

# Pragmatic Competence in Saudi Kindergarteners: Politeness Strategies in Social Communication

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**Abstract**—This research examines the development of pragmatic competence in Saudi kindergarteners, focusing on their use of politeness strategies during social interactions. The research used a qualitative methodology to investigate the sociocultural and developmental aspects of politeness, integrating pragmatic awareness tasks with naturalistic observations of 16 children in a Riyadh kindergarten, with semi-structured interviews with parents and teachers. Research reveals that Saudi kindergarteners often exhibit culturally embedded politeness markers, such as "assalamu alaikum" and "jazak Allah khair", so indicating the impact of Islamic and social traditions on their language behaviors. The study highlights the critical roles of parental modeling and peer interactions in sustaining these habits. Gender variations were significant as females showed more degrees of respect and language mitigating behavior in line with cultural standards. Furthermore, older children showed cognitive and social growth by using more complex and contextually appropriate politeness strategies according to developmental trends. This paper underlines the role of cultural context in language development and closes a gap in the knowledge on the pragmatic competence of Arabic-speaking children. The findings indicate the necessity of integrating cultural knowledge in early childhood education to enhance pragmatic development and facilitate effective communication.

**Index Terms**—pragmatic competence, politeness strategies, social communication, cultural, early childhood education

## I. INTRODUCTION

Pragmatic competence – which refers to the ability to employ language appropriately in different social situations – is one of the most important features of linguistic development. It involves both understanding and using language according to implicit and explicit norms which govern interaction. One of the most central issues in pragmatics is politeness strategies, through which social interaction can be smoothly made, possible conflicts are mitigated, and interpersonal harmony is maintained (Eun, 2010). Politeness is not only a matter of linguistic convention; it is also a complex social tool by which individuals manage relationships, signal respect, and adhere to cultural norms (Leech, 2014). The acquisition of politeness strategies in early childhood marks an important point in children's language and social development, providing the basis for effective communication and social interaction (Owens, 2011). In Saudi Arabia, where cultural and religious values are entrenched in respect, research on politeness in early infancy offers valuable information about the way in which such values are transmitted and internalized through language.

Saudi Arabia's socio-cultural scene, marked by firmly ingrained Islamic values mixed with Arab customs, provides a particularly unique setting for the growth of pragmatic competence. In this sense, politeness strategies are intrinsically linked to religion teachings that support societal peace, respect of seniors, and modesty in speech and conduct. For example, "assalamu alaikum" and "jazak Allah khair" are not just politeness markers but also partial representation of the deep-rooted cultural and religious beliefs of a country (Samarah, 2015). Usually modeled by adults, they then operate as the frameworks upon which the young learners see their social contacts. Investigating how Saudi kindergarteners learn and use politeness helps us to grasp the larger processes of cultural transmission and the function of language as a means of social norm inculcation.

Deeply ingrained in Islamic principles and tradition, Saudi Arabia's socio-cultural fabric provides a special setting in which pragmatic competence develops. In this regard, politeness strategies are closely related with religion teachings stressing societal peace, respect of elderly, and modesty in speech and conduct. Adults model these quite regularly, therefore young children have models for how to engage in social interactions. Examining how Saudi kindergarteners choose and apply politeness helps make some broad observations on the more fundamental mechanisms of cultural transmission and on the function of language as a vehicle of socializing.

The combination of cognitive, social, and cultural elements determines the developmental path of pragmatic competence, particularly the application of politeness strategies. While social interactions essentially establish the contextual framework within which such skills are learned and mastered, cognitive development allows the young child to make sense of the social structure and adapt their language to that reality in a fitting manner. Saudi kindergarten children embrace the use of polite strategies through situations involving various groups of activities and classmates in communicating. Interaction enables a young child to explore many language forms and grow from the responses received; likewise, parents and teachers in the children's lives model the appropriate use of these behaviors. They also provide the

youngsters clear guidance and subdued scaffolding so they may learn complicated social dynamics and gain appropriate linguistic ability in a given society (Alduais et al., 2012; Botana & Peralbo, 2024).

