



Linguistic Appropriateness and Social Variables as Performed by EFL Learners at Sudanese Universities (A Case Study of Al Fashir, Nyala and Zalingei Universities)

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ABSTRACT:

This paper aims to investigate to what extent EFL learners consider social distance, status and context of formality when addressing their colleagues and professors. The population of the study consists of 182 fourth-yearlevel students at the Universities of Al Fashir, Nyala and Zalingei. The data were collected by using open-ended Discourse Completion Test (DCT), then, the subjects' responses were analyzed according to their appropriateness with reference to the aforementioned social variables. The results were presented in terms of frequencies and percentages by using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The study concluded that EFL learners at Sudanese Universities are pragmatically incompetent and accordingly, their performance with reference to the social distance, status and context of formality has been proved to be inappropriate compared with the conventional English speech acts under the investigation. The results also showed that respondents tended to be more direct in addressing distant colleagues and professors and were unable to distinguish between formal and informal social contexts. Moreover, an apparent influence of Arabic and Sudanese culture has been reflected in their responses to some situations.

KeyWords: *Appropriateness, Politeness, Speech Acts, Discourse Completion Test, Social Variable.*

المستخلص

هدفت هذه الورقة الى دراسة مدى إعتبار دارسي اللغة الانجليزية كلغة اجنبية لمتغيرات الهوية و الرتبة و السياق كمتغيرات إجتماعية عند مخاطبة زملائهم و اساتذتهم. مجتمع الدراسة يشمل 182 طالبا و طالبة من طلاب السنة الرابعة في كل من جامعات الفاشر ونيالا وزالنجي. تم جمع البيانات باستخدام إختبار إكمال الخطاب و تم تحليل إجابات الطلاب بناءً على ملاءمتها للمتغيرات الإجتماعية المذكورة اعلاه. استخدم الباحث برنامج الحزم الإحصائية للعلوم الاجتماعية لعرض النتائج في شكل تكرارات و نسب. توصلت الدراسة إلى أن دارسي اللغة الإنجليزية في الجامعات السودانية ليست لهم كفاءة برقماتية ولذلك لم يستطيعوا تقدير عوامل الهوية و الرتبة والسياس كعوامل إجتماعية عند مخاطبة الطلاب والأساتذة، وقد أظهرت اجابات الطلاب أثراً واضحاً يبدو مرجعه اللغة العربية والثقافة السودانية في أدائهم.

كلمات مفتاحية: *ملاءمة، تأدب، أفعال الكلام، إختبار إكمال الخطاب، عوامل إجتماعية*

INTRODUCTION :

The term appropriateness is defined as “the extent to which a use of language matches the linguistic and sociolinguistic expectations and practices of native speakers of the language” (Richards & Schmidt 2010: 30). This definition means that the knowledge of pure linguistic rules apart from their sociocultural expectations is not quite enough to achieve successful

communication. To speak appropriately, “a speaker needs to know what is grammatical and what is suitable (appropriate) for the particular situation” (ibid: 30). Therefore, there are some social factors that play a significant role in being appropriate or the vice versa and “in any situation, linguistic choices will generally reflect the influence of one or more of the following



components: the participants, the setting, the topic and the function speaking” (Holmes 2001: 8). According to (Fraser & Nolan 1981: 96) the realization of politeness varies from context to context, and they point out that politeness is actually a contextual judgment: "No sentence is inherently polite or impolite". So, polite behavior is assessed according to the different paralinguistic factors such as distance, solidarity, gender, etc.

Holmes (2001: 271) argued that “You can cause offence by treating someone too familiarly, as in (a) or by treating them distantly as in (b) below:

(a) Post Office delivery man to elderly upper-class woman.

Can I have your signature, my love?

(b) Director to colleague at a meeting where first names are generally used.

- I think it's time you let someone else contribute, Mr. Morgan. (ibid: 271).

The Study Problem

In the light of what has been mentioned this study focuses mainly on the extent to which EFL learners at Sudanese Universities take account of social distance, status and context of formality as social variables when they address their professors and colleagues in English language.

Although the area of socio-pragmatic competence has been intensively investigated and gained continuous significance since 1970s, there are few studies in this area conducted in Sudan to show to what extent Sudanese speakers consider the aforementioned social factors and dimensions in everyday communication. The reviewed studies, however, showed that EFL learners at the Sudanese Universities confront some problems in communicating in English. According to Nureddein (2001) Sudanese have their own way of selecting apology strategies “which are not always acceptable to English native speakers, this often results in communication problems between Sudanese Arabic speakers and native speakers of English”.

The studies also, indicated that “many responses were inappropriate and this implies that Sudanese English learners lack the knowledge about English pragmatics” (Muhammed 2006:85).

Moreover, it was reported that “the Sudanese non-native speakers of English are pragmatically incompetent” (Almahi 2007: 106).

