An investigation of the reflection of politeness principle and face theory in the writing of Iranian EFL students

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ABSTRACT

Communication is an important element in each society. Through communication, people express themselves, their attitudes, their beliefs and opinions. They interact with other people as well. But how well this interaction continues depends on different factors. For example, the way you use language, the choices you make, and the way you express your wants and attitudes all are important and affect your interaction with others. According to Coulmas (2005, p. 84), "speakers make many choices when speaking, including the politeness level of their utterances". Every verbal utterance, as it is an instance of language use, has certain degree of politeness. This article aimed at investigating the reflection of politeness principle and face theory in EFL students' writing in Iran. For this purpose, a sample of 50 undergraduate students learning English as a foreign language, were selected from Hakim Sabzevari University. After administering a standard language proficiency test, a writing task was given to participants to investigate whether this aspect of sociolinguistics is reflected in Iranian writing. After analyzing the papers based on Brown and Levinson (1987) framework, it was found that politeness principle and face theory are reflected in the writing of Iranian EFL learners to a considerable extent.

Introduction

The definition and conceptualization of politeness has been issue to many debates; even the most recent literature on the issue gives way to different interpretations on a remarkable scale. In the most general sense, as an everyday term, politeness has been recognized as closely associated to social appropriateness, which as a field of inquiry dates back to at least the sixteenth century (Burke, 1993 cited in Eelen,2001). For others, politeness springs from a tradition in history dating as far back as the Augustan Age in the Roman times (Watts, 1992). Still today, for some researchers, being polite is saying the socially correct thing by "conforming to socially agreed codes of good conduct" (Nwoye, 1992, p. 310).

A number of studies have been carried out in the field of politeness. But one of the most influential frameworks of politeness is Brown and Levinson (1987). They present a model which is called Model Person(MP). It consists of a willful fluent speaker of a natural language, further endowed with two special properties-rationality and face. By *rationality* they mean something very specific-the availability to their MP of a precisely definable mode of reasoning from ends to the means that will achieve those ends. By *face* they mean something quite specific: their MP is endowed with two particular wants-roughly, the want to be unimpeded and the want to be approved of in certain respects (Brown & Levinson, 1987. p, 58). By this definition, their theory represents a face-saving view.

They proposed face theory as one of the most influential theory on politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987). This theory contains three basic notions: (a) face,(b) face threatening acts,(c) politeness strategies. They define face as "public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself, consisting in two related aspects :(a) *Negative face*: the basic claim to territories,

personal preserves, rights to non-distraction-i.e. to freedom from imposition. (b)*Positive face*: the positive consistent self-image or 'personality'(crucially including the desire that this Self-image be appreciated and approved of)claimed by interlocutors. (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 61). Therefore, with respect to the notion of face, we have positive politeness-to satisfy addressee's positive face in some respect, and negative politeness- to satisfy addressee's negative face, to some degree (Brown and Levinson, 1987, pp. 72-73).Their theory assumes that most speech acts inherently threaten either the hearer's or speaker's face wants and that politeness is involved in redressing those *face threatening acts*(FTAs). Hence,their theory offers a formula that is used in order to determine the seriousness of an FTA(x) based on three factors: the social distance between the speaker(S), and the hearer (H), a measure of power that the hearer has over the speaker and the absolute ranking of imposition in the particular culture.

2. Background

Perhaps the most thorough treatment of the concept of politeness in pragmatics is that of Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (1978). The book is named *Universals in Language Usage: Politeness Phenomenon*, which was first published in 1978 and then reissued in 1987. In the book, Brown and Levinson (1978, p. 71-3) point out that face refers to a speaker's sense of linguistic and social identity. Any speech act may impose on this sense, and is therefore face threatening. And speakers have strategies for lessening the threat, especially to the hearer. That is where the significance of Politeness Principle lies.

In their model, politeness is defined as *redressive action* taken to counterbalance the disruptive effect of face threatening acts (FTAs). In their theory, communication is seen as

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potentially dangerous and threatening. The basic term of their model is "face" which is defined as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" consisting of two related aspects. One is negative face, or the rights to territories, freedom of action and freedom from imposition, wanting your actions not to be constrained or inhibited by others. The other is positive face, which is consistent with the self-image that people have and want to be appreciated and approved of by at least some other people. Positive politeness means being complimentary and gracious to the addressee (but if this is overdone, the speaker may alienate the other party). Negative politeness is found in ways of mitigating the imposition. In the context of the mutual vulnerability of face, any rational agent will seek to avoid these face-threatening acts, or will employ certain strategies to minimize the threat. The speaker will want to minimize the threat of his FTA. The politeness theory of Brown and Levinson is also called "Face-saving Theory".

Brown and Levinson (1978) also argue that in human communication, either spoken or written, people tend to maintain one another's face continuously. In everyday conversation, we adapt our conversation to different situations. Among friends we take liberties or say things that would seem discourteous among strangers. And we avoid overformality with friends. In both situations we try to avoid making the hearer embarrassed or uncomfortable. Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) are acts that infringe on the hearers' need to maintain his/her self-esteem. Politeness strategies are developed to deal with these FTAs. They stress that the basic strategy of politeness is to minimize the threat to an addressee's "negative face" and enhance their "positive face" as much as possible.

Hence, Brown and Levinson (1987), propose a theory of politeness which draws its basic concepts from Grice's CP. They believe that the CP defines an unmarked or asocial presumptive framework for communication with the essential assumption of "no deviation from rational efficiencies without a reason" (p. 5). But they do not see the modifications of the Gricean program as wholly successful. Brown & Levinson also draw on speech act theory though less heavily than the CP. At first, they took this theory as a basis for a mode of discourse analysis, but then they found it not so promising as speech act theory forces a sentence-based, speaker-oriented mode of analysis where their own thesis requires that utterances are often equivocal in force. The alternative they took is that they avoided taking such categories as the basis of discourse analysis and chose other more demonstrable categories. In what follows, these categories and notions, as depicted in their lengthy description of their theory (1987) are reviewed.

