

**Process of EFL Learners' Politeness Markers Development: A
Sociocultural Perspective**

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Abstract

In spite of the crucial function of the politeness markers in the appropriate communication of the language learners, teachability of these markers has not received due attention in the pragmatic studies. Drawing upon House and Kasper's (1981) influential taxonomy of politeness markers, the present study addressed teachability as well as the underlying process or microgenetic development of these markers in an EFL context. A population of 56 undergraduate participants underwent instruction through consciousness-raising (C-R) tasks for nine sessions. The data were obtained through repeated measurements during the first, third, fifth, seventh, and ninth sessions. The findings highlighted the effectiveness of the politeness markers instruction and suggested that the learners' heavy reliance on some structures like "please" and consultative devices such as "willingness" and "ability" structures at early stages of data collection was mostly due to their unawareness of other politeness structures. This reliance decreased over time and was replaced by "play-downs" especially "progressive aspect + past tense" structure in the course of the instruction. Likewise, a wider range of simple politeness markers such as hedges, understaters, and downtoners which were absent in the learners' early data increased steadily in their subsequent data. The findings highlight the acquisitional difficulty of pragmatic features and provide researchers, practitioners as well as language learners with information concerning the acquisitional sequence and order of pragmatic features in an EFL instructional context.

Keywords: Pragmatics; politeness markers; microgenetic development; consciousness-raising

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1. Introduction

Politeness as an important and indispensable component of pragmatic knowledge and communicative competence has been one of the major concerns of many researchers and practitioners of pragmatic studies (Holmes, 2006). As a significant communication strategy, politeness is used to show respect and consideration and functions to maintain effective relationship between interlocutors. Misuse or underuse of politeness strategies can easily culminate in breakdown in effective communication.

Kasper (1997) noted that “learners frequently underuse politeness marking in L2 even though they regularly mark their utterances for politeness in L1” (p. 3). It seems that language learners, especially at early stages of language development, are not familiar with politeness strategies and even lexically and grammatically competent language learners may deviate from target norms and underuse politeness markers. Appropriate use of these strategies requires considerable amount of processing control on the part of language learners (Kasper & Rose, 2002).

Politeness and its various aspects in general and politeness markers in particular have been one of the considerations in a large number of pragmatic studies (e.g., Bousfield, 2008; Chang, 2008; Dufon, 2008; Knupsky & Nagy-Bell, 2011; Tajeddin & Pezeshki, 2014; Watts, 2003). All these studies were either descriptive in nature or focused on the product or final outcome of the development. Few studies to date, however, have examined the underlying processes of change. The present study is an attempt to document the developmental changes or microgenetic development of politeness markers among a group of EFL learners. According to Ohta (2005), sociocultural theory and its insightful contributions like microgenetic approach, which traces the processes and mechanisms of change within a relatively short period of time, offer an effective and promising means for the researchers and practitioners in the field of SLA to concentrate on the same learners and take repeated measurements from them usually over a short period of time to inspect closely the transition process.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Politeness Theory

Politeness theory, as one of the pillars of the pragmatics research, has been attended to by different scholars. Lakoff (1977) was one of the first scholars who tried to describe politeness in a pragmatic sense. She regarded clearness and politeness as two cornerstones in the course of linguistic and non-linguistic interactions. Considering her first cornerstone, clearness, her work is influenced by Grice's (1975) maxims of the cooperative principle. With regard to the second cornerstone, politeness, she suggests that speakers can choose one of the three rules of politeness: "Formality: don't impose/remain

aloof; Hesitancy: allow the addressee his options; Equality or camaraderie: act as though you and addressee were equal/make him feel good" (p. 88).

Lakoff (1977) believed that speakers should select the appropriate rules of politeness on the basis of the contextual conditions of the conversation. She also put a great emphasis on issues such as social status differences between interlocutors, social distance or the degree of the familiarity between the participants in a conversation as well as the culture in which the interaction is made.

Leech (1983) also made an important contribution to our understanding of politeness. He proposed a number of maxims of politeness that are comparable to Grice's (1975) maxims of conversation. Tact, Generosity, Approbation, Modesty, Agreement, and Sympathy are six components of his Politeness Principle.

