EFL Learners’ Perceptions of (im)politeness: The Possible Gender Differences

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Abstract — One of the speech acts to which considerable research attention has been directed is the act of request (Marti, 2006; Félix-Brasdefer, 2010; Lin, 2009; Liu, 2007; Tagushi, 2006) which has often been investigated adjacent to the politeness (Taleghani-Nikazm, 2006). Situated in Iranian university English language context, the present study strived to cast further light on Iranian EFL learners’ perceptions of the requests which lack any politeness markers in terms of their gender. It further tried to see how male and female EFL learners would respond if they were in the same situation. To this end, 60 MA students and graduates (30 males and 30 females) were asked to rate eight requests in terms of their (im)politeness on a 4-point Likert scale. They were also required to write the possible response they would provide if they were in the same situations. The results indicated that both males and females had similar perceptions regarding the (im)politeness of the requests while their responses showed some variation. The possible underlying reasons behind this variation across genders were discussed and some suggestions for further research were presented. Generally speaking, though, one might conclude that gender would not influence the addressee’s perception of the degree of politeness of the request speech act in both formal and informal settings.

Index Terms—Request, (Im)Politeness, Politeness markers

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the speech acts to which considerable research attention has been directed is the act of request (Marti, 2006; Félix-Brasdefer, 2010; Lin, 2009; Liu, 2007; Tagushi, 2006). Request is “an illocutionary act whereby a speaker (requester) conveys to hearer (requestee) that she/he wants the requestee to perform an act which is for the benefit of the speaker” (Trosborg, 1994, p. 32, cited in Liu, 2007). It is “a directive act and a pre-event that indicates conversations” (Félix-Brasdefer, 2010, p. 2) and has often been investigated adjacent to the politeness since it is believed that “the activity is intrinsically impolite and carries heavy social implications and is therefore governed by putative principles of politeness” (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989; Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987; all cited in Taleghani-Nikazm, 2006, p. 11).

Most of the studies have taken a cross-cultural approach to reveal the commonalities and discrepancies between native and nonnative speakers’ request realization patterns (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Sifianou, 1992; Rinnert & Kobayashi, 1999) and a limited number of researchers have looked into the possible differences in the realization and performance of the request speech act under the influence of such variables as gender and age (Goates, 2004; Holmes, 1995; Marquez-Reiter, 2000; all cited in Félix-Brasderfer, 2010). Moreover, a large body of research has been allocated to the effects of social and situational factors e.g. social distance, social power, and imposition on the request and its directness in a variety of languages (Becker et al., 1989; Trosborg, 1995; Kwong, 2004; all cited in Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2010). Less is, however, known about the gender differences in the perceptions of and possible responses to the requests in general. In particular, the way the requests lacking any politeness markers would be perceived and responded, has not been studied either. It is worth noting that studying perceptions of politeness from a cross-cultural perspective came to the fore following the project carried out to investigate realization patterns of requests and apologies in different languages (the CCSARP project) (See Blum-Kulka, 1987) which aimed at exploring intra-lingual, situational, and cross-lingual variation in the use of these two speech acts.

Bearing this in mind, the current study tried to cast further light on Iranian EFL learners’ perceptions of the requests which lack any politeness markers in terms of their gender. It further tried to see how male and female EFL learners would respond if they were in the same situation.
II. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

A. Theoretical Background

Spoken and written forms of language have their own distinguishing characteristics (Leech, Deuchar, & Hoogenraad, 1982). However, what interlocutors mostly favor is being polite. Yule (1996) holds that politeness is realized as “polite social behavior, or etiquette, within a culture” (p. 60) and entails “a range of principles expressing politeness in any social interaction which may include being tactful, generous, modest, and sympathetic to others” (p. 60). In the same line, Urbanová and Oakland (2002) define politeness as “the ability of the speaker to show respect, discretion, and goodwill” (p. 42). In Hirschová’s (2006) terms, it is the way language is used while the focus is on “smooth communication, self-fulfillment, and self-defense of the individual in the interaction with other communicating individuals” (p. 171). Lakoff (cited in Hirschová, 2006, p. 171) summarizes politeness in the form of three rules: “do not impose, give options, and make the addressee feel good—be friendly”.

