

**Politeness in an Academic Context: Omani and American  
Requests and Apologies**

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## **Abstract**

This study compares requests and apologies produced by an Omani and an American group of students. The pragmatic skills required to create appropriate speech acts of this kind have been given little attention and have also been rarely taught explicitly, in contrast to the attention given to the four traditional skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing) in the EFL/ESL settings. The lack of knowledge and use of these skills would have a serious impact on the flow of communication and can lead to misunderstandings between interlocutors, especially if there is a difference in culture and background knowledge of the others' culture. This dissertation examines the differences and similarities found in the types of requests and apologies produced in a Discourse Completion Test by students from the two groups with respect to types and frequency of strategies employed for each speech act. Moreover, the use of request and apology strategies is studied with respect to such variables as rating of imposition, power and distance between interlocutors. These variables are often relative to the cultural context, and this dissertation tries to isolate sociopragmatic factors and proficiency factors as possible explanations for observed differences. The results show that Omani students use fewer indirect request strategies than the American counterparts. This was shown directly by examining the range of strategies and modifiers used, and, more indirectly, by examining the utterance length, strategy combinations, and relative use proportions across situations. On the other hand, it is shown that apology strategies, although sometimes distributed differently across situations often on the basis of sociopragmatic factors, are employed in similar ways by the two groups.

The study recommends that three important factors needed to be considered when we deal with teaching and learning of pragmatics in the Omani context due to the clear weakness in knowledge and comprehension by Omani students. Instructors need to be aware of the inclusion of pragmatic teaching in the curricula. Instructors need to receive training during the course of study for their teaching degrees and the final recommendation is to include pragmatic and cultural aspects of language in the national Foundation Program Structure (FPS).

DEDICATION

*I dedicate this dissertation to my beloved parents, wife, and precious seven children.*

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## **CHAPTER I: COMMUNICATION AND PRAGMATIC CULTURAL DIFFERENCES**

Communication is a complex human activity that frames the relationship between members in any community. It takes also different forms and uses different means in different communicating contexts. In his ground-breaking sociolinguistic study, Labov (1966) pointed out that speakers vary their use of language forms to some extent in order to adjust the change of social context or conversation topic. This means that part of the linguistic variation is not just language internal, but actually speaker internal, since speakers can to some extent modulate their linguistic production to suit perceived social relations in different communicative situations. Labov was specifically concerned with pronunciation changes, but discursive strategies also vary as a consequence of contextual (pragmatic) factors. In communicative contexts, speakers of a given language have been claimed to try to strike a balance between their need to be involved with other people and their need to be independent and to deal with the risks that result from being close to each other (Tannen 2005). Adjustment to the challenges presented by interaction is clearly central, since communication is, perhaps not exclusively but almost necessarily, an interactional activity.

This study will examine communicative strategies in some pragmatic situations where adjustment to power and distance variables between speaker and addressee are particularly important. Moreover, the study will have a comparative basis, trying to identify similarities and differences in native and non-native linguistic production of the same type of illocutionary act. This type of variation adds up to the many difficulties which must be confronted when

conversation takes place between native and non-native language speakers.<sup>1</sup> This is so even when non-natives are fluent speakers of the natives' language. Saving face, in terms of Brown and Levinson's (1978) theory, which underlies this study, will present more problems in that situation, and danger lurks in the use of language as an instrument when people are not fully in control of it. Dangers are much more pervasive when non-natives possess a limited level of language mastery. Misunderstanding and misinterpretation of messages communicated may occur as a result of lack of language knowledge.

In addition, many layers of cultural assumptions, references and connotations converge on any communicative situation, and if misunderstandings are not uncommon among native speakers of the same language, they are bound to be much more prominent when the participants in the speech situation, while using the same language, come from different cultures. These hidden cultural connections play a fundamental role in keeping or obstructing the flow of communication between interlocutors. This notion is discussed by Zaharna (1995:252) when he states that "As anthropologist Norman Daniels once observed, when intercultural differences are not perceived as "different", they are perceived as right or wrong. This is especially true when cultural differences are hidden below the level of awareness." The specific type of "cultural difference" relevant to linguistic production that this study focuses on is located in the area of pragmatic, discourse strategy use; like most other levels of linguistic structure, native speakers are only barely aware of their existence, so this is bound to be an area where "differences" from culture to culture will end up producing communication disruption.

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<sup>1</sup> Scarcella (1993:112) puts it in general terms "Conversation between native and non-native speakers of a language are characterized by more frequent conversational difficulties than conversation between native speakers."

Therefore, it is vital to understand that the source of some breaks in the appropriate flow of communication may not reflect differences in individual linguistic competence, but natural cultural differences which underlie linguistic performance, especially between speakers of different cultures and, certainly in our case, between native speakers of English and Omani learners of English, which may be interesting to isolate within the vast class of ‘mistakes’ if we are to be able to help learners. This study will concentrate on some pragmatic cultural differences that disrupt communication, but successful linguistic interaction between speakers can also be threatened by behavioral habits not directly related to the linguistic code, or, in other words, by failures in what has been termed *interactional competence*.<sup>2</sup> Thus, eye contact and interlocutor distance can affect the latter negatively. Eye contact with the opposite gender varies culturally, and Arabic speakers within a Spanish context, for instance, need to remember to maintain it throughout the conversation to an extent that would not be found in an Arabic context. Arabic speakers are not comfortable with lengthy eye contact with the opposite sex as it might be considered as bold and flirtatious. In different situational contexts, Asians in general avoid lengthy direct eye contact and keep it brief especially with people of high authority.<sup>3</sup> Physical distance in different type of social interaction (whose study was called *proxemics* in Hall’s (1976) important work) can also be used culturally, and, in particular, the distance maintained in

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<sup>2</sup> On top of conversation management strategies (when and how to initiate a conversation, break it, etc.), factors such as body language, proximity, or the ones we will discuss at present are often included in this type of competence. See for instance Kramsch (1986) or Young (2011).

<sup>3</sup> Wa-Mbaleka et al (2014:41) explain this notion of behavior in Philippine as in other East Asian nations: “Like most East Asians, they avoid staring, and even direct eye contact as a sign of respect, contrary to the Western connotation of guilt or embarrassment.”

conversation also varies from culture to culture<sup>4</sup> and may consequently pose a problem if that aspect of interactional competence is not taken into account (Heshka and Nelson 1972).<sup>5</sup>

Generally speaking, distancing also depends on many factors such as social power, relationship with the interlocutor, gender and community life style. A physical distance would be normally closer between interlocutors if they are close friends, from the same sex or live in large population communities. However, powerful individuals see themselves different and distant from others with less power (Lieberman et al, 2007). The latter gave an example of group leaders who distinct themselves from other group members and overtime separate themselves from the rest of the group. But while this is generally true cross-culturally, the specific line dividing what is perceived to be close from what is perceived to be threatening is largely culture bound. In Elfenbein and Ambady's (2003) study on emotions recognition, it has been found that the physical distance factor is significant and cross-culturally different within the multiple cultural groups examined from four previous published studies on the same topic.

Language learners, then, must cope with the many different dimensions of communicative competence in order to construct appropriate interactions, not just at the level of linguistic appropriateness but also at the level of the many factors involved in sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence. Language instruction in an academic context confronts the students with many of these sociolinguistic and pragmatic differences, in a context where it is competence of

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<sup>4</sup> In another study, for example, the physical distance kept in conversation by Scandinavians is far more than by Hispanic speakers (Fant, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> In my personal experience, I have had to adjust to the closer distance between non-friend interlocutors I found among Spanish speakers, as compared to that culturally shaped in Arabic countries.

the linguistic code that has traditionally received the main (and sometimes only) focus of attention.

Using a foreign language in communication presents formidable challenges which many language learners must learn how to handle, especially when it comes to the use of pragmatic skills and strategies such as those required when forming apologies, requests, refusals and compliment utterances. Failing to address them successfully can lead to miscommunication and accusations of being rude or impolite. These skills are presumed to be learned by ‘practice’ and awareness, and they are categorized by a progression from an initial declarative knowledge level involving controlled processing, to a final procedural level where knowledge is automatic (Ellis, 2008). Hence, the big challenge that can be observed in EFL settings is providing opportunities to practice these skills in real contexts.

Students in Omani classrooms, for instance, have limited chances to engage in real conversations where they can employ and practice these skills. Class time is the only opportunity where these types of conversations can occur between students and their instructors. It is then interesting to study how pragmatic skills are actually acquired in a typical learning environment where little consciously directed teaching or monitoring addresses students’ progress in that respect. The little attention awarded to pragmatic skills makes of them an excellent research territory where we can observe to what extent culture bound pragmatic aspects of linguistic competence may be transferred, often producing inappropriate communication.

The Omani context lacks enough studies that investigate the learning of these skills in an academic context despite the evolution in teaching English in the country. English is gaining paramount importance as a second language in the Gulf Countries in general and in Oman in

particular. Its continuous growth can be witnessed in the number of higher educational institutions in Oman, which reached 54 institutions, and the number of internal scholarships offered to Omani nationals to study in these institutions, which reached 9,738 in the academic year 2012/13 (Al-Sarmi 2014). Therefore, this comparative study aims to fill the gap in this area of research in Oman and to investigate the use of pragmatic strategies of two types of speech acts where politeness plays an important role, namely, requests and apologies.

### **1.1. Rationale of the Study**

Research on teaching and learning communicative skills in the Omani context has consistently brought to light the need to reform teaching these skills at the level of both schools and higher education institutions (Al-Issa 2007, Moody 2009 and Al-Mahrooqi 2012). Al-Issa (2005a) and Al-Husseini (2006) also point out that despite the fact that Omani students learn English from a very early stage in schools and are exposed to the language through much of their education, they fail to fulfill the role of successful communicators in that language in real interactional situations.

More traditionally 'linguistic' aspects of student English competence receive almost exclusive emphasis in language teaching and, perhaps consequently, it is inadequacies in their learning that feature prominently in discussions about communicative skill level and development among these learners. Conversely, pragmatic skills are seldom subject of conscious teaching/learning in the academic contexts and their contribution to inadequate communication often either goes undetected or only summarily acknowledged. However, my own experience in teaching English in EFL/ESL settings has allowed me to witness several recurring failures of my students' performance when it comes to the sociolinguistic/pragmatic adequacy of their speech

acts in L2. Unfortunately, in many cases, the type of communication failure prompted by pragmatically flawed output is caused by and produces intercultural misunderstanding. In the controlled academic context of English language teaching/learning, it is usually the instructor that stands for the addressee of a real life communicative situation, and, as a result, this causes EFL instructors, who are not aware of intercultural differences at this level of competence, to consider their students as rude, unfriendly or dishonest. It is likely that real communication contexts would prompt similar reactions, if not worse. These failures are defined as ‘pragmatic failures’ (Thomas 1983, cited in Wolfson 1989). Thomas observes that the failure occurs when learners are unable to understand what is meant from what is said. In other words, such communication disruption involves not just lack of semantic competence, but also pragmatic failure. Meier (1997:26) notes that “pragmatic failure is caused by the link between linguistic factors and cultural factors (Clyne 1983), and misconceptions of the target culture and language with the universality of particular act (Olshtain and Cohen 1983).” Obviously, these descriptions center on comprehension skills, but their reverse, that is, pragmatic failures in student production, is equally damaging for communication and produces mirror-image effects on native or highly proficient listeners: from the point of view of an L2 learner, these failures entail that native listeners perceive what is not meant from what is said.

In order to prevent our students from falling into the trap of these communication failures, we need to understand in what way pragmatic construction of the Omani learner’s English discourse differs from that of native speakers of the language. We also need to recognize in which way this discourse is perceived differently. Some of these differences may be connected

with cultural transfer that leads to deficiencies. Eventually, such understanding will enable us to develop systematic approaches to teaching pragmatic competences in English language classes.

Hence, there is a need to conduct studies of this type which can help identify culturally sensitive aspects of pragmatic competence. This study, then, will explore the realization and use of politeness speech acts of request and apology in an EFL Omani setting, comparing them with the realization and use of the same acts in an L1 American setting.<sup>6</sup> This study is an attempt to focus on the conditions of L2 use more than the teaching/learning of these speech act strategies in the Omani context.<sup>7</sup>

There are a number of reasons that make request and apology strategies a particularly important target of exploration in SLA research. Ellis (2008) identifies some of these reasons, such as their important role in social life, the fact that they are face threatening and therefore the stakes are higher in using them, the fact that they differ cross-linguistically and the fact they can often be recognized by means of clearly identifiable formulas. Thomas (1983) identifies two main failures associated with pragmatics: sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic. He argues that the former stems from the different perception of appropriate linguistic behavior across cultures whereas the latter is purely linguistic and could be originated from inappropriate transfer from L1 to L2. While sociopragmatic categories of requests and apologies can be observed in many languages, there are pragmalinguistic differences of the chosen forms used in different situations

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<sup>6</sup> Notice that we are shifting from general designators like ‘native speaker’, ‘native setting’ or ‘English speaking setting’ to the more specific ‘American setting’, since native speakers or addressees in general will receive speech production and interpret it from a specific cultural background which will affect reception.

<sup>7</sup> Obviously, the ultimate goal for studies of this type will be to enable us to facilitate the learning of pragmatic competences through our actions as instructors in academic language teaching environments, but this clearly falls outside the immediate scope of this study.

in these languages. Pragmalinguistic problems may arise if a listener does not recognize those forms and misconstrues the speaker's intended illocutionary act, or if a speaker misuses the forms, producing an unintended illocutionary act and/or not producing the intended one, situations which are not uncommon in second language learner performance. Ellis (2008) also points out that pragmalinguistics is one significant reason for choosing these speech acts as objects of research.

Moving from the general interest and convenience of researching this area to the type of second language learner this study deals with, it is necessary to point out that despite the fact that there are many published and unpublished pieces of research targeting East Asian contexts on this area of linguistics cf. Takahashi & Beebe (1987), Matsumoto (1988), Matsumoto (1989), Fukushima (1990), Yuan (1996) DuFon (2000), Kim (2000), Pham (2008), Song (2008), Dong, Xinran (2009) and, Wa-Mbaleka et al (2014), there is little research specifically targeting the West Asian context in general and Oman in particular. While there are studies centering on the acquisition of pragmatic competences by Arabic L2 learners cf. Al-Issa (1998), Umar (2004), Nureddeen (2008), Bataineh and Bataineh (2008), Al-Zumor (2011), Tawalbeh and Al-Uqaily (2012) and Shammas (2013) this study targets the specific case of Oman. In addition, the study will suggest some teaching tasks to develop the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) of Omani students.

Furthermore, the results are intended to facilitate further investigations in the area of pragmatics in the same context, making it easier not only to compare data from different cultural areas (Arabic learners as opposed to learners from other areas) but also to check for finer grained variation within different Arabic learners of English. Given the culture-bound nature of many of

the pragmatic mechanisms examined here, it is important to examine different cultural areas to derive conclusions as to the amount and nature of variability, and to propose taxonomies based on actual written data. Finally, this research is not only addressed to researchers, providing them with information on the field from another perspective and another L2 setting, but it is also addressed to English language educators in Oman. These must confront the complex task of advancing their students' ability to negotiate the many, intricately connected components of language competence, in the also complex every day, real-life conditions in and outside the classroom. Both researchers and educators can help us to ground theoretical issues in ICC and pragmatic studies against the specific problems in hand. The final goal is not only a purely academic exercise in using an approach, but to see how the specific problems of Omani students can help develop that approach and perhaps sharpen its claims, and how the approach can eventually help Omani students.

## **1.2. Hypotheses and Scope of the Study**

This study attempts to examine the variation in the use of two types of speech acts, namely, Apologies and Requests, in two different groups of students from two different cultural backgrounds. The two groups are, on one hand, Omani intermediate<sup>8</sup> level university learners of English as L2 and, on the other, undergraduate American university students who use English as L1. The American students, who represent different American universities, were participating in a one month visit to Oman to enrich their Arabic language studies. It is believed that members of

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<sup>8</sup> The students were using a pre-intermediate textbook (*Headway*) roughly equivalent to a European framework for language Upper B1 or Lower B2.

these two groups, speaking the same language but in different settings as L1 and L2, have variable interpretations of speech acts used in different social situations. The variations are assumed to be influenced by factors such as L1, L1 transfer and cultural background. However, on top of these ‘classical’ sociolinguistic factors, this study will focus on less well-studied pragmatic factors in inter-cultural communication in the Omani context, such as social distance, social power, rating of imposition and culture-specific evaluations of threat to face.

This study looks at these factors by using a data collecting tool which employs ten situations varied in terms of formality and in terms of power and distance. The tool is designed to elicit information regarding the possible differences in the use of request strategies in formal situations between Omani students and American students. It also aims to check for differences between the same two groups of students in the use of apology strategies in formal situations. Finally, the study seeks to identify the pedagogical impact of these differences in the context of ESL in Oman and, more generally, in GCC Arab countries. The hypotheses that this study examines are stated in (i) and (ii) below. Beginning with request speech acts, a first hypothesis hinges on the relative use of indirect vs. direct strategies in the two groups studied here, as indicated in (i):

- (i) Omani university students use fewer indirect requests strategies in formal situations than their American counterparts.

Although the primary focus of this thesis is to establish the factual basis for this hypothesis, rather than to explain why the facts are those rather than any other possible configuration of

facts, throughout this dissertation the importance of sociolinguistic cultural factors as a possible explanation for at least some of these facts will be highlighted.

The use of indirect request strategies is often assumed to be associated with ‘more polite’ verbal behavior, but there are cultural and linguistic factors that would, if not directly favor direct strategies instead, at least increase their incidence among Omani students, with the subsequent risk of incurring in pragmalinguistic communication failures. Previous comparable studies examining the use of polite requests in L2 by Arab learners using English as the target language seem to indicate deficiencies that have been attributed to linguistic or cultural factors, as in Umar (2004) with Saudi learners, Al-Momani (2009) with Jordanian learners and Sattar et al (2009) with Iraqi learners.

Part of the problems in constructing well-formed requests derived from features of the Omani students’ L1, which may affect their request forming strategies. Thus, modifications strategies through the use of modal verbs are important in forming polite requests in English. However, the Arabic language does not have word-to-word equivalents to modal verbs in English such as *would*, *should* and *could*, and this type of modality is conveyed by adding prefixes or particles or simply by using different structures. The absence of direct correspondence in what constitutes one of the major resources in English to mitigate the impact of requests on the listener’s face interferes with the learner’s communicative success. Taking as an example the case of the modal verb *would* in English (see below 1 and 2), it has different meanings, and therefore possible uses, depending on the context of the sentence it is used in. It could be used as a marker of courtesy such as in (1a) or simply convey epistemic modality in (1b) or in (1c):

(1) a. *Would you be able to help me?*

b. *If I were/was rich, I would travel around the world.*

c. *If I had studied well, I would have succeeded in the exam.*

There are also further, less central uses conveyed by this modal verb, like the frequency past meaning in (2), which further complicate the distribution of this single item for learners of English:

(2) *When I was young, I would play football every day*

These examples of uses of the verb *would* are expressed differently in Arabic and sometimes confuse Arab students, especially, if they attempt to translate them from L1 to L2. The use most directly related to politeness and requests is the one exemplified in (1a), and, even in educational contexts in which pragmatic concerns are not particularly salient, the connection between this use of the modal and the pragmatic function it signals is fairly straightforward and is explicitly taught in the classroom.<sup>9</sup> This use of *would* is part of the standard language teaching in ESL, and the problems it presents for the language learner in an Omani context may be connected with different types of pragmatic and linguistic issues. The hypothesis in (i) identifies one particular pragmatic aspect which may lie behind the learning problems for elements of this kind, where it

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<sup>9</sup> After all, we are not dealing here with the type of linguistic expression of more elaborate forms of requests, or with more theoretical terms like the very distinction between direct and indirect request strategies, which would too often go unmentioned in the ESL classroom.

assumes that Omani students use fewer indirect request strategies and forming past tense modals is one of more strategies used to form these types of requests.

Still in the realm of modal verbs in English, another difficulty that might be noticed appears in the use of the modal verb *could*, which is also used to convey (dynamic) modality (for instance, possessing the ability without referring to the actual exercise expressed through *be able*). In addition, this verb is used to soften the request and make it sound more polite: if the use of present tense *can* increases politeness by allowing the speaker to word a request to perform an action by presenting it as a question on the ability to perform it, the use of the past tense softens the request further by eliminating the immediacy by selecting the past tense. This is a derivative function of the modal form, and may also be acquired later by ESL learners. Thus, Arab students are confused by the pragmatic interplay of the past modal form meaning, restrict its use to convey modality, and disregard the politeness effect introduced by the temporal softening. As a result, pragmalinguistic mismatches may arise in the formation of requests involving this modal. Since the use of modals is vital in forming polite speech acts, the differences<sup>10</sup> on the use of modal verbs in L2 English by Arab students are presumed to affect the quantitative and qualitative uses of these verbs in formal situations of request. To explain this problem of Arab learners, an underlined phrase in Arabic language as in (3e) can be equal in meaning to any of the four phrases (3a-d):

(3) a. *Can you open the door for me?*

b. *Could you open the door for me?*

c. *Will you open the door for me?*

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<sup>10</sup> These differences will be discussed in detail in Ch. IV.

d. *Would you open the door for me?*

e. *Hal min al mumkin/bi imkanik an taftah li albaab?*  
 is.it from possible/with ability.2 to 2.open for.me the.door  
 ‘Could you possibly/ are you able to open the door for me?’

In fact, if an Arab learner wants to form a more polite request that can equal the use of the modal verb *could* or *would* in English, a phrase that will be added in front of the request or at the end can do the job as in (4a) and (4b) below:

(4) a. *Min fadlik law samaht iftah albaab.*  
 from offer.2 if permission2.sg open the.door  
 ‘Could you open the door?’

b. *Iftah albaab min fadlik law samaht*  
 open the.door from offer.2 if permission  
 ‘Could you open the door?’

As we can see from the above examples, the wide variety of possible formations of a certain polite request in English can create a big confusion to Arabic learners due to the number of possible equivalent forms in Arabic. Obviously this is a linguistic feature of Arabic that is creating difficulties to our Omani students. This study will look at different types of strategies for requests, comparing their frequency and structures in the two groups.

Apologies form the second major concern of this study, and the leading hypothesis that this thesis sets out to check is expressed in (ii):

(ii) Omani students use fewer apology strategies in formal situations than American students.

As in the case of (i), the importance of sociolinguistic and cultural factors as a source of explanation for the relative use of these strategies will be a recurrent concern in this dissertation.

The factual hypothesis in (ii) turns out not to be fully validated by the data collected here, and a culture-driven approach will be offered to account for strategy uses that crucially link pragmatic competence and sociolinguistic factors.

The hypothesis on the frequency of apology acts in (ii) builds on the results of previous studies conducted by Ghawi (1993) to investigate pragmatic transfer in Arabic learners of English, and Merzaei, Roohani and Esmaeili (2012), a study that explored pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic aspects of language use with Iranian learners. Although the latter study did not target Arabs, it does include an American group of students as element of direct comparison, and it refers to Iranians, linguistically very different from Arabic speakers<sup>11</sup> but culturally part of a wider West Asian region, also very close to Oman and with cultural and religious links to Oman's rich history. Ghawi's (1993) study showed that Americans use more apology strategies than Arab learners and the interview results collected by the researcher indicate that Arab learners remarked that "Americans apologized more frequently and at times unnecessarily. For instance, some of the Arab participants stated that Americans even apologized to their children, implying that this was less common in Arabic." (Ghawi 1993:49). On the other hand, Ashy et al. (2013) consider frequent expressions of apology and pardoning as important Arabic culture because they sustain the social culture and harmony between people in the community.

There is a general perception among academics in the Omani context that Omani students are polite and do use universal speech acts of apology as explored in Al-Siyabi's (2012) case study. There are, however, cultural factors that hinder and affect the use of these apology

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<sup>11</sup> It should be pointed out that Farsi is an Indoeuropean language belonging to the same linguistic family as English and Spanish, quite different from the languages of the Semitic group illustrated by Arabic.

speech acts, factors such as power, distance or gender.<sup>12</sup> As a continuation of the above study of Omani students and similar studies of Arab learners, this thesis will explore the use and internal organization of apology speech acts by Americans in contrast with a more specific group of Omanis within an Omani academic ESL context.

Pragmatics is considered as an essential aspect of language knowledge along with grammatical ability in both Bachman and Palmer's (1996) and Purpura's (2004) language models. Consequently, there is an increasing interest in the way pragmatic abilities are learned by foreign language students, reproducing in a way what by now already is a long history of research on the development of more traditional linguistic ('grammatical') abilities. Therefore, this study sides with the drive to highlight the importance of pragmatic competence instruction within an ESL classroom. More specifically, my main focus will concentrate on the pragmatic aspects of communicative strategies in the two types of speech acts mentioned above, requests and apologies. Other pragmatic types will only be indirectly referred to where relevant. Thus, the goal will be to identify differences with respect to politeness in the use and structuring of these illocutionary acts in English as L1 and L2. The data do not come from spontaneous speech, whether in the case of English as L1 or as L2, but have rather been collected in an academic environment, often checking behavior in that same environment by proposing classroom situations as prompts to elicit information. Moreover, the situations, as will become apparent, strive to control for different power and distance situations. By using a comparison group of the same type of population and in the same type of context, we can derive some conclusions on the

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<sup>12</sup> The gender factor is beyond the scope of this study and could be explored in a more extended investigation as a follow up of this study.

universality of these speech acts and the strategies particular groups of ESL students use. The underlying hypothesis is that at least part of the variation found in the construction of requests and apologies in the non-native student group researched here may be linked to culturally bound aspects of pragmatics. Eventually, this research aims at highlighting the importance of pragmatic competences in general and politeness in particular in the ESL classroom in the context of higher education, with particular reference to Omani higher education. The study does not have as its primary objective to explain the facts expressed in (i) and (ii) hypotheses above, but to establish facts for the specific group of students.

The dissertation is organized as follows. Chapter II provides the theoretical background on pragmatic and communicative competence in L2 learning and teaching. In chapter III the elicitation instrument, informants and answer coding methodology are laid out in detail, and in chapter IV the data obtained from the instrument is presented analyzed. Requests are discussed first in section 4.1 while apologies are dealt with in section 4.2. The final part, chapter V, looks both back at the experiment limitations and major results, and forward at possible further research stemming from this study. It also gives some brief recommendations for the incorporation of pragmatics in the teaching curricula in Oman.

## **CHAPTER II: PRAGMATICS AND COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN L2 TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Language use entails what we say, our indications of our intentions, how the hearers take our indications, and what their particular effects on the hearers might be as a result (Fraser 1983). Fraser also considers components of the success of linguistic communications the hearers' recognition not only of their interlocutors' message, but also of the attitudes that they intend to convey. In other words, unlike in non-verbal written statements, a successful interpretation of a verbal message requires a mutual process that needs more than understanding grammatical forms. It requires command not only of sentence grammar, but also what might be called "extragrammatical" knowledge such as knowledge of intonation, and non-verbal language such as facial expressions or body language in general. Another important component of language knowledge is the command of pragmatic skills, which also entails other sub-skills, factors and strategies that will be discussed later in detail.

Foreign language users are confronted daily with communication situations that require constructing correct, suitable forms of language, and interpreting correctly the messages they receive from their interlocutors. Therefore, the challenge for them is to employ successful communication strategies that express shared meaningful structures with participants in the communication event. Their success to use suitable strategies will reflect on the accuracy of the message, which eventually will determine the success of communication.

Academic contexts are only a subtype of the many possible communication situations speakers must face, and this communicative context is what this thesis is mainly concerned with. Across academic communities, ESL/EFL learners are dealing daily with very similar situations, typically involving student-instructor or student-student interactions, and for these communicative situations to be faced with the appropriate linguistic means, they are required to acquire similar communicative competences. However, these daily challenges are different from one cultural context to another. This thesis addresses the question of communication in an educational environment within an Omani context. As other Arab learners, for example, Omani students are faced with challenges that can be assumed to be rooted in linguistic and cultural differences between their L1 and L2 languages. In spite of a similar L1, however, the cultural component differs from one Arab country to another, and we should not assume a single cultural situation to underlie all Arab speakers. Similarly, even within the English speaking countries, sharing the language does not guarantee cultural uniformity between, say American, Australian and British students. This thesis concentrates on the specific situation of Omani students of English, and tries to identify pragmatic factors that affect successful communication in an academic environment. This chapter reviews previous literature on pragmatics and its relevance for the study of L2 learning. It, therefore, presents the pragmatics-based analytical tools that will be used throughout the dissertation to analyze academic communication in EFL contexts in Oman.

As mentioned before, ‘language’ cannot be reduced to grammar. Language use cannot therefore be reduced to the use of the correct morphological forms and word orders. Language at large also entails wider, not strictly grammatical entities such as tones, gestures, vocabulary,

culture, customs, attitudes and context. Tarone (1983:65) summarizes the complex nature of communication strategies in interlanguage interaction by claiming communication to be “a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared.” In other words, what Tarone labels ‘meaning structures’ would include linguistic rule structure, sociolinguistic rule structure, grammar and culture. Therefore, it is a joint communication, where interlocutors must jointly construct meaning in a process that relies on a variety of factors. One of the most important ones among these is the pragmatic competence, which is the ability to construct appropriate communication in different speech act forms such as in requests or apologies. These are the two types of acts this dissertation focuses on, as they illustrate the role of ‘extragrammatical’ factors in successful communication.

An oversimplification that many researches fall for is to consider Arabic speakers to be affected by the above factors to the same degree and in the same way regardless of contextual differences. In fact, this overgeneralization prevents the analyst from reaching descriptive and explanatory accuracy for many reasons. The effect of the old and modern colonial history of Arab nations, migration flows and geographical locations that limit or extend the communication with other parts of the world are important factors which contribute to different experiences and cultural outlooks. Al-Issa (1998) criticizes treating the whole Arab World as one single nation and states that it is a mistake to consider Arabs from different countries such as Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Jordan or Morocco to share the same characteristics in their discourse behavior, although they are all considered part of the Arab World community.

An example of this differentiation of culture, and therefore of spoken discourse in these countries can be observed in the different Arabic dialects spoken throughout the Arab world. Although these dialects originally derive from classical Arabic, they still include some borrowings, expressions and vocabularies from other languages and have also developed their own linguistic innovations, producing a complex linguistic map. Classical Arabic is a common referent and source, but it is limited in actual use to very formal contexts, such as written communication and formal speech situations. Dialects are also interacting and exposure to non-classical, regional variants has increased as a result of the mass media, in particular TV series and movies. Arab learners are in turn also affected by the domination of certain languages in their communities as a result of different colonial experiences. Exposure to colonial languages has also varied in accordance to the different colonizing powers in different parts of the Arab world.

Given this complex linguistic situation in the Arab world, what L1 means is not always immediately clear: it could refer to aspects of Arabic shared by all dialects, but it could also refer to aspects of Arabic particular to specific dialects, and both may be interacting with the L2 being acquired. These complex interactions between L1 (local forms of Arabic and also shared features deriving from Classical Arabic) and the different second languages in the regions result in a complex linguistic panorama in the Arab world. Thus, there are transfer patterns from different Arabic dialects into English production, which may be similar across the Arab world if stemming from shared features inherited from the Classical language, or different if stemming from new developments in the local dialects. Take for instance the presence of this effect in Gulf Cooperation Countries (Oman, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar and UAE) on learners of

English as a result of the presence of British English in the Gulf region due to historical colonial reasons. Some of these learners' transfer problems are phonological substitution of Arabic consonants for English consonants, such as [b] for [p], [f] for [w/v], [ʒ] for [dʒ], [n] for [ŋ] or [g] for [dʒ]. Some of these ([b] for [p], for instance) are common across the Arab world; some others ([f] for [w/v]) stem from the particular phonological make-up of the Gulf dialectal area, while still others ([g] for [dʒ]) are specific to the local variant of Arabic spoken in Oman. Transfer is also felt in syntactic aspects such as word order, producing transferred orders such as *hat big* for *big hat* (Khamis-Dakwar et al 2012). This happens to be a common feature to all Arabic variants. In a similar way, in a situation like that in the Maghreb, with the domination of the French language as lingua franca, monolingual speakers who have not been exposed to French have difficulties in distinguishing between /p/ and /v/; for example, they pronounce words like *paper* as /baber/ and *visit* as /fisit/ (Khamis-Dakwar et al 2012).<sup>13</sup> Although they do not explicitly claim so, they seem to suggest the expectation that Arabic and French bilingual speakers from that area would not have problems in distinguishing the sounds, since they are part of the phonemic inventory of French.

L1 on L2 effects like the previous ones are well-known and studied and constitute one of the most typical research areas in second language learning. The need to avoid oversimplification in the depiction of the L1 is nothing new in the area of phonetic, and the previous examples show typical variation in the L2 acquisition of English resulting from different aspects of an L1 which, as has been shown, is far from being a single and homogeneous language even if we call it

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<sup>13</sup> These are some examples of direct transfer from L1 to L2 observed with Arab learners. Pragmatic transfer will be discussed further in details with GCC learners of English. Khamis-Dakwar's research studied Arabic immigrant children in the US.

“Arabic”. The question in this thesis is to what extent the other, often overlooked major component of language, the pragmatic component, is also subject to different transfers from the L1 pragmatic competence. Given the linguistic complexity of the Arab world, it is important to avoid overgeneralizations and to examine specific cases like that of Oman. In the same way as phonetic transfer is mediated by complex phonetic interactions of different forms of Arabic, it is likely that pragmatic transfer will also be mediated by the complex cultural situations in different Arab countries.

Oman shares much of the common Arab and Islamic culture in the area, but at the same time, it has cultural peculiarities which may impact on pragmatic competence. Oman’s geographical location and long coast have allowed Omanis to have direct contacts with other nations throughout its rich history. The Omani empire from the 17<sup>th</sup> through the 19<sup>th</sup> century (117 years),<sup>14</sup> brought together a wide variety of peoples, languages and religions from the Persian coastal nations, Indian coastal nations to East Africa’s nations, helping shape the Omani culture at large. By providing narrow focus studies of Oman, this thesis will help researchers compare the pragmatic aspects of acquisition of English as an L2 both inside the Arab world and outside of it. The current study could hopefully add to pragmatic research targeting a small portion of Arab learners from the Arabian Peninsula.

This chapter provides the conceptual framework for the discussion on the role of pragmatics in second language learning (and consequently, teaching), reviewing the relevant literature and introducing concepts which will be used in the rest of the dissertation. First, section

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<sup>14</sup> Let’s not forget that Zanzibar was the home of one branch of the Omani royal family until 1963, when it declared independence.

2.1 introduces the basic notions of the role of pragmatics in communicative competence. Section 2.2 provides a presentation of pragmatic maxims, key concepts which pervade much discussion in pragmatics and which will re-occur throughout the dissertation. In section 2.3 politeness, another pervasive concept which permeates much of discussion to follow, is first introduced. The following sections examine politeness in request and its strategies (section 2.4), and politeness in apologies and its strategies (section 2.5). All the previous sections 2.2 through 2.5 deal with pragmatic issues in general terms, while the remainder of the chapter focuses more specifically on the pragmatics of language learning.

Much of the discussion in the earlier sections will hinge on aspects of pragmatic competence which can arguably be called universal, such as types of speech acts or even many of Grice's maxims. But at the same time politeness presents many culture bound facets which show up in a particularly way in the production of second language by learners usually as a result of transfer. A whole section then is devoted to pragmatic transfer in language learning (2.6). The language learner has been shown to employ specific strategies in language learning and language use, which will therefore be reflected in their use of requests and apologies, so section 2.7 delves on those strategies. The relative degree of success in L2 acquisition and use, on the other hand, have been claimed to be affected by different variables discussed in section 2.8. Culture, as this section shows, also features prominently among those variables, so section 2.9 discusses the role of cultural knowledge in L2 learning and production. The specific language learning context analyzed in this dissertation is that of foundation programs in Oman, and therefore, section 2.10 provides some backgrounds on the presence of pragmatics and culture in General Foundation programs in Oman and other Gulf countries. Section 2.11 reviews what work has previously

been done on apologies and requests in the context as EFL teaching in the Gulf countries. The chapter closes with a section (2.12) which briefly considers the applicability of the results of research on pragmatics in EFL to the actual classroom.

### **2.1. Communicative Competence and Pragmatics**

The development of the communicative approach to language teaching highlighted the importance of different components of the communicative competence in particular the role of pragmatic competence in L2 use. While grammatical transfer had been a standard research question, the pragmatic competence began to be studied within this new teaching framework. The wide area of pragmatic transfer and its complexity triggered researchers to study the learners' pragmatic performance in social communication and how L1 pragmatics would influence the use of L2. For a language learner to play the communication role successfully s/he needs 'communicative ability' which can be construed as comprising six competences, each standing for a different aspects of this concept (Van Ek cited in Byram 1997).

To begin with, Van Ek identifies in his model of communicative ability, a *Linguistic competence*, which he describes as the ability to perform and interpret meaningful utterances that are shaped in accordance with the rules of the language concerned and bear their conventional meaning. This corresponds to the more grammar-centered approach that had been used before the communicative language approach changed teaching practices. Second, Van Ek identified a *Sociolinguistic competence*, which he understood as an awareness of conditions that determine choices of language forms such as setting, relationship between communication partners and communicative intention. Third, he describes *Discourse competence* as the ability to use

appropriate strategies in the construction and interpretation of texts. Fourth, he points out that we use a *Strategic competence* when communication becomes difficult and we have to find ways to deliver our messages or to understand what other people say to us. In his view, the strategic competence comprises communication strategies such as rephrasing and asking for clarification. Fifth, in his discussion of the *Socio-cultural competence*, he observes that every language is situated in a socio-cultural context and implies the use of a particular reference frame, which is partly different from that of the foreign language learner. He notes that the socio-cultural competence presumes certain degree of familiarity with that context. Finally, he acknowledged that a *Social competence* entails both the will and the skill to interact with others, involving motivation, attitude, self-confidence, empathy and ability to handle social situations.

The socio-cultural competence is also discussed in Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, & Thurrell's (1995) model. Two main variables in this model are included under the *Social Contextual* component. The first one is the *Participant variable*, which directs the attention to factors such as age, gender, status and social distance. The second one is the *Situational variable*, which comprises factors such as time, place and social situation. In this model the cultural factor also consists of many components that are derived from the person's socio-cultural background knowledge such as major values, beliefs, norms, taboo topics, historical background and cultural aspects. These factors are subject to change from one speech situation to another, as well as to the degree of formality of each situation. Formality of situation and interlocutor power and distance will be two of the variables that the instrument used in Chapter III of this study takes into account.

As we can see from the two models above, language knowledge entails a wide variety of competences, the socio-cultural competence being one of them. This shows the importance for a language learner to recognize h/her own culture and the culture of others, to develop cognitive, emotional and behavioral abilities in order to engage in pragmatically adequate communication.

As more and more aspects of communicative competence are identified, it seems as if the learner's task becomes increasingly difficult. Byram (1997:11) and also later Byram (2003) criticizes Van Ek's model because it identifies the native speaker as an absolute model and describes the situation for a language learner as "...an impossible target and consequently inevitable failure." In Byram view this would create the wrong kind of impression that for a language learner to be accepted by native speakers and to merge into another linguistic environment is to abandon h/his social identity and h/his own language. Kramsch (1986) agrees that behaving at all levels like a native speaker of the target language is not an acceptable view of what learning a foreign language means and gives examples of successful merge of Asians, Hispanic immigrants or Native Americans in the United States. In an EFL setting, our aim should be preparing language learners to use the language successfully in the target language and not change them to a reproduction of a native speaker. Being aware of and respecting the target language, sociocultural environment as part of language learning process need not necessarily require adopting the native speaker's sociocultural personality.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> In a way this is similar to our perception of what 'pronouncing a foreign language well' means. For most learners, acquiring a native speaker's pronunciation is probably an unrealistic goal. Current approaches admit an 'accent' as an acceptable part of a learner's foreign language competence provided that communication is not impaired or severely damaged.

In order to understand the connection between pragmatics and language competence, let us look at some theories and definitions of pragmatics first. Initially pragmatics developed as a way to complete our understanding of linguistic meanings for communication. The meaning of utterances cannot be equated with the composite semantic meaning of each part of the utterance. On top of semantics, we need to understand the actual use of many linguistic elements. In a typical example, a question like *why don't we go outside?* has a use which is not an interrogation about the reasons not to go outside but actually an invitation to go outside. Pragmatics, therefore, crucially focuses on the conditions of use of utterances. The context at large becomes important if we are to understand human communication. Many scholars try to come up with definitions of pragmatics in which 'language structure' is embedded in a particular 'context of utterance', and this contextual information on the actual use of the language is the central aspect of the contribution of pragmatics to our understanding of what communicative competence means, as discussed by Grice (1978), Kaplan (1977), Campbell and Wales (1970), Bar-Hillel (1954), Levinson (1983), Green (1989) and Mey (2001), among others. The latter describes pragmatics as the aspect that gives our words their deeper meanings and defines it as the science of language that represents people's intentions, within their limitations and affordances. Once actual use is considered, not only the mere linguistic meaning is important but the speaker's intentions and their whole contextual conditionings become central concerns. The function of utterances, whether, for instance they are intended as requests or apologies has to be taken into account, and what constitutes a better representation of L1 communication has a direct bearing on L2 learning and teaching.

These two components of language (rules of grammar and context) are emphasized in Levinson's (1983:9) definition of pragmatics, as he states that "Pragmatics is the study of those relations between language and context that are *grammaticalized*, or encoded in the structure of a language." Davis (1991) considers pragmatics as part of the theory of the speaker's linguistic competence. As we will see in the description of apologies in section 2.5 and in Chapter IV, these speech acts often include a fairly conventionalized series of elements, which grammaticalize their linguistic encodings. He argues that in order to understand the language we use, we must add pragmatic understanding to the understanding of its semantics. To the knowledge of the meaning of the words and the rules of the language, which are used to form meaningful phrases and sentences, we have to add knowledge of their pragmatic use, which enables us to use them in actual situations and with actual interlocutors.

Therefore, he considers pragmatics to incorporate the speaker's communicative intentions, language use to form these intentions, strategies used by the hearer to determine these intentions and speech acts in order to realize the speaker's aims. In other words, it is the study that investigates the speakers' meanings of their speech acts and how the hearers perceive them within certain contexts. These acts take different linguistics forms and meanings, and those forms and meanings entail strategies, which will be the focus of this study.

After decades of neglect, pragmatics has finally captured the attention of language researches as a result of its essential role in understanding language acquisition. Ellis (2008) believes that the study of pragmatics and its uses is vital in the study of second language learning and assumes that the development of pragmatic competence and linguistic competence cannot be

separated in SLA. However, even though both types of competence are by now uncontroversially important, there is disagreement as to which competence must be developed first with the language learner. Ellis (2008) suggests that there are three factors which must be distinguished; the acquisition of the pragmatic competence; namely learner's level, transfer from L1 to L2 and the status of the learner. She further argues that learners need an adequate linguistic competence to construct native-like discourse, which also, as she claims, affects their transfer of complicated strategies from L1. She also asserts that learners benefit from having equal roles in communication opportunities such as communicating with other learners more than with native speakers who usually dominate conversation roles. Canagarajah (2007), discussing the dichotomy of grammar versus pragmatics in SLA quotes, House (2003) questioning whether pragmatic strategies really enable one to communicate successfully regardless of reaching the appropriate level of grammatical proficiency. As a result, neither grammar nor pragmatics alone can suffice to ensure the successful use of pragmatic skills in communication.

The results of some studies such as Bardovi-Harlig and Dornyei (1998) and Niezgoda and Rover (2001) found some differences in learners' judgments of pragmatic and grammatical errors where learners often differed as to which errors were more serious. Kasper (as cited in Ellis 2008) concluded that the awareness of both competences is largely independent. Based on this claim and the argument on the relationship between the two types of competences, we would assume that for foreign language learners to develop both competences simultaneously, it is crucial that both competences are given equal amount of attention in teaching and learning. Of course the grammatical competence has usually received primary and often exclusive attention in language teaching curricula, whereas the pragmatic competence has lagged behind. Many

teachers would probably feel at a loss if required to teach pragmatic competences. In fact, the whole issue of teachability immediately arises once the SLA consequences of recognizing this aspect of language are taken into consideration. Teachability will be briefly commented upon in section 2.12. The primary concern of this study is not how to teach pragmatics in the SLA situation but in which way L1 pragmatic conditioning is affecting L2 performance in the case of Omani students.

In spite of the significance of what is sometimes referred to as the sociolinguistic competence in second language learning, many second language programs consider it less important than the grammatical competence (Canale 1983) or quite simply ignore it. It is in fact quite likely that the absence of the pragmatic competence in the SLA curriculum is not a conscious decision to bypass it but actually may result from lack of awareness of its importance. To a certain extent, grammatical accuracy is considered as more important than appropriateness of utterances, and this more or less conscious belief disregards the fact that the sociolinguistic competence is vital for interpreting utterances for their social meaning, communicative function and attitude. However, it is true that one can argue that an L2 learner needs at least some basics of the purely grammatical component of language to understand and use 'social' meanings, and in this sense Ellis (2008:160) states that "[c]learly, learners will need at least some linguistic competence in order to perform even a primitive version of a speech act." In other words, for L2 language learners, it is unavoidable and a priority in their early stages of language acquisition to learn correct grammatical forms, whereas it is not an issue for L1 speakers because acquisition of language naturally occurs since childhood. L2 learners then will build on the linguistic knowledge acquired earlier to perform speech acts, which partly explains the connection between

successful performances of speech acts with the linguistic knowledge that the learner has already acquired.

Noticeably, knowledge of social meanings and communicative functions are also crucial for the L2 learner to be competent with the use of the language and affect the clarity of h/her intentions. Personal intentions are usually encoded by speech acts in normal communications and many of them are face-threatening in nature (Brown and Levinson 1987), so they directly involve the learner and must be used with at least a minimum level of command. Wolfson (1981) called for studies that investigate to what extent L2 learners with different L1 backgrounds are able to use native-like politeness strategies when conversation takes place using the target language. These studies do not only help us to understand the nature of the differences between native and non-native use of politeness strategies but also contribute to our investigation on how to enhance our students' knowledge. What studies of this type are aiming at is to determine to what extent much of the pragmatic competence is already in a way present as a result of direct transfer from L1.

The interest in finding out cultural differences as in this study, for instance, should not obscure the fact that many aspects of the pragmatic competence are probably universal. Grice's maxims, for instance, were never meant to apply to English exclusively but they were stated as underlying successful communication in general. From that point of view, many aspects of pragmatics can be regarded as general. Little of the grammatical forms of the language can be assumed beforehand for L2 learners, except perhaps in cases when L2 and L1 are particularly close. Much pragmatic competence can be in a way assumed even when L2 and L1 are widely different and across also very different cultures. This obviously should not lead us to disregard

the importance of pragmatic training and this study shows that in spite of common ground, lack of success in adequate communication can still be attributed to pragmatic failures. The following section reviews pragmatic maxims, an approach to understanding one aspect of language use which in principle is less culture bound than others but which still clarifies much of the linguistic behavior of language users both in L1 and L2.

## 2.2. Pragmatic Maxims

In order to fully understand speech act theory and its basics and to recognize the source that Lakoff (1973) built on his rules of politeness discussed below in the following section, it is vital to mention Grice's (1975, 1978) maxims of conversation, which have already been mentioned in this chapter. He proposed a theory on how people use language and identified four *maxims* that guide conversation through the co-operative principle, the maxim of *quality*, the maxim of *quantity*, the maxim of *relevance* and the maxim of *manner*. These maxims are understood as not being culture bound, but even here, in this core area of pragmatics we recognize some degree of cultural relativity at least in some of the maxims. For instance, the manner maxim *Be perspicuous* is intended among other things to refer to the avoidance of obscurity and ambiguity in order to make the communicative exchange progress. On the other hand, Asian cultures in general and Arabic culture in particular are sometimes claimed to favor less specific, to suggest more than to describe in detail, so that the hearer/addressee requires more context and a more interpretative attitude to communication (Hall 1976). Grice's maxims have also been described as vague and not to deal with some conversational strategies such as in

indirectness and irony.<sup>16</sup> Based on this criticism of Grice's maxims, Leech (1983) suggested an alternative set of six maxims of his PP (Politeness Principle) having different dimensions. His PP maxims are given in (5) through (10) below. All of them refer to politeness strategies that minimize a negative aspect and maximize a positive aspect, looking at factors such as cost/benefit, (dis)praise, (dis)agreement and antipathy/sympathy. The maxims typically have an effect of minimizing negative effects for the addressee while maximizing them for the speaker, or maximizing positive effects for the addressee while minimizing them for the speaker:

(5) Tact maxim

- a. minimize cost to *other*
- b. maximize benefit to *other*

(6) Generosity maxim

- a. minimize benefit to *self*
- b. maximize cost to *self*

(7) Approbation maxim

- a. minimize dispraise of *other*
- b. maximize praise of *other*

(8) Modesty maxim

- a. minimize praise of *self*
- b. maximize dispraise of *self*

(9) Agreement maxim

- a. minimize disagreement between *self* and *other*
- b. maximize agreement between *self* and *other*

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<sup>16</sup> See Thomas (1995), Gazdar (1979) or Leech (1983) for more criticisms of Grice's maxims.

## (10) Sympathy maxim

- a. minimize antipathy between *self* and *other*
- b. maximize sympathy between *self* and *other*

(Adapted from Leech, 1983)

An utterance like *How stupid of me!* inserted in a conversation has the effect of showing humbleness, therefore, indirectly praising the addressee as being more intelligent than the speaker. By maximizing the dispraise of the speaker we indirectly maximize the praise of the hearer. These maxims are directly relevant to our study and can shed much light on some of the strategies used by students in the Omani context as reflected in the instrument. Unlike many everyday conversations which might be ruled by a very general desire to have a satisfactory and pleasant exchange, the request and apology speech acts that form the basis of this study crucially require the hearer's benevolence to be accepted. There is more at stake in assuring the benevolence of a request and apology addressee than the benevolence of many more or less casual interlocutors. Under this light, the statement after the request in (11) below issued by an Omani student violates the agreement maxim (9) since it bluntly states the disagreement with the addressee. On the other hand, the request itself can be considered to be tactful because it minimizes the cost of the request for the hearer by expressing it as an enquiry about a possible action that minimizes the imposition (and therefore the cost) on the hearer, acknowledging the need to obtain the hearer's acquiescence:

(11) *Can we have a discussion about my notice [i.e. marks]? I don't agree with it.*

The previous maxims will be implicit in much of the discussion in Chapter IV where the apology and request utterances produced by Omani and American students are analyzed. The analysis

will more often resort to concepts derived from Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) and Trosborg (1995), who provide a fine grained descriptions of the pragmatic and linguistic strategies used.

Gricean maxims are relatively culture neutral and were meant by Grice to account for an important part of the pragmatic component of meaning. Another pragmatic concept, which criss-crosses language use, is politeness. It is a particularly important component of the pragmatic competence and therefore of communicative competence. Politeness has received a fair measure of attention from researchers, with numerous studies conducted based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) influential theory of politeness, and this dissertation assumes much of this theoretical background.

Students in the Omani context encounter pragmatic problems associated to politeness that will be investigated in this study such as the overuse of the word *teacher*, equivalent to Arabic *ustaath* 'teacher', which is excessively employed to address academic staff or professors leading to unforeseen pragmatic blunders (see section 4.1.4). We will also look at other linguistic and cultural problems associated but not limited to forming direct requests, direct transfer of requests from L1, the absence of modal verbs in Arabic language such as *could*, *might*, *should* and, *would* and other problems associated with the formation of apology speech acts. It is important therefore to first devote a section to politeness and its many implications for the study of language use and pragmatics in general.

