situation 7 | behavior | +P/+D |
| Situation 8 | behavior | +P/+D |

The situations and instructions of the DCT are written in simple English wording to ensure full understanding of the task requirements on the part of participants. Participants are also encouraged to ask any question that they might not understand before starting their answer. The written data from the Iraqi EFL learners are collected by the researcher himself while the data of American native speakers are collected by a research assistant. No time limit is imposed on the two groups of participants to answer the situations of the DCT. They are given open time to avoid any psychological pressure of time constraint on their performance.

4.3 Data Coding

The data collected are categorized according to a coding scheme of criticism realization strategies and mitigating devices originally proposed by Nguyen (2005, 2008, 2013). The adopted scheme has been relatively adjusted by the researcher to appropriately codify the criticism data of the present study. The speech act of criticism can be pragmatically realized by two broad categories, mainly, direct and indirect strategies, and each broad category of criticism is, in turn, divided into sub-strategies. Direct criticism is realized explicitly and directly pointing out to the problems being criticized whereas indirect criticism implies the reverse. The directness level of a criticism is determined by the degree of illocutionary transparency, and thus the amount of effort needed to interpret the illocutionary point of criticism (Nguyen, 2008, p.46). The examples provided are extracted from the study data. The coding scheme of present study is presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: The coding scheme of criticism strategies identified in the study data.

| Main Categories of Criticism | Sub-Categories of Criticism | Examples |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Direct Criticism | a. Stating the problem or difficulty | <i>The presentation slides are very bad organized. They need some amendments.</i> |
| | b. Disapproval | <i>I don't like what you wear. They are untidy.</i> |
| | c. Disagreement | <i>I don't agree with you on decreasing most of our hardworking employees. We need to think of other alternatives.</i> |

| | | |
|-----------------------|--|---|
| | d. Negative evaluation | <i>It is not really good at all to behave like this with your office colleagues</i> |
| | e. Warning | <i>This is the last time for you to come late. Don't do it again otherwise my procedures will be different.</i> |
| 2. Indirect Criticism | a. Giving advice | <i>I think you need to reconsider your suggestion</i> |
| | b. Suggesting changes and improvements | <i>You know if you add more milk to your cupcakes,</i> |
| | c. Correction | <i>I believe that you need to correct the wording of your PP presentation slides,</i> |
| | d. Demand for change | <i>Allison, you have to behave well with your colleagues,</i> |
| | e. Request for change | <i>I want you to consider the construction of this plant because I guess it won't be a good market.</i> |
| | f. Sarcasm | <i>Yeah, it seems a very good excuse over the last three ones,</i> |

As to the mitigating devices used to modify the head acts of criticism, there are two main categories, namely, external and internal modifiers. These mitigating devices are used to soften criticism. More specifically, the external mitigating devices are supportive moves which occur before or after the head act, while the internal mitigating devices are internal modifiers which occur as an integral part of the head act. Table 3 details the coding scheme of mitigating devices used in the present study along with their sub-categories.

Table 3: The coding scheme of mitigating devices identified in the study data.

| Main Categories of Mitigating Devices | Sub-Categories of Mitigating Devices | Examples |
|---|--------------------------------------|--|
| External Mitigating Device (Supportive Moves) | a. Sweeteners | <i>Your shirt looks cool but I think it doesn't go with your trousers.</i> |
| | b. Grounders | <i>You know the company needs more money and investment.....</i> |
| | c. Steers | <i>I think we need to talk about</i> |

| | | |
|--|-------------------|--|
| | | <i>what happened with your colleague,</i> |
| | d. Disarmers | <i>Do you know the cupcakes are a little bit dry but anyway I like them.....</i> |
| 2. Internal Mitigating Devices (Internal Modifiers) | a. Hedges | <i>Kind of, a sort of ...</i> |
| | b. Downtoners | <i>possible, probably, maybe, etc.</i> |
| | c. Understaters | <i>Quite, rather, a little bit, a bit, etc.</i> |
| | d. Cajolers | <i>You know, you see, I mean, etc.</i> |
| | e. Appealers | <i>Yes, OK, fine, right, etc.</i> |
| | d. Subjectivizers | <i>I guess, I suppose, I think, I feel, etc.</i> |

Besides the researcher's coding, two independent coders, who are experts in interlanguage pragmatics research, are consulted to set up the inter-reliability of data coding. The inter-reliability of both coding processes is amounted to be 92% agreement.

