Negotiating Politeness in Gendered Discourse: A study of the Speech Act of Request in Nigerian ESL Environment

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Abstract

This study examines politeness with regard to the speech act realisation patterns of request among male and female Nigerian bilinguals with the major aim of ascertaining the effect of gender on the choice of the politeness strategies utilised using Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory as a framework. Adopting a quantitative survey design, data were elicited from 300 purposively selected participants (150 males and 150 females) drawn from Nigeria's three major ethnic groups: Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba using an open-ended Discourse Completion Test (DCT). The DCT comprised five contextually grounded hypothetical request situations designed to approximate everyday communicative encounters. Participants' responses were thematically organised and analysed to identify recurrent politeness strategies and the contextual factors shaping their use. Quantitative procedures, including frequency counts and percentage distributions, were employed to examine the relative occurrence of these strategies and to compare their distribution across gender groups. The findings reveal that respondents employed four of the five super-strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson—bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies. Notably, significant gender-based variations were observed in the choice and patterning of these strategies, suggesting that gender plays a salient role in shaping politeness behaviour in request-making within the Nigerian ESL context.

Keywords: *discourse completion test, ESL, gender, politeness, requests*.

Introduction

Language, as a medium of human communication, does more than merely transmit information between speakers and hearers; it also functions as a means of performing social actions. This performative dimension of language is captured in J. L. Austin's (1962) seminal notion of *"doing things with words"*, which foregrounds the idea that utterances are themselves forms of action. Building on this insight, Yule (1996) observes that actions performed through utterances are commonly referred to as *speech acts*, which include acts such as apologies, complaints, invitations, promises, and requests (p. 47). Within Searle's (1976) taxonomy of speech acts, requests are

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classified as *directives*—acts through which speakers attempt to get hearers to do or refrain from doing something (pp. 11–12).

The performance of requests is particularly significant in social interaction because it directly implicates interpersonal relations and the maintenance of social harmony. Requests are central to everyday communication, yet they are inherently delicate because they impose on the hearer. Successful request-making therefore requires speakers to balance communicative goals with sensitivity to the social expectations and relational dynamics that govern interaction. This sensitivity becomes even more crucial in multilingual and second-language contexts, such as the Nigerian ESL environment, where interlocutors often draw on diverse linguistic and cultural norms in interaction.

Central to understanding how speakers manage such interpersonal demands is the concept of *politeness*, which according to Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory bothers on taking into consideration the face wants of the interlocutors. The authors conceptualise *face* as the public self-image that every member of society seeks to maintain. This notion of face comprises two related components: *positive face*, which reflects the desire to be liked, approved of, and valued by others, and *negative face*, which hinges on an individual's desire for autonomy, freedom of action, and freedom from imposition (pp. 61–62). Utterances that are insensitive to either aspect of face are termed *face-threatening acts* (FTAs) and typically require strategic redressive action to minimise their impact (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 63).

Requests are among the speech acts identified by Brown and Levinson as inherently face-threatening because they directly impinge on the hearer's negative face by placing demands on their time, effort, or resources. In non-emergency situations, speakers are therefore expected to deploy appropriate politeness strategies to mitigate the imposition inherent in requests. The choice of politeness strategy is not arbitrary; rather, it is shaped by the *weightiness* of the act, which is calculated based on social variables such as power relations, social distance, and the degree of imposition involved. In ESL contexts, pragmatic competence in deploying these strategies is especially important, as pragmatic failure—rather than grammatical inadequacy—often leads to misunderstanding and perceptions of impoliteness in intercultural communication.

An important social variable that has received sustained attention in language and communication research is gender. Studies have consistently shown that men and women may differ in their linguistic choices, interactional styles, and orientations to politeness (Freed, 1996; Butcholtz, 1999; Jones, 2016). Research on gender and language has suggested, for instance, that female speakers are frequently associated with greater use of politeness markers, indirectness, and relational strategies, while male speakers may favour more direct or assertive forms, though such patterns are context-dependent and culturally mediated (Mills, 2002; Haavik et al,2019; Latifa, 2021). These differences are not biologically determined but are socially constructed and negotiated through discourse.