However, the concept of politeness should be discussed in light of a closely related concept, i.e. face (Yule, 1996). As Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 62) put it, face is “the kernel element in folk notions of politeness” and underlies a good relationship (Yule, 1996). It is “a public self-image of a person” (p. 60) which falls further into two categories: a) positive face defined as “fields of concepts, interests, wishes in which the individual wants to be respected and positively evaluated” (Hirschová, 2006, p. 172) and “the need to be accepted, even liked, by others” and “to be treated as a member of group” (Yule, 1996, p. 62) and b) negative face which means “to be independent, have freedom of action, and not to be imposed on by others” (p.61).

Accordingly, politeness is divided into two categories: positive politeness and negative politeness. The former “redressed directed to the addressee’s positive face” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 101) while the latter encompasses “redressive action addressed to the addressee’s negative face” (p. 129). On the other hand, Leech et al. (1982) considers relative politeness and absolute politeness as a set of scales which have a negative and a positive pole. At the negative pole, negative politeness underpins minimizing the impoliteness of impolite utterances and at the positive pole, positive politeness underlies maximizing the politeness of polite utterances.

Politeness encompasses a wide range of research. To narrow it down, hedging, i.e. several different categories of politeness markers are briefly discussed in this study. Willamová (2005) refers to hedging devices as “one of the means through which linguistic politeness can be manifested” which aim “to soften the propositional content of the message” (p. 80). Their function is to “attenuate the strength of an utterance” (p. 81).

In brown and Levinson’s (1987) words, they include “a particle, word, or phrase that modifies the degree of membership of a predicate or noun phrase in a set” (p. 145) which prevent any threat to the addressee’s face. Hedging devices are categorized into seven types (Willamová, 2005):

1) **Subjectivity markers** which are “speaker-oriented” (p. 82) and reiterate the speaker’s subjective attitude towards the message e.g. I think, I guess.

2) **Performative hedges** that are used to avoid direct utterance by refining its illocutionary force

3) **Pragmatic idioms** which are “minimal lexical devices that signal how the illocutionary force of an utterance should be interpreted” (p. 87) e.g. please, kindly, maybe.

4) **Clausal mitigators** which are further divided into if-clauses and but-clauses. They strive to mitigate the strength of an utterance.

5) **Downgraders** that include words like just, a bit, rather, a little in order to “minimize the size of imposition” (p. 94).

6) **Tentativizers** which are pragmatic markers that carry the concepts like hesitation, uncertainty, or vagueness e.g. well, I don’t know.

7) **Hedges on politeness maxims** which “mitigate a FTA such as a refusal or criticism” (p. 103) e.g. a kind of, I’m afraid.

In another categorization, House and Kasper (1981) propose taxonomy of politeness structure including politeness markers, play-downs, consultative devices, hedges, understaters, downtoners, committers, forewarning, hesitators, scope-staters, and agent avoiders. They define politeness markers as a set of expressions added to the utterance to demonstrate a cooperative behavior e.g. please, if you wouldn’t mind/don’t mind, and will/would you follow an imperative structure. Moreover, they state that hedges are used to avoid giving an exact propositional content and to provide the addressee with an open option to impose his/her intent, e.g. kind of, somehow, rather.

B. Empirical Studies

Globalization has broadened the scope of communication and discourse practices are considered as the locus of this interconnectedness (Sifianou, 2013). This expansion pierced into the norms of communicating so that its effects on the expression of politeness and impoliteness have drawn the scholars’ attention. In this regard, Sifianou (2013) searched for evidence from the service sector in Greece and England and analyzed the concepts of formality/informality, terms of address existing in naturally occurring data and research findings and concluded that although globalization has moved toward homogenization process, it has, by no means, brought about cultural homogeneity.
On the other hand, with the growing technological advances within the last two decades, investigating computer-mediated communities gained prominence. Graham (2007) attempted to see how expectations of (im)politeness are negotiated within an e-mail community and what make up the polite behavior in a computer-mediated setting. The findings revealed that deviation from the norms of interaction would lead to conflict. However, the participants could compensate for the conflict by actively negotiating the norms of politeness. In a more recent study, Shum and Lee (2013) also examined the discursive and interactional approaches in Hong Kong Internet discussion forums in terms of the interlocutors’ disagreement strategies. They asked forum browsers to rate the disagreement strategies regarding the parameters of politeness on a 5-point Likert scale. They also conducted an interview. The results revealed that interlocutors mostly used direct strategies which were rated as polite. Accordingly, they pointed to the complex and multidimensional nature of relational work in speech act performance.