### **2.3. Politeness**

Politeness is an important factor which can turn interpersonal and perhaps intercultural communication into a satisfactory, non-threatening experience. Pragmatics, as a way of

communication, is concerned with the choice of language to be used in specific situations to convey certain meanings. Generally speaking, language and pragmatics are always associated with the different types of social communicative activities, so it is not surprising that we have been loosely talking about pragmatics and sociolinguistics aspects of intercultural communication. The core of this thesis is also a more mainstream aspect of pragmatics, namely the use of apologies and requests by Omani learners of English.

Politeness is of a paramount importance in the construction of these speech acts and for pragmatics at large. The ability to formulate appropriate polite request and apology strategies is a skill that sustains communication and increases the possibility of agreement between interlocutors. However, using these strategies is sometimes a personal choice, since the speaker can choose to avoid being rude or sometimes be intentionally rude (Green 1989). In most cases, describing an FL learner as ‘intentionally rude’ is a quick, unfair and false judgment, considering that these skills need significant time and effort to be fully acquired and successfully used even by native speakers. Address forms, for example, whether they are formal or informal could cause problems for second language learners to acquire because they are different from one language to another (Brown 2007).<sup>17</sup> In what follows, some general background of politeness and an introduction to Brown and Levinson’s theory of politeness will be offered. This discussion will lead us to talk about another important related topic, namely face threatening acts (FTA) in section 2.3.1. This is a subcomponent of politeness theory that that will supply the theoretical basis of this study. Throughout this dissertation we will explore the differences between native

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<sup>17</sup> “Japanese learners of English may express gratitude by saying “I’m sorry”, a direct transfer from *Sumimasen*, which in Japanese commonly conveys a sense of gratitude, especially to persons of higher status” (Kasper cited in Brown 2007:233).

English speakers represented by the American student group and Arab speakers represented by the Omani group in using request and apology pragmatic strategies in particular.

Takahashi and Bebee (1993) discuss the wide variation of politeness definitions and how linguists view this term, especially mentioning Brown & Levinson (1978, 1987), Ide (1989) and Lakoff (1973). Takahashi and Bebee explain that these researchers identify three main functions of politeness, beginning with Ide (1989) who sees politeness as a resource to smooth out communication; the second function is explored by Lakoff (1973), who points out that politeness seeks to reduce friction; and ‘finally’ the third function is seen in Brown & Levinson’s (1987) view of politeness as disarming the potential for aggression. Along the same line, Takahashi and Bebee (1993) emphasize Ide’s claim that politeness is a development of language usage that makes a situation less face-threatening and communication be smoother. These are indeed the key functions of successful communication in real life that a learner needs to acquire on top with other linguistic skills.

Politeness strategies are typically applied, but not limited, to direct speech communication situations. Leech (1983:131) points out that third parties other than the speaker and the hearer can also be treated politely and describes politeness as “a relationship between two participants whom we may call *self* and *other*... but speakers also show politeness to third parties, who may or may not be present in the speech situation.”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the use of

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<sup>18</sup> Pragmatic studies often employ *S* and *H* as standing for the two major participants in the communicative situations. They obviously stand for *Speaker* and *Hearer*. *A* is often also used as a synonym of *H* standing for addressee. Third parties are of course less directly relevant in pragmatics and in this study and they do not have any widely used abbreviation.

politeness strategies entails not only linguistic ability but also knowledge of social and cultural norms which affect the form and the content of speech act utterances.

Politeness utterances as clear examples of a mixture of socio cultural and pragmatic concepts can be identified in Lakoff and Ide's (2005) description of politeness. For example, they list concepts derived from the core of pragmatics, such as the idea of systematic rules or principles, speech acts (or utterances) as basic to language, speech as world-changing, indirectness as intentional and interpretable, etc. They also recognize ideas incorporated from sociolinguistics, which include the universality of the phenomena of politeness across languages and culture, the typological differences in the realizations of politeness in different cultures, the different forms and functions of politeness across social contexts and discourse genres within a culture, etc.<sup>19</sup>

As we can see, language is more than only rules of grammar and correct forms. It is a collective of skills and knowledge that constitute language knowledge, sociolinguistic knowledge, cultural knowledge, pragmatic knowledge etc. This knowledge is changeable in the same way that languages and cultures are different across the communities because it is based on acceptable language practices among groups of people in specific communities. Thus, an extended normal greeting between two Arabic speakers mentioning members of the family might be not acceptable in Western communities and regarded as breaking privacy rules.

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<sup>19</sup> One of the pioneer studies in this area is the CCSARP (*A Cross-Cultural Study of Speech Act Realization Patterns*) that covers a wide area of pragmatics and include participants from around the globe. (See Shoshana Blum-Kulka and Olshtain Elite, 1984).

Lakoff (cited in Green 1989) proposed three rules for politeness in a similar format to Grice's maxims (1975).<sup>20</sup> The first rule is '*Don't impose*'. This is particularly important in situations of asymmetric power relationships. The instrument used to elicit data in this study is constructed so that half of the situations correspond to asymmetric student-instructor interactions, so this rule would in principle apply to those contexts. However, since all the utterances in those situations come from the students in our examples of requests and apologies, this strategy is not as important in our study as it is in pragmatic studies. Green (1989) points out that not imposing means that the speaker should act upon recognizing that *A* is a human being with h/his own personal experiences and feelings not fundamentally different from those of *S*.

Lakoff's second rule is '*Offer options*', which unlike the first one also applies to situations in which the participants have equal status and power. In our instrument student-to-student exchanges would also offer the opportunity to use this strategy, especially in request acts.<sup>21</sup> The third rule is '*Encourage feeling of Camaraderie*', which according to Green would be appropriate to use between close friends or lovers. This strategy can of course be used in many other contexts since it simply creates the polite pretence of belonging to the same group or to share the same feelings, objectives, interests etc. Student-to-student situations in our instrument provide, in principle, contexts where this strategy could be used to the speaker's benefit although we have not identified any cases in the data collected. The above three rules will be investigated

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<sup>20</sup> See section 2.2 for more explanation of Grice's maxims.

<sup>21</sup> In our study, students making apologies occasionally include at the end offers to the instructor to perform some action. These are different types of offers from the ones referred to by Lakoff, since the student is not being polite to the instructor by not restricting the need to act to one specific action. Rather, students are expressing willingness to redress the harm that gave rise to the apology by offering to act in some specific way.

in this study through the focus on the use of requests and apologies in the academic field. We will examine the ability of students to choose appropriate strategies to address interlocutors in proposed different situations.

### **2.3.1. Face theory**

An important theory of politeness which will be used in analyzing the data is Brown and Levinson's (1978) and (1987) theory of face.<sup>22</sup> Since it was originally proposed, this theory became the core of many further studies and arguments targeting different speech acts in many languages. Brown and Levinson (1987) state that the factors that determine keeping face in conversation are social distance, social power and the degree of the act imposition to the shared culture of interlocutors. They define the power factor (P) as "an asymmetric social dimension of relative power, roughly in Weber's sense. That is, P (H, S) is the degree to which H can impose his own plans and his own self-evaluation (face) at the expense of S's plans and self – evaluation." (p. 77). However, they define the distance factor (D) as "a symmetric social dimension of similarity/difference within which S and H stand for the purposes of this act." (p.76). They also state that the degree of imposition (R) "is a culturally and situationally defined ranking of imposition by the degree to which they are considered to interfere with an agent's wants of self-determination or of approval (his positive and negative face wants)." (p.77). The three factors mentioned above (social power, social distance and degree of imposition) are the main factors that will structure our data analysis in chapter IV. We will look at how these factors affect the use of request and apology strategies in formal academic contexts.

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<sup>22</sup> Brown and Levinson published their revised work on the same topic in (1987) after their first publication in (1978). We will be referring to the most recent (1987) version.

Politeness theory posits two main types of face: positive face and negative face. Yule (1996) states that for a person to avoid face threatening acts, face saving acts can be used instead. These saving acts could be constructed using positive or negative politeness strategies: “Broadly speaking a person’s positive face consists of the desire to be approved of and his or her negative face the desire not to be imposed upon” (Hickey and O’Rourke, 1994:269). Examples of positive politeness strategies in requests are given in (12), adapted from Yule (1996):

(12) a. *How about I drive?*

b. *Hey mate, I’d appreciate it if you’d let me use your car.*

Examples (12 a,b) above are speech acts that are commonly used between familiar interlocutors such as friends or colleagues. In (12 a) the speaker uses ellipsis to convey in-group membership “*How about...*”. In (12 b) the speaker uses solidarity “*Hey mate*” to minimize the threat to the hearer and search for an agreement to the request. Examples of negative politeness strategies in requests can be found in (13), adapted from Yule (1996):

(13) a. *Would you lend me your car?*

b. *I’m sorry to bother you, but can I ask you to lend me your car?*

The speaker in (13a) puts his request, indirectly, in the form of a question and uses a modal auxiliary verb *could*. The speaker in (13b) starts with an apology *I’m sorry* followed by a request in the form of a question. As we mentioned earlier, these acts are different across languages and this is a rich area of study that adds a wealth of knowledge in the field of pragmatics. As a result, the two most common speech acts (requests and apologies) will be investigated in this study in another academic context (Oman). Politeness strategies used in

requests and apologies will be explored along with individual and cultural differences or similarities that would be found between foreign language learners and their counterpart native speakers in responses to similar situations.

### **2.3.2. Speech act classifications**

Speech acts are the minimal functional units of communication i.e. the types of function that different utterances can have. An utterance can be used to ask for information, to request something, to apologize, to persuade, etc. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) discuss the importance of studies that investigate the nature of variability in producing speech acts within different cultures and individuals, looking both at the learner's native language and at their target language. This is important for the present research because its main goal is to identify pragmatic deficiencies in the English production of Omani students trying to look for possible culturally bound strategies. In this context, intercultural and variability in speech act organization becomes a key issue. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (19984) name three main axes of variation: intra-cultural situation variability, cross-cultural variability and individual variability. They argue that studying these variables helps to understand their nature in a variety of situations and across different cultures. Politeness in speech acts can vary across cultures in social interaction; as Wierzbicka (1991:149) points out, "Every culture has its own repertoire of characteristic speech acts and speech genres". Cohen (2007) also deals with the fact that language and culture are interacting in pragmatic behavior. Therefore, L2 learners need to know the differences between their own culture and the target language culture in order to perform well in using the latter. It is the role of English instructors to include suitable teaching materials that tackle these cultural norms in their classes, and textbook writers should address these differences in their publications. Eventually

these teaching materials should prepare learners to understand how to use correct speech acts as effective language tools of communication in the target language. At present, the available materials only deal with these aspects of language use in a very basic way (when dealing with them at all), perpetuating the lack of awareness on the instructor's part and the continuation of flawed language learning on the part of students. For a discussion of a questionnaire designed to measure instructors' awareness of this issue in the University of Nizwa (Oman), see section 3.1.

The next section will introduce Austin's classical framework for speech acts, a review of the many classifications of speech acts that have been discussed in the literature can be found in 2.3.5. After that, the following two sections, 2.4 and 2.5 will focus the discussion on the two types of acts that this thesis is investigating in more detail, namely, requests and apologies.

### **2.3.3. Illocutionary uses of speech acts**

Previous research on speech acts was significant in the way to understand the use of pragmatics in speech. Austin (1962) did some pioneering work and divided speech acts according to their meanings into locutionary (the speech act that provides the propositional content), illocutionary (describe to what use the language is put) and perlocutionary (the effect that the speech act produces).<sup>23</sup> In what follows we give examples of the three, adapted from Austin (1962):

(14) *I talked to her* (Locutionary meaning: the propositional meaning of this utterance)

(15) *Talk to her!* (Illocutionary meaning: a command)

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<sup>23</sup> This is a fundamental and much quoted distinction that was made in Austin (1962) and therefore, worth reproducing here.

- (16) *Talk to her!* (perlocutionary meaning: actions resulting from this speech act such as somebody talking to that person or sending her a message, etc.

A speech act can be perlocutionary only if the utterance of that speech act is a result of a previous speech act, whereas a speech act is illocutionary depending on its actual function. The same word sequence may have a certain locutionary meaning, one or more illocutionary functions and may or may not have perlocutionary results. For further classification of the different components of the speech acts, we can refer to Bach and Harnish's (1979:231) where they consider *S* as the speaker, *H* as the hearer, *e* as an expression in *L* language and *C* the context of utterance. Accordingly, the main parts of a speech act would be as follows:

- (17) Speech act parts:

- a. *Utterance Act*: *S* utters *e* from *L* to *H* in *C*.
- b. *Locutionary Act*: *S* says to *H* in *C* that so-and-so.
- c. *Illocutionary Act*: *S* does such-and-such in *C*.
- d. *Perlocutionary Act*: *S* affects *H* in a certain way.

Notice that only (17a) and (17b) actually refer to verbal actions like uttering and saying, while the illocutionary act in (17c) does not refer to the words used but to the usage to which those words are put, and the perlocutionary act described in (17d) concentrates on the actions performed by *H* not by *S*.

As usual these distinctions and categorizations involve philosophical issues and raise questions and sometimes rejections among researchers. In this study our aim is not to discuss any

of these arguments, and we will be just using what has become by now the standard noncontroversial part of his theory. Therefore, we can simply say that the aim of this study is to investigate speech acts of a certain *illocutionary force*, namely, requests and apologies, as they display social dimensions of pragmatic acts. In the following section, however, we will include discussions on different classifications that have been proposed in the field of pragmatics, for reference purposes. The goal of this dissertation is not strictly theoretical and the data analyzed only shed very tangential light on these classifications. However, it may be interesting to mention discussions related to them here for reference purposes.

#### **2.3.4. A review of speech act classifications in the literature**

There is no theoretical clear-cut categorization of speech acts under one or more divisions of language aspects such as grammar, phonology, semantics or under some general theory of actions (Sadock 2004). Sadock adds that the story behind speech acts theory is that most of it is dedicated to reach the balance between convention and intention. Hence, speech act taxonomy has been under exploration by different scholars reach to an ideal list of classification, which still could be argued due to complexity and existence of speech acts across languages. Therefore, this section is limited to mention these classifications and some scholars' views and arguments whether to agree or disagree with each other's classifications.

Austin (1962), who is considered one of the first developers of speech act theory, noted five preliminary general classes of speech acts or 'illocutionary uses of language'; *Verdictives*, *Exercitives*, *Commissives*, *Behavitives*, *Expositives* and followed this classification with lists of performative verbs. This classification was under criticism from scholars such as Searle and

Leech (cited in Mey 2001) and Burkhardt (1990). The latter claims that these language expressions and performative verbs are not semantic but pragmatic classification on the base of functional, contextual and institutional criteria. Strawson (cited in Sadock 2004) also criticizes Austin in the sense that speech acts noted by Austin such as christening and marrying are not typical of how language works and these illocutionary acts are used in highly formal situations. However, despite all criticism to Austin work, almost all other later classifications have a print of his original work.

Searle later developed another general classification of speech acts into *Representatives* or *Assertives*, *Directives*, *Commissives*, *Expressives* and *Declaratives* (Mey, 2001). Searle points out that “[s]peaking a language is a form of intentional, rule governed behavior. If this is correct it should be possible to state the rules and intentions that determine the speaking of a language, and relate those rules to that language.” (Harnish, 1990:169) Cruse (2000) states in his explanation of the five acts categories noted by Searle that by classifying the performative verbs under some categories we get a clearer picture of the function of these verbs. He starts by explaining that *assertive* verbs are used when the speaker is committed to the truth of the expressed proposition and gives examples of such verbs as *state*, *suggest*, *boast*, *complain*, *report*, *claim*, *warn (that)*. He also suggests that *directive* verbs are used when a speaker has the intention of eliciting an action from a hearer with verbs such as *order*, *command*, *request*, *beg*, *beseech*, *advise*, *(to)*, *warn (to)*, *recommend*, *ask*, *ask (to)*.

*Commissive* verbs, in Cruse’s view, are used when the act commits the speaker to some future acts and he gives examples of some verbs that express this meaning such as *promise*, *vow*,

*offer, undertake, contract and threaten*. He explains the *expressive* acts as expressing the speaker's psychological attitude to a presupposed state of affairs and gives examples of such verbs as *thank, congratulate, condole, praise, blame, forgive and pardon*. Finally, he points out that the declarative speech acts are used when the speaker is expressing a change in reality of something, in other words, they change the state of being such as in marriage or work and gives examples of performative verbs as *resign, dismiss, divorce (in Islam), christen, name, open, (e.g. an exhibition), excommunicate, sentence (in court), consecrate, bid (at auction), declare (at cricket)*.

Searle's classification and further discussions on the theory of illocutionary acts triggered many scholars to agree to some extent with his classification such as Mey (2001) or disagree with him such as Crosby (1990). The latter explains his disagreement by stating that:

“Searle's theory of promising and other illocutionary acts absurdly exaggerates man's power of acting and doing when it assumes that man can devise the structures of the basic social acts, for not even divine power can devise them: but on the other hand it vastly underestimates man's power of acting and doing when it assumes that man can produce out of himself only intentions and linguistic utterances and when it fails to see the power of the person to act and to do, to generate, to modify and to abolish by means of social acts.” (Crosby 1990:86).

In other words, Crosby's criticism is based on the fact that verbal social interaction is hardly to be planned or predicted and social acts are subject to change in the process of speaking, which also entails other actions such as generate, modify and abolish. It is also worth mentioning that modification of speech might reach its climax to touch the borders of cultural variability in order to achieve a mutual understanding, especially, if interlocutors are from different cultures.

This mutual level of understanding will be out of reach if any interlocutors lack sufficient pragmatic skills.

#### **2.4. Politeness in Requests and its Strategies**

In spite of the lively discussions and disagreements on many aspects of speech act theory, some illocutionary acts like requesting and apologizing can be said to be unconventionally recognized as basic, and they define the research domain for this study. Beginning with requests, it is generally believed that forming requests in academic and social situations is a challenge for foreign language learners, especially when dealing with people from different status. In a normal form of a request it usually imposes to the hearer. Therefore, Trosborg (1995) points out that it is necessary for the request to be “plausible” and “justifiable” in order to persuade the hearer. There are other characteristics she mentioned of a request that expresses politeness such as using disarmers and flattering statements that add strength to the statement. Trosborg (ibid) also highlights that the act of request is a *pre-event* and it can be a request for non-verbal goods and services or verbal goods and services.

Sadock (2004) suggests two fundamental conditions in forming requests that should be considered by the speaker. The first condition is that the speaker desires the addressee to perform the requested action and the second condition is that the speaker believes that the hearer is able to carry out the action. He gives two examples (Sadock 2004:69) to explain these conditions as follows:

(18) *I would like you to (please) take out the garbage.*

(19) *Can you (please) take out the garbage?*

The speaker in the first request believes that the hearer is able to do the action and uses a modal verb as a courtesy such as in a request from a host to a friend who is willing to help. The second request is less formal and could be from a mother to her son. In both cases the addressee can perform the action that is being more or less indirectly requested.

A third condition is explained by Haverkate (cited in Trosborg 1995), what he calls “reasonableness precondition”, a general condition indicated by the speaker informing the addressee of the reasons for his or her to form the request, such as in the example: *Close the door please. It’s cold in here* or *Would you do the dishes? The kitchen is a total mess.* The second clause in both examples is used as an explanation, helping both the speaker’s and hearer’s face.

We can realize from the examples above that a request is a FTA (Face Threatening Act) that requires careful language forming if the speaker looks for a kind of a service from the hearer bearing in his mind the social status relationship between them. Trosborg (1995) explains this notion by noting that it is an attempt of exercising a power or direct control of the behavior of the hearer from the side of the speaker. She adds that by performing a request, the requestee’s negative face is threatened and the speaker is running the risk of losing face if the request is refused. The whole operation of a request as described by Trosborg implies a cost to the hearer and a benefit to the speaker. In this study, the speech acts of request covers the idea of “getting someone to do something” in different situations, where power and distance are two important varying factors for the request and the benefit mainly goes to the speaker; they will be, therefore, fairly prototypical request types.

Requests have often been analyzed consisting of two main parts, the head act and the peripheral modification devices that can be deployed to save face and increase the possibility of the request being granted (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989, Sifianou 1999 and Trosborg 1995). Bella (2012) identifies three main types of head acts in requests; direct, conventionally indirect and non-conventionally indirect. Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) also add that modification of the head acts is not obligatory and can be internal within the request act or external, linked to the immediate linguistic context of the head act. The following two sections identify the types of request strategies (2.4.1) and the types of modification that can be used to modulate them (2.4.2). Both sections introduce key axes for the analysis of the data in this research.

#### **2.4.1. Requests strategies**

Trosborg (1995), Brown and Levinson (1987) and Yule (1996) in their explanation of requests strategies name two ways of performing them, ‘baldly on-record’ and ‘off-record’. They state that a person can use an ‘on-record’ strategy when the act is performed without face redress or minimizing the threat to the hearer’s face, and in a direct request to a close friend or family member such as in *pass me the salt* or *don’t forget to do your bed*. On the other hand, they view an off-record strategy as that in which the act is not directly addressed to the hearer, which is in contrast with on-record form. Examples of off record strategy request would be *it is cold in here* implying the hearer to close the window or *who would like to wash the dishes?* implying to the hearer to agree to do so. For a clearer view, the following diagram suggested by Longcope (1995:71) explains the different types of politeness strategies that can be performed:

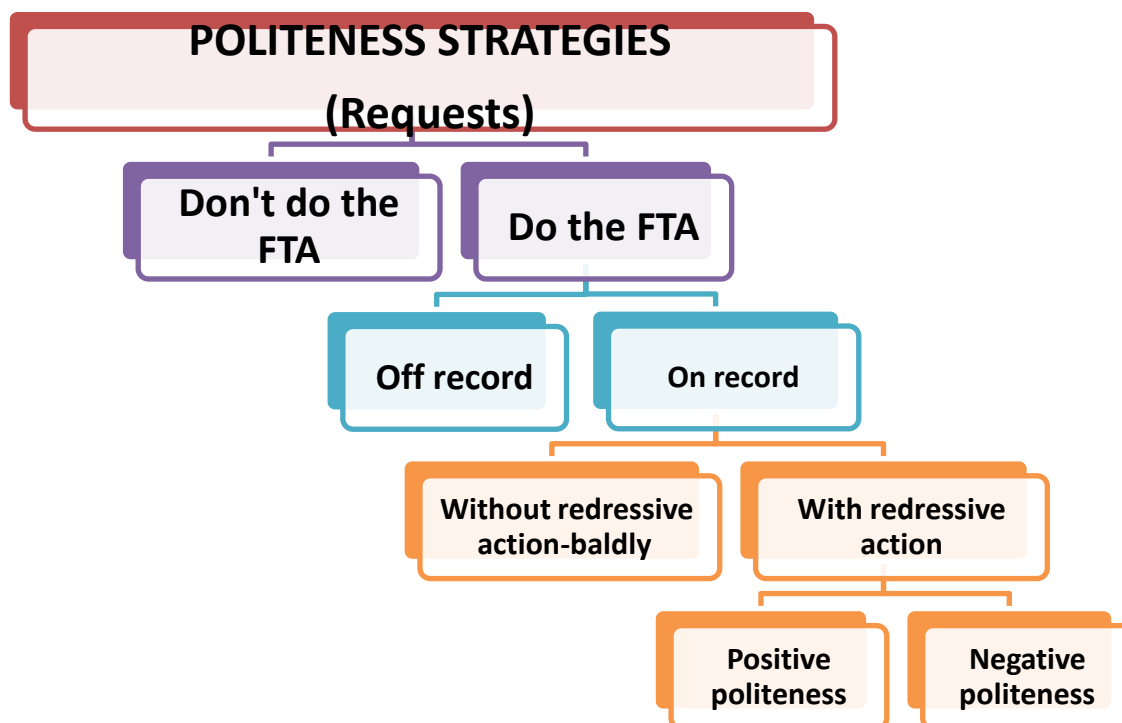


Figure 1. Politeness strategies (Longcope, 1995)

A speaker can avoid FTA not only by not doing it, as in the first option in Figure 1, but as to by resorting to a face saving act, which uses positive or negative politeness strategy (Trosborg 1995 and Yule 1996). However, the latter claims that in most English-speaking contexts a negative politeness strategy is used with modal verbs such as in the following examples (Yule 1996:64-65):

(20) *Could you lend me a pen?*

(21) *I'm sorry to bother you, but can I ask you for a pen or something?*

(22) *I know you're busy, but might I ask you if-em-if you happen to have an extra pen that I could, you know-eh-maybe borrow?*

In (20) the speaker is being conventionally indirect by using the modal *could* and minimizing the imposition by using the verb phrase *lend me*. The speaker in (21) is starting with an apology

phrase for interrupting to minimize the imposition and uses a question form with the verb *can*, and in the final example (22) the speaker starts by minimizing the imposition by employing the modal *might*. All of these modals imply caring for the hearer's face and are therefore negative politeness elements.

To simplify explaining the use of positive and negative politeness strategies in a speech act, refer to Figure 2, which spells out the different options and strategies available in a simple request instruction like asking to borrow a pen from someone else (Yule, 1996:66). Generally speaking, the more indirect the request is the more polite, and the other way round.



Figure 2. Borrowing a pen (following Brown and Levinson 1987).



### 2.4.2. Internal modification and external modification

In addition to the available types of strategies for the requester to choose from, there are other strategies called modality markers (House and Kasper 1981 cited in Trosborg 1995). The latter points out that these markers have the effect to decrease the impact of the utterance on the hearer, in which case they are *downgraders* or to increase the impact, in which case they are *upgraders*. Upgraders are beyond the scope of this study. Check Table 2 below for more information on the types of these markers with examples that illustrate their uses.

*Please* as a lexical politeness item deserves specific attention because of its multiple functions and the multiple positions in which it can occur as a politeness marker. Stubbs (1983) and Wichmann (2004) explain that its use is limited to speech acts of request and Stubbs (1983) and Sato (2008) further claim that it does not occur in other types of speech acts such as statements, promises, offers, invitations, and threats.<sup>24</sup> Wichmann (2004:4) explains that “[t]he addition of *please* is considered to be a further way of softening the force of requests, particularly if they are in the form of imperatives, in which case the force of command is reduced to that of a request.”

Trosborg (1995), in her general discussion on lexical/phrasal downgraders, points out that they are difficult to be acquired by learners because of their ‘optional’ nature of use. For Arabic learners, they have similar degree of difficulty if not more, due to the fact that the Arabic

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<sup>24</sup> Bella (2012) asserts that it is used more specifically with query preparatory requests. She also observes that Greek learners used the marker with direct constructions, quite the opposite to native speakers who use it when it is combined with query preparatory, the result is that Greek learners’ requests sounded abnormal and could lead to a communication failure. This marker may act as a key feature in the dissertation between requests and commands.

language is rich with expressions that can be equivalent of use of *please* in polite requests, such as *min fadhlik* (من فضلك), *law samaht* (لو سمحت), *lotfan* (لطفًا) and *raga'an* (رجاءً). They are fixed forms, generally conditional in requesting and mainly consist of one, two or, very few occasions three words (Shammas 2013). Consequently, as we will see, the convergence of all the Arabic alternatives into a unique English expression, easily identified as a request marker, makes of this particle a highly visible and easy to acquire.

Modality markers		
1. Syntactic downgraders		
Marker	Function	Example(s)
Questions	Often more polite than a statement	Can/will you do the cooking tonight?
Past tense /negation	Downtones the expectation to the fulfillment of the request	Could you hand me the paper, please? Can't you hand me the paper?
Tag question	Used in a fairly direct request to soften the impact.	Hand me the paper, will you? You couldn't carry this for me, could you?
Conditional clause	Used to distance the request from reality	I would like to borrow some of your books if you don't mind lending me them.
Embedding		
a. Tentative	I wonder if you would be to give me a hand.	
b. Appreciative	I hope you'll be able to give me a hand.	
c. Subjective	I think/believe/imagine...	
Long form	Emphasize the meaning expressed	I was wondering if you would give me a hand.
Modals	Used to convey tentativeness	I thought you might let me have one of your lovely books.
2. Lexical/phrasal downgraders		
Politeness marker	Needs for cooperative behavior	Hand me the

		paper, please.
Consultative device	Asking for the hearer consent	Would you mind ...
Downtoner	Downtone the impositive force	Just, simply, perhaps, possibly
Understatement	Minimize some of the desired act	Would you wait just a <i>second</i> ?
Hedge	To be intentionally vague about certain aspect of the desired act	Kind of, sort of, somehow
Hesitator	To convey certain qualms about asking	I er, erm, er
Interpersonal marker	Maintain good interpersonal relationship	You know, you see, I mean

Table 2. Syntactic downgraders and lexical/phrasal downgraders (adapted from Trosborg, 1995).

## 2.5. Politeness in Apology and its Strategies

*“Do you think sorry’s going to pay our bills”* (NS informants as cited in Trosborg, 1995).

Academic life, just like life in other spheres of human activity, is also full of instances where different forms of apologies are used by interlocutors to save the image for the speaker of a certain behavior that failed to meet the standard of the listener. They are acts that express regret of an offence done by a speaker to a hearer (Leech 1983). Searle and Katz (cited in Trosborg 1995) also note that the harm is done by an offence that requires an apology and consider it a debt that compensates for this harm. Edmond and House (cited in Trosborg 1995:374) describe the act of apology as “highly hearer-supportive and often self-demanding”. Trosborg (1995:373) also explains the use of apologies in instances “when social norms have been violated, whether the offence is real or potential.” All in all, it is a responsibility of the offender to use a suitable

apology strategy to save h/his face. Politeness in this case is less “interested” than in requests, where it can be claimed that it is used as a means to facilitate the hearer’s willingness to comply. In apologies, self-interest is more general in the sense that it is generally the case that healing relationships is beneficial to the parties of the relations. However, the burden on the speaker’s face is heavier in the case of apologies than in requests, since, even though they only seek to obtain something from the hearer (acceptance of the apology), they presuppose admission of an offence.

In an important line of reason which lies at the basis of the analysis of apology strategies in their study, Olshtain and Cohen (1983) and Cohen, Olshtain and Rosentein (1986) point out that there are five sets of strategies divided into two main basic groups, that could realize any apology act in any situation and can be used for apologizing across languages. Olshtain and Cohen (ibid) state that the first group includes explicit expressions of an apology such as *I’m sorry, excuse me, I regret* and expressions of responsibility, which reflect S’s degree of willingness to admit to fault for an action such as *It’s my fault, you are right, I didn’t mean to* etc, the second group, would include strategies such as explanation, offer to repair, and promise for forbearance, which are situation specific and semantically reflect the content of the situation. We can cite examples for these strategies expressions like *The bus arrived late* (explanation), *I’ll pay for your damage* (offer of repair) and *It won’t happen again* (promise of forbearance).

They also add that often a singly use of the above formula can form an apology but sometimes the apologizer can combine two or three strategies to create an apology of high force. An important issue discussed by the same authors is the result of the lack of linguistic

proficiency in nonnative speakers in forming apologies. In their view, nonnative speakers use different strategies to overcome lack of language proficiency or they “say too much” to fulfill their needs to apologize. In addition, they claim that there exist other influential factors that affect the formation of apologies such as age, familiarity and social status of the two interlocutors. Section 4.2 will deal with the uses these factors may (or may not) affect the performance of Omani learners of English.

Trosborg (1995) poses some questions on the borderline between apologies and other remedial acts in strategies in which, for example, the speaker refuses to take on responsibility for the offense, and or in strategies which minimize the degree of offence. It is not clear whether these should be considered apology strategies since they do not offer a direct apology. She gives examples of utterances such as *I know nothing about it*, *I can assure you* and *You know that I would never do a thing like that*. Trosborg sums up the situation with a statement from Owen (cited in Trosborg 1995:387), saying that there exists “no clear boundary between utterances which are apologies with those which are not”. In fact, it is hard to build our judgment unless we know the contexts in which they are used and the intention of the speaker, lots of which are crucial in apology forms. In addition, Bataineh and Bataineh (2008) discuss some non-apology strategies that are used when the wrongdoer avoids claiming responsibility and apologizing by using strategies such as blaming the injured party and brushing off the subject as unimportant, also to the dismissal and minimizing strategies discussed earlier.

The complexity of apologizing is reflected in the difficulty of categorizing speech acts of apology. However, they are normally characterized as such based on external factors such as

the reference of the object of regret or context (Afghari and Karminia 2012). Afghari and Karminia provide a discussion of previous categorization models by different authors that we summarize in Table 3 below:

Author	Apology strategies	Other elements
Fraser (1981)	Announcing apology, stating obligation to apologize, offering to apologize, requesting H to accept the apology, expressing regret, requesting forgiveness, acknowledging responsibility, promising forbearance, and offering redress	
Olshtain and Cohen (1983)	An illocutionary force indicating device (IFID), an expression of responsibility for the offence, an account of cause of violation, an offer of repair, and a promise of forbearance.	
Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984)	IFID performative verbs ( <i>regret, excuse, (be) sorry, forgive, pardon and apologize</i> ), and/or the use of an utterance that refers to a specified set of propositions (an explanation or account of cause, taking responsibility, making an offer of repair and promising forbearance). Each proposition can be used alone or with a selected IFID.	Intensifiers
Holmes (1989)	Explicit expression of apology (an offer of apology/IFID, an expression of regret and a request for forgiveness); an explanation or account; acknowledgment of responsibility (accepting the blame, expressing self-deficiency, recognizing H as entitled to an apology, expressing lack of intent, an offer of repair/redress); and a promise of forbearance.	
Bergman and Kasper (1993)	IFID; downgrading reducing the severity of offense, and reducing responsibility including excuse and justification, claiming ignorance and denial); upgrading or use of adverbials (i.e. intensifying the IFID); taking responsibility or admitting the offense (including self-blame, lack of intent and admission of fact); offer of repair; and verbal redress (concern for the hearer and promises of forbearance)	

Table 3. Apology strategies categorization models (adapted from Afghari and Karminia, 2012).

Apologizing is also a common practice in the Omani context, but some linguistic and cultural factors could affect the use and the form of apology speech acts, such as power and distance. In a case study of Omani students, Al-Siyabi (2012) notes some teachers' perceptions of Omani students' impoliteness is often accidental or based on isolated incidents, and probably resulting from a lack of language proficiency which makes them seem rude or abrupt partly as a consequence of lack of expertise in the construction of apologies. In the current study, our interest is going to be focused on collecting empirical data for the act of apologizing in English from non-native Omani students and compare it with American students. The situations that are given in the questionnaire are designed to trigger remedial responses to offending acts, using one or more of the above formulae. Situations are provided with a clear description of the social status between interlocutors in each situation in order to cover for P, D and R variables. As indicated, the classifications that will be used in the analysis of apologies in the present study are adapted from the work by Olshtain and Cohen (1983), Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) and Trosborg (1995). In the following sections, theoretical and contextual aspects that will prove important in the analysis in Chapter IV will be presented, in order to complete the background picture of both the approach to pragmatics taken here and the type of ESL program in which our informants' learning process takes place.

## **2.6. Pragmatic Transfer**

Alderson and Bachman (as cited in Luoma, 2004:ix) single out speaking skills as the core of language competence and add that “[o]ur personality, our self image, our knowledge of the world and our ability to reason and express our thoughts are all reflected in our spoken

performance in a foreign language.” In the context of productive skills, oral production is less monitored<sup>25</sup> than written production and it is typically in less monitored contexts where transfer takes place, since there is less time to ‘correct’ one’s linguistic output. Nonetheless, written production, especially in the beginner and intermediate stages of L2 learning is an activity where transfer from L1 is also frequent. This study focuses precisely on the written production of Omani intermediate learners of English and our data collects language examples which also include transfer errors.

Sometimes transfer is conceived of as ‘thinking in L1 and learning and performing in L2’.<sup>26</sup> Fasold and Preston’s (2007) map of the mind also contains two grammars: grammar 1, which represents L1, and grammar 2, which represents L2. In other words, the brain of the second language learner works on two types of background grammatical knowledge; the knowledge and the rules of L1 (inherited grammar) and the knowledge and the rules of L2 (acquired grammar). This view, on the other hand, is quite static, and one should not forget that, as Corder (1983) claims, transfer is a communication strategy, so that “borrowing” from L1 is a performance phenomenon feature of language use.

When the focus is transferred from language as a static “grammar” in the speaker’s brain to language as use, the emphasis of transfer also shifts from the transfer of purely grammatical elements or structures to the transfer of usage characteristics. In other words, we move to the realm of pragmatic transfer. Kasper (1992) conceives pragmatic transfer as the influence of the speaker’s pragmatic knowledge and cultures on the use and learning of

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<sup>25</sup> Using Krashen's (1982) terminology in one of the five hypotheses of his theory.

<sup>26</sup> See Olshtain (1983) performing apologies and Takahashi and Beebe (1987) and Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz (1990) performing refusals (cited in Jarvis and Pavlenko, 2010).

pragmatic information of the target language. Pragmatic knowledge can sometimes be culture bound and this is why Ellis (2008) argues that social context has a major role on the extent of language transfer. He defines the ‘classroom’ and ‘outside classroom’ settings, and tries to observe the extent to which transfer takes place in these two social contexts. He notes that in an outside-classroom setting learners pay less attention to target language forms and transfer freely from L1 to L2. One may assume that even though Ellis is talking about transfer in general, pragmatic transfer in particular is also more salient outside of a classroom situation where the language is used in non controlled real environments where pragmatic patterns of language use in L1 will probably emerge more often.

The perception of linguistic transfer changed drastically, from considering its results mere errors whose subtypes could be simply listed to considering them normal and perhaps even necessary interlanguage (Selinker 1972) effects of the different stages of SLA. This gave rise to a more positive perception of transfer as a result of the learners’ process in developing speaking skills and in general improving in second language fluency. However, as usual, these changing perception, of the role and effects of transfer were mostly based on the examination of purely grammatical transfer, leaving pragmatic transfer aside. This occurs when learners assume universalities and transferability of strategies when they are not actually present (Kasper and Schmidt 1996), and when these strategies are pragmatic in nature the result of transferring one’s own into the L2 being acquired can be potentially very damaging. Misconstructing requests or apologies might result not just in interference with communication but also interference in the interlocutors’ attitudes and image as indicated in the previous sections. One cannot forget that

many speech acts have face threatening components that may bring about important consequences for one's face.

Ellis's (2008) differentiation between 'classroom' and 'outside classroom' contexts in terms of the promotion of L1 transfer is consistent with research that indicates that classroom contexts fall under two very different types, each of which features different degrees of transfer in general and pragmatic transfer in particular. The two contexts are the student-centered classroom and the teacher-centered classroom. Each of these is characterized by different types of discourse. Kasper and Rose (1999:96) referred to some studies which investigated teacher-centred classroom discourse and observed that the discourse features in that type of context displays "a narrower range of speech acts (Long *et al.* 1976), a lack of politeness marking (Lörscher and Schulze 1988), shorter and less complex openings and closings (Kasper 1989, Lörscher 1986), monopolization of discourse organization and management by the teacher (Ellis 1990, Lörscher 1986), consequently a limited range of discourse markers (Kasper 1989) and a much reduced use of affective particles in teacher talk (Ohta 1994)." In a student-centered classroom, on the other hand, students use more types of speech acts (Long et al cited in Kasper and Rose 1999) and it is also noted that we can find less adequate conventions, mechanisms and forms in this type of discourse. This might be attributed to the less threatening environment of language use with colleagues, which maximizes the opportunities to communicate in the target language.

The above mentioned differences are taken up in a different way in our current study where two different types of communicative interactions are examined. Following up on the idea that there are differences between controlled and student oriented educational situations in terms

of the likelihood of pragmatic transfer, we proposed mixed types of formal classroom situations and outside classroom situations in the data collection tool of our current study, as well as both asymmetric student-to-teacher situations and more symmetrical student-to-student situations. Based on the above discussion, a possibility of L1-to-L2 transfer would be greater in student-centered situations (student-to-student), whether they are outside or inside classroom situations that would hold the same features mentioned earlier by Kasper and Rose (1999).

Furthermore, Franch (1998:6) identifies three factors that explain the degree of transferability, connecting it to developmental stages: linguistic proficiency, also shared by Koike (1996) and Scarcella (1993), cultural information and length of stay in the L2 community, also shared by Bardovi-Harlig & Hartfold (1993), Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1986) and Omar (1992). The first two factors are essential in our evaluation of the performance of our target students.<sup>27</sup> There are other factors that affect the learners' pragmatic perceptions and behaviors in the transfer process: the type and amount of instruction that the learner is required to perform (House and LoCastro as cited in Jarvis and Pavlenko 2010) and the overgeneralization of TL pragmatic conventions (Robinson as cited in Jarvis and Pavlenko 2010). To begin with the amount of instruction, as expected, the longer the period of instruction the smaller the amounts of L1 transfer. Reported cases of the opposite relation, like Cenoz (2002), have been explained away by Jarvis and Pavlenko (2010) as a consequence of the low proficiency level of the students considered. Thus, Cenoz's students were Spanish Basque beginner students of English. A study which showed the expected correlation between amount of instruction and incidence of

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<sup>27</sup> The last factor, also shared by Jarvis and Pavlenko (2010) study as an important factor of transferability, is beyond the scope of this study because our Omani students do not have the experience of living in an L2 community.

transfer, like Sjöholm (1995), was on the other hand based on high level learners. Proficiency level is definitely not the only variable accounting for different degrees of transfer. In particular, pragmatic transfer, although most likely diminished over long periods of instruction, seems to be harder to eradicate and will still be found in high proficiency speakers.<sup>28</sup> As for overgeneralization as a factor, transfer is based on the assumed similarities between L1 and L2.<sup>29</sup> Overgeneralization is a significant factor that influences Omani students when performing pragmatic speech acts in requests and apologies. One clear example of this overgeneralization is the use of the words *teacher* and *please* (see 4.1.4 and 2.6.1.2) in their speech acts, which will be investigated further throughout this study.

## 2.7. Pragmatics and L2 Learner's Strategies

Strategies in the area of language learning are conceived as actions that facilitate L2 learning, and one might wonder whether there are specifically pragmatic learning strategies. It is common to differentiate language strategies into language learning strategies (2.7.1) and language use strategies (2.7.2). Obviously, language use strategies will be closer to pragmatic concerns than language learning strategies, but the connection between strategies and pragmatics is often a loose and indirect one. This is probably more the result of the typical emphasis on non-

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<sup>28</sup> See the following section for example of pragmatic transfer effects conveyed through extremely proficient language.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Biskup, Eisenstein, Bodma, Jarvis, Ringbom (as cited in Jarvis and Pavlenko 2010:179). Jarvis and Pavlenko give examples, in this sense, of Finns who show a tendency to use Swedish words in learning English because of the similarities between English and Swedish, two close Germanic languages quite distant from the non-Indoeuropean Finnish. The perceived similarity between the words in the two Germanic languages is assumed to hold true more often than is really the case. Thus, in a sentence like *As a barn I was told stories every evening*, (from Ringbom 1987) the Finnish speaker assumes that the Swedish word *barn* 'child', must be similar in English.

pragmatic aspects of language learning in research than of a lack of relevance of the concept of learner's strategy for prototypical pragmatic concerns like speech acts.

This study in fact often analyzes L1 transfer in what might be called strategies in the instructions of speech acts such as requests and apologies. For instance, in a request speech act the use of *please* at the beginning of utterances, more commonly found with Omanis, could be understood as a merely linguistic strategy to mark the utterance as a request; although the utterance is a specific pragmatic speech act type, the strategy itself can be interpreted as purely linguistic. In contrast, the acknowledgment of the higher rank of the interlocutor in forming the same request speech act is more directly a pragmatic strategy since it takes into account the cultural and sociolinguistic environment in order to produce an effective and successful request.<sup>30</sup> The concept of strategy will be used in this pragmatic construal throughout this dissertation, so it is interesting to lay it out in this overview chapter, as well as the underpinnings of the concept of strategy in describing the performance of language learners. As indicated above, there are two major uses of the notion of strategy in L2 studies, strategies that learners use to enhance learning, and strategies that they use to enhance communication and these will be discussed in turn in sections 2.7.1 and 2.7.2 below.

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<sup>30</sup> This type of pragmatic strategy might be classified as sociopragmatic, following Takahashi's (1996) discussion of the possible types of pragmatic transfer. This is claimed to differ from the pragmalinguistic type of strategy which looks more at the linguistic realization of the speech act. An example of the latter could be the transfer of *ustath* 'teacher' discussed in section (4.1.5). A similar example involving a much more advanced linguistic expression, which nonetheless is not very adequate from a pragmatic point of view, is the use of formulae such *may God grant you a long life* produced by Middle Eastern learners of English and discussed in Eisenstein and Bodman (1993).

### 2.7.1. Language Learning Strategies (LLS)

Research on the use of language strategies shows that students that employ these ‘metaactions’ are more successful learners, so it is interesting to identify what these strategies are at the linguistic and pragmatic level. Radwan (2011:117) states quite categorically that “Successful language learners ... employ more effective and diverse language learning strategies than less successful learners.”<sup>31</sup> We understand from the discussion above that success in language use is associated with the acquisition of learning strategies that facilitate learning and differentiate learners’ abilities. There is a slight distinction between language learning strategies (LLS) and language use strategies (LUS) or what we might call communication strategies and this section will focus on the former.

Many researchers have come up with definitions for LLS, such as Bialystok (1983), Chamot (1987), Rubin (1987), O’Malley and Chamot (1990) and Oxford (1990), who define these strategies as those learners’ actions that facilitate and develop the learning of L2 and help to gain new information to be used in different language activities. These, Bialystok (1983) lists some of these strategies such as guessing, willing to appear foolish, having a tolerance of and empathy with the speakers and always attempting to convert passive knowledge into active productive knowledge.

Notice that under the term strategies are here included not only actions or activities but actually other aspects of competences such as attitudes and values, so the usage of the concept strategy is in fact fairly wide and perhaps even vague. All of them distinguish the successful

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<sup>31</sup> See Cohen (2007a) citing some different types of these studies targeting the use of these strategies such as in listening (Rubin 1990), speaking (Dörnyei 2007; Cohen, Weaver, & Li, 1998, Nakatani 2005), and the literacy skills of reading and writing (Macaro 2001).

language learner who is able to use these strategies to boost h/his learning experience. Language learning, however, can be understood as acquisition to use the language, so it is more interesting from the perspective of this study to identify those strategies which are put in action at the moment of language use, that is, strategies which are used for communication.

Cohen's (2008) view of LLS also underscores the more linguistic, rather than pragmatic orientation of these strategies. He conceives these strategies as actions or attitudes which enhance the identification and acquisition of linguistic materials for the first time. His cognitive and metacognitive strategies are those that regulate attitudes, motivation, and emotional reaction to the learning experience. Cohen (2007b) also mentions cognitive strategies such as identifying, distinguishing, grouping, practicing and committing materials to memory and he gives an example of how to make polite request using the modal auxiliary *could* or the use of the past progressive in *I was wondering if...* Similarly, he explains metacognitive strategies as those used in planning how to make the speech act, checking how it is going during interaction and evaluating how it went forward. The metacognitive attitudes are closer to the pragmatic strategies that this study is interested in, since they include awareness of speech acts and effectiveness language use. His cognitive strategies seem like a preliminary step of gathering the relevant linguistic *materials* that will be put to use in LUS.

### **2.7.2. Language Use Strategies (LUS).**

According to Cohen (2007a, 2007b) and Cohen (2008), LUS strategies are seen as using the material that has been learned in actual performance, when they are already accessible. Bialystok (1983) discusses LUS by focusing on the learner's interlanguage. The language

produced by the learner provides indications as to the extent to which the learner's utterances in the TL are affected by L1, the procedures used to express concepts when TL words are unknown, and the extent and the manner in which the lexicon of the TL is simplified. Here the learner shows his ability to put these strategies in action and successfully use them in communication in the target language. Of the three examples of types of strategies Bialystok mentions as being perceivable through the learners' interlanguage, it is the first one which is more directly relevant to this study. Although L1 transfer to the TL includes all sorts of linguistic features of the L1 which are subject to transfer, it is clear that along with the more often discussed syntactic, semantic and lexical transfers, pragmatic transfer also takes place and pragmatic strategies based on L1 can surface in L2 performance. Remember that Cohen (2007b), mentioned in the previous subsection, explicitly refers to speech act planning as one of "actions" that qualify as strategies for language use.

To summarize the discussion above, it seems legitimate to refer to *pragmatic strategies*, especially in connection with LUS situations. Strategies are sequenced in two progression steps on the basis of the logical assumption that learning precedes use. The first step is the acquisition of language forms in the formation of strategies that facilitate learning of the foreign language and the second step is reached when the acquired language is actually used in communicative situations, where different types of strategies help the learner meet communicative demands. A subset of these will be pragmatic strategies, many of which may be affected by factors such as the learner's L1, social context and culture. Interlanguage pragmatics is often linked to sociolinguistics in SLA research. Tarone (2007:837), for instance, states that "An important aspect of sociolinguistic SLA work examines the social contexts in which IL is used and the

cognitive processes of the learner that affect learner language variation and change, leading to acquisition.” In Bachman’s (1990) approach to the communicative competence pragmatics is understood to include sociolinguistic factors along with more typical speech act factors, so it is not strange to find much discussion of pragmatic competence directly connected to sociolinguistic competence. In this study we focus our investigation on the students’ pragmatic knowledge, examining strategies they employ in request and apology speech acts. In principle, our interest is to explore the differences in the strategies used in the production of these speech acts and the actual forms that these take, comparing native language users (Americans) as model language users and non-native language users (Omanis). The success of Omani students in the use of these strategies and in the construction of requests and apologies in different academic contexts will constitute the center of this dissertation, which explores which factors may affect their linguistic choices.

## **2.8. Variables in Interlanguage Pragmatics**

Although much depends on the individual learner’s internal attitudes towards learning a second language, input, context and culture are also important variables that influence L2 acquisition and use of the language. All these factors are embodied in the sociolinguistic approach to SLA. Tarone (2007:837) states that this approach “studies the relationship between such social contextual variables as interlocutor, topic, or task and the formal features of language or Interlanguage (IL) production.” Hence, these variables are considered extremely significant in

the study of interlanguage pragmatics and their effects on interlanguage communication are highlighted by many scholars.<sup>32</sup>

Input, context and culture summarize the major variables that result in different types of language acquisition, therefore in different types of interlanguage production. Variable linguistic input is received in varying communicative contexts by learners with different sociocultural frames. The type of linguistic input is an important variable of interlanguage pragmatics, and it could be divided into non-interactive, such as the linguistic input we receive in reception tasks such as listening and reading texts, or interactive if it can be obtained through direct interaction, as for example when participating in a conversation (Ellis, 2008). As for context, Batstone (2002) classifies it under two different categories: *external*, which can be viewed through elements such as participants, channel, topic, discourse type, and location, and *internal* context, which can be seen as the learner's orientation towards the external context. In other words, the extent to which learning can take place in any given external context is determined by how the learner relates to it and h/his ability to deal with the external elements of the setting. This approach looks at the interaction between cognitive and situational factors in an attempt to gain more insight into the process of language learning. Ellis (2008) claims that Batstone's (2002) definition of context crisscrosses with his own definition of context. The former distinguishes two types of contexts: communicative context and learning context. He views the communicative context as that in which the learner's focus is on how to form the message, whereas in a learning context the learner's effort is focused on learning the L2. In other

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<sup>32</sup> See particularly Kasper & Dahl (1991), Cohen & Olshtain (1994), Kasper & Rose (1999), Kasper (2001) and Tarone (2007).

words, in the former context the learner's attention is more on the particular message to be used in certain context. However, in the latter context, the learner's attention is directed to use h/his prior knowledge of the language without focusing on a particular setting.