5. Results and Discussion

As presented in Table 4 below, it is evident that the two groups employ all the types of criticizing strategies, but they show different patterns of strategy preferences. The overall distribution of the two main categories of criticism reveals that Iraqi EFL learners and American native speakers employ different preferences for strategy types. The total frequency of criticism strategies is significantly different for the two groups. Generally, native American speakers exceedingly employ more criticisms than Iraqi EFL learners do. Precisely speaking, the American speakers employ 450 criticism strategies in the eight situations, while the Iraqi EFL learners employ 314 criticism strategies.

To examine the significance of statistical differences between the two groups in their use of direct and indirect criticism, a two-tailed *t*-test is run. The *t*-test results confirm significant differences in the use of direct and indirect criticism strategies. More specifically, American speakers tend to be direct in their criticisms whereas Iraqi EFL learners tend to be indirect in their

criticisms. Statistically, the American group uses predominately more strategies of direct criticism (290/64.44%) than indirect strategies (160/35.56%). The Iraqi EFL group, on the other hand, uses significantly more indirect strategies of criticism (203/64.65%) than direct ones (111/35.65%). A closer look at the statistical distribution of both groups shows that Iraqi EFL learners employ fewer direct strategies of criticism but more indirect ones than the American group, whereas the American native speakers employ fewer indirect strategies but more direct ones than Iraqi EFL learners. The same finding has been reported by Nguyen (2008) who found that Vietnamese EFL learners produce fewer direct criticisms but more indirect criticisms than the Australian speakers. The different preferences for the use of criticism strategies can indicate that Iraqi EFL learners cannot approximate the pragmatic norms of the target language when compared to the American native group.

Table 4: The statistical distribution of criticism strategies as used by the two groups.

| Categories of Criticism | American Group (AMG) | | Iraqi EFL Group (IEFLG) | | <i>t-Test Results</i> | |
|-------------------------|----------------------|-------|-------------------------|-------|-----------------------|-----------|
| | No. | | No. | % | <i>t.</i> | <i>p.</i> |
| 1.Direct Criticism | 290 | 44 | 111 | 35.35 | 5.237 | .005 |
| 2.Indirect Criticism | 160 | 35.56 | 203 | 64.65 | 4.001 | .005 |
| Total | 450 | | 314 | 100 | | |

The choice of a strategy type and the directness level are closely related to the notion of politeness. In that sense, Brown and Levinson (1987) maintain that there is a strong link between politeness and directness level where the more indirect an illocution is, the more diminished and tentative its force tends to be, and vice versa. That is, a direct criticism tends to be probably unwelcomed since it would be perceived as impolite as it threatens the interlocutor's face. Face wants need to be continually attended to in the process of communication; therefore, criticism is needed to be softened in order to achieve politeness. In their attempt to be polite with their

interlocutors, Iraqi EFL learners prefer using indirect criticism unlike American speakers who prefer using direct criticism in the same situations. Iraqi learners of English appear to exhibit different pragmalinguistic choices or preferences from the American speakers in realizing criticisms, and this can be due to learners' lack of L2 pragmatic knowledge.