2.1.1 The notion of face

The face theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) serves as the most influential theory on politeness. It plays an important role in the study of speech acts. Brown and Levinson's face theory contains three basic notions: face, face threatening acts (FTAs) and politeness strategies. Brown and Levinson(1987, p. 61) argue that the concept of face is "the public self- image that every member wants to claim for himself". This public self- image comprises two desires. They argue that everyone in the society has two kinds of face wants. One is negative face: the basic claim to territories, personal preservers, rights to non-distraction -- i.e.to freedom of action and freedom from imposition. The other is the positive face: the positive consistent self-image or 'personality' (crucially

including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of)claimed by interactants.

Brown and Levinson built their theory of politeness on the assumption that many speech acts, for example requests, offers, disagreement and compliments, are intrinsically threatening to face. Speech acts are threatening in that they do not support the face wants of the speaker and those of the addressee inherently threaten either the hearer's or the speakers' face-wants and that politeness is involved in redressing those face threatening acts (FTA). On the basis of these assumptions, three main strategies for performing speech acts are distinguished: positive politeness, negative politeness and off-record politeness. Positive politeness aims at supporting or enhancing the addressee's positive face, whereas negative politeness aims at softening the encroachment on the addressee's freedom of action or freedom from imposition. The third strategy, off-record politeness, means flouting one of the Gricean (1975) maxims on the assumption that the addressee is able to infer the intended meaning.

Brown and Levinson (1987,pp. 59- 60) argue that face is something that every member of a society has. Hence, every time a speaker wants to utter something he needs to be careful that his utterance will either maintain or threaten the addressee's face in a way that he intends to do, and at the same time enhancing or maintaining his own face."It is in general in every participant's best interest to maintain each other's face. That is to act in ways that assure the other participants that the agent is heedful of the assumptions concerning face" Brown and Levinson (1987, p.61).The assumptions that Brown and Levinson (1987) refer to are termed as positive and negative face.

Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 62) define *negative face* as: The want of every 'competent adult member' that his actions be unimpeded by others. Negative politeness "is oriented mainly toward partially satisfying (redressing) H's negative face, his basic want to maintain claims of territory and self-determination. Brown and Levinson (1987,p. 70) believe that "negative politeness is primarily 'avoidance-based' and realization of its strategies requires that the speaker recognizes and honors the addressee's negative face wants and tries not to interfere with addressee's freedom of action." Hence, negative politeness is characterized by self-effacement, formality and restraint, with attention to very restricted aspects of H's self-image, centering on his want to be unimpeded (p. 70).

As for positive face and the relevant positive politeness, Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 62) define it as "the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others."Positive politeness by definition is "redress directed to the addressee's positive face, his perennial desire that his wants (or the actions/ acquisitions/ values resulting from them) should be thought of as desirable" (Brown &Levinson, 1987,p. 101). As Brown & Levinson (1987, p. 103) put it, positive politeness utterances are used to extend intimacy, to imply common grounds or shared wants even between strangers who assume that they share similarities for the purpose of interaction.

Basic to Brown and Levinson's model, is a Model Person who is a willful fluent speaker of a natural language. All Model Persons are endowed with two qualities: 'rationality and face' as means to satisfy communication and face-oriented ends. They have borrowed the term 'face' from Coffman(1967)and from the English folk term that is related to the notions of being embarrassed or humiliated or losing face. In B & L's view, face consists of two related aspects: (1) negative face: the basic claim

of territories, personal preserves, right to non-distraction,i.e., to freedom of action and freedom from imposition, and (2) positive face: the positive self-image or 'personality' (crucially the desire of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others. The other notion that B&L's theory rests on is the notion of face threatening acts (FTAs). They assert that either or both of an individual's face, i.e., the negative face and the positive face can be threatened by certain face threatening acts, which are defined in terms of whose face, Speaker's (S's) or Hearer's (H's) is at stake and which face want is threatened.

Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 65) defined face-threatening acts (FTAs) according to two basic parameters: "(1) Whose face is being threatened (the speaker's or the addressee's), and (2) Which type of face is being threatened(positive- or negative-face)". Acts that threaten an addressee's positive face include those acts in which a speaker demonstrates that he/she does not support the addressee's positive face or self-image (e.g., complaints, criticisms, accusations, mention of taboo topics, interruptions). Acts that threaten an addressee's negative face include instances in which the addressee is pressured to accept or to reject a future act of the speaker (e.g., offers, promises), or when the addressee has reason to believe that his/her goods are being coveted by the speaker. Examples of FTAs to the speaker's positive face include confessions, apologies, acceptance of a compliment, and self-humiliations. Some of the FTAs that are threatening to the speaker's negative face include expressing gratitude, accepting a thank-you, an apology or an offer, and making promises.

The kind and amount of politeness that the speaker applies to a certain speech act is determined by the weightiness of this speech act. Speakers calculate the weight of their speech acts from three social variables: the perceived social distance between the hearer and the speaker, the perceived power difference between them, and the kind and amount of politeness that the speaker applies to a certain speech act is determined by the weightiness of this speech act. Speakers calculate the weight of their speech acts from three social variables: the perceived social distance between the hearer and the speaker, the perceived power difference between them, and the cultural ranking of the speech act (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

2.1.1.1 FTAs (face-threatening acts)

In daily communication, people may pose a threat to another individual's self-image, or create a" face- threatening act" (FTA). Some FTA's threaten negative face and some others threaten positive face. These acts prevent the freedom of action (negative face) and the wish that one's wants are desired by others (positive face) by either the speaker, or the addressee, or both. The former includes directives such as commands, requests, advice, invitations, etc. The latter, on the other hand, includes criticisms, insults, disagreements, and corrections. Some speech acts threaten the hearer's face; some others threaten the speaker's face. Some scholars assert that requests potentially threaten the addressee's face because they may restrict the addressee's freedom to act according to his/her will. Refusals, on the other hand, may threaten the addressee's positive face because they may suggest that what he/she says is not favored by the speaker. However, there are still some other scholars who believe that some speech acts like refusals may threaten both interlocutors' faces. In other words, they are dual face-threatening acts. In an attempt to avoid FTAs; interlocutors use specific strategies to minimize the threat according to a reasonable estimation of the face risk to participants.