In the instrument through which the data is elicited in this study, students are presented with a variety of situations with contextual variables. Obviously the context in which the data are elicited is a learning context, since the situations are merely fictional constructs in which the learners are asked to imagine themselves in. This is therefore, role playing, a learning context which purports to be communicative. However, it should be pointed out that this difference between the communicative and learning contexts is important in differentiating settings for language acquisition, while the focus of this study is not on the process of learning itself but on the features of the acquired language state and the types of pragmatic strategies that they reveal.

The third important variable in interlanguage pragmatic, is the possibly different cultural knowledge of the EFL learner and that of the speakers of the target language, which plays a significant role in the social interaction in a foreign language. An example of cultural difference playing a role in social interaction can be found in the different ways in which power, authority or respect asymmetries among interlocutors should be overtly indicated by language or not, or in the degree of presence or absence of religious expressions in a given culture.<sup>33</sup> In this sense, Richards and Sukwiat (1985) point out that a communication exchange of a foreign language learner with a native speaker is a type of cross-cultural encounter. In other words, it is a conversation that is formed around a social situation, which comprises cultural differences and

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<sup>33</sup> Expressions in Arabic such as *inshallah* 'God willing', *biawn Allah* 'with God's help' or *alhamdulillah* 'thanks God' are much more frequently inserted in Arabic discourse than in contemporary English discourse.

different speech styles between interlocutors. As a result of these differences of culture and speech styles, pragmatic problems are likely to occur and could frequently create a misunderstanding. An Arabic student requesting an exam invigilator's help with an utterance like *Please come here* is likely to have the wrong pragmatic effect even though the same formula in Arabic is perfectly adequate and appropriate as a speech act in that situation.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, since pragmatic skills are considered as one of the basic communication skills that students should acquire, cultural knowledge is also a vital element that should not be ignored and should be clearly addressed in the academic standards of higher education institutions.

In addition, it is worth to note that cultural knowledge is dynamic; it can change over time and this allows a change of the behaviors, attitudes and beliefs of individuals (Byram 1997 and Lantolf 2000). Currently, this change of behaviors, attitudes and beliefs can be noticed in the speech styles of communities and individuals as a result of the rise of easy use of social media and modern technology, which give users less local and more global opportunities for interaction and exchange of idea.<sup>35</sup> As a result, due to the influence of the cultural element in language learning and use, it is important to be aware that teaching a language should involve a particularly important component of cultural sensitivity.

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<sup>34</sup> The expression in Arabic *Law samaht, taal huna* 'Please come here' is completely polite and can be addressed to a person to whom respect is due.

<sup>35</sup> Even without taking the dramatic effect of technology in contemporary communication, we can see the dynamic nature of the cultural component in language by observing that religious expressions like *God willing, God bless you, God forbid* or *with God's help* have been quickly disappearing from most types of discourse in English in the course of the last century.

## 2.9. Cultural Knowledge

Language and culture should not be separated when it comes to teach a foreign language, since culture is a vital part of the learning experience to be provided for learners and an important element of how language is practiced among its speakers. In fact, almost all communities have certain specific linguistic norms and expressions that can be used in certain situations, and these norms and expressions normally verify each community's identity. In a broader explanation of Intercultural Communication (ICC) Aguilar (1998) points out that it deals not exclusively with the intrapersonal linguistic system, but also with communication between speakers of the same language but belonging to different cultures. Another view point of practicality in ICC is what Chen and Starosta (cited in Deardorff 2004:36) characterize as "the ability to effectively and appropriately execute communication behaviors that negotiate each other's cultural identity or identities in a culturally diverse environment". This difference in culture makes for a communicative situation to be *intercultural* whether the language used is the interlocutors' mother tongue, second language or *lingua franca*. In other words, interlocutors using English, for example, will be engaged in intercultural communication regardless of whether English is their native language or just a *lingua franca*, provided that they belong to different cultural spheres. A similar point is made by Byram (1997:22), who discusses the following intercultural communication contexts: a) between people of different languages and countries where one is a native speaker of the language used; b) between people of different languages and countries where the language used is a *lingua franca* and c) between people of the same country but different languages, one of whom is a native speaker of the language used. The three situations are meant to be general intercultural communication contexts, and it may be

interesting to consider to what extent the ESL/EFL classroom situation is an intercultural communication context. Almost by definition, the EFL/ESL classroom is obviously an intercultural communication setting, since it is inherently multilingual and, as we are saying, languages are associated usually with different cultures. Whether the teacher is a native speaker of the foreign language or a fluent speaker of the target language from the same country and native language as the students, the teacher and students engage in interlanguage communication, since inevitably cultural elements of the target language will be consciously or unconsciously taught and perhaps acquired.

Aguilar (1998) also points out that intercultural communication includes linguistic and cultural aspects, which might facilitate communication or lead to miscommunication. It is believed that both aspects of language, linguistic or cultural, are important for successful communication but probably miscommunication due to cultural difference has more effect on the hearer, as it sometimes leads to false judgment on behavior. Thus, when an Omani student requests to be given his exam results by forming an utterance like *excuse me, give me my score!*, his behavior is judged to be impolite by Western instructors even though for the student himself the presence of the politeness marker *excuse me* is sufficient to render the utterance polite. Inadequate pragmatic competence is the main source of this false judgment.<sup>36</sup> In light of the discussion above, practically the merging of cultural elements in language learning is inevitable

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<sup>36</sup> In order to be intercultural two speakers must have different cultures even though they share the same language, we may think of some of the communication problems between interlocutors of different age groups as also reflecting intercultural communication problems. For instance, the uses of *tu/usted* in Spanish change across generations. Older generation value the usage of *usted* as a display of respect, whereas younger generations value *tu* as a display of familiarity. An utterance which is meant to show closeness and familiarity may then be interpreted as a disrespectful behavior.

and can be provided through learning contexts that overtly deal with the culture of the target language or simply through more subtle teaching of culturally laden linguistic materials: teaching how to form a request, for instance, will expose the students to the pragmatic use of that speech act of the target language.

But not only contexts are intercultural: speakers can also be and become intercultural. Alred, Byram and Fleming (2003:4) argue that for a person to be intercultural he must have “the capacity to reflect on the relationships among groups and the experience of those relationships.” In other words, being intercultural depends on understanding the cultural norms of the groups/community that a person belongs to and how these cultural norms could be expressed successfully whether in speech or behavior. They also believe that the intercultural experience should be part of the reason for education, leading to intercultural competence. In other words, creating an environment where intercultural is practiced would contribute to develop the intercultural competence of a language learner. This will be a challenge for instructors, especially in EFL contexts such as the Omani one, for example, because, just as with second language exposure in general, intercultural exposure will be limited to the classroom interaction and textbook contents, with little chance to connect to the sociocultural environment.

In purely cognitive terms, Bredella (2003) provides a general description of how we become “inter-cultural”, emphasizing the need to first acknowledge our belonging to our own culture in order to better understand other cultures. By exploring how our lives are shaped around our culture, we can then realize how the lives of others are also shaped and linked in the same way to other cultures. In other words, personal communicative experiences with other people are believed to lead to a better understanding of our own culture, customs, beliefs and

attitudes if they are supported by similar knowledge of other people's culture, customs, beliefs and attitudes. In this respect, our self-awareness increases our awareness of the others and being aware of their culture also enlightens our own cultural self-knowledge. This understanding will have a positive impact on the learner's communicative competence, linguistic performance in general and pragmatics in particular.<sup>37</sup>

The cognitive aspect of ICC is often emphasized in the literature of the field. Thus, Wiseman (2011:4) identified some cognitive motivational factors which would enhance intercultural communication. According to him, we should pay attention to "the set of feelings, intentions, needs and drives associated with the anticipation of or actual engagement in intercultural communication." The latter perspective highlights the set of personal/individualistic factors that stimulate the person to be engaged in cultural interactions, which we could summarize as motivational factors. These motivational factors indeed need a context or environment as explained above, so these are intrapersonal factors which can help stimulate interpersonal cultural communications. Kim (1992) proposes a view of intercultural communication which combines cognitive and communication skills, studied independently in Wiseman (2011) and Chen and Starosta (1999), respectively. The former focuses on communication acts whereas the latter emphasizes more the set of cognitive skills. Kim considers ICC as comprising one's "adaptive capacity", related to cognitive sense-making, "affective capacity", that involves on one hand emotional and aesthetic inclination, and on the other hand motivational and attitudinal predispositions, and, finally, an "operational/behavioral

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<sup>37</sup> In addition, Byram and Feng (2004) also discuss some factors about the relationship between culture knowledge and other aspects of teaching and learning a language such as foreign culture motivation, language learning attitudes, teaching methodologies, and perceptions of other cultures.

capacity”. All the above factors are believed to contribute in the development of ICC in one way or another. All three can lead to an increase of effective ICC, and all three should, therefore, be planned into the EFL/ESL classrooms, as previously described in Byram (1997).

Very often, discussions of ICC and its role in the EFL and ESL classroom take the student as the participant whose affective, adaptive, and operational/behavioral capacities are to be developed. However, the previous cognitive and skill oriented approaches may not apply directly to the typical ESL student in a typical academic environment. Leaving motivational issues aside, it is clear that most students do not need the urge to adapt to or to make sense of the other *culture*. The student population researched in this study, Omani EFL students at the university level can be made aware of the cultural dimension of language, of their own culture and of the different factors that play a role in becoming competent in ICC, but this for most of them is a purely academic need associated to passing a subject more than a vitally felt urge to overcome intercultural communication barriers. In the Omani and perhaps also in the context of other Gulf countries, it is the foreign instructor, hired by a local institution and transported to an exotic cultural milieu, that most likely experiences communication incompetences in the classroom and outside. Even though our goal is to study the pragmatic competence of Omani students, we will often refer to the other side of the learning situation, namely, to the perception of foreign instructors teaching in that environment. The instructor is then the key agent who must be aware of ICC and pragmatic problems associated with it to integrate this type of content more realistically and more effectively into the ESL classroom.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> A context where both students and instructors are more vitally aware of the problems of intercultural communication would of course be that of ESL classrooms in an English speaking country. Here both actors in the

As a result, language instructors and curriculum designers should take into consideration “culture” as well as pragmatics when dealing with language teaching and give them the deserved attention. At a higher level in the hierarchy, stake holders and national language teaching frameworks should also include culture and pragmatic considerations in their guidelines. We will briefly discuss the national frameworks been used in the GCC (Arab Gulf Cooperation Council) in section 2.10 as examples of such guidelines being incorporated into EFL settings, as well as similar guidelines in US, UK and EU (European Union) L1 settings. Both comprise cultural differences that can make an ideal environment for intercultural communication education that leads to an increase in the awareness of intercultural pragmatics in language teaching and learning.

Before we conclude our discussion of ICC, let us look at how it is conceived as an important component of language knowledge. A comprehensive model of ICC has been investigated in the ESL literature with some variation in its components (Byram 1997, Deardorff 2004, and Imahori and Lanigan 1989, among others). Scholars studying the communicative competence have been proposing models of this aspect of language that would combine possible factors affecting the acquisition of this competence, of which the culture aspect is considered as a vital one. The model framework of communicative competence outlined by Byram’s (1997) is considered by Deardorff (2004:183) as the most widely accepted definition by administrators in US higher education institutions due to its wide applicability in identifying the students’ intercultural competence, linguistic competence, cultural identity and cultural understanding. He

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teaching learning process encounter pragmatic and more generally cultural miscommunication, students with respect to the environment (including the instructor) and instructors with respect to the foreign students.

outlines it as “knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others’ values, beliefs, and behaviors; and relativizing one’s self. Linguistic competence plays a key role”. We agree that this model seems to be covering almost all components of language and, most importantly, the cultural aspect, even though culture is not explicitly mentioned as such. Finally, Imahori and Lanigan’s (1989) model of ICC considers factors like motivation (attitudes), skills (such as respect, empathy, and interaction management), and knowledge, all expressed as interaction rules (culture-specific and culture-general), and linguistic. Byram’s and Imahori and Lanigan’s comprise the most important components of ICC that effectively cover what a learner might need to acquire in order to communicate effectively in intercultural communication situations. This indicates that ICC knowledge is important not only in language education but also as a life skill.

ICC is a life-long learning process, and an ICC framework should provide a simulation of real life situations and daily life practices where the learner would develop knowledge of oneself, skills and cultural knowledge (Weber 1997). Paige (1993) explains the complexity and challenges that teaching and developing this knowledge presents to educators, as it is psychologically intense and includes risk of embarrassment and failure. Bearing in mind the status of English as a lingua franca, interpersonal communication across cultures, as well as local use of English to express one’s own sociocultural values and beliefs, should be encouraged and developed through promoting the understanding of other cultures in an intercultural language learning context. Kasper (2001) points out that language has a double function, not only as a means of communication but also as a tool for thinking. He also adds that interaction must be regarded not just as a tool for learning L2, but also as a competence in its own right. In the above

view of ICC, there would be a significant need for an approach that strives to teach this competence and include it in the learning and teaching agenda of the GFP (General Foundation Programs) described below. These foundation programs should not only focus on the linguistic aspects of the target language when preparing students for their majors, but they should also include social and pragmatic aspects which need to be covered. The following section attempts to shed some light on the cultural and pragmatic aspects of the language in the foundation programs in the Arabian Gulf region (GCC) as examples of EFL settings; it also looks at some European and US foundation programs as examples of L1 settings. Foundation programs provide an important background to this study since the data gathered and analyzed by the tool derives from students studying English within such a foundation program.

### **2.10. Culture and Pragmatics in a General Foundation Program (GFP)**

The view of the intercultural aspect of language presented in the previous section basically claims that any learning in any context and with any content or mode of delivery involves language, culture and learning how to communicate and interact (Crichton et al. as cited in Scarino, Crichton and Woods 2007). We emphasized in the previous section that it is important for L2 learners to acquire ICC in order to be able to interact with people from other cultures, and to understand their way of life, attitudes and behaviors. These interaction skills, as we believe, could be developed through intensive language programs by integrating them with other traditional skills such as the reading or speaking skills.

One of the main objectives of intensive language programs in any institution, as we educators understand them, is to enable learners to successfully exchange information and

communicate effectively in the target language. This certainly is the main objective at the University of Nizwa Foundation Institute Language program, the learning environment of the students whose data are analyzed in this study. Interaction in the FL begins with the very first contacts of the students with Foundation Institute personnel. Language program administrators are the first people that these language learners get to interact with, and some of them are foreign instructors performing also some administrative tasks and with little or no knowledge of Arabic.<sup>39</sup> Faculty and staff in these programs, in many cases, misjudge the language of L2 students interacting with them and have problems understanding their message or their point of view (Christison & Stoller 1997); in fact incidents sometimes arise, where a cultural norm of the target language has been violated.

There are two possible outcomes for intercultural communication situations, as proposed in Storti's (1990) model (cited Christison and Stoller 1997). The latter believe that this model is important for students and university personnel in order to understand each others' behaviors and attitudes in ESL contexts. We believe that the types of situations described in this model could also occur in EFL contexts when two interlocutors from different cultures use the target language, as is the case in student-instructor interactions. Figure 3 below represents different possible stages in interactions, beginning with the first stage describing normal expectations not met in an intercultural communication situation, and leading to very different outcomes depending on two types of likely reactions to those situations:

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<sup>39</sup> Some of these are Level Coordinators, Assessment Coordinators, Curriculum Coordinators ...etc. Many students are required to take a placement test in order to determine their proficiency level, and this makes it necessary for them to interact with the Assessment coordinator. Many such interaction situations with foreign personnel can take place in a complex program of this type.

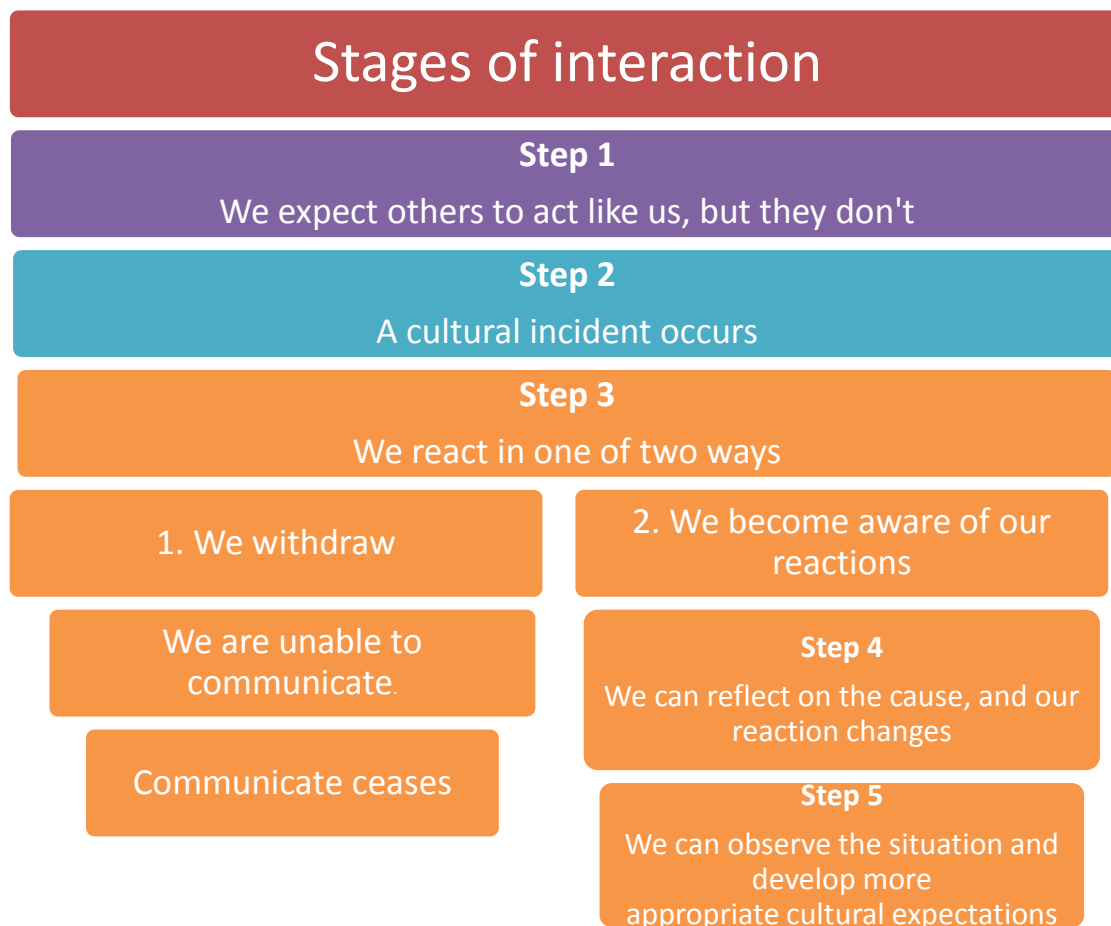


Figure 3. Adaptation of Storti's (1990) five-stage model of intercultural communication (cited in Christison & Stoller 1997:148).

The model above describes the progression of a conversation after an intercultural incident takes place. It points out that people react differently and the success and continuation of intercultural communication depends on the ability of the interlocutors to understand cultural norms of the language. If they fail to do so, the conversation will end and they will face difficulty. What we are more interested in this study through our investigation is to understand the sources behind these intercultural incidents and the reaction of the interlocutors to them. One of the two reactions envisaged in this table is the one that language teaching programs in general

and foundation program in particular should seek to promote, one that leads to an increase of self awareness and awareness of the others and which will help avoid future incidents. In the following lines we will describe what a foundation language program perhaps should include in terms of cultural and pragmatic aspects of language.

### **2.10.1. ICC in the Omani academic context**

In the context of Omani universities, foundation programs are devised to provide students with a pre-university basic learning in skills which are considered fundamental (hence the label ‘foundation’) in their undergraduate education, such as language skills, mathematic skills and digital skills.<sup>40</sup> We can take the University of Nizwa as a typical example of Omani universities in order to examine to what extent ICC is part of the agenda of the linguistic component of a foundation program. The language program in the University of Nizwa foundation scheme requires students to take a minimum of two language levels with an exit TOEFL score over 400, except for students majoring in Arabic, English or French (see Appendix F for sample of TOEFL test and Appendix G for the conversion chart of TOEFL test with other similar international tests).<sup>41</sup> Different levels have different competence indicators and learning outcomes for the different language skills. The framework describes the knowledge, skills and

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<sup>40</sup> These are intensive programs to which students are devoted full time for one or two years, depending on their entrance level in those subjects. Foundation programs are mandatory although not credited, so in a way they substitute for university entrance exams, which do not exist in Oman.

<sup>41</sup> The requirement to reach a certain level as measured by internationally recognized test such as the TOEFL or IELTS is in fact, only found at Nizwa University for the former and the German University for the latter test at the time of writing this study. Other Omani universities express language exit requirements in terms of internally defined levels. The usage of internationally recognized language accreditation is justified as a way to enhance the internationalization prospects of the students, whose level is then directly comparable and recognizable in case they go for further studies outside of Oman.

applications of L2 that should be reached and also describes the approaches to assessment that should be used to evaluate the level of acquisition (see Appendix H). Unfortunately, ICC or relevant aspects of culture and pragmatics are normally not included among the skills to be explicitly acquired and evaluated in the foundation program at the University of Nizwa, and this is also the situation in other Omani universities. Sociopragmatic skills and competences are not clearly stated in the objectives of these programs probably because these skills are considered less important compared to the more traditional skills such as Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing, Grammar and Vocabulary. Instructors have at best only a very partial awareness of pragmatic skills and little experience to teach them.

Instructors may also shy away from using ICC sensitive materials because the canonical textbooks used for EFL teaching in the area do not highlight in any way ICC contents or skills. The textbook most widely used in the whole Gulf area is Oxford University Press *Headway*, where the ICC component is virtually non-existent. This might result not only from a lack of awareness or interest in ICC but also from purely economic considerations, since a “culturally neutral” text or at least a text that exclusively reflects British or American culture, or, at best, Western culture, has a far bigger market than textbooks which target different cultural areas and have therefore to be adjusted accordingly. The interest of culturally sensitive globalization may conflict with the economic interests of globalization understood as a mere expansion of market and consumers. ICC sensitivity calls for localized products tuned to the specificities of the cultures that engage in communication.

In this context, the University of Nizwa is also typical in the drive to create materials localized in that sense. It is not only that local users do not see their culture reflected at all in the

typical commercially produced international textbooks, but also the fact that there exist contents which are inappropriate in their cultural context. For instance, instructors in Oman are often faced with culturally inappropriate topics such as dating, drinking and night life topics. There is nothing such as a culturally neutral textbook since cultural values which usually even go unnoticed by textbooks writers that have always been imbued in them also permeates a textbook. As a response to this, the University of Nizwa has launched a project to produce its own English language teaching materials that are culturally adjusted to the Omani society and meet national OAAA (Oman Academic Accreditation Authority) and international teaching standards (see appendix M for the core value, goals and strategic objectives for writing the in-house materials in the UoN FI). This is of course only one step in the direction of teaching contextually appropriate language but there are still many levels of language use that still remain to be incorporated into these textbooks to and to be considered appropriate in terms of teaching the pragmatics of language. Still, the common international English language textbooks loom large and provide the unconscious model on which many local new materials are based. These commercial textbooks are organized around the traditional skills mentioned above and do not consider pragmatics, let alone propose activities to develop pragmatic skills. The result is still the lack of visibility of pragmatics in the teaching of English as a second language.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> An exception in this context is UoN (University of Nizwa), which launched four years ago a promising project to produce in-house materials based on the Omani context and culture, which are meant to fill the gap in this area of L2 learning, at least in the Gulf region. The textbooks will be designed for Level 1, Level 2, Level 3 and Level 4 students in the Foundation Institute of UoN. The Level 1 package containing the Teacher's Book, Student's Book and Work Book has already been published and registered with an ISBN (International Standard Book Number).

### **2.10.2. The Cultural element in the foundation/intensive English programs**

The Omani EFL context represented in the GFPs (General Foundation Programs) is an example of EFL contexts that not only encompass foundation programs offered by local educational institutions but also include other programs offered by colleges or universities affiliated with international institutions. The notion of the importance of ICC in the learning cycle of English as a foreign language needs to be clearly addressed and emphasized in the learning standards of Oman OAAA (Oman Academic Accreditation Authority) and similar organisms in GCCC (Gulf Cooperation Council Countries), as we emphasized in the previous section. However, at present, as we will see, this concern is not clearly enough indicated in the standards of the quality assurance frameworks of some Gulf States. These standards basically outline the learning outcomes of GFPs in all academic institutions that wish their programs to be recognized and accredited, especially at the national level.

In addition, these standards need to be compatible with the standards of the programs in the mother institutions, in case any university program in the Gulf States is affiliated with another program abroad. However, the standards of branch universities are still required to be revised as necessary to accommodate them to the regulations and cultures of host countries in the Gulf region. Notice that in the context of the Gulf countries, where English as the language of university education does not correspond with the language of social communication, the quality accreditation of foundation English language programs is an important task undertaken by the accreditation agencies in the region.

As mentioned, these quality assurance agencies detail all the aspects of the process of teaching and evaluating English. In English speaking countries, on the other hand, the language

of instruction coincides with the language of the majority of the students, and applicants whose L1 is not English must show proof of language skills through standard tests like TOEFL and IELTS. Foreign students then need not go through intensive English instruction. There are intensive programs but they are more limited than the mandatory foundation language programs in the Gulf. This means that it is difficult to find an exact equivalent to foundation programs within English speaking countries, so we will have to look for the role of ICC in English language teaching in the standard language knowledge test mentioned above. However, a more promising line of comparison is that between foundation programs and L2 language teaching programs in Europe, which possesses a Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. This has been used in Europe since 2001 as a unified system to validate language learning and, therefore, provides us with a good instrument to determine the extent to which ICC considerations have been incorporated into it.

The CEFR (2001) assumes that in the process to become language users by becoming *plurilingual*, language learners also develop *interculturality*. It asserts that linguistic and cultural knowledge of one language transforms the other and contributes to intercultural awareness, skills and *know-how*. In the view of the CEFR, cultural awareness is crucial to bridge the gap between interlocutors in terms of differences such as values and beliefs, politeness conventions, and social expectations. Intercultural skills and *know-how* skills are outlined in (CEFR: 104-105) as follows: a) the ability to bring the culture of origin and the foreign culture into relation with each other; b) cultural sensitivity and the ability to identify and use a variety of strategies for contact with those from other cultures; c) the capacity to fulfill the role of cultural intermediary between

one's own culture and the foreign culture and to deal effectively with intercultural misunderstanding and conflict situations and d) the ability to overcome stereotyped relationships. The above skills are already discussed and described as essential components of ICC language learners (see section 2.9).

In terms of the communicative competence, the CEFR identifies three components: linguistic competences, sociolinguistic competences and pragmatic competences. The pragmatic competence is conceived as including discourse competence, the functional competence and the design competence, the last of which is only discussed in a very cursory way. The discourse competence is explained as the ability to produce coherent stretches of language, looking at factors like information packaging, text coherence and cohesion, logical ordering, style and register, rhetorical effectiveness, etc.<sup>43</sup> The CEFR provides illustrative competence scales for flexibility to circumstances, turn taking, thematic development and coherence and cohesion (CEFR: 123-124). The functional competence is concerned with the production of spoken and written texts that are adequate for the specific functional goal for which they are produced in communication. Included under this competence are *microfunctions* (imparting and seeking factual information, expressing and finding attitudes, communication repair, etc.), *macrofunctions* includes description, narration, instructions, argumentations, persuasion etc.

The CEFR is meant as a reference document and it strives to incorporate into the discussion of language learning, teaching and evaluation all aspects that play a role in linguistic performance. As shown in the previous paragraphs, the pragmatic component receives a treatment on a par with other components of linguistic competence and it is one of the few

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<sup>43</sup> The CEFR also makes reference to Grice's cooperative maxim as necessary for a discourse competent discourse.

official documents where pragmatics is taken into account. Of course this is a reference document specifying in great detail all of the different components of language learning and teaching. Actual teaching programs cannot realistically incorporate all the different aspects and scales that would be required to fully implement this vision. But the reference value of the document remains and its function is precisely to increase awareness of the multiple aspects that go into the complex processes of language teaching and evaluation.

We can gain some insight into the role assigned to pragmatics in western quality assurance statements by referring to the QAA (The British Qualification Assurance Agency) document that describes learning outcomes or benchmark statements for university language programs. These are not again fully comparable with the statements in the frameworks issued by some Gulf countries as program standards for foundation programs, to which we will turn below. The QAA (2007) document for *Language and Related Studies* is meant to provide bench mark statements and standards for university programs devoted to language studies. This is different from foundation programs preparing students for studies in any field using English as a language of instruction. However, they provide us with a good view of what a quality assurance agency considers language to be, since a major component of this language document is precisely the language itself. Moreover, language studies in the British context refer to L2s for British students, that is, for languages other than English which, like English itself for Gulf students, is not the learners' native language. QAA (2007:7) overtly claims that productive language skills require "knowledge of the grammatical, discursal and pragmatic conventions that govern language use, and of the societal factors which make language use effective." The document also

stresses the role of intercultural awareness as required for effective intercultural communication and therefore as an important component of language competence.

It might be enlightening to contrast the prominent place assigned to pragmatic and cultural knowledge in the previous documents from European institutions with the actual role this knowledge is assigned to in standard language tests. Evaluation is in fact an area in which we can see the actual role that pragmatics is granted in actual life. As mentioned before, universities in English speaking countries typically require proof of English proficiency through standard tests like TOEFL, IELTS, TOIES, Cambridge exams etc. Since language level tests rather than intensive English programs are the major means to ensure language proficiency of incoming (foreign) students, it might be good to look at them to compare with the quality standards for foundation English language programs in Gulf countries.<sup>44</sup> It is important to stress that the above mentioned tests are exactly that, evaluation devices and not teaching programs with learning outcomes. However, we can indirectly check the relevance attached to a specific aspect of language competence by checking to what extent it is being tested (see Appendix I for TOEFL benchmark with FI UoN IELP). And in this respect it is quite clear that pragmatics receives little or no attention in such testing devices. They are restricted to the traditional linguistic components and skills of language, such as morphology, vocabulary, and in general, the four skills.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> A requirement of TOEFL is likely for US universities and a requirement of IELTS is for UK universities, however, these days both tests scores are accepted for admission in many universities around the world including US and UK. In Oman UoN, for example, both scores are accepted with a minimum of 450-500 in TOEFL and 5.0 in IELTS (See appendix G) for conversion chart of the two tests and other language equivalent test).

<sup>45</sup> See appendix (F) for a model TOEFL test offered in the official web page of the TOEFL organization ETS, retrieved on 2<sup>nd</sup> of October, 2014 from:  
[https://www.ets.org/toefl/pbt/prepare/sample\\_questions/listening\\_comprehension\\_practice\\_section1](https://www.ets.org/toefl/pbt/prepare/sample_questions/listening_comprehension_practice_section1).

Let us now turn to a consideration of the frameworks statements for Foundation Programs issued by quality assurance agencies or higher education ministries in some Gulf States. We will look at the Omani, Saudi, Emirati, and Qatari cases in turn. As we will see, pragmatics *per se* is not mentioned and culture is only discussed in passing in some of the documents, a good reflection of the small role assigned to these components of language in the language teaching culture in this area.

The OAAA (Oman Academic Accreditation Authority) standards document for General Foundation Programs (GFPs) was adopted in the academic year 2009/2010. It only includes some statements dealing with communicative aspects of language use. For instance it emphasizes the students' ability to communicate and discuss relevant topics as one of the important objectives of GFPs. In the descriptions of listening and speaking abilities, it is pointed out that learners need to acquire skills to be able to follow task instructions, listen to conversations, identify register and relate with interlocutors. It is clear that implicitly there is a concern for the communicative aspects of language mentioned above, although pragmatics or culture is not explicitly mentioned. However, even though the cultural element of language is not clearly worded, a certain awareness of its importance in these types of communicative contextual tasks could be inferred. It proposes that the Omani learners engage in real conversation in the target language (English) with their interlocutors, and in the foundation program context, the latter are their foreign instructors. The cultural underpinnings of this particular choice of communicative

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The contrast with the view of language competence sponsored by the CEFR document helps us relativize the validity of single scale tests like TOEFL. It is unrealistic to narrow down the many dimensions of competence laid down in the CEFR to a single point of position in a 120 point scale in (iBT), 990 point scale in (TOEIC), 677 point in (TOEFL) paper, 9 point scale in (IELTS) etc.

skills might be connected with a perceived passive attitude in terms of classroom participation by Omani students when compared with Western students. Kim and Markus (2002:432 ) claim that “...college and universities with large numbers of East Asian and East Asian American students are concerned that although many of these students earn very high grades, they do not participate in the academic community. The problem, in the eyes of some faculty and administrators, is that East Asian students often do not talk in class and this is a pressing concern because students “need to express themselves” to become independent thinkers.” In an Omani and perhaps more generally in an Arabic cultural context, respect relationships between teachers and students entail that the latter receive the knowledge imparted by the teacher in a duly respectful way without interacting or “interrupting” with the knowledge transfer process. The skills that are important in this cultural context are then receptive more than productive, and it is the perceived deficiency in productive skills that may have prompted the QAAA to emphasize the need to work on conversation skills.

Turning now to the KSA (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) there are no branches of foreign higher education institutions established there, but foreign faculty is quite prominent, particularly native speakers hired to teach English in different higher educational institutions in KSA. This means that similar communication mismatches due to pragmatic/cultural misunderstandings will likely occur as they do in similar contexts in the region. This may have lead educational officials to incorporate ICC concerns in their frameworks. However, the role of communication in general and pragmatics/culture in particular deserves little attention. In the national Saudi Framework for Post Secondary Education (2006), one of the learning outcomes recommends that Saudi students should possess the ability to communicate in the target language and “to communicate

effectively in oral and written form and interpersonal skills and responsibility. These skills are among general capabilities that all students should develop”. As we can see, there is no use of words such as “culture” or related terms in the above statement although to some extent the conception of language as communication has gained ground. However, the lack of explicit reference to culture would send a message to educators that this element of language is not counted on a par with other traditional language skills.

The situation is not very different in the UAE (United Arab Emirates) higher education context. In a declaration similar to the Saudi framework, the Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA) framework standard for academic institutions (CAA, 2011) proposes that institutions should be required to ensure that undergraduate students can demonstrate competence in oral and written communication in the language of instruction. This can be considered a bare minimum for ICC awareness. Culture does get mentioned, however, by the Qatari Higher Education Institute of the Supreme Educational Council (2011), whose main standards require educational institutions to provide opportunities for students to further develop their language (language of instruction) and opportunities for students to have more awareness and understanding of other cultures.<sup>46</sup> The reference to Qatari culture and values, however, is stated as a general guideline for all programs without making any specific reference to the role of culture in language programs.

As we see above, the development of language and communication skills is a common standard in frameworks of all four Gulf States mentioned above, despite wording differences.

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<sup>46</sup> The wording is as follows: "Each program shall be consistent with the needs of human development and the labor market in Qatar and all activities and courses provided shall take into account the values and culture of the Qatari society"(2011:9).

Culture as a factor is clearly acknowledged in the Qatari framework, if applied in general to education. Having said so, the remaining countries in the Gulf region (Bahrain and Kuwait) have not yet developed their own national framework, which might have a negative impact on their students and the quality of their programs in higher educational institutions.

The absence of the cultural dimension and the gap in ICC guidelines and pragmatic concerns observed in the frameworks for foundation programs in the Gulf countries is not the result of a conscious decision to sidestep these dimensions of language learning. Rather, it is the normal consequence of a lack of awareness of stake holders and of the educational community about the importance of these components of language behavior and therefore, of language learning and teaching. It comes, therefore, as no surprise that this study finds recurring communication problems in the production of Omani learners of English, which can be related to poor input in these neglected areas. As indicated in Chapter V, pragmatics can (and should) be taught,<sup>47</sup> and in fact, this does not require drastic changes in the organization of the language curriculum provided the instructors are made aware of the sociopragmatic dimension. Probably, the development of this aspect of language teaching would give a distinct shape to what many instructors, perhaps vaguely and without a clear conceptual framework already feel to be needed. However, as Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002:4) point out, this does not necessarily require from the instructors to use a “new method of teaching but rather an extension of what most teachers recognize as important without reading lots of theory.” The same with pragmatic skills, which, along with social and cultural elements, can be integrated with the more traditional

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<sup>47</sup> See also Kasper (1997) for a discussion of teachability of pragmatics in a foreign language classroom environment.

knowledge of skills and grammar of the language. The CEFR provides a good reference model for a conceptual framework of language teaching which incorporates these dimensions. In this sense, Byram, Gribkova and Starkey state that this approach would turn learners to be “intercultural speakers”, successful communicators and develop a more satisfactory human relationship with people from different languages and cultures.

The need for intercultural competence is becoming even more acutely felt within the academic environment in the Gulf countries as a result of the spread in the region of local branches of prestigious foreign universities, i.e. offshore campuses. These branches could become powerful internationalization environments if only simply as a result of the fact that they constitute academic outposts maintaining the vision, values, quality assurance, procedures and learning atmosphere of the home institutions. Moreover, many of these institutions offer programs for their own instructors and staff in order to ensure a smooth integration into their teaching environment. In the following section we will discuss this educational trend in more detail.

### **2.10.3. Offshore learning**

Offshore learning is a new trend in higher education across the globe due to the increasing demands of knowledge that higher education institutions can provide for their learners without students bothering to travel and study in their main campuses. Offshore learning is particularly prominent in some emerging economic powers. Currently most offshore campuses are located in the Gulf area, especially in Emirates and Qatar, although South East Asian countries like Malaysia or Singapore are also frequent hosts for these universities, especially

those originating in Australia or Britain. The US is currently the source of most of offshore branches along with Australia and Britain. But more countries are following this trend of establishing offshore campuses such as Canada, China,<sup>48</sup> and even Egypt (Al-Azhar University at Doha), India and, interestingly, Malaysia<sup>49</sup> itself. On top of the traditional movement of foreign students to US and European university programs, we observe a movement of these programs to the foreign countries themselves.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, despite the emergence of new teaching and learning technologies that facilitates transfer and exchange of information, the human factor as a basic source of information is essential, and therefore, online programs have not substituted for the traditional student-teacher direct contact in a classroom environment. The result is that online learning has not eliminated the need for movements of students to US or EU universities nor the movement of western universities to the (Middle) East.<sup>51</sup> Leaving economic and geopolitical considerations aside, the development of offshore learning is presented as the fruit of international cooperation between stake holders, governments, universities or institutions to

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<sup>48</sup> Currently two, both of them in Malaysia, Shanghai Jiao Tong, University Sarawak Campus and Xiamen University of Malaysia.

<sup>49</sup> Limkokwing University has branches in Bali, China, Cambodia, South Africa and London.

<sup>50</sup> "Between 1980 and 1995, the numbers of overseas students world-wide grew from 0.93 to 1.5 million, an increase of 60.8%. ... students from two regions accounted for most of this increase – Asia (52%) and Europe (42%). Elsewhere, the numbers of foreign students have either declined (Africa) or stagnated at low enrolment levels (North and South America)." (Bennell, 1998: 5).

<sup>51</sup> "There are nearly 60 transnational institutions and programmes in the Middle East today and of these, over 80% are located in the Persian Gulf with staggering concentrations in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. Nearly half these institutions are affiliated with universities in the United States, while the rest are spread across several other mostly Western and Asian nations." Hanauer and Phan (2011). Examples of these institutions that are promoted in the Arab Gulf countries: German University (GUtech) in Oman, American university in Sharjah (UAE), New York University in Abu Dhabi (UAE), American University in Kuwait and Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts and Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar.

provide international presence and quality higher education through branch campuses in the host country.

Many offshore universities take the so called CLIL (Content Language Integrated Learning) approach to language teaching according to Darn (2006). CLIL entails the development of language skills through content courses rather than or in addition to *ad hoc* language courses. The CLIL approach is claimed to have cultural and linguistic advantages, such as “to build intercultural knowledge & understanding by developing intercultural communication skills whilst learning about other countries/regions and/or minority groups”; it is also claimed that it “not only improves overall target language competence, but also raises awareness of both mother tongue and target language while encouraging learners to develop plurilingual interests and attitudes.” (Darn 2006). Therefore, due to the increasingly wide existence of offshore Western institutions that teach and use L2 in L1 contexts and also due to the broad differences between the Arabic and English speaking cultures in the Gulf States, an awareness of the cultural element of language is inevitable and presents challenges to educators to balance their presentation of knowledge of both cultures. Both national and offshore universities in the Gulf countries can, therefore, be viewed as intercultural melting pots.

The medium of instruction in these private institutions, as well as in many other public higher institutions across the Arab Gulf States, is English, and as indicated above CLIL is an important strategy for English language learning.<sup>52</sup> However, in addition, most of these

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<sup>52</sup> Arabic is only used as language of instruction for subjects as Law, Religious Studies, Journalism, Arabic Studies and a few other programs. There is no strong public perception that Arabic should be generalized in higher education. Part of the explanation is historical since at the time when universities were established in the region local professors were scarce. If we look at the history of universities in Oman, for instance, the first, and for many years

institutions also have English foundation programs or bridging courses that prepare freshmen for their major studies, where content courses are mostly delivered in L2 (English) by foreign native or semi-native instructors. Therefore, in many cases their knowledge and experience of their host countries' culture and of their students is very limited, if not non-existing. This is specially the case of newly appointed foreign faculty. In this context, it is not surprising that induction programs have also been implemented for teachers. At the University of Nizwa Foundation Institute (Oman), for example, new instructors are engaged through an orientation program that explains all necessary information on Omani students and Omani culture before being given their teaching tasks. It is within this type of Foundation Program that this study has been developed so that the specific speech acts examined here are to correspond to situations that can conceivably be found in these programs. Similarly, the results of this study are expected to be relevant and useful for language instructors, especially in Foundation Programs, who want to provide their students with interculturally important pragmatic competences. In the following section, I will place this study in the context of similar studies in the Gulf States.

### **2.11. Recent Studies on Requests and Apologies in the Arab Gulf States**

Although previous research in the Arabic Gulf Countries investigating the area of pragmatics is not plentiful, it agrees on the suggestion that students encounter problems in forming request and apology speech acts. The following is a cursory review of these studies,

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the only, university was established in 1986 (University of Sultan Qaboos). We have to wait until 2004 to see a private university emerge (University of Nizwa).

supporting the claims that insufficient pragmatic competence can affect inter-cultural communication.

Al-Mahrooqi (2012) conducted an exploratory study targeting Omani university level students to investigate the state of communication skills in Oman from a student perspective. The study focused on how communicative skills are taught in Oman. A total of 58 students (27 females and 31 males) participated. The results show that communication skills are mostly not directly addressed in teaching in Oman public schools and at Sultan Qaboos University (the only public university in Oman). The study points out that it is important to introduce communication skills into the school and university curriculum in Oman. The study shed light on the little importance attached to this skill, that was not tackled well in the classrooms or in the textbooks. Therefore, we assume that our current study is a continuation of this investigation in the Omani context and aims to give a broader idea of some specific communication problems that Omani students encounter.

In another study by Tawalbeh and Al-Uqaily (2012), conducted in Saudi Arabia, these researchers compared the use of requests in a cross-cultural comparison study between 30 undergraduate Saudis and Americans students. The study used a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) given to students that includes twelve contextualized situations. The results showed that the level of directness differed cross-culturally between the two groups. The study showed that directness in the Saudi Arabic context was the expected behavior in a solidarity politeness system (-Power, -Distance), which questions the assumptions in Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) and Leech (1983) that the more indirect an utterance is, the more polite it is. Although the

study showed only some differences between the two groups of participants in using request acts and questioned some theories of pragmatics, it confirmed the claims that these pragmatic differences occur in our GCC academic communities and should be considered by language instructors who teach these students, as well as by curriculum writers who design English course books targeting these students.

In the same line of research but with different groups of graduate Saudi students, compared now with British graduate students, Umar (2004) found that there are some similarities and differences between the two groups in the use of request strategies. One of these similarities is that the two groups adopt similar strategies when addressing their requests to equals or people in higher positions. On the other hand, the study reveals a difference between the two groups when requests are addressed to people in lower positions. In this context, Saudi students showed a marked tendency towards using more direct request strategies in performing their requests than the British students. Another difference found in this study is that British students use more semantic and syntactic modifiers than their Arabic counterparts and hence their requests sound more polite and tactful. The study provides yet further evidence that even advanced Arab students can have difficulties when using pragmatic politeness acts.<sup>53</sup>

There is also a clear lack of studies that investigate apologies in this part of the Arab world, a knowledge gap whose study could add towards the literature of pragmatics from another perspective. The reason behind giving these examples above is to show that there is a need for more studies to explore the use of this important element of language learning in this part of the

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<sup>53</sup> Similar results can be found in several other studies which focuses on students outside of the GCC (see Ghawi 1993, Al-Momani 2009 and Najeeb, Maros and Nor 2012)

world. It is also important to notice that the findings of the current study, which contrasts two groups of Omanis and Americans, can give a clearer view on whether Omani students share similar specific pragmatic problems with other Gulf states students or the rest of the Arab world while learning English EFL/ESL.

### **2.12. Pragmatics Teachability**

Despite the fact that pragmatic knowledge is vital for language learners, ESL/EFL teachers are hesitant to teach pragmatics as they do with the four main linguistic skills taught in L2 contexts. The need and importance to teach pragmatics is discussed in many studies such as in Eslami-Rasekh (2005) and Rose & Kasper (2001) (as cited in Jianda 2006). The latter also cited some studies that show that teachability is actually possible with pragmatics, such as Bardovi-Harlig (2001), Fukuya, Reeve, Gisi, & Christianson (1998), Golato (2003), Matsuda (1999) and Rose & Kasper (2001). Matsuda (1999) discusses two main reasons for this attitude among language teachers. Usually, the teachers' first claim is that it is a difficult and sensitive skill because of the "face threat" that it entails and the second reason for this attitude is the lack of materials available for teachers. Jianda (2006) attributes this attitude also to the lack of valid methods of testing interlanguage pragmatic knowledge and calls for more studies of pragmatics assessment.

### **CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY AND SCORING APPROACH**

The general goals of this study are to investigate the pragmatic skills and ICC usage in the Omani context. This is a broad goal that will be narrowed down to two key speech acts, namely, requests and apologies. In this chapter first the leading research questions will be presented in section 3.1. The original motivation to undertake a study into these questions comes from my own experience as a language teacher and from confronting problems associated with the misuse by English language students of speech act strategies, usually as a result of lack of awareness and transfer from L1 competence to L2. A first step into this area was to move at least from personal observation to intersubjectivity, in an attempt to establish to what extent other language instructors were confronted with similar problems, to what extent they were aware of the lack of pragmatic competence as a source for some of these problems and to what extent pragmatic competences are being integrated into their teaching. Section 3.2 presents this preliminary questionnaire with a largely qualitative interpretation of the results. The research questions that lead this study can be investigated by obtaining data from Omani students and comparing it with data from native speakers of English in a parallel context, so a research tool was prepared to that effect which will be described in 3.3. First, section 3.3.1 gives extensive details about the questionnaire that was used to elicit the data from both student groups. Section 3.3.2 provides the relevant information about the informants to whom the questionnaire was administered. Finally, in section 3.3.3 the scoring system is presented. This is important since although the thrust of this study is qualitative, quantitative measures are taken from the

questionnaire results. After all these preliminary issues are discussed in this chapter, Chapter IV will present the data resulting from this research tool along with an interpretation of the results.

### **3.1. Research Questions**

Communication failure among EFL students does not exclusively arise from purely linguistic deficiencies, where *linguistic* is interpreted in a narrow construal referring most directly to the form of this communication code. It also arises from inadequacies of otherwise linguistically well-formed production used inappropriately. If pragmatics deals with the appropriate use of linguistic forms in a specific communicative environment, these communication failures can then be attributed to pragmatic failures. Some types of speech acts are particularly important for a language learner to master because they have a significant impact on both the speaker's and hearer's face (see Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987, Locher and Watts 2005 and Eelen 2011). Moreover, many speech act strategies obey culture bound rules and constraints, which are hardly ever spelled out or taught to students and which are, therefore, likely candidates for transfer related communication failures. This study concentrates on two such speech acts, requests and apologies. Both of them involve important stakes for the speaker's and hearer's face. In a request, the speaker must acknowledge h/his needs and limitations and the speaker is requested to act prompted by another person. In an apology, the hearer takes the role of the wronged participant and the speaker's face is also possibly at risk in having to accept liability for some action and perhaps even offer redress. In both cases the stakes are high and it is in the interest of the speaker to negotiate requests and apologies with competence if those communicative situations are going to be carried out successfully. At the same time, culture-

internal rules affect these speech acts to ensure adequacy for both parties, but most often these rules are just acquired without overt teaching, along with the linguistic code that conveys them and just like the grammatical code they are used without conscious knowledge. It is therefore, no wonder that the strategies and rules of the game for these speech acts are not often taught to L2 learners perhaps under the hidden assumption that these pragmatic mechanisms are language independent and need not be taught. On the other hand, the experience of many language instructors, and certainly the experience of EFL instructors in Oman is that too often some generally not well understood pragmatic mechanism must be “going wrong” if many communications failures that are not linguistic in the narrow sense mentioned above are to be understood. This study sets out to find out what the possible sources of communication failures might be accountable for the production of inappropriate request and apology among Omani EFL students. The questions leading this research are then whether and to what extent requests and apologies pragmatic strategies used by Omani EFL students in English differ from the pragmatic strategies used by native speakers of English, in particular students of roughly the same age. “Differences in use” can refer to a wide variety of differentiating factors, so an appropriate answer to these questions will have to consider internal components and structure of verbal behavior of these two types and frequency of use. The leading hypotheses that the research tool is designed to check (see Ch. I) posit that there are fundamentally frequency differences between the two groups, and these hypotheses were confirmed only to some extent by the data. More fine-grained differences were also found in the analysis of the data elicited by the questionnaire.

The possible existence of culture-bound factors affecting the use and perhaps the structure of request and apology speech acts is a recurrent concern in much of the ICC research

into pragmatics and consequently also in this dissertation. This research question, though pervasive, is not directly tested as a hypothesis in this dissertation, since the primary concern is to provide factually valid descriptions of the use of requests and apologies by the two groups. Consequently, the research tool is designed to elicit data strictly on frequency and structure. Explanations for observed differences will be offered throughout Ch. IV and many of these proposed explanations hinge on cultural specificities of Omani culture as opposed to American culture. However, this thesis does not set out to verify or falsify cultural explanations but has the more humble goal of providing an accurate description of the facts on which more explanatory accounts can be grounded.

This thesis, although an academic research, also aspires to provide some justification for the incorporation of a pragmatic dimension to actual EFL teaching in Oman, so that over and beyond the hard facts and interpretations contained in it, the practical question of teachability is also an underlining concern that will be briefly discussed in the conclusion.

The previous questions and concerns on the teaching and acquisition of pragmatic competences originally are, if not a general concern of EFL instructors in Oman and elsewhere, at least not uncommon. In order to ascertain the extent of awareness, concern and incorporation of pragmatic competences among Omani EFL teachers, a preliminary survey was carried out at the Foundation Institute of the University of Nizwa as described in the following section.