Moreover, to provide a more comprehensive insight into the norms of politeness and their possible change with the pass of time, one set of studies has given particular attention to a comparative framework by examining the commonalities and discrepancies between historical and contemporary practices of polite interaction (Gu, 1990; Pan & Kádár, 2011). A second set of studies sought to explore the possible interface between several speech acts and politeness. Sifianou (2012) found that inter- and intra-cultural variation may cast some doubt on labeling disagreement as a face-threatening or impolite act as a number of other factors e.g. interlocutors’ personal traits and relational histories would make an impact on the way it is perceived.

A number of researchers also concentrated on linguistic strategies in refusal interactions in different situations. Félix-Brasdefer (2006) asked Mexican male university students to perform four role-play interactions with two native speakers of Spanish in both formal and informal situations and found that a number of formulaic/semi-formulaic expressions were applied for face negotiation. Bella (2011) also took advantage of role-plays to explore the politeness strategies which were used by native and non-native speakers of Greece while refusing an invitation from an intimate person. In this study, the possible influence of length of residence and intensity of interaction with native speakers on non-native speakers’ performance was also investigated. The results revealed that length of residence does not suffice while intensity of interaction can cause better results considering pragmatic appropriateness and politeness. Moreover, since the participants, regardless of the length of residence and intensity of interaction, proved to be pragmatically underdeveloped, the researcher reiterated the notoriety of pedagogical intervention to provide meaningful opportunities for interaction in order to enhance their pragmatic development.

On the other hand, discourse markers indicating (im)politeness have been the focus of much research. In this regard, Masahiko (1998) examined how narrative discourse markers and linguistic strategies would specifically shape Japanese oral personal narratives and found that Japanese adult narrators use the formal verb-ending patterns which are considered as politeness markers. However, it was found that these markers are not merely employed to reinforce politeness and they also play a key role in cultural and contextual framing. Mulken (1996) also found that different conceptions of the need for repair strategies would lead to different distribution of politeness markers in the Dutch and French speech communities.

Sifianou (1992) also tried to cast further light on the use of diminutives in expressing politeness by taking a contrastive approach toward Modern Greek and English. The findings indicated higher frequency and flexibility of formation of diminutives in Greek. It was also found that these linguistic elements were employed to show friendly and informal politeness. The researcher drew this conclusion that these markers are used to serve different purposes in the two languages under the study, i.e. in English they are used to show a preference for distance and formality whereas in Greek, they demonstrate a tendency for intimacy and informality.

Chodorowska-Pilch (2008) also pointed to interactional/interpersonal role of a grammaticalized politeness marker “Veráx”, i.e. “You’ll see” in Peninsular Spanish which was employed to establish politeness. However, the results of this study revealed that this discourse marker can invoke both positive and negative politeness simultaneously. In a more recent study, Terkourafi (2011) analyzed spoken corpus data from Cypriot Greek to investigate the changes three expressions “thank you”, “sorry”, “please” undertake when they are borrowed from English and found that they lose their main function and serve to demonstrate discourse-, gender-, class-, and ethnicity-based variation, i.e. they don’t function to express thanking, apologizing, and requesting speech acts.

Other scholars raised concerns related to the concept of politeness in business context. Jensen and Jensen (2010) investigated the effects of adding and combining positive politeness strategies to letters denying claims to policy holders and found that giving reasons would contribute positively to the evaluation of the letter. Dunn (2011) also examined the concept of politeness in Japanese business etiquette training in five work force development companies that provided seminars in business manners for new employees and understood that these classes would raise the young Japanese employees’ awareness of the type of politeness which is considered as important in the business world. Further, the work of several researchers revealed the conceptualization of face and
relational work and (im)politeness (Spencer-oatey, 2011; Ruhi & İşık-Güler, 2007) in which the results called for more pragmatic research to scrutinize relational work that is influenced by cultural issues.

C. Request Speech Act

One of the speech acts to which a host of studies have been allocated is the act of request (Félix-Brasdefer, 2010; Lin, 2009; Liu, 2007; Marti, 2006; Taguchi, 2006). Extensive research on this speech act has been conducted taking a cross-cultural orientation (Rinnert & Kobayashi, 1999; Sifianou, 1992) to compare native and non-native speakers’ request realization patterns.

In this regard, Marti (2006) attempted to explore the realization and politeness perception of requests made by Turkish monolingual speakers and Turkish-German bilingual returnees. The results of this study revealed that indirectness and politeness are related but the relationship is, by no means, linear. It was also found that Turkish monolingual speakers tend to apply more direct strategies in comparison with their bilingual counterparts. In the same line, Rinnert and Kobayashi (1999) investigated the relationship between indirectness and politeness among L1 speakers of Japanese and English by analyzing the requestive hints. The findings showed that requestive hints were more frequently used than direct and conventionally indirect requests. Contrarily, Blum-Kulka (1987) argued that indirectness does not necessarily mean politeness and it is the pragmatic clarity of the message that acts as an inevitable part of politeness.

