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Investigating the Use of Reference, Impoliteness and Mitigation by Iraqi EFL learners at the University Level

A B S T R A C T

The current study is an attempt to measure the Iraqi EFL University learners' abilities in pragmatics. The study aims to test whether the Iraqi EFL learners are able to understand pragmatic concepts, Assessing the Iraqi EFL University learners' recognition of Reference, Impoliteness and Mitigation. The study hypothesizes that the Iraqi EFL postgraduates are more able than undergraduates to utilize reference, impoliteness and mitigation. The participants of the study are seventy four Iraqi undergraduates and forty two Iraqi postgraduates, Dep. of English from different Colleges and universities. The data elicitation tool is a recognition test according to the nature of the study. The study reached at a conclusion that postgraduates are better than undergraduates in their understanding of pragmatics.

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تقصي استخدام الاشارة وعدم الادب والتلطيف من قبل المتعلمين للغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية في المستوى الجامعي

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المستخلص

الدراسة الحالية هي محاولة لقياس امكانيات الطلبة العراقيين متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية (EFL) في مجال التداولية (البراغماتية). تهدف الدراسة الى اختبار ما اذا كان الطلبة العراقيين متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية قادرين على فهم المفاهيم التداولية وتقييم مدى ادراكهم للإشارة، قلة التأدب والتلطيف. وتفترض الدراسة ان طلاب الدراسات العليا العراقيين أكثر قدرة من طلاب المرحلة الجامعية على فهم الاشارة وعدم الادب والتلطيف. ويبلغ عدد المشاركين في هذه الدراسة ٧٤ طالب في المرحلة الجامعية و ٤٢ طالب دراسات عليا من قسم اللغة الانكليزية من كليات وجامعات مختلفة. ان الاداة التي استخدمت في جمع البيانات هي اختبار ادراكي يتناسب مع طبيعة الدراسة واهدافها. وتوصلت هذه الدراسة الى ان طلبة الدراسات العليا يتفوقون على طلبة المرحلة الجامعية في فهمهم للتداولية من حيث الاشارة وقلة التأدب والتلطيف.

1. Introduction

Language serves as the primary medium of communication. According to pragmatic perspective, language use and language users are the main focus in interaction. Accordingly, pragmatics is the study of meaning in interactions in which listeners and speakers create meaning that is highly influenced by situational and contextual factors. Pragmatics plays an effective role in communication and helps to understand the meaning beyond the literal one. Aspects of pragmatics such as reference, impoliteness and mitigation, amongst others play a vital role in meaning- making in conversation. Although the learners have the linguistic knowledge, they need to recognize this knowledge in a communicative context.

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent are the Iraqi EFL (undergraduates and postgraduates) able to:

a. Recognize reference effectively in speech to achieve clarity and cohesion?

b. . Comprehend impoliteness strategies correctly in different situations?

c. Understand mitigation devices during communication?

This study aims at:

1. Assessing EFL undergraduates' and postgraduates' recognition of reference correctly.

2. Shedding light on EFL undergraduates' and postgraduates' recognition of impoliteness strategies.

3. Knowing EFL undergraduates' and postgraduates' abilities to comprehend mitigation devices.

According to the aims of the study, it is hypothesized that:

The Iraqi EFL postgraduates are more able than undergraduates to:

1. Comprehend reference.

2. Recognize impoliteness strategies.

3. Recognize mitigation.

The sample of study is selected randomly from one hundred sixteen answers of EFL learners distributed to 74 undergraduates and 42 postgraduates, Department of English selected from different universities and colleges. Evaluating the Iraqi EFL learners' abilities is limited to the recognition side.

This study adopts the following steps:

1. Conducting an objective test of 15 items in the form of questions with four options, one option is correct and the other ones are incorrect. The items are equally divided to three areas in pragmatics: reference, impoliteness and mitigation.

2. Selecting randomly 74 undergraduates and 42 postgraduates of Iraqi EFL university learners taken from different universities and colleges to participate in the test.

3. The categories of the respondents are EFL undergraduates who are currently at the fourth year, Departments of English; and postgraduates who consist of MA and PhD students in some Iraqi Universities and colleges of Education and Arts.

4. Applying the test on the selected samples.

2. Literature Review

Pragmatics is a vibrant and swiftly growing field in contemporary linguistics and the philosophy of language. Recently, it gained prominence as a central topic in cognitive science, artificial intelligence, information science, neuroscience, language disorders, anthropology, and sociology (Huang, 2014: 1). Levinson (1983: 3), pointed out that pragmatics examines how utterances communicate contextually influenced information, encompassing the speaker's intent and the listener's viewpoint. Levinson's work positions pragmatics as decisive for understanding communication nuances emphasizing the need to explain meaning beyond words alone .

.٢1 Reference

Referring expressions, or "references," are used by speakers to designate particular entities. A reference is significantly dependent on its context. In the same way as in (38), the speaker intends to use the term "Edinburg" to refer to the city of the same name in Indiana:

(١)Today, we travelled to Edinburg by car (Griffiths, 2006, pp. 13-14).

In order to prevent the utterance from being misinterpreted as referring to the Edinburg in Illinois or the one in Texas, the speaker of the aforementioned example must ensure that the listener is aware that they are in Indiana (ibid).

Reference is classified into two types: exophoric and endophoric reference. Both exophoric and endophoric references provide an instruction to acquire information from elsewhere in order to interpret the passage in question (Haliday & Hassan, 1976: 34):

(2) George disliked his work. He tried to avoid it whenever possible.

George and work are two nouns with exophoric references, whereas he and it have endophoric references: they relate to 'George' and 'work' in context rather than to real-world entities (James, 1980: 106).

2.1.1 Deixis

Deixis is a component of the reference system. According to Rowe and Levine (2018: 173), deixis refers to words that shift reference, that change meaning according to the context and/or the speaker. Yule(1996: 9), states that deixis is a technical term (from Greek) for one of the most fundamental things we perform with words. It means 'pointing' through language. A deictic expression refers to any verbal form needed to accomplish this 'pointing.'