An interesting insight was recommended that "Educationalists in Sudan should change the ways of teaching English as mere linguistic systems, because it does not suffice to fulfill communicative needs and that EFL should be taught with communicative and cultural functions so as to enable learners to communicate appropriately" (Muhammed 2006: 87)

Methodology and Materials

The method of this study is basically qualitative and analytical descriptive. It is qualitative in that it investigates and interprets the quality of politeness (appropriateness) phenomenon. “Researchers who adopt this approach usually investigate the quality of the phenomenon being under the investigation to describe and explain the different variables that compose it” Al-Samawi (2000: 67).

Based on the nature of the topic and data required for investigation, the method of the present study is categorized as a descriptive study since it aims at investigating the manifestation of linguistic appropriateness as performed by EFL learners at Sudanese national universities as educational institutes. The descriptive method is considered as useful for investigating educational problems (Gay 1981:153).

Concerning the data analysis, the researchers adopt the linguistic performance analysis that is defined by (Al-Samawi 2000: 150-153).

The data were collected from language learners to find out how they perform in certain aspect of language under certain conditions. The required



data for the present study were mainly collected by using Discourse Completion Test/Task (DCT). An open-ended DCT was submitted to the subjects to elicit their performance with reference to the social variables. The DCT consisted of twenty five suggested situations covering the five speech acts; request, apology, invitation, compliment and greetings, in which the subjects were prompted to write down their responses to each situation with reference to social distance, status and context of formality as social variables. The data were categorized according to their appropriateness and then analyzed by using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

The population consisted of fourth year-English EFL learners at three Sudanese national universities of Al Fashir, Nyala and Zalingei. The whole available population was selected as sample of the study and that the sample of the research included all individuals in the population.

Results, Analysis and Discussion

The study was intended to answer the following question and then to test the realization of the hypothesis below it:

Question: To what extent do EFL learners at Sudanese universities consider social distance,

status and context of formality when addressing their colleagues and professors?

Hypothesis: EFL learners at Sudanese universities are pragmatically incompetent to address their professors and colleagues appropriately.

To answer the question above, the subjects' responses were analyzed according to their appropriateness to social solidarity, status and formality as social variables that affect language use.

Social Distance

To examine the appropriateness of subjects' performance to social distance, two types of relationship between people of the same rank (students) are considered; familiarity and distance, that is to say, whether the addressee is close and familiar to the addresser or not.

Table 1 shows to what extent English Majors appropriately address their colleagues. Generally, 78% of situations are responded to inappropriately. In contrast, only three situations out of fourteen are responded to more appropriately than being inappropriate (see situations 7, 8 and 11 in table 1 and attached chat 1 below).

Table 1: Appropriateness of Subjects' Performance to Social Distance

No.	Situation	Appropriate		Neutral		Inappropriate		Direction
		F	P %	F	P %	F	P %	
1	Requesting a distant student to turn the music down.	40	21.4	20	10.7	127	67.9	Inappropriate
2	Requesting a close friend to borrow his/her notes book.	89	47.6	2	1.1	96	51.3	Inappropriate

3	Inviting a close friend to a party at home.	76	40.6	2	1.1	108	57.8	Inappropriate
4	Inviting a foreign student met for the first time for wedding.	29	15.5	4	2.1	154	82.4	Inappropriate
5	Inviting a brother who studies English at another university to attend seminar.	81	43.3	1	.5	105	56.1	Inappropriate
6	Declining an invitation from a foreign student for smoking cigarette	47	25.1	56	29.9	84	44.9	Inappropriate
7	Declining an invitation from a close friend because of being busy with an important task.	119	63.6	8	4.3	60	32.1	Appropriate
8	Apologizing for losing a classmate's rare reference.	93	49.7	12	6.4	82	43.9	Appropriate
9	Apologizing for stepping painfully on a foreign student's foot	55	29.4	23	12.3	109	58.3	Inappropriate
10	Apologizing for a close friend who is offended from being called as "fox".	59	31.6	10	5.3	118	63.1	Inappropriate
11	Expressing admiration of classmate's beautiful suit.	109	58.3	3	1.6	74	39.6	Appropriate
12	Admiring a foreign student's way of speaking English.	69	36.9	15	8.0	103	55.1	Inappropriate
13	Greeting a close friend.	31	16.6	11	5.9	145	77.5	Inappropriate
14	Greeting a distant friend.	5	2.7	42	22.5	140	74.9	Inappropriate

The table 1 shows that the percentage of inappropriateness is relatively higher than that of appropriateness. The ratio of inappropriateness ranges from 82.4 to 32.2% whereas the ratio of appropriateness ranges from 63.6 down to 2.7%. Below is the presentation of the most noticeable inappropriate responses and their interpretation: for instance, according to situation No. 1 (Requesting a distant student to turn the music down.), the responses to the situation came out more direct with reference to the given social distance. e.g.,

- *Down the music.*
- *Don't do loud music.*
- *Turn the music down.*

It is clear that these responses are absolutely inappropriate to be used for requesting an unfamiliar addressee even if s/he has the same social status.

