# Cross-Cultural Study on Requesting Made by EFL Learners and Native Speakers

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| Article Info | Abstract |
|---|---|
| | *The present descriptive-quantitative study explored the request strategies that emerged in Iraqi Arabic and American English. In addition, it also inquired the way social factors such as power, distance and rate of imposition affected the choice of request strategies in both groups. The sample consisted of 30 Iraqi and American male and female students in a university in Baghdad, Iraq, selected based on convenience sampling from the undergraduate students. In addition, 10 young American speakers were asked to take part in the study. The participants were supposed to fill in the Oral Discourse Completion Test (ODCT). It consisted of twelve context-enriched written situations developed by Reiter (2000). In order to compare the frequency of the request strategies in Iraqi Arabic and American English speakers' speech Chi square was run. The findings revealed that the most frequent request strategies of Iraqi Arabic participants were Mood Derivable, Explicit Performative, Strong Hint, Want Statement, Locution Derivable, Mild Hint, Query Preparatory, and Suggestory Formula, respectively. However, the most frequent request strategies that emerged in American English were Locution Derivable Query Preparatory, Mild Hint, Mood Derivable, Hedged Performative, Suggestory Formula, Explicit Performative, Strong Hint, and Want Statement, respectively. Additionally, the results indicated that there was a significant difference between Iraqi Arabic and American English with respect to social power and distance factor. In contrast, no difference was found between Iraqi Arabic and American English in rate of imposition.* |

## Introduction

From among the different issues involved in discourse studies, one that has received a lot of attention over the past few decades are pragmatics. Yule (1996) defined pragmatics as "the study of intended speaker meaning" (p. 127). Pragmatics includes "the study of how speakers use and understand speech acts" (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). It is worth mentioning the fact that pragmatics plays a very important role in the production and perception of the language. That is why interlocutors use different strategies during their conversations in order to express their intended speech acts. On the other hand, one of the main factors in the process of communication is pragmatic competence. How interlocutors produce and perceive the language in different situations is a significant issue that has been investigated so far by different researchers since creating inappropriate utterances would lead to misunderstanding or even breakdowns in communication. Accordingly, knowing this matter is very essential especially for second language learners because they do not have enough knowledge of the target language and as a result, they would be influenced by their first language and transfer their pragmatic knowledge of their native language to the target language.

Within general pragmatics, Leech (1983) draws a distinction between pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics. The former can be applied to the study of the more linguistic area of pragmatics where we consider the particular resources which a given language provides for conveying particular illocution(s). Barron (2002) states that pragmalinguistics refers to the range of resources from which speakers of language have to choose when using that language. These resources include pragmatic strategies (e.g., directness and indirectness), pragmatic routines, and modification devices. Sociopragmatics is the sociological interface of pragmatics which studies the ways in which pragmatic performance and principles are subject to specific social conditions.

## Statement of the Problem

Cross-cultural pragmatics (henceforth, CCP) is a field of study that has sprung up in the 1980s of the last centuries as a reaction against the linguistic universalism of Searle's typology of speech acts in the sense that such a universal stance can be no longer maintained (Huang, 2007). Its emergence is strongly associated with the names of such

world-known scholars as Wierzbicka 1985, 2003; Tannen, 1981; and Schiffrin, 1984. Wierzbicka remarks that the fundamental tenets of CCP are best delineated in the following terms:

1. In different societies and communities, people speak differently.

2. These differences in ways of speaking are profound and systematic.

3. They reflect different cultural values, or at least different hierarchies of values.

4. Different ways of speaking, different communicative styles can be explained and made sense of in terms of independently established different cultural values and cultural priorities.

These four tenets altogether embrace the basic pillars upon which this area of pragmatics is built. In this respect, speech acts and politeness are assumed to be linguistic universals, and when applying the notion of culture into pragmatics, cross-cultural pragmaticians are able to find out how people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds perform a stock of speech acts such as expressing gratitude, apology, request, etc., and to what extent the notion of politeness is present, and in what way or ways people from cross-cultures/languages keep responsive to the politeness principle. As a result, Wierzbicka (1985:175) concludes that cultural norms are reflected on speech act realizations as evidenced by many cross-cultural studies.