Within the Nigerian ESL environment, which is characterised by linguistic diversity, gender may play a significant role in shaping how politeness is enacted in request-making.

However, empirical studies that systematically examine gendered patterns of politeness strategies in Nigerian ESL contexts remain relatively limited. This study therefore seeks to address this gap by examining gender-based differences in the choice of politeness strategies employed in the performance of the speech act of request among Nigerian bilinguals, using Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory as its analytical framework.

Review of related literature

The speech act of request has received a great deal of attention in scholarship due its inherently face-threatening nature and sensitivity to social factors such as power, distance, and imposition (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The review is approached the following perspectives: politeness and cross-cultural speech act realisation perspective, request and politeness in ESL and EFL contexts, gender and politeness in request making, and request modification, cultural orientation and pragmatic transfer.

From the angle of cross-cultural speech act realisation perspective, Foundational work on politeness and speech acts was pioneered by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) under the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realisation Project (CCSARP). Examining request and apology strategies across eight languages—Australian, American, and British English, Canadian French, Danish, German, Hebrew, and Russian—the study established that while a shared set of politeness strategies exists across languages, their distribution and preference are culture-specific. Using discourse completion tests (DCTs), the project revealed both universality and cross-cultural variability in speech act realisation, a finding that has shaped subsequent pragmatic research.

Building on this tradition, Shahrokhi (2012) examined apology intensification strategies among Persian male native speakers, focusing on the influence of contextual variables such as social dominance, social distance, and severity of offence. Using DCT data analysed through Blum-Kulka et al.'s coding scheme, the study identified both universal strategies—such as illocutionary force indicating devices (IFIDs)—and culture-specific strategies, notably the use of humour to downplay offence. Shahrokhi's findings highlight the role of cultural norms in shaping politeness behaviour and emphasise the need for awareness of culture-specific strategies to prevent pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication.

Similarly, Kyong (2011) investigated culture-specific perceptions of politeness in English, Hebrew, and Korean using the speech act of request. Drawing on the CCSARP framework, the study demonstrated that indirectness is not universally equated with politeness, particularly in Korean and Hebrew, thereby challenging Anglo-centric assumptions embedded in traditional politeness models. This position aligns with the argument that politeness must be interpreted within specific sociocultural contexts rather than as a universal pragmatic principle. On this category are the works of Rutenbeek (2020) and Economidou and Woodfield (20210.

A substantial body of research has examined how second and foreign language learners realise requests and other face-threatening acts, often revealing gaps in pragmatic competence. Mohammadi and Tamimi Sa'ad (2014), for instance, assessed Iranian EFL learners' request

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strategies using DCTs and native-speaker evaluations. Their findings showed that only a small proportion of learners' requests were rated as polite, indicating limited pragmalinguistic awareness and deviation from native-speaker norms.

In a similar vein, Najeeb, Maros, and Fariza (2012) analysed emails written by Arab postgraduate students to their supervisors in a Malaysian university context. The study revealed a strong preference for direct request strategies and identified pragmatic transfer from Arabic as a major influence on learners' English usage. The researchers further identified an "over-politeness strategy," culturally appropriate in Arabic but pragmatically inappropriate in the Malaysian ESL context, underscoring the complexity of intercultural politeness.

Taguchi's (2006) study of Japanese L2 learners of English approached request-making from the perspective of appropriateness. Using role plays and a combination of rating scales and linguistic analysis, Taguchi found that higher proficiency learners produced more pragmatically appropriate requests. Importantly, the study demonstrated that pragmatic appropriateness is not solely determined by linguistic form but also by grammatical accuracy and discourse management skills.

Alemi and Khanlarzadeh (2016) extended the discussion by examining how Iranian EFL learners' request strategies were assessed by non-native English-speaking teachers. Their findings indicated that raters prioritised politeness, appropriateness, and contextual sensitivity, but that neither gender nor teaching experience significantly influenced rating outcomes. This study contributes to the growing literature on pragmatic assessment in second language pedagogy.