2.1.1.1 Strategies for doing FTAs

The next notion that B&L's theory rests on is the strategies for doing FTAs. They believe that in the context of the mutual vulnerability of face, any rational agent will seek to avoid these FTAs or will use certain strategies to minimize the threat. In deciding to do the FTA, they can go *on record* or *offrecord*.In going on record, an actor makes it clear to participants what communicative intention led the actor to do an act (A).On the other hand, if an actor goes off record in doing A, then there is more than one ambiguously attributable intention so that the actor cannot be held to have committed him/herself to one particular intent.

According to Brown and Levinson, any rational agent, in the context of the mutual vulnerability of face will seek to avoid face threatening acts. So in order to minimize the threat will employ certain strategies. By putting in to consideration the relative weightiness (W_x) of at least three wants: (a) the want to communicate the content of the FTA, (b) the want to be efficient or urgent (c) the want to maintain H's face to any degree, S will select five kinds of strategies.

According to this model, if you want to do FTAs, there are five politeness super strategies: without redressive action, baldly, positive politeness, negative politeness, off record and don't do FTA which will be discussed below:

1. Without Redressive Action, Baldly

According to Brown and Levinson, doing an act baldly means doing it in the most clear, direct, unambiguous and concise way possible. This kind of strategy normally happen if the speaker does not fear retribution from the addressee in circumstances where (a) S and H both tacitly agree that the relevance of face demands may be suspended in the interests of urgency; (b) where the danger to H's face is small (c) where S is mostly superior in power to H, or can enlist audience support to destroy H's face without losing his own.

2. Redressive Action

By redressive action they mean action that give face to the addressee. It means such attempts that prevent any damage to one's face. This happen by modification or addition that indicate clearly that no such face threat is intended or desire, and that in general recognize H's face wants, and himself wants them to be achieved. Such redressive action takes one of two forms, depending on which aspect of face is being stressed (Brown and Levinson 1987, p. 70).

2. Positive Politeness

Positive politeness deals with positive face of H; the positive self-image that he claims for himself. In fact, positive politeness refers to addressee's perennial desire that his wants or action resulting from them should be thought of as desirable. So by this strategy the speaker redress what he does. Redress consist in partially satisfying that desire by communicating that one's own wants or some of them are in some respect similar to the addressee's wants (Brown and Levinson,1987,p, 101). In accordance with Brown and Levinson, in negative politeness the sphere of relevant redress is restricted to the imposition itself, but here in positive politeness the sphere of redress is widened to the appreciation of H's wants in general or to the expression of similarity between ego's and H's wants. So, positive politeness is not necessarily redressive of particular face want infringed by the FTA.

The linguistic realization of positive politeness are in many respect, simply representative of the normal linguistic behavior between intimates, where interest and approval of each other's

personality, presumption indicating shared wants and shared knowledge, implicit claims to reciprocity of obligations, etc. are exchanged. Brown and Levinson further argue that it is precisely this association with intimate language that gives the linguistics of positive politeness its redressive force. Positive politeness utterances are used as a kind of metaphorical extension of intimacy to imply common ground or sharing of wants to a limited extend even between strangers who perceive themselves as somehow similar (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 103). For this reason positive politeness strategies can be used both for FTA redress and as a kind of social accelerator to indicate that S wants to come closer to H.

Positive politeness, as discussed by Brown & Levinson, consists of fifteen strategies that briefly discussed here:

3. Negative Politeness

According to Brown and Levinson, negative politeness is a redressive action that addresses the negative face of H. It is oriented toward partially satisfying H's negative face. It means the hearer's wants to be free from imposition and a claim for his territory and self-determination. Thus, negative politeness is essentially avoidance-based and realization of negative politeness strategies consist in this fact that the speaker recognize and respect the H's negative face wants and will not interfere with the addressee's freedom of action. Hence, this strategy deals with self-effacement, formality and restraint, with attention to very restricted aspects of H's self-image. In this technique, face threatening acts are redressed with apology, with linguistic and non-linguistic deference, with hedges on the illocutionary force of the act, with impersonalizing mechanism that distance S and H from the act and other softening mechanisms that give the addressee an 'out', a face-saving line of escape permitting him to feel his response is not coerced. In addition, negative politeness has a minimizing function which minimizes the particular imposition that the FTA unavoidably effects. The following are strategies of negative politeness which are drawn from Brown and Levinson's model of politeness.

Once one has chosen the super-strategy of negative politeness, one seeks means to achieve it. Negative politeness enjoins both on-record delivery and redress of an FTA. The simplest way to construct an on-record message is to convey it directly, as in bald-on-record usage. However, it turns out that these clashes with the need for redress attuned to H's negative face, so in fact one does not issue negatively polite FTAs completely directly.

There is a clash between the two wants, that is, the want to be direct stemming from Do FTA On Record, and the want to Be Indirect that derives from Don't Coerce H. A compromise means of partially satisfying them both should be reached. The following strategies are such means of compromise which are delineated in detail.

4. Off record

Another way of expressing politeness is using off-record communicative act to provide a variety of defensible interpretations. "A communicative act is the off- record if it is done in such a way that it is not possible to attribute only one clear communicative intention to the act" (Brown and Levinson, 1987,p. 211). Off record utterances, hence, are used when the speaker wants to do a face-threatening act, but does not want to accept direct responsibility for doing it.Since the possible interpretations for an off record utterance are not only one clear communicative intention, it is up to the addressee to interpret it.

Therefore, off-record utterances are basically indirect and require the addressee to make inference to get what was intended. Based on this basic and essential feature, off-record utterances are mainly general (containing less information) or different from what one means (p. 211).

