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## POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN ENGLISH BUSINESS LETTERS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF NATIVE AND NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH

This study investigated the use of politeness strategies in a corpus of English business letters written by Iranian non-native speakers in comparison with business letters written by English native speakers. The positive and negative politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson's (1978) theory were employed. A corpus of 46 business letters written by non-native employees of four companies and 46 letters written by native speakers who were in correspondence with these companies were analyzed to examine their use of politeness strategies. The results collected from the analysis of letters written by non-native parties as senders were compared to those written by native speakers as receivers in response. The findings showed that although both parties used both types of politeness strategies in their letters, non-native participants employed both types (negative and positive politeness strategies) more than native speakers, especially positive politeness strategies, which were found to be used more frequently than negative ones. Additionally, the results demonstrated that social distance plays an important role in the employment of different strategies, particularly in choosing the type of salutation, which is an act requiring the positive politeness strategy to reduce face threatening act. Thus, more frequent use of positive politeness strategies by non-native speakers could be an effect of this factor.

*Key words:* Business letter, politeness strategy, social distance

### **Introduction**

Today's workforce must stay connected at all times. "Knowledge and information workers are expected to remain tethered to their jobs wherever they are, even on the weekends or on vacation" (Guffey & Loewy, 2012, p. 106).

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Therefore, the ability to communicate in a manner that preserves the relationship and at the same time comes up with the business requirements and goals is something that needs more consideration. Nevertheless, it is not as simple as it seems since business discourse is not just a matter of vocabulary and grammar; choosing an appropriate tone is also fundamental. The tone of a business letter may transfer something more profound than the surface meaning of words and may even maintain or break a business relationship (Xinglian, 2006). Therefore, saving the face of both parties and using politeness principles are essential. These principles show their remarkable importance when written communication between the parties contains requests, complaints, or rejections. The current study attempted to investigate the use of politeness strategies, as proposed by Brown and Levinson (1978), among non-native businessmen in their written international business communication in comparison to their native counterparts.

Brown and Levinson's politeness theory can be traced back to Goffman's (1967) notion of face, defined as "the public self image" or image of self which can be lost, maintained, or enhanced (Brown & Levinson, 1987). This concept consists of two parts: the positive face and the negative face. The positive face is the desire to belong and to be approved, appreciated, and accepted. The negative face is "the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, right to non-distraction, and freedom of action and from imposition" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 61). According to Brown and Levinson (1978), some acts intrinsically threaten the face of addressee; they called these acts face threatening acts (FTAs). FTAs include acts that threaten either positive or negative faces, or both of them. For instance, acts such as apologies threaten the positive face of the speaker, while acts like expressing thanks threaten the negative face of the speaker. Acts such as orders and suggestions are threats to the negative face of the addressee, while the positive face of addressee is threatened by receiving criticism, complaints, disagreements, etc. The weight of FTAs or the degree to which they threaten the face of speaker or addressee is determined by three factors: (a) social distance between the speaker and hearer, (b) the relative power, and (c) the degree of the imposition in that culture. The greater these three factors are the greater the seriousness of the FTAs (Nickerson, 1999), and the greater the seriousness of FTAs the more likely the speaker is to employ politeness strategies to mitigate the degree of the threat to the addressee's face, especially when the addressee has more power or is at a higher social distance than the speaker (Maier, 1992).

In business letters, the speaker is the sender and the addressee is the receiver of the letter. Since the basic content of business letters includes issues such as orders, requests, offers, complaints, apologies, and suggestions, knowing how to use politeness strategies is something that is especially necessary at the beginning of a relationship between two parties.