In addition, a burgeoning research has increasingly focused on the effects of social and situational factors e.g. social distance, social power, and imposition on the request and its directness in a variety of languages (Becker et al., 1989; Trosborg, 1995; Kwong, 2004; all cited in Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2010). Besides, a large body of research has shown that power variables influence the speakers’ requestive behavior (Brown & Gilman, 1989; Fukushima, 2000; Holtgraves & Yang, 1990; Lustig & King, 1980; all cited in Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2010). Further, some researchers have attempted to delineate the choice of speech act strategies across different languages (See Barron, 2005).

Some other studies have also been allocated to the possible similarities and differences in the realization of requests in terms of the speakers’ gender. However, the investigation of pragmatic conventions in the light of this variable has received scant attention (Barron, 2005). Only few studies tried to cast light on gender differences in the realization and performance of requests (See Félix-Brasdefer, 2010).

D. The Study

As the review of literature might suggest, most of studies tried to cast light on cross-cultural variations in realization of request patterns (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Sifianou, 1992; Rinnert & Kobayashi, 1999). Few has been known of the possible impact of gender on the way request speech act is perceived and performed (See Félix-Brasdefer, 2010) and this was the main interest of the current study to bridge this gap. Hence, male and female Iranian EFL learners’ perception of the requests lacking any politeness markers was examined. Further, their responses in the case of experiencing the same situation were scrutinized considering their gender.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

A total of 60 EFL learners including 30 male and 30 female learners contributed to this study. All participants were either MA students or MA graduates whose age ranged from 24 to 41. It took almost 15 minutes to complete the DCTs individually. The participants were asked to rate the requests considering their (im)politeness on a 4-point Likert scale and to write the probable response (verbal or non-verbal) they would provide if they were addressed by the same speaker in the same situation. A total of 480 responses (240 ones from each gender) were collected.

B. Instrumentation

The study adopted a written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT) which included 8 situations. The participants were asked to imagine themselves in the situations and rate the (im)politeness of each request situation on a 4-point Likert scale. They were also required to write the probable answer they would provide if they were faced with the same situation and request. Two situations included a request made by a high-status person to a low-status person. Two situations embodied a request posed by a low-status person to a high-status person. Four situations (two in formal and two in informal settings) were related to requests made by a person of equal status with the addressee (See the Appendix).

IV. RESULTS

Table 1 and 2 summarize the descriptive statistics for the male and female EFL learners’ perceptions of the (im)politeness of eight request situations. As Table 1 and II illustrate, the lowest and highest mean scores belong to situations 6 and 5, respectively for both male and female participants. Both male and female participants deemed that a request, including no politeness marker, made in an informal situation, e.g. a class, between two interactants of equal status would not necessarily be perceived as impolite while this is not the case in a formal situation, e.g. an office.
A. Situation 1 and 7: The case of high-low status

The results of two independent t-tests reveal that no significant difference exists between male and female EFL learners’ perceptions of the (im)politeness with regard to request situation 1 and 7 (Sig.=0.09, 0.24, respectively, p≤0.05) (See Table 3).

Ten male participants perceived the request in situation 1 as mostly/slightly polite while 20 ones perceived it as mostly/slightly impolite. On the other hand, 6 female participants perceived the request in situation 1 as mostly/slightly polite whereas 24 ones perceived it as mostly/slightly impolite. Sixteen male participants rated the request in situation 7 as mostly/slightly polite while 14 ones perceived it as mostly/slightly impolite. On the other hand, 12 female participants perceived the request in situation 7 as mostly/slightly polite while 18 ones thought that it was mostly/slightly impolite.

All male participants who perceived request 1 as mostly/slightly polite tend to respond politely by positively reacting to the speaker. Eight out of 10 said that they would respond by giving the pen and saying “here you are” and “of course” while 2 participants deemed that they would say nothing and just give the pen. Five out of 6 female participants who perceived the request as mostly/slightly polite stated that they would respond politely, both verbally (e.g. here you are, sure) and non-verbally (e.g. smiling, showing respect) while one of them said that she would say nothing and give the pen. Among 16 male participants who perceived request 7 as mostly/slightly polite, 13 ones stated that they would respond by bringing the chair and using expressions like “sure”, “OK”, “Alright”, “in a minute”. However, 3 ones said that they would obey the request reluctantly (“I’ll do it reluctantly, It’s not my job) or refuse it by making an excuse (Super sorry, I have a backache). All 12 female participants who perceived this request as mostly/slightly polite, however, deemed that they would respond positively to the request. Nevertheless, two of them stated that they would get angry.