Conversely, the responses to the situation No. 2 (Requesting a close friend to borrow his/her notes book.), it is seemed to be more formal and inappropriate to be used for requesting such a close friend. e.g.,

- *Could you lend me your notebook?*

- *Would you mind if I barrow your notes for short time?*

Themodal auxiliaries *could* and *would* are usually used as more formal and polite forms of request (Coe 2010:86) whereas the situation requires less informal forms of request for the fact that "choosing a formal style in a casual context may sound funny" (Richards & Schmidt 2010: 546).

Although the Situation No. 3 (Inviting a close friend to a party at home.), was devoted to extract how the participants construct informal forms invitation such *will you* or *can you*, the responses were expressed extremely direct and as in the examples below:

- *Come to my home I have party.*
- *I invite you to attend the party.*

It is noticed that the respondents used imperative forms which are more appropriate to be used to order the addressee to come or to attend rather than to invite him/her. The speech act of "inviting" appears when speaker is showing his/her intention to request hearer's participation in or attendance at a certain occasion (Suzuki 2009: 87). Thus, invitation is supposed to be



basically an FEA (face-enhancing act) for H (cf. Kerbat-Orecchioni, 1997: 14).

According to the situation No. 4 (Inviting a foreign student met for the first time for wedding.), the responses are even more direct compared to the previous situation, in which directness and informality is desired to some extent. However, inviting a foreign colleague met for the first time demands adequate formal and polite forms to suit the social distance.

- *I have wedding.*
- *Come to my home, I have party.*
- *Can you attend my party?*
- *Hi all of you, we have wedding please come, invitation for all.*

It is clearly that the instances above do not suit the respective situation and hence they are inappropriate. Moreover, they could be interpreted linguistically impolite and inappropriate to be used as invitations to unknown persons and consequently threaten hearer's face.

Concerning greetings, the same results are obtained that the EFL learners are unable to differentiate between greeting close and distant friends. For examples, the majority of the responses to the situation No. 13 (Greeting a close friend.), came out as follows:

- Good morning?
- How are you?

The adequate expressions to be used as greeting in such situation are "Hi, Hello, etc. but the respondents used relatively formal forms.

Conversely, according to the situation No. 14 (Greeting a distant friend.), less indirect forms were used instead of formal ones. e.g.,

- Welcome
- Hi, you are welcome.
- Hello, how are you student? Are you fine?

To sum up, it concluded that the subjects are pragmatically incompetent to consider the social distance when addressing their colleagues.

Social Status

This section is concerned with the relationship between subjects' performance of speech acts under the investigation and social status. In other words, it attempts to answer the question: to what extent English majors consider the social status when they converse with their Professors. Status was defined as "higher, lower, or equal position, particularly in regard to prestige, power, and social class. Speech varieties may have different statuses in a speech community. For example, a variety which is limited to use in markets and for very informal situations would have a low status whereas another variety which is used in government, education, administration, etc., would have a high status (. Richards & Schmidt 2010: 557).

By examining the direction of the general performance in the situations in table 2 below, it is noticed that 88% of subjects responded to inappropriately.

Table 2: Appropriateness of Subjects' Performance to Social Status

No.	Situation	Appropriate		Neutral		Inappropriate		Direction
		F	P%	F	P%	F	P%	
1	Requesting a professor for taking the test another day.	33	17.6	13	7.0	141	75.4	Inappropriate
2	Inviting the elder brother who is the dean of the college for breakfast in cafeteria.	35	18.7	1	.5	151	80.7	Inappropriate
3	Inviting the vice chancellor to a graduation celebration.	53	28.3	3	1.6	131	70.1	Inappropriate
4	Accepting an invitation from a professor to a meal at his/her home.	89	47.6	13	7.0	85	45.5	Appropriate



5	Declining an invitation from the head department for having dinner at his/her home.	67	35.8	51	27.3	69	36.9	Inappropriate
6	Apologizing for being absent from professor's lecture who is serious about students' attendance.	44	23.5	34	18.2	109	58.3	Inappropriate
7	Expressing admiration of professor's comfortable new car.	71	38.0	10	5.3	106	56.7	Inappropriate
8	Greeting a professor.	34	18.2	75	40.1	78	41.7	Inappropriate

Form the table 2, it is observed that the subjects' performance significantly inappropriate for addressing people of higher statuses. The percentages of inappropriateness ranged from 80.7% to 36.9% as a minimum score while those of appropriate responses ranged from 47.6% as a higher score to 18.2%.