This research aims at Saudi children between the ages of 4 and 6 and focuses on how politeness strategies are selected and used by young children in everyday contact with Riyadh. Therefore, it attempts to explain the complex interplay between cultural norms, linguistic input, and social dynamics that lead to pragmatic competence using children's language in naturalistic ways. This study also investigates how adult models help to reinforce politeness behavior, therefore underlining once again how family and school settings both support language development.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Acquisition of pragmatic competence, embracing politeness strategies, is one of the important areas of research within the studies on linguistic and social development. Pragmatic competence thus empowers people to manage social interactions by using contextually appropriate language. According to Kasper and Rose (2002), appropriateness lies at the heart of pragmatic competence, and this comprises politeness strategies, which are used in mitigation, maintaining interpersonal harmony, and in the avoidance of social conflict (Brown & Levinson, 1987). This literature review explores some key works and theoretical frameworks in pragmatic competence development in early childhood, focusing on politeness strategies, and thereafter assesses the impact of cultural and contextual factors on the acquisition of such strategies among young children within a Saudi Arabian context.

### A. Theoretical Perspectives on Pragmatic Competence

Pragmatic competence manifests how language is contextualized in social life. The theory of politeness, especially the work done by Brown and Levinson (1987), was a seminal contribution that explained the way politeness strategies operate in interactions. Whereas politeness strategies establish solidarity, negative politeness represents a means of avoiding imposition while showing deference. This contrast provides valuable information about how a developing child learns to weigh his or her own communicative needs against those of interlocutors.

It is accepted that during childhood, particularly at a young age, pragmatic development occurs along with cognitive and social development. Three-year-old children already develop the skills of understanding social status and using linguistic mitigation when necessary (Botana & Peralbo, 2024). Obviously, such abilities will continue to develop in their further life and social interactions, considering both overt and covert feedback provided by adults. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory goes one step further in emphasizing the primacy of social interaction and scaffolding in developing language and places heavy emphasis on the role of adults and peers in internalizing pragmatic norms (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996).

### B. Politeness Strategies in Early Childhood

Research into the politeness strategies of early childhood has largely focused on how children develop various linguistic forms, such as requests, apologies, and thanks. Indeed, studies illustrate that young children at the earliest stages of language acquisition rely heavily on direct linguistic forms; as their cognitive and social understanding develops, they begin to incorporate politeness strategies into their speech production. Botana and Peralbo (2024) noted that it is around the age of four to six years that children first begin to produce indirect requests, along with other forms of politeness, marking an emerging awareness of social convention.

Context plays a very important role regarding the employment of politeness strategies. A study conducted by Alduais et al. (2012) on politeness strategies employed by Arabic-speaking children stated that cultural conventions dictated their language use to a significant extent. For example, children were found to be more agreeable to using formal greetings and words of thanks with adults rather than with friends. Likewise, social relationships, such as those between teachers and children, also determine politeness strategies.

### C. Politeness and Cultural Contexts

Cultural values have a great impact on the structuring of the varieties and purpose of politeness strategies. In Saudi Arabia, respect and modesty go to the very roots of social structure. As such, the use of polite language becomes not simply a matter of linguistic competence but a cultural one as well (Tawalbeh & Al-Oqaily, 2012). Such phrases as "assalamu alaikum" and "shukran" are not only conventional expressions but have significant cultural and religious meanings. This set of phrases has always appeared in adults and further been solidified in them throughout their lives in interaction.

In this context, Saudi Arabian collectivist culture significantly influences the various instructional methodologies for teaching politeness strategies. Collective cultures strongly foster group cohesion and respect amongst members of the group, and positive politeness strategies are thus well developed across such cultures. This cultural perspective suggests that politeness for Saudi Arabian children is not just a means to achieve one's goals; rather, it is an important means of developing group cohesion. Samarah (2015) reported that Saudi kindergarteners used the polite expressions quite frequently during group work to confirm a belief in maintaining social harmony.

