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EFL LEARNERS' POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN EXPRESSION OF DISAGREEMENT

Dr. Samina Ali Asghar[1], Dr. Mazhar Iqbal Ranjha[2], Samina Yasmin[3]

[1]Lecturer in English, University of Education Lahore, Pakistan.

[2]Assistant Professor, Department of English, Lahore Garrison University, Lahore.

[3]Lecturer in English, University of Education Lahore (Faisalabad Campus), Pakistan.

Abstract

The present study aims to examine strategies of politeness employed by Pakistani EFL learners in an expression of the speech acts of disagreement.Itis a face-threatening act and causes communication breakdown if it is not produced properly. Threat to face can be minimized by the use of politeness strategies. This study investigates EFL learners' strategies of politenessin using face-threatening acts of disagreement and compares their choices with those of British speakers of English to find out similarities and differences between them. Data have been collected from two hundred speakers, i.e.one hundred Pakistani EFL learners and one hundred British English speakers by using discourse completion test. Data have been analyzed by using the model of politeness presented byBrown and Levinson (1987). The findings reveal that EFL learners and native speakers apply the same types of politeness devices but with varying frequency. EFL learners are more direct in the expression of disagreement as compared to British speakers. Native speakers use more mitigating devices to soften the impact of disagreement. Contextual factors have also been found to exert influence on the choice of politeness strategies by both groups.

Introduction

Speech acts have been conceptualized as the utterances and specific context in which those utterances are produced (Austin, 1962). Realization of speech acts differs across cultures. Culture and communication are so closely related to each other that Hall (1959) maintains that "culture is communication and communication is culture" (as cited in Schauer, 2009).What is perceived as polite or impolite may differ in different social contexts and cultures. So the choice of different politeness strategies is made by interlocutors according to their contextto save the face of others especially when they want to disagree with others.

The speech act of disagreement is a face-threatening act. When a speaker does not consider the social and cultural norms of the other speaker, it results in communication breakdown.

Disagreement is "a reactive, requiring a prior utterance from an interlocutor" (Sornig, 1977, p.364). When a person has a different viewpoint from his/her interactant, he expresses disagreement.His expression of disagreementis determined by his language and culture. This speech act, if not produced properly, maybe a threat to the relationship between the participants and this threat to the face of the other speaker may be reduced by usingstrategies of politeness (Locher, 2004). In English, politeness is conceptualized as "someone who is polite, has good manners and behaves in a way that is socially correct and not rude to other people" (Co build English Dictionary for Advanced Learners, 2001).

.Brown and Levinson's (1987) approach to politeness is considered the most influential approach (Kasper, 1996).

Following is a politeness modelpresented by Brown and Levinson.

Lesser
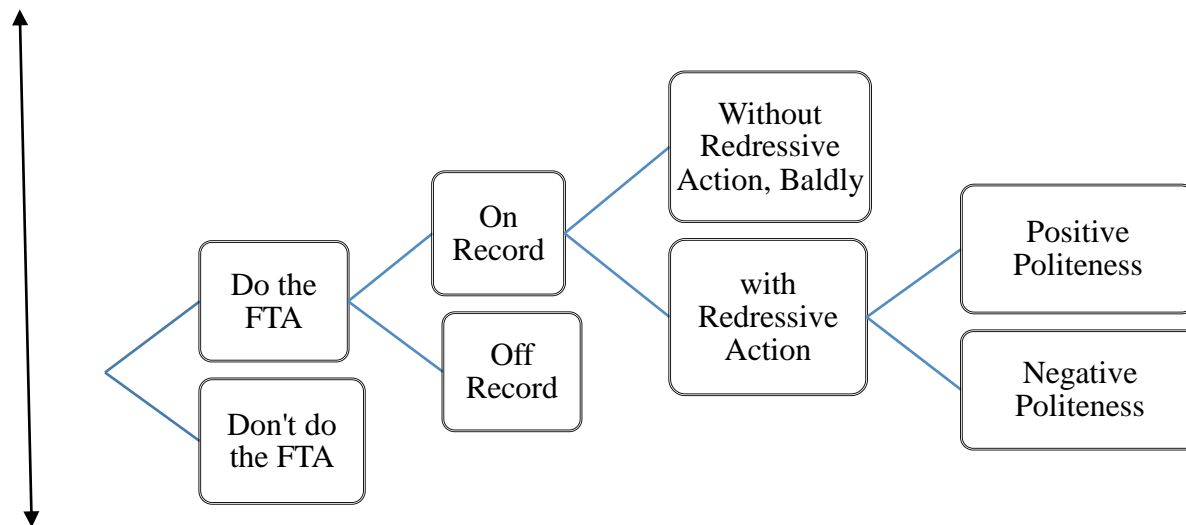
Greater

(Brown and Levinson, 1987)

According to Brown and Levinson, a speaker can use any of the five types of strategies which include three on record strategies, i.e., performing the FTA without any mitigating

devices, doing FTA by using positive politeness, performing FTA by manipulating negative politeness strategy. There is also one set of off-record strategies for doing FTA. Speaker can make an appropriate choice of strategy if he keeps in mind three parameters: power, distance and relative ranking while performing FTAs. If the speaker considers that performing FTA is risky, he may choose to avoid performing it. Strategies of politeness applied in this study includeNo FTA,off record, on record with redressive actionand bald on record. Every strategy has been studied based on disagreement.