Furthermore, gender has been identified as a potentially influential variable in politeness research, though findings remain inconclusive. Shahidi-Tabar (2012) examined request strategies among Iranian Persian monolinguals and Turkish–Persian bilinguals, focusing on directness levels and the influence of gender and socio-economic status. The study revealed significant gender-based differences: Turkish females favoured more direct strategies than males, while Persian females employed less direct strategies than their male counterparts. These findings suggest that gender interacts with cultural norms to shape politeness behaviour.

Kuhi and Jadidi (2012) similarly investigated Iranian EFL learners' production of requests, refusals, and apologies, finding that gender significantly influenced the choice of politeness strategies across the three speech acts. Participants generally favoured negative politeness strategies, with observable differences between male and female respondents.

Conversely, some studies have reported minimal or no gender effects. Alzeebaree and Yavuz (2017), in their study of Kurdish EFL learners' request and apology strategies, found no significant differences between male and female participants. Khorshidi (2013) likewise reported that gender had no influence on pragmatic development among Iranian EFL learners studying abroad and those studying at home, suggesting that exposure to the target language environment may outweigh gender effects in pragmatic acquisition.

Several studies have focused specifically on request modification devices and their cultural underpinnings. Salter and Farnia (2014), using Spencer-Oatey's rapport management theory, conducted a comparative study of Iraqi and Malay students' request strategies. The findings

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revealed extensive use of grounders, apologies, gratitude, and compliments as mitigation devices, with cultural orientation accounting for differences in how power and distance were perceived.

Yazdanfar and Bonyadi (2016) compared request strategies in Persian and English television series, finding that both native Persian and native English speakers frequently employed direct strategies in everyday interactions. The authors argued that directness in such contexts was motivated by familiarity and minimal social distance rather than impoliteness, while the higher use of mitigation devices by English speakers reflected cultural orientations towards individualism.

Muthusamy and Farashaiyan (2016) examined international postgraduate students' request and apology strategies in Malaysian universities, revealing a dominant preference for conventionally indirect requests and IFIDs in apologies. However, the study also found that social variables such as power and distance did not significantly influence request strategy choice, a finding that partially contradicts Brown and Levinson's model and points to the role of cultural hybridity in multilingual contexts.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that politeness and request-making are shaped by factors such as: o cultural norms, pragmatic competence, contextual variables, and, in some cases, gender. While some studies report significant gender-based differences in politeness strategies, others suggest that gender effects are mediated/or even overridden by factors such as proficiency level, exposure to the target language, and sociocultural context.

despite the breadth of research on politeness and request strategies, none of the reviewed studies focuses on the Nigerian ESL context, where English coexists with multiple indigenous languages and deeply embedded cultural norms. Moreover, few studies have systematically examined gender as a variable in request-making within African multilingual settings. This gap necessitates the need for the present study, which investigates gender-based differences in politeness strategies in the realisation of requests among Nigerian bilinguals.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, which hinges on the central notions of *face* and *rationality*. Within this framework, *face* is defined as the public self-image that every competent member of a society seeks to claim and maintain in social interaction (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 61). The theory assumes that all adult members of society possess face and are mutually aware of one another's face needs. Consequently, interlocutors are expected to orient to these needs in interaction, as the neglect of another's face may also threaten one's own face in the communicative encounter.

Brown and Levinson conceptualise face as a dual construct comprising *positive* and *negative* face. *Positive face* refers to an individual's desire to be appreciated, approved of, and valued by others, while *negative face* concerns the desire for autonomy, freedom of action, and freedom from imposition (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 62). Linguistic strategies designed to attend to these two dimensions of face are respectively termed *positive politeness* and *negative politeness* strategies.

For social interaction to proceed smoothly, interlocutors are expected to adopt face-saving stance by attending to both positive and negative face needs. Acts that potentially damage either or both aspects of face are referred to as *face-threatening acts* (FTAs). Brown and Levinson identify a number of speech acts as inherently face-threatening, classifying them according to the type of face threatened (positive or negative) and the participant whose face is at risk (speaker or hearer). Requests, in particular, are intrinsically face-threatening because they infringe upon the addressee's negative face by imposing obligations or demands.