Deixis is expressed verbally through words and nonverbally via gestures. The interpretation of gestural use necessitates direct, real-time observation of certain physical elements of the speech event. The interpretation of the symbolic usage of deictic phrases merely requires an understanding of the fundamental spatio-temporal parameters of the speech event (Huang, 2014: 172). Although any referencing expression can be employed deictically, the fundamental deictic 'vocabulary' is notably limited: it comprises a limited set of “ready-made indexical expressions”, including the first- and second-person pronouns, place adverbs like ‘here’ and ‘there’, time adverbs like ‘now’, ‘yesterday’, and ‘tomorrow’, along with a select few motion deictic verbs like ‘come’ and ‘go’ (Ruhlemann, 2019: 48).

Deixis pertains to how languages encode or grammaticalize contextual characteristics of utterances or speech events, and thus, it also relates to how the interpretation of utterances relies on the study of that contextual framework. The pronoun "this" does not consistently denote a specific entity; instead, it serves as a variable or placeholder for a particular entity determined by the context (e.g., by a gesture) (Levinson, 1983: 54). The context of an utterance is essential for interpreting specific words and fully conveying meaning. Words like here and there, this and that, now and then, yesterday, today, or tomorrow, along with pronouns like as you, me, she, him, it, and them, might be unclear without an understanding of the speaker's physical context. Specific contexts influence the interpretation of certain English sentences. To comprehend these sentences, it is essential to ascertain the speaker`s identity, the audience, the subject, as well as the time and location of the discourse. This understanding of the context is classified as non-linguistic knowledge, as it pertains to circumstances that fall outside the scope of general linguistic knowledge (Dylgjeri & Kazazi, 2013: 90).

Levinson (1983), proposes five types of deixis, namely:

person, time, place, discourse and social deixis.

1. Person Deixis

Person deixis relates to the representation of the roles of participants in a speech event during which the utterance is made: the first person denotes the speaker's self-reference, the second person indicates the speaker's reference to one or more addressees, and the third person signifies reference to individuals or entities that are neither speakers nor addressees of the utterance (Levinson, 1983: 62).In addition, verchueren (1999: 20) states that first-person pronouns such as (I), second-person pronouns such as (you), and third-person pronouns such as (he) are together referred to as person deixis .

(3) I am delighted to meet you (Chapman, 2011: 40).

Example (40) presents two instances of person deixis: 'l' denotes the speaker, while 'you' refers to the hearer.

2. Time deixis

Time deixis concerns with the representation of temporal points and spans in relation to the moment an utterance is articulated. It ultimately refers to participant roles. Consequently, a first approximation , 'now' can be interpreted as 'the moment at which the speaker articulates the speech including "now". It is crucial to differentiate between the moment of speech (or inscription), referred to as coding time, and the moment of reception, known as receiving time (Levinson, 1983: 62-73). Devices that indicate temporal deixis primarily include time adverbials and verbal tense, which can be categorized as temporal deictics (Grenoble, 1998: 52). Numerous English words and phrases have a basic temporal deictic meaning, such as: tomorrow, next week, in four hours, and on Tuesday (Chapman, 2011: 40).

(4)William encountered Martha yesterday.

The word "yesterday" in (4) illustrates 'temporal deixis.'

3. Place Deixis

Place or space deixis concerns the identification of locations in relation to reference points during the speech event (Levinson, 1983: 79). The standard spatial deictics include the adverbs "here" and "there," as well as the demonstrative pronouns "this" and "that" (Levinson, 1983: 97 and Grenoble, 1998: 52).

(5) When William saw Martha, she was sitting directly there.

Place deixis is also inherent in the meaning of certain verbs. For example, "come" and "go" are both verbs denoting movement; their distinction lies in the directional relationship to the speaker's present location. They vary about their association with the 'deictic centre,' a characteristic which is dependent upon context (Chapman, 2011: 41).

4. Discourse Deixis

Discourse deixis is the use of expressions within an utterance to refer to a component of the discourse that includes that utterance (Levinson, 1983: 85). According to Fillmore (1975: 70), discourse deixis refers to the selection of lexical or grammatical elements that signal or otherwise relate to some piece or aspect of the continuing conversation, such as "the former".

Some lexical expressions in English, such as: really, anyway, after all, besides, but, even, nonetheless, in conclusion, moreover, so, therefore, and well, can also serve as discourse deictic functions when they occur at the beginning of an utterance (Huang, 2014: 217).

(6) In the next chapter more will be said about space (Marmaridou, 2000: 93).

5. Social Deixis

Social deixis examines the elements of sentences that reflect, establish, or are influenced by certain facts of the social context in which the speech act occurs (Fillmore, 1975: 75) and is related to the coding of the social position of the speaker, the addressee, or a third person, along with the social interactions that exist among them (Huang, 2014, 208). It may encode information regarding social status, kin relationships, age, gender, profession, and ethnicity. Social deixis is notably linked to person deixis (ibid), and does not form an independent deictic system, since it inherently pertains to the roles of the speaker and addressee as represented in person deixis (Marmaridou, 2000: 74). Terms of address like 'sir' and 'mate' exemplify social deixis (Chapman, 2011: 42).

(7) Professor Higgins is not at her office (Marmaridou, 2000: 79).

2.1.2 Anaphora

Anaphora is an expression that requires interpretation through another expression, known as the 'antecedent,' which usually appears earlier in the discourse. The term 'anaphora' denotes this phenomena (Cruse, 2006: 12).

The term 'anaphora' refers to the connection between two or more linguistic elements, where the meaning of one element (known as an anaphor or anaphoric phrase) is shaped by the meaning of another element (referred to as the antecedent). In example (8) below, 'he' functions as the anaphoric statement, with 'Newton' identified as its antecedent in one interpretation. The connection between him and Newton is described as anaphoric.

(8) Newton acknowledged that he had formulated the principles of mechanics and universal gravitation (Cummings, 2010: 9).

Additionally, anaphora is the process by which a language element is interpreted based on a preceding unit, known as its 'antecedent.' While it encompasses several expressions that the speaker may employ in referencing and identifying the intended referent:

(9) Fred entered the room. He took a seat.

The theory of anaphora examines the link between the pronoun 'he,' the proper noun 'Fred,' and the entities that these parts denote or refer to (Green, 2009: 179).