A qualitative analysis of Iraqi EFL learners' responses shows the frequent use of the structures like "you should", "you have to" and "you must" in their criticisms. Such a tendency of use can be attributed to the context of learning where such structures are continually introduced at their learning stages, so they become well-automatized in the learners' interlanguage system. The same finding is reported in Kasper (1982) and Nguyen (2013). The American speakers, on the other hand, make frequent use of the structures "you need", "the imperative structure" and "you should" in their criticisms. The following are some illustrative examples;

1. You should organize the PP presentation more clearly than that! You should make it well-organized. (IEFLG)
2. Do you know your cupcakes not baked well, you need to add more sugar and milk to them! (AMG)

Table 5 demonstrates thoroughly the distributions of the five strategies of direct criticism. It can be noted that the two groups use the same strategies but show different patterns of strategy preferences. The Mann Whitney test is run to examine the statistical differences between American and Iraqi EFL groups in their means of the five categories of direct criticisms. Overall, the use of the five strategies of direct criticism by the American group significantly exceeds those used by the Iraqi EFL group (290-AMG, 111- IEFLG). The distributions of the five categories of direct criticism for the two groups can be displayed as follows; *stating the problem or difficulty* (84-AMG, 22-IEFLG); *disapproval* (65-AMG, 16-IEFLG); *disagreement* (48-AMG, 28-IEFLG); *negative evaluation* (55-AMG, 18-IEFLG); and *warning* (38-AMG, 27-IEFLG). It can be said that the statistical results are positively in favor of the American speakers who produce considerably more strategies of direct criticism in comparison to Iraqi EFL learners. When compared within the two groups, *the strategy of stating the problem or difficulty* (84/28.96%) ranks first whereas *the strategy of warning* comes last (38/13.12%) for the American group. The other strategy types are distributed sporadically

between these two strategy types. For the Iraqi EFL group, there are relative statistical differences wherein learners seem to vary slightly among themselves. That is, *the strategy of disagreement* (28/25.22%) comes first while *the strategy of disapproval* (16/14.41%) occupies the last position. The distributions of the remaining three strategies come between these two strategies. The following are some illustrative examples from the study data;

3. There is something wrong with your project unnoticed. (*Stating the problem-IEFLG*)
4. I think it's not a good way to wear this shirt! (*Negative evaluation-IEFLG*)
5. I don't like the way your clothes look like! (*Disapproval- AMG*)
6. I don't quite agree with some points you raised about the construction of the new plant. (*Disagreement- AMG*)

Table 5: The statistical distribution of the sub-categories of direct criticism.

| Sub-Categories of Direct Criticism | American Group (AMG) | | Iraqi EFL Group (IEFLG) | | Mann Whitney Test Results | |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------|------|-------------------------|-------|---------------------------|------|
| | No. | % | No. | % | z. | p. |
| 1. Stating the problem or difficulty | 84 | 36 | 22 | 19.81 | 06 | .004 |
| 2. Disapproval | 65 | 41 | 16 | 14.41 | 33 | .003 |
| 3. Disagreement | 48 | 55 | 28 | 25.22 | 01 | .024 |
| 4. Negative evaluation | 55 | 36 | 18 | 16.21 | 08 | .033 |
| 5. Warning | 38 | 12 | 27 | 24.35 | 01 | .013 |
| Total | 290 | 100% | 111 | 100% | | |

Looking closely at Table 6 below, the frequencies of the six strategies of indirect criticism are distributed sporadically between the two groups. Though Iraqi EFL learners produce more strategies of indirect criticism than American speakers do, it does not reflect their mastery of the pragmatic knowledge of the target language. Rather, Iraqi learners cannot approximate

the L2 pragmatic knowledge producing substantial verbosity of strategies than required compared to the baseline data of American speakers. The distributions of the different strategies of indirect criticism for the two groups can be presented respectively as follows; *giving advice* (30-AMG, 41-IEFLG); *suggesting for changes and improvements* (27-AMG, 47-IEFLG); *correction* (17-AMG, 34-IEFLG); *demand for change* (43-AMG, 21-IEFLG); *request for change* (21-AMG, 40-IEFLG); and *sarcasm* (22-AMG, 20-IEFLG). Specifically, *the strategy of demand for change* (43/26.87%) comes relatively first whereas *the strategy of correction* (17/10.62%) occupies the last position for American speakers. As for Iraqi learners of English, *the strategy of suggesting for changes and improvements* (47/23.15%) ranks first while *the strategy of sarcasm* (20/ 9.88%) comes last. The different preference for criticism strategies among the two groups is supported by findings of previous research on learners from different linguistic backgrounds (Hoa, 2007, Nguyen, 2008, 2013). It cannot be said that the difference in Iraqi EFL learners' preference of criticism strategies is attributed to L1 influence since the present study lacks a baseline Iraqi Arabic data. Rather, Iraqi learners still lack the access to the L2 pragmalinguistic knowledge when criticizing, and that their L2 pragmatic competence is relatively far from being complete. Consider the following examples;