**Objectives of the Study**

This study was mainly a cross-cultural and cross-linguistic approach to study a pragmatic function of request in Arabic and American English used by Iraqi learners of English. To this end, the objectives of the study included examining the extent to which the request strategies that emerged in Iraqi Arabic and American English speakers different or similar. Moreover, this study aimed at identifying how social factors such as power, distance and rate of imposition affect the choice of request strategies in both groups.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions were proposed for this study:

**RQ1.** What are the frequently emerged request strategies in Iraqi Arabic and American English?

**RQ2.** How do social factors such as power, distance and rate of imposition affect the choice of request strategies in both groups?

**Significance of the Study**

The findings of the study will have great value for the teachers of English and material developers in Iraq and other Arabic-speaking countries as well. They can practically calibrate their teaching methods and the techniques they use for teaching language functions in general and teaching requests in particular to better focus on the differences in using request strategies by the learners. It is believed that the differences of request strategy use may be the source of errors in using pragmatic function in the target language. This study will be considered to be innovative in that in incorporates the cross-cultural and cross-linguistic differences between in terms of strategy use in Arabic and English which has been widely researched, especially among Iraqi learners of English.

The present study can have considerable value for those studying speech acts across cultures. Since requests may cause cross-cultural problems, the study of the variations in the realization of requests across cultures can be useful for non-native speakers. It is commonly recognized that the importance of cross-cultural communication is constantly escalating due to the increasingly cross-cultural nature of economic, political and personal relationships worldwide. However, cross-cultural communication, without an understanding of different sociolinguistic rules, often leads to pragmatic failure and consequently to cross-cultural misunderstanding. The differences between Iraqi culture and American culture may be reflected in the realization of requests in Arabic and English. If they can be described in concrete ways, such differences could be more easily understood and thus could improve cross-cultural communication, reduce misunderstandings and minimize cultural clashes. The study will assist English teachers in Iraq to understand the common features of the English spoken by Iraqi learners of English as a foreign language. It also provides the predominant possible forms and strategies of request for different occasions in Arabic and English from which learners may benefit. Finally, it is worth stating that this is the first study that investigates how requests are realized in American English and Iraqi Arabic.

## Review of the Related Literature

In addition, the notions of pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics. Then, the concept of speech act will be discussed. As this study investigates request strategies from a cross cultural perspective, it also sheds some light on the important area of cross-cultural pragmatics by elucidating its basic tenets. The next section defines culture viewing it as being constructed in interactions. Finally, the cross-cultural studies conducted on request strategies will be touched upon.

### Theoretical Background

This section presents the theoretical backgrounds of each variable as well as their definition in literature and related concepts.

### Pragmalinguistics vs. Sociopragmatics

Within general pragmatics, Leech (1983) draws a distinction between pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics. The former can be applied to the study of the more linguistic area of pragmatics where we consider the particular resources which a given language provides for conveying particular illocution(s). Barron (2002, p. 44) states that pragmalinguistics "refers to the range of resources from which speakers of language have to choose when using that language". These resources include pragmatic strategies (e.g., directness and indirectness), pragmatic routines, and modification devices. Sociopragmatics is the sociological interface of pragmatics which studies the ways in which pragmatic performance and principles are subject to specific social conditions.

A distinction made by Thomas (1983) between pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure is a very useful one: a. Pragmalinguistic failure occurs when the pragmatic force mapped by a speaker onto a given utterance is systematically different from the force most frequently assigned to it by native speakers of the target language, or when speech act strategies are inappropriately transferred from first language (L1) to second language (L2). b. Sociopragmatic failure is a term Thomas (1983) appropriated from Leech (1983), which he used to refer to the social conditions placed on language in use. Moreover, Thomas (1983) argues that while pragmalinguistic failure is basically a linguistic problem, caused by differences in the linguistic encoding of pragmatic force, sociopragmatic failure stems from cross-culturally different perceptions of what constitutes

appropriate linguistic behavior. As this study focuses on requests from a cross-cultural perspective, the following section focuses on cross-cultural pragmatics.