Nickerson (1999) investigated the use of politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1978) to gain a greater understanding of how the relationship between the sender and the receiver affects the rhetoric within the letter (Nickerson, 1999). In her study, a corpus of 82 non-technical business letters was analyzed and the following positive and negative strategies were identified as occurring most frequently in the business letters she examined:

***Positive Politeness Strategies***

1. Use appropriate forms of address
2. Establish common ground
3. Be optimistic
4. Sender asserts knowledge of and concern for receiver's wants

***Negative Politeness Strategies***

1. Go on record as incurring a debt
2. Show deference
3. Be pessimistic
4. Hedged
5. Minimize imposition
6. Impersonalize sender and receiver
7. Admit impingement
8. Give reasons
9. Beg forgiveness

(Nickerson, 1999, p. 132-133)

She found these strategies for both categories (see methodology for the categories), including different parts of a business letter, and identified the polarity (positivity or negativity) of strategies used in each act of these categories.

Several studies investigated the area of politeness, both in spoken language and written documents, and the theory itself (e.g. Kitamura, 2000). Most of the studies based on Brown and Levinson's model had been surprisingly limited to samples of spoken language, like Kitamura's (2000) analysis of casual conversation (Maier, 1992). Myers (1989), however, applied this model to journal articles. Some studies applied politeness strategies to business letters (Pilegaard, 1997; Jansen & Janssen, 2010; Maier, 1992; Nickerson, 1999) and some other studies examined politeness strategies used by native and non-native speakers of English (e.g. Carrell & Konneker, 1981). Maier (1992) investigated politeness strategies elicited in business letters by both native and non-native speakers. She examined the native speaker letters for "specific constructions which could be categorized as politeness strategies based on Brown and Levinson's model" (p. 193). Then, she compared the native speaker data with the non-native speaker data in order to determine similarities and differences between the two groups. For this purpose, she collected the data from business letters written by eight native and ten

non-native speakers of English who were told to consider a fictional situation in which they had unavoidably missed a job interview in another city. Each subject should write a letter to the personnel manager of the company to explain the situation and to persuade him to give him/her another interview at a later date. The results showed striking differences between these two groups in using politeness strategies: the use of politeness strategies by non-native speakers was less formal and more direct than native speakers. In addition, non-native speakers avoided using certain strategies and employed others more than native speakers (Maier, 1992). They used fewer negative strategies and relied more heavily on positive strategies (Nickerson, 1999).

Brown and Levinson's politeness theory has been widely applied and is considered to be one of the most influential frameworks within the field of sociolinguistics (Eelen, 2001; Fraser, 2005; Ming-Chung, 2003, as cited in Gilks, 2009). Many researchers used this model to analyze different written texts or speech data (e.g. Pikor-Niedzialek, 2005; Holmes, 1990). Brown and Levinson's politeness model was demonstrated to be applicable for languages other than English and was detectable in both native and non-native texts and speech (e.g., Maier, 1992; Holmes, 1990; Wadsorn, 2008). Therefore, the findings of different studies and researchers conformed to Brown and Levinson's theory and provided evidence for different aspects of this model. This comprehensiveness developed the idea that this model would also be an applicable model for current data and a proper framework to analyze English business letters written by native and non-native speakers.

The current study looked at authentic business discourse rather than elicited data. It presented a study of politeness strategies (both positive and negative strategies) in English, including a brief comparison to such strategies in English business letters written by native and non-native speakers. This study aims to compare politeness strategies in a corpus of English business letters written by Iranian non-native speakers in comparison to business letters written by English native speakers. To this end, the following research questions were addressed:

1. Do non-native and native speakers of English use the same politeness strategies in their business letters?
2. If so, what is the typology of politeness strategies used by the two groups?

## Methodology

A corpus of 92 English business letters (emails) was collected. 46 letters were written by Iranian native speakers and the other 46 letters were written by their native English addressees. These letters were chosen as they were sent to native speakers of English for business purposes; therefore, the access to native business letters was more facilitated. They were short, written correspondences between four Iranian companies and their English counterparts, including common business concepts such as buying products, introducing new

products, asking for additional information, contracting, confirming information already known to the receiver, accepting responsibility for an action or event, etc. Non-native letters were written by employees who were responsible for correspondence in their companies. They included both males and females in an age range of 28-40, and they all held MA degrees. The native speakers were both males and females between the ages of 35 to 48. They held MA degrees or PhD's, and were the general managers or the line managers of their companies. Thus, there was a social distance between native and non-native parties in some letters.

