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Published online: 05 December 2015

To cite this article: Abdul Amir, A. R. Z. (2015). Utilization of request mitigators by Omani learners of English and native speakers: A comparative study. *International Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences*, 1(4), 156-172.
DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.20469/ijhss.20004-4>

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UTILIZATION OF REQUEST MITIGATORS BY OMANI LEARNERS OF ENGLISH AND NATIVE SPEAKERS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Keywords:

Request Mitigators
Pragmatic Competence
Language Proficiency
Discourse Completion Test

Received: 9 August 2015

Accepted: 15 October 2015

Published: 05 December 2015

Abstract. This study examines Omani learners of English for proper use of syntactic, lexical/phrasal, and discursal request mitigators when issuing their requests. To achieve the purpose of the study, a discourse completion test that contains nine scenarios was distributed to three groups: 50 level 1 students, 50 level 4 students, and 30 native speakers. Fisher's exact test was used to point out statistically whether there are any significant differences in the frequency and types of request mitigators used by the three groups. The results from the Fisher's exact test show that native speakers differ significantly from Omani learners of English because Omani learners of English restrict their use of mitigators to syntactic ones, especially modals, and rarely use lexical and discursal ones, while native speakers use a wider range of all types. From the results of the study, a number of pedagogical recommendations were provided.

INTRODUCTION

Numerous studies have been conducted on the production of politeness strategies by second language learners of English when they communicate with native speakers of English. Some of these studies include Rose (2000), Benham and Niroomand (2011), Tan and Farashaiyan (2012), Najeeb, Maros and Nor (2012), Khalib and Tayeh (2014). However, this study differs from this type of research as it focuses only on linguistic request mitigators used by native and non-native speakers of English to mitigate the negative impact of their requests on the hearer.

A request is usually defined as an attempt made by a speaker to get the hearer do what he/she wants him to do. Thus, making a request is a politeness strategy by which the speaker asks for a favor from the hearer without sounding obtrusive. In order to mitigate his/her request, the speaker has to use some linguistic devices to show his/her respect to the hearer; thereby achieving his/her compliance. This linguistic device and the way it is implemented by native speakers and learners are of paramount importance to the success or failure of communication. Therefore, employing inappropriate request mitigators usually results in a pragmatic failure which leads to collapse of interaction. This is the first impetus of the researcher to investigate this linguistic area because, as a long time teacher of English at Sohar University, he regularly observed that the inappropriate use of request mitigators by students when they made requests to their native speaker teachers to do something for them usually resulted in pragmatic failure. In spite of the lengthy duration of exposure

to English, these learners are not always successful in communicating effectively with their native English speaking teachers. This fact was asserted by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) who concluded that only having linguistic competence does not enable second/foreign language learners to be successful in communicating effectively which, consequently, results in making pragmatic mistakes. The misuse of request mitigators by the students gives a false impression to their native speaker teachers in particular, and other native speakers of English in general, that they are impolite; hence communication is usually impeded.

A request is the most common, important and high frequency directive used by human beings because most human interactions take the form of requests. Hence, using the appropriate mitigation devices in the act of requesting is fundamental to the success of communication. However, although mitigation is a universal phenomenon, its types and frequency vary from one language to another and from one culture to another because this phenomenon is linguistically and culturally bound. This conclusion was arrived at by Guodong and Jing (2005) who stated that misunderstandings frequently occur between people from different cultures, which make them unable to communicate successfully. Furthermore, Kihckaya (2010) has asserted that social, cultural, situational, and personal factors usually complicate the situation for language learners when they try to select the appropriate number and types of mitigation devices to effectively maintain communication. This

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motivates the writer to compare the implementation of request mitigators by native speakers of English and Omani learners of English to find out how far they are different. The difference in performance will give a clear indication for all those who deal with English teaching that those learners need to be equipped with a better knowledge of pragmatics to help them communicate successfully with native speakers.

Request mitigators are frequently and unconsciously used by native speakers of English to appear as polite as possible when they communicate. This implies that the type and frequency of mitigators that an individual uses give a clear indication to his addressee about his/her level of politeness. When the writer started this research, he had the following questions in mind:

1. Do Omani learners of English have the same ability as native speakers of English in using the appropriate number and types of request mitigators in different situations?
2. Does the interlingual factor play any role in the misuse of these mitigators?
3. Does Omani culture have any negative impact on their correct use?
4. Can these learners appreciate the role of the contextual factors that demand and govern the natives' use of these mitigators?
5. What techniques can curriculum designers and teachers of English suggest enabling their learners to own the same pragmatic competence of native speakers in using request mitigators?

There have been a number of studies which investigated second/foreign language learners' production of politeness strategies, however, to the best knowledge of the writer, no such study has ever been conducted in the Sultanate of Oman. Moreover, this paper will also explore, for the first time, the different types of syntactic, lexical/phrasal, and discoursal request mitigators utilized by native speakers and Omani Learners of English when issuing requests in different situations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is inevitable for any researcher who wants to investigate any area in politeness to refer to two prominent theories in this area, Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) and Leech's (1983). The main concept that the first theory focuses on is 'face' which is the public self-image that every adult tries to protect. In this theory, face is divided into two types, positive and negative. While the former represents the wish to be accepted and appreciated, the latter represents the wish to be undisturbed by others. The other concept that is related to 'face' is 'face threatening acts' (FTAs) which are usually defined as those acts that run contrary to what the 'face' wants of the addressee and/or the speaker. In other words, they are acts that inherently damage the 'face' of addressee or the speaker by being in opposition to the wants and desires of the other.