A communicative act can be done off-record if it is done in such a way that it is not possible to attribute only one clear communicative intention to the act. In order to do this, the actor leaves himself an 'out' by providing himself with a number of defensible interpretations. Off-record utterances are essentially indirect uses of language. In order to construct an off- record utterance, one says something that is either more general or actually different from what one means. In both cases, H must make some inference to recover what was in fact intended. Off-record strategies, according to Brown & Levinson's model, consist of the following:

5. Don't do the FTA

Finally, in cases where the risk is great, a fifth option would be not to perform the act at all. So by using this strategy S decides not to perform the act, because he feels that the risk is too great.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The participants of the present study were Iranian male and female undergraduate students learning English as a foreign language in Hakim Sabzevari University (Sabzevar, Iran)and a group of EFL learners from Torsys institute in Kashmar. They were sophomore and senior students of English Language and Literature. The sophomore students were considered as intermediate-level students and the senior students were taken to be advance-level students of English as a foreign language. All of learners speak Persian as their first language. The sample of the study will include 50 participants which was composed of both male and female students. Their age ranges from 18 to 25.

3.2 Research Design

The design of this study is descriptive qualitative method. The data about utterances which are containing the politeness principle used by EFL learners is described based on Brown and Levinson frame work (1987). The qualitative method was used because of four reasons based on Bogdan and Biklen's (1982, p. 1) it enjoys naturalistic data the key instrument of which is the researcher; 2) the data consists of utterances that are written by the students and they are in the form of words rather than numbers; 3) it is concerned with process rather than simply with outcomes or products; and 4) the data is analyzed inductively. However, the descriptive statistics of the participants performance will be given in the form of tables and figures.

3.3 Research Instruments

The instruments used in this study were as follows: (a) the TOEFL proficiency test and written complaint letters.

3.3.1 The TOEFL proficiency test.

This test consist of 100 multiple-choice items: 40 grammar items, 60 vocabulary items, and 30 reading items. The TOEFL proficiency test was used to determine the proficiency level of students

3.3.2 Written complaint letters

This test consisted of sample writing test which was task-based in nature. The task was that of reacting to a job opportunity lost because of a friend' negligence to inform the addressee or, perhaps, conscious attempt to hid significant information for his/her friend. The participants were required to

write a letter to their friend and express their feelings toward the lost opportunity as well as the status quo of their friendship. What follows is the stimulus of the complaint letter:

You are looking for a job. You really need it. There is a classified ad about a suitable job you can have, but you are not aware of it. On the other hand, one of your close friends finds it, registers for it and sends his/her documents, but s/he does not tell you anything. Finally, you get informed when the registration deadline is over. Your friend confesses that s/he knew about it. In such a situation, how do you write him/her a letter?

After reading the direction give above, the participants of the study were supposed to write a one-page letter to their friend and express their attitude and feelings toward this issue. There was no space limitation for the response letter so that the participant could write as few or as many sentences as s/he thought was necessary.

3.4 Procedure

The study was conducted in two phases. First, the participants were checked with their proficiency levels in English. Secondly, there were tested on the extent of politeness strategy use in their writing.

The researcher went to different classes to elicit learners' writing. This elicitation was based on a writing task on a specific topic. The topic was about social phenomena that asks for students attitudes. The topic is concerned with something that happens between two friends. Thus, the 'social distance' is understood to be low between friends who know each other. Since the concept of 'power' refers to superior/subordinate relationships, it was supposed to be equal between friends because none of them is superior to another.

After collecting the papers, they were numbered. Then, these papers were read by the researcher. For each paper, a file was made. These files contained information, such as the number of politeness items which were used by learners and even the number of politeness items that learners can use but did not use.

3.5 Data Analysis

Each of the participants' files will be subjected to the framework by Brown and Levinson (1987) for analysis. The reasons for the absence or presence of each specific strategy in the writings of the participants will be discussed on the basis of the findings of this study and the studies in the literature on politeness principle and face theory.

4.1 Research findings

The analysis of the data, on the basis of the model developed by Brown & Levinson (1978/1987), is done in three steps: First, the reflection of positive politeness in the students' writing is considered. Second, negative politeness strategies will be analyzed. Third, off-record strategies will be analyzed and discussed.

Positive Politeness, Strategy 1: Notice, attend to H.

This strategy was absent from the writings of all the participants of the study, whether they were male or female and whether they were intermediate- or advanced-level students. Of course, the absence of this strategy from the data stands to reason owing to the fact that this strategy is related to some aspects of the appearance of bodily features of the H (hearer). Since the data of the study covered only the linguistic aspect of communication, not paralinguistic of prosodic factors, it was quite expectable that this strategy would be missing from the writings of the students. No case of this strategy was observed.

However, in a face-to-face encounter between the participants of an speech event, there is a great likelihood that this strategy will be used, and perhaps, used a lot.

Positive Politeness, Strategy 2: Exaggerate interest, approval, sympathy

No case of this strategy use was observed in the data elicited from the college students who took part in this study. Owing to the fact that it was a complaint letter and in a compliant letter one does not expect the use of positive attitude or interesting outlooks, it was quite likely that there would be no such strategy use in the data. Moreover, since paralinguistic features of language are absent from a written language output, there were no instances of the use of intonation, stress or such language features. However, in a naturalistic session in real physical encounters, there would be a great possibility of the use of this strategy.

Positive Politeness, Strategy 3: Intensity interest to H.

This strategy was also missing from the data. The reasons of lack of this strategy in the students' writing are related to the nature of the task of communication at hand. This strategy is mainly used when the speaker draws on some interesting issue for the sake of the hearer so that the act of communication goes on smoothly. This is usually a characteristic of a lengthy speech rather than a short one. Again, this strategy is generally used in a face-to-face interaction between the participants of a communicative act. This strategy is characterized by such features as changing the tense of the sentence, i. e., going from past to present and vice versa; exaggeration, rhetorical questions and bringing up new domains of talk. The nature of the task at hand evidently delimited the use of this strategy.