Brown and Levinson (1987) called Leech's politeness model into question and argued that his model was too theoretical and abstract. They made another important contribution to the study of politeness by proposing a theory of politeness that is probably the most influential theory of politeness to date and is particularly important in the field of cross-cultural speech act research. In fact, the majority of cross-cultural speech act studies have adopted this theory as their theoretical framework.

In addition to some factors such as status differences between the speaker and hearer and the relative power of the interlocutors, Brown and Levinson (1987) introduced a further element in their study: Perceived degree of imposition involved in the utterance. Politeness theory attempts to explain how and why people in different cultures establish, maintain, or support social relations through language. Brown and Levinson's approach to politeness is grounded in the notion of face, based on the work of Goffman (1967). They defined face as the "public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (p. 61).

Brown and Levinson (1987) make a distinction between two types of face: Positive face and negative face. The term positive face refers to the person's desire to be approved of and liked and respected by others, and negative face refers to the person's desire not to be imposed upon or not to be impeded in his or her actions. Based on this concept of face, they introduced two types of politeness: Positive and negative. Positive politeness attends to the hearer's positive face, and is achieved by conveying signals that demonstrate the closeness, intimacy, and rapport between speaker and hearer. Negative politeness, on the other hand, deals with the hearer's negative face by indicating that the speaker does not intend to impede the hearer's freedom of action or invade his or her personal space.

Brown and Levinson (1987) suggested that some speech acts such as requests are intrinsically impolite and face-threatening because the speech act of requesting, for example, threatens the hearer's negative face since it shows

that the speaker intends to impede on the hearer's freedom from imposition. As a result, they labeled such acts as Face-Threatening Acts (FTA). They based their idea of FTA on two premises: Whether the speaker's or the hearer's face is being threatened; and whether the positive or negative face is being threatened. They also regarded the relative power of speaker over hearer, the social distance between hearer and speaker, and the weight, or rank, of the imposition as three factors that affect the seriousness of a FTA.

2.2 Politeness Markers

Politeness markers are certain linguistic structures and expressions such as "please", "kind of", "I wondered if ...", and many other structures that are frequently used by native speakers to show respect and consideration and to mitigate or soften the force of the certain speech acts. A compelling body of evidence suggests that, in comparison with native speakers, language learners underuse politeness markers in their L2 speech (e.g., Dufon, 2008; Kasper, 1997; Kasper & Rose, 2002). Different typologies of politeness markers have been suggested by researchers (e.g., Brown & Levinson, 1987; Crystal & Davy, 1975; Edmondson, 1977; Holmes, 2000). However, the most influential framework in the literature was put forward by House and Kasper (1981) which includes the following 11 categories:

1. Politeness markers: Some expressions like "please" and "if you wouldn't/don't mind" which show the speakers' respect to the addressee and reveal cooperative behavior.
2. Play-downs: Include some syntactic structures like past tense (e.g., "I wondered if/ I thought you might"), progressive aspect together with past tense (e.g., "I was wondering whether/ I was thinking you might"), interrogative accompanied by a modal verb (e.g., "Would it be a good idea/ could we"), and negative interrogative accompanied by a modal verb (e.g., "Wouldn't it be a good idea if/ couldn't you"). These syntactic structures mitigate the perlocutionary force that an utterance is likely to have on the addressee.
3. Consultative devices: Some expressions like "Would you mind" and "Could you" which invite addressee for cooperation and engage him/her.
4. Hedges: Some devices such as "somewhat", "rather", and "kind of" by which the speakers make an utterance vaguer or avoid giving an exact propositional content and let the addressee keep their own intent.
5. Understaters: Some adverbial mitigators such as "a moment", "a bit", and "a second" which are employed by the speakers to decrease the imposition of an utterance by underrepresenting the proposition of an utterance.

6. Downtoners: Some sentence adverbials like “maybe”, “perhaps”, and “possibly” which are employed by the speakers to reduce the force of an utterance.
7. Committers: Expressions like “I guess”, and “in my opinion” which function to lower the speaker’s commitment to the propositional content of an utterance.
8. Forewarning: Strategies like paying a compliment or using utterances such as “far be it from me to criticize, but” and “you may find this a bit boring, but” as some kind of metacomments on a face threatening act which are made by the speaker.
9. Hesitators: Some non-lexical phonetic materials like “er”, “uhh”, and “ah” which are employed by the speakers in the conversation to fill pauses.
10. Scope-staters: Expressions like “I’m afraid you’re in my seat” and “I’m disappointed that you couldn’t” which intend to show the speaker’s personal opinion about the subject of discussion.
11. Agent avoiders: The utilization of passive structures in sentences like “people don’t do X” in which agent is absent and the criticism is diverted from the hearer to some generalized agent (Watts, 2003: 183-184).