As the focus of this study was mostly on the participants’ responses to those requests which would be perceived as mostly/slightly impolite, the researcher tried to identify the strategies which the addressees would use. Table 4 illustrates the strategies and their frequency of use among male and female participants for situations 1 and 7.

B. Situation 2 & 8: The case of low-high status

The results of two independent t-tests show that both male and female EFL learners perceived the requests in situation 2 and 8 quite the same with regard to their
(im)politeness (Sig.= 0.23, 0.18, respectively, p<0.05) (See Table 5).

Table 5: The Results of t-test Analysis- Gender and Perception of (im)politeness of Request Situation 2&8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>P</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sit. 2</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>-1.20</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sit. 8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>-1.35</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>0.72</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Non-significant

Thirteen and six male participants perceived the requests in situation 2 and 8 as mostly/slightly polite respectively while 17 and 24 ones perceived them as mostly/slightly impolite. Among their female counterparts, 6 ones perceived the request in situation 2 as mostly/slightly polite while 4 ones had this opinion about the request in situation 8. Twenty-four and 26 female participants thought that the requests in situation 2 and 8 were mostly/slightly impolite, respectively.

As regards the request in situation 2, 10 male participants who perceived it as mostly/slightly polite stated that they would repeat the point for the student while 3 ones said that they would add some politeness markers, e.g. please and repeat the request posed by the student. However, all 6 female participants who had the same perception as their male counterparts deemed that they would repeat the point. Considering the request in situation 8, 4 male and all (4) female participants who perceived it as mostly/slightly polite mentioned that they would order the food while 2 male participants stated that they would leave the restaurant or react verbally.

Table 6 demonstrates the strategies used by those male and female participants who perceived the requests in situation 2 and 8 as mostly/slightly impolite along with their frequency of use.

Table 6: Male and Female Participants’ Strategies to Respond to Slightly/Mostly Impolite Request (Situation 2&8)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies/Situations</th>
<th>Male participants</th>
<th>Female participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Directly refusing the request verbally or nonverbally</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Complaining about the language which was used for making the request by using verbal expressions</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Complaining about the language which was used for making the request by using non-verbal reactions</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Agreeing to the request and using positive verbal expressions</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Agreeing to the request and using positive non-verbal reactions</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Agreeing to the request and using neither a verbal nor a non-verbal reaction</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Agreeing to the request and using negative verbal expressions</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Agreeing to the request and</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>T</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sit. 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>-0.67</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sit. 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>-0.76</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Non-significant

As regards situation 2, both male and female participants mentioned that they would agree to the request and use positive verbal expression (Ok, Please listen more carefully, Sure, etc.). However, as Table 6 indicates, female learners seemed to tend more either to use verbal expressions to complain about the language of the request (You mustn’t ask in this way, change your request, Use a better language) or to agree using neither verbal nor non-verbal reaction. Considering situation 8, female students expressed that they would mostly use verbal reactions (Who is your boss?, Be more polite, is this the appropriate way of taking to customers?) to remind the speaker of his/her (im)politeness in posing the request while their male counterparts asserted that they would prefer to use non-verbal reactions (leaving the restaurant) to show their dissatisfaction with the way the request was made or they would agree to the request by using some positive verbal expressions.

C. Situation 3 & 5: Equal status (formal setting)

As Table 7 displays, no significant difference was found among EFL learners’ perceptions of the (im)politeness of the requests in situation 3 and 5 in terms of their gender (Sig.= 0.50, 0.44, respectively, p<0.05).

Nine male participants perceived the request in situation 3 as mostly/slightly polite while 21 of them rated it as mostly/slightly impolite. Among their female counterparts, 7 participants perceived it as mostly/slightly polite whereas 23 ones rated it as mostly/slightly impolite. As regards the request situation 5, only 4 male participants perceived it as mostly/slightly polite while 26 ones rated it as mostly/slightly impolite. Only 2 female participants, on the other hand, perceived it as mostly/slightly polite while 28 ones agreed that the request in this situation was mostly/slightly impolite.

