

# An Exploration of Upper-intermediate Iranian EFL learners' Perception of Politeness Strategies and Power Relation in Disagreement

Masoumeh Niroomand<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Scientific-Applied Education Center of Ostad Sharyar Tikmedash, Tabriz, Iran

Correspondence: Masoumeh Niroomand, Scientific-Applied Education Center of Ostad Sharyar Tikmedash, Tabriz, Iran. E-mail: commuter\_60@yahoo.com

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## Abstract

The present study was designed to examine the ways power relations influence politeness strategies in disagreement. The study was an attempt to find out whether different power status of people influence the choice of appropriate politeness strategies and speech act of disagreement by Iranian EFL learners, in a university setting. A Discourse Completion Test (DCT) was utilized to elicit the required data. The sample included 20 Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners who were selected based on their scores on a proficiency test. The DCT consists of five scenarios in which the subjects are expected to disagree with two higher statuses and two with peers and one with a lower status. Selection of disagreement situations in DCT was based on relative power and status of people. The main frameworks used for analyzing data were the taxonomy from Muntigl and Turnbull (1995) for counting and analyzing the utterances of disagreement and Brown and Levinson' (1987) theory of politeness. It was found that EFL learners employ different kind of politeness strategies in performing this face threatening speech act. When performing the speech act of disagreement, they used more direct and bald on record strategies. The findings of this study provide some evidences for the relation between the type and frequency of disagreement and choice of politeness strategies associated with people with different power status.

It concludes by arguing that the results can be closely related with learning contexts and textbook contents and some suggestions were put forward regarding the issue. It is also hoped that the findings of this study will provide some worthwhile knowledge into the teaching and training of communication skills in EFL courses. Furthermore, this study may reveal some cultural differences between Iranian societies and others.

**Keywords:** disagreement, EFL, Iranian learners, politeness, power, pragmatic, speech act

## 1. Introduction

Acquisition and learning politeness strategies as a part of learning L2 pragmatics have attracted a lot of attention in the second language acquisition (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) claim that despite having linguistic competence, second and foreign language learners may not always be successful in communicating effectively and even they may make pragmatic mistakes. It is most likely that non-native speakers deviate from native speaker form of speech act realizations (Cohen & Olshtain, 1993).

Due to misunderstanding among people from different cultures, people often fail to have successful communications. Although being polite is a universally acceptable concept, the meaning of politeness might vary across culture, gender, and power relations (Guodong & Jing, 2005). For that reason, researchers need to investigate the denotation of politeness in different cultures and try to identify different patterns and discourse strategies. Kılıçkaya (2010) asserts that social, cultural, situational, and personal factors, which shape the eventual linguistic output of the L2 learners, complicate the situation for language learners in selecting and using certain kinds of speech acts.

According to Liu (2004), disagreement is unavoidable in human interaction. It happens no matter how hard people try to avoid it; people face a very complicated condition when they try to avoid the unavoidable. There is

always a contradiction between disagreement and face saving. When trying to soften their disagreement, people need rhetorical strategies including both concepts of politeness and hierarchy. So the present study tries to answer following questions:

1. What is the relationship between power and politeness strategies of disagreement in Iranian EFL context?
2. What disagreement strategies do Iranian EFL learners mostly employ? and How do the learners differ in expressing disagreement?
3. What types of politeness strategies are employed by subjects to soften the impact of this inherently face threatening act?

## 2. Review of Related Literature

As well as knowing the structure of a language, we have to know how to use it. According to Al-Tayib Umar (2006), acquisition of socio-cultural rules, which is widely known as pragmatic competence, is crucial to second language learners. Scollon and Scollon (1993) also assure that violation of pragmatic rules is bound to lead to communication breakdowns. Kasper (1999) states that, competences, whether linguistic or pragmatic, should be developed and learned systematically.

Politeness has become one of the most active areas of research in language use by increasing interest in Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principles (Chen, 2007). Acquisition and learning of politeness strategies is a part of learning L2 pragmatics, which has attracted a lot of attention in second and foreign language acquisition. In different cultures, politeness can be manifested and understood in different ways through both verbal and nonverbal behaviors.

A large number of theoretical and empirical books and articles concerning politeness and/or the notion of face have been published in the last decades. In most of the studies, the politeness has been conceptualized especially as strategic conflict-avoidance or as strategic construction of cooperative social interaction (Watts 2003).