2.3 Microgenetic Approach

Vygotsky-inspired sociocultural theory is a mental development theory that is strictly associated with the social approaches to SLA. This theory, according to Ellis (2008), is rooted in a number of key constructs such as developmental or genetic analysis of mental functions, mediated nature of human action, and social interaction in individual mental functioning. In the genetic study of the psychological processes, Vygotsky (1987) specified four domains: (1) phylogenesis, which concerns the evolutionary development and history of human species; (2) sociocultural history, which relates to development of humans and a particular culture throughout history; (3) ontogenesis, which refers to the origination and development of an individual in their lifespan; and (4) microgenesis, which focuses on cognitive changes and developments that occur over a relatively short period of time in a particular interaction and in a specific sociocultural setting.

Vygotsky’s contributions have found their way into second language learning and teaching (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). One of these promising contributions that presents second language acquisition researchers and practitioners with fascinating insights into L2 acquisition is microgenetic approach (Siegler, 2006). Ellis (2008) states that microgenetic method “... seeks to uncover the stages through which a learner passes en route to achieve SELF REGULATION” (p. 522). Lavelli, Pantoja, Hsu, Messinger, and Fogel (2004) suggested four key features of the microgenetic method: (1)

In the course of developmental change period, the language learners are followed and observed closely, (2) The changing individual and rapid developments in a specific domain are monitored carefully before, during, and after the period of developmental change, (3) Close inspections and observations are carried out regularly and frequently within the development and transition period, and (4) The observed changes and developments are scrutinized qualitatively and quantitatively to highlight the underlying processes of the developmental change.

Through repeated measurements in the area of interest, the microgenetic approach targets the developmental process of the same learners during a specific span of time. Via this developmental process, researchers are able to track learners' cognitive development as it really transpires. Microgenetic analysis throws light upon the origin and history of a specific learners' knowledge or capability and draws attention to both the methodology and the object of research. This approach makes researchers spot apparent instances of learning as they actually occur throughout an activity (Van Compernelle & Williams, 2012). According to Siegler (2006) microgenetic approach illuminates the way, proportion, broadness, width, variability and source of development. While cross-sectional and longitudinal approaches merely emphasize the ultimate outcome of the change and are product-oriented, microgenetic approach examines the fundamental processes and mechanisms of development and is primarily process-oriented (Calais, 2008).

A number of studies have concentrated on the learners' microgenetic development in the realm of interlanguage pragmatics. Van Compernelle (2011), for instance, in a case study, examined the microgenetic development of L2 sociopragmatic competence in a one-hour concept-based instruction. The findings of the microgenetic development of the cognitive functioning of an intermediate US university student of French in cooperation with a skilled tutor indicated the positive impact of a concept-based approach on teaching L2 French sociopragmatics. In another study, Kinginger and Belz (2005) investigated the impact of telecooperative partnership and residence abroad on the pragmatic competence development. An American pupil of German in the United States took part in various interactive intercultural discourses with adroit speakers of German for eight weeks. The findings of a corpus-based microgenetic analysis revealed that the learner's cognizance and application of the address German forms enhanced.

A cursory look at the literature of politeness markers reveals that these structures have been mainly approached descriptively in the writing or speech of the native or nonnative speakers, and few studies have been carried out to instruct such markers to EFL learners. It seems that Tajeddin and Pezeshki (2014), drawing on House and Kasper's (1981) taxonomy, is one of the rare studies that attempted to teach these markers through input-

enhancement and output tasks. Focusing on the final outcome or the product of the development, the researchers reported that both tasks were beneficial for the learners. Their findings showed that input-enhancement activities improved the participants' comprehension of politeness structures, and the output tasks had a positive impact on the learners' production of politeness markers.