Unlike Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) theory of politeness, Leech's (1983) theory focuses on the existence of a set of politeness maxims that determine adult's discourse, namely tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, and sympathy. All of these maxims aim at minimizing speaker costs and maximizing hearer benefits. Cost benefit, optionality, indirectness authority, and social distance are all involved in the Tactic Maxim which indicates a category of indirectness. To Leech (1983), different levels of indirectness indicate different levels of politeness. To illustrate this association, some studies provided the following examples, the first of which is considered the most direct and the least polite whereas the last one is the least direct and the most polite.

- a. Answer the phone.
- b. I want you to answer the phone.
- c. Will you answer the phone?
- d. Can you answer the phone?
- e. Would you mind answering the phone?
- f. Could you possibly answer the phone?

Politeness is defined by Mills (2003, p.6) as "the expression of the speakers' intention to mitigate face threats carried by certain face threatening acts towards another." Since making a request (the main focus of the current study) is considered a face threatening act, politeness strategies should be employed to mitigate its threatening effect on the hearer (Okamura, 1997). This illustrates the fact that since issuing requests asks for favor and does not aim to threaten the hearer, it is indivisible from politeness strategies. In this regard, Bialystock (1993) states that it is necessary for any person who makes a request to have the ability to appropriately mitigate the level of his request based on the given situation. Therefore, requestors should vary their mitigation devices to show their courtesy to the hearer (Sh, Hause & Kasper, 1989). It is generally known that these devices are important to the success or failure of communication. In communication, speech acts, such as making requests, cannot be conveyed without some universal principles such as 'give option' (Lakoff, 1973), 'don't coerce on hearers' (Brown and Levinson, 1978, 1987), and 'minimize dispraise of other' (Leech, 1983). These universal principles are realized through the use of mitigation devices (Fraser, 1980).

Some writers try to differentiate between mitigation and politeness by considering them as two different, unrelated phenomena. In order to prove that, Fraser (1980, p.343) cites the following three examples:

- a. I'd appreciate it if you would sit down.
- b. Sit down.
- c. Please, sit down.

While in the first example, both mitigation and politeness are employed, neither of them is used in the second one. In the third example, though there is an element of politeness, there are no mitigation devices.

In spite of what has been stated above, the writer conceives the notion that mitigation is a part of politeness as it is one of the strategies used by the speaker to tone down the negative impact of imposition.

Mitigation devices are usually classified by discourse analysts into two types, internal and external. While the former includes

lexical/phrasal and syntactic items that are found inside the same request head act, the latter includes the items surrounded by the request head act (Alcon, Safont & Martínez-Flor, 2005). Hence, linguistically, mitigation is subdivided into syntactic, lexical/phrasal, and discorsal. The following table describes how each type of mitigation is manifested in discourse.

TABLE 1
The Manifestation of Mitigation Types in Discourse

Mitigation type	Categories	Example(s)	
Syntactic	Modals	Would you mind helping them?	
	Yes/no questions	Will you take me home?	
	Past tense	Could you send it to me again?	
	Negation	Couldn't you prepare it for me?	
	Embedding	I'd be very grateful if you talk to them.	
	If clause	If you are not too busy, would you give me a hand?	
	"ing" form	I was thinking you might tell them the truth.	
	Tag questions	You couldn't give me a lift, could you?	
	Agent indirection	Third person forms	Each person has to clean up after himself.
		First person plural	We have to clean up after ourselves here.
Passivization		This place needs to be cleaned up.	
Lexical/phrasal	Deference markers	Hand me this paper, please.	
	Interpersonal markers	Cajolers	Such things happen, you know.
		Appealers	You will visit me tomorrow, OK.
	Minimizers	Would you wait just a second?	
	Consultative devices	Would you mind having the meeting on Friday?	
	Terms of address	Close the door, mate.	
	Downtoners	Adverbs	It would seem somewhat unlikely that...
		Adjectives	It seems possible to finish the report today.
		Nouns	May be you wouldn't object to their suggestion that ...
	Introductory phrases	To the best of my knowledge, you can give me a hand.	
Discorsal	Disarmers (expressing apology)	I'm so sorry that I have disturbed your meal. I'll phone again later.	
	Preparators	Preparing the content to go smoothly with the context I don't know where I have put my pen. I can't find it. May I use your pen for a while?	

Mitigation type	Categories	Example(s)
	Preparing the speech act	Can I request something from you?
	Checking on availability to prevent an excuse	May I disturb you for a moment?
	Getting a pre-commitment to ensure compliance	May I ask you a favor?
	Cost minimizing :	Could I borrow your car tonight? I'll have it back in time for you to drive to work
	persuasion to ensure	If you help me now, I'll help you later.
	Promise of reward :	
	making requests sound	
Supportive reasons (Providing reasons for issuing a speech act to ensure		Could I have this picture for my grandson? He loves sheep and he will be so pleased.
Sweeteners (Flattering the hearer before stating your need)		You did such a good job last time. Can you type this, too?