### 3.2. Exploratory Questionnaire: Pragmatics in an EFL Setting in Oman

An exploratory questionnaire (cf. Appendix L) was given to English instructors working in the context of this study (Foundation Institute, UoN) to explore the perceived importance and awareness of pragmatic competences among Omani instructors and their perception of the level of acquisition of pragmatic competences by their students. The survey also aimed at exploring the possibility of teaching these skills and competences in a formal academic environment. Thirteen EFL/ESL instructors from different levels participated in the survey. As reflected in answers to the survey, we can conclude that many of these instructors noted that they were aware of the problems their students had and described many situations when their students failed to construct polite responses using English as a target language. Instructors varied in their responses but a correlation did emerge such that the more experience with the Arabic culture and Omani context, the more understanding that what was impolite for other instructors was actually a result of language proficiency or cultural differences between the students' mother tongue and the target language. As expected, most of the instructors had been made aware in their professional activity of linguistic communication failures that were due to a disruption or inadequacies of pragmatic factors. This can be observed in some of their responses given in (23-27) below. In the first response, the instructor is pointing out at the simplifying identification of a key word like *please* as the sole linguistic element required to construct a polite speech act, be it a request or an apology:

(23) *Sometimes it feels as if they think if they use the word 'please', their remark is polite.*<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Cf. section 4.1.3.1.3 for more details on the effect of the overuse of *please* in Omani students' speech acts.

The testimony in (24) brings up a type of pragmatic inadequacy that will be dealt with more extensively in Chapter IV, i.e., the overuse of vocative *Teacher!* It also provides a good example of a lack of pragmatic competence on the part of the student who is constructing what should be a well formed request by bluntly voicing his or her wish:

(24) *I have been in Oman for a long time now but I remember how I felt in the beginning when students shouted TEACHER loudly to get attention and I felt they were impolite saying I want marks, teacher.*<sup>55</sup>

The following remark is a particularly perceptive statement where, if we understand behavior as verbal behavior, we can see the difference between semantic meaning and pragmatic adequacy:

(25) *They cannot match the meaning of the words with their behavior.*

This remark may also be similar in content to what is being conveyed in (23) and (24), that the speech act that the student is trying to construct (a request to obtain grades in (24)) is actually being worded as almost a direct expression of wish bordering on an expression of command, or that the speech act is simply marked with some key identifying syntactic downgrader expression (*please* in (23), see 4.1.3.2) but it lacks any further element that would raise its politeness level.

Misunderstandings and misinterpretations are a standard feature of a second language classroom, and more so of low level second language learners interacting with a native speaker in an unconstrained non-academic situation outside the classroom. Obviously, part of these communication breaks is simply due to low proficiency levels, but the following instructor's

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<sup>55</sup> Cf. section 4.1.4 for a discussion of the teacher concept in the Omani context.

remark also points at pragmatic or socio cultural factors intervening. The instructor in (26), refers to sense of humor and sarcasm. The former is well known to be largely culture bound not, just because of the necessary references that may be missing for an outsider to understand the humor but in the way humor is expressed. On the other hand, sarcasm is a derogatory use of humor addressed against someone or something and is, therefore, a mode of interaction which may be highly constrained in different cultures in terms of context of utterance and possible addressees.

(26) *Sometimes, when I use a sense of humor to get a meaning across it is misinterpreted. I try to avoid sarcasm as much as possible.*<sup>56</sup>

To finish up with this cursory review of pragmatic problems observed by English language instructors in the Omani context, it may be useful to bring out a remark like (27) which also points at semantic problems:

(27) *Misunderstandings are a daily occurrence. It usually helps to put things into different words.*

While the point is well taken, it may be useful also to remember that, although semantic paraphrasing is of course almost unlimited in its possibilities and only bound by the students' lexical and linguistic resources, misunderstandings that derive from pragmatic failures in

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<sup>56</sup> Despite categorizing Arabic language as a high-context culture (Cf. section 4.1.4.1.1 for high-context languages), misunderstanding perhaps occurs due to low language proficiency of the students.

forming requests or apologies are more difficult to patch up by paraphrasing as a result of need to follow their highly constrained structures.<sup>57</sup>

The instructors' responses with regards to incorporation of pragmatics into L2 teaching and learning were varied, but the majority expressed the need to teach pragmatic skills to Omani learners at the university level, due to the lacunae in these skills students are observed to have at the end of their high school education. However, many instructors also pointed at the problem of scarcity of teaching materials that are culturally appropriate and which, if available, could improve those skills. Instructors repeatedly expressed their willingness to use any available pragmatics materials. At the same time, they voiced the need for guidance, support and instruction in this area, since most of them acknowledged the lack of the necessary training. The feedback received from the instructors was a driving force behind this study. As indicated in (1.2), the general area of pragmatics teaching and learning is narrowed down to hypotheses that pertain to the frequency and, to a lesser extent, the structure and cultural underpinnings of two key speech acts, namely requests and apologies. The following section will discuss the characteristics of the main research instrument that was used to validate these hypotheses.

### **3.3. The Discourse Completion Test as a Research Instrument**

The research tool used to elicit data in this dissertation is a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) as in Bachman and Palmer (1996). As a result of the complexity in language interaction, they claim that language ability should be measured within an interactional framework of

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<sup>57</sup> See chapter IV for a discussion of the internal elements that constitute pragmatically well formed requests and apologies.

language use. Based on their view of pragmatic knowledge, a test tool should investigate the ability of language users “to relate words, utterances, and texts to concepts, communicative goals and features of the language use setting.” (p.78). Therefore, one of such language tools that could comply with all the requirements set by these notions is the DCT (Discourse Completion Test which often take the shape of questionnaires). According to Dörnyei (2007:103) DCTs are “structured language elicitation instruments and, as such, they sample the respondent’s competence in performing certain tasks, which makes them similar to language tests.” This is appropriate since the informants for this study are language learners and this DCT format would then be familiar to them from their classroom experience. Cohen (1996) adds that a DCT also allows researchers to focus on specific speech act realizations and to control the social and situational variables, which is precisely what this study aims to do, to concentrate on requests in apologies and to control their range of variation given power and distance variables. Beebe and Cummings (1985) also state that discourse completion questionnaires are highly effective means of data collection because they entail many benefits, such as collecting large amount of data in a short time and classifying semantic formulae, especially those used in natural speech. Therefore, they allow the researcher to study stereotypical expressions, understand the requirements for appropriate social responses, identify the social and psychological factors that affect speech performance and determine the basic shape of speech acts such as refusals, apologies, partings, etc., in the minds of the speakers of a language. Consequently, the type of tool used in this research can be claimed to be generally perceived as one of the best tools that could be used in an investigation of pragmatic aspects of EFL learner production.

Obviously, a DCT task is an academic type of activity and even if this is positive in eliciting data by proposing tasks familiar to students, it clearly gathers data that cannot be called “natural”, in the sense that it is not spontaneously produced in a real communicative context. This is indeed a pervasive problem in second language learner production studies within academic contexts. Even if we do want to constrain ourselves to the study of EFL in an academic setting (say in a foundation program) as opposed to other possible natural learning environments, more spontaneous data may have been elicited by studying email messages or student-instructor interaction in the foreign language recorded (illegally) without the students’ awareness. In any event, this type of elicitation of the data introduces some qualification into their nature which must be acknowledged. However, DCT- like data elicitation is fairly standard in second language learning studies and in fact, it makes possible comparison of the result of this research with the results of much of the current literature in the field. Beebe and Cummings (1985) also point out some weaknesses of the data gathered by using a DCT, first and foremost describing data which do not adequately represent the authentic wording of real interaction. As with other elicitation methods, even though the context guides the students in the desired direction, informants might not use the expected formulas or strategies, or these might even be entirely left out. More importantly, as Beebe and Cummings (1985) indicate, the length of the produced text and conversational turns used to complete the task might be affected, missing the depth of emotions present in spontaneous speech in real situations. This in turn affects the tone, content, and form of linguistic performance in the data, and the number of repetitions and elaborations that might occur in natural speech will also be missing from the data elicited by the DCT.

The above mentioned criticism of DCT elicitation methodology is also supported, to some extent, by scholars such as Wolfson (1980), Kasper and Dahl (1991), Cohen (1996) and Nelson et. al (2002). In response to these shortcomings pointed out by researchers, and still wanting to preserve the many positive aspects of this methodology, it is possible to avoid some of these weaknesses by paying closer attention to the structuring of the content of the data tool and giving clear instructions to the informants. This approach is supported by Kwon (cited in Nurani 2009) who perceives DCT as a controlled elicitation method that allows participants to easily vary the responses and identify which strategy is appropriate to use in each context. Kwon also notes that DCT helps researchers to understand the construction of speech acts in authentic conversations.

As a result, it seems that, all in all, the advantages gained from using this type of tool weigh more than the weaknesses. Besides, in the absence of completely spontaneous speech data, the data elicited by DCT tools fit quite well the aims of this study. Accordingly, the data collection instrument used in this study is constructed in the form of a DCT that elicits requests and apologies from Omani-non native EFL students as well as from American students of roughly the same age group and who are native speakers of English. In the following subsection the questionnaire that was used in this study following the DCT methodology will be presented first in 3.3.1, turning in 3.3.2 to a description of the informants to whom it was administered and devoting finally section 3.3.3 to a discussion of the important issue of the scoring keys used to quantify the results elicited by means of the questionnaire.

### 3.3.1. The questionnaire

The questionnaire included twenty academic situations (see appendices J for Omanis and K for Americans) requiring requests and apologies, and containing different interlocutor role relationships in terms of relative social power, social distance between interlocutors and degree of imposition, the major variables that Brown and Levinson (1987) consider. The choice of academic situations follows from the acceptance of the initial lack of naturalness of the elicited data: there is no pretense of spontaneity so that the types of situation that are more natural for the EFL students are employed. The three variables are checked by situational modulations which highlight or downplay the degree of power (P), distance (D) and rating of imposition (R) (see Chapter IV for more specific details on these concepts and their reflection in different situations). Thus, relative social power relates to social hierarchy, social distance varies with familiarity and degree of rating of imposition is dependent of the type of situation, rather than the type of participant. Power and distance, thus, are participant dependent while degree of imposition is socially dependent. For instance, the first apology situation #1 (in using the convention to designate situations that will be used in the following chapter), requires a student to apologize for not handing in a homework. In terms of power, the instructor is hierarchically superior to the student; in terms of distance the relationship is not as close as between two students but it is at the same time smaller than with respect to an unknown participant that is at the same time superior in terms of power; in terms of imposition, the situation is severe and imposing for the student.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> The degree of imposition just like social power and social distance are not as perceived by the participants in the situations in part they are not real situations. They are analyzed as perceived by the researcher constructing the

Situations are described in writing and a space is provided for students to supply speech acts under the texts, as shown in (28) below. These situations are in a mixed order in terms of relative social power, social distance and degree of imposition so the students will not immediately identify any one factor as the object of the study. The test is to be conducted in one lecture session of up to 50 minutes. In order to avoid affecting the students' responses, the word "request" or "apology" was not mentioned throughout the texts in the DCT, although situations related to the same speech act were presented together. A clear instruction is given at the beginning of the questionnaire so that informants would understand exactly what to do.<sup>59</sup>

Test items were revised and edited for language accuracy, estimated time for completion and suitability for the targeted students before piloting. After piloting, test items were refined and some were eliminated due to complexity as observed in the preliminary run. For instance, some of the situations were initially expressed in texts which turned out to be too long for the students' normal attention span, and some lexical items which presented difficulties for some students were also weeded out. The texts are followed by a brief open prompt like *What would you say?* The gender of the requester is not specified in the text, so this variable was not built into the questionnaire.

Situations (1), (3), (6), (8), (9) and (10) in the request part of the questionnaire elicit requests from students to their instructors, with a low social power force of the former with respect to the latter, high social distance and high rank of degree of imposition. On the other

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situation. In some other studies they are analyzed as perceived by informants such as Al-Momani (2009) and Mirzaei, Roohani and Esmaeili (2012).

<sup>59</sup> The prompts are also included in appendices J and K. No time deadline was mentioned in the instructions in order to avoid pressure and the prompt also generally ask them to write what they would say in each of the situations.

hand, situations (2), (4), (5) and (7) elicit requests from students to an equal power and distance and lower degree of imposition such as to a friend or a classmate. In the same line of classification based on the three factors of FTA approaches (P (Power), D (Distance) and R (Rating of imposition)), in the apology part of the questionnaire, situations (1), (4), (6), (7) and (9) required students to form apologies considering lower power, high distance and high degree of imposition to an instructor. On the other hand, in the situations (2), (3), (5), (8) and (10), the prompts require forming apologies involving equal power and distance and low degree of imposition between classmates or friends.

The following examples illustrate all the preceding characteristics with a single sample of the test items: (28a) is the first situation constructed to elicit a request, and (28b) the first situation constructed to elicit an apology:

(28) a. You work in a lab and one day you missed your class because you were busy in the lab.

You need to borrow a classmate's notes for your missed class. What do you say to him?

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b. You are supposed to submit a report to your professor for one of your classes in the university tomorrow. The next day in class you discovered that you have forgotten to bring your report. What do you say to him?

---

The questionnaires are administered to a group of Omani students and a group of American students. The answers that we expect native speakers of English to provide for (a) and (b) will show us the preferences that they have for realizing a request and an apology in situations among familiar equals (P) and in formal situations (D). In addition to comparing the

answers of the non-native Omani students and native American students under the same circumstances, the test was expected to show whether there are any deficits in use for any strategy or whether different strategies are used to realize the acts under the same social constraints across Omani users of EFL and native speakers of English.

### 3.3.2. Informants

Two groups of students were chosen to participate in the questionnaire; a group of EFL undergraduate university level Omani students and a group of native undergraduate university level American students. The students were mixed in terms of gender and they were aged 20-25 in both groups. The group of Omani students was gathered from the University of Nizwa (Oman) and it was composed of a mixture of first year college students, who had passed the foundation program stage of their studies at Nizwa but were still taking the English courses in the College of Arts and Science and of level three of the final level at the foundation program.<sup>60</sup> The group includes 14 male students and 33 female students.<sup>61</sup> At the time of the study the Omani informants were placed in an intermediate level course, equivalent to the CEFR B1 level.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> As explained in Ch. II section (10.2), foundation programs in Gulf Countries provide pre-college basic university education to enable students to bridge the gap between secondary education and higher education. English language skills correspond to the four areas deemed to be fundamental for successful academic performance. The University of Nizwa has a 450 TOEFL score pre-requisite for admission to different colleges and students close but not reaching that score are to take extra English classes until they reach the required level while they are allowed to take a limited number of college credits. The first group of Omani students, referred to as “first year college students” in the text, falls into this type of transitional stage between foundation program and College proper.

<sup>61</sup> There are two main reasons why the male/female proportion is not balanced. First, the study does not look at the gender variable as a factor operating on the pragmatic strategies studied here. This is in no way to be interpreted as a claim that this factor may or may not be significant: it just clarifies that this was not studied and is therefore a limitation of this research (see section 5.2). The second the reason is that the actual male/female ratio at University of Nizwa is close 20/80 and it was actually difficult to find male informants initially exclusively from the

The American group of students, all native speakers of English, was formed by 25 informants. They were enrolled in different American universities and were all studying Arabic as a foreign language in their home institutions. The students were participating in Arabic language programs in the Nizwa area, some of them at the University of Nizwa and some of them, the majority, at Sultan Qaboos College for Teaching Arabic to Non-Native Speakers in Manah. Students in this program usually stay in Oman for a period of one or two months. The male/female ratio for these students is 10/15, more balanced than in the first group, although, as mentioned in footnote 60, the gender composition of the groups is not relevant for this study. Most of the informants from this group were undergraduates, but there were also some students at the graduate level. The undergraduate or graduate level of their studies was not considered as relevant a factor affecting their first language production of apologies and requests as the age and educational background, so that both types of informants were employed.<sup>63</sup>

### 3.4. Scoring Keys

Even though this is a study which falls under the qualitative research type, there are some quantitative data that form the basis of the discussion in Chapter IV, so it is important to

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Foundation Institute. This explains first why the Omani group includes FI foundation program and transitional students and also why the gender variable, which would have required balanced informant ratios, was not pursued. In this context, the 14/33 Omani proportion was considered appropriate for the variables examined and the goals of the study.

<sup>62</sup> The two Omani sub-groups belong to the same intermediate or B1 level of English ranging from TOEFL 380 to 450, see footnote 59. While 450 is the TOEFL requirement for entry to majors, the exit requirement set by the University of Nizwa is a 500 score.

<sup>63</sup> Obviously, this factor was more relevant for the Omani students whose English was acquired through university instruction.

lay out in detail the scoring system that was used to extract the figures which were eventually statistically analyzed. Scoring oral or written texts in non-trivial ways is possible only provided there is a full-fledged analysis of the constituent parts of, in this case, requests and apologies, so the following two sub-sections present the theoretical analyses underlying the scoring criteria used in this study.

### 3.4.1. Request scoring

The tabulation and scoring that was followed in this study is based on Trosborg (1995), itself theoretically grounded on the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Pattern project (CCSARP) led by Blum-Kulka (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1984, Blum Kulka, House and Kasper 1989). This project is described in Cohen (1996:387) as “one of the most comprehensive empirical studies of speech act behavior, for both its breadth and its depth”. The CCSARP project developed within this framework a coding system, and due to its ground-breaking importance in the study of these speech acts, it was decided to take it as the baseline for the coding scheme to evaluate students’ responses of requests, using Trosborg’s (1995) more systematic categorization. The table below shows the type of grade used to tabulate the results.

Non conventionally indirect (Hint)	Conventionally indirect					
	Prep. Conditions		Perm.	Sugg.	Wishes	Desire Needs
	Ability	Will.				
Direct						
Obligation	Performative		Imperatives	Elliptical		
	Hedged	Unhedged				

Table 4. Scoring criteria grid for Requests.

The students' responses to the situations presented to them in the questionnaire were analyzed according to these coding categories, so that one score point was assigned to a strategy when it was found in the responses. Table (4) classifies requests initially from the point of view of the directness of the strategy type used by students: non-conventionally indirect requests (Hint), conventionally indirect requests and direct requests. Conventionally indirect requests were classified according to whether they were built expressing the request as ability (*could you, can you ...etc.*), willingness (*will you, would you ...*), permission (*may I, can I, could I ...*), suggestion (*I suggest you...*), wishes (*I wish you ...*), desires/needs (*I would love to, I need to...*). In the same way, any examples of direct requests using the strategies under that heading in Table 4 where scored in the relevant column. Because the P, D and R variables varied from situation to situation, the occurrences of the previously described strategies were tabulated relative to each situation so that any effect of these variables on the usage of one or other strategy would be easily identified. On top of this scoring chart based on the directness of the requests, a second chart slightly simplified from Trosborg's work (see Table 3 in Chapter II) was also used to code specific elements that modified internally or externally the requests. The scoring grade for these modifiers made it possible to tally any instances found in the responses of internal modifiers such as syntactic downgraders (questions as opposed to declarative statements, use of past tenses like *could* or *might* as opposed to *can* or *may...*etc) or lexical/phrasal downgraders (politeness markers like *please* or consultative device like *would you mind*).<sup>64</sup> External modifiers were tallied for occurrence of grownders (*I didn't get a copy-can I get one?! I missed class*

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<sup>64</sup> Upgraders, a category explored in Trosborg (1995) were not found in the elicited data, so the category was eliminated from the chart.

*yesterday, could you tell me what I missed?*), sweeteners (*Hmmm, this is an interesting idea, let's think about a few ideas/you are really good at explaining grammar, could we meet and go over some of it?*), disarmers (*would you able to help me study for the test? In understand if you're way too busy with other stuff, though*) and cost minimizers (*sorry, I couldn't hear you/I'm sorry, I was too sick to attend the class yesterday*).<sup>65</sup>

### 3.4.2. Apology scoring

According to Cohen (1996), the speech act of apologizing may include a fairly wide range of strategies or semantic formulas which construct or help construct as appropriate, and perhaps effective apology. Minimally, a single word like *sorry* already constitutes an apology, but it is to the interest of the speaker to elaborate the speech further in order to obtain the addressee's acceptance of the apology. This minimal formula can be extended by using verbal expressions like *be sorry, excuse me for, forgive me/my*, or sometimes with a performative usage of the verb *apologize* itself (*I apologize (for...)*). More articulate apologies may resort to the use of indirect explanations or accounts of the situation in which the offense was committed as a way to dilute the blame (*it was beyond my control, I was stressed, etc.*) or may include an acknowledgment of responsibility as in expressions like *it was my fault, I take full responsibility*, etc. Further components that contribute to the construction of a more elaborate type of apology include strategies like offering repair of the damage for which the speaker is apologizing, or uttering promises of non-recurrence of the offence. The last type of semantic formula that may complement an apology and which was found in the questionnaire is constituted by expressions

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<sup>65</sup> The categorization offered in Trosborg's chart is almost exhaustive and some of the devices identified were not found in the data; therefore, they were eliminated from the simplified chart presented here.

of denial. These are close to explanations but differ from them in that, rather than diminishing the degree of responsibility actually claim no such responsibility can be attributed to the speaker that utters the apology. Thus, an expression like *I had a car accident* as part of an apology for arriving late to class (situation D in the apology questionnaire, see appendices J and K) is an explanation, while an expression like *sorry, it was him who was talking* contains a denial of responsibility along with a direct expression of apology.

Accordingly, the scoring criteria for students' responses to the apology situations in the questionnaire will have to count the occurrences of any of these strategies or semantic formulae. The scoring tabulation grid is based on Table 3 in Chapter II and the semantic formulas discussed in Olshtain and Cohen (1983), and its headers are shown in the following table:

S 1: (-P/+D)					
Expression of apology	Explanation or account of situation	Acknowledgment of responsibility	Offer	Forbearance	Denial

Table 5. Scoring criteria grid for Apologies.

These grids were completed for each situation and each student. For each situation the P and D values were indicated on the top of the grid. For instance, situation #1, exemplified in the previous table was classified as involving distance between speaker and addressee and lack of power of the former over the latter, since this was a situation where a student has to apologize to an instructor for not handing in the homework. Within the table for each situation, each student response was examined for occurrence of any of the six formulae or apology components in the table.

Not all of the student answers to the situations could be tallied in the tables since some of the responses had to be disregarded, so the analysis will be based exclusively on valid responses that elicit data from the informants in cases where the prompt was fully understood. Therefore, invalid responses were not counted when they did not constitute examples of a request or an apology. Since the prompts were also English texts, the native speaker group did not present significant comprehension problems and produced valid responses that were adequate requests and apologies for the proposed situations. Most invalid responses were given by Omani students, and they ranged from leaving prompts with no answer to not forming a request or apology or even to producing incomprehensible and malformed responses. Examples classified under this category for request prompts are *what are questions that we need to discuss with teacher?* or *I need some help* in response to situation #2 (asking a colleague to join a meeting with an instructor). Examples under the same category for apology are *nothing for me. I will not do that thing* in response to situation #6 (talking during a presentation) and *oups* as a response for situation #5 (breaking a picture). These scores then provided the raw material for the quantitative data at the basis of Chapter IV.



## CHAPTER IV: DATA ANALYSIS

This chapter is devoted to the analysis of the data obtained through the DCT elicitation tool described in Chapter III. Results for requests and apologies will be discussed in turn. Section 4.1 is devoted to requests. In 4.1.1, the characteristics of the request prompt situations are explained with special attention to the P(ower) and D(istance) variables. In this section tallies and percentages for indirect strategies of requests in the different types of situations will be given. Different types of specific request forming strategies employed by students are tackled in section 4.1.2. Modification devices in requests are described in the following two sections, dedicated to internal modifications (section 4.1.3) and external modifications (section 4.1.4). Section 4.1.5 gives a brief excursus to deal with one recurrent feature of the Omani student interlanguage, which surfaces in both requests and apologies while not being exclusively confined to them and which is salient enough in the elicited data to deserve an *ad hoc* subsection. Some concluding remarks and a summary of the findings on requests are given in section 4.1.6. Apologies are described in section 4.2. As in the case of requests, in a first section (4.2.1), situations proposed to students as prompts for apologies are described in detail, turning in the next subsection (4.2.2) to the contrastive analysis of the types of strategies employed by Omani and American students. This section is divided into subsections, where section 4.2.2.1 is devoted to apology IFIDs (Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices), section 4.2.2.2 to intensification strategies, section 4.2.2.3 to acknowledgment of responsibility, section 4.2.2.4 to explanation of account of situations, section 4.2.2.5 to offer of repair, section 4.2.2.6 to promises of

forbearance, and finally section 4.2.2.7 to denial strategies. The findings of the analysis of apologies are summarized in the concluding remarks given in section 4.2.3.

#### **4.1. Requests**

Requests along with commands are described as “among the most face-threatening speech acts because they challenge the hearer’s autonomy by assuming her readiness to comply” (Pinker 2007: 440). We will be analyzing formal requests, i.e. those that are uttered in formal situations. Ide (cited in Fukushima and Iwata 1985:9) defines formal requests as “fixed formal expressions which change according to the status and familiarity of the speaker and the addressee and formality of the context.” Accordingly, in the elicitation instrument in this study, students are expected to form polite requests to their instructor or their colleagues, always bearing in mind the type of context provided.

A considerable number of studies show that there is a preference for conventionalized indirect requests types as in Searle (1969), Wierzbicka (1985), and Clark and Schunk (1980). Conventionally indirect strategies have been found by Trosborg (1995) to be used by all proficiency groups in her study. Several other cross-cultural comparative studies investigating the effect of proficiency level on the production of speech acts provide some evidence that higher proficiency learners show improvement in their use of conventionally indirect strategies, see Hill (1997), Rose (2000) and Félix-Brasdefer (2007). In what follows, I will present the results obtained through the elicitation procedure targeting requests. First, the following section will introduce the situations used in the questionnaire to prompt for requests.

#### **4.1.1. Description of request inducing situations**

In this section we will examine the types of situations that the questionnaire proposed to the students as prompts for expected production of requests. The situations can be broken down into two different types on the basis of the relationship between the speaker uttering the request and the addressee of the speech act. In this way we can separate formal requests from a student to instructor (situations #1, 3, 6, 8 and 10) and formal request from a student to a colleague (situations #2, 4, 5, 7 and 9).<sup>66</sup> The analysis of the data will consider two major factors, social (P)ower and social (D)istance when the speaker utters the request to the hearer. Moreover, the study will concentrate on the relative frequency of appearance of different request forms, i.e. the productivity of each of the two groups in forming requests when responding to the situations. Qualitative data analysis will be used to describe similarities and differences. The percentage of the request strategies used by the two groups under study is tallied and compared. Decimals in the percentage score will be ignored if the value is less than .5 and they will be raised to make the next integer if it is .5 or up.<sup>67</sup> Student-to-instructor situations are discussed first, followed by student-to-student situations.

##### **4.1.1.1. *First group: student-to-instructor situations***

Five of the situations (#1, 3, 6, 8 and 10) present requests by a student to an instructor. Considering the fact that the Omani students under investigation are higher in total number (there

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<sup>66</sup> As will become clear below, student-to-colleague requests are labeled as 'formal' because the situations make it clear that colleagues are not close friends and therefore, even though in principle there are no inequalities in the P relationships, the D factor forces the speaker to utter a request, which is much more formal than what is expected to be addressed to a friend.

<sup>67</sup> For example, 70% is given for the decimal value in 70.212% and 98% for 97.872%.

are 33 females and 14 males in comparison to 15 females and 10 males in the American student group), we will build our comparisons on the percentage of the total strategies used within each group as well as on the situation in which they occur. This set of formal situations (#1, 3, 6, 8, and 10) can be considered to entail a high level of imposition on the hearer. Power and distance factors are judged from the speakers' side, and in all these five situations the hearer (instructor) has social power over the speaker (student); similarly, social distance between them is high. Following standard conventions this specific combination of factors is represented as  $-P +D$ .

As for the situational contents that fall under this group, situation #1 is meant to generate a request for a meeting, #3 to request an explanation of class content that was missed due to sickness, #6 to request a copy of an article, #8 to request for a recommendation letter and #10 to request for an extension of a deadline. Table 6 and Figure 4 below show the frequency of the total number of request using formal indirect strategies in the two groups:

Situation	Group	Number of students	Found strategy users	%
1	Omani	47	25	53
	American	25	25	100
3	Omani	47	38	81
	American	25	21	84
6	Omani	47	42	89
	American	25	25	100
8	Omani	47	40	85
	American	25	25	100
10	Omani	47	40	85
	American	25	25	100

Table 6. Frequency of indirect strategy requests used in the student-to-instructor situations.

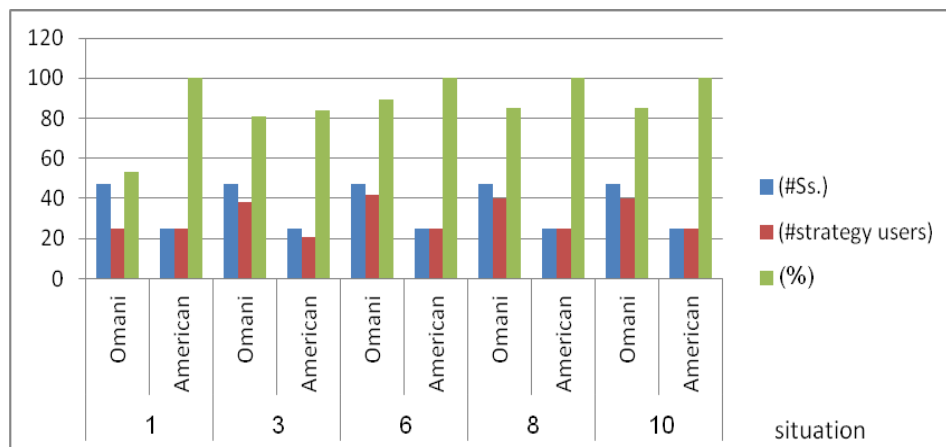


Figure 4. Frequency of indirect strategy requests used in the student-to-instructor situations.

A general observation on the figure shows that American students score a higher percentage of use of these strategies in all situations compared to Omanis. They even display absolute scores in situations #1, 6, 8 and 10, where all of the American informants produced indirect requests. The Omanis' scores are always lower than the Americans' and a clear drop in strategy use can be found in situation #1. The significance of this drop in this particular situation is not immediately evident, but it may be related to extralinguistic performance factors. Formal requests come more easily for American students per se and in an experimental situation like the one created by the questionnaire, Omani informants may be considered to take longer to initiate a request speech act productions. Since all requests situations had to be answered sequentially, request formation gained strengths after the first exposure to this type of prompt. In any event, it is difficult to find a situational explanation that accounts for the different output in situation #1 as opposed to the other student-to-instructor situation in this group.

#### **4.1.1.2. *Second group: student-to-student situations***

Turning now to student-to-student situations (#2, 4, 5, 7 and 9) that give evidence of students' performance, the same factors regarding the total number of students in each group that applied to the first group formal situations (#1, 3, 6, 8 and 10) in the previous section is relevant here. Therefore, figures for requests will also be expressed in percentages, rather than exclusively in absolute occurrence numbers. In addition, all student-to-student situations are considered to have a slightly lower imposition level on the hearer, and this is important to differentiate these situations from the previous ones even when the power and distance factors seem to be identical (-P+D), since these factors are calculated from the speaker's side, not from the point of view of the addressee. As a result, student-to-student situations are -P, because the speaker lacks any power over the addressee but also +D since there is distance with respect to non-inner circle colleagues and classmates. D is regarded as being high between the speakers in these situations involving a colleague or a classmate as the latter is not considered to belong to the close group of the speakers, unlike close friends and family members. This is based on a differentiation between a colleague/classmate on one hand and close friends/family members on the other hand. The distance differential between speech act participants in the latter group is far inferior to the differential that obtains between interlocutors of the two groups. The common feature +D underlines the fact that individuals are expected to think that colleagues and classmates that do not belong to the inner groups of family and friends are also relatively distant from this perspective.

Similarly, the relationship between students and their classmates/colleagues is qualified as -P. This is meant to indicate the fact that being low in this hierarchy with respect to

instructors places colleagues and classmates in a classroom situation on a par in terms of power even though the distance among them is unequal. Variable R (Rating of imposition), however, is different and it incorporates the decrease in severity of the situation created by the fact that the hearer is not either in a power situation with respect to the speaker. Consequently, power equality between the interlocutors lessens the severity of the imposition in these situations, while in the previous section an unequal hierarchical relationship sets the stakes higher for the speaker, resulting in an increase of degree of imposition.

The types of pragmatic situations under this group are as follows. Situation #2 is a request to join the speaker for an appointment to see a professor. Situation #4 asks the student to request a classmate to have a break from studying. The request in situation #5 is prompted so that the student asks a classmate to change the topic of a presentation. Situation #7 is a request to a classmate for help in studying, and finally, situation #9 requires the student to produce a request to repeat what he/she has expressed. Table 7 and figure 5 below give the students' figures regarding the frequency of the total number of formal indirect requests used in both groups.

Situation	Group	Number of students	Found strategy users	%
2	Omani	47	35	74
	American	25	24	96
4	Omani	47	33	70
	American	25	25	100
5	Omani	47	46	98
	American	25	24	96
7	Omani	47	47	100
	American	25	25	100
9	Omani	47	40	85
	American	25	25	100

Table 7. Frequency of indirect strategy requests used in the student-to-student situations.

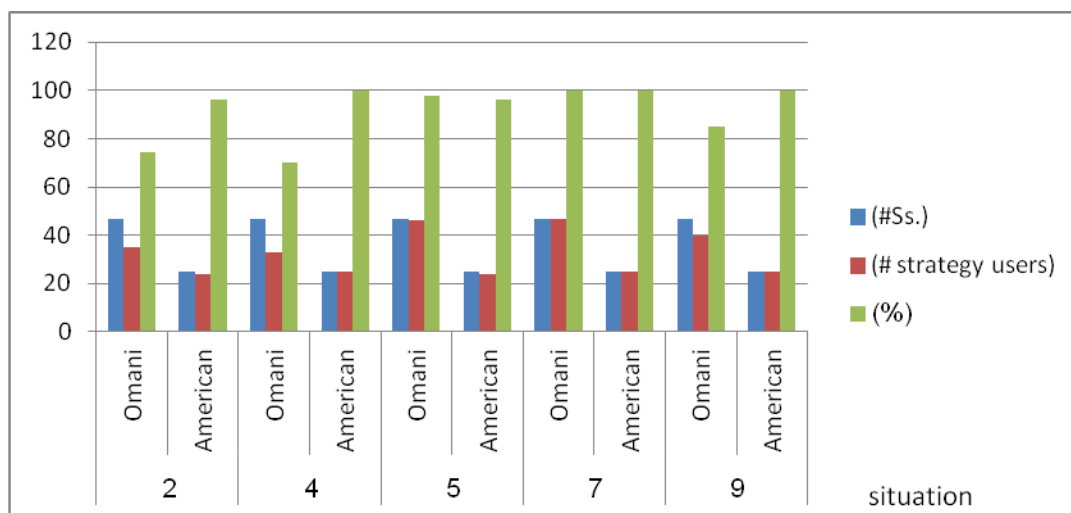


Figure 5. Frequency of indirect strategy requests used in the student-to-student situations.

A general observation on this figure shows that American students are also leading in the use of formal indirect strategies except in situation #5 and 7. A full score for American students can be noticed in situations #4, 7 and 9. Moreover, Omanis also show full score in situation #7, and their score is slightly higher than the Americans' in situations #5.

It is worth noting that “Rating” of imposition, which as we have discussed helps us differentiate the student-to-instructor and student-to-student situations, may be playing a role in the slight difference found with respect to the relative use of indirect strategy requests between Americans and Omanis. While American students overall produced more instances of these requests than Omani students, the latter were closer to the former in the total number of requests in student-to-student situations, and even scored higher in one of the situations rather than systematically producing smaller figures as was the case in student-to-instructor situation. A possible explanation of the perceived differences may come from cultural considerations, more specifically from a difference in the power relationship between students and instructors. Omani students may feel more coerced by the more authoritative figures of teachers in Omani society, and this may be sufficient to limit their willingness to address requests in these increased imposition contexts. On the other hand, the higher power equality and perhaps also the smaller distance between the students and their classmates contribute to lower R levels.<sup>68</sup>

In this section, the different situations used in this study have been presented and discussed in terms of P, D and R. Moreover, we have looked at the overall occurrence of indirect strategy request in the two major types of situations, contrasting Americans and Omani results. In the following sections, we will present the data for the different types of strategies in the formation of requests produced in student-to-instructor (4.1.2) and student-to-student situations (4.1.3) situations. More specific aspects of requests formation strategies such as intensification and modification in general will be discussed in later sections.

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<sup>68</sup> See also section 4.1.5 for what might be further consequences of the higher status of a teacher figure in the Omani cultural context.

### **4.1.2. Non-Conventionally and Conventionally Indirect Request Strategies**

Trosborg (1995) ranked different types of request strategies in terms of directness, from a non-conventional type of request such as a hint (where the request is not directly formulated and instead a remark is made which pragmatically implies a request; see 2.4.1 in Chapter II) to different direct strategies, the most extreme case of which might be an imperative. This section will examine the data elicited in the study looking for instances, incidence, form and relative frequency of indirect requests in the two informant groups, analyzing both conventionally and non-conventionally indirect strategies. Direct requests will not be discussed simply because they were not found in the sample, probably because, as usually the case with direct request strategies, they were felt to be impolite. Section 4.1.2.1 concentrates on the results in student-to-instructor situations and section 4.1.2.2 turns to an analysis of the results in student-to-student situations.

#### **4.1.2.1. *Indirect request strategies in student-to-instructor situations***

For most of the contrastive analyses between Omani and American students made in this study, there is a tendency for Americans to score higher percentages in each of the aspects examined, namely frequency of use and type of modification. At the same time, given this result, small deviations from this overall tendency become more interesting and will centre much of the discussion throughout the chapter. In the case of indirect strategies again, although both target groups show high scores for occurrence, the American group displays a higher percentage of use and a slightly wider variety of strategies. We will examine the results for different strategies in

turn (refer to Figure 6 below for the exact percentages for each of the strategies discussed in this section).

Pinker (2007:438) provides reasons why request speech acts should be particularly indirect in these kinds of situations. According to him, indirect speech acts serve to “escape embarrassment, avoid awkwardness, save face, or reduce social tension.” Another important factor affecting strategy choice in these situations is the high level of imposition in formal requests, which requires face saving speech act behavior resulting in a higher percentage of use of indirect request strategies. We see, therefore, that the strategy choices used by students in this study are to some extent appropriate and expected. As we will see, some of the percentual differences between the two groups that will be discussed below could be attributed to cultural differences.

As indicated above, some significant differences in the use of request strategies can be found between the two groups. A clear difference between the two groups emerges in situation #1 (request an appointment), where the American students’ total percentage of strategy use is 100%, see Table 8 and Figure 6 at the end of this section. The percentage of request strategy use by American students nearly doubles the strategy use percentage of Omanis (53%). Quite a considerable number of responses by American students in this situation exhibit a general tendency to use more elaborate outputs, obviously in an attempt to persuade the hearer of their requests. This is compatible with Brown and Levinson’s (1987) claim that simple compounding of hedges, indirectness and particles are used to increase the relative politeness of utterances. In contrast, Omani students use shorter, simpler and sometimes poorly formed utterances. This is,

of course, largely related to the proficiency mismatch between the two groups and the factor that obviously affects the result, and which will be looming over the contrastive analyses in this study. The following examples give some typical requests produced by the Omani students and exemplifying the less articulate nature of their output:

(29) a. *May I discuss with you my marks?*

b. *Can I check my answer paper?*

c. *Can we have a discussion about my notice [i.e. marks]? I don't agree with it.*

Notice that the (29b) and (29c) requests, although formed using indirect strategies as indicated by the presence of the ability preparatory element *can*, are pragmatically close to direct requests, inappropriate in a request addressed to an instructor who has higher power level over the student. This is particularly so in an Omani situation where the instructor is socially and culturally considered an authority. Probably as a result of their proficiency level, the Omani informants were producing requests employing a simple, all-purpose softening modifier like *can* it barely enough to change the speech act from demand to request. Simply by changing the modifier to *could*, a more polite indirect request would have been produced. The overall effect is compounded by the lack of further elaboration, which results in a harsh type of request that might raise politeness issues in real life. The example in (29c) sounds more like a direct explanation of disagreement producing the type of pragmatic failure that we discussed earlier in Chapter I. Although the language of these requests is pragmatically well formed, the lack of pragmatic skills generates a request which would probably be received as inappropriate in a real world situation.

American students, on the other hand, issue lengthier and more elaborate requests, exemplified in (30) below:

(30) a. *Professor, I am concerned about my low test scores. I know I can perform better. Will you review my mistakes with me?*

b. *Would it be possible to come to your office hours later to discuss the test? I wasn't very happy with how I did.*

Notice that in (30) American students are mitigating their request head acts (marked here by underlining) using external modification devices that are constructed before the head act as in (30a) or after the head act as in (30b).<sup>69</sup> Obviously, speakers producing these requests come through as more polite and might therefore have more chances of seeing their requests attended in real life. Native speakers can make use of the full array of linguistic devices, including pragmatic strategies. The purely grammatical and lexical parts of the discourse in (30) are not significantly outside of reach for the Omani students in the questionnaire, but the pragmatic skills are conspicuously absent. This corresponds to the major concerns underlying this study, the lower competence level of Omani learners of English in their pragmatic skills as opposed to the linguistic skills considered in a traditional narrow way, which include grammar, lexicon and also, recently communication skill but excludes pragmatics.

The higher frequency of the use of indirect strategies by the Americans over the Omanis can also be found in the other remaining situations, for example in situation #6 (request a copy of an article), #8 (request a recommendation letter) and #10 (request an extension for a project). As

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<sup>69</sup> Modification devices are divided into two main groups, namely, internal modifiers, which appear within head acts, and external modifiers, which surround the head act before or after, as in the examples here. External modification will be dealt with more extensively in section 4.1.4.

discussed in section 4.1.1.1, see Figure 4, the Americans score an absolute 100% in all these three situations, while the Omanis score approximately 80%.

The non-conventionally indirect hint strategy shows that the general difference between the Omani and the American students groups extends also to less commonly used strategies such as hints.<sup>70</sup> Both target groups employ it less commonly than conventionally indirect strategies in this first group of formal student-to-instructor situations. The Omanis' score of the hint strategy in student-to-instructor situations reaches 17 tokens (3%), while Americans score 13 tokens (10%). If we look at the situations one by one, the Omani group always shows a significantly lower percentage: 0% by Omanis vs. 4% by Americans in situations #1 and #3, a much tighter 36% vs. 40% in situation #6, 9% vs. 16% in situation 8, and an even score of 4% for the two groups in situation #10 (refer to Figure 6 below). Brown and Levinson (1987) explain that hints can be pragmatically construed as "positively polite" when there is only one polite interpretation which is acceptable in the context. That is, a semantically neutral declarative statement can become a polite request provided the statement can receive a congruous interpretation to that effect. The context in situation #6 explains that there are no more copies left and this may have led the informants to use these facts as a hint to construct a request using this strategy. The sentences in (31) below illustrate the hint requests produced by Omani students in response to situation #6 and those in (32) are corresponding examples produced by American students for the same situation:

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<sup>70</sup> Hints are indirect but non-conventional request in the sense that as explained in section 2.4.1, Chapter II, the request is not directly mentioned but some information is provided which pragmatically implicates it. For example, *your pen ran out of ink* does not constitute a conventional request speech act but is pragmatically used as a hint to request someone to change the pen.

(31) a. *Teacher, how can I take one copy?* (strong hint)<sup>71</sup>

b. *Is there any extra paper please?* (strong hint)

(32) a. *It seems there aren't enough copies for me. How can I get a copy?* (strong hint)

b. *Excuse me prof. do you by any chance have an extra copy? There wasn't enough to go around.* (strong hint)

Notice that examples (31a,b) from Omani students are not conventional requests but rather hints, which are pragmatically interpreted in the context of the utterance as polite requests asking for a single copy of an article.<sup>72</sup> In addition, they are not supported or followed by phrases that help to clarify the requests. On the other hand, the examples in (32 a,b) from Americans show that they are supporting the requests head act with external modifiers, “grounders” formed before the head act as in (32a) or after the head act as in (32b) to clarify any misunderstanding that may occur by the hearer. As mentioned for the examples (30) and (31), there is nothing linguistically beyond the capability of an Omani learner of English in the wording of a request like (32a). In fact, (32a) and (32b) differ minimally in the head act and only diverge in the modifiers, one of them an external term of address (pragmatically inadequate for independent reasons, see 4.1.4) and the other one an internal modifier akin to an explanation of situation. It is this modifier that is creating a more articulate and pragmatically effective request.

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<sup>71</sup> Strong hints are utterances containing partial reference to objects or elements needed for the implementation of the act.. Mild hints, on the other hand, are utterances that make no reference to the request proper (or any of its elements) but are interpretable as requests by context (Jalilifar 2009:47). For instance, a comment like *it is too hot in here* in the context of an Omani office would be interpreted as a weak hint to turn the air conditioner or to go out etc. This hint qualifies as weak because neither any air conditioning nor going out have explicitly mentioned. On the other hand, an utterance like *the AC isn't working* would be a strong hint to fix it, since, according to this definition the object required for the implementation of the act of fixing is directly mentioned in the hint. However, the same utterance would be a weak hint to a request to go out.

<sup>72</sup> Although (31 b) could mislead the hearer to understand that it is used to ask for yet another copy.

The percentages in situation #6 are outstanding in terms of the absolute numbers of hints produced by both groups, so what must be explained here is the absolute numbers of hints in this versus other situations rather than any contrast between the two groups. As indicated above, while other situations led more naturally to willingness or ability strategies, there may be something in the wording of the prompt and the pragmatic context it created (scarcity of handouts) that somehow led more naturally to the use of an “off-record” hint strategy. Alternatively, of course, the result might be an artifact of the elicitation tool.

As in general, the use of indirectness in the student-to-instructor situations by both groups is generally assumed to be driven by the social power and distance factors (-P+D), since the hearer has a higher power status in these situations. This leads to a decrease in the speakers’ imposition on h/his hearers, and an increase in her/his needs to use negative face strategies.

Further differences between the two groups can be observed when we turned from non-conventionally indirect strategies like hints to conventionally indirect strategies, such as willingness, permission, wish and the use of suggestory elements. There is a clear inclination to overuse the ability strategy (as in *can you*, etc.), one of the two preparatory condition queries, in almost all situations by Omani students. This contrasts with the underuse of the other conventionally indirect strategies such as wish (*I would like to*, etc.), willingness (*would you*, etc.), permission (*may I*, etc.) and suggestory elements (*how about*, etc.). Furthermore, the same students use ability strategies more often than Americans: 48 % of the 113 tokens of indirect requests correspond to the ability strategy, compared to the low use of the same strategy by Americans (38% of 48 tokens, see appendix C for the detailed score of the data). Table 8 and the

makeup detailed view of the data in Figure 6, present summaries for ability and wish queries as preparatory conditions strategies.<sup>73</sup>

Forming polite request speech acts with wish, willingness, permission and suggestory strategies is considered pragmatically demanding and requires greater pragmatic skills and linguistic knowledge. According to the results summarized in Table 8, Omani students also show low frequency in the use of some of these strategies, which might be attributed to their insufficient linguistic proficiency or lack of confidence to form these acts in formal situations.

This tendency to low use of strategies other than ability has been reported in a few studies which investigated speech acts, such as the study on suggestory strategies by Banerjee and Carrell (1988). They claim that non-native speakers were more unlikely than native speakers to make suggestions in slightly embarrassing or potentially embarrassing situations. Potentially embarrassing factors can be found in the contexts provided by the formal situations #1, 3, 6, 8, and 10, as a result of the difference in Power and Distance between interlocutors. Similar results can be replicated for other request strategies. For instance, the data gathered by the elicitation tool also reveal that willingness statements show high score in the performance of the American group. This difference in figures can be attributed to the more prominent use of the past modal auxiliary in the head act of the requests.<sup>74</sup> 26% of the tokens produced by the Americans

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<sup>73</sup> Both ability and wish expressions can be used as query preparatory conventionally indirect strategies. Pragmatically it is very normal, especially among learners, to inquire about the ability to do something as a way to prepare the hearer to act. The request can be simply an implication of this query.

<sup>74</sup> The highest scores can be found in American data in situation #8. Example: *would you be willing to write me a letter of recommendation?/Prof. Jessica, would it be alright if you wrote me a recommendation letter for this activity I would like to join?*

informants in this study included the auxiliary *would* (33 tokens), as compared to a count of 5 tokens (2% of the total) by Omanis.

The differences between Omani and American students discussed above in the incidence of conventional indirect strategies are in accordance with the findings in Trosborg (1995), which also revealed that they were the most common request strategies among Danish learners of English as a foreign language. Table 8 below shows detailed frequency percentages of non-conventionally and conventionally indirect strategies used by both groups. The numbers in the columns in this and following tables indicate the percentage of the strategy under which the number appear with respect to the total instances of requests for that group and that situation. For instance 32 in the ability strategy column for situation #1 in the Omani group indicates that requests using this strategy represent 32% of the total number of requests by the Omani students in that situation.

Situation	Group	Hint	Ability	Wish	Desire/needs	Willingness	Permission	Suggestory
1	OMANI	0	32	2	15	4	4	0
	AMERICAN	4	56	0	12	22	0	4
3	OMANI	0	59	0	11	4	9	0
	AMERICAN	4	48	0	15	20	0	14
6	OMANI	36	36	0	9	4	2	0
	AMERICAN	40	32	0	15	5	10	0
8	OMANI	9	26	0	17	0	0	0
	AMERICAN	16	24	0	5	49	0	0
10	OMANI	4	34	0	10	3	7	0
	AMERICAN	4	48	5	0	27	14	0

Table 8. Percentages of indirect student-to-instructor strategies.

These results can also be represented as in Figure 6 below.

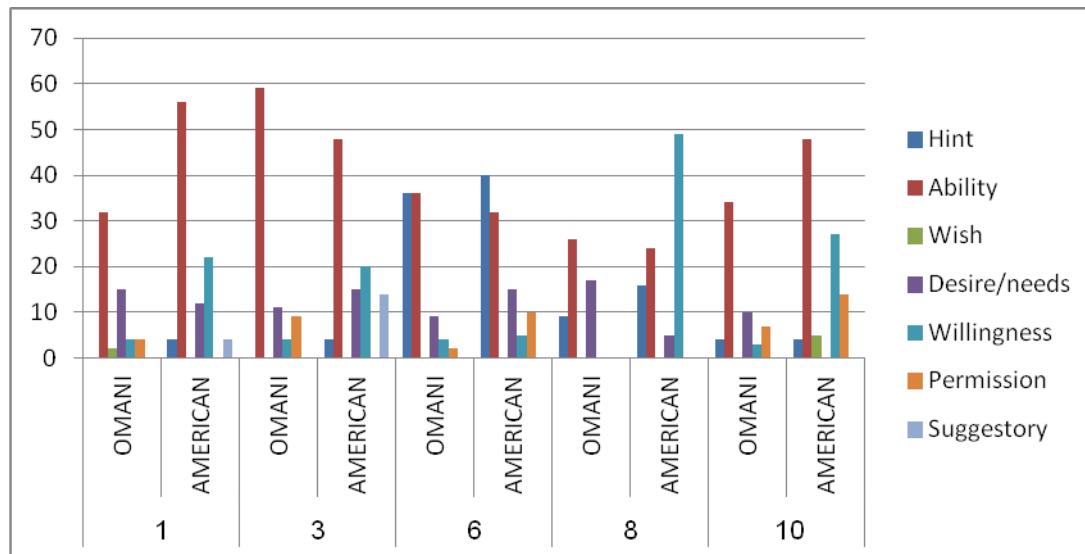


Figure 6. Percentages of indirect student-to-instructor requests strategies.

As we can see from the above Table 8 and Figure 6, the query ability strategy (ability and willingness) is the most commonly used strategy by both groups of students in all situations, and wish, permission and suggestory strategies are the least commonly used across all situations. These general results refer to the relative prominence of some strategies over others. In section 4.1.3, we will be looking at internal modifications data, that is, modulations that can be introduced by modifying syntactically or lexically the defining elements of these strategies. More significant contrasts between American and Omani students will emerge in that section.