Given the face-threatening nature of requests, their realisation typically requires *redressive action*. By redressive action, Brown and Levinson (1987) refer to communicative strategies that "give face" to the addressee—that is, deliberate efforts to mitigate the potential face damage occasioned by an FTA (p. 69). Politeness strategies are therefore deployed to minimise the interpersonal risk associated with request-making, except in situations where urgency or efficiency overrides face considerations.

Brown and Levinson propose five super-strategies for dealing with FTAs. These are: performing the FTA on record without redressive action (bald on record); performing the FTA on record using positive politeness; performing the FTA on record using negative politeness; Performing the FTA off record; and not performing the FTA at all.

Performing an FTA *on record* involves the use of a strategy that allows for only one unambiguous interpretation, making the speaker's intention explicit to the hearer. When this is done *without redressive action*, the FTA is realised *baldly*. Bald-on-record strategies are typically associated with contexts where efficiency is prioritised over face concerns, such as emergency situations, or where there is a significant power asymmetry in favour of the speaker. For example, in a life-threatening situation such as a fire outbreak, a subordinate may issue a direct command to a superior (e.g., *"get out of the car!"*) without concern for face mitigation.

In contrast, performing an FTA on record *with redressive action* reflects the speaker's awareness of and respect for the addressee's face needs. This redressive orientation may be achieved through either positive or negative politeness strategies.

Positive politeness strategies are oriented towards the addressee's positive face and seek to establish solidarity, shared identity, or common ground between interlocutors. Such strategies signal that the FTA is not intended as a personal affront or negative evaluation of the addressee. In request-making, positive politeness may be realised through inclusive language, expressions of camaraderie, or appeals to shared goals.

Negative politeness strategies, on the other hand, attend to the addressee's negative face by recognising their right to autonomy and freedom from imposition. These strategies often involve indirectness, hedging, deference, apologies, and impersonalisation, all of which serve to soften the imposition inherent in requests and allow the addressee room to refuse without loss of face.

Performing an FTA *off record* entails the use of indirect strategies that are open to multiple interpretations, thereby allowing the speaker to avoid explicit responsibility for the imposition. Off-record strategies typically involve violations of Grice's conversational maxims and may be

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realised through hints, metaphors, rhetorical questions, understatements, overstatements, or elliptical constructions. For instance, an utterance such as *"I forgot My wallet at home, and I need to get some toiletries at the super market"* may function as an implicit request, while allowing the speaker plausible deniability if the addressee chooses not to respond.

The final option—*not performing the FTA*—is chosen when the potential threat to face outweighs the communicative benefit of the act. In such cases, silence or avoidance becomes the most polite strategy.

According to Brown and Levinson, the selection of a particular politeness strategy is influenced by the *weightiness* of the FTA, which is calculated based on three sociological variables: social distance (D) between interlocutors, relative power (P), and the ranking of imposition (R) within a specific cultural context. The combined effect of these variables determines the degree of politeness required. Higher power asymmetry, greater social distance, and greater imposition typically necessitate the use of more indirect and face-saving strategies. This hierarchical model predicts a strong correlation between politeness and indirectness (Blum-Kulka, 1987, p. 139).

Importantly for the present study, these sociological variables are not gender-neutral. Gender operates as a social construct that shapes access to power, expectations of deference, and norms of appropriate behaviour in interaction. Consequently, male and female speakers may differ in how they perceive face threats, evaluate contextual variables, and select politeness strategies in request-making. Within the Nigerian ESL environment characterised by multilingualism, and culturally embedded gender norms, gender is therefore expected to play a salient role in the negotiation of politeness. Brown and Levinson's framework thus provides a useful analytical tool for examining how gender mediates the choice of politeness strategies for the realisation of requests.

Methods

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design and employed a quantitative approach to investigate gender-based differences in the use of politeness strategies in the performance of the speech act of request. The choice of a descriptive design is informed by the study's aim of systematically describing and comparing patterns of language use across gender and ethnolinguistic groups without manipulating any variables. The quantitative approach enables the objective measurement of variations in politeness strategy use through statistical summaries, thereby allowing for reliable comparison across groups. The population of the study comprises speakers of English as a second language from the three major ethnolinguistic groups in Nigeria: Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. A quota sampling technique was employed to select a total of 300 participants, consisting of 100 respondents from each ethnic group, with equal representation of males and females to ensure gender balance. This sampling strategy was considered appropriate for the study as it guarantees proportional representation of both gender and ethnic variables, which are central to the study's objective.