### D. Adult's Role in Pragmatic Development

Influences from both parents and teachers on the development of pragmatic competence among children are well-documented. Adults model politeness in language use mainly by explicit teaching and implicit exposure. For instance, Alduais et al. (2012) mentioned that Saudi parents often corrected their children about proper politeness, mainly in more formal situations. In Saudi kindergartens, teachers also embed politeness features into daily routines and interactions.

Vygotsky's theory of the role of scaffolding (1978) in a child's development also supports the efficiency of adult scaffolding to enhance pragmatic competence. For example, in Saudi Arabian kindergartens, where respect to customs and traditions is an important element of culture, teachers model polite forms and encourage children to use such forms during classroom activities (Al-Jarf, 2023). In this way, one consolidates the linguistic behavioral pattern and the cultural norm about politeness.

#### *E. Interactions Among Peers and Social Dynamics*

While adults provide the framework for pragmatic development, peer interactions present a rich environment within which politeness strategies may be exercised and mastered. Play and cooperation provide broad social contexts that challenge the child to revise his usage of language (Bruner, 1983). Indeed, Botana and Peralbo (2024) have emphasized the role of peer interaction for testing pragmatic abilities and receiving feedback to shape and alter behaviors accordingly. Play is also considered instructional, and it is utilized as an additional free unstructured time between activities. However, according to Nicolopoulou et al. (2009), play is resilient and tends to help develop thinking, language, and social skills.

Since Saudi kindergartens have put much emphasis on group activities and cooperative learning, peer interactions become especially important. Al-Jarf (2023) reported that Saudi children working together on a problem-solving activity often used the politeness strategies of turn-taking and verbal apologies. Interaction of this type develops language ability but also social cohesiveness in congruence with Saudi culture's emphasis on group harmony.

#### *F. Challenges in Politeness Development*

Even with the supportive assistance of adults and peers, however, children may face developmental problems in acquiring politeness strategies. Indeed, such frequent challenges are embedded in the complex interrelationship of cognitive, linguistic, and cultural variables (Al-Hozali, 2024; Al-Seghayer, 2024). For example, children in their early years may poorly manage the demands of politeness against their communicative intentions. Besides, the discontinuities from home to school entailing variations in input for children may result in hindering their pragmatic development accordingly.

Although the concept of pragmatic competence has been adequately enlightening, quite significant gaps persist in the literature, more so in relation to specific cultural contexts. Most studies on politeness strategies have been directed on Western and East Asian civilizations. As a result, less research has been done on Arab children. This lack of studies calls for an examination of the pragmatic growth of Saudi kindergarteners to increase the understanding of the learning of politeness strategies in many different cultural settings.

In other words, the development of pragmatic competence, in which politeness strategies are included, is a multi-factorial process influenced by cognitive, social, and cultural factors. Almost everything Saudi Arabian kindergartners do and interact within is deeply connected to the cultural and religious climate with which they are surrounded and shapes their way of living. As such, this research provides a highly valuable and instructive window onto broader, more general processes of language socialization. It underlines the critical part played by the cultural context in which pragmatic norms of social interaction are fashioned, pointing out the need for research in contexts that have not been considered or received adequate attention, including the setting of Saudi Arabia.

### III. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research examines pragmatic competence development among Saudi kindergarten children and their use of politeness strategies in social interactions. Therefore, the methodological framework was chosen to be reflective of the spontaneous behaviors of children in natural settings and the perceptions of parents and teachers as they contribute to shaping children's behavior. The combination of naturalistic observation, semi-structured interviews, and pragmatic awareness tasks allowed for an all-encompassing qualitative approach toward the investigation of the interaction between cultural, social, and developmental factors in politeness among young children.