According to (Cummings, 2023: 88), anaphors may manifest in several linguistic forms, such as third-person pronouns (e.g., he, it), adverbs (e.g., there), and demonstratives (e.g., that). A pronoun or reference as pertains to anything previously addressed in the discourse is termed a homophoric reference. In the utterance below, the pronoun "it" denotes the Aeneid previously mentioned:

(10) Max studied the Aeneid and enjoyed it.

Conversely, cataphoric reference pertains to an element that will be addressed subsequently in the discourse. In the subsequent statement, the pronoun "them" denotes the term "taxes." (11) Although we all hate them, taxes are an inevitable aspect of existence (ibid).

2.1.3 Definiteness

Languages can indicate definiteness in various ways. The definite article "the," the most prevalent word in both written and spoken English, along with determiners such as possessive pronouns (e.g., my/your/our/their book), demonstratives (e.g., this/that book), or s-genitives (e.g., Jonathan's book), serves to establish the definiteness of the noun phrase.

(12) The book you are currently reading is excellent.(Culpeper& Haugh, 2014: 16).

Definite expressions convey specific semantic meaning through their nominal components. For instance, in the definite word "the book," the term refers to the specific mental picture associated with the concept of a "book." A specific word not only signifies something but also suggests its existence. Expressions like "the book" not only suggest existence but also typically denote uniqueness (Culpeper & Haugh: 2014: 16).

2.2 Impoliteness

The notion of impoliteness is a universal phenomenon that exists across all cultures; however, its manifestation may differ from one culture to another. Even within a single culture, the expression of impoliteness might vary across different social contexts. There is no verbal utterance which is inherently unpleasant until assessed as such by a certain society (Thompson & Agyekum, 2015: 21).

In addition to being the opposite of politeness, impoliteness is the expression of mutual hostility, disapproval, and non-cooperation through specific communication practices that convey disrespect (Acheampong & Kwarteng, 2021: 32). Impoliteness frequently entails attempting to harm an individual's identity or identities. This behavior has the specific negative impact of being 'very insulting' (Culpeper, 2011: 1). Most impoliteness behaviors are unacceptable.

Defining impoliteness represents a significant challenge. A significant reason for this is while certain verbal behaviors are often considered unfriendly, they are not invariably so; this is dependent upon the situation. For instance, shouting and employing possibly unpleasant language towards an elderly individual living in a quiet cul-de-sac may be perceived as extremely rude; but, the same conduct within a football crowd might not be regarded as unfriendly whatsoever (Culpeper, 2011: 22).

The model of politeness that was developed by Brown and Levinson in 1987 provided the path for linguists to investigate the phenomenon of impoliteness (Mohammed & Abbas, 2015: 198 and Hassan & Nadhim, 2018: 12). There is no solid agreement on what 'impoliteness' actually is. Locher and Bousfield (2008: 3) state that " impoliteness is behaviour that is face-aggravating in a particular context". Impoliteness comes about when: (1) the speaker communicates face-attack intentionally, or (2) the hearer perceives behaviour as intentionally face-attacking, or a combination of (1) and (2) " (Culpeper, 2005;

cited in Culpeper, 2011: 19). One of the most prevalent situations in which a behavior is recognized to be unintentional but is still interpreted as impoliteness that causes offense is when it occurs between individuals who are socially close to one another, often partners. According to Culpeper (2013: 3), the individual who is responsible for the impoliteness is held accountable for the fact that they did not anticipate the offensive implications of their actions.

Bousfield (2008:72) states that "impoliteness constitutes the communication of intentionally gratuitous and conflictive verbal face-threatening acts which are purposefully delivered: (1) unmitigated [...], and /or (ii) with deliberate aggression". According to Brown and Levinson (1987: 311), "face is the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself, consisting in two related aspects: negative face and positive face". Face is an emotionally invested aspect that can be lost, preserved, or augmented, requiring continual attention during interactions (ibid). Impoliteness is aimed to maximize confrontation in discourse, as stated by Culpeper (1996; cited in Kizelbach, 2023: 23). It focuses on the utilization of methods that are "oriented towards attacking face, an emotionally sensitive concept of the self in order to produce "social disruption." Those that engage in impolite communication are not interested in resolving their face threatening acts; rather, they intentionally attack the face of the other in order to cause harm. Culpeper (1996: 354) argues that impoliteness is likely to occur in situations when there is an imbalance of power in the conversation between the respective participants. Usually, the individual with more authority typically has more freedom to behave in an unfriendly manner.

2.2.1 Impoliteness Functions

Culpeper (2011: 221) identifies three functions or categories of impoliteness:

Affective, Coercive and Entertaining.

(1) Affective impoliteness The first function of impoliteness is termed affective impoliteness. Culpeper (2011: 223) defines affective impoliteness as the deliberate expression of intensified emotion, usually anger, suggesting that the recipient is responsible for eliciting that negative emotional response. For example:

(13) You are causing me crazy(Huang, 2014: 150.

According to Khalid and Hammood (2024: 61), the speaker makes an announcement to the listener about his passive effect by utilizing this unpleasant utterance at the same time.

(2) Coercive impoliteness: The second function of impoliteness is referred to as coercive impoliteness. Coercive impoliteness is a form of impoliteness aimed at shifting values between the producer and the target, hence benefiting the producer or protecting their existing benefits (Culpeper, 2011: 226).

(14) Be silent, or I shall shut your mouth (Huang, 2014: 150).

In this instance, the speaker cautions the addressee over his behavior. This statement occurs when the speaker possesses authority over the listener.

Coercive impoliteness occurs when the person who is speaking to the recipient is of a higher and more influential social level than the person who is receiving the message. Despite the fact that it typically takes place in circumstances in which there is an imbalance of power, it is also possible for it to take place when the interlocutor is on an equal footing with the recipient in order to acquire social power (Theresia & Nisa, 2024: 71).