Among those male participants who perceived the request 3 as mostly/slightly polite, 4 ones stated that they would just fetch a glass of water without saying anything while 5 ones said that they would agree to the request and use such expressions as “Ok”, “I’ll get you in a minute”, “Sure”. For this request, all female participants who rated it as mostly/slightly polite asserted that they would agree to the request and use some positive polite expressions e.g. “Of course”, “Sure”. On the other hand,
those few male participants who perceived the request 5 as mostly/slightly polite stated that they would either agree (2 participants) or refuse (2 participants) politely. Two female participants who perceived it as mostly/slightly polite, however, mentioned that they would either say nothing or react nonverbally (frowning).

Regarding those male and female participants who perceived the request in situation 3 and 5 as mostly/slightly impolite, the strategies they employed are presented in Table 8. The frequency of use for each strategy is also provided.

### TABLE 8. MALE AND FEMALE PARTICIPANTS’ STRATEGIES TO RESPOND TO SLIGHTLY/MOSTLY IMPOLITE REQUEST (SITUATION 3&5)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies/Situations</th>
<th>Male participants</th>
<th>Female participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Directly refusing a request verbally or nonverbally</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Complaining about the language which was used for making the request by using verbal expressions</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Complaining about the language which was used for making the request by using nonverbal reactions</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Agreeing to the request and using positive verbal expressions</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Agreeing to the request and using positive non-verbal reactions</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Agreeing to the request and using neither a verbal nor a non-verbal reaction</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Agreeing to the request and using negative verbal expressions</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Agreeing to the request and using negative non-verbal reactions</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With regard to situation 3, male participants who perceived it as mostly/slightly impolite mostly stated that they would agree to the request and use some positive expressions (Ok, Sure, Here you are, Wait a minute please”) while female participants asserted that they would agree to the request without saying anything. Considering situation 5, male participants who rated it as mostly/slightly impolite mentioned that they would complain about the way language was used for making request by using both verbal (This way of talking is inappropriate, Be polite, My ears are working properly!”) or non-verbal (I look at him frowning, I just look at him strangely) expressions. Some of them also said that they would agree to the request and employ a number of positive expressions (I’ll answer, Ok, just a minute). Their female counterparts, however, showed higher tendency to refuse the request directly either verbally (I won’t answer, It isn’t my job, I won’t answer, You can answer if you can hear) or non-verbally (I keep silent and frowning, I continue my job without saying anything).

**D. Situation 4 & 6: Equal status (informal setting)**

As Table 9 displays, no significant difference was found among EFL learners’ perceptions of the (im)politeness of the requests in situation 3 and 5 in terms of their gender (Sig. = 0.18, 0.64, respectively, p≤0.05).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sit. 4</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>30</th>
<th>3.10</th>
<th>-1.33</th>
<th>58</th>
<th>NS*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Sit. 6 | Male | 30 | 2.30 | 0.74 | 0.46 | 58 | NS* |
|--------|------|----|-----|-------|----|-----|
| Female | 30   | 2.20| 0.92|      |    |     |

With regard to situation 4, 9 male and 5 female participants rated it as mostly/slightly polite while 21 male and 25 female participants perceived it as mostly/slightly impolite. On the other hand, 18 male and 20 female participants thought that the request in situation 6 was mostly/slightly polite whereas 12 male and 10 female participants agreed that it was mostly/slightly impolite.

All male participants who perceived the request 4 as mostly/slightly polite asserted that they would lend money by using some positive expressions (I would like to, Sure, How much do you need?). However, one of them stated that he would first talk about his financial problems and then he would ask how much money is needed. Among their female counterparts who held the same opinion considering this request, 4 respondents said that they would lend money. One of them, however, stated that she would not lend it. Among those who perceived the request in situation 6 as mostly/slightly polite, 9 male and all female (10) participants stated that they would give the eraser and apply some positive expressions (Here you go, Ok, Get it, Take it, Of course). Three male participants, on the other hand, deemed that they would complain about the way the request was made either verbally (EXCUSE ME!!, This is not appropriate way of talking!) or non-verbally (frowning).