The Hausa participants were drawn from the Federal College of Education, Katsina**,** the Igbo participants from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and the Yoruba participants from the University of Ibadan. These institutions were selected to provide access to educated second-language users of English who are routinely engaged in diverse communicative interactions, thereby making them suitable for a speech act study in English as a second language (ESL) context. Data were collected using a Discourse Completion Test (DCT)**,** which is widely used in speech act and pragmatics research for eliciting comparable linguistic data across participants. The DCT consisted of five request scenarios designed to reflect varying power relations between interlocutors, in line with Brown and Levinson's (1987) sociological variables of power, social distance, and ranking of imposition (see appendix 1for a sample of the DCT). The scenarios were carefully constructed to elicit naturally occurring request strategies while controlling contextual variables that could influence politeness choices.

To ensure content validity, the DCT was reviewed and validated by two language experts, whose feedback informed necessary modifications before administration. The instrument was then administered to the participants, who were required to indicate how they would perform a request in each of the given situations. The responses generated were analysed by identifying and categorising the request politeness strategies employed by the respondents in accordance with Brown and Levinson's politeness framework. The categorised strategies were subsequently quantified using frequency counts and percentages, allowing for systematic comparison across genders. This analytical procedure made it possible to determine patterns of preference in politeness strategy use and to account for observed gender-based differences in the realisation of the speech act of request.

Data presentation and Data Analysis
Table 1 Request Strategies Used by both Genders in Situation one

Request Strategies Used	Male		Female	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Offering an Apology+ Deference	6	35.3	11	64.7
Deference +Grounder+ Strong Hint	61	49.2	63	50.8
Deference+ Minimizing the Imposition	4	21.1	15	78.9
Deference +Grounder+ Bald On-record Direct Strategy	28	65.9	14	34.1
Deference +Grounder+ Indirect Strategy	8	28.6	20	71.4

Deference +Bald On-record Strategy	-	-	2	100
Deference + Conventionally Indirect Strategy	30	63.2	8	36.8
Indirect Strategy+ Internal Modification	1	25.0	3	75.0
Grounder+ Strong Hint	11	52.4	10	47.6
Hedging	1	33.3	2	66.7
Bald On-record Strategy+ Internal Modification	-	-	2	100

Table 2 Request Strategies Used by both Genders in Situation two

	Male		Female	
Request Strategies Used	**Frequency**	**Percentage**	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Positive Politeness	134	51.1	127	48.9
Conventionally Indirect Strategy	10	33.3	20	66.7
Bald on-Record Strategy	-	-	3	100
Strong Hint	6	100	-	-

Table 3 Request Strategies Used by both Genders in Situation Three

	Male		Female	
Apology Strategies used	**Frequency**	**Percentage**	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Deference + Conventionally Indirect Strategy	87	49.7	88	50.3
Conventionally Indirect Strategy	7	46.7	8	53.3
Offering an Apology	31	50.0	31	50.0
Positive Politeness	4	50.0	4	50.0
Use of Question	1	14.3	9	85.7
Internal Modification Device+ Conv. Indirect Strategy	18	64.3	10	35.7
Bald On-record Strategy	2	100	-	-

Table 4 Request Strategies Used by both Genders in Situation 4

Request Strategies Used	Male		Female	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Conventionally Indirect Strategy	47	51.6	44	48.4
Internal Modification Device+ Direct Strategy	69	53.5	60	46.5
Bald On-record Strategy	29	42.0	40	58.0
Positive Politeness	5	50.0	5	50.0
Offering an Apology	-	-	1	100

Table 5 Request Strategies Used by both Gender in Situation five.