Positive Politeness, Strategy 4: Use in-group identity markers

This strategy was used greatly by the participants of the study. It was one of the politeness strategies which were heavily employed by almost all of the students. 39 students used this strategy in their letters. This means that 78% of the participants used this positive politeness strategy in their writings. In some cases, some participants used the same strategy more than once. Terms of endearments such as *dear, honey, brother, sister* or so were used extensively. It was followed by address terms such as *buddy* which were used here and there. Another way in which this strategy was used was the use of contractions which is an element of sincerity or lack of formality between the interactants. Contractions were employed heavily in the data. This gives us a sense of friendliness and takes us away from deference. Partly, the reason of the heavy use of contractions was the conversational or colloquial style of language which was used by the participants. Moreover, a number of cases of the use of slang word and terms was also observed such as *ohhhhh, crazy, vow,* and so on. Quite often, the letters started with openings like *dear friend, hello, my best friend, honey* and they were ended by formal closings like *sincerely, your close friend, your best friend* and so on. Due to the fact that this letter was a letter of criticism or complaint, the occurrence of such openings and closings to a great extent is meaningful and indicative of the kind of relationship between the two parties in the communicative act. Some examples of the use of this strategy are given in the Appendices Section.

Positive Politeness, Strategy 5: Seek agreement

This strategy was little used by the participants of the study. There were only three cases in which this strategy was used, which means only 6% of the students used this strategy in their

writings. The reason behind the scarcity of use of this positive politeness strategy is the fact that this situation requires more disagreement than agreement. In a complaint letter, one does not agree with the H's statements; otherwise, there is no point of complaint or criticism. The few instances in which this strategy was employed by the participants show the strategic manipulation of language. It is likely that the statements used are metaphorical or ironic.

Positive Politeness, Strategy 6: Avoid disagreement

The use of this strategy was observed in the writings of 14 students which means that 28% of the participants used this positive politeness strategy in their writings. In the majority of cases this strategy was used in the form of *hedges*. This is quite predictable since hedges are used in language to soften the demands, to mitigate the statements and to show degrees of uncertainty or likelihood. Moreover, hedges are used to provide some room for alternative interpretations of the same statement. It also gives some loopholes to the speaker not to enforce commitment to any fixed meaning. The linguistic realization of this strategy use was terms such as *maybe, merely, probably,* and some other phrasal expressions.

Positive Politeness, Strategy 7: Common ground

Seven out of fifty participants made use of this strategy in their writing task, i.e., the letter of complaint. In percentages, it amounts to 14% of the participants. This strategy is linguistically realized through the use of gossip or small talk which was absent from the data owing to the fact that this was not a conversation between two interlocutors. Another linguistic realization of this strategy is in the form of reference to shared beliefs and ideas which are portrayed through the use of idioms, proverbs or other devices of shared cultural knowledge. In four ceases, known proverbs were used; for example, *Humans are a member of a whole, in creation and soul,* or *Friendship is known in bad situations*, or *After raining, you see the rainbow*. In other cases, some rather idiosyncratic renditions of commons facts of life were used; for example, one student wrote *when you take a nail from the wall, its effect is always there on the wall.* Another student used the expression, '*The anvil fears no blows"* meaning that a miserable person is not that much sensitive toward bad happenings.

Positive politeness, Strategy 8: Joke

This strategy was absent from the data because the situation portrayed in the task demanded seriousness and formality. Pragmatically speaking, there was no point of joking in such a serious undertaking. Even if the speaker used joking to redress the FTA, it might prove counterproductive. The absence of this strategy from the data is quite predictable due to the circumstances and the background of the issue. That was why none of the participants made use of this strategy in their writing tasks.

Positive Politeness, Strategy 9: Presuppose S's concern for H

This strategy was used by a few numbers of students. 6 students out of 50 used this strategy in their writing which gives us the 12% strategy use. This strategy requires that the speaker show or express some concern for H that is considered a politeness strategy. Owing to the fact that the nature of the task required that the speaker (or the writer, for this task) to criticize the H in some way, rightly or softly, one does not expect much use of this strategy in a complaint letter. That is, the type of task determines, to a great extent, the type of strategies that might be used by each of the interlocutors in a speech event. However, some of the participants showed concern over the possible

feelings of the hearer about what s/he had done at the moment of committing the act. The speakers/writers of the letter drew the hearers' attention to the fact that they knew that s/he needed the job and thus the sympathized with the hearer although they emphasized their own right of being informed of the advertisement and the job opportunity. Some of the instances of this strategy use were the following: *I knew that you needed that job more than me*, or *maybe you needed it more*, and *if you needed it, it's OK*.

Positive Politeness, Strategy 10: Offer, Promise

This strategy was rarely used by one fourth of the participants of the study. Only 2 students made use of this strategy in their letters of complaint. This strategy is used when the speaker/writer uses offers or promises in the process of conversation or communication. The type of promises that were made by the participants was trying to find a job opportunity for the hear, i.e., *I promise to inform you if a found a job*or they were in the form of offers like *One day I will come to your office with a box of confectionary and congratulate you on finding a suitable job*. However, since the type of task did not require the use of offers or promises, it was quite predictable that this strategy would be sporadically used.

Positive Politeness, Strategy 11: Be Optimistic

One fourth of the participants of the study made use of this strategy which amounts to 20% of the students. The strategy draws on the speakers' optimistic attitude toward the hearer or the hearers' acts. The participants of the study expressed the hearer's rightful intentions for doing the act or perhaps the hearer's simple forgetting of the act of informing his/her friend of the job opportunity. The writers of the complaint letters somehow sympathized with the urgent need of the hearer and his/her miserable state so that s/he could not or did not have the time to inform the friend of the advertisement for the job. The types of optimistic views expressed by the participants of the study were such as below: *Surely you had your reasons*, *I hope you have a logical reason for it*, *maybe you forgot to tell me*, or *I try to understand you,* or *You are not to blame*, *I can understand your reasons* and *If I were you, I would do the same thing.* All of these expressions and comments illustrate the speaker's optimistic view or attitude toward the hearer and his/her act.