As regards the male and female participants’ strategies to confront with the request they perceived as mostly/slightly impolite, Table 10 illustrates the results.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies/Situations</th>
<th>Male participants</th>
<th>Female participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Directly refusing a request verbally or nonverbally</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Complaining about the language which was used for making the request by using verbal expressions</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Complaining about the language which was used for making the request by using nonverbal reactions</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Agreeing to the request and using positive verbal expressions</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Non-significant.
Taking situation 4 into account, both male and female participants who perceived it as mostly/slightly impolite agreed that they would refuse the request verbally through using such expressions as “I’m out of money right now”, “Sorry, I don’t do it at all”, “Sorry, I don’t have any”, “Sorry, I require it myself”. Some female participants, however, asserted that they would agree to the request using no special verbal or non-verbal reaction. With regard to situation 6, both male and female participants who rated it as mostly/slightly impolite stated that they would agree to the request and use a number of positive verbal expressions (Ok, Take it, Sure, Here you are).

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The current study aimed at investigating Iranian EFL learners’ perceptions of (im)politeness of request speech act in request situation that lacked any politeness marker across two genders. Among eight request situations, both male and female respondents perceived request 5 as the most impolite one, followed by request situation 8 and 4. In situation 5, the status of the interlocutors was equal in a formal setting (workplace). In situation 8, the request was made by the waiter to the customer lacking any politeness marker and in situation 4, a neighbor posed the request to borrow some money.

One might notice that when the request lacking any politeness marker is made by a person of the same status with the addressee, it would be perceived as more impolite. This might indicate that people may not expect higher-status people to express their requests indirectly as they enjoy higher power and degree of imposition. Moreover, they seem not to expect lower-status people to make the request indirectly as their socio-economic status might influence their way of talking. However, they expect the people of the same status with them to understand that no one has superiority over the other one and thereby, no one has the right to behave like a commander.

Moreover, the findings demonstrated that gender would make no significant difference in EFL learners’ perceptions of (im)politeness of different request situations. However, comparing the number of participants who perceived a request as mostly/slightly impolite seemed to provide information about their expectations of politeness in different situations.

With regard to situations 1 and 7 in which the request was made by a person of higher status, the results seemed to be revealing. Both male and female respondents mostly agreed that the request posed by the teacher was more impolite than the one made by the boss. This might suggest that a teacher in an educational setting is expected to be more polite than a boss in an occupational setting. Furthermore, it might indicate that the degree of imposition is expected to be higher in an occupational setting and thereby, the request lacking any politeness marker by a boss would be perceived as less impolite. Interestingly, when it came to a request made by a person of lower status (situation 2 and 8), it was perceived as mostly/slightly impolite by most of male and female learners regardless of the setting. This may point to the fact that no matter it is made in an educational setting (class) or a public place (restaurant), lack of politeness markers in these situations makes the request impolite.

The way the respondents mentioned to react to the request they perceived as mostly/slightly impolite seems to be of significance. In the former situations in which the speaker was of higher status, both male and female participants agreed that they would politely agree to the request. This might be attributed to the speaker’s position as a teacher who is regarded as a respectable person whose requests should be politely considered. This point also has its roots in cultural and religious practices of Iranian people. The same results in situation 7 might stem from the fact that their boss should be respected due to some job-related considerations. Indeed, people prefer to keep their positive face in an occupational setting even if they are exposed to face-threatening acts by their boss; keeping face equals keeping jobs for them. In the latter situations, however, male and female participants seemed to feel much more offended so that they would prefer to react. However, what seems to make male and female participants’ reactions different is a matter of the type of reaction. Male participants tend to employ nonverbal strategies while their female counterparts prefer nonverbal reaction. The findings indicate that when the speaker’s status is lower than the addressee and the request lacks politeness markers, it would be perceived as more impolite and would be responded more seriously and both male and female learners tend to employ some other strategies to react rather than merely agree to the request.

Taking into account two situations in which the requests were made by a person of the equal status with the addressee (situations 3 and 5) in formal settings (conference meeting and office), the results revealed that they perceived as mostly/slightly impolite by most of the participants. This may show that interlocutors of equal status expect higher degree of politeness. Moreover, as regards situations 4 and 6 in which the requests were made in informal settings (neighborhood and classroom),
the participants mostly rated request 4 as mostly/slightly impolite while only 36% of them thought that request 6 as mostly/slightly impolite. This might indicate that equal status in very informal setting like classroom would not lead to expectations of higher degree of politeness. Hence, the request situation 6 was rated less impolite than the one in situation 4.

As regards the equal status in the formal setting, the probable reactions of the participants seem to be of importance. In situation 3 which was highly formal, both male and female participants preferred to overlook the impoliteness and agree to the request and either use positive expressions or say nothing. However, in situation 5, male participants stated that they would complain about the way the request was made and female respondents asserted that they would refuse the request either verbally or nonverbally. Here, it seems that they thought much freer to react to impolite behavior.