The face theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) serves as the most influential theory on politeness. It plays an important role in the study of speech acts (Ji, 2000; Hobbs, 2003). Brown and Levinson's face theory contains three basic notions: face, face threatening acts (FTAs) and politeness strategies. Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 61) argue that the concept of face is "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself". This public self-image comprises two desires. They argue that everyone in the society has two kinds of face wants. One is negative face: the basic claim to territories, personal preservers, rights to non-distraction -- i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition. The other is the positive face: the positive consistent self-image or 'personality' (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants. Brown and Levinson built their theory of politeness on the assumption that many speech acts, for example requests, offers, disagreement and compliments, are intrinsically threatening to face. Speech acts are threatening in that they do not support the face wants of the speaker and those of the addressee inherently threaten either the hearer's or the speakers' face-wants and that politeness is involved in redressing those face threatening acts (FTA). On the basis of these assumptions, three main strategies for performing speech acts are distinguished: positive politeness, negative politeness and off-record politeness. Positive politeness aims at supporting or enhancing the addressee's positive face, whereas negative politeness aims at softening the encroachment on the addressee's freedom of action or freedom from imposition. The third strategy, off-record politeness, means flouting one of the Gricean (1975) maxims on the assumption that the addressee is able to infer the intended meaning.

Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 65) defined face-threatening acts (FTAs) according to two basic parameters: "(1) Whose face is being threatened (the speaker's or the addressee's), and (2) Which type of face is being threatened (positive- or negative- face)". Acts that threaten an addressee's positive face include those acts in which a speaker demonstrates that he/she does not support the addressee's positive face or self image (e.g., complaints, criticisms, accusations, mention of taboo topics, interruptions). Acts that threaten an addressee's negative face include instances in which the addressee is pressured to accept or to reject a future act of the speaker (e.g., offers, promises), or when the addressee has reason to believe that his/her goods are being coveted by the speaker. Examples of FTAs to the speaker's positive face include confessions, apologies, acceptance of a compliment, and self-humiliations. Some of the FTAs that are threatening to the speaker's negative face include expressing gratitude, accepting a thank-you, an apology or an offer, and making promises.

The kind and amount of politeness that the speaker applies to a certain speech act is determined by the weightiness of this speech act. Speakers calculate the weight of their speech acts from three social variables: the perceived social distance between the hearer and the speaker, the perceived power difference between them, and

the cultural ranking of the speech act (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Although the studies on speech act of disagreement are less than other speech acts, being inherently a FTA, the speech act of disagreement has also aroused much attention in recent years (Rees-Miller, 2000; Muntigl & Turnbull, 1998). Rees-Miller (2000, p. 1088), defines disagreement as: "A Speaker S disagrees when s/he considers untrue some Proposition P uttered or presumed to be espoused by an Addressee A and reacts with an utterance the propositional content or implicature of which is Not P".

Disagreement is thus conceived as an opposing viewpoint in reaction to a speaker's prior position. However, this oppositional statement "calls for some kind of reaction from the party disagreed with" (Locher, 2004, p. 95).

The speaker is required to have sociocultural competence of language use in a language as well as linguistic competence to perform the speech act appropriately. In addition, the speech act of disagreement is a face-threatening act when the speaker violates the sociocultural rule of speaking. This can lead to a breakdown in communication and in the relationship with the other participants. In fact, it is frequently observed that nonnative speakers fail in successful communication in a target language.

Locher (2004) explains that power and politeness are linked in that politeness is often used as a strategy or tool to soften or redress the display of power. Power is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests (Weber, 1947).

Nancy Bell (1998) in the paper "Politeness in the speech act of Korean ESL learners", examined the production of three face threatening speech acts (disagreement, request and giving advice/ suggestion) by a group of high beginning Korean ESL students. This study was conducted in the context of vocabulary grammar elective class which consisted of 11 students. The analysis revealed only limited use of Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies (five of 10 negative politeness strategies and two of 15 positive politeness strategies were used). By comparing the ESL Korean learners' strategies for producing the speech act of disagreement to those strategies they use when requesting and giving suggestion, different results obtained. The learners in this study used direct, bald on-record strategies in performing the speech act of disagreement, but they revealed a high linguistic level and the ability to increase the politeness of the act when making request and giving suggestion. It was argued that sensitivity to status, which in the Korean context includes a great emphasis on age differences, is a major factor for these differences.