Since the emergence of the two theories of politeness by Brown and Levinson (1978) and Leech (1983), numerous studies on second/foreign language learners' production and development of politeness strategies in non-Arab and Arab countries have been conducted. These studies are divided into two categories. While the first category includes studies that focus on the second/foreign language learners' production of politeness strategies, the studies of the second category are comparative studies which focus on pinpointing the differences and similarities between second/foreign language learners and native speakers in employing politeness strategies. Some of the studies that were carried out in non-Arab countries from the first category are Rose (2000); Benham and Niroomand (2011); Aidinlou, Tina and Bonab (2012), Tan and Farashaiyan (2012); Shahrokhi (2012);

Khalib and Tayeh (2014). Other studies that were also carried out in non-Arab countries from the second category are Tanaka and Kawade (1982), Suh (1999); Parent (2002); Kaneko (2004); Nogami (2005); Taguchi (2006); Jalilifar (2009); Su (2010); Chiravate (2011); Sorahi and Nazemi (2013). Some of the studies that were conducted in Arab countries from the first category include Umar (2004); Sattar, Lah and Suleiman (2009); Almarrani; Sazali (2010), Aribi (2012) and Najeeb (2012). Studies form the second category include Al-Momani (2009); Al-Ali and Alawneh (2010); Aldhulaee (2011) and Bataineh (2013). The following table gives a concise summary of the problem, methodology and results of previous studies including the aforementioned ones.

TABLE 2
Summary of Previous Studies

Author(s)	Problem	Methodology	Results
Tanaka and Kawade (1982)	Japanese second language learners are different from native speakers of English in the production of politeness strategies.	Using a multiple-choice questionnaire, the writer compared the politeness strategies used by 32 Japanese second language learners of English with 53 native speakers of English.	The study arrived at the following results: 1. Native speakers of English used more politeness strategies in situations where the requester-requestee relationship is distant. 2. Native speakers of English employed less politeness strategies in situations where the relationship between request-requestee is close. 3. Japanese learners did not differ significantly from native speakers in the use of politeness strategies.

Author(s)	Problem	Methodology	Results
Suh (1999)	Korean second language learners of English lack the knowledge of politeness strategies.	Employing a multiple-choice questionnaire, the prediction of politeness strategies of a group of native speakers of English was compared to a group of Korean second language learners in terms of their different proficiency.	<p>4. In certain situations, native speakers employ more politeness strategies than Japanese learners.</p> <p>The results revealed that in some situations where a requester-requestee relationship was both socially and psychologically close, the Korean English language learners use less politeness strategies than native speakers of English.</p>
Rose (2000)	Cantonese learners of English are not as competent as native speakers of English in employing politeness strategies of request.	Different groups of Cantonese learners of English were introduced to different EFL contexts to find out whether the level of proficiency played a role in the knowledge of producing politeness strategies.	<p>The study arrived at the following two conclusions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Frequency of conventional indirectness increased with proficiency. 2. No situational variation in request strategy was found across all groups of Cantonese learners of English.
Parent (2002)	Catalan learners of English face issues when making requests.	A discourse completion test (DCT) was given to four groups. The first group is comprised of 36 native speakers. The other three groups are 36 Catalan learners of English categorized according to their level of proficiency.	<p>The results of the study were:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Culture plays an important role in determining the implementation of direct and indirect strategies. 2. The two groups showed significant difference in the choice of the appropriate politeness strategies required in making a request due to social distance and dominance. 3. Pragmatic competence was developed with the increase of the linguistic ability.
Kaneko (2004)	Japanese EFL learners are incompetent in using politeness strategies in making requests.	The data of the study was collected through the role-play part of Standard Speaking Test (SST) corpus.	<p>The following results were arrived at by the researcher,</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Native speakers of English use less direct requests than the learners. 2. The lower the proficiency of the learners was, the less strategies were used. 3. Learners often used performative verbs associated by the deference marker 'please' whereas native speakers used the subjunctive mood.

Author(s)	Problem	Methodology	Results
Umar (2004)	Arab learners of English do not have the same knowledge of native speakers in making requests.	The researcher compared the performance of advanced Arab learners of English in making requests with British native speakers of English.	The results of the study arrived at the conclusion that though the two groups used indirect politeness strategies when requesting people in equal or higher social status, Arab learners of English unlike native speakers often tend to use direct request strategies when requesting people who are lower than them in status.
Nogami (2005)	Japanese learners of English utilize less communication softeners than native speakers of English.	The participants were asked to discuss to reach a consensus by the end of their discussion on a prepared topic which approximately lasted for 30 minutes.	The results showed that Japanese learners of English used only a few softeners in their conversation because of three reasons. First, they do not know how to soften their message. Second, they overlooked using conversational softeners. Third, they regarded them unnecessary.
Taguchi (2006)	The inability of Japanese learners of English to use different politeness strategies when compared to native speakers of English.	A role play task was conducted to measure how far Japanese learners of English were different from native speakers in using politeness strategies to mitigate their requests.	The results of the study indicated that Japanese learners of English were highly affected by power, social distance, and degree of imposition in using different indirect strategies when making their requests whereas native speakers were far less affected by these factors.
Jalilifar (2009)	Incapability of Iranian EFL learners of English in using direct and indirect politeness strategies in making requests.	A discourse completion test (DCT) was given to two Iranian groups consisting of 96 undergraduate and postgraduate students as well as a group of 10 Australian native speakers of English to investigate the difference between them in making requests.	The results of the study revealed that in spite of the progress of postgraduate students' pragmatic competence, they displayed overuse of indirect strategies, whereas the native speakers used more balanced strategies. Furthermore, the lower proficiency Iranian learners used more direct than indirect strategies.
Al-Momani (2009)	Jordanian EFL learners face difficulties in performing request.	A discourse completion task (DCT) and a scale-response questionnaire (SRQ) were given to three groups, 44 native speakers of Jordanian Arabic, 44 native speakers of American English, and 44 Jordanian EFL learners, to	The results of the study showed that Jordanian EFL learners are negatively influenced by their first language by being more direct than Native speakers. Moreover, the patterns they use are totally different from the patterns used by native speakers of English as they