This was the same for situation 4 (informal setting) as both male and female participants mentioned that they would refuse the request directly and verbally. Contrarily, in situation 6, both groups noted that they would agree to the request politely. Hence, it might be concluded that even situations in which the interlocutors are considered as having equal status enjoy variations regarding the way a request without politeness marker is perceived and responded.

To put it in a nutshell, familiarity of the interlocutors of equal status and their relational history might influence their perceptions and responses in a request situation (Sifianou, 2012). Furthermore, as Blum-Kulka (1987) pinpointed, indirectness does not necessarily mean politeness. It might be inferred from the findings of the current study that directness may not always imply impoliteness. As Shum and Lee’s (2013) findings indicated, direct strategies might sometimes be perceived as polite.

On the other hand, as the number of participants who perceived the requests lacking politeness markers as mostly/slightly impolite might suggest, deviation from norms of interaction would result in conflict (Graham, 2007). Hence, indirectness and politeness should be considered as related concepts (Martí, 2006; Rinnett & Kobayashi, 1999) but this is a relative issue.

As a large body of research demonstrated, power variable would play a significant role in speaker’s requestive behavior (Brown & Gilman, 1989; Fukushima, 2000; Holtrgraves & Yang, 1990; Lustig & King, 1980; all cited in Economomidou-Kogetisidis, 2010). According to the findings of this study, one might speculate that this variable would influence the addressee’s perception of the degree of politeness of the request speech act in both formal and informal settings as well. Moreover, interlocutors’ personality traits and relational history might affect the way the politeness of a speech act is perceived (Sifianou, 2012). However, as employing politeness strategies would be positively evaluated (Jensen & Jensen, 2012), it seems better to keep face by adding some politeness markers to the request.

Although the current study enriched the politeness literature, the findings should be approached cautiously due to the small sample size. It is, therefore, recommended to replicate the current study with larger sample size and different groups of EFL learners, e.g. BA students, in different educational settings, e.g. learners in the institutes. Besides, further research can be carried out taking the gender of the speakers into account to see how people would perceive and respond to the requests lacking politeness markers and made by male or female speakers. Besides, it is also possible to explore the possible influence of teaching politeness markers on EFL learners’ perceptions and responses in different request situation.

Appendix A: POLITENESS QUESTIONNAIRE

Age: ............ Gender: Male Female

Dear Participant! Read the following situations and rate the speaker's request based on its appropriateness in terms of politeness within the range of 1-4. Then, put yourself in the addressee's shoes and write (in "Your Response" section) what you might say/do in response?

1. You are in class and your teacher wants a pen and says: "Hey, give me your pen." 
   1. Mostly polite
   2. Slightly polite
   3. Slightly impolite
   4. Mostly impolite
   Your response: .........................................................

2. You are explaining a grammatical point in the class as a teacher. Your student has problem in understanding that point and says: "Repeat this point again."
   1. Mostly polite
   2. Slightly polite
   3. Slightly impolite
   4. Mostly impolite
   Your response: .........................................................

3. You are at a conference. The presenter is thirsty and wants some water. He tells you: "Bring a glass of water for me."
   1. Mostly polite
   2. Slightly polite
   3. Slightly impolite
   4. Mostly impolite
   Your response: .........................................................
4. Your new neighbor needs some money to buy something and tells you: "Lend me some money."
   1. Mostly polite
   2. Slightly polite
   3. Slightly impolite
   4. Mostly impolite
   Your response:

5. You are in the office. The phone is ringing. Your colleague is too busy and says: "Can’t you hear? Answer the phone."
   1. Mostly polite
   2. Slightly polite
   3. Slightly impolite
   4. Mostly impolite
   Your response:

6. You are in class and your classmate needs an eraser. Your classmate tells you: "Give me your eraser."
   1. Mostly polite
   2. Slightly polite
   3. Slightly impolite
   4. Mostly impolite
   Your response:

7. You are an employee in an office and your boss needs an extra chair in the meeting room and tells you: "Bring one extra chair to the meeting room."
   1. Mostly polite
   2. Slightly polite
   3. Slightly impolite
   4. Mostly impolite
   Your response:

8. You go to a restaurant. The waiter comes to take your order and tells you: "Order the food."
   1. Mostly polite
   2. Slightly polite
   3. Slightly impolite
   4. Mostly impolite
   Your response:

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REFERENCES


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