## Cross-Cultural Pragmatics

Cross-cultural pragmatics (henceforth, CCP) is a field of study that has sprung up in the 1980s of the last centuries as a reaction against the linguistic universalism of Searle's typology of speech acts in the sense that such a universal stance can be no longer maintained (Huang, 2007). Its emergence is strongly associated with the names of such world-known scholars as Wierzbicka (1985, 2003), Tannen (1981), and Schiffrin (1984). Wierzbicka (2003; p. 45) remarks that the fundamental tenets of CCP are best delineated in the following terms:

1. In different societies and communities, people speak differently.

2. These differences in ways of speaking are profound and systematic.

3. They reflect different cultural values, or at least different hierarchies of values.

## Empirical Studies

Research conducted at the request of native speakers of English and Arabic can be divided into two categories. Several studies have compared linguistic practices in different Arabic dialects with native speakers (e.g., Al-Ali & Alauneh 2010; Al-Marrani & Sazali 2010; Alawi 2011; Qarasneh, 2006). He compared the main strategies used by Arabic learners and English speakers (e.g., Umar, 2004; Abdul Sattar et al., 2009). Below we present some of the important studies related to the scope of our research. Abdul-Sattar et al. (2009) examined the production and perception of English requirements used by 10 Iraqi graduate students through their responses to a multiple-choice questionnaire consisting of eight different situations, in addition to a speech completion test and assessment. Scale. The results showed that the selection of the three main request strategies was indirect, as this was traditionally done through questions and etiquette. However, the participants were not aware of the social and situational rules that influence questions.

# Methodology

## Design of the Study

The present study utilized a descriptive-quantitative research design. In this study, the requesting speech acts in Arabic and American English among Iraqi EFL Learners as the

variables of the study were investigated. In fact, the design of the present study was exploratory conversation analysis, which is an approach to the study of social interaction, embracing verbal conduct, in situations of everyday life (Pomerantz & Fehr, 2011). The age factor was controlled in this study through using young participants. The other three factors were controlled through categorizing Oral Discourse Completion Test (ODCT) prompts with different situations, social distances, and offence types.

**Participants**

The sample consisted of 30 Iraqi and American male and female students in a university in Baghdad, Iraq. They were selected based on convenience sampling from the undergraduate students, ranging from 18 to 24 years old, enrolled in different departments of the undergraduate program in the fall semester of the 2022/2023 academic year. All of them were Iraqi native speakers. To do the semi-structured interview, 10 of the students participated in answering the interviews were chosen to be asked about requesting speech acts. In addition, 10 English native speakers, ranging from 19 to 21 years old were selected from the social media. Most of them (n=7) were university students. The researcher contacted them via Skype and email. Table 3.1shows the demographic information of the participants.

**Table 1.**

*Demographic Background of the Participants*

| Number of Participants | 30 |
|---|---|
| Gender | Male & Female |
| Age | (18-24)- (19-21) |
| Native Language | Arabic and English |
| Proficiency | Undergraduate |
| Target Language | English |

**Research Instrument**

**Oral Discourse Completion Test**

The Oral Discourse Completion Test (ODCT) is a questionnaire that is a natural state in which respondents are expected to answer and respond by submitting a request. This test

was first performed by Blum-Kulka in 1982 and has been widely used ever since to collect data on the performance of a speech act. The questionnaire that was used in this study includes twelve context-enriched written situations developed by Reiter (2000). In each of the situations, information was given about the desired goal, social distance, social dominance, role relationships, time of meeting, frequency of interaction and description of the setting. Any situation can only be answered with a request. For Arab university students, whose native language was Arabic, the questionnaire was translated into Arabic with necessary changes in the names of people and places to make them more familiar with the situation. Table 3.1 presents the situations.