Therefore, the present study was set up to provide a thorough analysis of politeness markers and highlight both the product and process of politeness markers development among language learners in an EFL context. To this end, the facilitative role of instruction and the process of developmental change or microgenetic development of the learners' politeness marker use were probed through taking repeated measurements from the same group of learners at various points in time. The following research questions were formulated to achieve the above-mentioned objectives:

1. Does instruction have any significant effect on EFL learners' knowledge of politeness markers?
2. What microgenetic changes do EFL learners' politeness marker use undergo at different points in time during instruction?

3. Method

3.1 Participants

A population of 56 male and female Iranian EFL learners in three available classes agreed to participate in the study. The sophomore participants of the study were majoring in English language and literature at University of Qom. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 25 years old, and they declared that they had little contact with native speakers of English before and during the instruction. The results of a TOEFL proficiency test that they had taken just prior to the study indicated that they were between -1 and +1 SD on the normal probability curve and homogeneous in terms of language proficiency.

3.2 Instruments and Treatment Materials

The study was conducted in nine sessions. Five written DCTs were used during the first, third, fifth, seventh, and ninth session to gather data. Each written DCT included four high statuses, high imposition request scenarios. The main rationale behind the selection of request speech acts with these contextual variables was that politeness markers are typically represented conspicuously when one asks for a big favor and makes a formal request. These scenarios were mainly borrowed from Jalilifar (2009) and Schauer (2009).

Inductive pragmatic C-R tasks were employed during the even sessions (four sessions) to highlight House and Kasper's (1981) categories of

politeness markers. In these tasks, the participants did not receive any explicit sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic information on politeness markers. Rather, they were encouraged to work in pairs and through discovery learning and problem solving do the tasks. In each task, they were provided with some sentences and requests that had been labelled as acceptable/unacceptable, appropriate/inappropriate, or polite/impolite. The learners were asked to go through these examples in pairs and discuss why some requests were regarded as acceptable, appropriate, and polite for some specific contexts while some others were quite the opposite. For example, in a high-status situation where a student addresses her professor, sentence B is more appropriate:

- (A) I was wondering if you could listen to me a few minutes.
(appropriate)
- (B) I was wondering if you could possibly listen to me a few minutes.
(more appropriate)

In the following, the participants were presented with different situations and were asked to indicate whether the presented sentences/requests for those situations were acceptable or unacceptable. In the end, the students were invited to try with their partners and make up a rule to explain how these politeness markers were used. They shared their rule with other pairs, and in the case of any discrepancies, the teacher put the right rule on the board.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

The students of the three intact classes agreed to accompany the researchers for nine sessions in the course of this study. About 30 minutes of the students' regular class time was devoted to the study. During the first session, the participants took the first test which included four high statuses, high imposition request scenarios. The second session, the learners were presented with the inductive pragmatic C-R tasks and worked on the tasks in pairs. On the third, fifth, seventh, and ninth sessions, the participants took four more tests which all consisted of four high statuses, high imposition request situations, and during the other even sessions, fourth, sixth, and eighth sessions, the learners were instructed through inductive pragmatic C-R tasks again.

3.4 Data Analysis

Researchers of the study employed Taguchi's (2006) pragmatic knowledge rating scale to rate the participants' performance on the five DCTs produced during the experiment. The rating scale evaluates appropriateness and correctness of the learners' performance on a 6-point rating scale ranging from (0) or "no performance" to (5) or "excellent performance" in each scenario. Pearson correlation was used to examine the agreement between the

ratings of the two raters. The result indicated an acceptable level of interrater reliability ($r=.90$). The average score of the two researchers was considered the final score of the learners. In addition, repeated measures ANOVA and post-hoc comparison tests were utilized to shed further light on the participants' progress during the instruction and over the five tests.

4. Results and Discussion

This study investigated the microgenetic development of politeness markers among 56 EFL learners over a nine-week period. During this while, the participants took five tests and the employment of politeness markers in their requests were scrutinized on the basis of House and Kasper's (1981) famous taxonomy of politeness markers.