#### *A. Participants*

Data were collected from a kindergarten school in Riyadh through a purposive sampling method. A sample of 16 children, aged between 4-6 years, was included in the sample. An equal number of boys and girls were included in the sample for an even distribution to analyze any gender differences operating in the use of politeness strategies. They were selected according to regular attendance and participation in classroom activities because this participation was crucial for capturing a wide range of pragmatic behaviors. Along with the children, the participants in the research included 5 teachers and 8 parents. This procedure was followed to identify the socio-cultural and familial factors affecting pragmatic development in children. Adult participants were selected by virtue of being actively involved in daily activities with the children, as well as in language engagements, and would have relevant and valid perspectives to share within this context.

#### *B. Data Collection*

This study explored politeness strategies of Saudi kindergarteners by utilizing three major data collection tools: naturalistic observation, semi-structured interview, and pragmatic awareness tasks. Each tool was devised to achieve particular research objectives while providing complementary insights into the children's pragmatic competence.

### 1. *Naturalistic Observations*

Naturalistic observations were conducted for three weeks to document the use of politeness strategies by kindergarten children during their daily normal activities. Observations were conducted in three main settings: free play, group activity, and teacher-directed sessions. The settings were chosen because they reflected a broad range of social interactions, from the most informal, one-on-one peer-to-peer interactions to structured interactions. These included the politeness markers of greeting, requesting, apologizing, and thanking, e.g., the researcher recorded the way the children asked for something during the play, the way they apologized after some minor conflict, and the way they thanked each other in cases when they got help or shared some materials. Such detailed field notes were taken down, with audio-recording interactions on informed consent from both the administration of the kindergarten and the parents themselves. The researcher maintained a non-participatory role during observations to minimize potential biases or disruptions to the children's natural behavior (Williams, 2008).

### 2. *Semi-Structured Interviews*

Semi-structured interviews with teachers and parents were carried out regarding their knowledge of politeness strategies and how these would help encourage these behaviors in children. Interviews lasted between 30 to 45 minutes, using a flexible framework that allowed probing and follow-up questions. These included the knowledge of politeness as defined in Saudi cultural settings, the strategies they used to teach the notion of politeness, and observations on children's language usage across social settings. For example, teachers were asked to reflect on how they conducted themselves politely in the classroom while parents were asked about how they continue to have polite conversation at home. Audio-recorded and verbatim transcribed, the interviews guaranteed accuracy and made theme analysis easier (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

### 3. *Pragmatic Awareness Tasks*

Appropriate, simple tasks involving imaginary scenarios – that is, children interacting with sequence images in storyboards representing common social situations – such as asking for a toy, apologizing for spilling water, or thanking a person for sharing a snack – helped the children develop their use of politeness strategies. The children were then involved in activities to state how they would react to such situations and to choose the correct language from a pre-set list, where appropriate. For example, if the child wanted to borrow a crayon, they chose to either respond, "Give me the crayon," "Please, can I borrow your crayon?" or to not respond at all. These activities were designed to examine the children's knowledge of contextually appropriate language as well as their ability to use politeness strategies in hypothetical situations. Responses were recorded and then documented for further analysis.

Overall, the research used different tools to establish the validity and reliability of the findings. Triangulation of data was achieved by incorporating observations, interviews, and awareness tasks, thus giving multiple perspectives on the children's pragmatic competence. Member checking was done by distributing the preliminary findings to the teachers and parents to check the accuracy of the interpretations. Peer debriefing with colleagues conversant with qualitative research methodologies further helped in refining the process of coding to validate the thematic analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## C. *Data Analysis*