#### 4.1.2.2. *Indirect request strategies in student-to-student situations*

In this subsection, the results of student-to-student situations will be examined. As in the discussions in other sections of this study, the rationale for the separation of the two groups

of situations lies in the difference in equality relations between the interlocutors, which is expected to have an impact on the pragmatic strategies deployed in the construction of requests. Brown and Levinson (1987) point out that the degree of imposition, and Distance and Power between interlocutors play a significant role in the choice of politeness strategies to be used in forming polite requests. Taguchi (2006:515) links imposition and equality in equal relationships to indirectness in politeness, claiming that “when the speech act involves a low degree of imposition and is produced for a person in equal relationship, the degree of required indirectness is smaller.” Therefore, since the degree of imposition is lower in the second group (student-to-student) of requests (#2, 4, 5, 7 and 9) being addressed to individuals from the same social status, students were expected to avoid using the most polite forms and strategies. This is certainly the case in the answers to the questionnaire, as will be detailed in this section.

In spite of the smaller rating of imposition and higher equality between speaker and addressee in student-to-student situations, and of the lower formality nature of the contexts described in these situations compared to the first group of situations, it is nonetheless clear that both American and Omani students still favor responding to the prompts with indirect strategies (non-conventional and conventional) to different degrees. American students score a higher percentage of total of indirect strategy use in situations #2 (joining to see an instructor) with 96% as opposed to 47% for Omanis, in situation #4 (have a break from studying) with 100% as opposed to 70% for Omanis, and in situation #9 (repeat an opinion) with 100% as opposed to 85% for Omanis (see Appendix B for more detailed scores of the data). These results correlate well with the results observed earlier in the previous section for the first group of formal situations. The score of Omani students is slightly higher in situation #5 (change a topic of a

presentation) with 98% as opposed to 96% for Americans, whereas in situation #7 (help in studying) both groups reach the maximum percentage (100%); refer to Table 9 and Figure 7 below.

Situation	Group	Number of students	Found strategy users	%
2	Omani	47	35	74
	American	25	24	96
4	Omani	47	33	70
	American	25	25	100
5	Omani	47	46	98
	American	25	24	96
7	Omani	47	47	100
	American	25	25	100
9	Omani	47	40	85
	American	25	25	100

Table 9. Total frequency of indirect strategies in student-to-student situations.

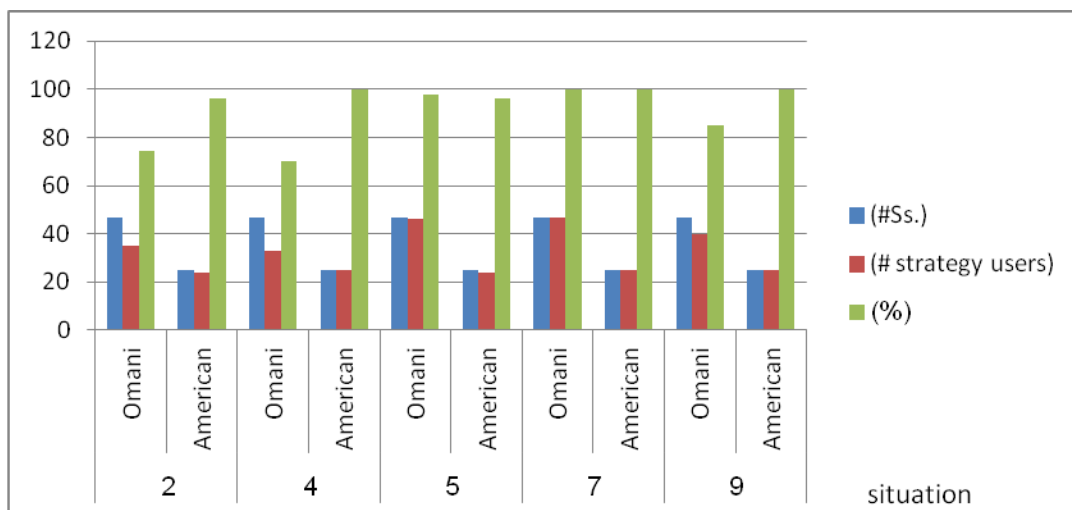


Figure 7. Total frequency of indirect requests strategies in student-to-student situations.

Obviously, the difference between the two groups in total number of use of strategies in the student-to-student situations is, to some extent, smaller than in the student-to-instructor

situations. In fact, the Omanis score is quite high in situations #5 and #7. The closer results between the two groups in the second group of situations may, in fact, be related to overuse of the ability indirect strategy with *can* by Omani students. This is by far the most common indirect strategy used by Omani students, so when natives complement it with *would* forms in higher imposition student-to-instructor situations, the Omani percentage rises; in lower imposition and more equal student-to-student situations, the usage of *would* forms decreases slightly among American students and correspondingly, the ability form counts become more similar to those of Omani students.<sup>75</sup> The following subsections examine non-conventional (hint) and conventional strategies in these situations.

#### 4.1.2.2.1. *Pragmatic clarity in the use of hints in student-to-student situations*

A general observation regarding the use of the hint strategy in all student-to-student situations reveals that Omani students use it less frequently than their American counterparts except in situation #1. In a study of the notion of indirectness and politeness in English and Hebrew conducted by Blum-Kulka (1987), non-conventional hint strategies were rated as the most indirect “off record” strategies in the indirectness scale. In addition, she adds that conventionally indirect strategies are considered as most polite ‘on record’ strategies. In the same study, although hints are perceived as most indirect by speakers of both languages, they were not rated as the most polite ones. This is so because, by forcing the hearer to infer the request, without

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<sup>75</sup> Since both *can* and *could* count as ability expressions, and requests using either of them are tallied as tokens of the ability strategy, the percentual similarity between Omanis and Americans in the use of this strategy actually hides differences which will be highlighted in section 4.1.3. In particular, Omani students tend to stick to the simple present *can* form, whereas Americans can alternate between *can* and *could*. These modulations inside each strategy will be the subject matter of section 4.1.3.

it actually being worded in a normal request structure, hints can be claimed to lack concern for pragmatic clarity. When we consider the expected frequency of hint strategy use in student-to-student versus student-to-instructor situations, it seems that, a priori, the connection between politeness and clarity that Blum-Kulka (1987) encountered is in fact, fairly dubious. The lack of pragmatic clarity of the hint strategy would account for the relatively low use of this strategy in comparison to others, but it is difficult to associate this factor directly to politeness level. If at all, the fact that hints are the most indirect type of strategy might make one expect them to be more prominent in polite request speech acts, on the assumption that indirect expressions of desire would be considered to be more polite than direct appeals. If this were so, then, they would be expected to be more frequent in student-to-instructor situations. The data in this study, however, show that, in fact, the opposite might be the case since both American and Omani students used hints more often in student-to-student than in student-to-instructor situations. The Omanis' score in the use of the hint strategy in the student-to-student situations reaches 33 hints (14%) while the Americans' use of the same strategies is 25 hints (20%). In contrast, the Omanis produced 49 hints in student-to-instructor situations (10%) and Americans also display a lower percentage of hints in the same situations (68 hints, making a 14%). Some examples from students' data are given below as an illustration of the types of hints encountered in this study. In response to situation #5 (to request changing a topic of presentation) Omanis produced examples like those in (33):

(33) a. *I don't feel the topic is OK for me.* (strong hint)

b. *It will be a good idea if we change it. Is there another opinion?* (strong hint)

These are hints because they do not directly request for a change and therefore, they are not clearly worded as expected in that type of speech acts (Weizman 1993). The request must be inferred by the hearer from a speech act which describes the speaker's feelings (a), or the desirability of an action (b). They are both strong hints because they include reference to the topic or even to changing the topic.<sup>76</sup> The sentences in (34) show examples of hints produced by American students:

- (34) a. *Well Ray, it is not a topic that really interests me, but if you are really passionate about it perhaps we can combine it with something that interest both of us.* (strong hint)
- b. *That's interesting, but this other topic would fit better with my current goals.* (strong hint)

As we can see in (34a,b), American students also use strong hints that exclusively rely on indirectness. Their statements also display a use of external modification strategies that reduces imposition on the hearer such as using the disarmer *it is not a topic that really interest me* in (34a) and sweetener like *That's interesting* in (34b). The speaker in (34a) is particularly skillful in showing concern for the hearer's benefit in performing the request. These features can be found in almost all hint statements by Americans. The results for hints in student-to-student situations could be found in Table 10 and Figure 8 below:

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<sup>76</sup> Cf. footnotes 70 and 71.

Situation	Group	Hint
2	OMANI	5
	AMERICAN	0
4	OMANI	8
	AMERICAN	12
5	OMANI	49
	AMERICAN	52
7	OMANI	12
	AMERICAN	14
9	OMANI	2
	AMERICAN	22

Table 10. Hints in student-to-student situations.

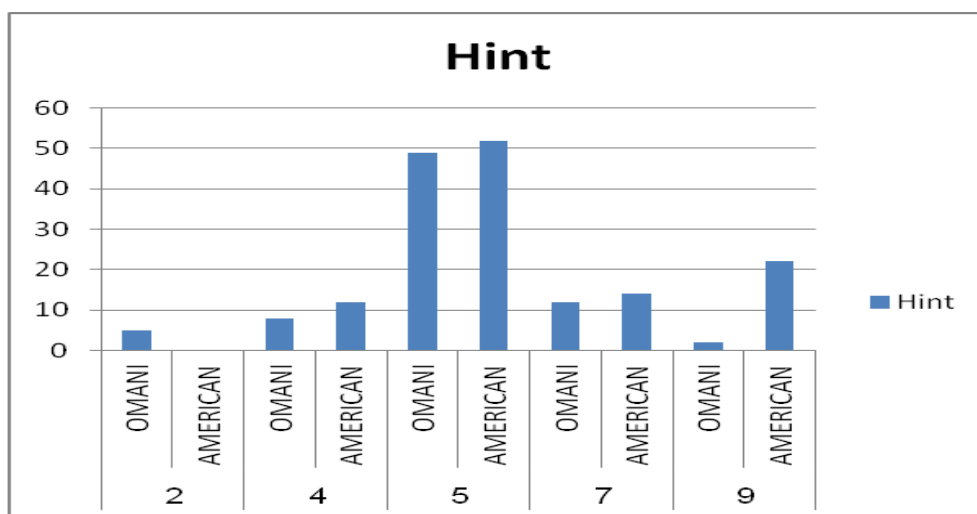


Figure 8. Hints in student-to-student request situations.

#### 4.1.2.2.2. Conventional strategies in student-to-student situations

Turning from the non-conventional hint strategy to conventional strategies, similar to the student-to-instructor situations data results, the query preparatory ability strategy is also widely used by students from both groups in the student-to-student situations. The total number of use of this strategy in the latter situations by the Omani group reaches 123 tokens (52%) while

the American group produces 40 items (32%). As already mentioned in 4.1.2.2, this might result from the overuse of the *can* ability form by Omanis in requests where the American students alternate between *can/could* and *would*. The results of the ability strategy in both types of situations are similarly high for Omanis (see 4.1.3.1.1 below for further discussion of the *can/could* choice in each of the groups). As a consequence of the overuse of *can*, the data also reveals the underuse of other strategies by Omanis such as willingness and suggestory strategies. Americans lead the score in the willingness strategy (16%) and in the suggestory one (27%), whereas the Omanis' score is 3% in the willingness strategy and 6% in the suggestory strategy. As we discussed earlier concerning the student-to-instructor group situations, the Omani students' preference for some strategies and underuse of other strategies could be attributed to their insufficient linguistic proficiency, considering that these strategies are pragmatically demanding and require greater pragmatic skills from the students, if only because *would* forms tend to be produced at a higher level of proficiency both pragmatic and linguistic than the all-purpose *can*.

Table 11 and Figure 9 below show detailed results for each strategy in the student-to-student situations:

Situation	Group	Ability	Willingness	Wish	Desire/needs	Permission	Suggestory
2	OMANI	45	7	4	7	11	2
	AMERICAN	39	29	0	4	0	22
4	OMANI	40	3	0	2	0	16
	AMERICAN	4	8	0	0	7	70
5	OMANI	41	2	0	0	0	8
	AMERICAN	5	4	0	0	0	37
7	OMANI	55	4	4	27	4	0
	AMERICAN	52	29	0	0	0	7
9	OMANI	77	0	0	0	7	0
	AMERICAN	64	2	0	0	0	0

Table 11. Conventionally indirect strategies in student-to-student situations.

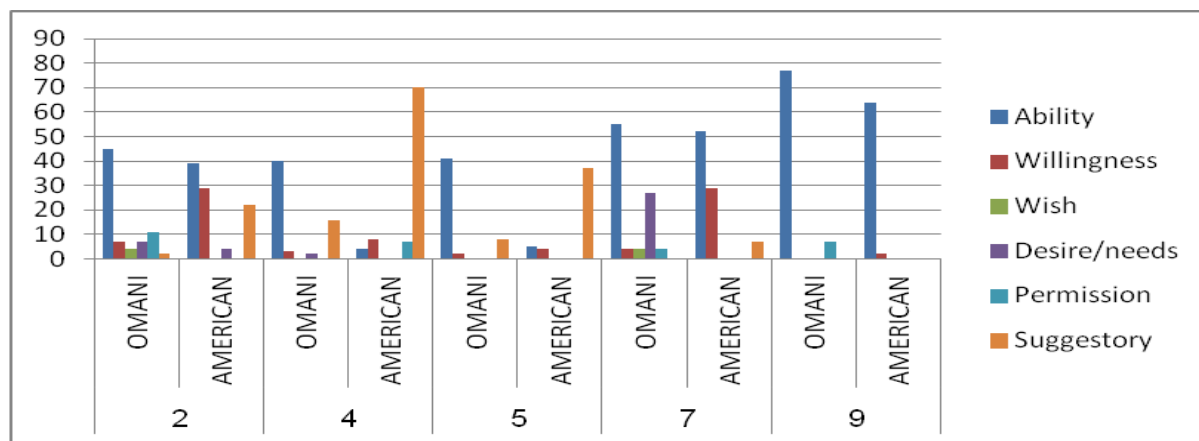


Figure 9. Conventionally indirect requests strategies in student-to-student situations.

Summarizing the results related to strategy use, the discussion of the data concerning the use of non-conventionally and conventionally indirect strategies in the two groups of student-to-instructor and student-to-student situations shows that indirect strategies in general are the most frequent ones in the two groups of students, as opposed to direct requests. This finding is consistent with many other studies and results from the status of politeness as a common value

across cultures. One has to turn to more specific levels of descriptions to begin to find contrasts in the two groups of students with respect to the use of request strategies. As expected, both groups of students score low in the use of the non-conventionally indirect hint strategy, with lower percentages in student-to-instructor situations than in student-to-student situations. It seems as if in the former, the use of hints were limited due to the high imposition feature of these situations, although, on the other hand, the fact that hints occupy the lowest position in the directness continuum would perhaps make one expect them to be more prominent in these contexts, at least to the extent that directness is linked to lower levels of politeness. American students score higher than Omanis in hint strategies in almost all situations.<sup>77</sup> Omani students also score lower in the use of some other conventionally indirect strategies as when expressing suggestions and willingness in both student-to-instructor and student-to-student situations compared to American students. Most likely this is due to the greater pragmatic skills and linguistic knowledge required to be deployed by the learner. Although most likely the linguistic resources needed to employ these strategies are not far beyond the reach of learners, the lack of pragmatic training brings about a corresponding low frequency in comparison to native speakers.

After looking at the comparative data in the usage of requests strategies, now we will turn to discuss our data in term of the use of modification devices of requests, i.e. modulations within these strategies that can increase the level of politeness and the efficiency of requests.

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<sup>77</sup> The only situation in which this is not the case is in student-to-instructor situation #10, where their score is even.

### 4.1.3. Internal modification devices in requests

Modification devices employed with the speech act of request have been discussed by many scholars such as House and Kasper (1981), Trosborg (1995), Hill (1997), Achiba (2003) and Soler et al (2005).<sup>78,79</sup> The latter point out that acquiring the ability to use these elements by language users would increase their appropriate use in different context and improve overall pragmatic language competence. They also add that the main use of these modifiers is to mitigate the speech acts or intensify their force. There are many types of internal and external modifiers that can be used in speech acts of requests; however, examination of these modifiers in this study is limited to the ones that have been elicited in the students' responses. Internal modifiers that occurred in the students' data of both groups are divided into two acts, namely, *syntactic downgraders* (such as past tenses of modal auxiliaries, conditional clauses, long forms and embedding) and *lexical/phrasal downgraders* (such as the use of words like *please* as a politeness marker and consultative device). The former will be addressed in section 4.1.3.1, while lexical and phrasal downgraders will be examined in section 4.1.3.2.

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<sup>78</sup> Refer to Ch. II section 2.4.2 for definitions of the two types of modifiers.

<sup>79</sup> Examples of internal modifiers can be found in expressions like *Could you hand me the paper, please?* or *Hand me the paper, please.* While both *can* and *could* mark the usage of the ability strategy, there is an obvious increase in politeness obtained by choosing the past tense form of the modal versus the present tense. In fact, formally temporal morphology is not really linked to tense refer but rather to degree of politeness and it is this type of modification within what is the same type of strategy that will be discussed in this section. In the second example, modification of the request is achieved by the use of the overt politeness marker *please*.

#### **4.1.3.1. *Internal syntactic downgraders and modifiers***

We mentioned in the previous section that modifiers, in general, are used to lessen the force of request utterances diminishing the threat to the hearer's face. In the same line of indirectness, syntactic downgraders are used to raise the level of indirectness by giving the listener the choice in performing the action and at the same time reducing negative face-threat to the listener, who is asked to comply with the desire of the speaker (Barron 2008). In the next two sections we will look at the modification markers through the syntactic downgraders used by the two target groups of students in student-to-instructor situations (4.1.3.1.1) and student-to-student situations (4.1.3.1.2).

##### **4.1.3.1.1. *Downgraders in student-to-instructor situations***

Blum-Kulka (1992) points out that the speakers' choice of request strategy and level of directness is accompanied by internal and external modification dimensions that contribute to the formation of polite requests. Blum-Kulka (1989:60) defines internal modifiers as "elements within the request utterance proper (linked to the head act), the presence of which is not essential for the utterance to be potentially understood as a request". This characterization of modifiers is very broad and perhaps not every single element that is not strictly necessary for the formation of a request utterance might fall under the label "internal modifier", let alone be a downgrader. In any event, the internal modification that will be examined in this study is restricted to the actual examples that have been found in the data, and these are not very varied. The internal modification through syntactic downgrader strategies used by both groups of students in this

study mostly consists of the use of question forms with modal auxiliaries, while other possible downgrading mechanisms such as past modal auxiliaries, negation, conditional clauses, embedding and the use of long forms occur less commonly.

#### 4.1.3.1.1.1. *Modals as modifiers in student-to-instructor situations*

As mentioned in the discussion of the ability strategy, the formality of our student-to-instructor situations is dealt by the Omani group with an excessive use of the auxiliary *can* in comparison to the moderate use of *could* in the head acts of request statements. It is generally considered that the use of the modal *can* in requests is less polite than the use of the past auxiliary *could* (Searle 1975, Biber et al 1999, Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman 1999, Wichmann 2004 and Beiler 2011). Already Searle (1975) pointed out that using past tense modals such as *could* and *would* produces more polite requests than *can* and *will*. Wichmann (2004:11), in her corpus study of private dialogues (possibly colloquial in nature), links social distance and the usage of past tense *could* when she asserts that “[t]he only example of *could* in the private dialogue is taken from a university committee meeting, which, while not public, is a more formal affair, and less symmetrical, than chats between family and friends. In public - and thus in situations where there is generally greater social distance between interlocutors - we find only one example of *can* in an indirect request; all others use *could*.” While the distinction is not new, her data is particularly interesting in finding in actual linguistic behavior collected in corpora a distribution of two forms which are close to complimentary. Biber et al (1999) also refer to the pragmatic value of what was originally a morphological marking for past when they point out that the main functions of *can* and *could* depend on the speaker’s stance rather than the

marking of time distinctions. Nonetheless, politeness is not the only function of this morphological distinction of modal verbs, and they also add that past time models are associated with hypothetical situations, conveying overtones of tentativeness.<sup>80</sup>

Overuse of *can* in the head acts is a significant failure in the Omani data. The total number of the use of *can* by this group is 80 instances (34%) compared to 19 instances by Americans (15%), more than double. As for the use of *could*, it occurs 37 times (16%) among Omanis and 24 times (19%) among for Americans. The results show that while there is a clear overuse of *can*, *could* is only slightly underused. A closer look at the data reveals that the latter is mainly used by Omani females in situations #8 (recommendation letter) and #10 (extend deadline of project), so there might be gender related variables at play in this lexical choice which, however, fall beyond the scope of this dissertation. Refer to the table in Appendix C for details of the use of these verbs by the two groups in student-to-instructor situations.

The percentage of use of *can* in the American students data is also low, but it is important to remember that native speakers complement the ability strategy with the willingness strategy, so that the relatively low use of *could* is deceptive in that the students have made use of *would* in many of the possible situations where *could* may have been an option. Interestingly, *would* is mostly found in situation #8 among American female students.<sup>81</sup> The use of *would* is

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<sup>80</sup> Thus, while *can/could I go to the bathroom* is almost a prototypical example of the added politeness of the past tense *could*, in an example like *you can/could start now* the hypothetical and tentativeness overtones of the past tense are crucial to the choice of that form over *can*.

<sup>81</sup> As was the case with the use of *could* by Omani females, also in situation #8, the data may indicate that there are some gender based differences in the choice of the past tense *could/would* over the present tense. These differences will be subject of future research.

significant in our data for the two groups. The total Omani use of this auxiliary verb is only 8 items, constituting only 3% of the total of modifiers in the data and distributed in all situations except #3 (request to explain something) and in situation #6 (request a copy of an article). Unlike the data for situation #8, it is now female Omanis who never produce a request containing *would* in either situations, whereas among the Americans, both males and females formulate requests with *would* totaling 39 instances (31%). Refer to the table in Appendix (C) for details of this verb use by the two groups in student-to-instructor situations.

As a result, the lack of use of past form modals is obvious in the Omanis' responses compared to the Americans'. Avoidance, as explained earlier, and low use could be attributed to the L1 absence of modal verbs such as *could* and *would* that would have helped students to form acceptably polite requests. An important and major problem of Arabic students that could affect their use of these modals is the lack of direct correspondence between the two forms of English and clear Arabic correlates, since both English expressions correlate with a single whole phrase in Arabic.<sup>82</sup>

A similar situation is found if we look at the usage of other modal verbs like *may*. Although morphologically the present past distinction between *may* and *might* parallels the *can/could* distinction, the only member of the pair which can be used as a politeness element is

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<sup>82</sup> For instance, the utterance introduced by *would* correlates with full phrases of the type هل من الممكن *hal min almumkin* 'would it possible...'. This lack of one-to-one correspondence in Arabic for the English modals will probably add a burden on the Arabic learner of English. On the other hand, a speaker of Spanish can positively transfer a difference between *puedo* and *podría* matching the English pair in roughly equivalent ways.

*may*, since *might* is restricted to hypothetical contexts.<sup>83</sup> Even as a marker of politeness, *may* is fairly restricted in that it is almost exclusively found with the first person in requests for permission to perform an action in very formal situations. Given these limitations on the usage of *may*, it comes as a certain surprise to find that it was used 7 times by Omani students, distributed in situations #3 (request to explain something), #6 (request for a copy of an article) and #10 (request for an extension of project deadline), whereas it only appears twice in the Americans students' data (refer to Appendix C). The use of *may* in these contexts could be linked to the higher imposition level of the three requests in these situations compared to the rest, prompting Omani students to generate more polite forms of requests. However, the presence of *may* also in the student-to-student situations discussed below casts some doubts on the correct use of *may* as a very formal polite request for permission. Another possible approach to explain the unexpected comparatively high occurrence of *may* in the Omani data may be related to the L1 effect of Arabic. As was the case with previously mentioned modal verbs, there is no Arabic verb expressing modal and politeness content directly equivalent to English modals. The closest Arabic expression is the complex impersonal phrase *hal min almumkin an...* 'is there a possibility to...', which is can also be used in similar high imposition situations, which actually the functional equivalent not only for *may* but also for *can/could/would*. It looks as if faced with a one-to-four correlation between Arabic and English, Arabic intermediate student of English take *can* as a default all-purpose form for polite requests, with only occasional recourse to *could/would/may*. We will return to this issue when we discuss the occurrence of *may* as a

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<sup>83</sup> The same is true for *will* and *would*, where what is historically a present form has been grammaticalized as a future tense marker and only the morphologically past form of *would* is used to convey added politeness. Therefore, from the point of view of politeness *would* is more related to *could/can* than to *will*.

modifier in student-to-student situations. Figures for modal modifiers can be found in the general table for internal modification at the end of the following section.

#### 4.1.3.1.1.2. *Other internal modifiers in student-to-instructor situations*

In addition to the modal modification examined in the previous section, only one of the other types of modifications usually isolated in the literature is sufficiently attested in the data, and even this only in the American group. This is the usage of long forms, which will be discussed first in this section. Other modifiers which are only attested in very scarce numbers will be briefly discussed at the end of this section.

Constructing effective requests may be seen to involve elaborating the speech act so that not only the mere content of the request is expressed, but also adequate attention is paid to the hearer's face and consequently to deploying intensifiers and downtoners which would then jointly help to form a polite and hopefully acceptable request. It follows from this that more articulate requests will most likely entail the use of longer discourse, so that, although it is difficult to quantify this, longer requests will probably also be more elaborate and therefore, more polite requests. Long forms in requests are therefore considered to be downgraders and are classified as syntactic downgraders in Trosborg (1995). Learners lack not only the fluency to effortlessly amplify the discourse but they also lack awareness of the pragmatic mechanisms underlying request formation, which is typically not taught in the EFL curriculum. This means that learners will have to rely on their L1 pragmatic resources, most likely culturally bound and unconscious, heavily constrained by their proficiency level. It comes then as no surprise that there is a significant difference in the use of long, verbally more elaborated request forms as

syntactic downgraders. Although no systematic word count was made to find word averages in the requests of the two groups, the Omani answers were clearly shorter than the American requests. Of course length itself is just an indicator, but we can also approach the analysis of the data from this perspective by checking for the presence of modifier combinations<sup>84</sup> or of particularly articulate modifiers like for instance the appearance of tentative embedding.<sup>85</sup> Analyzing length from the perspective of these variables, we can observe that this type of syntactic modification was absent in the Omani data. This contrasts with the American data, where “long” forms occur 8 times (3% of the modifications found in requests) in situations #3, 8 and 10 (refer to Appendix C).

In accounting for this data, we have mentioned both L1 transfer and proficiency factors. The role of the first language and its culture can be further clarified by resorting to some cultural difference between the two groups. We can understand this better by making use of the notions of high-context and low-context cultures. Hall (1976:91) characterizes high-context cultures as those “in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message.” Hall himself considers Arabic culture as a good example of high context. Several studies on Arabic

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<sup>84</sup> Economidou-Kogetsidis (2009) showed that Greek learners of English used more combinations of supportive moves but, crucially, fewer combinations of internal modification devices.

<sup>85</sup> A difference is made in the scoring key for this study between subjective and tentative types of embedding, that is between the simple embedding introduced by the verb *think* in *I think that....* and the more complex embedding introduced by *wonder* in forms like *I was wondering if ....* The latter is often used by natives as a longer and more elaborate of *could* in requests. Although formally both structures employ syntactic embedding, it did not seem appropriate to consider that syntactic similarity should lead us to consider them pragmatically identical. Therefore, for the scoring, tentative embedding was counted under long forms and separated from the declarative embedding, which was tallied independently as seen in the chart.

communication such as Cohen (1987, 1990) Feghali (1997), Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey (1988), Katriel (1986), Zaharna (1995), Nelson, Al Batal and El Bakary (2002), support Halls' claims of the indirectness of Arabic communication style and add that some features characterize Arabic culture as symbolic, ambiguous, and implicit in style, contrasting with American culture which Zaharna (1995) describes as using direct, accurate, clear and explicit communication. She also adds that "burden of meaning" in high-context cultures falls on the listener while in low-context cultures the burden is on the speaker to convey the meaning to the listener. This cultural difference might be connected with a variety of specific linguistic features, some of them obviously connected with the quality of the speech (clarity, directness...etc.), and some others perhaps connected with sheer quantity, since high-context cultures place the burden of the recoverability of the message more intensively on the hearer. This is probably the reason why we find some inaccuracy, vagueness and lack of elaboration in some of the Omanis' responses in contrast with their American counterparts.<sup>86</sup> The following examples illustrate the types of request production discussed in this section. The requests in (35) come from Omani students and those in (36) come from Americans. All of the examples correspond to situation #10 (request to extend deadline of project):

(35) a. *Dr. Brown, may I ask you to extend the deadline?*

b. *Can you give me more time please?*

(36) a. *Hey Dr. Brown I've been very busy lately and I was wondering if you could give me an extension on our project. I think I could finish in time, but it'll be of much higher quality if I have a couple extra days. I'm really sorry I have to ask you this.*

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<sup>86</sup> Of course, we cannot ignore the fact that sometimes student proficiency plays a fundamental role in the ability to form similar complex request expressions.

b. *Hi Dr. Brown, I was wondering if I could possibly get an extension on the exam because*

...

Notice that in (36b) the informant wrote the ellipsis dots at the end probably to indicate that the speaker would continue elaborating the request by providing explanations for the need to get an extension. Even without the material that the informant meant to be part of the request in (36b), let alone the almost verbose (36a), are good examples of long requests even if a simple word count factor is taken into account. They obviously contrast with the much shorter Omani examples in (35). The Omani example (35a) includes a permission type of modification by inserting the modal *may* discussed in the previous section. But this modification hardly counts as a long form and thus stands in a clear contrast to the lengthier examples in (36). Notice that both of the latter include the expression *I was wondering if ...*, which is interpreted here as an elaborate and long version of *could...*, which softens the request by inserting it inside an indirect question acting as the complement of the verb *wonder*. In turn, this long phrase is co-modified by other types of elements, all of which help to construct a complex discourse. The Omani requests leave much of the context for the request of the discourse perhaps as a result of the speakers belonging to a high-context culture.<sup>87</sup>

Other types of syntactic downgraders are represented in far smaller number in the sample and the data might not be significant. Subjective embedding,<sup>88</sup> which we are not

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<sup>87</sup> It is also significant that the hearer is addressed directly in the Omani example (35a), while both examples in (36) accompany the address term with a greeting. This can be related to the bare usage of the term *Teacher!*, which will be discussed in section 4.1.5.

<sup>88</sup> As for example in *I think/believe/imagine you will be able to help me*. This is called subjective because the main verbs introducing the subordinate clauses are semantically epistemic predicates.

considering as a particularly complex type of modification is only found in situations #8 and #10, making up 4% of all modifiers in those two situations for Americans while Omani students use this type of modification in situation #10, and there it only represents 2% of the strategies used. Similar results are found in the usage of conditional clauses, not very well represented but appearing more often among the Americans than among Omani students. Table 12 and Figure 10 below summarize the percentage result for the total use of syntactic downgraders in the data of the two groups.

Situation	Group	Can	Could	Shall	Should	Will	Would	May	Subjective Embedding	Long form	Cond. clause
1	OMANI	21	13	0	0	0	4	2	0	0	2
	AMERICAN	36	20	0	0	8	16	4	0	0	4
3	OMANI	31	26	0	0	0	2	6	0	0	0
	AMERICAN	0	12	0	0	0	16	0	0	8	4
6	OMANI	23	19	0	0	0	2	4	0	0	2
	AMERICAN	20	24	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0
8	OMANI	44	13	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	2
	AMERICAN	4	4	0	0	0	80	0	4	16	0
10	OMANI	49	9	0	0	0	4	4	2	0	0
	AMERICAN	16	36	0	0	0	24	0	4	0	4

Table 12. Syntactic Downgraders student-to-instructor situations.

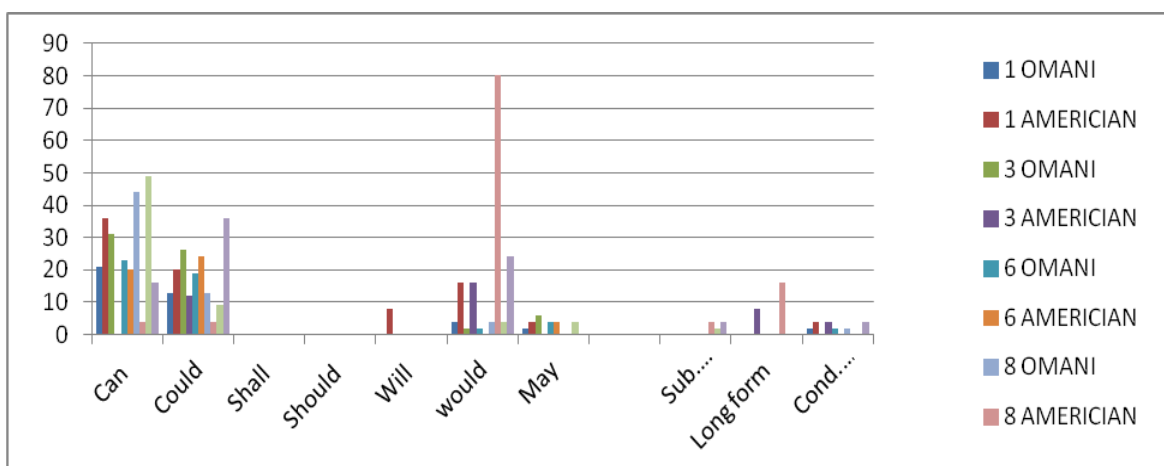


Figure 10. Syntactic Downgraders in student-to-instructor requests situations.

The figure and table above present systematically the percentages for all student-to-instructor situations and types of modifications in the two groups, as discussed in the previous sections. The column for the negation modification<sup>89</sup> results, initially present as part of the scoring key was subsequently deleted since no example of that strategy was found in the data. The next section will discuss findings from the data obtained for student-to-student situations.

#### 4.1.3.1.2. *Internal modification in student-to-student situations*

The same result of overuse of *can* in the head acts indicated earlier in the previous section on student-to-instructor formal situations is also significant in student-to-student situations. Omani students score high in its use with a total of 89 tokens (38%), whereas American students produce only 11 items (9%). In contrast, the use of the past auxiliaries *could* and *would* is low compared to the American use of the same verbs in the head acts. Americans produce 22 instances of *could* (18% of the total modifiers for this group of situations), while Omanis score 38 of this auxiliary (16%). Turning now to *would*, American informants used it 23 times (18%) while Omani informants only scored 4 (2%). Similar results were obtained in the student-to-instructor situations described in 4.1.3.1.1, especially with regards to the overuse of *can* by Omani students. In the current situations with lower rating of imposition, American students also used *can* more often than in the student-to-instructor situations but still less often than *could* or *would* and therefore, in smaller percentage than Omanis (see Appendix D for more

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<sup>89</sup> Stating requests in negative question form, as in *Couldn't you grant me an extension?* is claimed in Trosborg (1995) to downtone the expression of the expectations of the request being granted. Other nuances may also be present in some examples, since for instance the previous negative request also seems to give the request a flavor of it being a suggestion made by the student.

detailed scores in the data). As indicated in 4.1.3.1.1.1, this distribution might be connected with a one-to-four relation between the Arabic language phrase conveying these meanings and the four major modals in English sentences of this type. When such relations obtain, and before the differential aspects of the English modals are acquired by the Arabic learner, *can* is taken as a default modal corresponding to the Arabic phrase, the other three modals being used much less commonly regardless of the formality of the situation.

It is also worth pointing out that Americans produced more utterances with *would* than with *could*. This higher frequency of *would* among American students over *could* in student-to-student situations might be due to the context provided by the prompts. Most of them can be interpreted as appeals for commitments from the hearer to fulfill the request, which then trigger students to use *would* in situations such as #2 (join to see an instructor) and #7 (help in studying), rather than *could*, which is mainly used to appeal for ability.

There are other differences worth mentioning in the use of syntactic downgraders. Omanis use the modal *may* strategy 7 times (3% of the modifiers), whereas Americans never use it. One might consider the use of *may* as an attempt to mitigate the request; yet, it is not in the same level of mitigation as the past tense modal *might* or *could*. Moreover, as indicated in 4.1.3.1.1.1, usage of *may* need not indicate a real control of this modal as a mitigating modifier. In fact, it is very often used in requests with person other than the first person *I* as in the following examples, from the same informant in student-to-instructor situations (a) and in student-to-student situations (b):

(37) a. *May you help me and explain that again for me*

b. *May you come with me to my instructor*

We can conclude that this use of *may* is an interlanguage variant of *can* without clear connections with politeness and mitigation and in any case different from native *may*.

Turning now to internal modification strategies different from the use of modals, we only find a significant difference in the use of subjective embedding, which is quite salient in American students (12 times in situations #2 and #4, that is, 10% of the internal modifiers used) while Omanis use it far less commonly (2 times in situation #5 only, reaching only 4% of internal modification tokens). It may be possible to relate the frequency rate of subjective embedding and long forms in student-to-instructor and student-to-student situation. American students use more subjective embedding and fewer long forms in the latter. Long forms are expected to occur more in situations with higher rate of imposition, so their frequency declines in student-to-student situations, where, on the other hand, subjective embedding of the type *I think that ...* can be used without restriction in a colloquial environment. Omani students only used subjective embedding, lacking the ability to use the more formal long forms, and they used subjective embedding slightly more in student-to-student situations like Americans (2% in situation #10 in student-to-instructor situation and 4% in situation 5 in the student-to-student situations). Finally, with respect to conditional clause downgraders, one can observe an increase in percentages in situations in which there is a less level of imposition. It is not clear why this should be the case and whether this is a real correlation or just an idiosyncrasy of our data. In principle, acknowledging the existence of conditions for granting the request, usually dependant

on the addressee, helps the speaker save the hearer’s face and it is not clear why this strategy is more used in situations with lesser level of imposition and with classmates than with instructors.

The table below provides total percentage scores summarizing the use of syntactic downgraders in student-to-student situations.<sup>90</sup>

Situation	Group	Can	Could	Shall	Should	Will	Would	May	Sub. Embedding	Long form	Cond. clause
2	OMANI	36	11	2	2	0	2	11	0	0	4
	AMERICAN	12	0	0	4	8	28	0	8	0	16
4	OMANI	30	13	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
	AMERICAN	0	4	0	0	0	12	0	4	0	0
5	OMANI	30	12	0	2	2	2	0	4	0	4
	AMERICAN	0	4	0	4	4	12	0	0	0	4
7	OMANI	40	19	0	0	2	4	2	0	0	13
	AMERICAN	16	28	0	0	0	24	0	0	8	0
9	OMANI	53	23	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0
	AMERICAN	16	44	0	0	0	16	0	0	0	0

Table 13. Syntactic Downgraders in student-to-student situations.

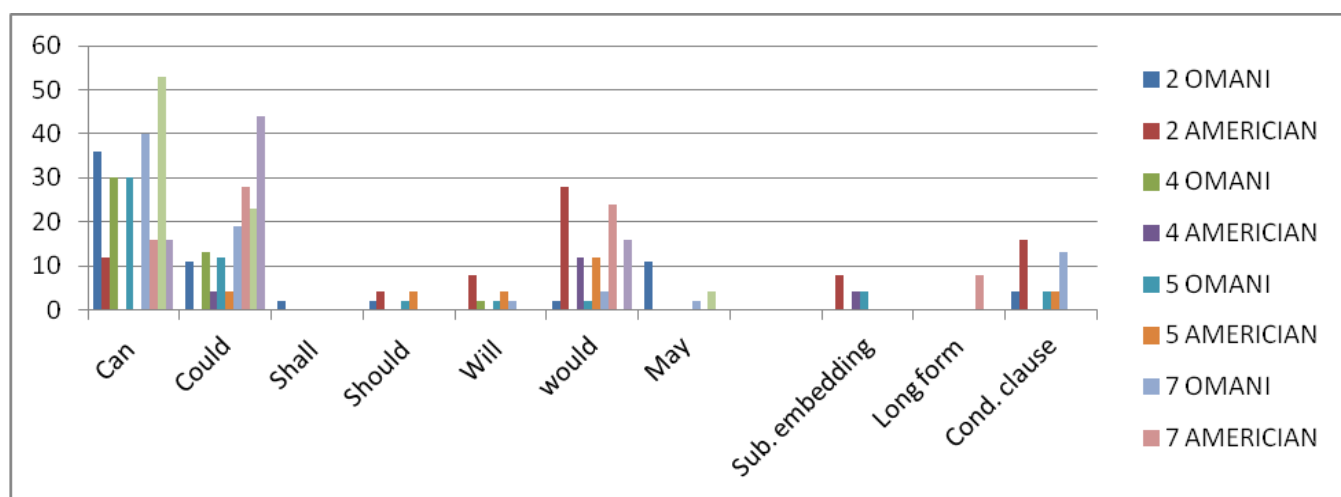


Figure 11. Syntactic Downgraders in student-to-student request situations.

<sup>90</sup> No instances of the negation strategy were found in the data, although the scoring key initially contained this category. Therefore, just as in student-to-instructor table 11, this strategy has not been assigned in any columns in the following, student-to-student table.

Before turning to other types of strategy modifiers in request formation, it may be worth pointing out that some of the differences that have been observed in the previous section between Omani EFL students and native speakers of English have been reported in similar terms in studies devoted to other types of EFL learners. For instance, as indicated repeatedly in the previous section, Omani speakers overuse modification with *can* while they underuse morphologically past tense modals like *could/would*. This is especially evident in student-to-instructor situations where these forms are more common in native speakers due to their added politeness level. In the discussion of these facts, reference has been made to the low competence level, especially in pragmatic skills, as a possible explanation. The underlying assumption mentioned in Chapter I that at least some of the pragmatic shortcomings might be related to cultural differences has not been mentioned as a possible explanation of these facts. In fact, this seems to be a fairly general interlanguage effect as opposed a culture bound effect. According to this, these differences would indicate that there is a lack of knowledge by the Omanis students in the use of past tense auxiliaries and other possible strategies that are used to form polite requests. It is then normal to find similar problems attested for speakers of very different languages and cultures. Thus, similar results were obtained in a study by Takahashi (2001) of Japanese learners where the use of *would/could you VP* and *would it be possible VP* in requests was researched. Japanese learners were unable to determine the equivalent of these forms in Japanese and Takahashi describes her learners as lacking pragmalinguistic knowledge.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> It is particularly interesting that the study targeted Japanese students given that the Japanese culture and even language is very sensitive to politeness. This shows that developmental issues are fundamental in interlanguage, even if L1 and its culture already might help in the acquisition of some linguistic or pragmatic competences.

As a final remark regarding internal modification, there is one type of general communication strategy, which may also be used in the formation of requests in ways which are akin to the internal modifiers we have been discussing in this section. It is not only the choice of strategy and head act verb that affects the illocutionary force of request. There are also some other perspectives that enclose the relationship between the speaker vs. the hearer. According to Blum-Kulka (1989), avoiding naming a hearer as an actor, as for instance when using the 1<sup>st</sup> person, can lower the level force of the form of the request. The 1<sup>st</sup> person places the focus on the speaker's needs, taking the weight from the demand that is being made on the hearer. A request could also be softened by excluding reference to the cost to the hearer from the expressions, so that for instance a speaker-oriented request like *Can I borrow this electric drill?* is more polite than the listener-oriented one *Could you lend me this electric drill?* (Leech, 1983).<sup>92</sup> As a general strategy, speaker versus hearer orientation is not easily classified as a internal modification of the head act or as a lexical type of modification. Speaker versus hearer orientation is discussed here simply because it involves the choice of the 1<sup>st</sup> versus 2<sup>nd</sup> person. This choice, in turn, conditions the type of verb that is used to indicate the act, so it might also be possible to discuss these facts as part of lexical modification. We discuss this orientation here because we reserve the label lexical modification for words like *please* which are directly connected with a type of speech act, in this case a request.

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<sup>92</sup> The universality of this distinction in the English request form does not seem to be culturally bound and regardless of the lack of direct linguistic matching between modal forms in English and the impersonal Arabic expression *Is it possible that ...* (see section 4.1.3.1.1.1) the head act itself can be presented as borrowing or lending with the same perspective change obtained in English. However, even though the orientation is semantically based in pairs like giving/taking, coming/going, borrowing/lending, the choice of one verb over the other forces the speaker to use the 1<sup>st</sup> or the 2<sup>nd</sup> person and this might interact with other cultural parameters of individuality, politeness, ...etc.

The politeness differential implied in the 1<sup>st</sup> versus 2<sup>nd</sup> person perspective can be clearly observed in our data, in which it is also possible to check for frequency of use of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person in the head act of requests formed by the two target groups. Omani students used 1<sup>st</sup> person in the 10 situations 80 times (34%), whereas Americans used it 71 times (57%). The American percentage of use is higher, perhaps because of a certain emphasis on directness and independence of that culture. The Omani students' score in using the 2<sup>nd</sup> person is correspondingly higher, reaching 101 tokens and 43%, which nearly doubles the Americans figures (45 instances and 23%). In finding a possible explanation for these figures, we can resort again to the idea of "eastern" cultural indirectness (Hall, 1976). From this perspective, it would be possible to attribute this attitude to the difference and categorization of cultures according to which while Arabic culture is categorized within the group of high-context and less direct culture, American culture is regarded as low-context and more direct.

#### **4.1.3.2. *Lexical/phrasal downgrader modifiers***

Lexical/phrasal downgraders are words or expressions which serve the function of mitigating request speech acts. Trosborg (1995) identifies different elements which can all help soften the request and ingratiate the speaker with the addressee of the request. First and foremost, a direct polite request expressions like *please* is clearly working on the hearer's face by overtly begging for something but this is only one of the many lexical/phrasal downgraders that speakers use. *Would you mind* is a consultative device which overtly asks for hearer's consent; words like *perhaps*, *possibly* downplay the level of imposition that the request is making on the hearer; a phrase like *just a second* minimizes the time the request will involve on the hearer, therefore,

also minimizing its cost; a similar effect can be achieved by expressions like *kind of* or *sort of* which add some vagueness to the elements they modify and also indicating lesser directness and commitment, etc; the ubiquitous *you know, I mean*, as a last example, serve the function of involving the listener or accepting the need to be clearer to the hearer. Only two of these downgraders were used by both groups of students, *please* and consultative phrases, which, as indicated above, have a mitigating function and, in the case of the latter, involve the listener directly in an attempt to get agreement (Barron 2008).

Trosborg (1995) in her study of Danish learners of English also states that even the highest proficiency group lagged behind native speakers regarding the use of internal and external modification devices, including downgraders. On the other hand, Economidou-Kogetsidis (2009:102), concentrating now on the use of *please*, reports less frequent use of these downgrader among Greek EFL learners, stating that “Internal modifiers such as ‘*please*’ and the consultative device can be seen as negative politeness devices that aim is to minimize impositions and thus it comes as no surprise that they were favored more by the English native speakers.” It is quite likely that the frequency of overt politeness markers like *please* might in fact be related to cultural factors rather than proficiency development since cultures differ in the extent and use conditions for this element. The data in the present study seems to show that Omani students overuse *please* as a lexical downgrader compared to the Americans. This differs from the relative frequency of use of other consultative devices as we will see later. The use of *please* in the Omanis’ responses as nonnative speakers can be regarded as a way to strengthen their speech act to be conceived only as a request (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Students identify this word as the ready-use easy marker that automatically turns the utterance to a polite request

over all other politeness markers we are discussing. This notion is confirmed by Soler, Flor and Jorda (2005) who also note that this politeness marker requires less pragmalinguistic competence than other strategies such as downtoning. The Omani students' tendency to use this marker leads them to overuse, sometimes attaching it to every single request utterance. This result, therefore, confirms what some other previous studies found on the use of this marker, such as in Færch & Kasper (1989), House (1989) and Barron (2003). Economidou-Kogetsidis (2009) states that these examples of overuse were seen as a result from the marker's double function as illocutionary force indicator and transparent mitigator. The following Omani examples show the double function of this lexical marker, as illocutionary force indicator (38) and as a transparent mitigator (39):

(38) *Please Waleed, try to come to me at 2 pm. I need you.*

(39) *Please Fatima, if you don't mind I would like you to help me.*

Notice that the use of *please* as a mitigation device is a more advanced and native-like strategy. It is more advanced than the self evident illocutionary marking that we can find in (38), where *please* is overtly and almost single-handedly making the utterance a polite request as opposed to an order. On the other hand, in (39) this word is forming part of a series of ingratiating devices along with the *if you don't mind* and *I would like*. It is understandable then that in our data *please* is used by Americans less often and mostly as a mitigator as illustrated in the following examples:

(40) *Can I please receive an extension?*

(41) *Professor, will you please go over the lesson I missed during your office hours?*

Notice also that American students use *please* following the subjects rather than at the very beginning of the utterance. The latter placement is cogent and consistent with its illocutionary force function. The request is immediately identified as such at the beginning of the utterance. The frequency of the Omani group's use of *please* as a lexical downgrader is 62% (147 instances), while the American group's score is far lower, with 9 instances (7%). Figure 12 below shows the frequency of use of *please* as a downgrader across all 10 situations by both groups of students.

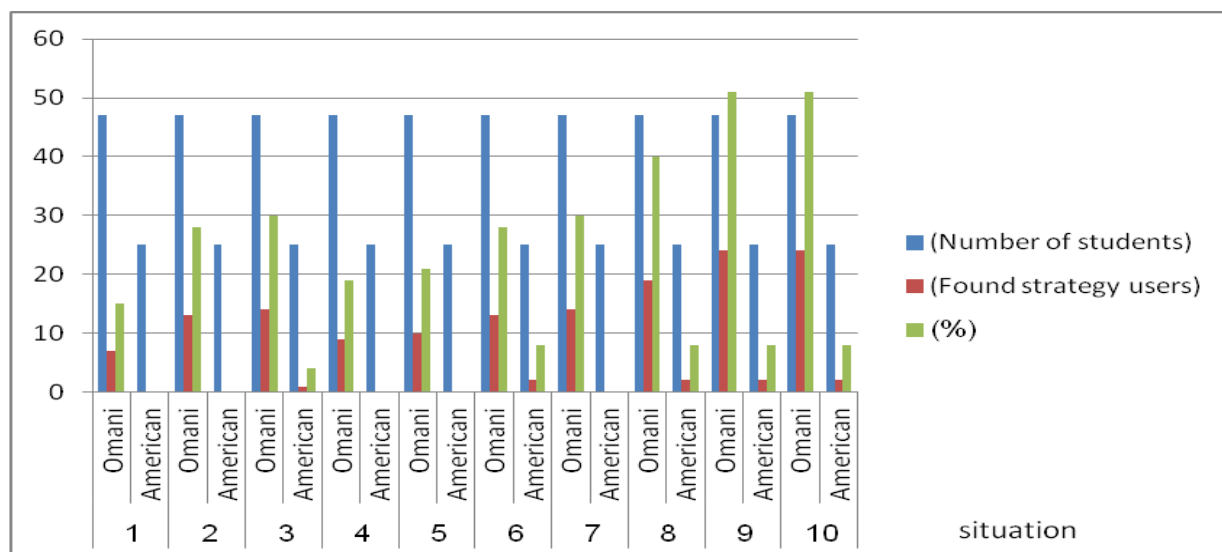


Figure 12. Frequency of Lexical/Phrasal downgraders (*Please*) in request situations 1-10.