Author(s)	Problem	Methodology	Results
Sattar et al. (2009)	Iraqi EFL learners face difficulties when making requests.	A discourse completion test (DCT) and multiple choice questionnaire (MCQ) were given to 10 Iraqi Arabic native speakers to investigate their use of variable request.	The results of the study revealed that there was a sort of variation in the frequency and content of the politeness strategies of request according to different situations.
Su (2010)	Chinese EFL learners of English encounter difficulties in making requests.	Via discourse completion test (DCT), a group of Chinese EFL learners was compared with native speakers of English in the production of request strategies.	The results showed that Chinese EFL learners used less indirect strategies than English native speakers even though they use more politeness strategies in their mother tongue.
Al-Ali and Alawneh (2010)	Jordanian EFL learners lack English native speakers' pragmatic request behavior.	A discourse completion test (DCT) was conducted to compare the performance of 90 Jordanian and American undergraduate students in making requests.	The study showed that there were interesting differences between the Jordanian learners and American native speakers in the utilization of request linguistic mitigation devices in relation to structure, type, frequency, and realization.
Almarraniand Sazali (2010)	The negative impact of culture and religious values cause problems for Yemeni males and females in choosing appropriate request strategies.	A discourse completion test (DCT) was introduced to 186 Yemeni male and 186 female university students to explore their employment of request.	The study arrived at the following two conclusions: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Male-male interaction is characterized by using direct strategies when requesting each other. 2. When Yemeni male students interact with female students, they usually use indirect politeness strategies.
Chiravate (2011)	Thai EFL learners face many difficulties when they produce politeness strategies.	Through a multiple-choice questionnaire, the researcher compared the politeness strategies produces by 30 native speakers of American English and 60 Thai EFL learners in terms of their proficiency.	The researcher arrived at the following conclusions: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Thai EFL learners used dissimilar politeness strategies to that of the native speakers because native speakers use more politeness strategies than the Thai EFL learners. 2. The low proficiency learners differed from the native speakers to a greater extent than the high proficiency learners. 3. The difference in the utilization of politeness strategies between the native speakers and Thai EFL learners was attributed to first language influence.

Author(s)	Problem	Methodology	Results
Aldhulaee (2011)	Iraqi learners of English lack the competency in making requests.	Via role –play interviews, request samples made by Australian native speakers of English and Iraqi EFL learners were collected, compared, and analyzed.	The two groups used different request mitigators according to linguistic and cultural variations.
Benham and Niroomand (2011)	The incompetence of Iranian EFL learners in employing the same politeness strategies produced by native speakers of English.	A discourse completion test (DCT) was conducted to investigate how far the two groups of Iranian EFL learners were different in terms of their proficiency in employing politeness strategies.	The results of the study showed that the more proficient the learners were in English, the more appropriate the politeness strategies they produced.
Tan and Farashaiyan (2012)	Malaysian ESL learners' lack of competence in using politeness strategies.	60 Malaysian undergraduate students were divided into two groups; treatment group and controlling group. Via using pre-tests and post-tests, the two groups' performance was examined.	The results of the study revealed that the treatment group significantly outperformed the control group in using politeness strategies.
Tawalbeh and Al-Oqaily (2012)	The tendency of Arab learners of English to use direct strategies in making requests.	A discourse completion test (DCT) that consists of 12 written situations was given to 30 Saudi and American undergraduate students to investigate their performance in using request strategies.	The study arrived at the conclusion that the most prevailing strategy employed by the American students was indirectness whereas directness characterized the Saudi EFL learners' responses in intimate situations to express closeness.
Aidinlou et al. (2012)	Iranian EFL learners' incompetence in using the appropriate politeness strategies in their written discourse.	50 Iranian English major college students' ability of using the appropriate politeness strategies in their written discourse was examined through a discourse completion test (DCT), the responses of	The researchers indicated that these college students need to be more proficient in English to utilize the appropriate politeness strategies in their writing.
Aribi (2012)	Tunisian EFL learners tend to use politeness strategies regardless of the social power, social distance, and degree of imposition.	67 Tunisian female students were analyzed to show the level of directness and indirectness in request issuance.	The study arrived at the following results: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. When Tunisian learners of English requested people in lower positions, they used direct strategies. 2. Indirect strategies were used 3. The same learners are found requesting people when the ranking of imposition is very high. 4. When the request was addressed to people who have