Researches on disagreement regarding politeness theory include the effect of contextual factors on the speakers' choice ofstrategies of disagreement and politeness in the Workplace (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989; Dogancay-Aktuna&Kamisli, 1996) and an academic context. (Rees-Miller, 2000).

In Fairclough (1989), Beebe & Takahashi (1989) and Dogancay-Aktuna&Kamisli's (1996) studies which deal with institutional power, more powerful speakers disagreed directly whereas less-power speakers disagreed indirectly using redressive actions. Rees-miller's (2000) study gave opposite results. In his study, professors (a more powerful group) were softer in their expression of disagreement as compared to students. It was stated that positive politeness strategies help to develop solidarity among teachers and pupils.

Beebe and Takahashi (1989) investigated the performance of Americans and Japanese in two face-threatening acts, i.e., disagreement and providing embarrassing information. The findings of the study showed that Americans are more indirect and polite in interaction with higher status people as compared to Japanese who are more direct.

The study by Guodong and Jing (2005) indicated that students of Chinaare more polite than those of Americain disagreement with superiors. Nguyen (2009) compared the performance of undergraduate students of Vietnam and America. The results showed thatAmericans are more indirect and more conscious to save the face of their interactants. It was found that female respondents are more indirect in their expression of disagreement in comparison with male respondents.

Though politeness can be expressed in a verbal and non-verbal ways, the present study focuses only on linguistic politeness, i.e., the ways people exhibit their politeness by using language. It has been aimed to investigate Pakistani EFL learners' realization of the speech act of disagreement based on the model of politeness proposed by Brown & Levinson. A comparison of cross-cultural social values has been made to present this study from a cross-cultural perspective.

Objectives of the study

1. To identify the politeness strategies used by Pakistani EFL learners in an expression of the speech act of disagreement.
2. To find out the similarities and differences of politeness strategies used by Pakistani EFL learners and British English speakers in the realization of the speech acts of disagreement.

Research Questions

1. What types of politeness strategies are employed by Pakistani EFL learners in an expression of the speech acts of disagreement?
2. What are the similarities and differences in politeness strategies used by Pakistani EFL learners and British English speakers to soften the impact of FTA of disagreement?

Materials and Methods

This section describes materials and methods applied in the study. It combines qualitative and quantitative methods in the analysis of politeness strategies used by EFL Learners in an expression of disagreement.

Population

The population of the study consists of Pakistani EFL learners and native speakers of English from the University of Management and Technology Lahore, Govt. College University, Lahore, Institute of Education, London, University of Glasgow, Glasgow respectively. The group of native speakers serves as a baseline for cross-cultural comparison.

Sample and Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling technique has been applied to select a sample which comprises two hundred participants, i.e., one hundred native speakers and one hundred EFL learners at the graduate level

Instrument

Discourse Completion Test (DCT) has been used to collect data from participants. "Discourse completion Task" is a written role play questionnaire where participants write what they think they would say in a particular situation.

There are ten situations in DCT. All situations differ in contextual factors of respondents' formality, social distance and social status. The disagreement situations in DCT, have been borrowed fromKaren Kreutel (2007). Chemnitz University of Technology, Germany and have been adapted according to the situation.

Data Analysis

Responses of the participants have been compared by using politeness strategies introduced by Brown and Levinson. These strategies include: On record without redressive action, baldly, on record with redressing action, Off-record and No FTA. Descriptive statistics were employed in the presentation of the results.