(3) Entertaining impoliteness: Impolite behavior sometimes entails entertainment at the expense of the intended target. Entertaining impoliteness implies a victim or a possible victim (Culpeper, 2011: 233). This function provides enjoyment at the expense of the victim of impoliteness. The goal of entertaining impoliteness is to control this impolite behavior. The addressee amuses the listener and enjoys the experience of receiving amusement. Sarcasm and politeness are common strategies employed by speakers to gain control over their audience (Mohsen & Abdullah, 2022: 13).

2.2.2 Impoliteness Strategies

Culpeper (1996: 356) proposes five impoliteness suprastrategies:

1.Bald on record impoliteness: This strategy involves the speaker deliberately and explicitly expressing impolite expressions to threaten and attack the interlocutor's face, as the speaker occupies a position of greater authority (Baldó, 2019: 8; Idrees, 2020: 220;). Mullany and Stockwell (2010: 71) assert that Culpeper uses the notion of a face attack act, in contrast to a face threatening act, to distinctly differentiate an intentional attempt to harm someone's face.

2. Positive impoliteness: Positive impoliteness refers to the implementation of strategies that aim to damage the addressee's desire for a positive self-image, such as ignoring the individual, excluding them from activities, exhibiting disinterest, displaying unconcern or lack of sympathy, employing inappropriate identity markers, use obscure or secretive language, provoking disagreement, using taboo language, or call the other name (Culpeper & Hardaker, 2017: 8).

3. Negative Impoliteness: Negative impoliteness, unlike positive impoliteness, aims to attack the recipient's desire for negative face. For instance, intimidating the recipient for actions perceived as harmful by the interlocutor, employing disrespectful language, mocking, failing to engage another participant sincerely, and encroaching upon the recipient's personal space (Theresia & Nisa, 2024: 70).

4. Off-record impoliteness denotes sarcasm or mock impoliteness. It entails executing face-threatening acts via implicature. An face threatening act is executed indirectly by politeness methods that are evidently insincere, thus remaining as superficial insights (Khalid & Hammood, 2024: 63).

5. Withhold politeness: Impoliteness happens when there is an absence of politeness at the appropriate time. Failure to express thanks or thank someone for a kindness might be regarded as deliberate impoliteness (Lucky, 2015:18).

Culpeper (1996: 357) suggested a list of some output strategies for positive and negative impoliteness and it depends upon an appropriate context to be impolite:

Positive impoliteness output strategies:

Ignore, snub the other- fail to acknowledge the other's presence. Exclude the other from an activity. Disassociate from the other – for example, deny association or common ground with the other; avoid sitting together. Be disinterested, unconcerned, unsympathetic. Use inappropriate identity markers- for example, use title and surname when a close relationship pertains, or a nickname when a distant relationship pertains. Use obscure or secretive language – for example, mystify the other with jargon, or seek disagreement- select a sensitive topic. Make the other feel uncomfortable – for example, don't avoid silence, joke, or use small talk. Use taboo words – swear, or use abusive or profane language. Call the other names – use derogatory nominations. etc.

Negative impoliteness output strategies:

Frighten – instill a belief that action detrimental to the other will occur. Condescend, scorn or ridicule – emphasize your relative power. Be contemptuous. Do not treat the other seriously. Belittle the other (e.g. use diminutives). Invade the other's space – literally (e.g. position yourself closer to the other than the relationship permits) or metaphorically (e.g. ask for speak about information which is too intimate given the relationship). Explicitly associate the other with a negative aspect – personalize, use the pronouns 'I' and 'you'. Put the other's indebtedness on record. etc.

2.3 Mitigation

The notion of mitigation and the term itself are first introduced in pragmatics by Fraser (1980, cited in Caffi, 2013, :259). In his work (1980: 341), Fraser defines mitigation as " the modification of speech act that reduces the unwelcoming effects that the act might have on its hearer". Fraser emphasizes the concept of conversational agreement, which entails a framework of reciprocal rights and responsibilities between the speaker and the listener that can be redefined throughout the conversation. Mitigation refers to the modification of solely those effects that are undesirable to the listener. To mitigate is to reduce the impact of an order, lessen the effect of unfavorable information, render criticism more acceptable, and similar actions. It does not aim to reduce the hearer's current state of displeasure. We may mitigate the impact of criticism, but we do not refer to weakening the impact of our praise (ibid: 342).

Mitigation has a crucial function in establishing appropriate interpersonal relationships, thereby attracting considerable attention from linguists (Cheng et al., 2023: 1). Betti (2021: 1) defines 'mitigate' as the act of reducing the force, harshness, or discomfort of anything. Mitigation denotes the tactics individuals employ to avoid face-threatening situations in conversation, thereby linguistically repairing the harm done on someone's face by their utterances or actions (Ali & Salih, 2020: 3). Typically, participants in a conversation utilize mitigation to soften the illocutionary force of undesired speech acts directed at addressees (ibid: 32).

Vine (2010: 339) asserts that mitigation is a prevalent element directed towards interpersonal goals. It facilitates the management of interpersonal interactions during verbal exchanges by rendering a speech as acceptable as feasible to the interlocutor while allowing the speaker to maintain their position. Mitigation expressions are fine tools used to establish

a balance between the speaker's intentions and the interlocutor's willingness (Schneider, 2010: 255).

Mitigation is frequently regarded as an aspect of the broader concept of 'politeness.' In politeness studies, the concept of mitigation is primarily utilized in relation to the strategies employed by speakers to reduce the influence of What Brown and Levinson (1987) refer to as 'face-threatening activities' (Caffi, 2007: 48). Mitigation is a comprehensive term utilized in pragmatics to denote the extensive set of strategies by which speakers attenuate one or more facets of their speech (Caffi, 2009: 645). Conversely, Fraser (1980: 343) asserts that mitigation differs from politeness in that, mitigation entails a decrease in the negative effects of what is done, but politeness is contingent upon the degree to which the speaker behaved suitably within the context.

Mitigation can be effectively examined in the context of broader communicative strategies aimed at altering the intensity or impact of speech acts, including attenuation and boosting (Holmes, 1984: 345). Similar to Fraser (1980), Holmes equates mitigation with attenuation, which is commonly defined as the gradual reduction or weakening of the force or effect of an utterance (Salih & Othman, 2024, : 569), as both concepts serve to soften the illocutionary force of speech actions.