Author(s)	Problem	Methodology	Results
Najeeb et al. (2012)	Arab learners of English always used direct politeness strategies in their written discourse.	18 e-mails that were sent by six Arab postgraduate students to their supervisors were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative approaches to find out the politeness strategies used by these students in their writing.	The study revealed that Arab postgraduate students never used indirect politeness strategies when issuing their request.
Sorahi and Nazemi (2013)	Incapability of Iranian Persian speakers in using politeness strategies.	A written discourse completion task (DCT) was given to two groups; Australian native speakers of English and Iranian university students.	The results of the study showed that Iranian Persian speakers use fewer politeness strategies than their Australian counter parts due to cultural differences.
Bataineh (2013)	Arab learners of English determined by their culture used different politeness strategies than native speakers of English.	A discourse completion test (DCT) was conducted to examine differences and similarities of politeness strategies employment between Jordanian speakers and American speakers of English.	The study revealed that both groups tend to implement similar politeness strategies though they differ in frequency and realization.
Khalib and Tayeh (2014)	Confusion of Malaysian ESL learners in using direct and indirect politeness strategies.	Through a discourse completion test (DCT), 40 Malaysian university students' performance of direct and indirect politeness strategies was investigated.	The results revealed that Malaysian university students always used indirect politeness strategies regardless of Brown and Levinson's theory.

All the above studies, whether comparative or non-comparative, have arrived at two conclusions. First, learners of English, however proficient they are, cannot own the native speakers' pragmatic competence in using request mitigators. Second, there are significant differences between the two groups in employing request mitigators. Although the current study is of the comparative type, it is different in three regards. First, unlike other studies, it will only investigate the types of mitigators used by native speakers and Omani learners of English to mitigate the negative impact of requests. Second, two types of comparison will be conducted. While the first one compares the performance of Level 1 and level 4 students to show whether proficiency plays any role in helping Level 4 students to perform more adequately, the second compares the performance of the students and native speakers. Third, this study, to the best knowledge of the writer, is the first such study that has ever been conducted in Oman.

METHODOLOGY

In order to achieve the objectives of the study, i.e. determining whether Omani learners of English have the same ability and knowledge of native speakers of English in utilizing request mitigators, a discourse completion test (DCT) consisting of nine scenarios was designed by the writer and validated by a number of native English speaking teachers at the Faculty of English Language Studies at Sohar University. The nine scenarios were

chosen in accordance with Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies, i.e. power, social distance, and degree of imposition. The DCT was administered to three groups: 50 Level 1 students, 50 level 4 students, and 30 native speakers. While the first two groups were randomly chosen from Levels 1 and 4 students in the Faculty of English and Language Studies, the participants of the third group were taken from different academic institutions, including Sohar University. Groups 1 and 2 are considered the experimental groups while the third is considered the control group.

To minimize subjectivity and eliminate any overemphasis on negligible differences in the analysis, the results retrieved from the performance of the three groups were analyzed using Fisher's exact test. This test was used because the data can be quantitatively represented when the sample size is less than 20. R Studio software was used to apply Fisher's exact test. The hypotheses of the test are as follows:

Null hypothesis: $H_0 (>0.05)$ = There is no difference.

Alternative hypothesis: $H_1 (<0.05)$ = There is difference.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

After a thorough analysis of the three groups' performance, two comparisons have been conducted to find out how far the three groups were similar or different in using request mitigators. The results of the first scenario (Table 3) indicate that there is

difference between Level 1 and level 4 students as Fisher's exact test p -value is 0.01. This difference is attributed to level 1 students' excessive use of modals and multiple mitigators in their responses. The second comparison between native speakers and

Level 4 Omani learners of English clearly shows that the two groups are different as the Fisher's exact test p -value is 9.49E-12. The results for this scenario are represented in the following table:

TABLE 3
Scenario 1: You are Trying to Call a Family Member, But Your Phone is Out of Credit and Your Friend is With You. What Would You Say to Borrow Your Friend's Phone?

Type of mitigator	Mitigator	Level 1	Level 4	Native speakers
Syntactic mitigators	Modal (can)	36	1	4
	(may)	0	24	0
	Past tense (could)	13	18	2
	Past tense (would)	0	1	0
	Embedding	0	1	0
	If clause	0	1	0
lexical/phrasal mitigators	Minimizers	0	0	6
Discoursal mitigators	Preparators (Preparing the content to go smoothly with the context)	1	2	6
	Supporting reasons, Disarmers (expressing apology)	0	0	10
Multiple mitigators	Can /Could + deference marker (please)	7	0	0
Performative verbs	Give and lend	0	1	0
		0	0	2

The results for the second scenario indicate that there are no differences between Level 1 and 4 as the Fisher's exact test p -value is 0.4. However, there is difference between Level 4 students and native speakers of English as the p -value for this comparison is 0.04. The results for this scenario are represented in the table 4. The results for the third scenario show that Level 1

and 4 students are comparable in their use of mitigators because the p -value for the comparison is 0.4. However, Level 4 students differ from native speakers in their use of mitigators as the p -value for the comparison is 0.04. The table 5 shows the performance of Level 1 and 4 students as well as native speakers:

TABLE 4
Scenario 2: You Missed a Lecture and You Want Your Classmate to Give You His/Her Notes. What Would You Say?

Type of mitigator	Mitigator	Level 1	Level 4	Native speakers
Syntactic mitigators	Modal (can)	21	18	6
	(may)	1	0	0
	Past tense (could)	15	13	4
	Past tense (would)	4	6	0
	Embedding	1	1	8
	If clause	1	4	0
lexical/phrasal mitigators	Terms of address	1	0	0
	Deference markers (please)	0	4	0
	Consultative device (Do you mind)	0	0	6
Discoursal mitigators	Preparators (Preparing the content to go smoothly with the context)	1	1	4
	Supporting reasons	4	3	2
	Disarmers (expressing apology)	1	0	0
Multiple mitigators	_____	0	0	0
Performative verbs	_____	0	0	0

TABLE 5
Scenario 3: You are in the Library Trying to Focus and a Stranger Sitting Next to You is Humming in a Loud Voice. What Would You Say to Make Him/Her Stop Humming?