According the situation No. 1 (Requesting a professor for taking the test another day.), the majority of subjects' responses are structured as follows:

- *I don't come because I need to go my friend's wedding.*
- *I will be absent for some reasons, can you examine me tomorrow?*
- *Dear professor, you can give me that exam another day.*
- *Please, I am so busy today I can't come.*
- *Can I ask you about the test*

Since the social relationship between students and their professors is significantly sensitive and, it is socially important that learners should be conscious and serious in speaking with their teachers. However, the responses were expressed absolutely casual and barely direct therefore, they are classified as inappropriate to the situation stated above.

Another example of subjects' inappropriate performance can be clearly stated in their responses to situation No. 3 (Inviting the vice chancellor to a graduation celebration.). In spite of the wide suggested social gap between university students and vice chancellor, most of participants suggested the responses below:

Table 3: Appropriateness of Subjects' Performance to Social Context of Formality

No.	Situation	Appropriate		neutral		Inappropriate		Direction
		F	P%	F	P%	F	P%	

- *Come to the celebration.*
- *Please, vice chancellor, come to the celebration of my graduation.*
- *Our manager, the celebration is soon. What do you think?*
- *Mr. Vice Chancellor, today your students have great celebration. You must attend the celebration.*
- *You are welcome in front of your students.*
- *We invite you to our celebration.*
- *I invite you*
- *Can you come to our celebration?*

Speaking to people of higher social statuses require seriously selected expression and more formal structures. However, the responses to situation 1 reflect the extent to which the subjects were pragmatically incompetent to use appropriate forms to express themselves politely in front of the vice chancellor. In each case the speaker should estimates the weightiness of the FTA in terms of P (power), D (distance), and R (Rank) values in continuous scale: $W_x = D(S, H) + P(H, S) + R_x$, where $x = \text{FTA}$ (Brown & Levinson 1987:74).

Social Context of Formality

In the immediate two previous sections, manifestation of appropriateness in the performance of participants of speech acts with reference to social distance and status is presented. In the section 3 the relationship between subjects' performance and social context of formality will be analyzed and discussed in the light of interpreting the table 3.



1	Requesting the program organizer in an informal session for more time to complete the points.	36	19.3	8	4.3	142	75.9	Inappropriate
2	Requesting the dean in a formal session for speaking on behalf of colleagues.	73	39.0	10	5.3	103	55.1	Inappropriate
3	Apologizing to students' union in a formal meeting when being blamed for leading demonstration.	26	13.9	36	19.3	124	66.3	Inappropriate

Context is one of the crucial social factors that determine the different ways of language use (Holmes 2001:8). The situations tabulated in 3 above were intended to elicit the extent to which subjects estimate the role of social context of formality in using language. By investigating the percentages obtained, it is obviously indicated that all of the three situations were responded to inappropriately. According to the situation No. 1 (Requesting the program organizer in an informal session for more time to complete the points), it is found that the performance does not suit such informal context. e.g.,

- *May you give me more time to complete?*
- *Would you let me complete my points?*
- *Could you give more time me complete my points?*

Oppositely, the informal forms of request below were used as responses to the situation 2 (in a formal session held at your college. You want to ask the dean to let you talk on behalf of your colleagues. What would you say?).

- *Let me talk on behalf of my colleagues.*
- *Can you give me a chance please?*
- *Please, give me a chance.*
- *Can you give me a chance?.*

It concluded that the subject are pragmatically are incompetent that they failed to estimate the social distance, status and context of formality. It is also indicated that there are some expressions seemed to be influenced by Sudanese everyday Colloquial Arabic. For instance, in responding to situation No. 6, table 1 (A foreign student, who has met you for the first time, has given you a cigarette. However, you

strongly dislike it. What would you say?), some respondents suggested the following answers:

- *التدخين ليس في قاموسي أي، إنه ليس واراداً في أولوياتي.*
- *خليها معك، أي دعها معك.*

Although Brown and Levinson (1987) posit a universal Model Person with the ability to rationalize form communicative goals to the optimal means of achieving these goals (Vilkki 2013: 325), Eelen (2001:5) argued that the Model Person can be seen as the embodiment of universally valid human social characteristics and principles of social reasoning, however, politeness is a sociolinguistic phenomenon and it should be manifested in the speech of any speaker regardless of whether s/he is endowed with willfulness and fluency or not. .

Findings

The study has arrived at the following findings: The findings maximally agree with the hypothesis proposed in that EFL learners at Sudanese Universities are pragmatically incompetent and accordingly their performance with reference to the social distance, status and context of formality has been proved to be inappropriate compared the conventional English speech acts under the investigation.

The results show that Sudanese EFL learners are more direct in addressing distant colleagues and professors and unable to distinguish between formal and informal social contexts.

Respondents' performance reflects an apparent influence of Arabic and Sudanese culture in their responses to some situations.

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