Table 1

The Learners' Use of Politeness Markers During the Five Tests

	<i>Test 1</i>	<i>Test 2</i>	<i>Test 3</i>	<i>Test 4</i>	<i>Test 5</i>
Politeness markers	206	199	163	116	97
Play-downs	39	61	114	130	138
Consultative devices	167	142	97	49	43
Hedges	7	21	41	39	44
Understaters	5	11	25	36	31
Downtoners	14	26	41	47	52
Committers	15	17	15	14	18
Forewarning	6	12	12	26	31
Scope-staters	9	9	13	17	19

As table 1 reveals, the participants' utilization of "politeness markers" and "consultative devices" decreased over time from test 1 to test 5. However, the use of "play-downs", "hedges", "understaters", "downtoners", "forewarning", and "scope-staters" increased steadily in the learners' requests. It seems that the employment of the "committers" remained somehow the same in the requests of the participants over the five tests. Table 2 displays descriptive statistics for the performance of the participants over the five tests. The learners mean score suggests a steady increase over time.

Repeated measures ANOVA (Table 3) was run to find out whether the learners' performances were significantly different over the five tests. The results of the repeated measures ANOVA ($F(4, 52) = 54.35, p = .000$), suggested significant differences for the participants' performances in the five tests over time.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for the Learners' Politeness Markers Development over Yime

	<i>N</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>
Test: 1	56	1.00	5.00	2.44	.7608
Test: 2	56	2.00	5.00	2.77	.7001
Test: 3	56	2.00	5.00	3.29	.6860
Test: 4	56	3.00	5.00	3.74	.6536
Test: 5	56	3.00	5.00	3.81	.6575
Valid N (listwise)	56				

Table 3

Multivariate Tests for the Five Tests

<i>Effect</i>		<i>Value</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Hypothesis df</i>	<i>Error df</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
factor1	Pillai's Trace	.807	54.359 ^a	4.000	52.000	.000
	Wilks' Lambda	.193	54.359 ^a	4.000	52.000	.000
	Hotelling's Trace	4.181	54.359 ^a	4.000	52.000	.000
	Roy's Largest Root	4.181	54.359 ^a	4.000	52.000	.000

a. Exact statistic b. Design: Intercept Within Subjects Design: factor1

Post-hoc Comparison Tests (Table 4) were employed to compare the five tests two by two. The results revealed that the participants' performance have improved significantly over the time and during the five tests.

Table 4

Post-Hoc Comparison Tests for the Five Tests

<i>Tests</i>		<i>Mean Differences</i>	<i>Std. Error</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>95% Confidence Interval for Difference</i>	
					<i>Lower Bound</i>	<i>Upper Bound</i>
Pair 1	Test 1- Test 2	-.33	.048	.00	-.42	-.23
Pair 2	Test 2- Test 3	-.51	.052	.00	-.62	-.41
Pair 3	Test 3- Test 4	-.44	.052	.00	-.55	-.34
Pair 4	Test 4- Test 5	-.07	.032	.03	-.13	-.0066

The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

This study was an attempt to investigate the impact of instruction on microgenetic development of politeness markers among a group of Iranian EFL learners. Contrary to the belief that calls the instruction of politeness to EFL learners into question and notes that politeness is an inherent feature of the native speakers' culture (Watts, 2003), the results of this study, in line with the findings of some studies like Tajeddin and Pezeshki (2014), highlighted the effectiveness of politeness instruction. The findings of this study support Schmidt's (1995) "noticing hypothesis" stipulating that manipulation and saliency of some of L2 features in the input could lead to the noticing of those features which subsequently could result in their acquisition.

The overall findings of this study indicated that the participants' general knowledge of politeness markers improved over time, and they employed a wider range of politeness markers in the course of the instruction. Apart from "politeness marker", "consultative device", and "committer", the data reflected a steady increase in the use of different markers over time. As Table 1 displays, the participants' heavy reliance on "politeness marker" and "consultative device" decreased over time. Previous researches support learners' strong preference for some strategies like *imperatives* (Felix-Brasdefer, 2012) and *please* (Barron, 2003; Safont-Jorda & Alcon Soler, 2012) at early stages of learning a second/foreign language. *Please* is a simple and highly conventionalized structure that could be easily added to a request to make it polite. Frequent exposure to *please* in the textbook and classroom from the very early stages of learning the target language could be another reason for the overuse of this politeness marker. Finally, the findings of this study suggest that the lack of familiarity with other politeness strategies forced the learners to employ some strategies like *please* and "consultative device" to sound polite in request making. However, in the course of the instruction and as the participants got familiar with other politeness markers, they started to welcome other structures especially "play-downs" in their requests.