Rees-Miller (2000) investigated the act of disagreement and choice of linguistic markers used to soften or strengthen disagreement in university courses and academic talks in the United States of America. The act of disagreement was examined in terms of the factors of power, severity and context. The study revealed that professors use more markers of positive politeness when disagreeing with students than do peers disagreeing with each other or students disagreeing with professors. The results indicated that while power and severity are useful starting points for examining how disagreement is expressed in academic contexts, the purpose and particular context within which the disagreement occurs exert powerful influence on how the disagreement is expressed.

Si Liu (2005) investigated pragmatic strategies and power relations related to disagreement in Mandarin Chinese using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. The data were collected in the People's Republic of China at six universities in the north and the south of the nation as well as at a large conference. This study explored three general questions. The first question was; whether power relations in Chinese university settings influence pragmatic strategies in disagreement. The exploration of the ways, in which the strategies were significantly different, showed that the students use lower power-level strategies when disagreeing with the professors and administrators than vice versa. The students were addressed with highest level of all. However, the professors and administrators used more polite strategies to the students than the students to them. The result implied a subtle and twisted relationship between power and politeness, as well as power and indirectness. The second question asked what the pragmatic strategies in disagreement reflect regarding Chinese cultural dynamics in higher education. The result showed a hierarchy in China's higher education institutions. She revealed that power results in the hierarchy. The third question was; how the concept of relevance in Grice's CP dominates the analysis of communicative interaction involving power obtains an outcome contributing to the controversial issue on pragmatics and power. Through Chinese discourse analyses, this study proved that the maxim of Relevance of CP and implicature theory explain conversational cooperation with the connection of the frame of discourse type and the social parameters involving power. It was found that the maxim of quality does not explain a conversational cooperation encompassing lying.

The study by Parvaresh and Eslami (2009) designed to find the effects of solidarity and deference systems of

politeness, proposed by Scollon and Scollon, on the use of strategy by women native speakers of Farsi while doing the speech act of disagreement. This study was an attempt to explore some of the differences that might appear between same-sex (female-female) and cross-sex conversations (male-female).

Several expressions were used in order to disagree with what the other interlocutor had previously said. They ranged from highly impolite, rude responses to more polite one. The results indicated that in Iranian culture the addressee's gender highly affects the use of strategies while performing the speech act of disagreement even when there is a high amount of solidarity. It was found that women employ conflictives, which have the most impolite intention, mostly when and where the addressee is of the same sex. They argued that when men and women try to interact in cross-sex conversations they do not play the same role in interaction, even when there is no element of flirting. The women used about three times fewer contradictory statements compared with the women in the woman-woman situation. For the women in the man-woman situation, the major pattern was a boast, but in the woman-woman situation the dominant pattern was the use of a curse. The number of complaints in man-woman situations was three times as much than the number of complaints in woman-woman situations. Again women in the women-woman situation used more than twice as many contradictory statements as the women in the other situation did.

Vera (2010) explored the negotiation of (im)politeness carried out by Argentine speakers of English in the discourse of disagreement in simulated business meetings. The analysis revealed that the speakers draw on a range of different discursive strategies to voice disagreement in business negotiations. These have been summarized into four sub functions, namely contradictions, challenges, counterclaims and counterproposals. In the first phase of the negotiation, where participants take a stand and introduce their proposals, very few contradicting and challenging acts were detected. The results obtained have revealed that during the second phase of the negotiating fragment the speakers pay more attention to the transactional goals of the interaction, concentrating on solving the task at hand, than to the interpersonal side of the communicative event. So, during this phase, they exhibited a preference for directness when voicing their contradictions during. Finally, as for the use of contradictions and challenges in the first and last phase of the negotiating fragment, these two discursive strategies were perceived as impolite. Instead, the interactants exhibited a preference for the use of counterproposals and counterclaims in these two phases. The analysis has also revealed that the choice of discursive strategies depends on the personal negotiating style that each participant adopts.

Therefore, based on the results of the other studies mentioned above, there is a need for further research on the pragmatic competence of Iranian EFL students in all aspects. This study can be seen as an attempt of contribution to fill in this gap.

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1 Introduction*

The present study is a part from a larger project, studying Iranian EFL learners' use of politeness strategies and power relations in disagreement across different proficiency levels. This study mainly aimed to investigate the role of power on the choice of appropriate politeness strategies when uttering the speech act of disagreement. To obtain the required data, a Discourse Completion Test was distributed among 20 Iranian EFL upper-intermediate learners. The "Discourse Completion Test" borrowed from studies by Takahashi and Beebe (1993) and Liang Guodong and Han Jing (2005).