Frequency figures are actually reversed in the use of consultative device markers in the data, that is, expressions which explicitly look for the hearer's consent. Examples that occurred in the students' data of the use of consultative device are as follows:

(42) *Excuse me, would you mind to discuss with me about the test?* (Omani)

(43) *Please Fatima, if you don't mind I would like you to help me.* (Omani)

(44) *Prof. Simona, would it be possible to see you later today to go over the information I missed in class yesterday?* (American)

(45) *Peter, would you like to take a coffee break? I need break from this.* (American)

As we can see from Figure 13 below, American students chose to use the consultative device statistically more frequently than Omani students. This result is compatible with what other previous studies reveal about non-native speakers of English with respect to the use of this downgrader device (Kasper 1981, House and Kasper 1987, Færch & Kasper 1989 and Ogiermann 2009). The latter adds that it is a negative politeness strategy and the preference for it among English speakers is normal and culture specific.<sup>93</sup> Economidou-Kogetsidis (2009) also attributes this choice by British English speakers (who can perhaps be assumed to be comparable to the American subjects of this study) to a cultural perspective as their culture is characterized by a negative politeness orientation favoring tact, individuality and avoiding impositions. Thus, by using consultative modifiers like *would you mind ...*, the speaker consults with the hearer h/his willingness to carry out the request, therefore avoiding imposition and acknowledging h/his face. The American group data shows that their total frequency of use of this device is 42 (34%) with the highest score registered in situations #3 (request to explain something), #8 (recommendation letter) and #10 (extend deadline of project). In contrast, the Omanis' score is only 6 (3%). Figure 13 below shows the percentage frequency of the consultative device distribution among American and Omani students in all situations.

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<sup>93</sup> Consultative device is a negative strategy because it is used to maintain a distance between S and H as oppose to positive strategy that is used to sustain social closeness between S and H. Thus, since it is a negative politeness strategy, it is culture specific and in some languages it is very rare such as in German language (Ogiermann 2009).

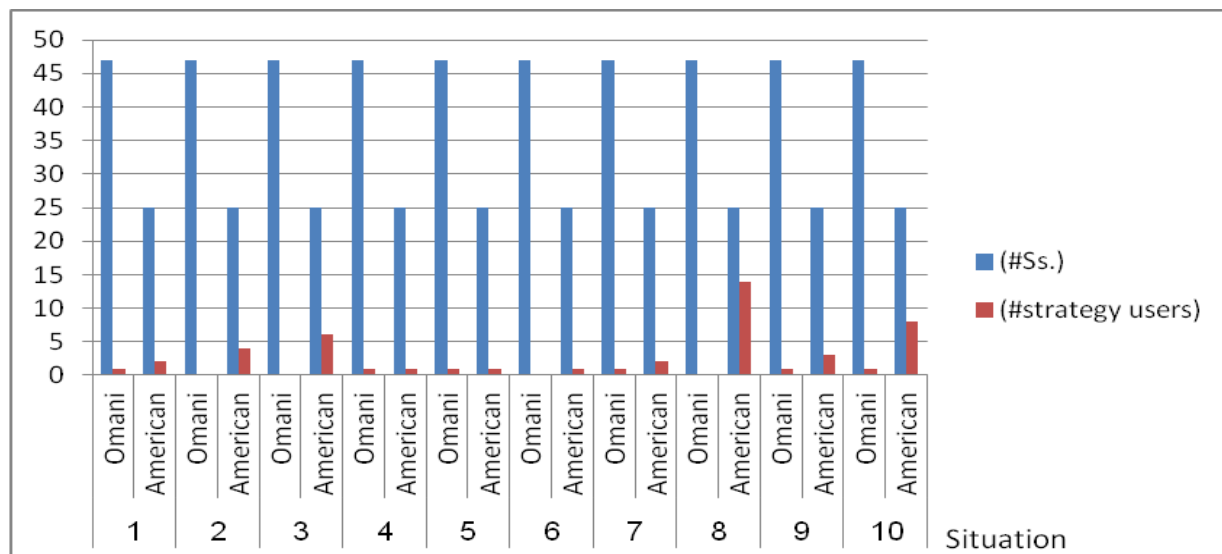


Figure 13. Frequency of Consultative Device (CD) in request situations 1-10

We turn now to an examination of external request modification in our samples.

#### 4.1.4. External modification

External modifiers are the elements that appear in the immediate linguistic context surrounding the request head act (Sifianou, 1999). Grounders (expressions like *I was sick yesterday* providing a background for the requests, in this case a request for tutoring) are the external modifiers used most frequently and they are the elements that display biggest difference of use if we compare Omani learners and American native students. Sweetening and cost minimizing are the two external modification devices that could be ranked as second, used with lower frequencies than grounding. Sweetening devices are flattering comments which act on the hearer's self image making the request more acceptable, while cost minimizing tries to achieve

the same goal by making the request sound as not at all burdening on the hearer.<sup>94</sup> According to Economidou-Kogetsidis (2009) external modification devices do not affect the utterances to realize the act but they embed the context and modify the illocutionary force. The following are full requests from the informants including external modifiers:

- (46) *In order to participate in this activity I need a letter of recommendation, would you willing to write one for me?*
- (47) *I'm sorry, I was too sick to attend the class yesterday, would you mind explaining ...?*
- (48) *Hi Farah, you're really good at explaining grammar, could you meet up and go over some of it? I have some questions and would really appreciate the help.*

Ogiermann (2009) elaborates that the role of grounders as external modification devices is to provide a reason for making the requests and may increase the hearers' willingness to comply with these requests. To the extent that external modification is a cognitive strategy without direct specific linguistic correlate, one might assume that it would be employed in approximately similar proportions among natives and non-natives. Studies, however, show high diversity results of their investigation on the use of external modification devices by non-native language learners. Some studies support the assumption that non-natives use more external

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<sup>94</sup> The underlined part in the following sentences are further examples of each of the three major types of external modifiers:

- i. *Martin, I missed yesterday class, could I borrow your notes?* (Grownder).
- ii. *You have a beautiful handwriting, would it be possible to borrow your notes for a few days?* (Sweetner).
- iii. *Would you mind explaining this lesson to me for a couple of minutes?* (cost minimize).

devices than their native counterparts (see Kasper 1981, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1986, Færch & Kasper 1989, and Marmaridou 1987, Kasper 1989, Sifianuo 1992, Weizman 1993, Mulken 1996, Hassal 2001, Otçu and Zeyrek 2006 as cited in Economidou-Kogetsidis 2009). On the other hand, some other studies support the assumption that natives use more external devices than non-natives (Edmonson and House 1991, as cited in Economidou-Kogetsidis 2009, Trosborg 1995 and Barron 2003). In our data, Omanis show a lower use of grounding with a frequency of 43% (100 times) over Americans, who score 72% (90 instances). The highest scores are registered in situations #3, 6 and 9. Appendix E gives detailed distribution of grounding and other external strategies across all situations.

There are two possible approaches that can help us understand the above results and the underuse of external devices by some Omani students. The first approach is that their linguistic proficiency level does not help them to support the head acts in the request forms produced with external devices and they have not yet acquired the skill to use them in the language they are learning. This assumption is supported by studies such as Hill (1997), Rose (2000) and Bella (2012), who suggest that these devices are acquired mostly by advanced language learners. To confirm this assumption, there is a need to investigate the linguistic proficiency of these students and compare it with their native language output in similar situations, which is beyond the scope of this study. While proficiency is related to the non-native underuse of this device, it does not necessarily entail that the strategy itself has not been acquired. Such cognitive devices are

probably language independent but since they have to be expressed by linguistic behavior, they are also limited by proficiency.<sup>95</sup>

The second approach to these facts would relate them to the “cultural dimension” of both American and Arabic cultures explained earlier,<sup>96</sup> which describes Arabic learners as tending to use implicit style and indirect language in speech. There are many common expressions that clarify and specify the speakers’ style in communicating messages in speech. In the American culture, sayings such as “*Say what you mean*”, “*Don’t beat around the bush*” and “*Get to the point*” (Levine as cited in Zaharna 1995), reflect this attitude in American communication style. On the other hand, in Arabic we find sayings such as “*The ideal phrase is that which is short and to the point*”,<sup>97</sup> “*The smarter you get the less you speak*”,<sup>98</sup> and “*If talk is silver then silence is gold*”.<sup>99</sup> To some extent, the second approach to explain this fact predicts that such cultural differences would affect and shape the Omani and American speech styles. However, broad cultural hypotheses cannot easily produce specific linguistic data that can be easily checked against facts. Throughout this study we are trying to point out which concrete effects can be attributed to cultural differences, although the balance between cultural and proficiency explanations remain debatable.

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<sup>95</sup> This would then be a different situation from the one that we have described above regarding the use of *could* vs. *can*, which can be analyzed as being more directly related to linguistic proficiency than grounding or sweetening. These can be assumed to be strategies also present in the students’ L1, and may be constrained by proficiency level, as indicated in the text, but also by more socio-cultural rather than individual variables, as indicated below.

<sup>96</sup> Cf. section 4.1.3.1.1.2.

<sup>97</sup> ‘خير الكلام ما قل ودل’

<sup>98</sup> ‘إذا تم العقل نقص الكلام’

<sup>99</sup> ‘إذا كان الكلام من فضة فالسكوت من ذهب’

There are some final differences between the two groups, which are not statistically significant but which are, nonetheless, worth mentioning. Omani students use sweetener marking only once in situation #5<sup>100</sup> (change a topic of presentation) while this strategy is used 9 times by their counterparts mainly in situation #5.<sup>101</sup> The occurrence of sweeteners in the same situation for the two groups might be related to the fact that in this prompt students engaged in team work must negotiate the change of topic. Team work adds an extra potential for a conflict, which can be deflected by the use of external modifiers. Americans also use cost-minimizing markers 7 times (7%) and Omanis used them only 3 times (2%). Americans also use a disarmer marker only once (.8%) whereas Omanis use it 4 times (2%).<sup>102</sup> There seems to be no balance in the use of external modification strategies between the two groups, with a higher use percentage for Americans, especially, in deploying sweetening and cost minimizing strategies. However, we cannot draw strong conclusions from the scores for these two strategies due to the small number of tokens and percentages. Figure 14 below shows the above differences in percentages of the use of external modification strategies and other strategies not expressly touched upon due to the fact that they are represented by a very limited number of examples or can only be found in one

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<sup>100</sup> An example of a sweetener produced by an Omani student is the following: *It's a nice topic but can you please change it?*

<sup>101</sup> The following example is a sweetener produced by an American student: *That's an interesting idea. I was thinking about taking it in a different direction. What do you think about (x)?*

<sup>102</sup> Disarmer expressions lower the risk of rejection by anticipating and attempting to eliminate any possible offence that the hearer might perceive in the request. An expression like *sorry to disturb you...* acknowledges an interruption of the speaker on the hearer and expresses concern and care for the latter, therefore, possibly disarming the burden of the request and a possible negative reaction to interruption.

group and not in the other. This is the case of preparatory remarks or a strategy to obtain pre-commitments from the hearer.<sup>103</sup>

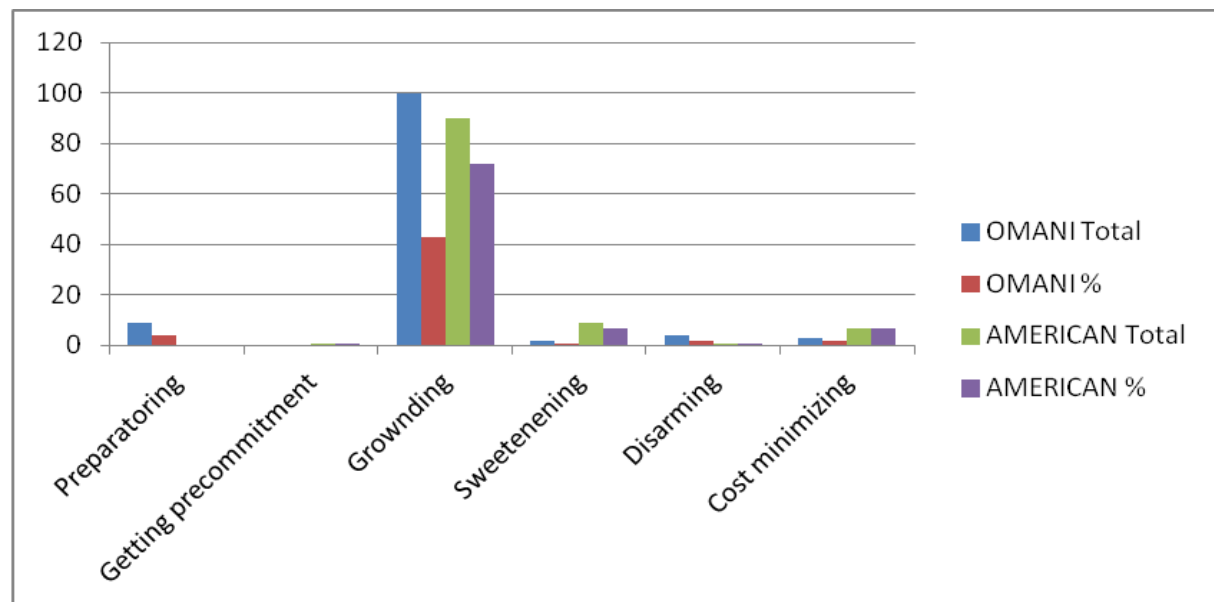


Figure 14. Total and % use of external modifiers in request situations.

The data findings in external strategy use show that American students score higher percentages and more variety of use of these strategies. The more restricted use of external modifiers by non-native Omani students confirms the findings in Trosborg's (1995) study of Danish learners of

<sup>103</sup> Preparatory expressions prepare the request in the sense that they announce the intention to express it, as in phrases like *can I ask you something please?* or *Can I ask something from you?*, both from the same informant. The strategy to obtain a pre-commitment refers transparently to the uttering of expressions before the request which can be interpreted as an attempt to obtain a confirmation of consent from the hearer, as in following extremely polite request to change the topic of a presentation from an American informant:

- i. *Well Ray, it is not a topic that really interest me, but if you are really passionate about it perhaps we can combine it with something that interest bot of us.*

The effect of the downtoner *perhaps* and the suggestion to combine topics, seems to be negotiating the change of topics by expressly requesting the classmate's overt consent.

English, who also employ these strategies less commonly than the native control group. These strategies are less culture bound and more related to personal style, but again proficiency levels might possibly hinder their appearance among non-native speakers. The request in the previous footnote, for instance, requires a very high level of proficiency and command of rhetorical skills to convey the idea that the speaker finds that the topic selected by the classmate is perhaps uncommon and out of place, as suggested by the lexical choices made by the speaker (see for instance the use of the word *passionate*).

External modifiers of requests as described in this section will be the last aspect of request formation examined in this chapter. Before turning to a summary and evaluation of requests strategies as a whole, the following subsection will be devoted to a special type of pragmatic problem for Arabic learners of English, which, although not exclusively related with request formation, recurs in the data elicited from the Omani informants and constitute a good example of pragmatic inadequacy largely disconnected from purely linguistic proficiency.

#### **4.1.5. Pragmatic inadequacy associated with cultural differences**

There is a cultural factor accounting for the poor performance in the use of non-conventionally and conventionally indirect strategies, namely, the fact that Arabic culture can be regarded as a high-context one with a preference for implicit indirect output that relies heavily on the hearer to decode the meaning. This cultural factor could be added as another explanation for the choice of Omani students to use shorter simple phrases with these types of indirect strategies.

One type of pragmatic inadequacy observed in the Omani data is the use of the title *teacher* as a vocative element to attract the instructor's attention in the Omani data. This is a

good example of the pragmatic inadequacy type that prompted this research. There is nothing linguistically objectionable about this lexical item and in fact, it is perceived by the Omani learners as a polite and respectful element in their production of English. Discussing the use of this word in this study amounts to claiming that this is a contextually inappropriate word in the context in which it is uttered by Omani students, as described below. The focus here is to explain cultural differences between the two target groups and draw awareness of the direct transfer of L1 into L2 learning context and, in this case, the Omani context.

Overuse of this word in forming requests, and also using it in other pragmatic speech acts such as in apologies, leads the Omani students to pragmatically inadequate language. Automatically transferring a pragmatically polite element in one language produces an impolite effect in the target language. This honorary treatment in Arabic does not carry over to English in a direct translation of the Arabic word *ustath* into the English word *teacher*. It is not only that the respectful overtones of the Arabic term are missing in the English term, but that the latter can only be constructed as a respectful term in very early general school settings. By associating the second language classroom with a general school setting and the second language teacher as a general school teacher, there occurs both a slightly disturbing dislocation of the learning situation and perhaps even a slight “demotion” of the language teacher.

The problems related to the use of this word surface clearly in the examples elicited from the Omani informants and contrast with the data from American speakers. Students are influenced by the cultural use of the word *ustath* in the Omani community and direct word translation from L1 to L2 leads to the pragmatic failure mentioned above. Addressing instructors is also common among American students, but the only forms of address that can be found are

personal names or titles like *doctor* or *professor*. On the contrary, the Omani students' data show considerable numbers of addresses to the instructor using *teacher*, with a frequency of use reaching 29 occurrences, that is, 12%.<sup>104,105</sup> The Arabic word *ustath* is a general word used by Arabic speakers to mark a social distance of respect to a recipient holding higher position in the community or to associate it with the names of individuals working in highly respected professions such as a lecturer, a lawyer, a journalist or a writer. This word contains politeness components such as power differential between the speaker (S) in this case the student, and the hearer (H), instructor, who represents the higher power. It also contains a component of the social distance between S and H where H is in a higher position than S, and of imposition since in the Arabic culture the H to whom this word is addressed belongs to a higher rank. When an Arabic speaker uses this word s/he is taking into consideration the concept of keeping face, *self face* and *other face* in politeness theory. By using the vocative expression, the speaker tries to keep the hearer's positive face as a respected individual while at the same time constructing his social face as a respectful individual. In many western cultures it is generally accepted to call school teachers and academic faculty and staff sometimes with their first names or their chosen nicknames, without their titles. It is even fairly common for higher ranking individuals to indicate to their hearers to use their first name on or shortly after their first encounter. However, this is considered culturally impolite and rude for most academics in the Omani academic formal

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<sup>104</sup> This is not restricted to the Arabic culture but can also be found in other cultures, which attach prestige to teachers. In this respect, the usage of *ustath* (أستاذ) is similar to the use of words like *sensei* in Japanese or *xiansheng* in Chinese.

<sup>105</sup> Students have also used *ustath* in student-to-student situations several times. This can be attributed to a contamination inside the narrow context of the questionnaire, where sometimes the student may carry over this address term from one situation to the next (remember that student-to-instructor and student-to-students situations were not ordered in the questionnaire).

context and only rarely suggested as formal treatment by individuals at any time of the relation.<sup>106</sup> Western instructors in Omani universities sometimes encourage the students to address them by their first names precisely because they want to reproduce some western higher educational patterns, where a teacher is not socially perceived as the repository of knowledge but more as a facilitator of its acquisition by the students.

The culture of politeness conceived in this way is still an important feature of the Omani community, as it is also generally so in almost all Arabic communities. In these communities speakers very rarely call a stranger during their first encounter by h/his first name at least at the beginning of a conversation. Most of the time, this is so for a long period even if the relationship continues until it reaches friendship level. First names are accompanied by expressions like *akh(t)* ‘brother’ or *ustath* ‘teacher’.<sup>107</sup> Hence, they overuse this word with professors or lecturers holding high educational degrees but not belonging to the same cultural realm.<sup>108</sup>

The transfer from the Omani cultural practice is mostly restricted in our data to the use of the word *teacher* instead of the instructor’s name to attract the latter’s attention. It should be

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<sup>106</sup> From a personal experience of my first days studying in a western context, I realized that it is widely accepted to call a professor with h/his first name without a title without fearing being impolite. In many cases they actually propose their preferences as their first names. However, it was not easy for a student coming from a different culture to comply with this custom, since it is felt to break politeness rules and traditional etiquette of their own culture. Cultural uses may actually change quite quickly in this respect. Thus, in the Spanish context a shift to an “antiauthoritarian” attitude occurred after the Franco dictatorship. In the past, teachers insisted from students to use respectful treatment (with title, last name and *Usted*) but after Franco era equality has been valued; this has meant that the *Usted* treatment has receded, and the figure of the “teacher” has also lost much its “authority” overtones.

<sup>107</sup> Therefore, Omani students hold on to this cultural practice when entering a university context and continue addressing their professors or lecturers with *teacher*.

<sup>108</sup> The source of this high prestige position for teachers is deeply rooted in the Islamic culture where teachers are likened to a prophet because they transmit knowledge. This image is often mentioned in the poems by the Egyptian poet Ahmed Shawqi, well known in the Arabic and Islamic world in general.

pointed out that the misuse of a respectful term is not just not perceived as respectful in the other language. Rather, it actually causes an impoliteness effect. The reason might be that this form of address seems to be linked to respect situations in primary school and lower levels of education, so that language teacher so addressed may feel “demoted” and taken back to a totally different educational context. In the preliminary questionnaire distributed to UoN instructors concerning awareness of pragmatic failures (see section 3.2), an English language instructor pointed at this word as a source of impoliteness:

(49) “I have been in Oman for a long time now but I remember how I felt in the beginning when students shouted TEACHER loudly to get attention and I felt they were impolite saying I want marks, teacher.”

The impoliteness effect is compounded in the second example provided by the instructor by the bare usage of the verb *want*, which is not even softened by making recourse of the politeness marker *please*. But, certainly the usage of *teacher* in that expression adds to the overall rudeness of the sentence. The two sources of impoliteness of this expression provide a good example of some of the pragmatic failures we have been discussing throughout this section on request. On one hand, a request is worded as a direct one with a verb expressing desire without any concern for the addressee and lacking any of the strategies described for indirect requests. On the other hand, the request is accompanied by a term of address, which although polite in the speaker’s L1 produces an impoliteness effect when directly transferred to the L2. The following section summarizes the main findings of the preceding section on request formation by Omani students.

#### 4.1.6. Concluding remarks

The analysis of results of the requests formed by the two groups of students (Omanis and Americans) confirms some similarities and differences between them. The students' preferences for using indirect request strategies in the student-to-instructor and student-to-student situations are driven by the three main pragmatic factors: degree of imposition, social power and social distance. Additionally, cultural differences have been shown to affect and modulate the preferences in the production of some of the strategies.

Both groups of students in our study used only strong hints. The results show that there is a mild linguistic difference in the structure of the non-conventionally indirect hint utterances, which are relatively highly employed by American students in both student-to-instructor and student-to-student request situations compared to the Omanis. The low use of hints (3%) by Omanis and relatively low use (10%) by Americans in the latter situations is, to a certain extent, not a surprising result due to the fact that these situations have a fairly lower degree of imposition, being addressed to a lower rank interlocutor. What is a surprising result, however, is the lower percentage of hints in the student-to-instructor situations, since hints are the most indirect types of requests and seem particularly appropriate for situations with increased hierarchy ranking asymmetries between the interlocutors. There is also a difference between the two groups in the construction of the requests utterance with the hint strategy. The Omani students' hint utterances might be described as implicit utterances that could carry interpretations other than what they are intended to be, whereas the American students' utterances are more explicit and supported by external modifiers such as grounders, disarmers and sweeteners (cf. 4.1.5). Therefore, we assume that some Omani students showed partial success in the use of hints

and their limited linguistic ability prevented them from forming less ambiguous and vague hint utterances, which was evident in their implicit and inaccurate use of this strategy.

A closer look at the overall results shows that both groups use a ‘query preparatory’ ability strategy over other conventionally indirect strategies, with a clear overuse by Omanis of the auxiliary verb *can*. On the other hand, the American use of the past auxiliaries *could* and *would* is higher in all situations. Underuse of the latter auxiliaries by Omanis could be attributed to the lack of knowledge of how to use these auxiliaries in requests. These forms are pragmatically demanding for most Arab learners because, as mentioned earlier, there is no grammatical class of verbs called modal auxiliaries in Arabic (cf. chapter IV section 4.1.3.1.1.1) and a single impersonal expression stands for the modal content permission/possibility with no room for different degrees of politeness. The fact that we are paying attention to pragmatic skills as opposed to more restrictively linguistic skills does not imply that each of them might be exclusively involved in any specific problem that a learner of English might encounter. Most likely there will be a full range of possible combinations of problems presented by each of them to different degrees in different forms and functions that the EFL student must master. The overuse of *can* provides a good example of the intimate relationship between the two types of factors. The full pragmatic complexity of the *can/could/would/may/might* distinctions requires pragmatic teaching directly targeting it, especially in the case of Arab learners who lack easy correlates to those forms in their own language. While the actual linguistic forms are acquired and used in other contexts not associated with politeness, full proficiency will only be reached when the pragmatic uses are also acquired. This means that the learner may have acquired the

correct use of *would* in conditionals but still use *can* almost to the exclusion of other modals to construct a polite request.

The students' linguistic and pragmalinguistic ability is inadequate to deal with formal situations presented in the elicitation instrument, and this is partially explained as a result of L1 and L2 mismatches between Arabic and English. From a linguistic point of view, permission and possibility modality are expressed by syntactically main clauses of the type *hal min almumkin...* 'is it possible...'.<sup>109</sup> One can of course modulate politeness in the Arabic personal expression by adding preparatory phrases to the main predicate, which itself remains unchanged.<sup>110</sup> In the process of acquiring English, the first modal learnt is *can*, associated with the form of the past *could* and correlated with polite request. Since no politeness difference is reflected in the Arabic modal expression itself for *could*, it takes some time in the learning process to be able to express more politeness by strategies different from adding adjuncts attached to the unchanging modal expression as in their L1.

There are facts that cannot be easily linked to sociocultural factors and might originate in the acquisition process of the language. Thus, the speaker vs. listener orientation of some requests (*I borrow...vs. you lend...*, see section 4.1.4.1.2) requires a settled and resourceful

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<sup>109</sup> These phrases, sometimes, express the modal meaning without the added politeness that one find associated with the modal auxiliaries in English.

<sup>110</sup> The basic expression can be modified for instance as in the following examples (cf. 1.2):

- |    |                                   |                        |
|----|-----------------------------------|------------------------|
| i. | (min fadlik    law samaht)        | hal min almumkin an... |
|    | from offer.2    if permission.2sg | is from possible to    |
|    | '(could you /is it possible)      | is it possible to...'  |

This modifications increase the level of politeness but they still do not constitute direct correlates of the *can/could/would* distinctions in English. Notice that in English the basic modal verb can also be modified by the same mechanisms as observed in 1, which also create compounded politeness, but the basic distinctions of level of politeness are still carried by the modal verb.

mastery of the language and its pragmatic use. Such pragmatic proficiency level takes its time even for native speakers and might be beyond the capacity of average intermediate learners.

Proficiency considerations, on the other hand, can help us understand the overuse of the lexical downgrader *please*. There is a clear overuse of this word *please* in the Omani data in contrast to a preference for higher use of consultative device strategies in the American data. This lexical item by itself overtly marks any utterance as a request, becoming a very useful mechanism for learners who lack sufficient proficiency to manipulate language in more complex ways. The difference in the use of grounders as external modifiers, very prominent in American students but not so in Omanis, can also be referenced to the same linguistic aspect of pragmatic competence. Grounders require more extensive elaborations of the message by adding explanation for the request. This requires more extensive verbal behavior costly to the learner who cannot simply add a single lexical item such as *please* to instantiate the grounder strategy.

The results are fully compatible with the hypothesis in Chapter I, which claimed that Omani students of English would use fewer indirect request strategies. This has been shown to be the case in different ways. Firstly, the variety of strategies and modifiers employed by the American students is higher than the ones employed by Omani students. Secondly, Omani requests are shorter and combine only few strategies to modify the central speech act, producing requests which are perceived by natives as less polite than expected. In the third place, there exist often frequency differences in use for strategies which are shared by the two groups, so that the same strategy is often (although not always) used in different proportions in the two groups. In accounting for these contrasts, proficiency and sociocultural factors have been employed. These two factors do not stand at the same level since cultural effects must be conveyed by well-formed

language, so in a way proficiency is a prerequisite for request formation. However, some contrasts between the two groups have been claimed to be better understood if the cultural background is taken into consideration. From a practical perspective, Omani learners of English with sufficiently high proficiency level are still not producing native-like requests largely because language instructions does not usually address request formation or other pragmatic speech acts.

#### **4.2. Apologies**

After examining the data resulting from requests situations, we turn now to the analysis of the apology production by both groups in the other major pragmatic illocutionary act under investigation, namely apologies. Apologies present important challenges for the speaker from the perspective of face theory, more so than requests. At the same time, they have an important role in restoring relationships between speaker and hearer (Brown and Levinson1987). This aspect of apologies is emphasized by Grigspy (2007), who highlights their functions “in promoting and maintaining positive relationships with those who have experienced emotional or physical injury because of our errors”. The relationship healing function of apologies is also pointed out by Lazare (2004:1): “Apologies have the power to heal humiliations and grudges, remove the desire for vengeance, and generate forgiveness on the part of the offended parties. For the offender they can diminish the fear of retaliation and relieve the guilt and shame that can grip the mind with a persistence and tenacity that are hard to ignore. The result of that apology process, ideally, is the reconciliation and restoration of broken relationships.” Even so, in spite of the unquestionably positive consequences that accepted apologies might entail for the speaker, the tension that they

introduce to the maintenance of face make them extremely difficult acts. This is traditionally recognized in both the English and Arabic cultures, as can be observed through sayings in English such as *Sorry is the hardest word* or in Arabic like *Abandoning guilt is easier than apologizing*.<sup>111</sup>

The culture-specific nature of apologies has often been pointed out.<sup>112</sup> This means that they may also present challenges to the pragmatic competence of second language learners, since context and culture are two factors that affect the form of this speech act.

According to Olshtain and Cohen (1990), the apology speech act consists of five main strategies, and the analysis of the data elicited in these situations has been organized in terms of those strategies. The two general ones are “explicit expression of apology” on one hand, where, by the use of performative expressions like *I apologize*, the speaker overtly and explicitly performs the speech act, and ‘expression of responsibility’ on the other, where the speaker accepts the blame for the breach of the relationship that has to be amended by the apology. These two general strategies can conform an apology act in any situation. The remaining three strategies are situation-specific: “explanation of cause”, “offer of repair” and “promise of forbearance”. Semantically, all three reflect the content of the situation. These strategies constitute the base analysis of this study, in addition to other strategies used by our informants which will be also examined. Further ways to modify the speech act of apology will also be

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<sup>111</sup> ترك الذنب اسهل من الاعتذار

<sup>112</sup> Trouillot (cited in Bateineh and Bateineh 2008:797) glosses over that cultural specificity by observing that “what obtains as a satisfactory statement of remorse between two parties involved in an automobile accident in New York may not work between two Caribbean peasants involved in a land feud.”

considered, such as the internal modification introduced by intensifiers like *very*, *really* and *terribly*, or the denial strategy.

The section devoted to apologies is organized as follows. Section 4.2.1 introduces the situations in the questionnaire which prompted for apologies. The major apology forming strategies used by students will be discussed in section 4.2.2 where five strategies will be discussed in turn. Section 4.2.2.1 addresses the most important strategy in terms of prominence in the two groups, namely the expression of apologies through IFIDs. Before turning to the second most common strategy (acknowledgement of responsibility, discussed in section 4.2.2.3), section 4.2.2.2 offers a discussion of the intensification devices used by students in forming the expression of apology. This is discussed immediately after the presentation of apology IFIDs, since it is the latter expressions that intensifiers help the speaker to modulate. Less common types of strategies are considered next: explanation of cause (section 4.2.2.4), offer of repair (section 4.2.2.5) and promise of forbearance (4.2.2.6). Finally, in section 4.2.2.7 we turn to a discussion of denial mechanisms. A summary of the whole section of apologies and some concluding remarks will be offered in section 4.2.3. As in the case of requests, a contrastive analysis is attempted, so that in this section we are going to discuss differences and similarities between the apologies produced by Omani and American students in academic situational contexts. These situations are described in the following section.

#### **4.2.1. The apology situations in the questionnaire**

Before detailing the result of the analysis, let us summarize the types of situations that require apologies in our data collection instrument as they were given to the students. For ease of

reference, in this section we will number them as follows: #1 missing a homework, #2 admitting committing a mistake in argument, #3 deleting a file by mistake, #4 arriving late, #5 breaking a picture, #6 talking during a presentation, #7 missing an appointment, #8 lending own car, #9 making a poster and #10 going out for a trip. All observations will be based on the same factors that were previously implemented in discussions of requests (section 4.1 above): rating of imposition (R), social power (P) and social distance (D); the possible role of the cultural factor in apologies will also be examined. The situations are designed to elicit apologies from students and a qualitative descriptive method is implemented to discuss the data. The situations display different degrees of imposition, higher or lower depending on the addressee and factors such as power and distance (P, D). Some of the situations are student-to-instructor; although the hearer has social power over the speaker, power and distance are calculated from the point view of the speaker, so that a student-to-instructor situation is  $-P$  just as much as the student-to-student situation. In that same situations, social distance is high between the speakers ( $+D$ ). Other situations involve student-to-student relationships. As discussed in the request section 4.1, the latter, although less asymmetric than the former nonetheless qualify as “distant”. A colleague or a classmate is considered not to belong to the group of close friends or family members, the only ones that could be considered fully symmetrical and not distant. Therefore, D is considered to be high between the speakers.<sup>113</sup> Similarly, students do not have power over classmates that are not friends, justifying the classification of such situations as  $-P$ . The percentage of the apology

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<sup>113</sup> These categories are binary, that is only + or – values are considered, which is why both types of situations will be  $-D$  even though classmates are less distant than instructors. Binary classifications produce, in this case, a range of sub-categories which does not fully correspond to the complexity of real life relationships. However, binary classifications are useful as analytic tools that identify crucial factors for language use.

strategies used by the two groups under study is tallied and compared. Unlike the results in the previous section, no major differences have been found between the set of student-to-instructor and that of student-to-student situations, so that the discussion will address all situations as a whole without making subsets, unlike the exposition of the result in section (4.1).

#### **4.2.2. Overview of the use of apology strategies**

The contexts in the elicitation instrument are designed so they present social situations which might occur between student and instructor on one hand or student and colleague/classmate on the other, all of them within an academic community and requiring apologies from the student's (speaker) side. Accordingly, the degree of power/distance factors between interlocutors in these situations will be as -P +D. A general observation of the data collected shows that the American group uses more frequently than Omani students all strategies except for the "promise of forbearance" and "denial" strategies. The data also shows that along with the fundamental IFIDs, used by all groups, students also add further strategies to form apology utterances. Figure 15 below depicts more details of the percentages of use for each of the six categories in Omani and American students.

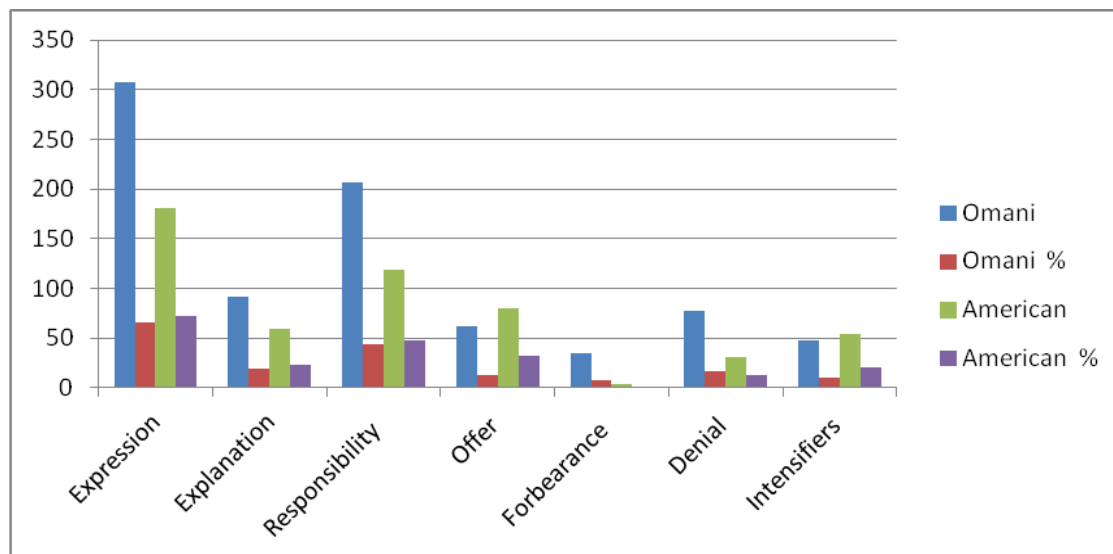


Figure 15. Total strategies in all student-to-instructor and student-to-student apology situations.

The next sections will discuss the specificities of each category in detail.

#### 4.2.2.1. *Expression of apology*

In this section we will look at explicit apology IFIDs (Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices), that is, the use of expressions such as *sorry* or *I apologize*, which overtly convey by themselves the illocutionary force of apology. The results show that the expression of regret *I'm sorry* is the most frequent apologetic device in the student data for both the Omani and American groups. Omanis employ this strategy in 65% of the utterances (307), and Americans employ it in 72% of their apologies (181). This strategy was systematically used by students of both groups as their primary apologizing mechanism, most often accompanied by another supporting strategy. Explicit apology IFIDs are typically placed at the beginning of the utterance, and very few of the students insert them at the end (less than 3% only in situations #1, 3 and 8), a fact to which we will return below.

The high frequency of this strategy has also been noted in other studies which targeted informants representing different languages and cultures. Thus, beginning and intermediate

learners have been shown to overuse expressions of apology in English (Rose 2000, Sabaté i Dalmau & Curell i Gotor 2007, Trosborg 1995).<sup>114</sup> Quite generally, the findings in these studies, including the present one, confirm the claim by Blum-Kulka et al (1989) that these acts are, to varying degrees, universal in most languages.

However, some situations depart from this common trend. Thus, the explicit appearance of IFIDs in situation #9 (making a poster) scores a relatively lower 36% among Omanis and 20% among Americans. This could be attributed to the low severity in the offense exemplified in this situation.<sup>115</sup> Similarly, there is a low frequency in situations #2, 3, 5, 8 and 10 among Omanis, which could be ascribed to the lower social distance between interlocutors and also, as in the previous case to mild offense contexts compared to other situations. These are precisely the student-to-student situations, which in the analysis of requests displayed differences which warranted their separation from student-to-instructor cases.<sup>116</sup> The relatively higher use of this strategy by American students seems to be consistent with the findings in Cohen, Olshtain, and Rosenstein (1986), which show that native speakers of American English have a tendency to frequently use explicit expressions of apology in all situations.

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<sup>114</sup> Similar results has been obtained by Olshtain (1989) for Hebrew, Canadian French and Australian; Olshtain and Cohen (1990) for Hebrew and American; House (1988) for British English and German; Færch and Kasper (1989) for Danish; Bergman and Kasper for Thai (1993); Ruzickova (1998) for Cuban Spanish; Wagner and Roebuck (2010) for (Cuernavaca) Mexican Spanish; Nureddeen (2007) for Sudanese Arabic; Afghary (2007) for Persian; Al-Zumor (2011) for Arabic, American and British English and Merzaei, Roohani, Esmaili (2012) for American English and Iranian.

<sup>115</sup> In all other situations the apology refers to obligations that have not been honored, whereas in situation #9 (making a poster to summarize what has been said in class) the student apologizes for the impossibility to do a future task.

<sup>116</sup> Not many facts that could be attributed to these differences emerge in the analysis of apologies, which is why we have not separated two sets of situations systematically unlike what has been done in section 4.1, but this does not mean that no difference whatsoever occurs, as these data show.

A difference in the realization of the explicit apology expression “*sorry*” surfaces in this study, since Omani students use it in 64% of their utterances, as opposed to 41% among Americans. This finding is compatible with Olshtain and Cohen (1990), who claim there is a difference between native and non-native speakers of English in the use of explicit apology utterances. Similarly, it is interesting to note that Omani students also prefer to use *excuse me* as an apology expression at the beginning of their utterances (18 times distributed in all situations except #6; the majority, 6 times, in situation #4).<sup>117</sup> However, at least some of the uses of this expression as in IFID by Omani students might not be good examples of apologetical IFIDs, since *excuse me* may be being used as an attention getter, where what the speaker asks to be excused is the interruption that opening a dialogue will cause on the hearer, rather than the object of the apology provided in the situation. The students’ L1 may be having some effect in this usage since expressions like *othran/ma’thiratan* (عذراً/معدرة) ‘excuse me’ can be equivalent to *excuse me* as an attention getter and mitigation for a request and to *sorry* as an IFID.<sup>118</sup>

In contrast, Americans use *excuse me* only once in situation #4 (see example 52 below) even though a significant number of them prefer to use *I apologize*’ (5 times), whereas Omanis use the latter only once. The saliency of apology IFIDs like *sorry* or *excuse me* among Omani students and quite generally among learners of English might be connected to the discussion on the overuse of *please* to overtly mark requests in section 4.1.3.2. Both *excuse me* and *sorry* are acquired early in the learning process as ready-use apology IFIDs, which can simply and overtly

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<sup>117</sup> As indicated above, *sorry* is also typically placed at the beginning of the utterance and only seldom at the end and then only by Omani students.

<sup>118</sup> Other translation of *excuse me* into Arabic language could be *law samaht* (لو سمحت) or *min fadlik* (من فضلك), see sections 1.2 and 4.1.6 which can only be used as a mitigation device in request utterances and not with apology utterances.

mark an utterance as an apology. Native speakers can tap a richer and more varied repertoire of mechanisms and items to indicate apology, among them the performative expression *I apologize*. Another fact that could be linked to the lower proficiency level is the usage of the expression *sorry* at the final position of the apology expression. This might be due to certain awareness on the non-native speaker's part of the insufficient apologetic force of the utterance they have formed; by adding this IFID at the end after the utterance, they belatedly mark the latter as an apology.

The following sentences provide some typical examples of the apology IFID found in the Omani students' data (50) as well as an example of *excuse me* from an American informant (51):

- (50) a. Excuse me Mr. I forgot the homework, but I promise you to do it.  
 b. Excuse me can I enter? The bus was late.  
 c. Please, I don't [know] what happen oh I am sorry.

(51) Excuse me, I am sorry for being late, there was an accident.

The IFID statement *excuse me* is used at the beginning of apology statements (50 a,b). However, even if in (a) it seems to be used as an IFID, in (b) it can be more adequately interpreted as an attention getter attached to a request to enter the classroom and then followed by an explanation strategy. This is also the function of *excuse me* in the American student data in (51). Both (51) and (50b) illustrate the usage of this expression as an apology for an interruption into the hearer's attention, rather than apology for being late. Example (50c) shows the usage of the IFID *I am sorry* in the final position. Notice that in this case the informant introduced the

apology with *please*, a request IFID begging for forgiveness rather than apologizing, so the apology IFID is inserted at the end to clarify the apologetic nature of the utterance.

Figures 16 and 17 below show the percentage use of the expressions of apology strategy among Omanis and Americans.

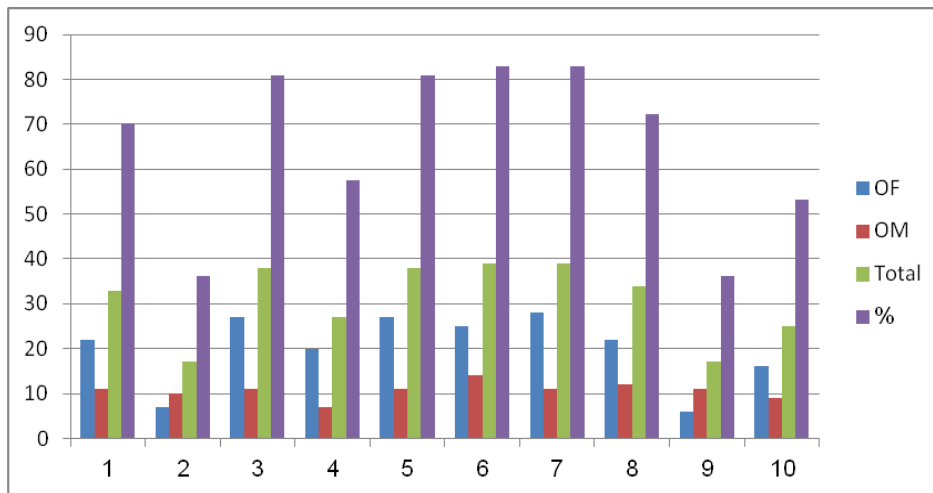


Figure 16. Expression of apology (Omanis)

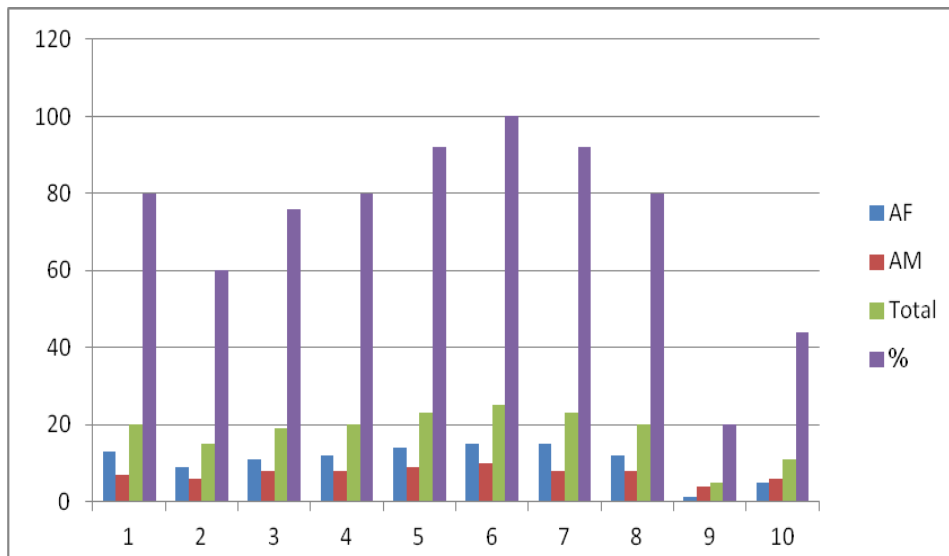


Figure 17. Expression of apology (Americans)

Figure 16 reveals that the Omanis' score is higher in situations #9 (making a poster) and #10 (going out for a trip). Although we assume that the high score among Omanis for this strategy in situation #9 can be attributed to the higher rank of the addressee (instructor), this assumption cannot account for the score in situation #10, where the addressee is equal in rank to the speaker. In this case the high score may be resulting from an attempt to keep the "social" face of the speaker and to avoid distancing h/himself from the group, since group membership is highly valued in the Omani community (see section 4.2.2.4). The following section will be devoted to discussing intensifier mechanisms used by both groups of informants with some significant differences.

#### 4.2.2.2. *Intensification*

The use of an intensifier in an apology act can change the utterance, increasing and decreasing its force (Nureddeen, 2007). Both groups in this study have used intensifiers to raise the power of their utterances by deploying modifiers such as *really*, *quite*, *extremely*, *highly*, *so* (as in *really sorry*, *very sorry*, *so sorry*) or even by doubling them (as in *so so sorry*, *very very sorry*, *so very much*, *so very happy*). Richness in the use of intensifiers usually correlates well with proficiency, so that early learners heavily rely on a restricted subset of them (*very* and *so*), whereas native speakers have both more forms and more elaborate uses of those forms (*extremely interesting*, *so very young*).<sup>119</sup> Therefore, as expected, the total use of intensifiers is higher in Americans students (21%) compared to Omanis (10%). This finding is compatible with

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<sup>119</sup> Learners often use two intensifiers but usually doubling one of the basic forms. Using two different intensifiers for the same adjectives is far less common among non-native learners and even among native speakers it is found in higher register context.

what Nakano (2005) describes for non-native Japanese students of English. He points out that various uses of intensifiers were very weak among Japanese students and ascribes it either to their poor ability in selecting the relevant lexical form or to the inadequate training of students. This is obviously related the different resources available to natives and learners in general and Omani learners in particular.

The adverbial phrase *so* is the most common device used by both groups. However, Americans score higher than Omanis in the frequency of this device (43% vs. 5% respectively). This may be attributed to a higher degree of linguistic complexity that *so* presents as opposed to *very*. Thus, *so* is typically found in negative polarity contexts (*he is not so intelligent*), emphatic contexts (*he is SO intelligent*) or with correlative phrases (*so intelligent that...*). This differs from *very*, which is virtually unrestricted. There is another significant difference in the use of *really* and *very*. Although both groups score the same percentage of use of *really* in the Americans' data and *very* in the Omanis' data (around 4%), the usage of the two items is more balanced in Americans than in Omanis. The latter use *really* (expressing great depth of an apology and concern) less commonly, whereas *very* (considered lower in the intensification scale) occurs with higher frequency. They also sometimes use the two elements simultaneously in the same situations as in #2 (arguing with a colleague), #3 (deleting a file from a colleague's laptop), #6 (talking in a presentation) and #7 (missing an appointment with an instructor).<sup>120</sup> This indicates that Omani students are mixing the use of the two intensifiers, which Olshtain and Cohen (1990)

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<sup>120</sup> On the other hand, Americans used *really* in situations #1 (missing homework), #3 (deleting a file from a colleague laptop), #5 (breaking a picture) and #9 (not able to make a poster), and *very* in #6 (talking in a presentation) and #7 (missing an appointment with an instructor). It is difficult to find reliable patterns in this data, so no analysis will be ventured for the time being.

relate to the overuse of *very* in teaching materials, where this degree word is first introduced as the main and sometimes the only intensifier. They argue also that intensifying is “overlearned” and used “indiscriminately”, which is noted in the Omani students’ responses as well. The data also shows that Americans intensify their utterances more with an instructor than with a colleague, whereas Omanis do not show this distinction in their responses. We might hypothesize that this can be related to the distance differential of students with respect to instructors and other students. Although we have classified both types of situations as involving distance, it is clear that the gap between the student and their classmates is far narrower than the gap between students and their instructors: the larger the distance, the more the need to intensify the apology. This distance related asymmetry is largely lost on the Omani learners, which then level the two cases and use intensifiers with very similar percentages.

In addition, emotional expressions are found to be a signal of apology utterances in the data. Expressions such as *crap*, *oh my gosh*, *oh man* and *my bad*<sup>121</sup> are often used at the beginning of utterances. Few Omanis used such expressions, although *ohhh no*, *oh my goodness*<sup>122</sup> do appear in the data. The usage of such emotional expressions has already been described by Cohen, Olshtain and Rosentein (1986) for native speakers of English, suggesting that they are sometimes meant as interjections and curses. These interjections are sometimes seen as additional to apology utterances and express emotions and add authenticity to speech acts. The disparity of use between American and Omanis can be easily explained as a result of the highly colloquial nature of these expressions, which are usually not taught in formal instruction

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<sup>121</sup> This set phrase fits better with acknowledgment of responsibility strategies.

<sup>122</sup> *Sic*. This looks like an interesting blend between *oh my goodness* and *oh my god*.

environments. Thus, Omani learners have only been seldom exposed to them and hence, produce them in very low numbers. The association of these expressions with colloquial language registers also accounts for their higher frequency in student-to-student situations than in student-to-instructor situations. See the figure below for total use of intensifiers among Omanis and Americans (Figure 18).