7. I would advise that you put more milk and butter to your dough. (*Giving advice- IEFLG*)
8. You come early as usual! Why you bother yourself? (*Sarcasm-AMG*)
9. Replace this slide by another one! Much better I guess. (*Correction-IEFLG*)
10. I still want you to reconsider your behavior with your colleagues. (*Request for change-AMG*)

Table 6: The statistical distribution of the sub-categories of indirect criticism

| Sub-Categories of Indirect Criticism | American Group (AMG) | | Iraqi EFL Group (IEFLG) | | Mann Whitney Test Results | |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------|----|-------------------------|-------|---------------------------|-----------|
| | No. | % | No. | % | | <i>p.</i> |
| a. Giving advice | 30 | 75 | 41 | 20.19 | 1.2 | .028 |
| b. Suggesting for | 27 | 37 | 47 | 23.15 | 2.0 | .011 |

| | | | | | | |
|--------------------------|-----|-------|-----|-------|-----|------|
| changes and improvements | | | | | | |
| c. Correction | 17 | 52 | 34 | 16.74 | 1.0 | .001 |
| d. Demand for change | 43 | 37 | 21 | 10.34 | 2.1 | .021 |
| e. Request for change | 21 | 12 | 40 | 19.70 | 2.0 | .113 |
| f. Sarcasm | 22 | 13.77 | 20 | 9.88 | 0.0 | .125 |
| Total | 160 | 100 | 203 | 100 | | |

Apparently, the speech act of criticizing is a complex act in nature and cannot be described in terms of a single head act. It consists of multiple heads, none of which seems to play the role of a head act. This holds true for the speech act of apologizing (Olshtain & Cohen, 1983) and complaining (Hartley, 1996) as well. It is best described as a set of head acts (i.e., a set of pragmatic strategies) employed to realize the speech act successfully.

Table 7 demonstrates how the two groups of Iraqi EFL learners and American speakers employ the two categories of mitigating modifiers. A *t*-test is run to find out the statistical differences between the two groups of participants with reference to their use of internal and external modifiers. It is observed that Iraqi EFL learners tend to use significantly more internal and external mitigators (350 & 406 respectively) in comparison to American speakers (245 & 220 respectively). When Iraqi learners and American speakers are compared, it seems that the propositional content of criticism is different in terms of length and complexity. Qualitatively, it is found that criticism modification produced by Iraqi learners of English is less detailed, shorter and less elaborate compared to that produced by American speakers. This can be attributed, according to Takahashi & Beebe (1993), to that L2 learners are lacking fluency and proficiency in the target language. This finding echoes the findings of Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz's (1990) study that American speakers' explanations are more informative whereas Japanese ESL learners' explanations are vague and less specific.

Table 7: The statistical distribution of mitigating devices as used by the two groups.

| Categories of Mitigating Devices | American Group (AMG) | | Iraqi EFL Group (IEFLG) | | t-Test Results | |
|---|----------------------|-------|-------------------------|-------|----------------|------|
| | No. | % | No. | % | t. | p. |
| 1. External Mitigators (Supportive Moves) | 220 | 47.31 | 406 | 53.70 | 3.006 | .005 |
| 2. Internal Mitigators (Internal Modifiers) | 245 | 52.69 | 350 | 46.30 | 2.704 | .005 |
| Total | 465 | 100 | 756 | 100 | | |