Results

This section is based on the analysis and interpretations of the data. It presents strategies of politeness use by Pakistani EFL learners and compares their choices with those of Native speakers of English.
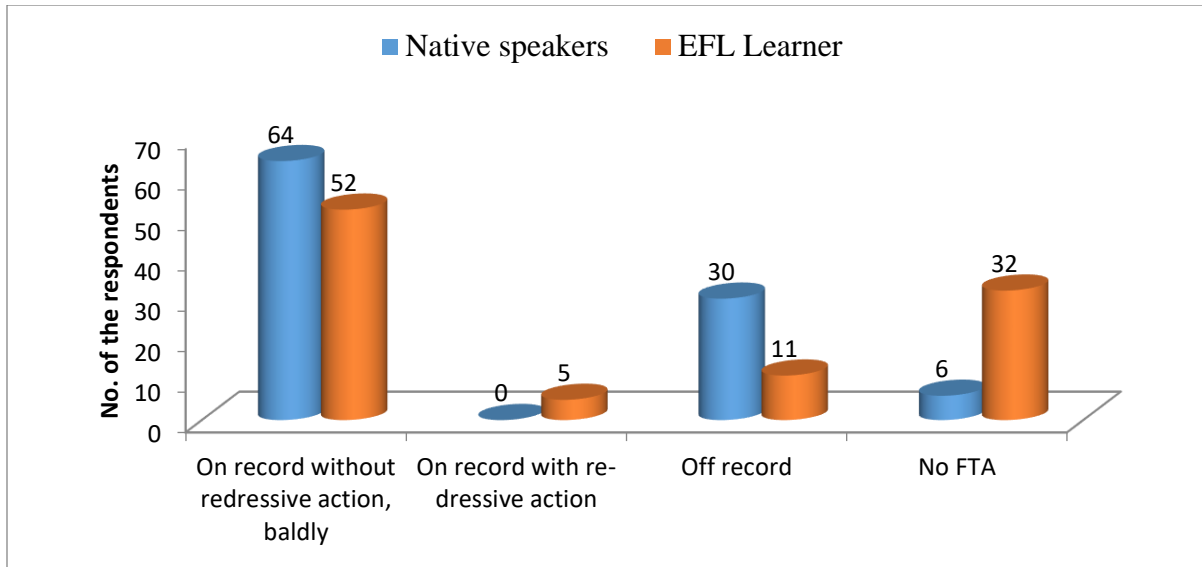
Figure1: Comparison between Native speakers and EFL Learner in situation 1

In situation one which is concerned with disagreement witha friend, both of the groups do not try to save the face of their interlocutors. Due to the frequency of interaction with friends, speakers do not show any hesitation to express disagreement directly. It shows their informal relationship. Both of the groups use bald on record politeness strategy(native speakers 64%, EFL learners 52%) without using any mitigating devices. Thirty percent of native speakers of English use different types of mitigating devices to minimize the threat to the hearer's face whereas only 11% of EFL learners use off record strategy.
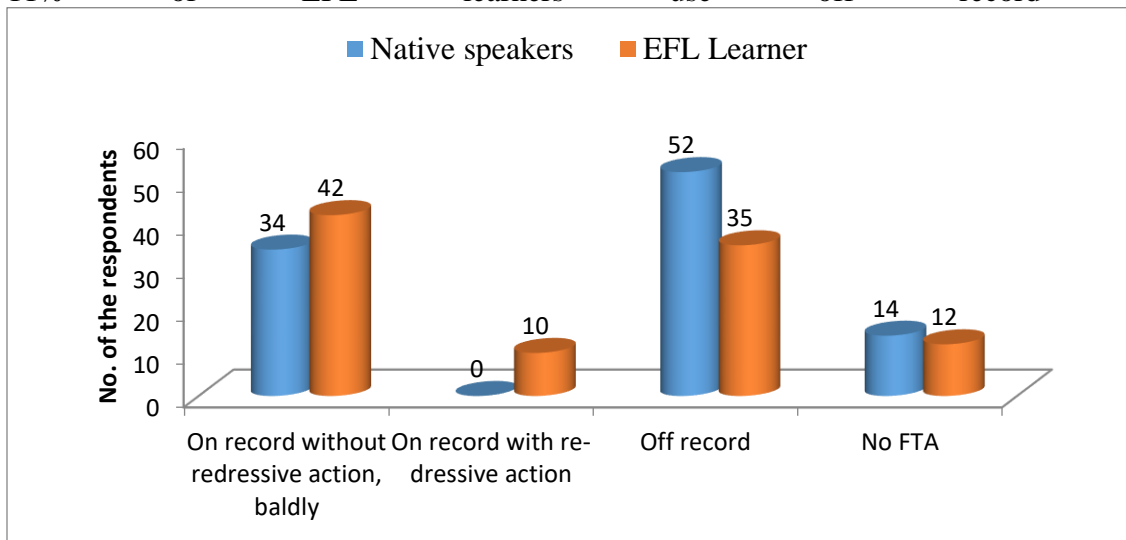

Figure 2: Comparison between Native speakers and EFL Learner in situation II

Figure 2 shows an association between native speakers and EFL learners in expression of disagreement with a friend. It indicates that native speakers of English are more careful in saving the face of their interlocutors which is reflected in their use of off-record strategy(52%) Whereas EFL learners are direct in their expression and use bald on record politeness devices (42%) the