A range of strategies employed by speakers to convey their intention to soften the impact of a statement. This encompasses the employment of indirectness in performing a speech act, the application of distancing strategies, disclaimers, parenthetical verbs, tag questions, and hedges (Fraser, 1980: 341).

Caffi (2007: 49) classifies mitigation techniques into three classes: bushes, hedges, and shields. Such devices are crucial in facilitating communication between the speaker and the listener.

1. Bushes

Bushes focus on propositional content (Caffi, 2007: 98). Qianbo (2016: 76) stated that mitigation decreases the impact of imposition Brown and Levinson (1978) associated with the directive and reduces the scalar component of illocutionary force, characterized as “obligation on the hearer.” Consequently, bushes influence the parameter of 'accuracy' and mitigate the severity of the problem. The indicative mitigators in speech context include phrases such as "I think," "I guess," "I assume," and "if I could," among others (ibid). For example:

(15) I`ll give you a cough syrup just a little to take.

The doctor formulates (15) as he prepares to write a prescription. A quick observation reveals that "to give" is a softened alternative to "prescribe," which accurately reflects the doctor's intended action (Caffi, 2007: 99).

2. Hedges

Language is a form of communication that allows people to convey their emotions, thoughts, experiences, cultures, and traditions. A primary necessity for effective communication is the ability to express meanings in a smooth, respectful, and pleasing

manner that is free of offense, disrespect, or underestimating of others' actions or personalities. Hedging between addresser and addressee is an effective linguistic tool (Almahameed & Farghal, 2024: 1). The term hedges was first proposed by Lakoff(1973), and she defined it as “the study of words whose meaning implicitly involves fuzziness-words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy”. Lakoff's early study and description of hedges served as a foundation for a number of other studies of hedging phenomenon (Varttla, 2001: 5). In addition, Yule (2010: 148) defines hedges as “words or phrases used to indicate that we’re not really sure that what we’re saying is sufficiently correct or complete”. 'Sort of' or 'kind of' can be used as hedges on the accuracy of our statements, as in descriptions such as:

(16) His hair was kind of long.

Liu (2020: 14) defines hedges as words that intentionally obscure the meaning of other words. Similarly, Wellner (2023: 1) defines it as phrases and structures that reflect an ambiguity in category membership and can lead to inaccurate or ambiguous wording. For example:

(17) It shows that there was presumably no acute decrease in heart rate (Tang, 2013: 157).

In the above sentence, the speaker used the word presumably to indicate uncertainty about heart rate in order to lessen the impression on the interlocutor.

3. Shields

Caffi (2007: 49) states that shields function is based on the deictic origin of the speech. In shields, there is no explicit operator of mitigation which works on a more abstract level. They employ backgrounding, objectivization, defocalization, or even omission of the speech source through an 'impersonalization mechanism' that includes phrases such as "so to speak," "let's say," "by the way," "for example," "what's more," and "incidentally" (Qianbo, 2016: 76). The categorization of mitigators according to the mitigating mechanism has its advantages in that, first the "impersonalization mechanism" associated with "shields" differentiates it from "bushes" and "hedges". Provided that the mitigator excludes the use of the personal pronouns "I" and "You," in that it falls inside the category of "shields." Secondly, from a functional standpoint, each group possesses its distinct functional use. Bushes represent a category of mitigators that serve as self-protective markers, whereas hedges are employed for the purpose of protecting others. Shields, in terms of their characteristics, might be aimed towards oneself or others. According to this classification, interlocutors may utilize any technology incorporating mitigators to accomplish a mitigated speech act (ibid: 77).

3. Research Methodology

This section presents the methodology of the study which is related to the Iraqi EFL University learners' abilities in Pragmatics. In this section, the participants, data elicitation tool, test objectives, validity and reliability are presented in details.

3.1 The Participants

The total number of the participants are one hundred sixteen Iraqi EFL learners which are distributed to seventy four undergraduate learners and forty two postgraduates. The test is implemented on these participants because they are considered as more advanced than others

3.2 Description of Data Elicitation Tool

The tool that is used for the data elicitation tool in this study is a recognition test. It is designed according to the nature and the aims of the study. The form of the test is a multiple-choice test. The test comprises of fifteen items and each item supplied with four alternatives. One of the alternatives is correct and the other ones are incorrect. The situations are adopted from various books of pragmatics include: Huang (2007), Fraser (2008), Caffi (2007), Chapman (2011), Cutting (2002), Allot (2010), Clark (2022), Culpeper (2011) and Levinson (1983). Each situation represents a specific topic of pragmatics including, implicature, presupposition, reference, mitigation, impoliteness, pragmatic markers and speech acts. The percentages are used in order to compare answers of both types of participants. The test is presented to a jury, which consists of a number of specialists in EFL teaching methods, to ensure its validity and reliability.

The situations from one to five test the EFL learner's abilities in reference. Item (5) is taken from the test to explain the nature of the test.

5. When are the exams? My mother asked me.

a. There is a difficult time that we will go through.

b. Exams stress the student's psyche.

c. Our exams are on the first of May.

d. Why are you asking about exams, mom?

Option (c) is the correct answer, because it contains an indication of time and thus provides a direct answer to the question. The other options are incorrect because they do not give a specific date.

The situations from six to ten are prepared to test the EFL learners comprehension of impoliteness. The following item is taken from the test:

9. When you entered your brother's room and took one of his things, he asked you to leave immediately, what would you say to him?

a. What do you do if I don’t leave?

b. your room is messy.

c. Shut up.

d. Wait a minute, I'll leave.

For this item, option (d) is the correct answer. It express polite answer. The other options are inappropriate because, they are impolite responses and show a lack of respect to others.

The situations from twenty one to twenty five are designed to test the EFL learners comprehension of mitigation. The following item is taken from the test:

12. Doctor, was there a dangerous drop in heart rate during the procedure?

a. The Heart rate dropped sharply.

b. The heart rate showed a clear drop.

c. There was no acute decrease in heart rate.

d. There was something scary.

In item (12), option (c) is the correct answer. By saying ' **There was no acute decrease in heart rate',** the speaker mitigates the effect of the unfavourable information to the listener. The other options are incorrect, because they represents a direct and clear answers without any mitigation.