Comparing within each group, it can be noted that Iraqi learners use more external modifiers (406/53.70%) than internal modifiers (350/46.30%) in their criticisms. The American speakers, on the other hand, show the reverse preference where internal modifiers (245/52.69%) are used more considerably than external modifiers (220/47.31%). The difference in modification preference is found to be statistically significant by means of using the *t*-test results. This finding supports earlier research findings that learners tend to produce verbose speech acts as they overuse supportive moves when compared to native speakers (Blum-Kulka, 1991; Edmonson & House, 1991; Hassall, 2001; Nguyen, 2008). In this regard, Edmondson & House (1991) argue that in the absence of socio-pragmatic knowledge of the target language, language learners may resort to the ‘play it safe’ strategy by making the propositional and pragmatic meanings as transparent and clear as possible. Compared to internal modifiers, supportive moves carry more explicit propositional meaning. They also do not form an integral part of the speech act but are planned in separate constituents to the speech act, thus causing less processing difficulty to language learners and being more available for use (Hassall, 2001).

Table 8 displays that both groups show relatively the same preferences for particular types of external modifiers. That is, Iraqi learners and American speakers tend to use more *sweeteners* (105-AMG, 280-IEFLG) and *disarmers*

(55-AMG, 85-IEFLG) compared to *grounders* (33-AMG, 21-IEFLG) and *steers* (27-AMG, 20-IEFLG). This can be interpreted as the two groups use frequently more *sweeteners* and *disarmers* but less frequently *steers* and *disarmers*. It is apparent that Iraqi EFL learners use more external modifiers than American speakers. In this regard, Nguyen (2008) justifies such tendency by arguing that L2 learners, who have achieved sufficient linguistic resources to express their sensitivity to politeness, have not yet developed a good control over more complex structures such as certain types of internal modifiers. Therefore, they tend to compensate for this by drawing more heavily on external modifiers, the addition of which usually does not increase the structural complexity of the utterances and thus requires only minimal processing attention. The following are sample examples;

11. Some ideas you presented are quite good (*Sweeteners- AMG*)
12. I think you have some personal commitments obliged you to come late. (*Grounders- IEFLG*)
13. Your pancakes need some additions that's because you're baking too quickly, nothing serious. (*Disarmers-AMG*)
14. Ah, I have some comments about your shirt. (*Steers-IEFLG*)

Table 8: The statistical distribution of the sub-categories of external mitigating devices.

| External Mitigating Devices | American Group (AMG) | | Iraqi EFL Group (IEFLG) | | Mann Whitney Test Results | |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|-------|-------------------------|-------|---------------------------|------|
| | No. | % | No. | % | z. | p. |
| a. Sweeteners | 105 | 47.73 | 280 | 68.96 | 2.006 | .009 |
| b. Grounders | 33 | 15 | 21 | 5.17 | 0.031 | .001 |
| c. Steers | 27 | 12.27 | 20 | 4.92 | 0.021 | .002 |
| d. Disarmers | 55 | 25 | 85 | 20.95 | 1.008 | .007 |
| Total | 220 | 100% | 406 | 100% | | |

Table 9 below demonstrates the distributions of internal modifiers by the two groups of Iraqi learners and American speakers. By and large, Iraqi

learners of English do not differ much from the American speakers in their preference for a particular type of internal modifiers. More precisely, Iraqi learners and American speakers seem to use frequently more *hedges* (120-AMG, 205-IEFLG) compared to sporadic distributions of the various types of internal modifiers. Though no significant differences between the two groups, the distributions of different types of internal modifiers are as follows; *downtoners* (25-AMG, 31-IEFLG), *understaters* (30-AMG, 37-IEFLG), *cajolers* (20-AMG, 29-IEFLG), *appealers* (17-AMG, 23-IEFLG), and *subjectivizers* (33-AMG, 25-IEFLG). The same preference of the different types of internal and external modifiers is reported in Nguyen's (2008) study where she found that Australian speakers and Vietnamese EFL learners follow the same preferences in mitigating their criticisms. Here are some illustrative examples;

15. In my opinion, (*Downtoners- AMG*)
16. Sort of..... (*Hedges-IEFLG*)
17. A little bit (*Understaters-AMG*)
18. You know..... (*Cajolers-IEFLG*)
19. Yeah!..... (*Appealers-AMG*)
20. Do you think..... (*Subjectivizers-IEFLG*)