#### *3.2 Participants*

The participants of this study consisted of 20 upper-intermediate EFL learners, including 17 females and 3 males, studying English in Islamic Azad University, Tabriz branch, Iran. The participants' age ranged from 19 to 25.

#### *3.3 Instruments*

During the research, two instruments were utilized: English language proficiency test, PET (Preliminary English Tests, 2004), and a "Discourse Completion Test", (DCT) (appendix 1).

To determine English proficiency level of the learners, an English language proficiency test, PET (Preliminary English Tests, 2004), was used. It contained questions in reading and writing and listening

To find out the subjects preferences toward choosing different kind of strategies in expressing their disagreement, a DCT that is a form of questionnaire describing some natural situations to which the respondents are expected to react, making disagreement was applied.

#### *3.4 Design*

This study adopted a survey design. In order to investigate the relationship between power and politeness in the

realization of disagreements, the participants were given a DCT which consisted of five scenarios. The questionnaire used here presented a brief description of certain situations, which specified the setting, the social distance between the interlocutors and their status relative to each other. When identifying the utterances of disagreement from the responses, the taxonomy from Muntigl and Turnbull (1998) were applied. Then responses of students were compared with Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies.

### 3.5 procedures

The present study was conducted in three stages.

In the first step the actual data collection, the (DCT) was piloted on six subjects, similar to the main group, not included in the sample to see if the language was comprehensible for EFL learners, and based on their opinion a few changes were made.

In the next stage, to check the students' homogeneity, an English language proficiency test (PET, 2004) including questions in listening, reading and writing was given to the participants. The participants, whose score were above 65, were considered as upper-intermediate and the students whose score were below 50 were sacked from the study.

In the last stage, a DCT was administrated to the selected students in their classes at Islamic Azad University, Tabriz branch. Selection of disagreement situations in DCT was based on social factor of relative power. The DCT consists of five scenarios, in which the subjects were expected to disagree with a higher status, three with peers and one with a lower status. The questionnaire describes situations that students in an Iranian college, university setting or everyday life may encounter, and seeks to elicit responses to such situations and all of these situations were grouped according to power and distance among interlocutors. The scenarios covered a variety of topics and types of situations to avoid intervening effects of topic selection. The participants were asked to produce appropriate disagreement utterances for a given context of situation in DCT.

## 4. Results and Discussion

This study adopted a survey design. Data required for the study were analyzed in three steps. First, invalid responses were discarded and the total number of valid responses was determined. In the second step, for identifying the utterances of disagreement from the responses, Muntigl and Turnbolls' (1998) taxonomy, which recognizes five types of disagreement, was used.

### Aggravation-Mitigation Continuum

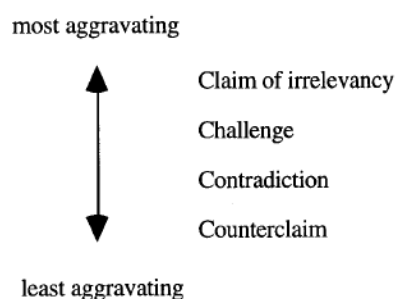


Figure 1. Muntigl and Turnbull (1995, p. 60)

Muntigl and Turnbull (1995, pp. 39-45) identify four types: Irrelevancy Claims (IC), Challenges (CH), Contradictions (CT) and Counterclaims (CC). In this taxonomy they rank the disagreement types from the most to the least face "aggravating". They define them as follows. Irrelevancy claim (IC) is the most face-threatening disagreement in which a speaker questions the relevancy of previous claim to the discussion at hand. The second disagreement type in this taxonomy is challenge (CH) in which the speaker demands that addressee provide supporting evidence for his and her claim. Contradiction (C) is the next type of disagreement in which a speaker explicitly contradicts with the previous claim, but it is less face-threatening than IC and CH in that it does not decline the capability of other interlocutor. Another type of disagreement is counterclaim that is the least face-threatening act. In this case the speaker does not contradict directly. By bringing reason for disagreement and using positive markers, CC mitigates threat and damage to the others' positive face (Peter Muntigl 1995).

In the last step, for counting and analyzing the politeness strategies, the taxonomy of politeness strategies for disagreement developed by Brown and Levinson was employed.