The different parts of a letter proposed by Nickerson (1999) were used here to analyze the politeness language of business letters written by both groups. They are as follows:

**Category 1** parts of a letter which contributed to the establishment of the sender and receiver relationship:

- a) The Salutation, used to identify the receiver.
- b) The Close, used to signal the completion of the letter.
- c) The Signature, used to identify the sender, including details of professional position, academic titles, company, etc.
- d) The Context, used to establish the sender's reason for making contact with the receiver.
- e) The Pre-close, an element which may or may not occur immediately before the close in order to signal or prepare the close.

**Category 2** parts were used to convey the informational content of the letter:

- a) Confirmation, used to verify information already known to the receiver.
- b) Enclose, used to indicate the information is being sent together with the letter.
- c) Request, used to ask the receiver to do something.
- d) Inform, used to convey news to the receiver.
- e) Suggestion, used to describe a corpus of action which the sender feels may be beneficial for the receiver to follow.
- f) Apology, used to acknowledge or accept responsibility for an action or event detrimental to the receiver.

(Nickerson, 1999, p. 130)

All the 46 business letters and their 46 responses were analyzed by the researchers to examine the occurrence of politeness strategies used by senders or receivers to mitigate the face threatening acts that may happen in these two categories. The frequency of usage for each positive or negative strategy was calculated for each group, and then the results of both groups were compared. The role of 'social distance' as one of the three factors affecting the weight of the FTA was also examined.

Table 1. Frequency of Positive Politeness Strategies Used by Non-Native Speakers

Act	Politeness Strategy	Percentage	Example
Salutation	Use appropriate forms of address	100	Dear Louis
Close	Use appropriate forms of address	91	Best regards
Signature	Use appropriate forms of address	100	Behrouz Elahi, MS Student
Context	Establish common ground	58	With reference to your e-mail
Pre-close	Be optimistic	15	We look forward to receiving your firm order
Enclose	Sender asserts knowledge	0	
	Be optimistic	2	We have pleasure in enclosing
Confirmation	Be optimistic	9	I'm so pleased to submit
	Establish common ground	0	

## Results and Discussion

Analysis of the gathered data revealed that positive politeness strategies ( $M = 3.65$ ) occurred more often than negative politeness strategies ( $M = 2.46$ ). Table 1 presents the percentage and frequency of politeness strategies used in the letters of non-native speakers and their types together with corresponding examples. The percentages in Table 1 and 2 were calculated from the number of times a given politeness strategy could be identified within each act.

The frequency of positive and negative politeness strategies used by English native speakers is presented in Table 3 and 4. The results showed that native speakers tended to produce more positive politeness strategies ( $M = 3.65$ ) than negative politeness strategies ( $M = 1.35$ ).

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to investigate negative politeness strategies in non-native business letters and those used in the letters of native speakers. The findings showed that there was a significant difference between native speakers ( $M = 1.35$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ) and non-native speakers ( $M = 2.46$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ) in using negative politeness strategies.

The t-test results showed that there was no significant difference between native speakers ( $M = 3.65$ ,  $SD = 1.402$ ) and non-native speakers ( $M = 3.65$ ,