Table 9: The statistical distribution of the sub-categories of internal mitigating devices.

| Internal Mitigating Devices | American Group (AMG) | | Iraqi EFL Group (IEFLG) | | Mann Whitney Test Results | |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|-------|-------------------------|-------|---------------------------|------|
| | No. | % | No. | % | z. | p. |
| a. Hedges | 120 | 48.97 | 205 | 58.57 | 6.308 | .828 |
| b. Downtoners | 25 | 10.21 | 31 | 8.85 | 0.085 | .001 |
| c. Understaters | 30 | 12.25 | 37 | 10.57 | 0.077 | .009 |
| d. Cajolers | 20 | 8.16 | 29 | 8.28 | 0.107 | .027 |
| e. Appealers | 17 | 6.94 | 23 | 6.58 | 0.006 | .211 |
| d. Subjectivizers | 33 | 13.47 | 25 | 7.15 | 0.065 | .110 |
| Total | 245 | 100% | 350 | 100% | | |

It is found that the structures of internal modifiers used by Iraqi EFL learners tend to be very restricted and less diversified. That is, Iraqi learners use only a few structures within each type of internal modifiers such as *hedges* (a sort of), *modals* (can, will), *understaters* (some, a little bit), or *downtoners* (might be), while the American native speakers show a diversity of internal modification structures. This could be attributed to the learners' limited L2 linguistic resources and lack of fluency.

Table 10 below shows the raw frequencies and percentages of strategy type of criticism according to situations. To find out if there is a statistical difference, the Mann Whitney test for relatedness is run for each group separately. Results reveal that the two groups' pragmatic choices vary considerably according to contextual variables of power and distance. Apparently, it is found that American native speakers show substantial variation in their strategy choices according to the contextual variable of distance (i.e., familiarity), while Iraqi EFL learners vary their strategy choices according to the contextual variable of power (i.e., status).

American speakers tend to use fewer direct strategies of criticism in situations 1, 2, 5 and 6, and more direct strategies in situations 3, 4, 7 and 8. The reverse tendency is found in the use of indirect strategies of criticism where they use more indirect strategies in situations 1, 2, 5 and 6, and fewer strategies in situations 3, 4, 7 and 8. This means that American speakers do not want to hurt close or familiar people's feelings and destroy their relationship with them unlike people who are not close to them. Moreover, they try to use more indirect strategies in criticizing them but more direct strategies when criticizing non-close people. Their preference of criticizing strategies in the eight situations proves that they are sensitive to the distance variable.

Iraqi EFL learners, on the other hand, appear to be relatively sensitive to the contextual variable of power. More specifically, Iraqi learners of English use fewer direct strategies of criticism in situations 1, 2, 3 and 4 where there is less power between the interactants, and more strategies in situations 5, 6, 7 and 8 where there is more power between them. The same preference is followed with indirect strategies of criticism. One possible interpretation is that though Iraqi learners of English are keen on having good relationships with their close and non-close people to a certain extent, the contextual

variable of power tends to significantly affect their pragmatic performance or choices. Similarly, Handayani (2017) found that Indonesian university learners of English are more sensitive to power than to distance when expressing criticism.

The disparity between the two groups in their preferences of criticizing strategies according to the contextual variables in question might be attributed to the socio-cultural norms of the two languages. It is maintained that the American culture or society is horizontally organized, defined as affected more greatly by social distance (i.e., familiarity) and less by social status (i.e., power), whereas Arabic culture or society is vertically organized, defined as influenced more greatly by social power and less by familiarity (cf. Al-Zubaidi, 2012; Al-Momani, 2009 among many). Iraqi EFL learners' pragmatic performance can be interpreted as an instance of L1 sociopragmatic transfer.