The learners' overuse of willingness and ability strategies as two subcomponents of "consultative device" at early stages of learning the second language is in accordance with the findings of previous studies (e.g., Hendriks, 2008; Sasaki, 1998; Woodfield, 2008). One possible justification for this frequency, according to Martinez-Flor (2012), could be the significance of these modal verbs at learners' syllabus at high school. Learners encounter these structures in their classrooms and textbooks frequently and have previous knowledge of them. Transfer of ability and willingness strategies from learners' L1 into L2 might be another reason for the overuse of these structures. "*Would you mind*" and "*Could you*

.....” are considered two unmarked and safe request formulas in Persian which are frequently used for polite request making.

The participants’ fewer use of “play-downs” at the first data collection session might be attributed to the pragmalinguistic complexity of these markers which has already come to light by other studies (Schauer, 2009; Woodfield, 2012). However, as time progressed and learners, as a result of instruction, came to know about the significance of pragmatics in general and politeness markers in particular, they deemed “play-downs” especially *progressive aspect + past tense structure* (I was wondering if) more appropriate than “consultative devices” to formulate polite requests.

Contrary to Otcu and Zeyrek (2006), Schauer (2009), and Woodfield (2012) and concerning the simplicity of “hedges”, “understaters”, and “downtoners”, the results of this study revealed that the participants did not employ these politeness markers frequently in their requests at early data collection sessions. However, the steady increase of these strategies in the learners’ requests over time suggest that they were not that familiar with these syntactically and pragmalinguistically less demanding markers. In fact, in the last two data elicitation sessions, almost all learners had utilized one of these simple politeness markers at least in one of their request formulations to modify their request force. In some cases, the participants had overused these markers in their requests. For instance, one of the participants in the fifth data collection session, in an attempt to sound more polite, wanted to ask her professor for a meeting during the holidays and had formulated the following request: “*I wondered if maybe I could just possibly meet you during the holidays.*”

The findings also indicated that the learners’ utilization of “forewarning” and “scope-stater” increased mildly over time. It seems that the learners’ familiarity with some concepts such as status and imposition in the process of request making inspired them to make sure that they had formulated appropriate requests. Therefore, they tried to incorporate compliments, metacomments on face threatening acts, and sometimes personal opinions about the subject of discussion into their requests to mitigate the illocutionary force of their requests. Making use of lengthy utterances and providing explanations and reasons to show deference to high-status interlocutor seems to be in agreement with previous studies (e.g., Takahashi, 2001; Woodfield, 2012).

Zero instances of “hesitators” and “agent avoiders” were documented in the study. “Hesitators” are non-lexical materials used to fill pauses mainly in spoken language. It seems that as the participants of the study were required to write their requests for the specified scenarios, they did not feel compelled to make use of them in their written requests. The lack of “agent avoiders” in the learners’ requests might be justified by the nature of the

requests that they had been asked to formulate. The participants had been urged to address a high-status interlocutor in their requests, and “agent avoiders” are some structures in which criticism is usually diverted from the hearer to some generalized agent. Levelling criticism at a high-status interlocutor is not that common in the Persian culture, and most students avoid doing so even indirectly.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The overall findings of the study revealed that the instruction of pragmatic knowledge in general and politeness markers in particular could be effective in EFL context. This result highlights the important role of pragmatic instruction in an EFL context which is seemingly an impoverished environment for acquisition and practice of pragmatics (Kasper & Roever, 2005). Preoccupation of EFL learners with linguistic correctness rather than pragmatic appropriateness (Niezgoda & Roever, 2001) is another compelling reason that suggests pragmatic knowledge and its components such as politeness markers should be presented explicitly and that learners’ consciousness should be raised to these significant features.

Scrutinizing the learners’ microgenetic development of politeness markers indicated that their heavy dependence on some structures like “please” and consultative devices such as “willingness” and “ability” structures at early stages of data collection were mostly due to transfer from the learners’ L1 and unawareness of other structures. As a result of unfamiliarity with some simple structures like “hedges”, “understaters”, and “downtoners”, the learners did not employ them frequently in early data collection sessions.

Close inspection of learners’ pragmatic microgenetic development, as Pan (2012) put it, could highlight the acquisitional difficulty of pragmatic features and provide researchers, practitioners as well as language learners with valuable information concerning the acquisitional sequence and order of pragmatic features.

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