**Table 2**

*Combination of three social variables in twelve cases*

| Situation | social power | social distancing | degree of load |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Borrowed book | S<H | +SD | upper |
| 2. Work in your spare time | S<H | -SD | upper |
| 3. Smart Phone | S> H | + SD | upper |
| 4. Ask for directions | S=H | -SD | upper |
| 5. Ask for a lift | S=H | + SD | Long |
| 6. Car rental | S<H | -SD | Long |
| 7. Cancel holiday | S > H | -SD | Long |
| 8. Write a letter | S > H | -SD | upper |
| 9. Debt House | S=H | -SD | Long |
| 10. Change location | S=H | + SD | upper |
| 11. Borrow | S<H | +SD | Long |
| 12. Computer Loan | S > H | + SD | Long |

S= speaker, H= listener, SD= social distance

**Coding Scheme**

The coding schemes were primarily based on the previous taxonomy developed by Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) in the CCSARP to recognize the participants' request

strategies, based on which request utterances are divided into three constituents: alerter, head act, and supportive move. For a request, there are three levels of directness as follows:

1. Direct: A request is coded as a directive if its meaning is directly determinable from its linguistic content alone.

2. Conventionally Indirect: An utterance is perceived as conventionally indirect if its meaning is interpreted through its linguistics content in relation to contextual cues.

3. Non-conventionally Indirect: A request is described as non-conventionally indirect if its illocutionary force relies on contextual inferences.

Also, for the head act, nine strategies from the most level of directness to the most level of indirectness are considered as below:

**a.** Direct Strategies

       1.Mood Derivable

       2. Explicit Performative

       3.Hedged Performative

       4. Locution Derivable

       5.Want Statement

**b**. Conventional Indirect Strategies

       6. Suggestory Formula

       7.Query Preparatory

       **c**. Nonconventional Indirect Strategies

       8. Strong Hint

       9. Mild Hint

**Data Collection Procedure**

The first step in conducting the study was selecting the participants, which was done through convenient sampling. To this end, a number of 10 young American speakers in the age of 18 to 24 were approached and asked to take part in the study. The same was done for undergraduate students of English in Baghdad University, Iran. Then, those who were volunteers for the research were invited to take part in DCT. All participants were

asked to take a DCT after the purpose of the study was explained. Then, they were collected and ad analyzed for preparing the report

**Data Analysis**

The search strategies made by the two groups were analyzed within the coding scheme developed by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989). The analysis was based on an independent assessment of the implementation of each "key action" according to the degree of "focus". By "principal act" is meant the principal claim or "the smallest entity that can make a claim" (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989). By "honesty" is meant "the extent to which the performative intention of the speaker is apparent from the utterance" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). Based on the open/indirect dimension, this research discussed three main levels of openness: direct, traditional indirect and non-traditional indirect. The Social Sciences Statistical Package (SPSS 26.00) was used for data analysis. In order to compare the frequency of the request strategies in Iraqi Arabic and American English speakers' speech Chi square was run. The alpha level is set to 0.05.

# Results

The present study was set to examine the request strategies that emerged in Iraqi Arabic and American English.

Results of Research Question 1

The first research question investigated the request strategies that emerged in Iraqi Arabic and American English. To this end, the frequency and percentage of each group were calculated and reported. Table 4.1 presents the request strategies that emerged in Iraqi Arabic participants.

**Table 3**

*Frequency of Request Strategies of Iraqi Arabic Participants*

|  |  | **Freq.** | **Percentage** |
|---|---|---|---|
|  | Mood Derivable | 24 | 28.2 |
|  | Explicit Performative | 19 | 22.3 |
| **Direct** | Hedged Performative | 13 | 15.2 |
|  | Locution Derivable | 14 | 16.4 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Want Statement | 15 | 17.6 |
| | **Total** | 85 | |
| **Conventionally Indirect** | Suggestory Formula | 9 | 40.9 |
| | Query Preparatory | 13 | 59.1 |
| | **Total** | 22 | |
| **Non-conventionally Indirect** | Strong Hint | 16 | 53.3 |
| | Mild Hint | 14 | 46.6 |
| | **Total** | 30 | |