Table 10: The statistical distribution of strategy type according to situations.

| No. of Situation | American Group (AMG) | | Iraqi EFL Group (IEFLG) | | Mann Whitney Test Results | |
|---------------------|----------------------|--------------|-------------------------|--------------|---------------------------|------|
| | DC | IDC | DC | IDC | z. | p. |
| | No. % | No | No. % | No. % | | |
| Situation 1 (-P/-D) | 22 7.58 | 30 18.76 | 9 8.15 | 11 5.43 | 0.008 | .600 |
| Situation 2 (-P/-D) | 14 4.84 | 24 15 | 11 9.90 | 9 4.43 | 0.005 | .011 |
| Situation 3 (-P/+D) | 50 17.25 | 15 9.37 | 8 7.20 | 7 3.44 | 0.470 | .065 |
| Situation 4 (-P/+D) | 56 19.31 | 12 7.5 | 7 6.30 | 8 3.94 | 0.509 | .025 |
| Situation 5 (+P/-D) | 20 6.89 | 23 14.37 | 20 18.01 | 23 11.33 | 0.105 | .410 |
| Situation 6 (+P/-D) | 18 6.20 | 31 19.37 | 15 13.51 | 30 14.77 | 0.940 | .810 |
| Situation 7 (+P/+D) | 49 16.89 | 14 8.75 | 22 19.81 | 66 32.51 | 1.888 | .409 |
| Situation 8 (+P/+D) | 61 21.03 | 11 6.87 | 19 17.11 | 49 24.13 | 2.501 | .033 |
| Total | 290 64.44 | 160 35.56 | 111 35.35 | 203 64.65 | | |

So far, the findings confirm that the choice of a criticism strategy and the directness level are highly constrained by the relative power of the speaker and the social distance between interlocutors. Both groups are bounded by their socio-cultural background and try to save their interlocutors' face via increasing the degree of politeness through the use of mitigation devices. Neither group tends to opt out in the eight situations; therefore participants' opinions and criticisms are verbally prompted and requested for their belief that it is an inappropriate behavior to opt out or keep silent in these situations. Moreover, it sounds that American speakers tend to place a greater emphasis on non-interference and autonomy via being direct in criticisms, while Iraqi EFL learners tend to assign more importance to solidarity and harmony via being indirect.

6. Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications

The present research examines how Iraqi EFL learners and American native speakers perform the speech act of criticizing in everyday situations. The data analysis reveals that despite learners' potential to have access to the same range of criticism strategies and mitigating devices as do the American speakers, the two groups of participants show notable differences with regard to their preferences for criticism strategies and mitigating modifiers. Specifically, the American group tends to be direct in their criticisms while the Iraqi EFL group tends to be indirect. As for supportive moves, the Iraqi EFL group employs significantly more internal and external modifiers than the American group. Furthermore, the two groups are significantly different in terms of their sensitivity to the contextual variables of power and distance. The American speakers are more sensitive to distance than to power while Iraqi EFL learners show the reverse preference.

Similar to previous research findings, the present research shows substantial differences between Iraqi EFL learners and the American native speakers in their pragmatic strategies. Such pragmatic differences between the two groups can be attributed to a number of intertwining factors like EFL learners' limited linguistic and pragmatic knowledge of the target language, the context of learning, and L1 pragmatic transfer. The study findings lend support to the claim that L2 pragmatic knowledge is incomplete for many learners. Actually, Iraqi learners of English exhibit different sociopragmatic

and pragmalinguistic choices from the American speakers in realizing criticisms though they are assumed to be having good mastery of the target language skills and knowledge after more than one decade of formal instruction in English.

The findings of this research suggest some pedagogical implications. First, there is a need for instructional intervention. It calls for an enhancement of the learners' awareness with regard to the pragmalinguistic realization of speech act of criticizing in English. This can be done through using explicit instructions where a form-function mapping is required for learners to successfully realize the speech act in question. Second, there is a need for the presentation of criticisms in the L2 teaching materials and textbooks. Teaching curricula and textbooks constitute a crucial source of linguistic input, especially in the EFL context, where there is a need for research-based rather than native speaker intuition-based descriptions of the speech acts if textbooks are to offer realistic input to learners. This is because native speakers intuition-based descriptions do not always accurately represent the native speaker language in use, and thus can provide learners with misleading information (Nguyen, 2005, p. 295).