most. Second favoured strategies used by both groups are bald on record(34% by natives)and off-record(35% by EFL learners).
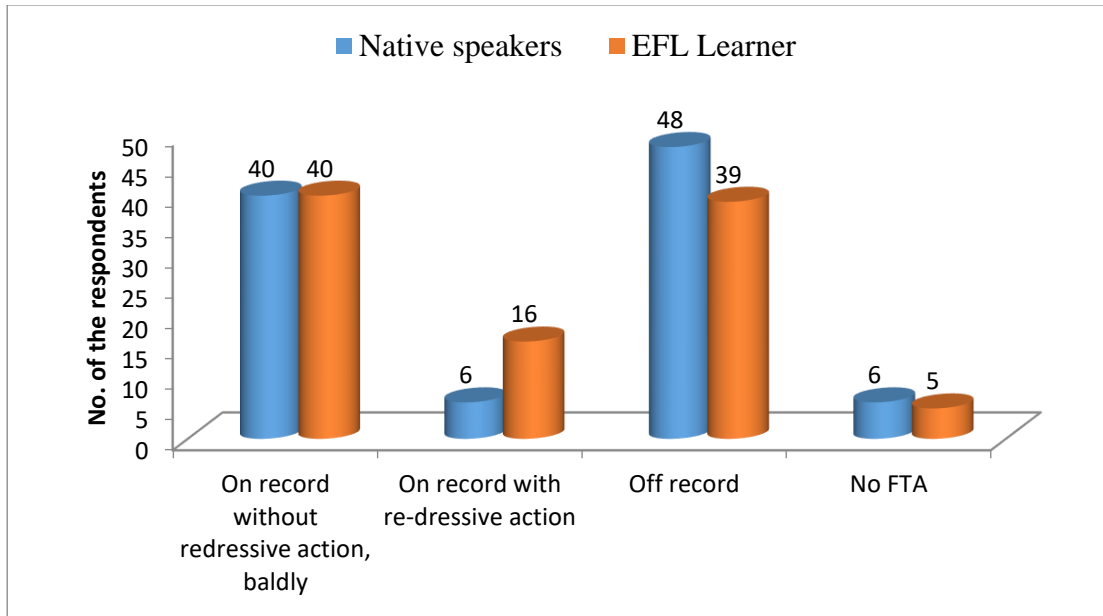

Figure 3: Comparison between Native speakersand EFL Learner in situation III

Figure 3 indicates that native speakers and EFL learners make almost similar choices of politeness in expressing disagreement with a classmate. Both groups use bald on record strategy in the same proportion(40%) but there is variation in the manipulation of off-record(48%, 39%) and on record strategy with redressive action (6%, 16%) by both native speakers and EFL learners respectively.
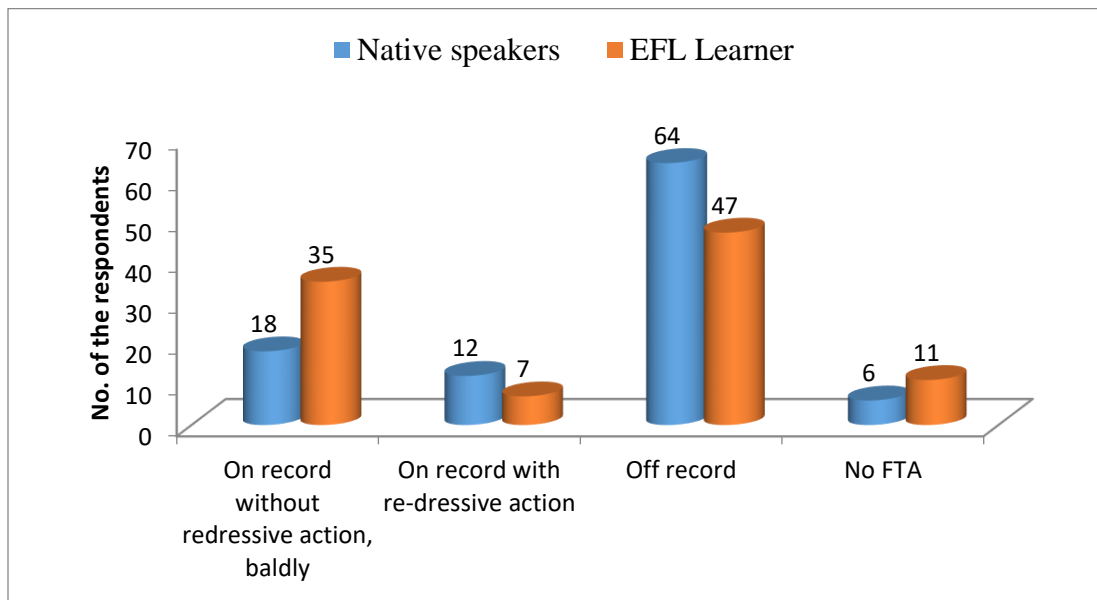