Positive Politeness, Strategy 12: Include S and H in the activity.

Only two students out of fifty students used this positive politeness strategy in their writings which gives us 4% use of the strategy in terms of the quantity of strategy use. This strategy demands a joint activity or suggestions for joint activity on the part of the two interlocutors. The two students who used this strategy in their complaint letters wrote *Let's be friends* and *let's learn from this situation* which are proposals for subsequent actions or undertakings.

Positive Politeness, Strategy 13: Give or ask for reasons.

This strategy was heavily used on the part of the students. 18 students used this strategy in their writings; this means that 36% of the participants made use of this strategy in their letters of complaint. This figure stands to reason due to the fact that the behavior of the hearer toward the speaker, whether international or unintentional, demands justification and reasoning. The reasoning could be supplied by the hearer who committed the act or by the speaker through conjecture. There are instances of both cases in the data elicited from the participants. The linguistic realization of this positive politeness strategy were through the use of the following expressions: *I don't want to*

judge you, I don't know how I can explain…, there were reasons for…, I would ask for your reasons, I'm eager to know why you did it., I can't understand why…, I don't know why you did it., Why did you do it?, I don't know why you did not tell me., You didn't want to make a rival for yourself., I want to know if it's right or not to do such a thing., Could you please give me an answer… and so on.

Positive Politeness, Strategy 14: Assume or Assert Reciprocity

Only three students made use of this strategy in their writing task which means 6% of the participants used this strategy. Again, the scarcity of use of this strategy is related to the nature of the task at hand which is a one-sided speech event rather than reciprocal at the moment. One expects reciprocity in face-to-face interactions which embody all sorts of strategies which are strategically determined. The linguistic realization of this strategy were in the form of the following: *We could tolerate the issue and be friend together* or *Each of us should have a cemetery to bury all of our faults in it.*

Positive Politeness, Strategy 15: Give Gifts to H

This strategy was the most heavily used strategy among all the positive politeness strategies which were observed in the data. The use of this strategy is in the form of giving goods to H, expressing sympathy, understanding the status of the H, as well as cooperation with H on any act that satisfies H. 33 students used this strategy in their writing task which amounts to 66% of the participants. The majority cases in which this strategy was used in the data were instances of sympathizing with the hearer, trying to understand H's case, and giving non-material gifts of different sorts to H including best wishes for H. The reason behind the extensive use of this strategy, compared to other strategies of positive politeness, is that, culturally speaking, this is part of the tradition of Iranian people to express best wishes or express something positive when they are going to end the speech event and take leave from each other. Examples of this strategy use are the following: *I got happy for your job., I miss your friendship., It's too good that you found the job., I hope you will be successful in your life and job., I hope that you can get this job., Have a good time with your job., I'm happy that my close friend got the job., Have a good time with your job., Thank you for your favor., I Hope you will be good., I believe in you and I accepted you as an intimate friend., Congratulations!., You are still my friend., I wish the company would accept you., Have a lucky life., I want you to be happy., I'm happy you found your favorite job., I became happy when I heard the news* and *I really miss you. Take good care of yourself.*

Now that we have presented the results of the elicitation of politeness strategies from the participants and discussed the reasons behind each strategy use, it's time to get to the second aspect of politeness principle and face theory—the reflection of negative politeness strategies in the writing task of the students who took part in the study. Thus, what follows is a description of the results of the study with regard to negative politeness strategies as well as the justification for their use or nonuse on the part of the participants.

Negative Politeness, Strategy 1: Be conventionally indirect.

This negative politeness strategy requires that the interlocutors in a speech event go indirect in a conventional way so that minimize the extent of FTA committed towards the hearer. There are many conventionalized expressions and utterances in any language in the world which are learned by language learners as part of the process of language learning.

These conventional indirect expressions are sometimes called clichés or set expressions. One way to minimize the danger of FTA towards the hearer is to use softening utterances such as *please, would you please, can you, could you, I wonder if I may…* and so on. Seven students used this negative politeness strategy in their writings which amounts to 14% of the participants. Some instances could be seen in the following expressions used by some participants: *Please get away from me., Please tell me about your thinking., Would you please try to inform me., Please never call to me., Would you please give me an answer* and *please if you found a job tell me.*

Negative Politeness, Strategy 2: Question, Hedge.

This strategy was the most frequent strategy among all positive and negative strategies used by the participants of the study. 45 students made use of this strategy in their writing task, which means 90% of the participants of the present study used this strategy in their letters of complaint. The linguistic realization of this strategy use was mostly in the form of hedges rather than questions. The hedges used by the students as a linguistic device of negative politeness were sometimes in the form of one word and at other times in the form of phrases and sentences. They consisted of both types of hedges: intensifiers and minimizers. The use of a hedge shows degrees of uncertainty and gives room to different interpretations of the same utterance. The speaker or hearer can make a strategic or tactical use of hedges to offers shades of meaning which could be used both for avoidance and commitment. What followare some examples of the use of this negative politeness strategy by the participants of the study:*merely, really, seriously, completely, no matter, too, perhaps, maybe, never, always, everything, something, anything, only, just, very, exactly, actually* and expressions such as *But this is not important., I'm not sure, It's so better., It's too good., by the way, I think., I suppose., I wonder…* and so on.

Negative Politeness, Strategy 3: Be pessimistic.