Qualitative data from naturalistic observations and interviews were thematically analyzed to outline recurring patterns and influences that could be at the root of pragmatic competence in children. In thematic analysis, a cyclic process involved coding, categorization, and interpretation of data to identify main themes related to politeness. Examples include recurring themes such as the impact of cultural norms, for example respect for one's elders, or the part social hierarchy played in determining the children's language use. Data from observations were triangulated with findings from interviews to increase reliability and to provide a detailed account of the factors affecting politeness strategies (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The data collected from the pragmatic awareness tasks were analyzed descriptively to identify developmental trends and differences in how the children employed politeness strategies. The children's reactions were classified according to their conformity to traditional standards of politeness – in terms of the use of polite requests, apology, or thanking – and according to their appropriateness to the situation. These trends were compared across age groups and genders to explore both developmental and sociolinguistic variations. While younger children would be more direct, for example, older children used more hedging structures as evidence of developing understanding of status relationships and social relations.

## D. *Ethical Considerations*

The research followed the ethical requirements for studies involving children. Informed consent in writing was taken from the parents of the child participants, as well as from the teachers and parents interviewed. The children themselves provided assent, after explanations were provided regarding the conduct of the research in an appropriate manner for their respective ages. Therefore, confidentiality was maintained through anonymization of data, with recordings and their transcripts securely

stored. The research received authorization from the appropriate institutional review board, thereby ensuring adherence to ethical guidelines pertaining to studies that involve human subjects (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

#### IV. RESULTS OF THE STUDY

This section outlines the findings on the pragmatic competence of Saudi kindergartners in terms of using politeness strategies in social interactions. The results are organized to present patterns observed in naturalistic interactions, information obtained from semi-structured interview data with adults, and development related to pragmatic awareness tasks. All results are framed within the context of the existing literature to point out areas of convergence and divergence, as well as the contributions of this study.

##### A. *Politeness Strategies Used in Naturalistic Interactions*

Naturalistic observations indicated that the politeness markers usually employed by Saudi kindergartners were greeting, requesting, apologizing, and thanking. Of those, the verbal greeting had the highest record, especially the culturally important utterance "assalamu alaikum" (peace be upon you), which was always used upon children's entry into the class or approaching their friends. This result aligns with Tawalbeh and Al-Oqaily's (2012) research that in Arabic culture a greeting is something not to be missed. Nevertheless, the consistent encouragement of this conduct by teachers implies a more systematic instillation than has been previously recorded in research concerning Western settings (Botana & Peralbo, 2024).

Children's requests varied situationally and depending on their interlocutors. The children's requests to their peers were also much more direct: "Give me the toy," whereas requests to teachers were softened by politeness markers, for example: "Please, may I have the crayon? This pattern illustrates one aspect of emergent consciousness of social status, in accord with Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which asserts that power relationship determines linguistic choices. Whereas Western studies have associated directness in peer interactions with assertiveness training (Bates, 1976), the directness of Saudi children is culturally appropriate and accepted within the peer group as reflecting a collectivist orientation, which emphasizes harmony within the group (Hofstede, 2011).

Gratitude and apologizing situations were less frequent but contextually appropriate when they occurred. As such, gratitude occurred towards situations after being aided by a child, "Thank you for sharing your pencil." Apologies seemed to occur around arguments, like the child knocking over another child's blocks. These findings are similar to those identified by Alduais et al. (2012) for Arabic-speaking children whose use of politeness strategies was linked to the requirements of the situation during socially relevant interactions.

##### B. *Gender Differences in Politeness Use*

Gender differences highlighted another theme in naturalistic data. The female participants had a higher tendency than their male counterparts to use mitigated linguistic expressions. For example, they used such expressions as "Excuse me" and "Could I borrow this?" more when they addressed their peers. The male participants favored asking for a thing directly and were less likely to apologize during a conflict. These findings align with the assertions of Mills (2014), Coates (2015), and Simon (2021) that language and gender are seen as interconnected factors, and that females are conventionally socialized to be highly polite.