Figure 4: Comparison between Native speakers and EFL Learner in situation IV

In Situation 4 which is based on disagreementwith classmates,Natives and EL learners use thesame devices of politeness but with different frequencies. The most preferred strategy by both groups, i.e., Natives and EFL learners is off-record (64%, 47%) respectively. The second strategy which they use frequently is the bald on record strategy (native speakers 18%, EFL learners 35%). Six percent of native speakers and 11% of EFL learners have not performed any FTA.
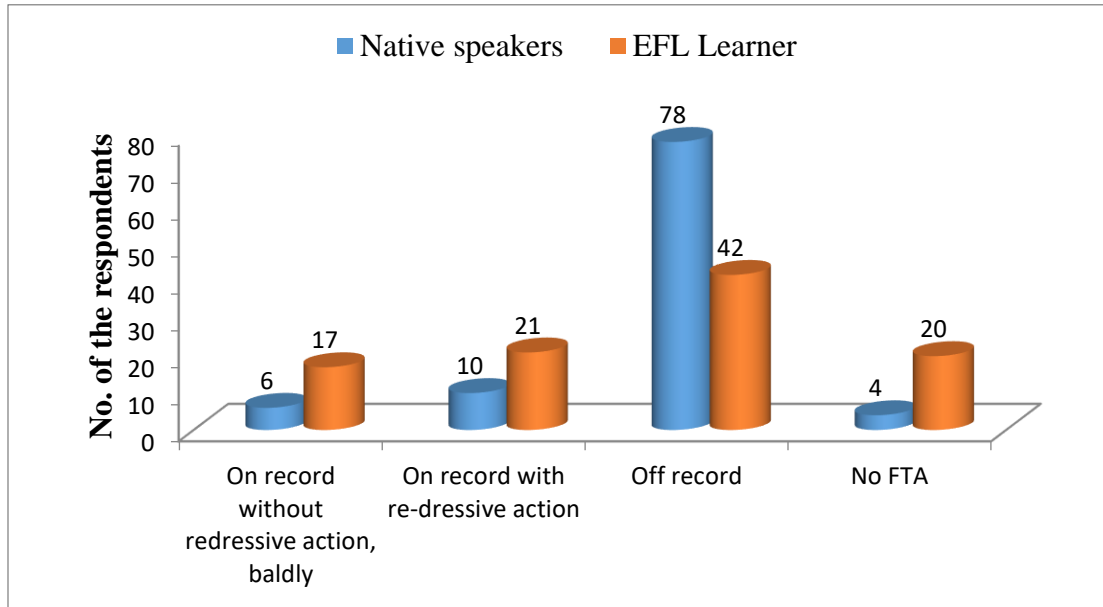

Figure 5: Comparison between Native speakers and EFL Learner in situation IV

Situation V shows that the most favoured strategy by both groups is off-record strategy. Native speakers useit 78% whereas EFL learners use it 42%.Native speakers are more concerned about saving their teachers' faces.
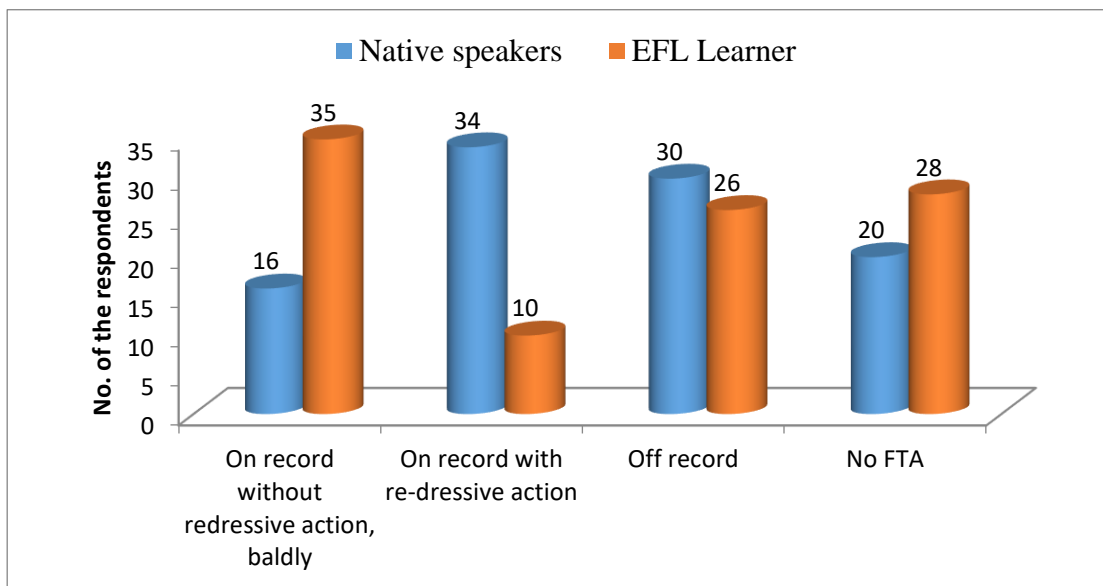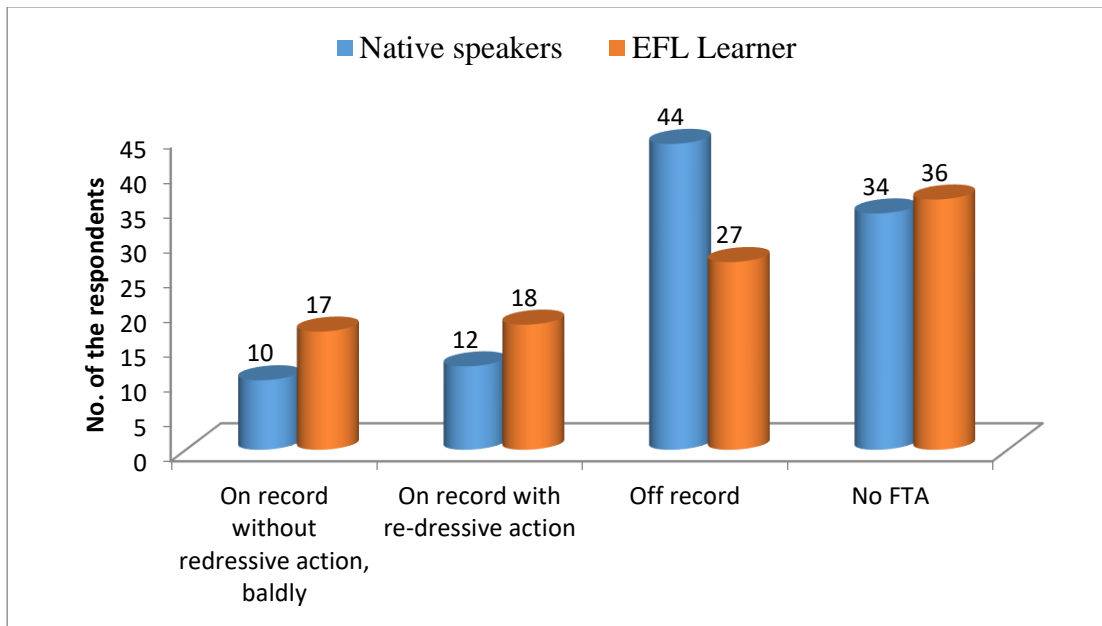
Figure 6: Comparison between Native speakersand EFL Learner in situation VI