Type of mitigator	Mitigator	Level 1	Level 4	Native speakers
Syntactic mitigators	Modal (can)	21	18	6
	(may)	1	0	0
	Past tense (could)	15	13	4
	Past tense (would)	4	6	0
	Embedding	1	1	8
	If clause	1	4	0
lexical/phrasal mitigators	Terms of address	1	0	0
	Deference markers (please)	0	4	0
	Consultative device (Do you mind)	0	0	6
Discoursal mitigators	Preparators (Preparing the content to go smoothly with the context)	1	1	4
	Supporting reasons	4	3	2
	Disarmers (expressing apology)	1	0	0
Multiple mitigators	————	0	0	0
Peformative verbs	————	0	0	0

The results for the fourth scenario indicate that Level 1 and Level 4 students are similar in their application of mitigators because the *p*-value is 0.5. The second comparison, however, indicates that

Level 4 students are drastically different from native speakers in applying mitigators as the *p*-value for the comparison is 4.87E-14. The results for this scenario are represented in the following table:

TABLE 6
Scenario 4: You Want to Borrow a Book From Your Lecturer. What Would You Say?

Type of mitigator	Mitigator	Level 1	Level 4	Native speakers
Syntactic mitigators	Modal (can)	20	17	4
	(may)	1	1	0
	Past tense (could)	19	15	2
	Past tense (would)	2	11	0
	Embedding	1	0	2
	If clause	0	2	0
lexical/phrasal mitigators	Consultative devices (Would you mind)	0	0	17
Discoursal mitigators	Preparators (Preparing the content to go smoothly with the context)	1	0	5
	Supporting reasons			
	Disarmers (expressing apology)	0	0	0
Multiple mitigators	————	0	0	0
Peformative verbs	Want and need	6	4	0

The performance of the three groups in the fifth scenario indicates that Level 1 and 4 students are comparable as the *p*-value is 0.059 while Level 4 students are significantly different from native

speakers because the *p*-value for the comparison is 1.46E-09. The following table represents the results of this scenario:

TABLE 7

Scenario 5: You are a Line Manager of Human Resources and You Asked One of Your Employees to Type a Letter For You and He/She Did. Then You Want Him/Her to Type Another Letter. What Would You Say?

Type of mitigator	Mitigator	Level 1	Level 4	Native speakers
Syntactic mitigators	Modal (can)	23	19	2
	Past tense (could)	9	13	2
	Past tense (would)	2	3	1
	Embedding	1	1	0
	If clause	0	3	0
lexical/phrasal mitigators	Consultative devices (Would you mind)	1	1	1
	Deference markers (Thank you)	3	0	1
Discoursal mitigators	Sweeteners (flattering the hearer before stating your request)	2	4	14
	Disarmers (expressing apology)	3	1	6
	Preparators (Preparing the content to go smoothly with the context)	1	1	3
Multiple mitigators	—————	0	0	0
Peformative verbs	Want, need, write, need, want, and type	5	4	0

The results of scenario 6 show that Level 1 and 4 students are comparable as the p -value for the comparison is 0.1. Conversely, Level 4 students differ drastically from native speakers in their use

of mitigators as the p -value is 2.61E-11. The following table reviews the results retrieved from scenario 5:

TABLE 8

Scenario 6: You Want One of Your Colleagues to Help You Design a Brochure as Part of an Assignment. What Would You Say?

Type of mitigator	Mitigator	Level 1	Level 4	Native speakers
Syntactic mitigators	Modal (can)	31	29	5
	(may)	1	0	0
	Past tense (could)	7	5	0
	Past tense (would)	7	1	2
	Embedding	0	1	0
	If clause	0	4	5
	Yes/no question	0	1	0
lexical/phrasal mitigators	Consultative devices (Do you mind)	0	0	3
Discoursal mitigators	Sweeteners (flattering the hearer before stating your request)	1	0	0
	Preparators (getting a pre-commitment to ensure compliance)	0	0	4
	Preparators (promise of reward)	0	0	3
	Preparators (preparing the content to go smoothly with the context)	0	0	8
Multiple mitigators	—————	0	0	0
Peformative verbs	Help, come, want, need, help, and hope	3	9	0

The results of the seventh scenario show that Level 1 and 4 students are comparable as the p -value is 0.4. However, Level 4 students and native speakers differ significantly in their use of

mitigators as the p -value is 8.36E-12. The table below depicts the results for the seventh scenario:

TABLE 9

Scenario 7: Your Car is Not Working and You Want Your Friend to Give you a Lift to the Airport. What Would You Say?