This negative politeness strategy was also heavily used by the participants of the study. This strategy demands that the interlocutor be pessimistic towards the intentions or behavior of the hearer or vice versa. To use this strategy, the speaker/writer builds on the nonexistence of an object or concept and refers to the entity in a negative way which is akin to the use of rhetorical question in literature. 27 students used this strategy in their writing task; this amounts to 54% of the participants. Some examples of the use of this strategy by the participants of this study are given below: *I thought you were my best friend now I changed my mind., your behavior is high treason., I couldn't forgive you., How did your heart enjoy what you did., I understand you aren't my friend., I didn't expect you to be such a selfish person., Shame on You!, You don't want me to be successful., If id don't find a job, it's your fault., My resentment is the result of my high expectations., You are crazy and proud and you think just about yourself., I don't want to have you as a friend., I'm not jealous like you., You broke my heart., Your behavior really angered me., I'm really sorry for you due to your unsuitable act.*

Negative Politeness, Strategy 4: Minimize the imposition

Twenty two students out of 50 made use of this strategy in their letters of complaint. In terms of percentages, it amounts to 44% of the participants. This means that almost half of the participants used this negative politeness strategy in their writings. This strategy requires that the speaker minimize the imposition inflicted by the FTA through the strategic

manipulation of the language available at the moment. The softening or mitigating element in this regard is the use of some adverbials. The linguistic realization of this strategy were in the form of the following expressions: *I decided not to forgive you but I couldn't unfortunately., I don't know how I can explain my feelings., I don't want to judge you., I try to think about your behavior., I don't know if it is right or wrong., I got angry but that's not important., Maybe I had a bad behavior and it made you unfaithful., If you really needed this job, I won't reprove you., It's right that it wasn't your duty but I expected you to do it., Maybe we were apart and our friendship changed to a new version., It doesn't matter what you did.*

Negative Politeness, Strategy 5: Give deference.

No case of this strategy use was observed in the data of the study. This was quite predictable since deference happens when there is a difference in terms of power or status between the two interlocutors of a speech event. However, the interlocutors of the speech event investigated in this study were friends; therefore, they were equal in terms of power and social status. If instances of deference were found in the data of this study, there were quite bizarre and needed justification and argumentation. Sometimes it is the case that the nonexistence of one politeness strategy is more indicative than the existence given the task and the activity required. Furthermore, this strategy is typical of a face-to-face communication rather than one-sided speech event.

Negative Politeness, Strategy 6: Apologize.

Seven students out of 50 students made use of this strategy in their writing task. In percentages, this means that 14% of the participants of the study made use of this strategy. Apologizing is an FTA which is sensitive enough to be taken great care by each of the parties of a conversation. When this strategy is used, there should be sound reasons for the employment of this strategy which exceeds the danger that it might inflict on each of the interlocutors. The linguistic realization of this strategy are in the forms of words, phrases or sentences that offer an apology; here some examples which were elicited from the participants of this study are offered below: *I would be sorry if this happening was like that., I'm sorry, not for you, but for myself., I'm sorry for you and myself that I have a friend like you., I'm sorry for myself that I called you a friend., I'm sorry to bring up this issue but it was better to tell me about it., I'm really sorry for you due to your unsuitable act.,* and *Everybody who hears it becomes sorry for you.*

Negative Politeness, Strategy 7: Impersonate S & H.

This negative politeness strategy was sporadically used by the participants of the study. The use of this strategy requires that an act or behavior be attributed to something or somebody other than the two interlocutors so that the FTA made apparently does not concern each of the members of a speech event. There are different ways to express the impersonation of an act; one of them is the use of proverbs or aphorism. These are meant to be used by speakers of a language when the want to draw the hearer's attention to some fact of life or, rather, to a principle of conduct among human beings. In this way, the interlocutor evades the responsibility of committing the FTA and the same happens to the hearer who could claim that s/he was not the receiver of the FTA. 9 students out of 50 used this strategy in their writing which amounts to 18% of the participants of the study. Some instances of the use of this strategy by the participants of this study could be seen below: *Each of us should look not only to one's own interest but to the interest of the other., Sometimes we select a person as a friend; we think with*

ourselves that she always stays with us. We think, as we want the best for her, she does so., Humans are a member of a whole in creation and soul., Always there are situations that one could know one's friend., The most powerful reason of friend's separation is being unfaithful., After the rain, we see the rainbow. So I shall wait for another chance., I think if two persons have a friendly relation with each other two maters remain…, There are some things in this world that deserves the most; friendship is one of them.*

Negative Politeness, Strategy 8: State the FTA as a general rule.

No case of the use of this strategy was observed in the data of this study which was elicited from college students. There might be some reasons for that: this strategy is much similar to the previous strategy since both of them try to impersonalize the FTA as well as the fact that the task demand of complaint does not guarantee the use of this strategy.

Negative Politeness, Strategy 9: Nominalize.

This strategy was infrequently used by the participants of the study. Only 8 students used this strategy in their writings, that is, 18% of the participants used this strategy in their letters of complaint. Nominalization is one of the techniques or strategies that are used by manipulators of language, which are mainly linguists or discourse analysts, to indirectly insinuate some concept or point of view in the receiver of the message in a communicative act. The use of this strategy requires the command of language to a certain degree; not all speakers of language could easily use this strategy. Eight students made use of this strategy in their writings. In percentages, this means 16% of the participants used this strategy in their writings one way or another. The following expressions illustrate how the participants of this study made use of this negative politeness strategy in their writings: *I think your behavior in friendship is high treason., I just miss friendship with you., I write this to our friendship., Our friendship doesn't work anymore., My imagination from the world of friendship wasn't that., Friendship is shown in bad situations.,* and *There are some things in the world that deserve the most; friendship is one of them.*

Negative Politeness, Strategy 10: Go on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebting H.

Only seven students made use of this strategy in their writings. This means that 14% of the participants used this negative politeness strategy in their writings. Some instances of the use of this strategy by the participants of the present study are the following: *I decided not to forgive you but I can't., I can forgive you., I don't want to ruin our friendship so I forgive you., I can forgive you now., I try to get her a job., I promise to inform you if I find a good job* and last of all *One day I will come to your office with a box of confectionary and congratulate you about the new job.*

4.3 Discussion

The research is completely based on the assumptions put forward by Brown & Levinson (1987) who believe there exist common rules in using politeness strategies among different cultures. The present research has tried to investigate the feasibility of such an assumption through an analysis of the EFL students' writing.