In Situation 6 speakers are supposed to disagree with their teacher. Native speakers of English disagree implicitly(30% off record, 34% on record with redressive action) by using mitigating devices whereas EFL learners mostly use bald on record politeness strategy(35%) which is the most direct and unambiguous without any redressive action. Only 26 % of EFL learners use off-record strategy. The result of this situation is consistentwith the previous situation which isalso based on disagreement with the teacher.

Figure 7: Comparison between Native speakers and EFL Learner in situation VII

Situation 7 reveals that native speakers and EFL learners apply the same kinds of politeness devices but with variations in frequency. Native speakers use off-record strategy of politeness (44%) more than any other strategy. They care about the face wants of their interlocutors. Most EFL learners (36%) choose not to perform an FTA.

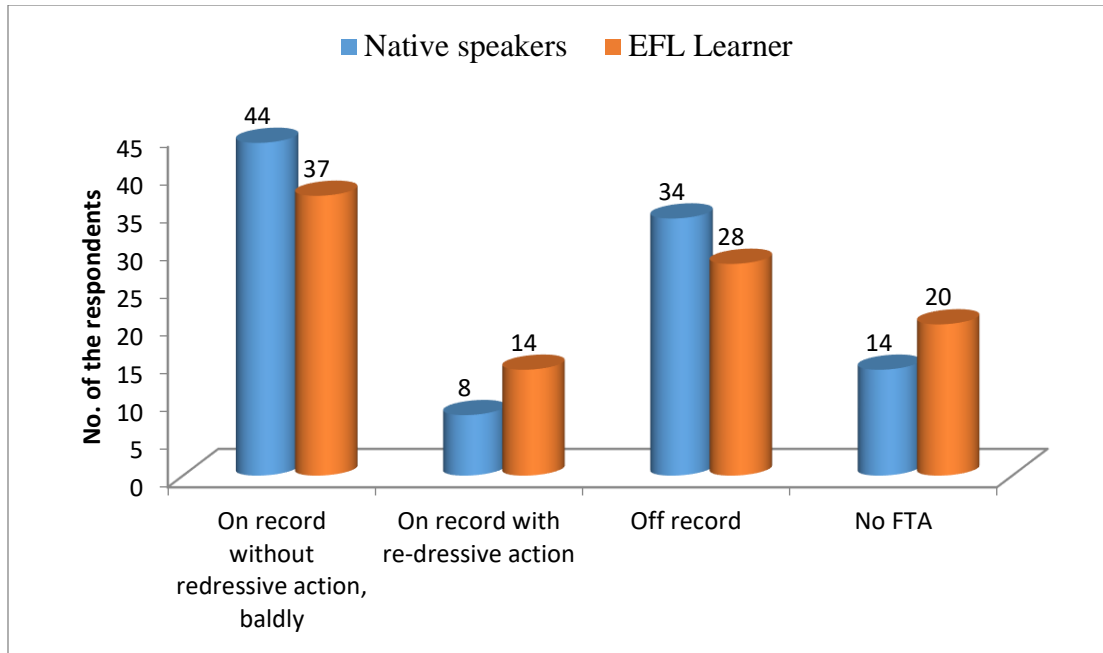**Figure 8:** Comparison between Native speakers and EFL Learner in situation VIII