Type of mitigator	Mitigator	Level 1	Level 4	Native speakers
Syntactic mitigators	Modal (can)	33	25	2
	(may)	0	1	0
	Past tense (could)	5	7	0
	Past tense (would)	5	2	0
	If clause	0	3	1
lexical/phrasal mitigators	Terms of address	0	2	3
	Consultative devices (would you mind)	0	0	3
	Supportive reasons (providing reasons for issuing a speech act to ensure the hearer's compliance)	4	4	3
Discoursal mitigators	Preparators (getting a pre-commitment to ensure compliance)	0	0	5
	Preparators (preparing the context to go smoothly with the context)	0	0	
	Preparators (checking on availability to prevent an excuse)	0	0	9
	Disarmer (expressing apology)	0	0	2
Multiple mitigators	—————	0	0	0
Peformative verbs	Help, come, want, and take	3	6	0

The results of the eighth scenario indicate that Level 1 and 4 students are not different in their use of mitigators as the p -value is 0.7. Nevertheless, the performance of Level 4 students is

significantly different because the p -value is 5.76E-08. The table below represents the results:

TABLE 10

Scenario 8: You Need to Photocopy a Handout, and You Forgot Your Wallet/Purse. What Would You Say to a Friend of Yours to Borrow Some Money From Him/Her?

Type of mitigator	Mitigator	Level 1	Level 4	Native speakers
Syntactic mitigators	Modal (can)	25	15	2
	(may)	2	0	0
lexical/phrasal mitigators	Past tense (could)	7	19	1
	Past tense (would)	0	0	0
	If clause	0	0	0
	Consultative devices (would you mind)	0	1	0
	Supportive reasons (providing reasons for issuing a speech act to ensure the hearer's compliance)	10	9	13
	Preparators (checking on availability to prevent an excuse)	1	1	0
	Preparators (preparing the content to go smoothly with the context)	0	3	3
	Preparators (getting a pre-commitment to ensure compliance)	0	0	10
	Cost minimizing (persuasion to ensure compliance and cooperation)	0	0	0
	Multiple mitigators	—————	0	0
Peformative verbs	Need, want, help, and lend	5	8	1

Scenario 9 results reveal that Level 1 and 4 students are comparable as the p -value is 0.6. However, Level 4 students and native speakers drastically contrast in the use of mitigators as the

p -value is 2.48E-08. The following table depicts the results for scenario 9:

TABLE 11

Scenario 9: You are Sitting in a Cafeteria With a Friend and You Want Him/Her to Pass You The Ketchup Bottle. What Would You Say?

Type of mitigator	Mitigator	Level 1	Level 4	Native speakers
Syntactic mitigators	Modal (can)	33	21	4
	Past tense (could)	5	10	5
	(would)	0	3	0
	Embedding	1	0	0
	If clause	0	1	0
lexical/phrasal mitigators	Difference markers (please)	3	3	11
	(thanks)			
	Terms of address	0	0	7
Discoursal mitigators	Disarmers (expressing apology)	0	0	1
Multiple mitigators	_____	0	0	0
Performative verbs	Want, give, and pass	8	12	1

Since the results show no significant differences between Level 1 and Level 4 participants whereas there are consistent significant differences between Omani learners and native speakers, the researcher finds it more reasonable and logical to comment in details on the differences between Level 4 participants as an experimental group and native speakers as a controlling group. For

the purpose of focusing the discussion on Level 4 and native speakers, the following table summarizes the results of these two groups' performance in all the scenarios:

TABLE 12

Summary of The Total Number of Request Mitigators Employed by The Native Speakers and Omani Learners of English

Type of mitigator	Omani learners of English (level 4)	Native speakers
Syntactic	363 (89%)	77 (29.5%)
Lexical/Phrasal	11 (2.7%)	65 (24.9%)
Discoursal	33 (8%)	119 (45.5%)
Total	407	261
Performative verbs	41	4

The table above shows that while Omani learners of English are inclined to frequently use syntactic mitigators (89%), native speakers keep a sort of balance between the three types of mitigators; syntactic (29.5%), lexical/phrasal (24.9%), and discoursal (45.5%). This gives a clear indication that while Omani learners of English prefer to use syntactic mitigators when they request their addressees as it is of the highest percentage, native speakers tend to use discoursal mitigators which take the highest percentage of their use. The high percentage of discoursal mitigators used by native speakers is an obvious indication that they try their best to be as indirect and polite as possible. On the contrary, Omani learners of English use only a few types of discoursal mitigators because they do not know how to prepare the addressees to gain their compliance to perform the speech act they issue. The vast difference in the three percentages of discoursal mitigators, lexical/phrasal mitigators, and syntactic mitigators

gives the impression that Omani learners of English cannot match the native speakers' pragmatic competence, especially in the utilization of request mitigators. This conforms to the conclusion arrived at by most non-comparative studies.

Although the three groups do not frequently use lexical/phrasal mitigators, the percentage of native speakers' use (24.9%) appears to be much higher than the percentage of Omani learners of English (2.7%).

The other fact that the above table shows is that while Omani learners of English use the two modals 'can' and 'could' for 333 times (81%), native speakers only use them for 52 (19.9%) times. This means that these two modal verbs are given priority by Omani learners of English as they are of the highest percentage of all the other modal verbs, syntactic mitigators, and all types of request mitigators. This conveys the indication that most of the learners seem to have good knowledge of using these two modals

while the other mitigators do not constitute a part of their vocabulary repertoire.

Another difference between native speakers and Omani learners lies in the use of performative verbs which are used 41 times by Omani learners and only four times by native speakers who use them only when they make informal request, i.e., to their close friends and in informal setting. This is another indication that while native speakers tend to be indirect, Omani learners are inclined to be direct because they do not have this concept of politeness strategy.