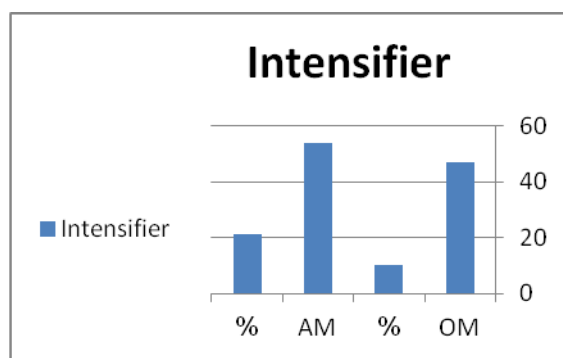


Figure 18. Intensifiers in apology situations (Omanis and Americans)

#### 4.2.2.3. *Acknowledgment of responsibility*

Apologies can often be strengthened by adding expressions in which the speaker accepts the responsibility for whatever event caused the need to apologize. From the point of view of the face theory this strategy helps the speaker and the hearer keep face. By accepting the blame the speaker builds his public face as a trustworthy and honest person who accepts h/his responsibility in the wrongdoing thus making it easier for the hearer to accept the apology. For the listener, being publicly exempted from blame also keeps his face by openly establishing having being wronged. This strategy very commonly co-occurs with IFIDs and it is very common in the responses of students to our questionnaire. We find expressions accepting the blame (*It's my fault; I didn't mean to*), regretting committing the offense (*that was rude of us*) and expressing

self deficiency (*sorry for being disrespectful*). The set expression *my bad* was also used by the American students. This strategy is categorized, as we mentioned earlier, as one of the first two general strategies in the expression of apology. Nureddeen (2008) describes this strategy as the most explicit, most direct and the strongest one. Its frequency in our students' data is only second to the "expressing of apology" strategy, and Omanis employed it in 44% of their apologies (206 instances) while Americans use it in a very similar 48% of theirs (119).

The strategy can be found distributed throughout all situations with varying degrees but peaking in situation #1 (missing homework) in the two groups, where the Omanis' score is 93% and the Americans' 92%. There is a close percentage in most situations for both groups, but nonetheless there is a significant mismatch between them in situation #6 (talking during a presentation), where the Omanis' score is 13% as opposed to 32% for Americans. In this particular situation both groups' score is lower than in other situations and Omanis favor the "promise of forbearance" strategy by 53%. They feel they are responsible for the offense and promise not to repeat it again.<sup>123</sup>

Our findings for this strategy go along the lines of the results in Olshtain (1989) for Hebrew, French, Australian and German language speakers, Afghary (2007) for Persian speakers and Rojo (2005) for Spanish speakers. They found in their studies that acknowledgement of responsibility was one of the most preferred strategies, also occurring alongside with the basic expression of apology strategy. However, different findings were reported by Nureddeen (2008)

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<sup>123</sup> The offense (talking in a presentation) is of a type which can and is in actual life often repeated, unlike other offenses such as deleting a file from a laptop, etc. It is also found in student-to-instructor situation, which might increase the need to promise not to repeat it. This, however, does not explain why it is the Omanis that pledged not to repeat the offense, not the Americans.

in the analysis obtained from the data of her Sudanese informants, who showed a low frequency for this strategy in all her situations. A result that is similar to Nureddeen's findings was also reported in Sugimoto's (1997) study of Japanese and Americans. Sugimoto points out that Americans who did not propose *reparation* were also unwilling to weaken their position, assert their responsibility or satisfy future obligations. As indicated, however, our data do not pattern with the latter two studies since American students display high percentages of use of the acknowledgment of responsibility strategy. See figures 19 and 20 below for more details on the usage of these strategies by the two groups:

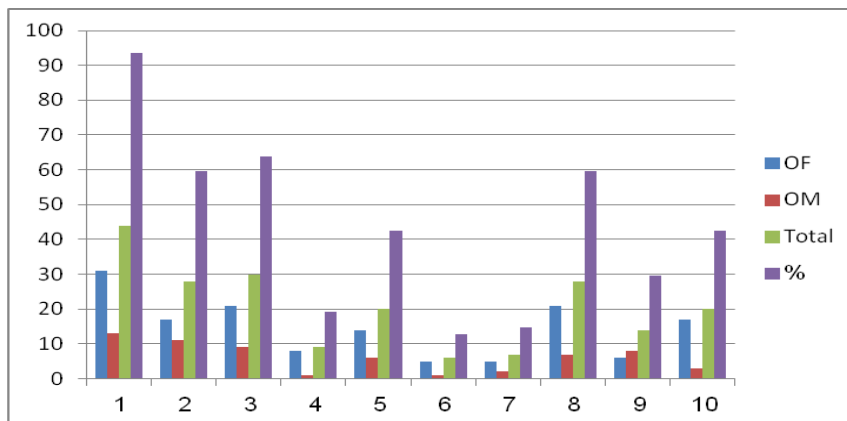


Figure 19. Responsibility in apology situations (Omanis)

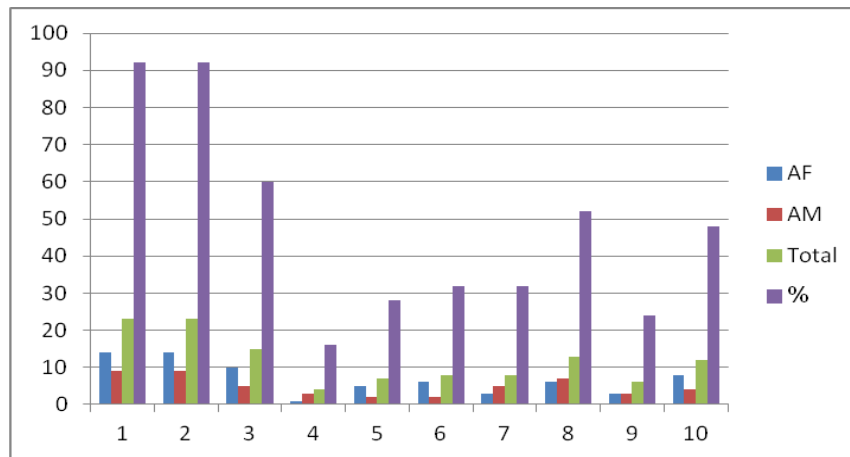


Figure 20. Responsibility in apology situations (Americans)

As indicated, the results of this study support Olshtain (1989), Afghari (2007) and Rojo (2005) and do not register any major difference between Americans and Omanis with respect to this strategy.

#### 4.2.2.4. *Explanation or account of situation*

In this type of strategy, a reason or account of the offense committed is offered (Trosborg 1987), providing a justification or rationale, which restores the speaker's face thereby making acceptance of the apology more likely. This semantic formula has also been claimed to be used to mitigate the offense (Al-Zumor 2011), which is then depicted not as a random act but as following from logical premises. Both groups present a very similar percentage of use for this strategy in our data, with a total frequency for Omanis of 20 % and of 24% for Americans. The highest frequency score can be found in situation #10 (weekend trip), with 49% for Omanis and 56% for Americans. The situation could be described as a mild offense directed to a person in similar rank (-P+D), where the hearer has social power over the speaker and social distance is

high between the speakers. Being a mild offense in and of itself does not explain why this particular situation shows such a high percentage of addition of explanation by both groups. The apology in this situation is directed to restore a “social” face to the extent that it is the whole group to whom the apology is directed. This specific situation involves an invitation to a group activity refusing which requires an explanation to support the apology. A refusal to a group activity invitation requires an apology to save the face of each and all members of the group, so the act of apologizing, in order to be effective, is better accomplished by supporting it with explanations that eliminate the possibility that declining the invitation is interpreted as a rejection of the group or any of its members. This is a socially as well as individually sensitive situation, and a collective face and many individual faces have to be taken care of. There is also an aspect of group exclusion lurking as a problem in declining this invitation. Although depicted as more individualistic than Omanis, the American students in this study also produced the highest percentage of this strategy in this particular situation. It may have been expected that this situation might have generated less fear of social exclusion and therefore, less pressure on the American group to provide explanations. However, we must remind the reader that the American group in this study actually were living in Oman and studying there so that this particular invitation to a group activity might elicit a response different from what it might have elicited in their home environment.

Apologies are often accompanied with an explanation because the latter seems to shift the blame or responsibility to persons, circumstances, objects, etc. In fact, it seems that this tendency is equally found among both American and Omani students. Most students are trying to give excuses for their offenses and save their face, especially in situation #10, as indicated earlier

and also in situation #7 (missing appointment). The highest score for Americans is 56% in this situation, roughly the same percentage as in situation #10. The following examples illustrate the strategy with sentences from the Omani (52) and American (53) responses in the same situations:

- (52) a. *I'm really sorry. I didn't come because my car had an accident.*  
 b. *O you choosed (chose) the wrong weekend. I've spent long time at the hostile (hostel) and I miss home a lot, so could you delay it till another weekend?*<sup>124</sup>
- (53) a. *Hi professor, sorry I missed the appointment. I was in a car accident.*  
 b. *Nah, sorry guys, I'm going home to visit the family, have fun though.*

Explanations in the previous examples have been underlined. Notice the particularly elaborated explanation in (52b), which also happens to be an example where there is no direct expression of the apology. The highly elaborate explanation can be taken to compensate for the absence of an overt IFID. In all other examples, the explanation directly follows the expression of apology.

The scores of the two groups in some other situations are different, the highest contrast being found in situations #8 (lending a car, Omanis 47% vs. Americans 24%) and #9 (making a poster, Omanis 30% vs. Americans 48%). Although the percentages are not drastically different, they are significant in the overall results of this strategy, which are in general very similar for both groups. There might be a cultural background accounting for these results. It is worth mentioning that individuals differ in their beliefs and practices but cultural norms sometimes

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<sup>124</sup> This is particularly a good example of pragmatically awkward utterance. Not only is that there no expression of apology, but moreover, 'choosing the wrong weekend' is in itself slightly insulting, especially as a follow-up to an invitation in this kind of situation.

have an influence on their behavior. Omanis are part of the Arab world societies, which as indicated in section (4.1.3.1.1.2) are high-context cultures that place great emphasis on communication to maintain harmony and save face (Al-Issa, 2005b). Situation #8 (lending a car) might be a good example of the effect of this difference between the two groups. Omanis display higher use of the explanation strategy in this situation perhaps because they are committed to the social value of avoiding confrontation. The type of situation in which this apology is required here involves a request to borrow personal or valuable items that most people are reluctant to lend (cars, money, a flat, etc.). By asking for such items, the recipients of the request are placed under pressure, divided between their desire to please and their fear of the item being damaged or lost. Omani culture values social relations very highly, so that refusal to accept the request is more costly than in other cultures where social relations may have less paramount importance. This indicates that Omanis and Americans do not necessarily share the same perceptions of using this strategy in all situations and their choices depend on context, social and cultural norms, which are different from culture to culture. Al-Zumor (2011:28) explains the following regarding Arab culture in general: “The immunity of one’s private self is much less part of the Arab culture. People are more publicly available to each other”. One might add that the proportion of one’s self that is private or social also changes, in line with the perception that social relations are extremely important in Arab culture.

Nureddeen (2008) finds in her study of non-native Sudanese Arab informants that they use the explanation strategy more often in mild offense situations than in severe offense ones. This is also applicable to some of the Omanis scores in our study, especially in #9 (making a poster) with 49%. However, assigning severity to offenses in different situations is sometimes

culture specific (Al-Zumor 2011), and this is clear in this situation #9, where Americans and Omanis seem to differ in their perception of the degree of the severity of the offense, perhaps according to their respective cultures. Similarly, there are different percentages in situation #8 as discussed above. Consequently, when Omanis use this strategy more commonly, the Americans use it less or vice versa. The following figure shows the data for these two situations #8 and 9:

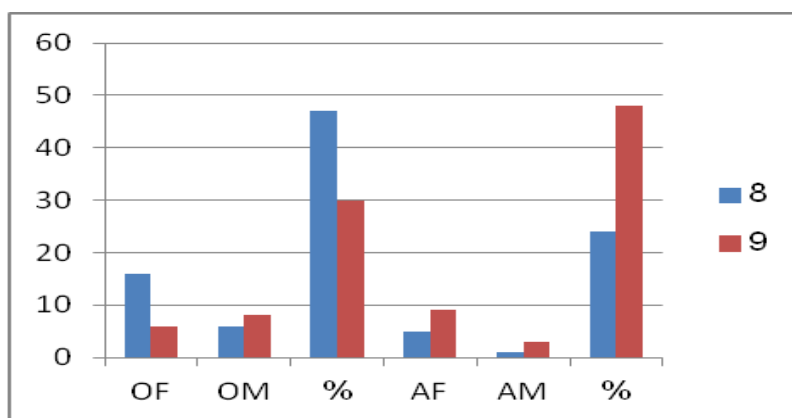


Figure 21. Explanation strategy use in apology situations #8 and #9 by both groups.

There are interesting differences in the way that explanations are worded by the two groups. The examples in (54) below give some the instances generated by Omanis, while those in (55) come from the American student group.

- (54) a. *I wish I could but I need it badly ..but I can give you a ride if you want.*  
 b. *Unfortunately, I should take my mother to somewhere, I'm really sorry.*

- (55) a. *Sorry man, I can't risk something happening. Maybe I can help you pay for a cab instead.*  
 b. *I am sorry but I do not feel comfortable lending my car out.*

Notice that the American students' responses provide explanations which are actually close to acknowledgment of responsibility. If the function of explanations is typically to transfer the blame to save the speaker's face by transferring the cause of the offense to external circumstances, this is certainly not what we find in the explanation in (55). They bluntly admit responsibility for the refusal without any possibility of change depending on circumstances. On the other hand, the Omanis' explanations in (54) imply that, were circumstances different, they would not have refused. Moreover, in (54a) an alternative is suggested. As Al-Zumor (2011) points out, one's "private self" comes out very clearly in American examples, whereas "social relationships" in the examples in (54) are better preserved.

Furthermore, the relative difference in social distance between the student-to-instructor and the student-to-student contexts may account for the number of explanations supplied by American students in different situations. Thus, most explanations by Americans occur in situations #9 (making a poster) and #7 (missing an appointment). The former is directed to higher status addressees and this might be felt to require more elaboration of the apology by complementing it with an explanation.

We conclude from this discussion that explanations or accounts of situations within the apology are also heavily context-dependent, where the speaker's culture provides one very important type of context. Quite generally the linguistic expressions of the pragmatic strategy cannot be reduced to a set of formulaic phrases taught and acquired as any other lexical item or phrase. They are associated with complex individual and social factors that should also be

considered.<sup>125</sup> To conclude this section, below we provide figures with percentages of use of this explanation strategy for the two groups in all situations.<sup>126</sup>

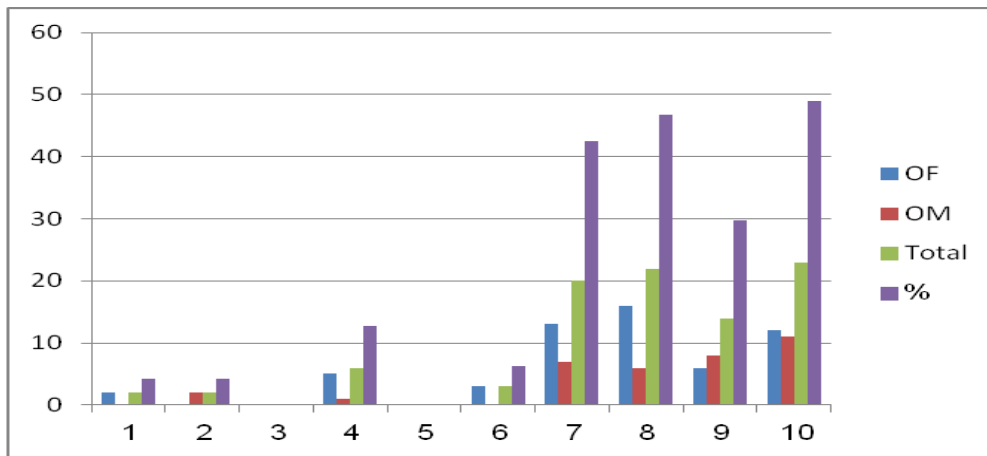


Figure 22. Explanation strategy use (Omanis)

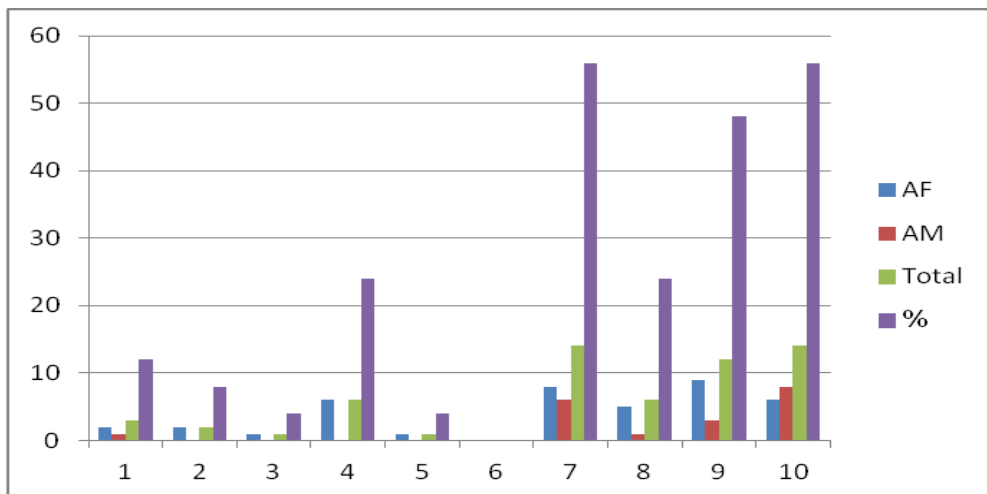


Figure 23. Explanation strategy use (Americans)

<sup>125</sup> Section (2.12) addresses the pedagogical implications of these factors.

<sup>126</sup> The male vs. female factor is also included in the figures for completeness sake, even though we will leave for future research the relevance of this factor in formation of this illocutionary acts.

#### 4.2.2.5. *Offer of repair*

Al-Zumor (2011:111) discusses that this strategy is situation-specific and defines it stating that “Repair is an attempt by the offender to compensate the incurred damage.” This strategy is a subtype of the explanation and promise of forbearance strategies, which are situation-specific since they are anchored to the context which required the use of apology (Olshtain and Cohen 1990). The repair is either offered in its literal/physical sense or emotionally (Trosborg 1987). Most students’ responses which include this strategy offer a repair in a physical sense, perhaps simply because the contexts provided in the instrument require physical action to repair damage, as in situation #5 (breaking a picture), or to repair misbehavior as in situation #1 (missing homework).

This strategy can be marked as one the least common strategies in the data, where the Omanis’ total score is 13% while the Americans’ score is 32%. The use of this strategy by Americans appears in all situations except in situation #2 (arguing with a colleague), and Omanis did not use it either in this situation. The Omanis’ score is concentrated in situations #1, 3, 5 and 9 and their highest score is registered in situation #5 (36%). In the latter situation Americans achieve the second highest use of this strategy (68%). However, there is a big gap between the two groups which can be observed in situation #1, where Americans show the highest score with 88% while Omanis barely reach a much lower 30%. The most probable reason for the Omanis’ weak performance could be that in the questionnaire this situation comes first in the group of apology situation list and it is, therefore, the first situation that students are confronted with. As also mentioned by Cohen and Olshtain (1993) the informants’ answers at the beginning of situation based questionnaires tend to be more elaborate and therefore include more complete

types of verbal acts, in our case more complete apologies which contain less common strategies like the present one.

The influence of this factor can also be observed in the use of the less common strategies such as explanation and promise of forbearance contrasting with more basic strategies like IFID, which can be conceived of as the “bare minimum” in the construction of apologies. A similar point of discussion is raised by Cohen and Olshtain (1993), where they stated that the order of prompts in the research material has an effect on the informants’ responses.<sup>127</sup> If this was the only factor, however, we would expect Omanis to display the same ‘onset’ effect in their responses. As the following figure shows however, their responses are fairly even from the first situation on:

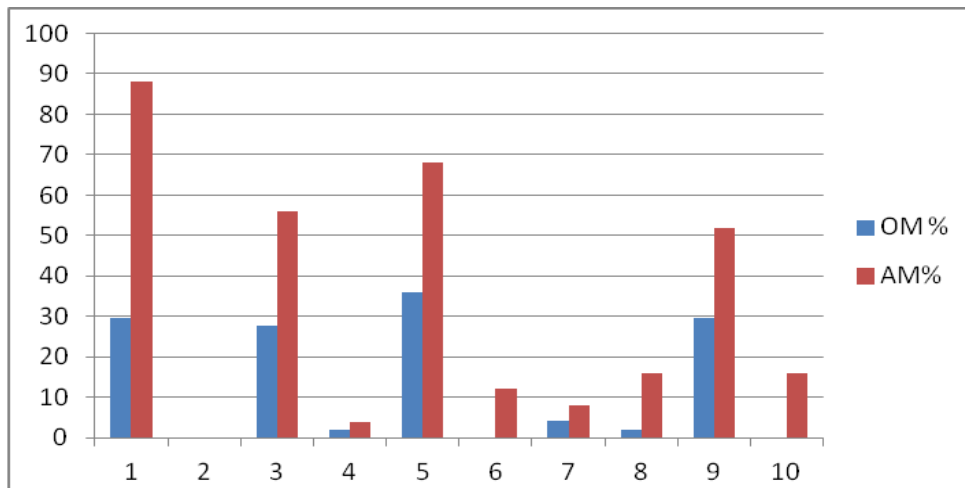


Figure 24. Use of offer of repair in the Omani and the American across situations 1-10.

<sup>127</sup> They also question whether it is necessary to provide culturally relevant information in the prompts or tell informants directly what stance they should take or what emotion they should express. In the instrument used for the present research the prompts were kept to the basic information without cultural elaborations or directing students to specific type of strategies.

The different behavior of American and Omani students might indicate that this external factor affects primarily L1 speakers, which begs the question of why L2 speakers are not similarly affected. One may hypothesize that learners cannot actively tap from the very beginning all of the strategies that they could in fact use, activating only basic ones first.<sup>128</sup>

Joyce (1999) considers the frequency of this strategy in the Americans' score in most situations as a practical application of their general tendency to regard apology as valid when it is sincere, heartfelt and voluntary. However, this culture oriented explanation does not look completely adequate since it is hard to accept that other cultures do not assign so much importance to sincerity in apologies. As is the case in many of the factors accounting for the different use of some strategies, it may actually be that proficiency level is playing a role here. As indicated above, L1 speakers seem to be able to make more extensive use of less common strategies than L2 speakers. Notice that in the Figure 24 the Omanis' score is systematically lower than the Americans' score.

The following examples of American student responses using this strategy illustrate some of the characteristics mentioned above. The offer of repair is underlined:

(56) a. *I forgot to do this and have no excuse. May I send it to you later for partial credit?*

(missing homework)

b. *I'm sorry but I'm not comfortable with letting people use my car. Maybe I can drive you there instead?* (lending a car)

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<sup>128</sup> Figure 24 also shows that offer of repair is least used in situation #7 both among Omani and American students. Given the situation-specific nature of this strategy, this is hardly surprising, since failing to show up at an appointment is a type of "wrongdoing" which students cannot easily repair with an action of their own.

Notice that in the first example there is no directly expressed IFID but the accumulation of other apology strategies: explanation and acceptance of wrongdoing leading to the offer of repair make of this utterance a valid one for this illocutionary act. The second example also shows an IFID and explanation before offering to repair. The difference in proficiency between American and Omani students can account, as mentioned above, not only for the higher occurrence of offers of repair among the former but also for the shapes these offers have taken. Thus, compare the previous examples with the following ones from Omani students. These show their limitations in constructing the offer of repair, mirroring their general problems in constructing apologies:

- (57) a. *I am sorry, I forgot it, so I will bring it tomorrow.* (missing homework)  
 b. *I am so sorry, I will pay for it.* (breaking a picture)

The first example (57a) includes a simple IFID and explanation, missing in (57b), but what is more significant is the form of the offer of repair itself when compared to those produced by the American students. Notice that the latter take the form of questions, a request in the case of (56a) and a tentative offer which gives the listener the power to refuse or to suggest other options. In contrast, the offers in (57) are stated as blunt future events, where the listener does not have any role. The questions in (56) address and therefore incorporate the listeners' possible responses into the apology situation, while the assertions in (57) exclusively express the speaker's offer.

#### **4.2.2.6. *Promise of forbearance***

Wagner and Roebuck (2010) and Nureddeen (2008) consider using this a high face-threatening strategy for the speaker while contributing to the listener's face. Nureddeen (2008:

291) sees it as “a clear confession of being responsible for the offense” performing which damages the speaker’s positive face because it makes h/him admit a limitation on h/his ability to act in the future. In many apology studies it is found that this is among the least used strategies (Bergman and Kasper 1993, Rojo 2005, Nureddeen 2008 and Wagner and Roebuck 2010).

A similar result is noticed in our data, where the use of this strategy is limited to certain situations and, in general terms, is avoided probably because it threatens positive face. The strategy is used only in situations #1 (missing homework), #4 (arriving late) and #6 (talking during a presentation) by Omanis and only in #6 by Americans. All three situations are directed to a hearer of higher rank (-P+D), where the hearer has social power over the speaker and social distance is high between the speakers.

A closer look at the data shows that Omanis have a higher use percentage than Americans. This difference is maintained even in situation #6, which elicits most promises of forbearance from both groups. The Omanis’ score reaches 7% in total and 53% in situation #6, whereas the Americans’ score in this strategy is 2% in total, peaking to 16% in that situation. Obviously, students who are using this strategy from both groups agree in considering the situation as a severe offense that requires an immediate, strong apology.

Given that Omanis have English as a second language and therefore their proficiency level is lower, one might expect, in the light of the discussion in section 4.2.5, that this minor strategy should occur less frequently among them. As indicated above and figures 25 and 26 below show, we actually find the opposite. Following the logic of the analysis of L1 vs. L2 speakers, this should indicate the presence of a cultural factor which is reversing the effects of proficiency on apology production. The key element to consider here will be high face

threatening cost of this strategy for the speaker. A promise of forbearance is equivalent to accepting a severe limitation on one's individual freedom to act, and this might be culturally more threatening to Americans than to Omanis. Notice that situation #6 contributes the highest number of promises of forbearance, and it involves a student-to-instructor situation with higher social distance and power. Omanis seem to be more willing to generate this type of promise when addressing a culturally respected figure such as an instructor, whereas Americans are much less so.<sup>129</sup> Interestingly, 21% of Omani students use the first person plural in constructing their apologies, attributing their guilt to group action with their colleagues, whereas all American users agree to attribute it to personal responsibility. Leake and Black (2005) categorize American culture among "individualistic cultures" to which Western European cultures also belong. These cultures emphasize the personal responsibility of actions and their outcomes, so using first personal pronouns in apologies might be related to this cultural factor. At the same time, the more individual oriented nature of these cultures as opposed to the higher role played by the group in the Omani and Arab culture in general may account for the fact that the data show that Omanis have fewer restrictions and are more open to use this strategy when faults are committed. Therefore, they use it in more situations on top of #6, the only one in which Americans produced an offer of forbearance. This is more outstanding when one bears in mind the ample use of apologies in Americans social life. It seems clear then that there are some possible cultural background constraints in the usage of apologies in general and some strategies in particular.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> It is not only that the teacher figure may be culturally less marked for respect in American than in Omani culture, but also that the individual sphere is much stronger in American culture than in Omani culture.

<sup>130</sup> A clear example of this attitude can be found in cases in which there is a car accident, where insurance agents warn their clients not to say *I am sorry* as this utterance might make them responsible for the accident.

As a result, the use of this strategy by Americans is accompanied with caution and as much avoidance as possible. Figures 25 and 26 below show the use of this strategy by both groups.

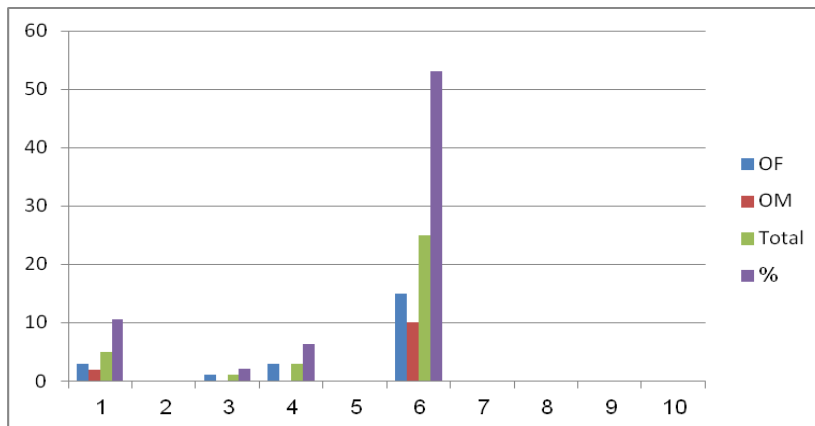


Figure 25. Forbearance strategy use in apology situations (Omanis)

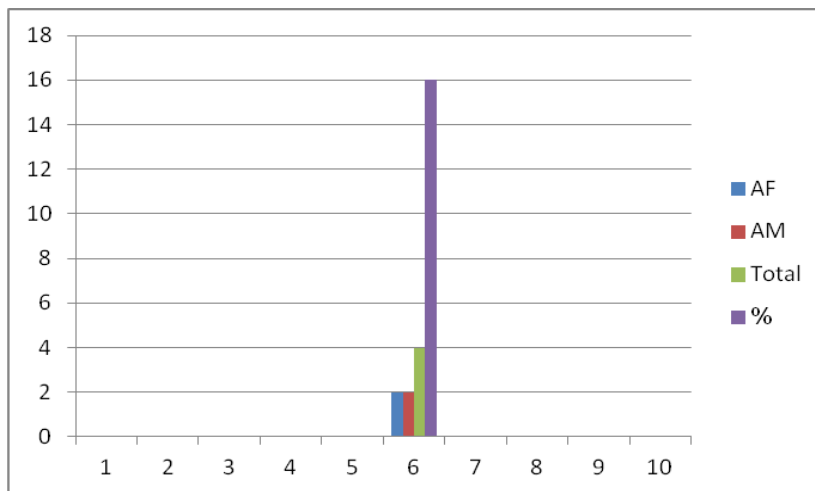


Figure 26. Forbearance strategy use in apology situations (Americans)

Figure 25 illustrates that the use by Omanis of the promise of forbearance strategy is rather broad, since it figures in situations as in #1, 3, 4 and 6.

#### 4.2.2.7. *Denial*

Utterances that are classified under this subcategory are those expressions that indicate a refusal to take responsibility or that place a direct blame on human or non-human subjects for their wrongdoings. The total score of the two target groups is quite close, where the Omanis' total score is 16% and their American counterparts used it in 12% of the apologies. The two groups also agree in the top scores within the situations, since the highest percentage of use can be found in situation #4 (arriving late to class) and #7 (missing an appointment). The apologies in these two situations are directed to a person of a higher rank, in this case an instructor. The context is different in the two situations. In situation #4 students are required to form an apology for a recent wrongdoing and, in a normal situation, this type of apology would be publicly uttered. There is a risk the addressee does not accept the apology and this can be then embarrassing and face threatening to the speaker; therefore, shifting the blame to an outside cause can save the speaker's face and probably convince the addressee to accept the apology. This explains the high score of this strategy in the students' data for both groups. The Omanis' score in situation #4 is 74% and the score among Americans in the same situation is 80%. On the other hand, we can observe that the use and percentage of this strategy in situation #7 is lower but still significantly high in both groups. The degree of severity of the situation is lowered due to the long time elapsed between the time the wrongdoing took place and the need to form the apology in real life, which can be inferred from the question by the use of the word *yesterday*. Students have more time to think and prepare a proper apology for missing their appointment with the instructor and a few of them preferred to use other strategies apart from denial. This

explains the lower use of denial in this situation, especially in the Americans' data, where it reaches 24% in comparison to Omanis, who score 40%.

The following examples show some differences in the form of utterances using the denial strategy; the Omani students' responses can be found in (58a,b) and those produced by American students are given in (59a,b):

(58) a. *I'm sorry, that classmate asked me about the presentation.*

b. *Sorry, I had to be late, the road was crowded.*

(59) a. *Hi professor, how are you? I was late this morning because a traffic accident held up traffic.*

b. *I apologize for my tardiness. It is attributed to a mishap with the bus I was riding this morning. I am sorry for the disturbance.*

We can see that the denial strategy in the Americans' responses in (30a,b) is accompanied by other strategies in addition to IFIDs. In many American utterances we could find strategies such as the use of an attention getter, title, greetings (59a) and double IFIDs at the beginning and at the end of the utterance (59b). The use of these strategies along with denial makes the utterance appear more sincere and increases the acceptability to the hearer. It can be noticed also that in (59a) we do not find in fact any overt IFID other than the denial. The situation is given in such a way that a simple report of a fact is produced, as if the external factor eliminated any personal responsibility or even the need to overtly apologize. In the case of (59b), not only is the responsibility shifted to a mishap: even this is presented as an impersonal explanation, distancing the speaker even further from the event. In contrast, the Omani group utterances take only IFIDs with the denial strategy, which makes the utterances lose much of their sincerity and strength to

persuade the addressees to accept them. Figures 27 and 28 below show the distribution of this strategy in the data:

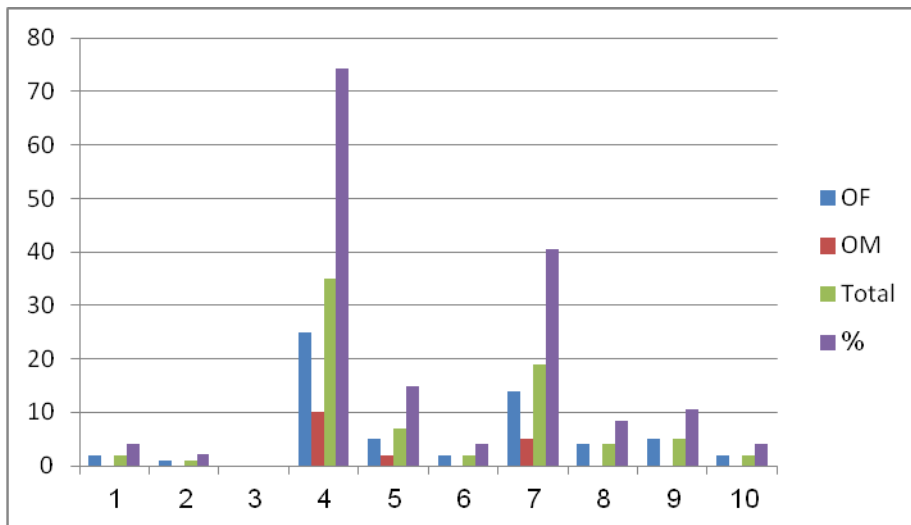


Figure 27. Denial strategy use in apology situations (Omanis)

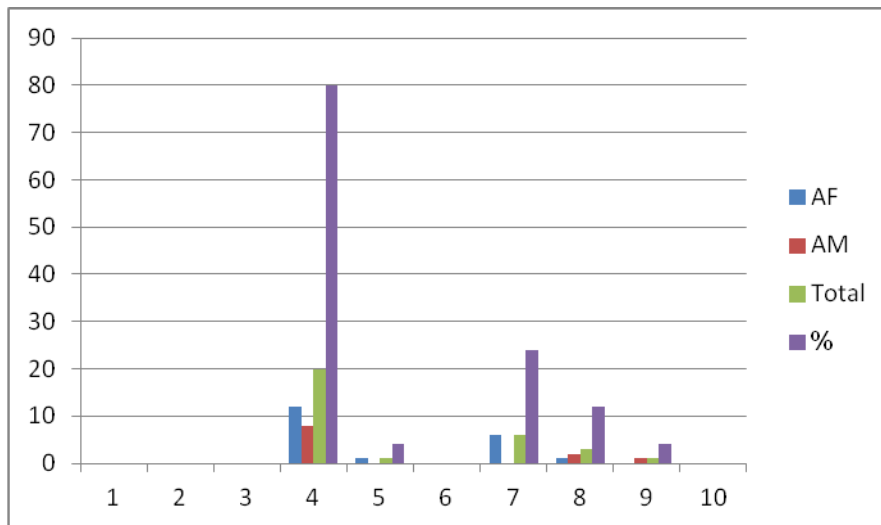


Figure 28. Denial strategy use in apology situations (Americans)

It can be perceived from the figures that the range of the use of this strategy is slightly broader in the Omani data. Situation #3 is the only one where this strategy is excluded from their data.<sup>131</sup> It seems also that students from both groups use this strategy regardless of the status of the addressee.

### 4.2.3 Concluding remarks

The findings on the use of apology strategies in this study show that expressions of apology IFIDs and acknowledgement of responsibility form a core group of commonly used apology strategies in the two groups of informants. American students used them very frequently, along with explanation of cause and offer of repair from the second group of less commonly used strategies. On the other hand, the score of the Omani group is higher than that of the Americans in the use of promise of forbearance and denial, from the second group of strategies. Moreover, the Omanis' score is higher than that of Americans in the use of promise of forbearance and denial from the second group strategies. Both groups of students use the IFID strategy with a considerable high frequency at the beginning of their apology utterances and very few use it at the end. In this area, there is an interesting difference between apologies and requests, where the latter often occurs after some introductory material. There is certain urgency in the restoration of relationships that apology serves, and overt expression tends to come first, while in the case of requests, preparations are important to ensure the addressee's willingness to comply, so that the actual expression of request may come later. Those students who use the expression of apology at the end of the utterance are mostly Omanis and they are possibly trying

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<sup>131</sup> There might be cultural practices underlying the higher overall incidence of this strategy in Omani students, but the data are too limited to warrant any generalization on this point.

to maintain the apologetic and assertive forces of these utterances because as can be seen they have already made the expression of apology at the beginning such as in the following examples:

- (60) a. *I'm sorry I deleted a file by mistake. I really feel sorry about that.*  
 b. *Oh I am sorry about that but I forgot to do my homework. Please forgive me.*

Considering the selection of IFID expressions, *sorry* is the expression most frequently used by both groups, with a higher frequency among Omanis. In addition, Omanis also score high in the use of *excuse me* over Americans, who prefer to use more *I apologize*, rarely used by Omanis. However, the data shows that some Omani students use *excuse me* as an attention getter rather than as an IFID expression, as in the example (60b). In fact, the equivalent of this expression in Arabic (*law samaht* or *min fadlik*) is only used as an attention getter and the phrase *excuse me* above can be clearly interpreted as an attention getter and not as an apology expression. One may add that this overuse can be connected with the overuse of *please* in requests in the Omanis' data, as mentioned and discussed earlier in the request section (cf. 4.1.3.2). In both speech acts of low proficiency cases, these are ready-use formulae which immediately and effectively produce the speech act required, without having to use strategies which require more creative use of the language, difficult for learners.

Americans use more intensifiers than Omanis and the data revealed that the latter group lacks sufficient knowledge to use them appropriately in apology contexts. A piece of evidence for this inadequacy can be observed in the Omani data showing that students mix the uses of the two words *really* and *very*. A considerable number of Omani students repeatedly use them without discrimination or taking into consideration that they correspond to different

interpretations and semantic differentials in English.<sup>132</sup> They are used by Omanis simultaneously in situations that carry different degrees of severity. In contrast, their American counterparts use *really* with situations that carry high degree of severity and *very* in lower severity degree situations.

Despite the significant impact of using emotional vocabulary on speech acts in terms of authenticity and acquisition of the socio-cultural competence, in many cases such vocabulary is arguably absent in foreign language teaching materials (Dewaele 2005). Dewaele also points out that the vocabulary for the expression of those emotions can be difficult to acquire and use when they involve the learner's representation of self and face. The presence of emotional expressions such as *oh my god* or *oh gosh* is another feature of apology utterances in the students' data, used to add strength and authenticity to the speech act of apology. They occur prominently in the American students' utterances but not in the Omanis' data; the latter use emotional vocabulary in a more limited way and to a lower degree in their apology utterances. This vocabulary can add expressive richness and lexical variety to this type of expressions.

Acknowledgment of responsibility is the preferred strategy chosen by the two groups of students to co-occur along with IFID expressions in our data. They show quite similar scores, with minor differences in some situations where students deploy more than one apology strategy along with the regular IFID. The Omani and American score for this strategy is quite close in situations #1, 3, 4, 8, 9 and 10 but fairly different in situations #2, 5, 6, and 7. These scoring differences can be attributed to contextual, social and cultural factors that affect the choice of the

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<sup>132</sup> Cf. Paradis (2003) for semantic aspects of *really*.

strategies used by the students. They are discussed in Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei & Thurrell's (1995) model of Sociocultural Competence (cf. 2.1).

Most students' apologies that include the use of the offer of repair strategy are found in their physical sense due to the context-specific presentation of the situations. In other words, these situations trigger the speakers to offer repairs of wrongdoings in actions. The data shows that Omanis employ this strategy in fewer situations than their Americans counterparts. Situation #2 (admitting having made a mistake in an argument) is the only situation where the offer of repair strategy is shared by both groups of students.

There are some cultural aspects that stand behind the higher scoring of the Omanis over Americans in using the promise of forbearance strategy. This strategy is considered especially face threatening for the apologizer (cf. section 4.2.6). In our study Americans have less of a tendency to use it in formal situations, unlike Omanis, who are slightly more open to use it with higher rank interlocutors. Thus, this strategy only appears in three situations in our current data namely, #1(missing homework), 4 (arriving late) and 6 (talking during a presentation). Situation #6 is the only situation that elicits American data, but Omanis still score higher than Americans. A clear difference between the two groups is that Omanis credited their guilt to group actions, thereby diluting responsibility, whereas Americans credited it to personal responsibility.

The denial strategy occurred frequently in both groups. There are no significant differences in the students' utterances for the two groups regarding the situations in which they have been used or in the score percentages that have been identified.

The hypothesis spelled out in Chapter I claimed that Omani students would be expected to use fewer apology strategies than their American counterparts in the study. The design of the

questionnaire, which directed students to produce apologies in specific situations, entailed that the elicitation tool could not be used to test aspects of apology production such as their relative frequency. In this respect, Arab participants in Ghawi's (1993:49) study of pragmatic transfer in Arabic learners of English perceived a more extensive use of apologies by native speakers of English,<sup>133</sup> while Al-Siyabi (2012), studying a specifically Omani context, did not observe major differences in politeness as reflected in the use of apologies. Rather than frequency, the hypothesis in Chapter I is restricted to a claim on the internal organization of apology speech acts, as measured by the strategies that instantiate them. The results of the study do not fully support the hypothesis. It is true that, as Figure 15 in section 4.2.2 shows, American students display marginally higher percentage of explicit apology IFIDs, acknowledgment of responsibility and explanations of situation strategies, but it is only in the case of offers of repair that the difference is significant (13% vs. 32%). On the other hand, lesser used strategies like promise of forbearance and denial are used more often by Omani students than by American students, although, again, by a marginal difference. Consequently, the variety of strategies used by the informants in the sample does not differ from one group to the other, and even their relative frequency is not significantly different for most strategies. The pragmatic strategies used in the formulation of apologies seem to be shared by both groups of students, so that, in general terms, Omani students make use of the same pragmatic resources as American students. There is evidently an obvious linguistic difference in the realization of those strategies, where proficiency limitations affect the learners' output, as indicated with respect to the intensification mechanisms

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<sup>133</sup> The perception may be prompted more by the range of contexts where apologies are culturally expected rather than by the real overall frequency, since speakers mentioned apologies directed to children as an argument for the claim.

discussed in section 4.2.2.2, but whether more or less articulated, the strategies used by the two groups are roughly similar. The intensification mechanisms, on the other hand, provide interesting contrasts for the two groups, which may be considered to illustrate different sources for divergent linguistic behavior. Proficiency is obviously a factor accounting for the more restricted repertoire of intensifiers among Omani students, with fewer items and, even among those that do occur, an obvious dominance of *very* over *so* or *really*. At the same time, the extremely limited number of emotional expressions among these students may not be rooted in cultural differences, since they are also found in their L1. Rather, this may be related to the low profile of such expressions in teaching materials, often including relatively neutral language. The higher frequency of intensifier use among the female students in both groups, on the other hand, points at the role played by gender differences in this aspect of apology construction.

More interesting from a contrastive point of view is the situation that emerges when specific situations are examined, since it is that cultural factors may be playing a role in the relative use of the strategy. As indicated in section 4.2.2.4, even if both groups resort to explanations or accounts of the situation which gave rise to the need to apologize in roughly similar percentages (20% Omanis and 24% Americans), some questionnaire situations elicit fairly different relative numbers of instances of this strategy. A case in point is the mismatch in situation #9 (lending a car), where 47% of the Omani students provide explanations for the apology as opposed to 24% of the accounts elicited from the Americans. Moreover, the explanations offered by the two groups were often different, leading to accounts aimed at saving the social face in Omani students while just asserting the individual's feelings in American students. One possible way to explain the difference in the results for this particular situation, as

indicated above, is to link it to the relative importance of the private self in the two groups (Black 2005, Al Zumor 2011). The social construction of one's face plays a more important role for Omani students, accounting for their interest in offering explanations that emphasize the impossibility of performing an action rather than the personal unwillingness to do it. Omani students also use the first person plural in as many as 21% of the apologies, in stark contrast with its virtual absence in the American student's apologies, thus diluting personal responsibility in the event giving rise to the apology. Therefore, when we move from the general figures of strategies to examine figures for each situation in each strategy, some differences emerge which reveal that the speaker's cultural background may affect the formulation of apologies on a context-dependent basis. However, when total figures are considered, the strong hypothesis in (ii) in Chapter I, centered exclusively on the number of strategies deployed by students in each of the groups, does not receive a significant support from the questionnaire results.



## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS AND BEYOND

This chapter provides a summary of the overall findings and analyses discussed throughout the dissertation, also pointing out the limitations and qualifications which derive from the type of data collected in the tool. It also addresses, although briefly, a practical concern which has emerged occasionally in previous chapters and which is acknowledged as an underlying motivation for this research, namely, the consequences of these findings for EFL instruction in an Omani context. In this respect, and on the basis of some of the analyses mentioned in this dissertation, some recommendations are proposed for the future implementation of EFL programs where pragmatic skills are taken into consideration.

Let's turn first to a brief summary of the type of data collection mechanisms and the composition of the informant groups. The study targeted the Omani EFL learning/teaching context in general and University of Nizwa students in particular, and aimed to investigate the pragmatic similarities and differences in the use of request and apology strategies between Omani students and American students in a university context. The American informants were short term university exchange students in Oman, so both in terms of age group and education level the two groups were sufficiently similar and such variables may be assumed in principle not to play a role in observed differences between the two types of informants. At the same time, the fact that the American group consisted of short term, summer program students in Oman does imply a certain level of cultural contact with respect to the Omani group. The nature and length of the contact, however, probably makes the pragmatic data elicited from this group as representative as that from a similar one without such contact, so observed similarities between the American and Omani informants in this study are expected to result from similar use of

pragmatic strategies by two socioculturally distinct groups. A questionnaire was used to explore these similarities and differences in the use of requests and apologies, two significant types of speech acts in which the speakers and listener's face are crucially challenged and in which, therefore, politeness strategies play a central role. The questionnaire took the form of a standard Discourse Completion Test (DCT), in which a set of situations are presented in order to elicit a contextually appropriate response from the informant. While linguistic data elicited via DCT questionnaires does not qualify as fully "natural", the advantages DCT tools present to control and focus prompts outweigh the disadvantages that the lack of naturalness obviously presents. Furthermore, it is also possible that pragmatic strategies may be relatively unaffected by the type of data eliciting tool, since the key aspects of request and apology formation dealt with in this dissertation are not taught in either L1 or L2 contexts and therefore are not easily monitored by informants.

With informant groups thus delimited, the two major variables which may be used to account for observed differences are language competence levels, since English is L1 in one group but L2 in the other, and contextual, social and cultural factors. The main goal of this dissertation has been to, first, gather data on the similarities and differences in the request and apology production of informants from the two groups and, only secondly, to examine to what extent differences in the use (or lack of use) of strategies for these speech acts may be attributed not to proficiency level but to sociopragmatic factors. Proficiency levels may be claimed to play a more limited role than one might initially expect in the use of request and apology strategies. Typically, the latter, like other pragmatic skills, are not the subject of formal instruction, and, with differences in prominence and range of use, are sufficiently 'universal' to allow for direct

transfer of most strategies, even though their construction may be more or less impaired by lack of the appropriate level of purely “linguistic” competence. For studies of this type, a promise of forbearance in an apology, for instance, counts as an instance of that strategy regardless of the more or less fortunate wording of the actual text. The main focus of the dissertation, therefore, has hinged on the sociopragmatic aspects of request and apology formation. With this in mind, the data collection tool included a range of situations where factors such as social power, social distance and degree of imposition varied, in order to find out whether they had any significant impact on the students’ choices of strategies.

The emphasis in this dissertation has fallen on the factual basis provided by the questionnaire, as a necessary step to ground the analyses and proposed explanations on a solid foundation. Thus, the leading hypotheses for this research, as laid out in Chapter 1, were descriptive in nature and assumed that Omani students used fewer indirect request strategies as well as fewer apology strategies than American students.

### **5.1. Revisiting the findings**

Let us turn now to a brief summary of the results, necessarily succinct in order not to repeat the summaries at the end of the relevant sections in Chapter IV. As noted in the previous section, the study was designed to explore the differences in the use of requests and apology strategies under similar circumstances between American students and Omani students. The findings of request strategies discussed and analyzed in chapter IV, section 4.1, were organized into two main categories, on the basis of whether the observed differences could be attributed to purely linguistic factors or to sociocultural differences.

The data collected and analyzed in this study is fully compatible with the initial hypothesis laid out in Chapter I, namely, that Omani students use fewer indirect request strategies than their American counterparts. This was shown directly by examining the range of strategies and modifiers used, and, more indirectly, by examining the utterance length, strategy combinations, and relative use proportions across situations. On one hand, linguistic differences originated from insufficient linguistic abilities among Omani students. This deficiency of linguistic abilities can be assumed to be at the origin of the problems that were encountered in the formation of request speech acts, such as the underuse of the past auxiliaries like *could* as opposed to present tense modals like *can* in these acts, misused of *would* and overuse of the lexical downgrader *please* in comparison to the underuse of external modifiers such as grownders, disarmers and sweeteners. Past auxiliaries were also found to be underused by Omanis, which is a problem that is shared with other Arab learners due to the nonexistence of these verbal forms in the Arabic language. The expression of politeness in the Arabic language is usually formed by adding adjuncts to the modal expression, which remains unchanged. Formal teaching and learning of requests usually begins with simple, almost formulaic use of the present tense ability marker as a politeness element, with the past tense adding further politeness. The use of tense for politeness gradience, and the use of a modal element itself, is not transferable from Arabic, and students often limit their repertoire to the simple present form. More complex forms to modulate requests, like the speaker orientation of expressions like *can/could I borrow*, as opposed to the speaker orientation of *can/could you lend me* expressions is also missing from Omani students. This subtle type of modulation requires a good command of the language, and it

may well be that mastery of this pragmatic proficiency might be beyond non-native intermediate learners of English.

Leaving the influence of linguistic proficiency in a narrow sense, cultural and sociopragmatic factors play an important role in the formation of requests that affected the students' performance. Such sociolinguistic and pragmatic factors can help in the explanation of differences as observed in the data elicited in this dissertation, particularly in the relative prominence of strategies in different types of situations. In general terms, an important cultural factor that differentiates the Omani from the American context is the fact that Arabic culture is categorized within the group of "high-context" cultures, that is, cultures that rely heavily on the hearer to interpret the meaning of implicit utterances. Another important sociopragmatic factor which differs in the two groups is the social prestige and authority of teachers in the Omani context. A consequence of this is that the term of address *teacher*, a public recognition of authority, is overused in the academic context in the Omani group. It seems that there was an automatic transfer of the use of this word by Arab learners from early general school settings into the second language classroom of an academic university setting. The American group did not use this term of address, and, lacking the cultural prestige associations of the expression, its common use in primary education contexts makes it pragmatically inappropriate in a higher education environment.

Fewer differences were found between the two groups in the use of apology strategies, in comparison to the use of request strategies. Thus, the hypothesis expressed as II in Chapter I, namely, that Omani students use fewer apology strategies than American students, was not supported by the data. The variety of strategies used by the two groups was similar, and only

minor differences were found as to the relative frequency of some strategies in specific situational contexts. The major differences derived from the findings showed that Omanis scored lower in use of IFID, acknowledgment of responsibility, explanation of cause and offer of repair apology strategies. In contrast, they scored higher in the use of promise of forbearance and denial strategies. These are summarized below.