3.3 Test objectives, Validity and Reliability

The test is designed to achieve the following objectives:

1. Testing the Iraqi EFL learners' abilities to recognize speech acts .
2. Assessing the Iraqi EFL learners' comprehension of implicature .
3. Testing the Iraqi EFL learners' understanding of presupposition.

The test includes three areas of pragmatics; namely, speech acts, implicature and presupposition. The test is an objective one and it is definitely a reliable one. The jury members stress the test validity and reliability.

4. Data Analysis, and Discussion of Results

This section presents the practical side of the study. It begins with data analysis and discussion. The data analysis and discussion consists of data related to speech acts, implicature, presupposition, reference, mitigation, impoliteness and pragmatic markers respectively. Results are shown by using tables and percentages.

4.1 Data Analysis, and Discussion of Results of Reference

Table (1) below contains the numbers and percentages of correct and incorrect responses that are given by EFL learners (undergraduates and postgraduates), regarding the comprehension of reference.

Table (1): The Distribution of Undergraduates' and Postgraduates' Responses Regarding the comprehension of Reference

Item No.	Undergraduates				Postgraduates			
	Correct answers	%	Incorrect answers	%	Correct answers	%	Incorrect answers	%
1.	40	10.81	34	9.18	19	9.04	23	10.95
2.	52	14.05	22	5.94	27	12.85	15	7.14
3.	29	7.83	45	12.16	18	8.57	24	11.42
4.	66	17.83	8	2.16	35	16.66	7	3.33
5.	57	15.40	17	4.59	32	15.23	10	4.76
Total		65.91		34.03		62.35		37.6

Regarding the EFL learners' abilities in reference, two thirds of the EFL undergraduates and postgraduates are able to recognize reference effectively (65.91%). The highest frequency of undergraduates' and postgraduates' correct responses is represented by item (4.a) 66 occurrences making 17.83%:

4. While you were standing with your friend and your father came from far away, your friend asks you, do you know that man?

a. Yes, he is my father.

b. people often walk here.

c. I met many people today.

d. My father works as a carpenter.

In item (4.a), by saying **' my father'**, the speaker identifies a particular person Known to both the speaker and the listener. It provided a clear answer, a unique reference and clearly identified the father's identity. The same item expresses the least frequency of the incorrect responses 8 occurrences, making 2.16%. The learners' correct responses reflect their understanding of reference, meaning that they are able to identify the correct referent and link it to the appropriate context.

Concerning postgraduates' correct responses (62.35%), item (4.a), represents the highest frequency of the correct responses 35 occurrences, making 16.66%. The use of definiteness refers not only to the existence of something, but also to its uniqueness. The speaker answers the question by using the possessive pronoun (my). This choice represents the highest correct answer among the learners, because in such situations, the learner is able to use the referent related to the person being referred to. Additionally, in everyday interactions, speakers always use references, whether to their possessions or to other things. This option represents the least frequency of postgraduates' incorrect responses 7 occurrences, making 3.33%.

For undergraduates' incorrect responses (34.03%), the highest frequency of the incorrect responses is available in item (1), 34 occurrences, making 9.18%:

1. when you were on a business trip and someone asked you, did you enjoy our meeting?

a. I am delighted to meet you.

b. The meeting was wonderful.

c. It was a good experience.

d. going on business trip is very important.

In this item, option (b) represents the correct answer. It is the most appropriate answer, because it directly answers the question by giving a positive evaluation for the meeting. Item (1) contains the highest frequency of the incorrect answers 34 occurrences, making 9.18%. The learners focused on answers that may be appropriate to the context in general, but do not specifically address the question.

In relation to postgraduates' correct responses, item (3) represents the least frequency of the correct responses 18 occurrences, making 8.75%. They focussed on the overall value of the business trip rather than on their enjoyment.

Concerning undergraduates' incorrect responses (34.03%), item (3) represents the highest frequency of the incorrect responses 45 occurrences, making 12.16% which means that, undergraduates are unable to respond correctly to this item. It is formulated as follows:

3. when your friend asks you, do you like your job?

a. Some duties are enjoyable.

b. I dislike my work.

c. Some activities are boring.

d. Work is good for health.

In this item, option (3.b) is the correct answers 29 occurrences, making 7.83%. In this situation, the question is about liking or disliking the work, so a direct answer was appropriate. Most of the learners prefer to talk about duties and activities rather than giving emotional response.

In relation to postgraduates' incorrect responses (37.06%), item (3) represents the highest frequency of the incorrect responses. Postgraduate learners have the ability to analyse and describe different contexts, and this is due to their academic level. In the question mentioned above, the learners preferred to answer by describing the work in terms of duties and activities rather than in terms of giving a direct answer.

In conclusion, the total percentage of undergraduates' correct responses (65.91%) is slightly higher than that of postgraduates (62.35%). Undergraduates tend to use direct references.

4.2 Data Analysis and Discussion of Results of Impoliteness

Table (2) below contains the numbers and percentages of correct and incorrect responses that are given by EFL learners (undergraduates and postgraduates), regarding the comprehension of impoliteness

Table (2): The Distribution of Undergraduates' and Postgraduates' Responses Regarding the comprehension of Impoliteness

Item No.	Undergraduates				Postgraduates			
	Correct answers	%	Incorrect answers	%	Correct answers	%	Incorrect answers	%
6.	44	11.89	31	8.37	25	11.90	17	8.09
7.	40	10.81	34	9.18	18	8.57	24	11.42
8.	63	17.02	11	2.97	39	18.57	3	1.42
9.	52	14.05	22	5.94	30	14.28	12	5.71
10.	38	10.27	36	9.72	19	9.04	23	10.95
Total		64.04		36.18		62.36		37.95

Regarding the EFL learners' abilities in impoliteness, two thirds of the EFL undergraduates and postgraduates are able to comprehend impoliteness effectively 64.04% and 62.36% respectively. Item (8.a) represents the highest frequency of undergraduates' and postgraduates' correct responses which is 63 occurrences, making 17.02%, and 39 occurrences making 18.57% , make a high number of undergraduate and postgraduate learners having a good academic level about how language is used in an appropriate context. This means that, they use different expressions to express thanks. Social norms influence the use of appropriate language during communication. Every society has its own ways of expressing gratitude.