Table 2. Frequency of Negative Politeness Strategies Used by Non-Native Speakers

<b>Act</b>	<b>Politeness Strategy</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Example</b>
Context	Go on a record	30	Thank you for your e-mail
Pre-close	Go on a record	61	If you have any further questions do not hesitate to contact me
	Show deference	13	It is my pleasure to collaborate with you
Confirmation	Minimize imposition	0	
	Hedged	2	I agree with you that we should ...
	Be optimistic	0	
Enclose	Minimize imposition	2	Please find attached file ...
Request	Go on a record	20	I will be very thankful if you let me
	Minimize imposition	41	Please send invoice for me
	Hedged	13	You are requested to check
	Be pessimistic	9	We kindly request you to take necessary action
Inform	Go on a record	13	Certainly I will let you know ...
	Hedged	9	I'd like to inform you
	Impersonalise sender and receiver	9	Regarding LC terms of course
Suggestion	Be pessimistic	2	Please check my website for
	Hedged	7	Please follow as hereunder
Apology	Beg forgiveness	9	Please accept my apology for the late reply
	Give reasons	2	I am sorry for delay because ...
	Admit Impingement	2	I apologize for delay

*SD* = 0.971) in their use of positive politeness strategies. The group statistics and the independent samples t-test results are shown in Table 5 and 6.

The correspondence of both groups was analyzed and politeness strategies were examined. In all letters under investigation, the senders (non-native

Table 3. Frequency of Positive Politeness Strategies Used by Native Speakers

Act	Politeness Strategy	Percentage	Example
Salutation	Use appropriate forms of address	100	Dear Peyman
Close	Use appropriate forms of address	80	Kind regards
Signature	Use appropriate forms of address	100	Louis Grace, Sales Manager
Context	Establish common ground	30	It is a pleasure for me to hear that news from you
Pre-close	Be optimistic	10	Looking forward to hearing from you
Enclose	Sender asserts knowledge	4	Attached is the following
	Be optimistic	0	
Confirmation	Be optimistic	21	I am very keen to meet up with you
	Establish common ground	17	However, as you would agree

speakers) and the receivers (native speakers) both used ‘appropriate forms of address’ in the salutation and signature parts, whereas in the close part non-native speakers used fewer positive politeness strategies and tended to use less close phrases. It seems that social distance between the sender and receiver played a significant role in the employment of politeness strategies in salutation; that is, non-native senders in lower social distance used more formal salutations than native receivers in higher positions. For example, the salutation “Dear Dr Grace” was used by the sender while “Dear Behrouz” (Dear + First Name) was used in frequent correspondence by the receiver who was in higher social position, and when the receiver was a manager and the sender was an employee. However, letters in which the sender and the receiver were in approximately the same social position, i.e. both were managers of their companies, the salutation was more sensitive to the frequency of correspondence between the sender and the receiver. This means that “Dear + First Name” was used frequently in correspondence within a low social distance. For instance, “Dear Payman” was used by the receiver and “Dear Achal” was written by the



Table 4. Frequency of Negative Politeness Strategies Used by Native Speakers

<b>Act</b>	<b>Politeness Strategy</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Example</b>
Context	Go on a record	19	Thank you for the message ...
Pre-close	Go on a record	13	Please let me know so that we can ...
Confirmation	Show deference	2	Looking forward to meeting you
	Minimize imposition	4	I agree with you regarding
	Hedged	10	I would like to acknowledge that you ...
Enclose	Be pessimistic	0	
	Minimize imposition	4	Please find attached the Price list of our ...
Request	Go on a record	10	I would appreciate if you could contact them
	Minimize imposition	41	Also please let me know how you ...
	Hedged	4	Can you please contact them
	Be pessimistic	0	
Inform	Impersonalise sender and receiver	13	Regarding Nebulisers for Neonates
Suggestion	Be pessimistic	6	I suggest you to kindly let me know
	Hedged	2	You can promote MW Digitals
Apology	Beg forgiveness	2	I am sorry to disappoint you
	Give reasons	0	
	Admit impingement	0	

Table 5. Group Statistics of Politeness Strategies Used by Native and Non-Native Speakers

<b>Politeness Strategy</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
Negative Strategies	Non-native	46	2.46	1.11
	Native	46	1.35	1.70
Positive Strategies	Non-native	46	3.65	0.97
	Native	46	3.65	1.40

Table 6. Independent Samples T-Test Results of Negative and Positive Politeness Strategies