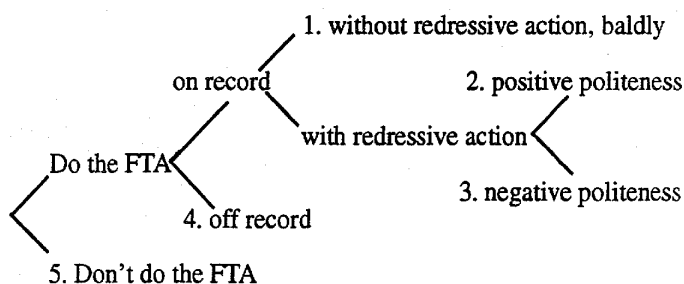


Figure2. Five politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson 1987, p. 69)

4.1 Types of Disagreement

This analysis involved both qualitative and quantitative, independent examination of each response for the five situations. Frequency of occurrence of these components as used by upper-intermediate learners is presented in tables for each situation.

Situation 1

Your supervisor questions the originality of the term paper you submit. S/he says to you, "I'm sorry, but I don't think these ideas are yours." However, they are yours. In response, you will say, " ....."

In this situation, which contains certain kind of formality, a power inconsistency exists between interlocutors. The person, who the speaker is disagreeing with, is in a higher power and position than the speaker. Table 1 summarizes the frequency by which the learners used different types of disagreement for this situation.

Table 1. Disagreement to the supervisor who questions the originality of the term paper she or he submits

	Types of disagreement	Frequencies
1	Irrelevancy claims	5%
2	Challenges	10%
3	Contradictions	15%
4	Counterclaims	45%
5	Contradictions followed by counterclaims	20%
6	Message abandonment	5%

45 % subjects performed disagreement using counterclaims and 20% of them performed disagreement using contradictions followed by counterclaims (e.g. Teacher, you are always right, but now I am sure about the originality of my paper). These are implicit without directly disagreeing to the person. These kinds of disagreements are violation of the maxims of manner and quantity.

Contradictions with the frequency of 15% (e.g., no, they are definitely mine) were the next favored disagreement type in this situation. To express their disagreement, only 10% of subjects used challenges (e.g., it is unfair, why do you question the originality of my term paper). Irrelevancy claim (IC) was the least favored way of disagreeing (only 5% of learners).

Situation 2

You work in a company. Your boss presents you with a plan for reorganization of the department that you are certain will not work. Your boss says isn't it a great plan? In response, you will say, " ....."

In situation 2, a power differences exists between the interlocutors. Table 2 displays the types and frequencies

with which the learners performed the speech act of disagreement.

Table 2. Disagreement to the boss

	Types of disagreement	Frequencies
1	Irrelevancy claims	
2	Challenges	5%
3	Contradictions	15%
4	Counterclaims	55%
5	Contradictions followed by counterclaims	25%
6	Message abandonment	

Because of power asymmetry between interlocutors and attention to the face needs of the interlocutor, counterclaims, 55% (e.g., you always have good ideas, but why we don't think some more), and contradictions followed by counterclaims, 25% (e.g. no sir, I don't agree, but may be you are right) were the most favored strategies which were used in this situation. Only one of the subjects performed act of disagreement by challenges (why you don't try another plan, I'm sure it won't work).

### Situation 3

Your friend makes the following comment on your thesis, "I think you should supply more data to support your arguments. You know, your conclusion is a little bit weak."

However, you think that there has been enough evidence and the problem is how to give a better explanation of the data. In response, you will say,

" ....."

Table 3. Disagreement to the friend

	Types of disagreement	Frequencies
1	Irrelevancy claims	5%
2	Challenges	5%
3	Contradictions	10%
4	Counterclaims	60%
5	Contradictions followed by counterclaims	20%
6	Message abandonment	

Table 3 displays the frequency of use of disagreement strategies for this situation in which the interlocutors are status equal and we may find far fewer contradictory statements. In this situation only a few numbers of learners are found to use contradictory statements in expressing their disagreements.

The acquired data reveal that in expressing their disagreement to a friend, upper-intermediate learners are more careful. In expressing their disagreement, over half of the subjects (60%) used counterclaims (e.g. I'll try to expand it, but not now. I'm so tired). The results in this situation indicates that Contradictions followed by counterclaims, e.g. "everyone has his own understandings, but I'll try more", with the frequency of 20% were other kind of strategies applied by the subjects while only 10% of the subjects used contradictions (e.g. no you are wrong; I've done the best work). In expressing their disagreement, only two applied challenges and irrelevancy claims (5% irrelevancy claim and 5% challenge). One example of their answer is: "so do think my conclusion is weak. Surprisingly no single subject kept silent.