Request Strategies used	Male		Female	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Def.+ Conventionally Ind. Strategy + Internal Modification Device	72	46.5	83	53.5
Deference +Strong Hint	4	66.7	2	33.3
Positive Politeness+ Deference	10	90.9	1	9.1
Def.+ Internal Modification Device+ Direct Strategy	8	66.7	4	33.3
Grounder+ Deference +Bald On-record Strategy	18	56.2	14	43.8
Offering an Apology	2	50.0	2	50.0
Def + Grounder + Internal Modification + Bald On-record Strategy	36	47.4	40	52.6
Deference+ Grounder+ Strong Hint	-	-	4	100

The second aspect of this section discusses the distribution of request politeness strategies across gender in the five discourse situations, as presented in Tables 1–5. The coding of the request strategies is done in such a way that all aspects of the request sequence is considered. The open-ended nature of the DCT allowed the respondents to frame their request as they would in real life situation and one unique feature of the data elicited is that the requests were realised in parts comprising different politeness strategies. There are only few cases of requests made with single strategies. This behooved the researcher to take time in considering the sequences of requests made and grouping them according to types. The request modification devices were also considered because they serve as politeness markers as well. Every bit of the responses given by the

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respondents were considered following the illustration given above to arrive at the individual request strategies. The analysis was guided by Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and reflects how gender intersects with contextual variables such as power relations, imposition, and social distance in shaping request realisation in the Nigerian ESL environment.

Table 1 reveals both convergence and divergence in the request strategies employed by male and female participants. A salient finding is the greater strategic diversity among female respondents, who exclusively utilised *Deference + Bald on-record Strategy* and *Bald on-record Strategy + Internal Modification*. This suggests that female participants were not uniformly indirect; rather, they combined directness with mitigation, thereby maintaining efficiency while attending to face needs. This pattern aligns with earlier gender and language studies which argue that women's politeness is better understood as strategic adaptability rather than excessive indirectness. The relatively balanced use of *Deference + Grounder + Strong Hint* by both genders indicates shared pragmatic norms in situations requiring explanation and justification. However, females showed stronger preference for indirect strategies enhanced with internal modification, which points to a heightened sensitivity to the addressee's negative face. Males, on the other hand, displayed a stronger inclination toward direct strategies with fewer mitigating devices, especially when deference and power asymmetry were presumed to legitimise such choices.These patterns support Brown and Levinson's claim that politeness choices are context-sensitive, while also demonstrating that gender mediates how contextual cues are interpreted and acted upon in request making.

As shown in Table 2, positive politeness overwhelmingly dominated the strategies employed by both genders, accounting for over half of the responses. This indicates that the situation favoured solidarity-building and in-group alignment, suggesting low social distance between interlocutors. Both male and female participants relied on shared identity and camaraderie to mitigate the imposition inherent in requests. Notably, *Strong Hint* occurred exclusively among males, whereas *Bald on-record Strategy* was used only by females. This finding challenges stereotypical assumptions that women are uniformly indirect. Instead, it suggests that in contexts perceived as low-risk, female speakers may prioritise clarity and efficiency, especially where relational harmony is already established. Overall, Situation Two demonstrates that contextual affordances can override gendered tendencies, resulting in similar politeness behaviour across genders.

Table 3 indicates that *Deference + Conventionally Indirect Strategy* was the most frequently used strategy by both genders, underscoring its perceived appropriateness in managing face concerns in this situation. This strategy effectively balances clarity, politeness, and respect for negative face, making it a pragmatic default in Nigerian ESL interactions. Gender differences become visible in the use of *Questions* and *Bald on-record Strategy*. Females overwhelmingly preferred interrogative forms, which function as softeners that grant the addressee interactional autonomy. In contrast, the exclusive use of *Bald on-record Strategy* by male participants reflects a greater tolerance for directness, particularly where authority or urgency is implied. The equal

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distribution of *Offering an Apology* and *Positive Politeness* across genders suggests a shared cultural understanding of the politeness demands of the situation, reinforcing the idea that gender operates alongside, not independent of, sociocultural norms.