According to Table 3, the most frequent request strategies of Iraqi Arabic participants include Mood Derivable (N=24; 28.2%), Explicit Performative (N=19; 22.3%), Strong Hint (N=16; 53.3%), Want Statement (N=15; 17.6%), Locution Derivable (N=14; 16.4%), Mild Hint (N=14; 46.6%), Query Preparatory (N=13; 59.1%), and Suggestory Formula (N=9; 40.9%), respectively. In addition, Figure 1 illustrates the most frequent request strategies of Iraqi Arabic participants.
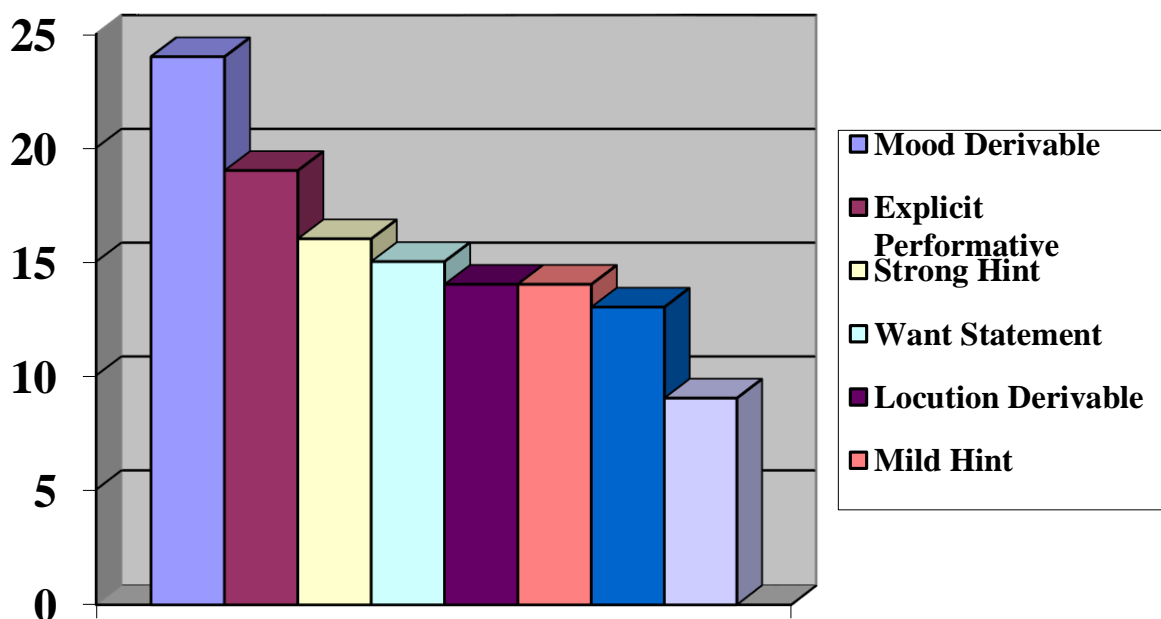
**Figure 1**



**Figure.1** *Frequency of Request Strategies of Iraqi Arabic Participants*

Furthermore, the request strategies that emerged in American English were calculated. Table 4 shows the results.

**Table 4**

*Frequency of Request Strategies of American English Participants*

|  |  | **Freq.** | **Percentage** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Direct** | Mood Derivable | 17 | 23.6 |
|  | Explicit Performative | 12 | 16.6 |
|  | Hedged Performative | 16 | 22.2 |
|  | Locution Derivable | 18 | 25.0 |
|  | Want Statement | 9 | 12.5 |
|  | **Total** | 72 |  |
| **Conventionally Indirect** | Suggestory Formula | 16 | 47.0 |
|  | Query Preparatory | 18 | 53.0 |
|  | **Total** | 34 |  |
| **Non-conventionally Indirect** | Strong Hint | 11 | 39.2 |
|  | Mild Hint | 17 | 60.7 |
|  | **Total** | 28 |  |