<b>Politeness Strategy</b>	<b><i>t</i></b>	<b><i>df</i></b>	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>
Negative Strategies	3.70	90	0.000
Positive Strategies	0.00	90	1.000

non-native sender as a salutation. This considerable sensitivity to the frequency of correspondence between sender and receiver was also shown to be the case by Nickerson (1999), when she reported such sensitivity in salutations, closes, and signatures in all of the letters she examined. As she mentioned, when a realization becomes fixed it can no longer be changed. It means that once “Behrouz Elahi” in the present corpus becomes “Dear Behrouz” (Dear + First Name), the use of “Dear Mr. Elahi” (Dear + Last Name) to address him will be an FTA made by the sender.

The context act included both positive and negative strategies that indicated the sender’s reason for making contact with the receiver. The non-native group used more politeness strategies in this act both positively and negatively, with a higher frequency for positive politeness strategies. Non-native participants emphasized common ground between two parties more than their native counterparts. For example, the sender referred to the purpose of the letter, e.g. “With reference to your email ...” as a positive strategy of ‘establishing common ground’ or “Thank you for your email ...” as a negative strategy of ‘going on record’ to mitigate the FTA. This is in line with Nickerson’s (1999) study. She assumed that British receivers expect a context at the beginning of a business letter, i.e. immediately after the salutation, and in the case of omission there is a risk of FTA of the same type posed by inappropriate forms of address.

Negative politeness strategies found in pre-close had a higher frequency for non-native speakers, whereas both groups were nearly the same in using positive politeness strategies. The higher frequency of negative strategies used by both groups identified the need for the sender to minimize imposition and maintain a good relationship with the receiver. For example, the pre-close realizations “It is my pleasure to collaborate with you ...” or “If you have any further question do not hesitate to contact me ...” were used to ensure the cooperation of the receiver. Brown and Levinson’s negative strategy ‘go on record as incurring a debt’ seemed to be a key strategy for non-native speakers in order to minimize imposition. In addition, omission of pre-close may make an additional threat to the receiver’s positive face, as was the case for context, since the sender will be using an inappropriate form of address (Nickerson, 1999).

In enclose acts where information was being sent together with the letter, positive and negative strategies were employed. For example, realizations such as “Please find attached the price list of our ...” is an example of the negative strategy ‘Minimizing Imposition’ in order to mitigate the threat to the receiver’s negative face. “We have pleasure in enclosing ...” is a pre-close realization in which the positive politeness strategy ‘Being Optimistic’ was used. The native speakers used 4% positive and 4% negative strategies, whereas non-native speakers used positive and negative strategies for only 2% of their sentences. An example of a negative strategy is “Please find attached the price list of our products”. “Further to my below mail, I have attached a presentation of...” is a positive strategy used in the letters. Non-native participants preferred ‘being optimistic’ as positive strategy in order to mitigate the FTA, but native speakers preferred to use ‘asserting knowledge’ in attaching the information.

Confirmation act, which is used to verify or clarify information already known to the receiver, included both positive and negative strategies. Native speakers showed more tendencies toward using politeness strategies for confirmation than non-native speakers, especially for negative strategies. They used ‘hedging’, e.g. “I would like to acknowledge that ...”, or try to ‘minimizing imposition’, e.g. “I agree with you regarding ...”, as negative politeness strategies. ‘Being optimistic’, e.g. “I am very keen to meet up with you ...”, or trying to ‘establish common ground’, e.g. “However, as you would agree ...”, were used as positive politeness strategies in order to create or maintain the relationship with the receiver and to reach a favorable business decision.

In the request act, where the sender asks the receiver to do something, the negative strategy was used much more by non-native speakers to mitigate the FTA. The strategy of ‘Minimizing Imposition’ and ‘Going on record as incurring a debt’ occurred frequently. For example, in realizations such as “Please let me know how you ...” and “I would appreciate if you could contact them ...” verbs such as ‘can’ in “Can you please contact them ...” is an example of ‘hedging’ used as a negative politeness strategy. 41% of negative politeness strategies used in request acts were ‘Minimizing Imposition’ for both native and non-native parties in order to lessen the threat of their requests.