The data in Table 4 reveal increased use of direct strategies, especially *Internal Modification Device + Direct Strategy* and *Bald on-record Strategy*. This suggests that the situational context legitimised higher levels of imposition. Female participants, however, demonstrated a stronger inclination toward *Bald on-record Strategy*, possibly reflecting pragmatic efficiency rather than impoliteness. The exclusive use of *Offering an Apology* by a female participant further reinforces findings that women tend to employ affective and relational strategies when the potential for face threat is high. The equal use of *Positive Politeness* by both genders again points to contextual symmetry in politeness behaviour.

Table 5 reflects the highest level of strategic complexity, consistent with a situation involving greater imposition. Both genders overwhelmingly preferred *Deference + Conventionally Indirect Strategy + Internal Modification Device*, confirming Brown and Levinson's prediction that higher-ranking FTAs attract higher-numbered politeness strategies. Female participants exclusively used *Deference + Grounder + Strong Hint*, indicating a preference for layered mitigation that allows the speaker to minimise responsibility for the request while maximising face protection. Male participants, by contrast, showed higher frequencies in strategies combining positive politeness and deference, suggesting an appeal to shared goals and solidarity as a mitigating resource. The equal use of *Offering an Apology* reinforces its role as a culturally salient politeness marker in Nigerian ESL interactions, especially in situations of high imposition.

Discussion of Findings

The five situations in the DCT were carefully designed to reflect graduated levels of power asymmetry and imposition, ranging from high-risk institutional contexts (e.g. Situation One) to low-risk, everyday encounters (e.g. Situation Three). The results show that participants were highly sensitive to these contextual cues, adjusting their request strategies accordingly. Importantly, gender emerged not as an isolated determinant of politeness behaviour, but as a mediating variable influencing how speakers interpreted and responded to contextual constraints.

Situation One encapsulates maximum power distance (P) and high ranking of imposition (R): a subordinate requesting financial assistance from a superior. The predominance of strategies combining deference, grounders, indirectness, apologies, and internal modification, especially among female participants, is therefore pragmatically predictable. These strategies function as redressive actions aimed at protecting the boss's negative face while simultaneously safeguarding the speaker's positive face against possible rejection or loss of esteem. Female participants' exclusive use of certain mitigated strategies—such as *Deference + Bald on-record Strategy* and *Bald on-record Strategy + Internal Modification* is particularly revealing. It suggests that women were willing to perform the request explicitly, but only after carefully framing it within deferential and mitigating discourse, thereby neutralising the face threat. Male participants, while also polite,

relied more frequently on direct strategies combined with fewer layers of mitigation, reflecting a comparatively higher tolerance for face risk in institutional hierarchies. These patterns underscore the role of gender in calibrating politeness intensity, especially in high-stakes interactions.

Situation Two presents a lecturer–student interaction, characterised by asymmetric power, but a relatively low material imposition. However, the situation also carries implicit ethical and cultural sensitivities, given the gender dynamics involved. The overwhelming preference for positive politeness strategies across genders suggests an attempt to reduce social distance and frame the request as a matter of shared concern rather than authority. The exclusive use of *Strong Hint* by male participants and *Bald on-record Strategy* by female participants is particularly significant. Male lecturers' reliance on hints may reflect an awareness of the potential face and moral implications of making such a request overtly, especially in a Nigerian sociocultural context where lecturer–student interactions are highly regulated. Female participants' use of bald on-record strategies, on the other hand, may reflect a perception of the request as benign and non-threatening, thus requiring minimal redress. This finding illustrates how gender interacts with institutional norms and cultural expectations to shape pragmatic choices.

Situation Three represents a case of low power, distance and imposition, where the interlocutors are strangers just as in everyday request involving minimal power asymmetry. The dominance of conventionally indirect strategies across genders confirms that such forms function as default politeness markers in Nigerian ESL interactions with strangers. These strategies strike a balance between clarity and politeness, ensuring compliance without undue imposition. The marked preference among female participants for interrogative forms further indicates a heightened sensitivity to the addressee's negative face, even in low-risk contexts. Male participants' exclusive use of bald on-record strategies, though limited in frequency, suggests that directness is considered acceptable by some speakers where the request is culturally a matter of routine and unlikely to be face-threatening. This situation demonstrates that gender differences are attenuated when contextual demands are minimal, lending support to the view that politeness is fundamentally situational.