### Situation 4

In a seminar class on the effect of modern technology, one of your classmates says, "The so-called modern technology is endangering the environment. It causes too much pollution". However, you believe such problems are only temporary and can be solved gradually. In response, you will say:

" ....."

Although the interlocutors are status equal, in this situation the social distance is larger than situation three. The result revealed that with the increase in social distance, the subjects used more contradictory statements than the previous situation. Table 4 displays the frequency with which they use these strategies.

Table 4. Disagreement to the classmate

	Types of disagreement	Frequencies
1	Irrelevancy claims	5%
2	Challenges	15%
3	Contradictions	20%
4	Counterclaims	35%
5	Contradictions followed by counterclaims	20%
6	Message abandonment	

The obtained results indicate that the subjects utilized much more contradictory statements (irrelevancy claims 5%, challenges 15%, and contradictions 20%), (e.g. “no you are wrong, I’ll bring some good reasons”) than previous situation. Although some increases were seen in the use of contradictory statements by the subjects, again over half of the subjects were more inclined to the use of less contradictory statements (counterclaims 35% and Contradictions followed by counterclaims 20%) (e.g. “I accept there are some problems, but its advantages are more than its disadvantages”).

### Situation 5

You are watching the movie Titanic with your younger sister at home. When the ship is about to sink and the first mate calls out, "Women and children first" to get on the lifeboat, your sister suddenly blurts out, "It's really unfair and prejudiced to women: we're no weaker than men. Why should women instead of men go first with the children?" In your opinion, women are, physically speaking, not as strong as men. Your response will be:

" ....."

Table 5 presents the responses of the subjects to the last situation.

Table 5. Disagreement to the younger sister

	Types of disagreement	Frequencies
1	Irrelevancy claims	5%
2	Challenges	10%
3	Contradictions	15%
4	Counterclaims	50%
5	Contradictions followed by counterclaims	20%
6	Message abandonment	

Similar to the first and second situations, a speaker is disagreeing with an interlocutor of an unequal status. But contrary to those situations, this is the speaker who possesses higher status and power. When it comes to the more explicit contradictory statements just a minority of the subjects (irrelevancy claims 5%, challenges 10%, and contradictions 15%) used these strategies (e.g. “Yes I agree, they are weaker than the men”, “it’s nothing to do with”). The results revealed that exactly half of the subjects (50%) employed Counterclaims in expressing their disagreement (e.g. “I know what you say, but it’s a real fact. Women and children are physically weaker than the men”). Four out of 20 subjects favored contradictions followed by counterclaims.

### 4.2 Politeness Strategies

As mentioned earlier, this study is a part from a larger study. The results of the study showed that upper-intermediate learners are more sensitive about power and status of their interlocutor and applying politeness strategies. The present study confirms the most general finding from the previous studies, namely high proficiency (upper-intermediate) learners, because of their linguistic competence, employ desirable features more frequently than low proficiency (intermediate) learners. In line with agreement maxim (Leech, 1983), this finding means that the learners attempt to minimize the disagreement between themselves and others much more than intermediate learners.

Because in the situations 1 and 2 a power inconsistency exists between interlocutors and the person who the speaker is disagreeing with, is in a higher power and position than the speaker, a majority of the subjects preferred performing the FTA off record, i.e., indirectly by the use of partial agreement and positive remarks to mitigate their disagreement. Off-Record Indirect politeness strategy outlined by Brown and Levinson (1987) uses indirect language and removes the speaker from the potential to be imposing. By Brown and Levinson's term, disagreement, inherently threatens either the hearer's or the speaker's face-wants, and that politeness is involved in redressing those face threatening acts. This is in line with the findings of Pearson (1986) and Beebe



and Takahashi (1989) that native speaker's strategies for expression of disagreement are generally characterized by mitigation, that is, by means to reduce the directness of the disagreement and with it the strength of the FTA. Disagreement threatens the hearer's positive face; therefore it would be expected positive politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In these two situations a large numbers of the subjects applied positive politeness strategies, such as partial agreement and positive remarks, to save the face of their interlocutors.

In line with findings of Kreutel (2007), some subject's expressions of disagreement included linguistically simple and short statements. They were mostly characterized by the absence of the surface features established for native-like language use, which in turn results in an overall lack of mitigation. Bell (1998), observed with Koreans apart from the lack of redressive devices, ESL learners' expressions of disagreement include explicit no as well as the direct statement of the opposite.