Most of the realizations in inform acts of letters written by non-native speakers were mitigated by the use of the negative politeness strategy ‘Go on record as incurring a debt’, e.g. “Certainly I will let you know ...”. They also used ‘hedging’ and ‘impersonalize sender and receiver’ as appropriate strategies to mitigate the threat caused by conveying news to the receiver. However, in letters written by native speakers the inform acts were mitigated mostly by employing ‘Impersonalize sender and the receiver’, e.g. “Regarding nebulizers for neonates ...”.

The frequency of occurrence of the suggestion act was not noticeable in business letters written by both groups. However, they partially used the same percentage of negative politeness strategies to minimize FTAs. The positive po-

liteness strategy 'Being Pessimistic', e.g. "I suggest you to kindly let me know ...", occurred more frequently in non-native business letters, while native speakers tended to use 'Hedging' as negative politeness strategy for mitigating suggestions, e.g. "Please follow as here under ...".

The apology act is a mitigation that is used to accept responsibility for an action. Non-native senders included more negative politeness strategies in their business letters in order to 'Beg Forgiveness', e.g. "Please accept my apology for the late reply ...", or 'To Give Reasons', e.g. "I am sorry for delay because ...". In addition, 'Admit Impingement' was another politeness strategy used by this group to minimize the threat of apologies, e.g. "I apologies for delay ...". The negative politeness strategy 'admit the impingement' occurred in Nickerson (1999) and Maier (1992) studies. Compared to the native speakers, the sentences of apology used by non-native speakers were less formal in Maier's research. Maier identified that in all of the letters analyzed the reason for having missed the interview was included, i.e. they used the negative strategy 'give overwhelming reason'.

In Iranian culture politeness and being polite in social relationships is important. People need to be polite because it enhance both their own face and the addressees' face, i.e. showing respect to people. This goal is achieved by complementing, using hedges, applying appropriate terms of address and address pronouns, etc. The extent of employing politeness strategies differs regarding context and depends mostly on the social distance between interlocutors. The greater the social distance is the more the politeness strategies are used.

This issue was also discussed by Sofia A. Koutlaki (2002). She mentioned that:

in Persian, non-conformity to established norms is very likely to result in a face-threatening situation for one's interlocutor, because the use of an inappropriate linguistic form on the part of a speaker may be perceived as trying to establish a different relationship from the one an addressee feels appropriate or desirable (Koutlaki, 2002, p. 1739).

Loss of face can happen if an interlocutor is seen behaving or becomes known to have behaved in a way that is not socially acceptable. This is the society's criticism that damages the speaker's face. Therefore, in Iranian culture behaving in line with societal values is of supreme importance.

## Conclusion

The analysis of business letters written by two groups (native and non-native speakers of English) revealed that even in letters with low social distance between the sender and the receiver, there can be some variations between native and non-native speakers in choosing the appropriate form of politeness strategy. In addition, there was also a difference in frequency of politeness strategies used

by two parties with the same social distance in order to mitigate the FTA of acts occurred in business letters. In letters in which the receivers were in higher position, non-native speakers resorted much more often to politeness strategies to decrease the FTA and save the face of the receiver.

This investigation of business letters written by native and non-native speakers of English indicated several findings. First, there are noticeable differences in the use of politeness strategies by the native and non-native groups. The non-native speakers used more negative politeness strategies to mitigate the FTAs to preserve the receiver's face. Second, they used more formal salutations as a result of great social distance between the sender and the native receiver, whereas the difference between native and non-native speakers in using positive politeness strategies was not statistically significant. Third, the analysis of business letters written by each group indicated that both groups tended to use positive politeness strategies significantly more often than negative strategies.

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