In all the scenarios, most Omani learners use 'can' and 'could' regardless of power, degree of imposition, and social distance. This indicates that they do not choose their mitigators according to these three factors on which Brown and Levinson based their politeness strategies. This shows that Omani learners restrict their use to a limited number of mitigators whereas native speakers use most of them. All the above differences correspond with the finding arrived at by most comparative studies.

The writer believes that the lacklustre performance of Omani learners of English in this pragmatic area is mainly due to cultural and linguistic differences as well as English syllabi taught at schools and universities. Regarding culture, Arab people never use preparators to tone down their requests on their hearers. Instead, they usually use performative verbs to be direct because everyone thinks that he/she has the authority and power to ask people to do something for them, especially if the people whom they speak to are of lower and same rank or younger than them. If they talk to older people or people who are of upper rank, they usually use performative verbs accompanied by the Arabic deference marker */min fadhlak/* which means 'please'. If they use preparators or any other lexical/phrasal or discoursal mitigators, they are often accused of being exaggerative, courteous and hypocrite. Linguistically, most lexical/phrasal and discoursal mitigators do not exist in Arabic, so the learners normally resort to those mitigators that exist in their mother tongue. Another reason for the bad performance of Omani learners can be linked to the limited exposure of those learners to request mitigators in the Omani public school English syllabus that is called 'English For Me.' This is a set of forty-eight books; two course books and two workbooks for each of the 12 school years. In order to substantiate this statement, the researcher inspected all the activities in all the text-books. The examination showed that there is not a single activity utterly devoted to this important linguistic area. Thus, during their long period of study, those learners have rarely been exposed to these mitigators, therefore, they tend to refrain from using them.

CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The conclusions arrived at in this study can be summarized as follows:

1. The results of the study reveal that in spite of the long period Level 4 students have been studying at the Faculty of English and Language Studies, their progress of pragmatic

competence is not efficient enough to help them perform better than Level 1 students. This indicates that the degree of proficiency of English they own after that period of study does not enhance their pragmatic competence to use a variety of request mitigators according to different linguistic situations as native speakers do. As a result, both Level 1 and Level 4 students are not as competent as native speakers in employing the appropriate mitigators required for different people and situations.

2. The results of the study confirm a very important fact. The use of mitigators is culturally and linguistically bound. While native speakers of English resort to indirectness by using lexical/phrasal and discoursal mitigators to issue their requests in a very polite way, Omani learners tend to transfer polite expressions from their mother tongue when they ask for any request. Native speakers of Arabic are always direct when they make their requests. However, if they would like to mitigate their requests to appear more polite, they add the Arabic deference marker */min fadhlak/* which is the counterpart of the English deference marker 'please'. Linguistically, since most of the lexical/phrasal and discoursal mitigators do not exist in the learners' mother tongue, they seem to be obliged to use the counterparts available in their language. The high percentages of usage of 'can' and 'could' is a good example.
3. Native speakers of English tend to use discoursal and lexical/phrasal mitigators, especially preparators, in most situations in order to achieve the compliance of their hearers to perform the speech act. On the contrary, Omani learners only resort to some syntactic mitigators, especially modals, when they make their requests.
4. Native speakers seem to be highly affected by power, degree of imposition, and social distance to use a variety of syntactic, lexical/phrasal, and discoursal mitigators whereas Omani learners restrict their use to some syntactic mitigators, especially modals, regardless of these three factors.
5. Though native speakers use discoursal mitigators frequently, they keep a sort of balance between the three categories. On the other hand, the use of the modals 'can' and 'could' by Omani learners significantly outweighs the implementation of all other mitigators.
6. Most native speakers of English tend to use the same mitigators with different people regardless of age, sex and rank. This indicates that they want to be polite with all the people they make request to. Omani learners, however, use performative verbs with people who are younger, close friends, and lower in rank and only add the deference marker 'please' to those performative verbs or rarely try to choose different mitigators to appear more polite with people who are either older than them or of higher rank.
7. In all scenarios, the writer finds that native speakers of English tend to use a certain mitigator for every situation. This appears to be concomitant with the linguistic principle stating that every linguistic situation is considered unique and

- needs a unique piece of language. Omani learners seem to be unaware of this fact because in all scenarios most of the participants use the two modal verbs 'can' and 'could'.
8. In some situations, where more politeness is required, native speakers do not only use one mitigator, but also resort to different mitigators from different categories. Omani learners of English, on the other hand, usually add the deference marker 'please' to performative verbs and all other mitigators. As an attempt to overcome the problems faced by Omani learners in using request mitigators, the following recommendations are suggested:
 1. Textbooks in all levels need to incorporate more materials that reflect the conventions of the target culture and language to show how native speakers behave politely with each other.
 2. Text-books should contain authentic situations taken from the cultural environment of the target language where native speakers use different types of mitigators.
 3. Omani learners should be involved in more communicative activities to be familiar with all types of mitigators and the way each one is naturally used by native speakers of English.
 4. Teachers and tutors have to focus their attention on the learners' use of request mitigators in their lectures whenever it is possible in order to establish the native speakers' cultural conventions which elicit the most appropriate mitigators used by native speakers in different linguistic situations.
 5. Because Omani learners rarely use the discursual and lexical/phrasal mitigators which are frequently used by native speakers, there should be more focus on their employment to encourage Omani students to use them.

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