Some of the subjects used address terms (e.g. teacher, boss, sir and professor) as a sign of politeness. According to Wolfson (1989: 79) address terms are a "very salient indicator of status relationship". Similar to the findings of Dogancay-Aktuna and Kamisli's (1996) study, "Discourse of power and politeness, through the act of disagreement", on native speakers of Turkish and American speakers, the analysis revealed that lower status interlocutors in the first and second scenarios used address terms more frequently. They found that lower status interlocutors used more address terms than higher status interlocutors. Because just in the first and second situations the interlocutors were expected to disagree with higher status people, address terms were more frequent in these situations. This result confirms the findings of Guodong and Jing (2005) that the Chinese students use the address form in a significantly higher frequency than their American peers. In these two situations, the subjects violated the maxim of manner (Grice, 1975). Maxim of manner wants every conversationalist speak directly, not ambiguously and abundantly.

The findings revealed that in disagreeing to a friend in the third situation, the subjects were more careful about their interlocutors' face wants. In the friendly conversations, which account for a large amount of conversational encounters, speakers show reluctance and hesitance to express disagreement (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989). They used various kinds of mitigating devices to reduce the threat to the face of their interlocutor. This finding has similarity to the finding of Umar (2006) that the Sudanese learners are more "reserved" in making complaint to a friend and they use too modest ways in complaining to their friends. The subjects preferred to act their disagreement off record, which means flouting one of the Gricean (1975) maxims (maxim of manner) on the assumption that the addressee is able to infer the intended meaning, and implicitly. When interacting, the interlocutors possess the necessary pragmatic knowledge, but do not know how to realize it due to limited linguistic knowledge (Takahashi & Beebe, 1993). According to them, among NNSs, the higher the proficiency level, the more appropriately they will make complaints and the hypothesis. This result seems to be contrary to the Brown and Levinson's (1987, pp. 68-71) model of strategies for performing face-threatening acts and their discussion of factors influencing the choice of strategies (1987, pp. 71-83). They imply that more direct strategies of disagreement would be used in preference to less direct strategies when there is less social distance between speaker and addressee, when the speaker has greater power than the addressee, and when the rating of imposition on the hearer is less (1987, p. 83).

Situation 4 involves interaction between status equal interlocutors; however, the social distance is larger in this situation than situation three. The result revealed that with the increase in social distance, the subjects used more contradictory statements than previous situation. This result affirms the findings of Guodong and Jing (2005) on their Contrastive Study on Disagreement Strategies for Politeness between American English and Mandarin Chinese.

They found that with the increase of social distance (from friend to classmate to stranger), American students use more contradictory statements and less politeness strategies. The result of the last situation, in which 50% of the subjects uttered their disagreements off-record, have similarities with Guodong and Jing (2005) studies in that they found that in the American families the older sister or brother treats the younger sister with equal power status and use more positive remarks when disagreeing with them. When they want to disagree with younger sister or brother, they bring acceptable reasons for their disagreement. Bringing convincing reason for disagreement by use of softener will result in performing the communicative act of disagreement less imposing on the listener, mitigating the threat on the face of the listener, doing it off record to save positive and negative face of the interlocutor.

Inappropriate performance of learners in different disagreement situations may be resulted from their linguistic limitations. This result is in accordance with the findings of Umar (2006) by Sudanese learners on the speech act of complaint and Jalilifar (2009) by Iranian subjects on request strategies. They found that lower proficiency

learners may, to some extents, have pragmatic competence, but they lack sufficient linguistic competence to perform appropriately in a foreign language. The higher the proficiency level, the more appropriately they will utter their disagreements.

When identifying the utterances of disagreement from the responses, it was found that only two out of twenty of subjects didn't answer some situations. This again may be resulted from linguistic limitations of the subjects. Kreutel (2007) stated that "ESL learners often lack appropriate disagreement strategies, which makes their utterances appear impolite and rude, and which may even result in message abandonment". According to the Moon "Saying nothing" is an extreme form of implicit complaints". It was discovered from the collected data that the disagreeing expressions were uttered with both single and combined strategies and by the use of bald on record, positive and negative politeness strategies.

The examination of the first question revealed that the power status of people have strong effects on Iranian EFL learners' choice of politeness strategies when disagreeing. The investigation of second question revealed that students make use of different disagreement strategies and they are careful about the face wants of their interlocutors and choice of appropriate politeness strategies. It was found that when disagreeing, the EFL learners try to make use different politeness strategies to soften their disagreements.