8.When someone says to you, good luck when you are revising for your exam, what would you say to him?

a. Thank you, I appreciate it.

b. Why do you care?

c. Should I care about your opinion?

d. I don’t need your luck .

Option (a) is the correct answer. It expresses polite response and gratitude to others. Conversely, the other options are inappropriate, because they are impolite responses and show a lack of respect for the listener. Impoliteness happens when there is an absence of politeness at the appropriate time. A high number of undergraduates have a good understanding of social norms and using impoliteness in the appropriate context. For undergraduates' incorrect responses (36.18%), item (8) represents the least frequency of incorrect responses 11 occurrences, making 2.97%.

The same item (8.a) represents the least frequency of postgraduates incorrect responses (37.95%), 3 occurrences, making 1.42%.

The least frequency of undergraduates' correct responses (64.04%) is represented by item (10.c), 38 occurrences, making 10.27% :

10. Your friend asks you, can I borrow your car? What is your answer?

a. You don't know how to drive, so you'll ruin it if I give it to you.

b. You're crazy, how can I give you my car?

c. Let me wash it first and I will give it to you.

d. Please shut up.

Option is (c) is the most suitable answer and it expresses polite response , but this item contains the lowest percentages for undergraduates' correct responses. In such situations, the learners choose incorrect options for many reasons. First , due to social norms, people often refrain from lending certain belongings, especially cars, because of the repercussions if something happens to them. Second, the listener may not have a driving license, so it is difficult for him to drive a car. As a result, the EFL learners have the ability to use impoliteness in different situations. The same item represents the highest percentages of incorrect responses 36 occurrences, making 9.72%.

Regarding postgraduates' correct responses (62.36%), item (7.c) represents the least frequency of the correct responses 18 occurrences, making 8.57% :

7. If you ask your little brother to bring you water, what is his answer?

a. My family always asks me to bring water because I am the youngest here.

b. Why don’t you bring water for yourself?

c. Yes, I will bring you.

d. No, it's not my job to bring you water.

Option (c) which is the correct answer, represents a polite response . By saying, **'Yes, I will bring you**' The speaker shows a cooperative attitude and respect which emphasizes cooperation between the speaker and the listener. This item contains the highest frequency of postgraduates' incorrect responses 24 occurrences, making 11.42%. The other options are inappropriate . They contain a direct rejection, which leads to impolite behaviour.

In conclusion, the total percentage of undergraduates' correct responses (64.04%) is slightly higher than that of postgraduates (62.36%). Undergraduates and postgraduates are able to comprehend impoliteness strategies in different situations. Although the correct responses of the EFL participants (undergraduates and postgraduates) are higher than that of postgraduates (62.36%). Undergraduates and postgraduates are able to comprehend impoliteness strategies in different situations. Although the correct responses of the EFL participants (undergraduates and postgraduates) are higher than the average, they still need practicing in recognizing impoliteness strategies.

4.3 Data Analysis and Discussion of Mitigation

Table (3) below contains the numbers and percentages of the correct and incorrect responses that are given by EFL learners (undergraduates and postgraduates), regarding the comprehension of mitigation.

Table (3): The Distribution of Undergraduates' and Postgraduates' Responses Regarding the comprehension of Mitigation

Item No.	Undergraduates				Postgraduates			
	Correct answers	%	Incorrect answers	%	Correct answers	%	Incorrect answers	%
11.	19	5.13	55	14.86	13	6.19	29	13.80
12.	32	8.64	42	11.35	16	7.61	26	12.38
13.	24	6.48	50	13.51	21	10%	21	10%
14.	47	12.70	27	7.29	28	13.33	14	6.66
15.	51	13.78	23	6.21	32	15.23	10	4.76
Total		46.73		53.22		52.36		47.6

Regarding the EFL learners' abilities in mitigation, the EFL undergraduates are below the average in their comprehension of mitigation (46.73%). Item (15.b) represents the highest frequency of undergraduates' and postgraduates' correct responses 51 occurrences, making 13.78%. A high number of undergraduates are able to understand mitigation during communication:

15. My friend's academic level is weak and I know that he will not pass the exam. He asked me if I expect him to succeed?

a. Passing the exam is difficult.

b. Don’t worry, you have enough time. Try to read carefully.

c. You care more about your appearance than your academic level.

d. You didn't read well from the beginning.

In this item, option (b) is the most appropriate answer. In this situation, the speaker needs to use mitigation which means reducing the impact of harmful and offensive speech rather than using direct answer. Here the speaker mitigates his speech and prefers to offer encouragement to his friend. This item contains the least frequency of undergraduates' incorrect responses 23 occurrences, making 6.21%.

Concerning the EFL postgraduates' correct responses (52.36%), item (15.b) represents the highest frequency of the correct responses 32 occurrences, making 15.23%. EFL postgraduate learners are able to recognize how context influences the language use. Therefore, in this context, a high number of the learners used mitigation instead of direct speech. Each context has its own appropriate language use, and this is one of the most important features of pragmatics. Postgraduate learners have the ability to understand various contexts, due to their constant use of language. So, this item had the lowest frequency of incorrect responses 23 occurrences, making (6.21%).

The lowest frequency for undergraduates' correct responses is represented by item (11.a), 19 occurrences, making 5.13%. It is formulated as follows:

11. If you ask your doctor, what is my diagnosis ?

a. It is just a bit of a hernia.

b. You need a surgery.

c. The hernia you have is old.

d. You have a hernia and I prescribed you a treatment.

For this item, option (a) is the appropriate answer. Mitigation refers to the modification of unfavorable information for the listener. By saying ' **It is just a bit of a hernia**', the speaker reduces the difficulty of the medical issue. The learners believe that medical information should not be conveyed as it is, but should be expressed in a euphemistic way.

Similarly, the same item (11) represents the lowest frequency of postgraduates' correct responses 13 occurrences, making 6.19%, because the learners think that medical diagnosis should be clear, therefore they tend to use direct speech instead of mitigation, but this is a fault, it should be expressed euphemistically.