Regarding the aim of the study, the results revealed that Iranian EFL learners used off-record and positive politeness strategies more than bold-on record and negative strategies. Off-record strategies are indirect strategies, which mostly consist of

giving hints, contradictions, overstating, understating, and being vague. Actually, while off-record strategies invite the performance of FTA, they leave the actual interpretation of the act to the addressee. In other words, if a speaker employs an FTA but prefers to escape the responsibility of doing it, he can opt for an off-record strategy and thereby makes the addressee responsible for interpreting it as a threat to face or not (Lin, 2005). The superior use of this type of strategy more than others by Persian EFL learners, thus, may refer to their unwillingness to impose their will on the addressees by leaving it up to them to interpret it.

Furthermore, as Brown and Levinson (1987) believe, off-record strategies enjoy the most polite way of performing an FTA by communicating *indirectly* to the audience. Indirect FTAs such as off-record are classified as imposing the least threat in politeness theory, and as a result are ranked as the most polite verbal acts. A closer look at these indirect strategies suggests the existence of what Brown and Levinson (1987) refer to as 'relational harmony' which emphasizes a collectivist nature of eastern culture (Nisbett, 2004) in which a person prefers to be identified in harmony with a group in his community rather than gaining absolute identification as an individual. Actually, as Mao (1994, p.460) holds about the Chinese culture, Persian interpretation of the notion of *face* comparing with that of the English may also be more of a relative one not just emphasizing the "accommodation of individual needs or desires, but more of the harmony of one's conduct with the views or judgment of the community".

The findings illustrated a major tendency of English EFL writers towards positive politeness strategies which include: show in-group identity markers, seek agreement, avoid disagreement, be optimistic, propose S's concern for H, offer, give reasons, and give gifts to H. As the main purpose of positive politeness strategies, Brown and Levinson (1987) refer to shortening the social distance that is to make the speaker and hearer closer to each other and thus build up an individualistic connection. Having positive feeling about oneself along with praising personal success in western culture is considered at the opposite of group-driven success in eastern culture (Nisbett, 2004) which is gained in most of English output through the use of positive politeness strategies. Moreover, in accord with Lin's (2005) findings, positive strategies by minimizing the face threatening force of an act, try to save a person's positive face and provide him with more feeling of personal success which can lead to stressing the more individualistic and self-motivated nature of western communities.

The notion of face and face-saving acts as proposed by Goffman (1967), as well as the notion of 'self' may not be as individualistically perceived in eastern cultures like in Persian ads as they are perceived in western ones. Following the classification of culture into individualistic and collectivist as a highly mentioned topic of cross-cultural research, Ting-Toomey and Cocroft (1994) reported that in eastern communities the realization of 'self' is mainly gained through "personal achievements and self-actualization processes", whereas in western communities the realization of 'self' happens by more "role relationships, family reputation, workgroup reputation" (p. 514). Moreover, according to Allami and Naeimi (2010) in a high- context culture such as Iran, people tend to use indirect, symbolic, vague, and implicit style of communication whereas low-context culture is generally represented by direct and explicit communication approach.

As a result of the above mentioned classifications of culture in eastern and western communities, more use of indirect and off-record politeness strategies which are supposed to be one of the least FTAs, creates an atmosphere in which the addressee feels in-group membership and can enjoy the feeling of group-driven success. Our findings can also be consistent with those of Pishghadam (2011) who stated on the basis of Scollon and Scollon`s (2001) categorization, Iranian culture is a hierarchal one in which social hierarchy is assumed as a natural structure, whereas American culture works on the basis of a deference politeness system in which the interlocutors share the equal social level and rights. Undoubtedly, indirect way of talking is more prevalent in hierarchical cultures whole cultures based on deference favor for more direct way of dealing with issues.

One of the reasons for the obtained results is that there is *L1 cultural transfer*. The participants apply the same politeness strategies in first and second language use especially in opposite gender interactions. Females are expected to use a formal speech style in a male dominated society such as Iran; female participants use more power-politeness strategies in both similar and opposite gender situations. The next reason is that EFL learners are not linguistically competent in applying solidarity-politeness strategies, so they overuse power-politeness to compensate this incompetency; as it is especially observed in the same gender interactions. So, they are more formal in using English and this level of formality may be greater in comparing with NE speakers, as gender difference may not be felt as strongly as in Persian culture.

The aim of this investigation was concerned with the competency of EFL learners in applying politeness strategies. We found that EFL learners are competent in using power-politeness strategies and even they overuse power-politeness in different situations. So, EFL learners criticize or complain formally as they are not linguistically and socio-culturally competent in English greetings.

Reviewing previous studies also shows that speakers' realizations of speech acts and other aspects of L1 pragmatics are affected by cultural values (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Verschueren, 1978). It is important to provide learners with knowledge of the linguistic forms which are appropriate to convey the intended meaning in different situations. This study suggests that it is not enough to build learners' linguistic competence and it might be necessary to develop their socio-cultural competence, in order to develop their understanding of the frames of interaction and rules of politeness within the target language.

5.2 Conclusion

The present study was designed to investigate the reflection of politeness principle and face theory in the realization of complaint letters, to find answers to the questions of the study, a writing task was given to EFL learners which consisted of a letter to a friend who had seen and advertisement on a job opportunity but had not informed his or her friend. The friend who was not informed was supposed to write a letter in which s/he was going to react, positively or negatively, to the behavior of his/her friend.

The writings were collected based on that writing task. Then our data were analyzed in lines with Brown and Levinson's framework (1987). The analysis shows that Iranian EFL learners' are aware of politeness principle. It was observed in the data that they use both positive and negative politeness strategies. However, they use more positive politeness than

negative politeness. This tendency of Persian EFL learners may refer to their unwillingness to impose their will on the addressees by leaving it up to them to interpret it.

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