In situation 8,speakers disagree with their mother. Both of the groups use the same types of strategies with the same preference.Mostly native speakers (44%) and EFL learners (37%) express their disagreement directly without using any redressive action. Only 34% of natives and 28% of EFL learners use implicit expression i.e. off record.
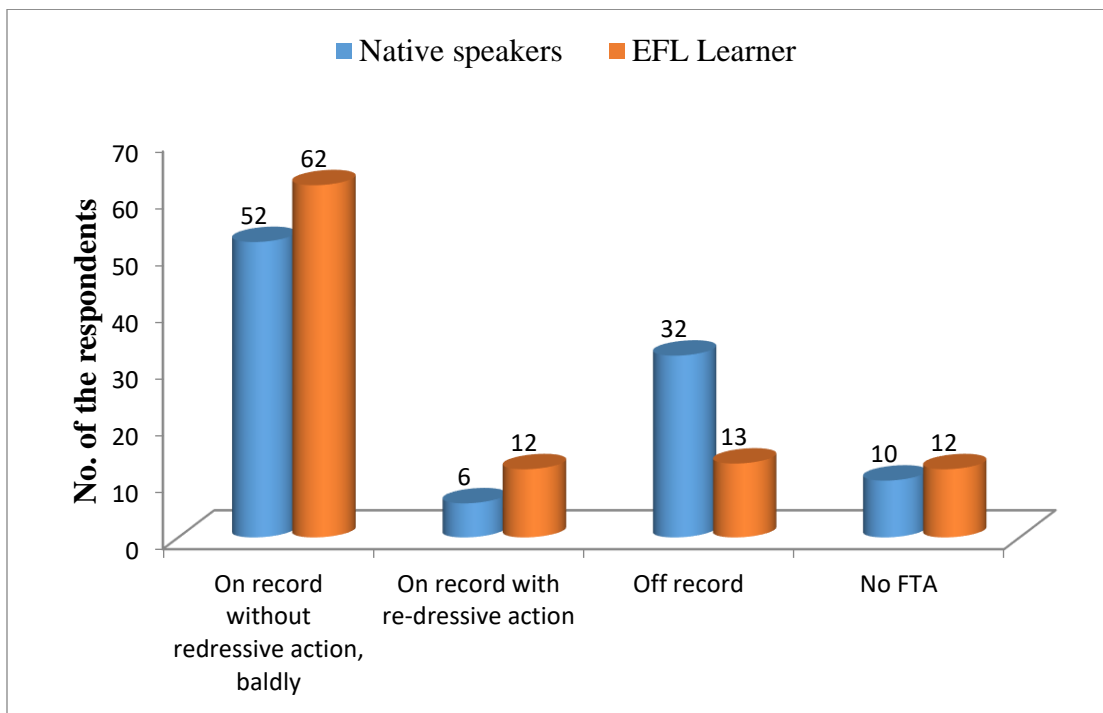
Figure 9: Comparison between Native speakers and EFL Learner in situation IX

Situation 9 Shows disagreement with sister. Both of the groups mostly use direct expression (native speakers 52%, EFL learners 62%) anddo not try to save the face of the interlocutor.Native speakers use a 32% off-record strategy whereas it has been usedonly 13% by EFL learners.
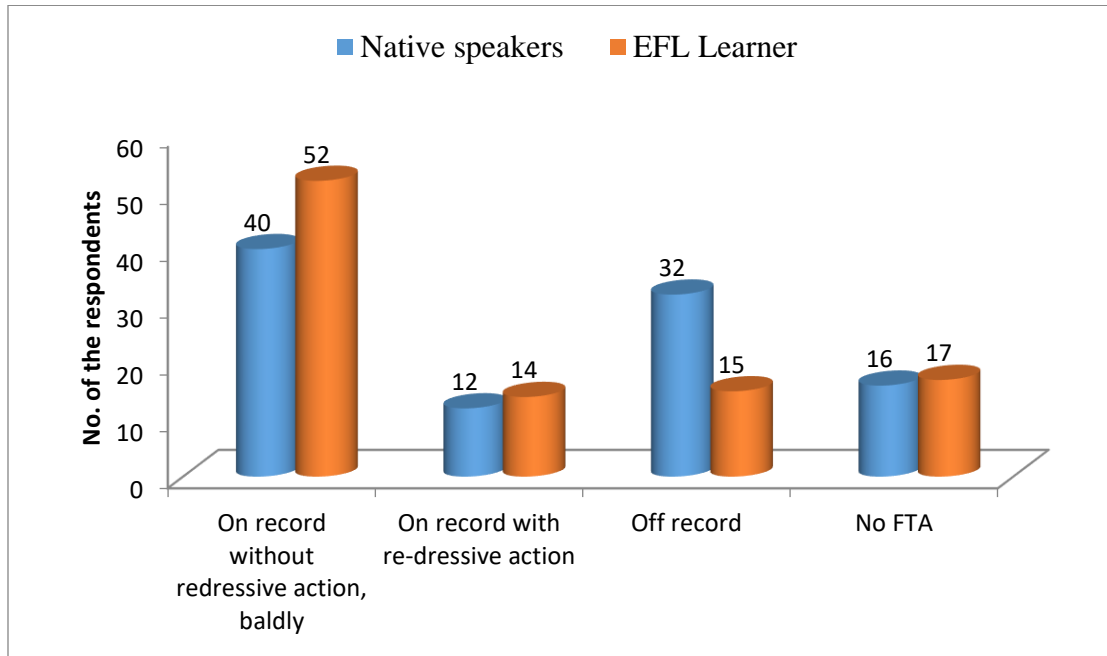