The data showed high level of use of certain IFID expressions among Omanis, such as *sorry* and *excuse me*. In many cases, it can be shown that the latter was used not exactly as a stereotypical expression of apology but rather as an attention getter, in a direct clear mixing in its use also as an apology IFID expression. The high incidence of this strategy could be also connected to the ample use of *please* in requests (cf. section 4.1.3.2). In both types of speech act, these expressions can be understood as easy ready-use formulae, which fulfill the required pragmatic functions with a minimum of linguistic expression, and enable to learner to create more elaborate apologies.

The Omani apology data also showed underuse of two significant sub-strategies that made a difference in the form of apology utterances by Americans and distinguish them from the Omani utterances. These are intensifiers and emotional vocabulary, which provide lexical variety to the forms of these speech acts, modulate severity and add authenticity and richness to them. These characteristics were absent from the majority of the apology utterances produced by Omani students, probably because they lacked sufficient knowledge of such vocabulary and how it can be used effectively.

In another pragmatic difference, the data showed that Omanis are less inclined to use the offer of repair strategy than their Americans counterparts. It is the least common strategy in

the data, even though both groups used it in almost all the situations. These situations can be characterized as requiring physical actions to repair damages of various degrees of severity. There is no sign that students consider the rank of the other interlocutor (the P variable) as a base of their choice to use the strategy. It was also found that Omanis are more open to use the promise of forbearance strategy with higher rank interlocutors and credited their guilt to group actions. This was a surprising result considering that Omanis use English as L2 and their proficiency is lower than that of native speakers (Americans). While proficiency factors can be invoked to account for the smaller relevance of some strategies in the Omani group, a sociocultural variable seems to be at work here. Notice that if proficiency alone were the key explanatory factor for the comparative data obtained for this speech act, we would expect the influence of this factor to pervade all strategy results, so that, quite generally, they should occur less frequently among Omanis than among Americans. Sociocultural factors, however, also play an important role, and can help boost or lower the relative prominence of some strategies over or below the levels the proficiency factor would account for. In this particular case, it was proposed that this strategy limits individual freedom, which is more threatening to Americans than Omanis.

There are therefore differences between the two target groups in the formation of polite formal requests and apologies. These differences are attributed not only to insufficient linguistic ability among Omani students, but also, to a considerable extent, to cultural differences. These differences, in fact, are often interpreted as providing some counterexample to question the universality of these speech acts suggested by Brown and Levinson (1978-1987) and which many researchers in fact consider to be context specific such as Meier (1995), Watts (1989,

2005), Trouillot (2000), Bateineh and Bateineh (2008) and Nureddeen (2008). Questions of universality arise not so much on the range of strategies employed in the construction of requests and apologies as on the conditions for their deployment. This study seems to provide evidence that the Omani (Arabic) context has to some extent a different effect on the choice and the use of politeness requests and apology strategies. Thus, sociocultural factors are a significant driving force influencing the choice of strategies to be used by Omani and American students on the basis of the contextual prompts offered by the elicitation tool in this study.

## **5.2. Limitations**

Turning now to the limitations of this study, there are some factors which can be considered to have a direct effect on our findings. An important one, in a study which, although qualitative in nature, does rely on quantitative facts, is the number of participants. The small size of completed questionnaires filtered for completeness and appropriateness from both groups has no doubt affected the richness of the elicited data. On a relatively low number of questionnaires which were distributed, further screenings were conducted. In this way, many questionnaires were excluded from the data, especially of Omani participants, mostly because they were either partly answered or because the informants did not address the questions correctly. It may be assumed that excluded questionnaires came from informants with lower proficiency levels, so that, had they been included, language mastery problems would have been more prominent. It is, however, a truism that lower level students will present severe language proficiency problems. For the concerns of this study, a critical mastery level is required for the

L2 so that relatively elaborate requests and apologies can be formed and an analysis along the lines described here can be conducted. Some other questionnaires were excluded because they presented identical answers, probably indicating they had been copied. Therefore, if those questionnaires had been included in the data and the analysis, they would have given a false picture of the target groups' preferences.

There is also unequal gender number in the data, especially in the Omani group. The number of male participants is much lower than the number of female students, who are overrepresented in the data. This is one of the reasons in the decision to avoid considering gender variables among the factors that differentiate the two target groups. The lack of gender balance in the informant sample simply reflects the gender composition of the University of Nizwa student population, where females, representing some 80% of the students outnumber male students in all fields of study. In some cases, gender differences have been commented upon, always bearing in mind the unbalance in the gender composition of the groups and the possible effect that it may have on the data collected. Observed gender differences have therefore not been the primary focus of this study and will be pursued in further work.

In addition, the limited numbers of American students who were available to participate has restricted our options in terms of number of participants. The students who collaborated in the study were originally a group of American students participating in an exchange program, and they came from universities scattered from different parts of the US. Although they are likely representing one context, one culture and their native language is English, they are representing a country that is known to possess an inordinate amount of cultural diversity resulting from the structure of its communities, which are largely composed by immigrants.

Therefore, such cultural variety might not be sufficiently reflected in the image projected by this specific group of students. We have been referring both to *Omanis* and to *Americans*, and if in and of itself this is a gross generalization, it may be even more so in the case of the latter. Also, as indicated at the outset of this concluding chapter, the context where the study was conducted may be a significant aspect that might also have affected the Americans' responses. One might wonder whether these American students were affected by the surrounding Arabic culture after being in a direct daily contact with its people and whether their responses would be different if they were surrounded by their own people and context. Answers for these questions are out of the scope of this study and need further research.

A final issue that should be considered when we draw conclusions from the data is to what extent one may draw valid generalizations from the results. The study targeted one specific academic context within a larger Arab and Omani context, and it would be unrealistic to automatically generalize the conclusion from the specific situation they apply to all similar contexts. From a broader perspective, it is true that Arabs share the same language and the same culture. However, there are other customs and practices that differentiate one Arabic context from another. These differences, partly originated from the geographical location and the colonial history, are sufficiently important to prevent swift overgeneralizations even within the Gulf Countries area.

The preceding constraints on the sample and type of data collected for this research are intended to help place the results laid out in Chapter IV in the correct frame in which they are obtained. Some of these restraints may have had an important impact on the results of this study, and different conclusions may have been obtained if those limitations did not exist. The role of

some of the factors which have not been fully considered due to the characteristics of the sample will be taken up in future research. Such is the case, for instance, of the gender variable. Given the gender unbalance in the sample, it is conceivable that the overrepresentation of female informants may have had some impact on some of the resulting data. At the same time, cases where gender differences were observed would have to be more directly assessed, since even though the results for females may be considered to be reliable, the small size of the male informant population may also have produced not wholly significant results. The next section will provide some practical ideas on how to improve the teaching and learning of pragmatics in the Omani context.

### **5.3. Recommendations**

As we have seen in our discussion of results in Chapter IV, there is a clear weakness in the knowledge, comprehension and use of pragmatics by our Omani learners of English. This weakness is not surprising given that pragmatic skills are almost completely neglected. Many instructors are not aware of pragmatic issues, and even if they are so, it seems to be assumed that pragmatic competences can be easily incorporated into the students' L2 by positive transfer from their L1. Foundation programs often organize L2 teaching, and learning, exclusively in terms of traditional discrete skills such as reading, writing, listening and speaking.

The resulting pragmatic weakness in the students' L2 could be discussed from the dimensions of the teacher, the curriculum and the stakeholders. Beginning with the teacher's perspective, in an EFL context such as the Omani one, foreign language teachers are sometimes confronted not only with the usual linguistic problems, but also with pragmatic inadequacies in

their students' production, while at the same time they themselves become aware of cultural differences. Awareness of pragmatics, even if present, is not enough given that instructors work on tightly defined curricula and temporal frameworks. Moreover, even if they did have the time and curriculum flexibility to address pragmatic issues, their earlier teaching preparation is likely not to provide them with the ability to do so. There are complaints that teachers do not receive training on how to teach pragmatics, which results in the decision to avoid dealing with it in their classrooms. The shortage of appropriate materials that address these skills is yet another reason not to tackle these competences. Therefore, it is highly important that ESL/EFL teachers receive pragmatic training during their regular course of study for their teaching degrees, or, in its absence, by means of workshops or seminars after graduation.

The majority of English teachers in private and government institutions in Oman are native or near native speakers. Hence, even if they have not received specific pragmatic training as part of their studies, they can still serve as direct models to be followed by Omani students in order to acquire accurate correct English language, provided they are made aware, with training that need not be excessively time-consuming, of the pragmatic underpinnings of speech acts such as requests and apologies. This type of teacher, with native or near-native pragmatic competence, willingness (if given the chance) to address pragmatic issues in the classroom and easily trainable in at least the basics of pragmatics, should be considered as a strong motive to provide teaching materials that address pragmatic skills and offer good practice of language. Incorporating classroom activities that address pragmatic issues is relatively easy, and, for instance, Kasper (1997) suggested activities that could be included in the pragmatics materials, such as role plays, simulations, drama and opportunities to practice them outside classrooms.

Thus, there is a need to investigate the inclusion and appropriateness of speech acts in textbooks that are used in the Omani context and institutions. This is yet another area of further research that would have to be tackled in the future.

The last and final important dimension of teaching pragmatics is the stakeholders' role. Given the need to fulfill curricular requirements issued by higher authorities, the latter have an important role in facilitating the incorporation of pragmatics teaching in the ESL curriculum and in Foundation programs in particular. In the case of Oman, the higher authority for language education policy is the OAAA (Oman Academic Accreditation Authority), and it is important to make it aware of the need to believe and understand the importance of studying pragmatic skills for Omani learners. This entails not only learning the correct use of English by the students but also the importance of acquiring cultural behavior in the target language. Foundation program standards (FPS) could also include pragmatic and cultural aspects of the language among their main standards and outcomes. Students should be expected to acquire pragmatic skills and cultural knowledge of the target language as they do with other traditional language skills. What applies to the Omani context could also be valid to other GCC FPs, which share geographical, political and cultural ties.



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**APPENDICES**

**Appendix A.** Percentages of non-conventionally and conventionally indirect strategies usage in student-to-instructor situations.

OF: Omani Female

OM: Omani Male

AF: American Female

AM: American Male

Situation	Group	Hint	Ability	Wish	Desire/ needs	Willingness	Permission	Suggestory
1	OF	0	39	3	15	0	0	0
3	OF	0	61	0	15	0	3	0
6	OF	36	30	0	18	0	3	0
8	OF	12	48	0	27	0	0	0
10	OF	6	52	0	12	6	6	0
1	OM	0	14	0	14	7	7	0
3	OM	0	57	0	7	7	14	0
6	OM	36	50	0	0	7	0	0
8	OM	0	71	0	7	0	0	0
10	OM	0	71	7	7	0	7	0
1	AF	7	60	7	13	13	0	7
3	AF	7	27	0	0	40	0	7
6	AF	60	27	0	20	0	20	0
8	AF	0	13	0	0	87	0	0
10	AF	0	40	0	0	33	27	0
1	AM	0	50	0	10	30	0	0
3	AM	0	40	0	30	0	0	20
6	AM	40	40	0	10	10	0	0
8	AM	40	40	0	10	10	0	0
10	AM	10	60	10	0	20	0	0

**Appendix B.** Percentages of non-conventionally and conventionally indirect strategies usage in student-to-student situations.

OF: Omani Female

OM: Omani Male

AF: American Female

AM: American Male

Situation	Group	Hint	Ability	Wish	Desire /needs	Willingness	Permission	Suggestory
2	OF	9	46	0	6	6	0	3
4	OF	9	36	0	3	6	0	18
5	OF	33	45	0	0	3	0	15
7	OF	9	67	0	24	0	0	0
9	OF	3	82	0	0	0	0	0
2	OM	0	43	7	7	7	21	0
4	OM	7	43	0	0	0	0	14
5	OM	64	36	0	0	0	0	0
7	OM	14	43	7	29	7	7	0
9	OM	0	71	0	0	0	14	0
2	AF	0	27	0	7	47	0	13
4	AF	13	7	0	0	7	13	60
5	AF	33	0	0	0	7	0	53
7	AF	27	53	0	0	7	0	13
9	AF	33	67	0	0	0	0	0
2	AM	0	50	0	0	10	0	30
4	AM	10	0	0	0	10	0	80
5	AM	70	10	0	0	0	0	20
7	AM	0	50	0	0	50	0	0
9	AM	10	60	0	0	3	0	0

**Appendix C.** Detailed internal modification (syntactic downgraders) in student-to-instructor situations.

Situation	Group	Can	Could	Shall	Should	Will	would	May	Sub. embedding	Long form	Cond. Clause
1	OF	8	6	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
3	OF	9	10	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
6	OF	5	8	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
8	OF	12	5	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
10	OF	15	3	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0
1	OM	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
3	OM	6	2	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	0
6	OM	6	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
8	OM	9	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
10	OM	8	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
1	AF	7	1	0	0	1	3	1	0	0	0
3	AF	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
6	AF	2	4	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
8	AF	0	1	0	0	0	13	0	1	2	0
10	AF	3	6	0	0	0	6	0	1	1	0
1	AM	2	4	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1
3	AM	0	3	0	0	0	3	0	0	2	1
6	AM	3	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
8	AM	1	0	0	0	0	7	0	0	2	0
10	AM	1	3	0	0	0	5	0	0	1	1

**Appendix D.** Detailed internal modification (syntactic downgraders) student-to-student situations.

Situation	Group	Can	Could	Shall	Should	Will	would	May	Sub. embedding	Long form	Cond. clause
2	OF	12	4	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	2
4	OF	10	4	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
5	OF	11	4	0	1	1	1	0	2	0	2
7	OF	13	8	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	4
9	OF	16	10	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2	OM	5	1	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0
4	OM	4	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
5	OM	3	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
7	OM	6	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	2
9	OM	9	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
2	AF	2	0	0	1	2	3	0	2	0	1
4	AF	0	1	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
5	AF	0	2	0	1	1	2	0	0	0	1
7	AF	2	6	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0
9	AF	4	5	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
2	AM	1	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	3
4	AM	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
5	AM	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
7	AM	2	1	0	0	0	5	0	0	1	0
9	AM	0	6	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0

**Appendix E.** Detailed external modification strategies in 1-10 situations.

Situation	Group	Preparatoring	Getting precommitment	Grownding	Sweetening	Disarmering	Cost minimizing
1	OMANI	0	0	4	0	0	0
	AMERICAN	0	0	7	0	0	0
2	OMANI	2	0	8	0	0	0
	AMERICAN	0	0	2	0	0	0
3	OMANI	0	0	17	0	1	0
	AMERICAN	0	0	17	0	0	4
4	OMANI	0	0	14	0	0	0
	AMERICAN	0	0	8	0	0	0
5	OMANI	0	0	9	1	1	0
	AMERICAN	0	1	4	8	0	0
6	OMANI	0	0	16	0	0	0
	AMERICAN	0	0	12	0	0	0
7	OMANI	6	0	5	1	2	0
	AMERICAN	0	0	8	1	1	0
8	OMANI	0	0	3	0	0	1
	AMERICAN	0	0	8	0	0	0
9	OMANI	0	0	16	0	0	1
	AMERICAN	0	0	12	0	0	2
10	OMANI	1	0	8	0	0	1
	AMERICAN	0	0	12	0	0	1

**Appendix F.** Sample of practice TOEFL test.**Listening Comprehension Practice Questions****Section 1**

The **Listening Comprehension** section tests your ability to understand both short and long conversations in English. The section contains recorded material that is similar to what you might hear if you were with a group of students at an English-speaking college or university. The language includes

- vocabulary and idiomatic expressions common to spoken English
- special grammatical constructions used in speech

Before completing these practice questions, [print out an answer sheet](#) so that you can become familiar with the format.

***Directions and Practice Questions***

Directions and examples of the types of questions you will find in the **Listening Comprehension** section of the *TOEFL*® test are below.

There are three parts to this section, with special directions for each part. Answer all questions based on what is stated or implied by the speakers you hear.

**Do not:**

- take notes or write in your test book at any time
- turn the pages until you are told to do so.

***Part A***

**Directions:** In Part A, you will hear short conversations between two people. After each conversation, you will hear a question about the conversation. The conversations and questions will not be repeated. After you hear a question, read the four possible answers in your test book and choose the best answer. Then, on your answer sheet, find the number of the question and fill in the space that corresponds to the letter of the answer you have chosen.

Sample Answer



*Here is an example.*

**On the recording, you will hear:**

(woman) *I don't like this painting very much.*

(man) *Neither do I.*

(narrator) *What does the man mean?*

**In your test book, you will read:**

- A. He doesn't like the painting either.
- B. He doesn't know how to paint.
- C. He doesn't have any paintings.
- D. He doesn't know what to do.

You learn from the conversation that neither the man nor the woman likes the painting. The best answer to the question, "What does the man mean?" is A, "He doesn't like the painting either." Therefore, the correct choice is A.

**PRACTICE QUESTIONS****1. You will hear:**

(man) *Shall I lock up the computer lab now before I go home?*

(woman) *Don't bother. I'm not leaving for a while, I can check it on my way out.*

(narrator) *What will the woman probably do?*

- You will read:**
- A. Lock the computer lab later.
  - B. Leave with the man.
  - C. Buy a new lock for the computer lab.
  - D. Show the man where the lab is.

**2. You will hear:**

(man) *Do you mind if I turn the television off?*

(woman) *Well, I'm in the middle of watching a program.*

(narrator) *What does the woman imply?*

- You will read:**
- A. The man should watch the program too.
  - B. The man should leave the television on.
  - C. The program will be over soon.
  - D. She'll watch television later.

**3. You will hear:**

**(woman)** *I heard the math requirements for graduation are being changed.*

**(man)** *Yes. And I may be short one course.*

**(narrator)** *What does the man mean?*

**You will read:** A. He isn't sure what course to take.

B. The math course is too short.

C. He may not meet the graduation requirements.

D. The graduation date has been changed.

**Part B**

**Directions:** In this part of the test you will hear longer conversations. After each conversation you will hear several questions. The conversations and questions will not be repeated. After you hear a question, read the four possible answers in your test book and choose the best answer. Then, on your answer sheet, find the number of the question and fill in the space that corresponds to the letter of the answer you have chosen.

Remember, you are **not** allowed to take notes or write in your test book.

**SAMPLE CONVERSATION AND PRACTICE QUESTIONS**

**(narrator)** *Questions 4 through 7. Listen to a conversation about a trip.*

**(man)** *Are you ready for "The Big Apple"?*

**(woman)** *Excuse me?*

*You know, New York City. You are going to New York with us, aren't you? I*

**(man)** *wanted to show everybody around my old neighborhood.*

*Oh...sure! I wouldn't miss it especially when the tour guide is a native New*

**(woman)** *Yorker.*

*I thought we could start at the Museum of Modern Art. Right now there's an*

**(man)** *exhibit on twentieth-century American painters.*

**(woman)** *Fine with me...but what were you saying about...a big apple?*

*“The Big Apple.” It’s a nickname for New York. I think I heard once that it*  
**(man)** *started with jazz musicians in the 20’s.*

**(woman)** *Oh.*

*Whenever they played a concert in a city, they called that city an “apple.” In*  
*those days, New York was the biggest city in the country, so they called it*  
**(man)** *“The Big Apple.”*

**(woman)** *Hey, I have an idea! Let’s go to a jazz club while we’re there.*

**(man)** *Sounds good.*

### Questions:

#### 4. You will hear:

**(narrator)** *What is the man planning to see?*

- You will read:**
- A. An art exhibit.
  - B. A Broadway play.
  - C. A modern dance production.
  - D. An opera.

#### 5. You will hear:

**(narrator)** *What can be inferred about the man?*

- You will read:**
- A. He is a jazz musician.
  - B. He wants to join the woman’s club.
  - C. He is in his twenties.
  - D. He was born in New York.

#### 6. You will hear:

**(narrator)** *What does the word “Apple” in the phrase “The Big Apple” refer to?*

- You will read:**
- A. An instrument.

- B. A city.
- C. A theater.
- D. A concert.

**7. You will hear:**

**(narrator)** *Who gave New York its nickname?*

- You will read:**
- A. Painters.
  - B. Tour guides.
  - C. Musicians.
  - D. Grocers.

**Part C**

**Directions:** In this part of the test you will hear several talks. After each talk, you will hear some questions. The talks and questions will not be repeated.

After you hear a question, read the four possible answers in your test book and choose the best answer. Then, on your answer sheet, find the number of the question and fill in the space that corresponds to the letter of the answer you have chosen.

*Here is an example.*

**On the recording, you will hear:**

**(narrator)** *Listen to an instructor talk to his class about a television program.*

*I'd like to tell you about an interesting TV program that'll be shown this coming Thursday. It'll be on from 9 to 10 p.m. on Channel 4. It's part of a series called "Mysteries of Human Biology." The subject of the program is the human brain — how it functions and how it can malfunction. Topics that will be covered are dreams, memory, and depression. These topics are illustrated with outstanding computer animation that makes the explanations easy to follow. Make an effort to see this show. Since we've been studying*

**(man)** *the nervous system in class, I know you'll find it very helpful.*

Sample Answer



*Here is an example.*

**You will hear:**

(narrator) *What is the main purpose of the program?*

**In your test book, you will read:**

- A. To demonstrate the latest use of computer graphics.
- B. To discuss the possibility of an economic depression.
- C. To explain the workings of the brain.
- D. To dramatize a famous mystery story.

The best answer to the question, “What is the main purpose of the program?” is C, “To explain the workings of the brain.” Therefore, the correct choice is C.

**Sample Answer**

*Here is another example.*

**You will hear:**

(narrator) *Why does the speaker recommend watching the program?*

**In your test book, you will read:**

- A. It is required of all science majors.
- B. It will never be shown again.
- C. It can help viewers improve their memory skills.
- D. It will help with course work.

The best answer to the question, “Why does the speaker recommend watching the program?” is D, “It will help with course work.” Therefore, the correct choice is D.

Remember, you are **not** allowed to take notes or write in your test book.

**PRACTICE TALK AND PRACTICE QUESTIONS**

(narrator) *Questions 8 through 10. Listen to a talk about animal behavior.*

(woman) *Today’s discussion is about a common animal reaction — the yawn. The dictionary defines a yawn as “an involuntary reaction to fatigue or boredom.” That’s certainly true for human yawns, but not necessarily for*

*animal yawns. The same action can have quite different meanings in different species.*

*For example, some animals yawn to intimidate intruders on their territory. Fish and lizards are examples of this. Hippos use yawns when they want to settle a quarrel. Observers have seen two hippos yawn at each other for as long as two hours before they stop quarreling.*

*As for social animals like baboons or lions — they yawn to establish the pecking order within social groups, and lions often yawn to calm social tensions. Sometimes these animals yawn for a strictly physiological reason — that is, to increase oxygen levels. And curiously enough, when they yawn for a physical reason like that, they do what humans do — they try to stifle the yawn by looking away or by covering their mouths.*

### Questions:

#### 8. You will hear:

**(narrator)** *What is the speaker's main point?*

- You will read:**
- A. Animals yawn for a number of reasons.
  - B. Yawning results only from fatigue or boredom.
  - C. Human yawns are the same as those of other animals.
  - D. Only social animals yawn.

#### 9. You will hear:

**(narrator)** *According to the speaker, when are hippos likely to yawn?*

- You will read:**
- A. When they are swimming.
  - B. When they are quarreling.
  - C. When they are socializing.
  - D. When they are eating.

#### 10. You will hear:

**(narrator)** *What physiological reason for yawning is mentioned?*

- You will read:**
- A. To exercise the jaw muscles.
  - B. To eliminate fatigue.
  - C. To get greater strength for attacking.
  - D. To gain more oxygen.

**Appendix G.** Conversion chart of TOEFL with other similar international tests.

TOEIC	TOEFL Paper	TOEFL CBT	TOEFL IBT	IELTS	Cambridge Exam	CEFR	VEC Online Score	Approximate VEC Level
0 - 250	0 - 310	0 - 30	0 - 8	0 - 1.0			0 - 34	2
	310 - 343	33 - 60	9 - 18	1.0 - 1.5		A1	35 - 38	3
	347 - 393	63 - 90	19 - 29	2.0 - 2.5		A1	39 - 45	4 - 5
255 - 400	397 - 433	93 - 120	30 - 40	3.0 - 3.5	KET (IELTS 3.0)	A2	46 - 53	6 - 7
					PET (IELTS 3.5)	B1 (IELTS 3.5)		
405 - 600	437 - 473	123 - 150	41 - 52	4.0	PET	B1	54 - 57	8
	477 - 510	153 - 180	53 - 64	4.5 - 5.0	PET (IELTS 4.5)	B1 (IELTS 4.5)	58 - 65	9 - 10
					FCE (IELTS 5.0)	B2 (IELTS 5.0)		
605 - 780	513 - 547	183 - 210	65 - 78	5.5 - 6.0	FCE	B2	66 - 73	11 - 12
	550 - 587	213 - 240	79 - 95	6.5 - 7.0	CAE	C1	74 - 81	13 - 14
785 - 990	590 - 677	243 - 300	96 - 120	7.5 - 9.0	CPE	C2	82 - 100	15
<b>Top Score</b>	<b>Top Score</b>	<b>Top Score</b>	<b>Top Score</b>	<b>Top Score</b>	<b>Top Score</b>	<b>Top Level</b>	<b>Top Score</b>	<b>Top Level</b>
990	677	300	120	9	100	C2	100	15

*[Handwritten signature]*  
19/8/2014



## **Appendix H. UoN Foundation Institute.**

### **Overview**

Upon the inception of the University of Nizwa in October 2004, the English Language Service, or ELS, a private professional institution provided micro-management of a fledgling foundation programme in which the Mathematics and Physical Sciences Department and the Lifelong Learning Centre contributed the mathematics and IC3 components. At the same time the Test of English as a Foreign Language, or TOEFL, was adopted as the standardized benchmark to assess English Language proficiency.

In May 2006, the University of Nizwa assumed full responsibility for delivery of its own programmes, with a Director, two Assistant Directors, 6 administrators and 65 native English speaking teachers staffing the Language Centre, providing courses for over one thousand students. Basic courses were of 22 hours of English and 6 hours IC3 instruction per week. In addition, English for Special Purposes courses were delivered to a wide variety of the public sector, including banks, hospitals and human resources.

In August 2010, the Foundation Institute assumed full responsibility for all foundation level programme delivery. Now, English, TOEFL, Mathematics, Information Technology, Life Skills and University Skills are all components in a fully integrated foundation study programme.

### **OAAA standards**

The OAAA's standards document<sup>134</sup> on Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) GFPs states that a student is deemed to have successfully met the learning outcomes of a GPF when they can satisfactorily<sup>135</sup>

- a) actively participate in a discussion on a topic relevant to his studies by asking questions, agreeing/disagreeing, asking for clarification, sharing information, expressing and asking for opinions,
- b) paraphrase information (orally or in writing) from a written or spoken text or from graphically presented data.
- c) prepare and deliver a talk of at least 5 minutes. Use library resources in preparing the talk, speak clearly and confidently, make eye contact and use body language to support the delivery of ideas. Respond effectively to questions.
- d) write texts of a minimum of 250 words, demonstrating control of layout, organisation, punctuation, spelling, sentence structure, grammar and vocabulary.
- e) produce a written report of a minimum of 500 words demonstrating evidence of research, note-taking, review and revision of work, paraphrasing, summarising, use of quotations and use of references.

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<sup>134</sup> Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programmes, MOHE, 2008, p10

<sup>135</sup> The determination of what is satisfactory is a matter of assessment

- f) take notes and respond to questions about the topic, main ideas, details and opinions or arguments from an extended listening text (e.g. lecture, news broadcast).
- g) follow spoken instructions in order to carry out a task with a number of stages.
- h) listen to a conversation between two or more speakers and be able to answer questions in relation to context, relationship between speakers and register (e.g. formal or informal).
- i) read a one to two page text and identify the main idea(s) and extract specific information in a specific period of time.
- j) read an extensive text broadly relevant to the student's area of study (minimum three pages) and respond to questions that require analytical skills, e.g. prediction, deduction, inference.

### **Foundation Institute compliance with Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA)**

The Foundation programme has been designed to meet the standards of OAAA. Students in the University of Nizwa are required to study English, Maths, Computer and Life Skills. Study Skills are taught as an integral part of each programme.

### **Learning outcomes for FI**

The learning outcomes are indicative of what a student should be able to do at the end of that level, but they are neither prescriptive nor exhaustive. A complete list of every skill would be impossible and the longer the list, the greater the danger that any language skills which are not on the list are ignored when it may be perfectly logical and beneficial that a student should know them. Similarly, a vague list of skills makes assessment difficult as individual interpretation of learning outcomes means some students are taught a particular skill and others are not. In addition, individual class dynamics, class size, student attitudes, student-teacher relationships and a wide variety of other factors can influence the number of skills a student learns.

In order to minimize variation between classes, where in-house textbooks are provided, these detail the outcomes to be addressed each week, suggested teaching methods, exercises and activities, and the means by which the outcomes can be assessed. These are not intended to stifle the creativity and individuality of teachers, but rather to give detailed and specific guidance as to which outcomes the students must achieve. The individual staff members approach the teaching materials is a matter of professionalism and personal teaching Philosophy and practice: The important fact is that the students are being effectively taught, and are engaged in a quality learning experience.

### **Assessment**

Assessment is a means of determining what students know, understand and can do; of whether lesson, courses or programmes are achieving their objectives and whether teachers and materials are delivering what they aim to deliver.

**Formative** assessment is assessment for learning — assessments modify and validate instruction and learning and are ongoing.

- Formative assessments enable students to know what they have achieved so far and what they still need to master.
- They tell teachers whether methodologies and materials are delivered as they should be and suggest how to improve outcomes.

**Summative** assessment is assessment of learning — assessments show whether a course or programme has worked. They are at the end of a course.

- Summative assessments tell students if they have achieved a particular level of in specific skills.
- They tell teachers and programme directors whether courses are being delivered successfully.

### **Continuous Assessment**

	L1	L2	L3	L4
Class participation	5%	-	-	-
Class oral work	5%	5%	5%	5%
Term project presentation	10%	5%	5%	5%
Book treasure hunt	10%	-	-	-
Process writing assignments (2)	-	20%	20%	20%
Weekly quiz	20%	20%	20%	20%
<b>Total</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>50%</b>

## Appendix I. Benchmarking TOEFL with IELP (Intensive English Language Program)

### Benchmarking

There are difficulties in benchmarking IELP to TOEFL because the nature and purpose of the exams are different. The IELP is designed to meet the OAAA outcomes: TOEFL is not. The IELP assessments include speaking and have writing as a major element. Both are designed to enable students to function in their majors — taught in English. Listening also differs, in that the IELP programme requires sustained listening to long dialogues and monologues, and requires note-taking skills, whereas the TOEFL listening is entirely short transactions. The TOEFL test does not test productive skills, and has no way of mirroring the normal academic processes of researching, drafting and editing reports. Of the ten OAAA requirements, the TOEFL test covers only g and h — the IELP must, and does, cover all of them.

<b>a</b>	Actively participate in a discussion on a topic relevant to his studies by asking questions, agreeing and disagreeing, asking for clarification, sharing information, expressing and asking for opinions.
<b>b</b>	Paraphrase information (orally or in writing) from a written or spoken text or from graphically presented data.
<b>c</b>	Prepare and deliver a talk of at least 5 minutes. Use library resources in preparing the talk, speak clearly and confidently, make eye contact and use body language to support the delivery of ideas. Respond confidently to questions.
<b>d</b>	Write texts of a minimum of 250 words, showing control of layout, organisation, punctuation, spelling, sentence structure, grammar and vocabulary.
<b>e</b>	Produce a written report of a minimum of 500 words showing evidence of research, note-taking, review and revision of work, paraphrasing, summarising, use of quotations and use of references.
<b>f</b>	Take notes and respond to questions about the topic, main ideas, details and opinions or arguments from an extended listening text (e.g. lecture, news broadcast).
<b>g</b>	Follow spoken instructions in order to carry out a task with a number of stages.
<b>h</b>	Listen to a conversation between two or more speakers and be able to answer questions in relation to context, relationship between speakers, register (e.g. formal or informal).
<b>i</b>	Read a one to two page text and identify the main idea(s) and extract specific information in a given period of time.
<b>j</b>	Read an extensive text broadly relevant to the student's area of study (minimum three pages) and respond to questions that require analytical skills, e.g. prediction, deduction, inference.

There are also issues arising from different interpretations about equivalency between the CEFR (Common European Framework), upon which the FI levels are based, and the TOEFL and IELTS scores referred to by OAAA.

According to ETS’s own report, TOEFL cannot test language competence below a certain level.

Test Section	Total Score Scale Range	Minimum Score					
		A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2
<b>TOEFL iBT Total</b>	<b>0–120</b>			<b>57–86</b>	<b>87–109</b>	<b>110–120</b>	
TOEFL iBT Reading	0–30			8	22	28	29
TOEFL iBT Listening	0–30			13	21	26	
TOEFL iBT Speaking	0–30	8	13	19	23	28	
TOEFL iBT Writing	0–30		11	17	21	28	

While this relates to the iBT, as the PBT is obsolete, it does illustrate that Reading and Listening are not measurable below B1.

When comparing across tests, ETS benchmarks IELTS, iBT, PBT and the CEFR in a different way to Cambridge ESOL with the IELTS test.

IELTS Score	TOEFL iBT	TOEFL PBT	CEFR	IELTS Score	CEFR	FI Level	CEFR
9	118-120	667-677	C1	9	C2	-	-
8.5	115-117	653-660	C1	8.5	C2	-	-
8	110-114	637-650	C1	8	C1	-	-
7.5	102-109	610-630	B2	7.5	C1	-	-
7	94-101	587-607	B2	7	C1	-	-
6.5	79-93	550-583	B1-B2	6.5	B2	-	-
6	60-78	497-547	B1	6	B2		-
5.5	46-59	453-497	B1	5.5	B2	L3	B2
5	35-45	417-450	A2	5	B1	L2	B1
4.5	32-34	400-413	A2	4.5	A2	L1	A2
0-4	0-31	350-397	A2	0-4	A2	L1	A2
0-2	0-20	310-347	A1	0-2	A1	L1	A1
1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	FI	FI

Sources:

- 1: <http://www.ets.org/toefl/institutions/scores/compare/>
- 2: [http://www.ets.org/Media/Tests/TOEFL/pdf/TOEFL\\_iBT\\_Score\\_Comparison\\_Tables.pdf](http://www.ets.org/Media/Tests/TOEFL/pdf/TOEFL_iBT_Score_Comparison_Tables.pdf)
- 3: [https://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/CEF\\_Mapping\\_Study\\_Interim\\_Report.pdf](https://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/CEF_Mapping_Study_Interim_Report.pdf)
- 4: [https://www.ielts.org/researchers/common\\_european\\_framework.aspx](https://www.ielts.org/researchers/common_european_framework.aspx)
- 5: [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/elp/elp-reg/Source/Global\\_scale/globalscale.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/elp/elp-reg/Source/Global_scale/globalscale.pdf)

According to Cambridge, IELTS band 5 (the exit level required by OAAA) equates to B1 (Our Level 2 exit point or Level 3 entry point), whereas ETS it at A2, with an equivalent PBT score of 417-450. It is highly unlikely that any FI student at A2 (Level 1) would score in that range. For B2 (our Level 3), Cambridge suggests a score of 5.5. ETS put that at B1 with a range of anywhere between 453 and 583.

**Appendix J. Omani student questionnaire.****Dear student,**

**Thank you for participating in this study that investigates the skills involved in Pragmatics. Your input will be a great help. All information you will provide will be dealt with confidentiality and will be used only of research purposes.**

عزيمي الطالب،

شكرا على مشاركتك في في هذه الدراسة التي تبحث في العلاقة بين اللغة والمواقف التي يتم فيها استخدامها في الحوار المباشر بين الاشخاص. جميع المعلومات التي ستشارك بها سوف تحاط بالسرية التامة وسوف تستخدم للأغراض البحثية فقط لا غير.

**A. Personal information**

1. Nationality:\_\_\_\_\_.
2. How long have you been learning at the University of Nizwa? (tick one)
  1.  1-2 Semesters
  2.  3-4 semesters
  3.  1-2 years
  4.  More than 3 years
3. Age (tick one)
 

1. <input type="radio"/> 18-20	2. <input type="radio"/> 21-30	3. <input type="radio"/> Over 30
--------------------------------	--------------------------------	----------------------------------
4. Gender (tick one)
 

1. <input type="radio"/> Male	2. <input type="radio"/> Female
-------------------------------	---------------------------------

**A. Imagine yourself in the following situations. Write exactly what you will say.**

1. You notice that your marks in the mid-term test are low and you want to discuss them with your instructor, Betsy, later in her office hours. What do you say to her?

---

2. You and your colleague, Waleed, are working on a class project. You have arranged an appointment to see your instructor today at 2 pm to discuss your proposal for your project and you want John to go with you. What do you say to him?

---

3. You did not attend the class yesterday because you were sick and you have a sick note for being absent. There was something important that the instructor, Simona, explained while you were absent and you want her to explain it again for you. What do you say to her?

---

4. You and your colleague, Salim, have been studying for two hours. You feel tired and want to take a coffee break. What do you say to him?

---

5. Your instructor asked you and your colleague, Hassan, whom you have just met for the first time, to choose an interesting topic for your presentation. He suggests a topic you don't like. What do you say to him?

---

6. At the end of a lecture, your instructor, Dennis, hands out an article to read for tomorrow's class. There were not enough copies. You want to ask for a copy for yourself. What do you say to him?
- 

7. While preparing for an exam you need some help. You have a good relationship with one of your classmates, Fatma, whom you think would help you. You call her to arrange to meet. What do you say to her?
- 

8. Your university is introducing a new activity for the students. To participate in one of these activities you need a recommendation letter from your instructor. You go to your instructor, Jessica, to ask for a letter. What do you say to her?
- 

9. While discussing a hot topic in class with your teacher, one of your classmates, Ali, gives his opinion, but you couldn't hear what he said. You turn to him and ask him to repeat what he just said. What do you say to him?
- 

10. Your instructor, Dr Brown, gives the deadline for the semester project. You want him to extend it and give you some more time. What do you say to him?
- 

**B. Imagine yourself in these situations. Write exactly what you will say.**

1. Your instructor gave you a homework. The next day you come to the class without it. What do you say?
-

2. You and your colleague are arguing about an answer to a question in an exam paper. You insist that your answer is correct, but when you checked, you were wrong and he was right. What do you say?
- 

3. Your colleague has a problem in his laptop. You offer to fix it. While trying to fix it you deleted an important file by mistake. You feel embarrassed. What do you say?
- 

4. You get up early in the morning to go to your classes. But you arrive late to your class. What do you say to the teacher?
- 

5. You are visiting a colleague in his apartment. You look at a picture on the wall, but when you touch it, it falls and breaks. What do you say?
- 

6. Your classmate is giving a presentation for the whole class. You and another classmate are talking and the teacher asks you stop talking and listen, but you keep on talking. The teacher stops the presentation and looks at you angrily. You are embarrassed and want to apologize. What do you say?
- 

7. Yesterday you had an appointment with your instructor. You could not go. You meet your instructor today. What do you say?
- 

8. One of your colleagues comes to you at the end of the class and asks if he can borrow your car. You do not want to lend him your car. What do you say?
-

9. At the end of the class your instructor asks you to make a big poster summarizing what he explained in class. However, you are busy. What do you say?

---

10. A group of your colleagues decide to spend the weekend at a nearby tourist site and ask you to join them. You already have another plan for the weekend. What do you say?

---

Many thanks for your contribution.

**Appendix K.** American student questionnaire.

Dear student,

**Thank you for participating in this study that investigates the Pragmatic skills used by native speakers of English in academic formal situations. Your input will be a great help. All information you will provide will be dealt with confidentiality and will be used only of research purposes.**

**B. Personal information**

5. Nationality:\_\_\_\_\_.
6. University/college/Institution: \_\_\_\_\_.
7. How long have you been learning at the University level? (tick one)
1.  1-2 Semesters
  2.  3-4 semesters
  3.  1-2 years
  4.  More than 3 years
  5.  Not applicable
8. Age (tick one)
2.  18-20
  2.  21-30
  3.  Over 30
9. Gender (tick one)
2.  Male
  2.  Female

**A. Imagine yourself in the following situations. Write exactly what you will say.**

11. You notice that your marks in the mid-term test are low and you want to discuss them with your instructor, Betsy, later in her office hours. What do you say to her?

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12. You and your colleague, John, are working on a class project. You have arranged an appointment to see your instructor today at 2 pm to discuss your proposal for your project and you want John to go with you. What do you say to him?

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13. You did not attend the class yesterday because you were sick and you have a sick note for being absent. There was something important that the instructor, Simona, explained while you were absent and you want her to explain it again for you. What do you say to her?

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14. You and your colleague, Peter, have been studying for two hours. You feel tired and want to take a coffee break. What do you say to him?

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15. Your instructor asked you and your colleague, Ray, whom you have just met for the first time, to choose an interesting topic for your presentation. He suggests a topic you don't like. What do you say to him?

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16. At the end of a lecture, your instructor, Dennis, hands out an article to read for tomorrow's class. There were not enough copies. You want to ask for a copy for yourself. What do you say to him?

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17. While preparing for an exam you need some help. You have a good relationship with one of your classmates, Farah, whom you think would help you. You call her to arrange to meet. What do you say to her?

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18. Your university is introducing a new activity for the students. To participate in one of these activities you need a recommendation letter from your teacher. You go to your instructor, Jessica, to ask for a letter. What do you say to her?

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19. While discussing a hot topic in class with your teacher, one of your classmates, Ali, gives his opinion, but you couldn't hear what he said. You turn to him and ask him to repeat what he just said. What do you say to him?

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20. Your instructor, Dr Brown, gives the deadline for the semester project. You want him to extend it and give you some more time. What do you say to him?

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**11. Imagine yourself in these situations. Write exactly what you will say.**

12. Your instructor gave you a homework. The next day you come to the class without it. What do you say?

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13. You and your colleague are arguing about an answer to a question in an exam paper. You insist that your answer is correct, but when you checked, you were wrong and he was right. What do you say?

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14. Your colleague has a problem in his laptop. You offer to fix it. While trying to fix it you deleted an important file by mistake. You feel embarrassed. What do you say?

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15. You get up early in the morning to go to your classes. But you arrive late to your class. What do you say to the teacher?

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16. You are visiting a colleague in his apartment. You look at a picture on the wall, but when you touch it, it falls and breaks. What do you say?

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17. Your classmate is giving a presentation for the whole class. You and another classmate are talking and the teacher asks you stop talking and listen, but you keep on talking. The teacher stops the presentation and looks at you angrily. You are embarrassed and want to apologize. What do you say?

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18. Yesterday you had an appointment with your instructor. You could not go. You meet your instructor today. What do you say?

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19. One of your colleagues comes to you at the end of the class and asks if he can borrow your car. You do not want to lend him your car. What do you say?

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20. At the end of the class your instructor asks you to make a big poster summarizing what he explained in class. However, you are busy. What do you say?

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21. A group of your colleagues decide to spend the weekend at a nearby tourist site and ask you to join them. You already have another plan for the weekend. What do you say?

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Many thanks for your contribution

## Appendix L. explanatory questionnaire to FI UoN English instructors



Dear teachers,

Thank you for taking part in this questionnaire that investigates “Pragmatics<sup>136</sup>” (1). My name is Ahmed Al-Rahbi and I am a faculty of UoN (FI). I am requesting your cooperation to answer the questions in this questionnaire, which focuses on “Pragmatic Competences” (2) of our students in the FI.

In many contexts of EFL/ESL, Omani context is not an exception, teachers find significant numbers of students who still experience some difficulties in interpreting the intended meanings of verbal and non-verbal acts in real communications and fall into the “Pragmatic failure” trap even when they reach a high level of language proficiency.

In the following I provide some examples that are categorized as pragmatic failures from everyday classroom communication in the Omani context. They will also give you a clearer idea of the focus of this questionnaire:

### Verbal utterances

Students are failing to understand and apply the “power” and “distance” rules:

- When they want to show extra respect to the teacher by asking about teacher’s health, well being, family, children and many times personal or general life news. All these speech acts uttered at once right at the beginning of a conversation with the teacher who might consider it as a break of privacy; whereas for Omanis it is a normal everyday lengthy speech acts to start a friendly conversation between people. Failing to do this in Omani context sometimes leads to being accused of disrespect to your interlocutor.
- In western culture the following requests by Omani students might sound rude: imagine a student knocking at your office door and says “*teacher, I want my mark*” or “*excuse me, I*

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1. Pragmatics "the study of communication action in its sociocultural context"

2. Pragmatic competence can be interpreted as the competence to employ language for appropriate communication, which can be simplified as the two major aspects of expression and comprehension (He Ziran, 1997)

want a book”. Both the word “*teacher*” and the phrase “*excuse me*” in Arabic carry strong respect meanings but students do not know that they could also carry other meanings in English if they are said in such ways.

#### Other statements

- You get into your class and your students are waiting for your arrival. It is the summer in Oman and the class is warm. You want one of the students to turn on the AC because they are closer than you to the unit and you say to them “it is hot in here!” meaning “Please, one of you turn on the AC”. However, your students did not respond in action!!!

#### Non verbal acts

The following might be categorized under cultural misconceptions by teachers:

- Students refuse to be paired reading aloud a dialogue with opposite classmate from opposite sex, especially if it is a female student. Schools in Oman separate students according to gender from grade 5 up to grade 12 (the highest level at high school)
- Students refuse to stand in front of the class and give a short talk about “*Halloween*”. They are not familiar to such situation as they have completed their high school in different cultural environments and Oman is rich with its diversity.

Dear teachers, your answers will provide me with valuable information on teaching pragmatics in the Omani context. All information you will provide will be dealt with confidentiality and will be used only of research purposes.

Ahmed Al-Rahbi

10. Name: \_\_\_\_\_

11. Nationality: \_\_\_\_\_

12. Mother tongue: \_\_\_\_\_

13. How long have you been teaching in Oman? (circle one)

1. 1-2 Semester 2. 3-4 semesters 3. 1-2 years 4. 3 years or more

14. Age (circle one)

3. 25-30   2. 30-35   3. 35-40   4. 40-50   5. 50-60
15. Gender (circle one)
3. Male  
4. Female
4. Teaching level (circle one)
1. Level 1  
2. Level 2  
3. Level 3  
4. Other duties: (e.g. level coordinator):
- 

16. How long have you taught EFL/ESL so far? (circle one)

1. 1-2 years  
2. 3-4 years  
3. 5-6 years  
4. more than 6 years

17. Do you speak any other languages? (circle one)

1. yes  
2. no  
3. If yes, which one(s)? \_\_\_\_\_

18. Have you taken ESL Methodology courses related to teaching (Pragmatic Competence) particularly **Politeness** aspect of Pragmatic (*Apology, Respect* and *Refusal*)? If yes, please list anything (course activities, lectures, readings, etc.) that you can remember

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19. Have you ever lived in a foreign country? (circle one)

1. yes  
2. no

20. If yes, which one(s)?

21. Have you noticed whether your way of saying things has created some misunderstanding as to your real intentions, desires, needs, etc?

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22. How have your studies, your language learning experience(s), including living in another country affect the way you teach? i.e. Do you teach things like how to apologize, how to refuse, how to contradict, how to help addressee keep face, etc.?

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23. During your teaching experience in Oman, list or describe any pragmatic problems of **Politeness** (*Request, Refusal and Apology*) whether it is spoken or acts you have experienced that you can remember. e.g. when you say “sorry” for sharing sympathy, where your students might take the meaning literally, which is not the same in Arabic *or* saying “excuse me” when sneeze which also your students think it is no need to excuse as it is a natural behavior.

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24. How frequently such above mentioned errors occur with your Omani students that you can link to pragmatic knowledge? (circle one)

1. Always   2. Frequently   3. Sometimes   4. Never   5. I don't know   6. No answer

25. I believe these Pragmatic problems are due to: (circle one)

1. Lack of culture knowledge
2. Lack of Pragmatic knowledge
3. Literal translation from L1 to L2
4. All above
5. Other(s) (please mention!) \_\_\_\_\_
6. I don't know
7. No answer

26. I feel comfortable to use pragmatic concepts with my students because they can understand me. (circle one)

1. Strongly agree 2. Agree 3. Disagree 4. Strongly disagree 5. I don't know 6. No answer

27. Do you think that Omani students have difficulty to distinguish the *social distance* between speaker and listener when performing **politeness** utterances and being able to cope with it following the (pragmatic) expectations and uses of the culture of the other language? e.g. *family* or *friend* Vs *stranger*

1. Yes
2. No
3. I don't know
4. No answer

28. If your answer is *yes*, please provide an example from your experience with Omani students.

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29. Do you think that Omani students have difficulty to distinguish the *power relation* between speaker and listener when performing **politeness** utterances and being able to cope with it following the (pragmatic) expectations and uses of the culture of the other language?

e.g. *classmate* Vs *teacher* (circle one)

1. Yes
2. No
3. I don't know
4. No answer

30. If your answer is *yes*, please provide an example from your experience with Omani students.

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31. I teach pragmatics because it is: (you can circle more than one)

1. Important for my students
2. Part of the textbook that I use and I have to cover it
3. I'm quite confident on teaching pragmatics
4. Does not take much time from me
5. I don't know
6. No answer

32. I don't teach pragmatics because it is: (you can circle more than one)

1. It is not my interest 2. Focusing on other aspects of the language is more important than pragmatics 3. Hard for the level of my students 4. Time consuming and not part of curricular goals 5. I don't know 6. No answer

33. If you have been given the chance to explicit teaching concepts of pragmatics (Politeness) and you are also supported with the necessary teaching materials, will you teach them?

1. Yes 2. No 3. I don't know 4. No answer

Many thanks for your contribution

Any further comments or suggestion will be most welcomed through:

[ahmed.alrahbi@unizwa.edu.om](mailto:ahmed.alrahbi@unizwa.edu.om)

**Appendix M. The Materials Writing Team (MWT).****Vision**

Students learning English at the Foundation Institute will be active learners, engaged, confident and competent.

**Mission statement**

Our mission is to research, design, produce and implement high-quality, culturally-appropriate English language teaching and learning materials that address the unique needs and goals of students at the Foundation Institute, that strengthen the skills needed for their successful experience in higher education, and that enable them to reach their highest level of academic potential.

**Core values**

Students, instructors and administrators are valued resources in the development of teaching and learning materials. English language competence is fostered through teaching and learning materials that:

- are culturally appropriate
- integrate the skills of reading, writing, listening, speaking, and studying
- are learner-centred and engaging
- include a combination of mixed media: aural, visual, written, and online materials
- integrate ongoing assessment and feedback
- stimulate creative and critical thinking
- develop independent study/learning habits
- meet national and international teaching standards of best practice.

**Goals and strategic objectives**

1. To review student needs in light of OAAA, student intake and teaching practices.
2. To create teaching, learning and assessment materials for all levels in the IELP.

- a) Articulate the purpose, goals and methodology of the materials.
- b) Determine the Scope and Sequence for each course book.
- c) Draft written, aural and visual materials, in both hard and soft/online versions, for all levels.
  - d) Design formative and summative assessment tools for the material.
  - e) Ensure the texts acknowledge all who contribute to the materials.
  - f) Design and implement professional development materials/workshops to introduce the materials to instructors.
- 3. To develop protocols for the ongoing evaluation and revision of materials.
  - a) Develop evaluation tools for the FI community, students and instructors.
  - b) Establish revision protocols.