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Appendix I: The Discourse Completion Task

Situation 1: Jack is your close friend. One day you were going to an appointment together. When you came to pick him up, you saw him wearing a new shirt. You thought his shirt did not match his trousers. What would you say to Jack?

Situation 2: John is your close friend. Both of you were going to a birthday party of your school friend. When you met him, you found his clothes were not clean and untidy. What would you say to John?

Situation 3: You are a new university student. Last week your class organized a camping picnic for you to mix and to get to know each other better. Susan is your new classmate and the same age as you. When you and she were preparing cupcakes for the class, you tasted the cupcakes that she baked and you thought it was a bit dry. What would you say to Susan?

Situation 4: You are a new university student. You were asked by your professor to prepare a PowerPoint presentation in collaboration with your new classmate, Fred. Fred was responsible for organizing the PowerPoint slides. When you came to see the slides, you found that Fred did not organize the slides well. What would you say to Fred?

Situation 5: You work in a company. Jenifer is your boss and is 10 years older than you. When there was a staff meeting one day, she said she was thinking about constructing a new plant in province X. You did not think it was a good idea because province X did not seem a big market for the company's products. You had been working as her assistant for a long time. What would you say to Jenifer?

Situation 6: You work in a company. Jack is your boss. One day you had a meeting today with him. In the meeting, he suggested that the company should decrease the number of its employees to make more profits. You did not think it was a good idea because the employees are hardworking and dedicated. What would you say to Jack?

Situation 7: You work in an office as a mid-rank executive. Alison is your new subordinate. She started working here a month ago and is 10 years younger than you. She is hard working and efficient but she is usually very late for work. Every time she has an excuse for this. You feel really annoyed about this. What would you say to Alison?

Situation 8: You are a CEO of a cosmetic company. One day your new secretary, Sarah, humiliated her colleague though her colleague did not do anything. You feel really annoyed about this. What would you say to Sarah?

تداولية النقد العام لدى متعلمي اللغة: دراسة للناطقين وغير الناطقين باللغة الانكليزية

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خلاصة البحث

يُعدّ النقد احد افعال الكلام غير المُهذبة والمُهددة التي تقود الى عدم الانسجام بين المتحاورين. ويُمثل هذا الفعل الكلامي تحديا حقيقيا للناطقين وغير الناطقين باللغة الانكليزية على حد سواء كونه يحتاج الى تخطيط مُسبق. تتقصى الدراسة الحالية انتاج النقد العام او غير التخصصي لدى الطلبة الجامعيين العراقيين متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية والامريكيين الناطقين باللغة الانكليزية. وتحديدًا تُكشف الدراسة مدى تباين واختلاف الطلبة الجامعيين العراقيين متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية والامريكيين الناطقين باللغة الانكليزية في (1) انتاج النقد (2) تلطيف النقد وتخفيفه (3) والخيارات التداولية وفق متغيري القوة والبعد الاجتماعي. تم استخدام فرض اكمال النص للحصول على بيانات لغوية تداولية من عينة مكونة من عشرين طالب جامعي عراقي و عشرين امريكي. على الرغم ان المجموعتين تستخدمان اساليب نقد متنوعة كما افصحت النتائج الا ان الطلبة الجامعيين العراقيين متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية ينتقدون بشكل مختلف عن الامريكيين الناطقين باللغة الانكليزية. حيث ينتقد الطلبة العراقيين بشكل غير مباشر بينما ينتقد الامريكيون بشكل مباشر ويستخدم كلاهما اساليب مختلفة لتلطيف النقد. فضلا عن ان كلا المجموعتين يتباين اختيارها التداولي على وفق السياق وهذا الاختلاف والتباين يمكن ان يعزى الى مجموعة عوامل منها محدودية المعرفة اللغوية والتداولية للطلبة العراقيين وسياق التعلم والنقل اللغوي. وختامًا تم اقتراح عدد من الاستنتاجات والمضامين التعليمية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النقد - اساليب التلطيف - النقل اللغوي - القوة - البعد الاجتماعي.

A Brief Bio Data

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