Figure 10: Comparison between Native speakers and EFL Learner in situation X

In disagreement with the driver in situation 10, the most preferred strategy by both of the groups is bald on record(40% by natives and 52% by EFL learners) without any mitigating devices. They do not care about the face wants of their interactant whereas they vary in the choice of second favoured device of politeness (off-record(32%)by natives and NO FTA by EFL learners). The least used strategy by both groups is on record with redressive action(12%by natives, 14% by EFL learners).

Gender and Choices of Politeness Strategies

Table 1. Association between male speakers and Female native speakers in all situations in implementation of politeness devices

Devices of politeness	Male		Female		Chi-square	P-value
On record without redressive action, baldly	160	32%	164	32.8%	1.47	.690
On record with re-dressive action	46	9.2%	54	10.8%		
Off record	224	44.8%	222	44.4%		
No FTA	70	14%	60	12%		
Total	500	100	500	100		

Table 1 indicates that there is no significant difference between male and female speakers in frequencies of politeness devices. The value of χ^2 (df=999) = 1.47, p=.690 is greater than α=0.05. Both of the groups prefer off record strategy of politeness inan expression of disagreement.

Table 2 Association between male and female EFL learners in all situations in use of politeness devices

Devices of politeness	Male		Female		Chi-square	P-value
On record without redressive action, baldly	193	38.6%	199	39.8%	2.90	.407
On record with re-dressive action	58	11.6%	70	14%		
Off record	132	26.4%	133	26.6%		
No FTA	117	23.4%	98	19.6%		
Total	500	100	500	100		

Table 2 reveals no significant difference between male and female EFL learners in the use of politeness devices. The value of χ^2 (df=999)=2.90, p= .470 is greater than α=0.05. Both of the groups express their disagreement by using a bald on record politeness strategy. They are more direct in an expression of disagreement and are less concerned with the useof mitigating devices.

Discussion

Politeness is to show good manners and consider others during an interaction. It is specific to culture and language. Brown and Levinson (1978) regard disagreement as a face-threatening act that demands indirectness (which is associated with politeness).

By applying Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of politeness in this study, it has been foundthat native speakers performed FTA off record. Natives are more indirect in their expression than EFL learners. They use more implicit expressions than EFL learners who are more inclined towards the bald on record strategy which is the most direct strategy of disagreeing. EFL learners' expression lack mitigation devices, i.e., the tool to soften the impact of FTA.The findings correspond to those of Kreutel (2007), Bell (1998), Behnam and Niroomand (2011) they also find a lack of mitigating devices in non-natives' expression of disagreement.

The context where the conversation takes place, influence on speaker's language choice. Contextual factors may include: different situations, age, gender and conversational objectives.Results of the current study reveal that contextual factors such as social status, the social distance between speakers and level of formality exert influence on the number of strategies, and use of strategies for both groups in the study. Social status has a significant impact on the expression of disagreement and politeness devices used by native speakers of English and Pakistani EFL learners. Both groups apply indirect strategies of disagreement in high-status situations whereas, in the case of equal and low-status situations, they are direct in their expression and use no mitigating devices to soften their disagreement. This finding is consistent with Cheng (2005)'s study with Chinese and English speakers,andBehnam, and Niroomand,

2011)'sobservation of Iranian EFL learnersand Chen's (2006) research with Chinese EFL Speakers in Taiwan.

So far as social distance and level of formality are concerned, both of the groups are influenced by these variables in their preference for strategies disagreement and politeness. Both of the groups use more direct disagreement with those who are close to them as compared to their acquaintances. With the increase of social distance, they use more and more politeness strategies whereas both of the groups use bald on record politeness strategies with their close ones. This finding is in line with Chen's (2006) research with Chinese EFL Speakers in Taiwan and is in contrast withGuodong& Jing's (2005) research withAmerican English & Mandarin Chinesein which American and Chinese students applied fewer politeness strategies with the increase of social distance.

Conclusion

The findings of the study reveal that both EFL learners and native speakers apply the same types of politeness strategies but with different frequencies. Native speakers prefer FTA off record. They use more mitigating devices to soften the impact of their disagreement. In the case of EFL learners, it is found that they are more direct as compared to native speakers and apply bald on record politeness devices more frequently. It illustrates that Pakistani EFL learners may not fully aware of the cultural norms of the English language therefore, they have different choices of politeness strategies. Infect their preferences are triggered by their own social and cultural values.

So far as the influence of gender is concerned, no significant differences have been observed between male and female in implementation of politeness devices.

The findings may be beneficial for EFL teachers and material developers. Teachers may be able to introduce the difference in social norms of the target language and why they cause diverse choices by speakers of the same language with different background cultures.

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