In Situation Four, the speaker occupies a position of authority over the addressee (the driver), but the request involves a third-party beneficiary and a morally compelling context (a sick child). This dual encoding explains the increased use of direct strategies combined with internal modification, as the urgency of the situation legitimises efficiency while still necessitating some level of face redress. Female participants' exclusive use of *Offering an Apology* reflects a tendency to acknowledge the imposition despite the legitimacy of the request, reinforcing findings that women are more likely to explicitly mark awareness of face threat. The equal use of positive politeness strategies across genders suggests shared cultural norms regarding empathy and communal responsibility.

Situation Five (implicitly involving high imposition and complex social negotiation) elicited the most elaborately mitigated strategies. The widespread use of *Deference + Conventionally Indirect Strategy + Internal Modification Device* confirms Brown and Levinson's

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prediction that greater face threat attracts higher-numbered politeness strategies. Female participants' exclusive use of *Deference + Grounder + Strong Hint* underscores a preference for plausible deniability and face protection, allowing the addressee latitude in interpretation. Male participants' stronger reliance on strategies combining positive politeness and deference suggests a greater emphasis on solidarity and shared goals as a mitigating resource. There are remarkable differences between the choice of request strategies made by the male and female respondents as the male respondents are more direct in making their requests while their female respondents use higher numbered politeness strategies such as off record strategies and negative politeness strategies.

Conclusion

This study investigated gender-based variation in the realisation of the speech act of request among Nigerian ESL users within the framework of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. Using a discourse completion test that systematically manipulated power relations, social distance, and degree of imposition, the study demonstrated that request strategies in the Nigerian ESL context are highly sensitive to interactional contexts. The findings reveal that both male and female speakers strategically employed politeness resources to mitigate face-threatening acts, particularly in high-imposition and asymmetrical power contexts

Gender emerged as a significant yet non-deterministic variable in the realisation of request strategies. While both male and female participants demonstrated awareness of face needs, female speakers consistently employed greater degrees of mitigation, favouring indirectness, apologies, and hedging, particularly in high-risk contexts. Male speakers, on the other hand, displayed a relatively higher tolerance for directness, especially where social roles or situational urgency legitimised explicit requests. These patterns suggest that gender influences not merely the selection of strategies but the intensity and density of redressive action, thereby supporting interactional and performative views of gendered language use (Freed, 1996; Gborsong, 2016; Jones, 2016; Latifa, 2021). This further affirms the value of Brown and Levinson's model in accounting for request behaviour in a multilingual ESL environment, while also underscoring the need to interpret politeness within culturally situated practices.

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Appendix

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DISCOURSE COMPLETION TEST

Instrument for the Elicitation of Request Speech Acts

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Sex………………………….   Ethnic Background……………… (Hausa / Igbo/ Yoruba)

First Language ……………...

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Instructions

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You are kindly requested to read through the 5 Situations presented below meant to elicit the speech acts of request. In each of the items, assume that you are the speaker and endeavour to respond as you would in real life situation. Please, take special notice of the varying degrees of familiarity, and power relations between the speaker and the addressee in addition to the severity of the offence committed and that of the rate of imposition of the request and respond as appropriate

Situation One:

You are in a financial difficulty and have sourced for money within your circle of friends but couldn't get much from them. Your only hope of getting the needed financial assistance is your boss in the office. How will you make the request to him?

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Situation Two:

You are a male lecturer. One of your female students came to your office to make enquiries about the course outline and you liked her dress. How will you ask her to help you get a similar one for your wife?

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Situation Three:

You are on transfer to an unfamiliar environment and do not know your way about. How will you ask a man you meet on the way to give a direction to your destination?

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Situation four:

You are at a function with your driver and meet a woman whose child is sick. How will you request your driver to take them to the hospital before coming back to take you home?

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Situation Five:

You are a student and one of the lecturers in your Department scheduled to administer an examination on the same day and time that an examination of a general course is taking place. As the course leader how will you request your lecturer to adjust the time of the departmental examination?

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