As illustrated in Table 4 the most frequent request strategies that emerged in American English are Locution Derivable (N=18; 25.0%), Query Preparatory (N=18; 53.0%), Mild Hint (N=17; 60.7%), Mood Derivable (N=17; 23.6%), Hedged Performative (N=16; 22.2%), Suggestory Formula (N=16; 47.0%), Explicit Performative (N=12; 16.6%), Strong Hint (N=11; 39.2%), and Want Statement (N=9; 12.5%), respectively. The following figure also shows the results for this group.
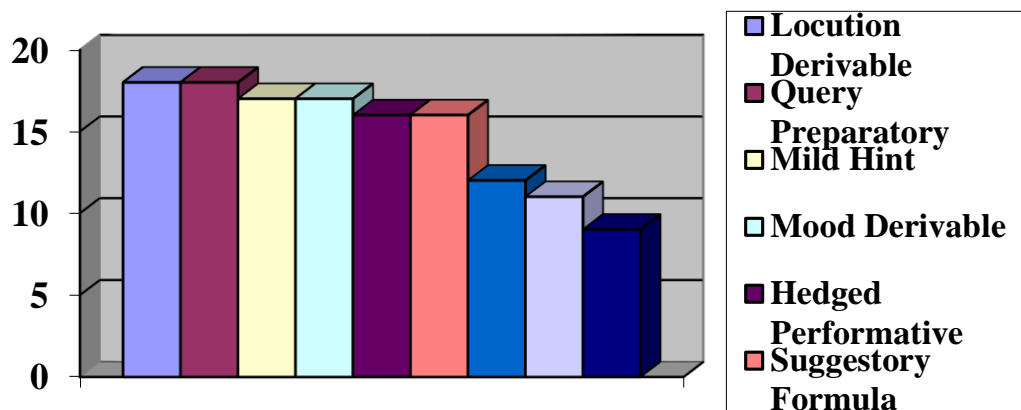
**Figure 2**



**Figure 2** *Frequency of Request Strategies of American English Participants*

Results of Research Question 2

The second research question investigates the way social factors such as power, distance and rate of imposition affected the choice of request strategies in both groups. To answer this question, the results obtained from two groups for each social factor were compared based on separate Chi-squares. Table 4.3 indicates the results for social power.

**Table 5**

*Chi-Square Test on Social Power in Two Groups*

|  | Chi-Square Value | *df* | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Pearson Chi-Square | 14.298[a] | 2 | .000 |
| Likelihood Ratio | 14.304 | 2 | .001 |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | 11.239 | 1 | .001 |
| N of Valid Cases | 37 | | |

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 62.02.

Table 5 reveals that there was a significant difference between Iraqi Arabic and American English with respect to social power ($\chi^2$=14.298, *df* = 2, *$p \leq$* .05). That is, the

realizations of the social power in request strategies of two groups were different. In addition, concerning the *distance* factor, another Chi-square was run to examine the difference between two groups.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The present study explored the request strategies that emerged in Iraqi Arabic and American English. In addition, it also inquired the way social factors such as power, distance and rate of imposition affected the choice of request strategies in both groups. The findings revealed that the most frequent request strategies of Iraqi Arabic participants were Mood Derivable, Explicit Performative, Strong Hint, Want Statement, Locution Derivable, Mild Hint, Query Preparatory, and Suggestory Formula, respectively. However, the most frequent request strategies that emerged in American English were Locution Derivable Query Preparatory, Mild Hint, Mood Derivable, Hedged Performative, Suggestory Formula, Explicit Performative, Strong Hint, and Want Statement, respectively. Additionally, the results indicated that there was a significant difference between Iraqi Arabic and American English with respect to *social power* and *distance* factor. In contrast, no difference was found between Iraqi Arabic and American English in rate of imposition. The results indicate that Iraqi and American people can be distinguished on the basis of some request strategies since the choice of request strategies reflects the different characteristics of both cultures. Further, a number of different request strategies have been reported by two groups. Each of these strategies can be realized by certain semantic formulae. These semantic formulae have been found to be attentive to certain aspects of the eliciting acts. As such, each strategy has its own specific nature. Furthermore, the linguistic expressions realizing these semantic formulae may convey different implications on pragmatic and interpersonal levels.