In conclusion, the total percentage of postgraduates' correct responses (52.36%) is higher than that of postgraduates (46.73%). Regarding the postgraduates' correct responses, about half of the learners recognize mitigation during communication. Although both correct responses are less than the average and more than the average slightly, both (undergraduates and postgraduates) still require more study, greater exposure to language, and an adapted curriculum that focuses on the practical application rather than theory, so that the learners gain the ability to deal with different situations.

The results of the analysis of the correct and incorrect responses, regarding the comprehension of reference, show that the total percentage of undergraduates' correct responses 65.91% is slightly higher than that of postgraduates 62.35%. The EFL undergraduates tend to use direct answers in comprehending reference, as in item (3). On the other hand, the EFL postgraduates have a broader perspective, so they do not refer to things directly, but instead describe them. The study results, as related to the comprehension of impoliteness, show that the total percentage of undergraduates' correct responses 64.04% is slightly higher than that of postgraduates 62.36%. Undergraduates indicate more than a moderate level of proficiency in understanding impoliteness strategies. Regarding the comprehension of mitigation, the results show that the total percentage of postgraduates' correct responses (52.36%) is higher than that of undergraduates (46.73%). A moderate number of postgraduates are able to understand mitigation devices. Their understanding reflects their academic level. Although postgraduate learners are able to use mitigation devices in different situations, they still need more practice and more exposure to real life contexts. For example they need to make a situational dialogue in order to apply mitigation devices and gain a good experience. Additionally, the learners need a curricula which contains a role-play activities. The focus should be on using mitigation expressions.

5. Conclusions

1. The Iraqi EFL undergraduate and postgraduate learners indicate a moderate proficiency in comprehending reference.

2. The Iraqi EFL undergraduates tend to give direct answers when referring to something, more than postgraduates.

3. The Iraqi EFL postgraduates are more able than undergraduates in recognizing mitigation; undergraduates are less than the average in understanding mitigation.

4. More than a half of EFL undergraduates and postgraduates perform well at the recognition test regarding the comprehension of impoliteness.

5. The Iraqi EFL learners should take into consideration the notion of context, which is an important element in understanding impoliteness strategies.

6. Postgraduate learners have the ability to analyse and describe different contexts, and this is due to their academic level.

7. Undergraduates and postgraduates are able to comprehend impoliteness strategies in different situations.

8.Regarding the variation of undergraduates and postgraduates' responses as related to mitigation, both types of EFL learners (undergraduates and postgraduates) still require more study, greater exposure to language, and an adapted curriculum that focuses on the practical application rather than on theory.

9. Undergraduates and postgraduates need more exposure to real-life situations and cultural norms.

10. More practice and less theory is needed for developing the EFL learners' communicative competence.

6. Recommendations

1. Activities that focus on conversation and role-playing should be emphasized in the curricula.

2. The focus on pragmatic awareness should be motivated in early stages at the university level.

3**.** More practical courses ought to be given to EFL learners whether at the BA level or at the MA or Ph.D. levels to promote their communicative competence.

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Appendix 1

1. When you were on a business trip and someone asked you, did you enjoy our meeting?

a. I am delighted to meet you.

b. The meeting was wonderful.

c. It was a good experience.

d. going on business trip is very important.

2. Your mother asks you, where will you meet your friend?

a. In my office on the first floor.

b. Next Monday.

c. The meeting is important.

d. I have a lot of useful information.

3. When your friend asks you, do you like your job?

a. Some duties are enjoyable.

b. I dislike my work.

c. Some activities are boring.

d. Work is good for health.

4. While you were standing with your friend and your father came from far away, your friend asks you, do you know that man?

a. Yes, he is my father.

b. people often walk here.

c. I met many people today.

d. My father works as a carpenter.

5. When are the exams? My mother asked me.

a. There is a difficult time that we will go through.

b. Exams stress the student's psyche.

c. Our exams are on the first of May.

d. Why are you asking about exams, mom?

6. If you are playing with your friend and he asks you, do you know anything about yo-yos?

a. Why should I spend my time teaching you yo-yos tricks?

b. Don’t ask me again.

c. That's mean.

d. My father taught me how to play.

7. If you ask your little brother to bring you water, what is his answer?

a. My family always asks me to bring water because I am the youngest here.

b. Why don’t you bring water for yourself ?

c. Yes, I will bring you.

d. No, it's not my job to bring you water.

8.When someone said to you, good luck when you are revising for your exam, what would you say to him?

a. Thank you, I appreciate it.

b. Why do you care?

c. Should I care about your opinion?

d. I don’t need your luck .

9. When you entered your brother's room and took one of his things, he asked you to leave immediately, what would you say to him?

a. What do you do if I don’t leave?

b. your room is messy.

c. Shut up.

d. Wait a minute, I'll leave.

10. Your friend asks you, can I borrow your car? What is your answer?

a. You don't know how to drive, so you'll ruin it if I give it to you.

b. You're crazy, how can I give you my car?

c. Let me wash it first and I will give it to you.

d. Please shut up.

11. If you ask your doctor, what is my diagnosis ?

a. It is just a bit of a hernia.

b. You need a surgery.

c. The hernia you have is old.

d. You have a hernia and I prescribed you a treatment.

12. Doctor, was there a dangerous drop in heart rate during the procedure?

a. The Heart rate dropped sharply.

b. The heart rate showed a clear drop.

c. There was no acute decrease in heart rate.

d. There was something scary.

13. When you work as an employee in an institution and there is a large crowd of people standing in front of you, what would you say to them?

a. I can't work while you're standing like this.

b. You all need to calm down and wait your turn.

c. You made me nervous.

d. I appreciate it if you sit down.

14. When you said something hurtful in a moment of anger and regretted it:

a. You shouldn’t take what I said seriously.

b. I say that ,you are very noisy.

c. I didn't mean that.

d. You made me angry.

15. My friend's academic level is weak and I know that he will not pass the exam. He asked me if I expect him to succeed?

a. Passing the exam is difficult.

b. Don’t worry, you have enough time. Try to read carefully.

c. You care more about your appearance than your academic level.

d. You didn't read well from the beginning.

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