### **5. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications**

Teaching English in Iran focuses on grammar and reading. In real-life situation, Iranian EFL learners may often fail to communicate effectively with foreigners. Although it seems logical to assume that a higher lexico-grammatical proficiency facilitates pragmatic proficiency (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999), it cannot be assumed that the former automatically gives rise to the latter. Rather, the data at hand confirm the assumption that explicit instruction may be necessary for the acquisition of pragmatic features in the target language and that "learners who are not instructed at all will have difficulty in acquiring appropriate language use patterns" (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996, p. 160). To help students realize maximum pragmatic success, teachers need to make their students fully aware of the specific speech act sets and the accompanying linguistic features to produce appropriate and acceptable complaint and other important speech acts (Tanck, 2002).

L2 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. This may result from the lack of enough linguistic proficiency. In spite of the relatively long period of learning English and being highly proficient, Iranian advanced EFL learners do not exhibit sufficient linguistic or socio-pragmatic skills that enable them to produce appropriate disagreement in English. This may be resulted from the inefficacy of the teaching methods and approaches adopted in Iran.

The fact that some of the subjects in the sample often chose to keep silence in situations where they needed to clearly express their opinion shows that there is a demand for explicit instruction of the speech act of disagreement and politeness strategies in the classroom. The findings may provide information to people who are responsible for designing textbooks and classroom activities and materials for EFL learners. It is hoped that, the insights provided in this study will be of use to the EFL teachers in understanding their students' language behavior and in revealing specific differences in the choice of certain politeness strategies that may need to raise learners' awareness of these differences.

### **6. Suggestions for Further Research**

This study concentrated on the speech act of disagreement and the choice of appropriate politeness strategies in Iranian culture. The present study evaluated Iranian EFL learners' performance when performing the speech act of disagreement in English. The results could be more valuable if it was a contrastive analysis of Iranian EFL learners' performance when performing the speech act of disagreement in English and Persian.

It did not consider factors such as gender and age on performing this speech act. Further studies should be designed to consider these factors (age and gender) that may affect the production of this face threatening speech act. Further studies should also involve cross cultural studies with larger samples and more situations to obtain more valid results. Direct comparison of native speakers and EFL learners also allows a number of practical implications for the language classroom. Such studies may highlight some difficulty that Iranian EFL learners may have on politeness during disagreement and it may show deviations of Iranian learners from native like production of this speech act. This provides the necessary knowledge for EFL teachers to point out these deviations and by teaching appropriate strategies enable learners to successfully perform the speech act of disagreement. If the production questionnaire were in a dialogue form instead, we had the chance of more intact disagreement forms and the results could be different. There are some strategies which can only be used in face

to face interaction. Results would have been much more reliable if an interview was conducted after collecting data through the DCT.

More contexts, would probably have allowed a more manageable data collection and more exhaustive data analysis and results. The present study was conducted between educated learners, so its' findings may not be applicable to all of the situations. Finally a comparative study between the speech act of disagreement and other speech acts may have valuable implications.

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## Appendix 1

### The English Version of the Discourse Completion Test

Thank you very much for your time and help.

Your Age: \_\_ Gender: \_\_ Hometown: \_\_

Five scenarios are described below in which you are expected to Disagree with the speaker on different occasions. How would you respond? Please write out what you are to SAY in real life scenarios.

1. Your supervisor questions the originality of the term paper you submit. S/he says to you, "I'm sorry, but I don't think these ideas are yours." However, they are yours. In response, you will say,  
" ....."
2. You work in a company. Your boss presents you with a plan for reorganization of the department that you are certain will not work. Your boss says isn't it a great plan? In response, you will say,  
" ....."
3. Your friend makes the following comment on your thesis, "I think you should supply more data to support your arguments. You know, your conclusion is a little bit weak." However, you think that there has been enough evidence and the problem is how to give a better explanation of the data. In response, you will say,  
" ....."
4. In a seminar class on the effect of modern technology, one of your classmates says, "This so-called modern technology is endangering the environment. It causes too much pollution". However, you believe such problems are only temporary and can be solved gradually. In response, you will say:  
" ....."
5. You are watching the movie Titanic with your younger sister at home. When the ship is about to sink and the first mate calls out, "Women and children first" to get on the lifeboat, your sister suddenly blurts out, "It's really unfair and prejudiced to women: we're no weaker than men. Why should women instead of men go first with the children?" In your opinion, women are, physically speaking, not as strong as men. Your response will be:  
" ....."