The frequency of use of each request strategy fluctuated from one group of participants to another in accordance with the influence of the two social factors (social status, social distance). However, sensitivity to those factors varied from one group to another. This may be indicative of a conception, in Iraqi culture, that a person higher in status and distance requires more explanation and elaboration of the reason for the request, in order to make the situation less confrontational and to avoid hurting the feelings of

others. Elaborate statements contain multiple reasons or excuses, and thus are perhaps more convincing as requests than would be brief statements. Conversely, it would appear that a request from someone lower in status and distance does not require the same level of elaboration and explanation, but rather a high level of insistence in asserting the request, hence the use of one semantic formula and a more direct strategy.

This finding supports those in the literature that Arabic communication style tends towards verbosity (Al-Issa, 1998; Al-Shalawi 1997; Pishkar (2019), Nelson, Al Batal, and Echols 1996; Nelson, El-Bakary and AL Batal 1993; and Morkus 2009). It is noteworthy that the phenomenon of circumlocution found in the Arabic data, appears to be an indication of the native language influence (Iraqi Arabic) on their request responses. As such, it is evidence of negative pragmatic transfer from the mother tongue language. American English participants, on the other hand, tend to use strategies that consist of one semantic formula more frequently than those of two or three semantic formulae. It could be argued that American English participants are more concerned about the clarity of the message in their requests than are Iraqis. The clarity of the message would appear to be more important to American English than is preserving the face needs of their subjects.

Although no difference of the rate of imposition was found in this study, however, the influence of the imposition variable conforms to the results of many studies in the literature such as Al Qahtani (2009), Eisentein and Bodman's (1986, 1993), Pishkar (2019) and Bradefer (2002). This can be explained by differences in communication practices. Iraqis give family related circumstances the greatest priority in their explanations, which reflects the value of family in their interaction.

## Conclusions

Based on the results of the study, it is concluded that both Iraqi and American English groups had differences in terms of the request strategies. EFL learners may have access to the same range of speech acts and realizations as do native speakers, but they differ from native speakers in the strategies they choose. More importantly, L2 learners must be aware of second language socio-cultural constraints on speech acts in order to be pragmatically competent. Following Rose and Kasper (2001), Pishkar (2019) , we claim that although

highly context-sensitive in selecting pragmatic strategies in their own language, learners may under differentiate such context variables as social distance and social power in L2.

It is also concluded that the finding showed the important differences in communication styles between Iraqis and American speaking communities. The most obvious difference between them is that, the English interlocutors made more use of the conventionally indirect strategy than the Iraqis, who employed more direct strategies than the English. Thus, different communication styles were adopted by those groups. The studies displayed a consensus that pragmatic knowledge can be taught request with assist strategies in EFL learning and teaching would help language students in their progress of pragmatic aspects. Additionally, it has been mentioned that students' different language request strategies may have served them to obtain fruitful language learning results. In line Pishkar (2019) with Alfattah and Ravindranath's (2009) and Roever and Al-Gahtani's (2015) findings, though contrasting with those of Alaoui (2011). The results of the present reflected the findings of Muthusamy and Farashaiyan (2016) and El Hiani (2015), but overlapping with the results of Alzeebaree and Yavuz (2017).

Arab students in general, and Iraqi students in particular face many problems in both communication and lack of learning speech act of request: such as produce of requests in their communication. Also, the great number of erroneous utterances that Iraqi learners of English produce in oral performance and their recourse to communication requests (Authors, 2018) is an indication of how serious the problem is. It is also an indication that the objectives of the English departments in Iraq classrooms, have not yet been attained, and that this circumstance requires a real solution. Basically, the researchers tend to put remedies and resolve problems of real communication in the 21th century schoolroom. Through learning of speech act of request, EFL Iraqi students can produce suitable requests.

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