##### C. *Semi-Structured Interviews*

Interviews with teachers and parents demonstrated a common emphasis on politeness as a cultural and religious value. Islamic teachings had a strong impression in the comments about expectations of children's behavior from both groups. Parents emphasized the need for their children to learn to always say "jazak Allah khair" while their teachers reiterated the importance of observing good speech behavior during lesson interaction; this is also evidenced by Alzahrani (2022), who asserts that the concept of politeness in Saudi Arabic is essentially based on Islamic religion.

The teachers expressed that they deliberately employed politeness markers in structured activities, such as asking children to add the word "please" when requesting an object or to apologize after small disputes. In this respect, parents also related similar strategies used at home, which often discussed the choice of form with the aim of instilling adherence to politeness standards in their child. These findings support Vygotsky's (1978) theory on social learning, which states that adult scaffolding is an important factor in language development. Cohen et al. (2020) also assert the longitudinal effects of the family support on and the language skills of preschool children. This study provides further proof for this aspect of Saudi kindergartners' pragmatic development, emphasizing the dual influence of home and school would suggest consistent reinforcement across contexts.

##### D. *Pragmatic Awareness Tasks*

Pragmatic awareness tasks resulted in developmental differences in how children used and applied politeness strategies. The older children, 5-6 years, preferred to provide indirect and polite answers like "Please may I have the toy?", when\* asked to request something, unlike the younger one's aged 4-5 years, who chose the more direct response "Give me the toy", or did not answer appropriately. That is, positive developmental tendencies confirm such a statement of Botana and Peralbo (2024) that there is a strong link between advanced cognitive and social maturity and the development of pragmatic abilities.

As a matter of fact, the oldest age group of males showed a very strong inclination for directness as opposed to females, even in those tasks in which politeness was explicitly stated. This is an uncommon result in Western contexts; boys and girls from the same group do not commonly show differences in pragmatic awareness from one another (Bates, 1976; Hofstede, 2011). This may be linked to cultural norms of Saudi Arabia, which put strong emphasis on gender-specific behaviors; this means that usually, boys are raised to behave competitively, while girls are socialized to maintain relational harmony (Alzahrani, 2022).

#### *E. The Role of Cultural and Religious Contexts*

The most important contribution of this research is the emphasis on the role of cultural and religious norms in the development of politeness strategies. The high frequency of certain religious-based phrases, for example, "assalamu alaikum" and "jazak Allah khair", suggests that the Islamic religion forms a core basis of pragmatic development in Saudi Arabian children. These findings extend the research of Alduais et al. (2012) by showing that those expressions are acquired and form part of children's linguistic and social identity.

Furthermore, this element of deference to an authority figure, as expressed both in naturalistic interactions and interviews, is a different cultural dynamic, rarely documented in either Western or East Asian studies (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Kasper & Rose, 2002). The mitigating language that Saudi kindergarten children consistently use when addressing teachers shows the interrelation between social structures and the ways in which individuals choose to use language, thus indicating differences to the way politeness may be contextualized within specific settings.

#### *F. Contribution to Literature*

This research makes important contributions in the literature on child pragmatics. It first underlines the requirement of cultural and religious embedding in politeness strategy research, hence filling an important gap in existing literature. It also gives a clear analysis of the gendered patterns of politeness use and gives insight into how societal expectations are entrenched in language development from a very early age.

The combination of naturalistic observation, interviews, and pragmatic awareness tasks provides a rich methodological framework within which to explore young children's pragmatic competence. Meanwhile, this research underlines the multi-facets of the pragmatic competence developed by Saudi kindergarteners due to a complex interaction of cultural, social, and developmental factors. Although most of the findings are in line with previous research, such as the role of adult scaffolding and the progressive development of politeness strategies, this particular socio-cultural and religious environment of Saudi Arabia allows for a new light to be shed on pragmatic competence acquisition. These insights enrich our understanding of child pragmatics while carrying, at the same time, important implications for teachers and parents interested in promoting appropriate and culturally sensitive communicative skills in children.

### V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study has highlighted the complexity of socio-cultural, developmental, and contextual interaction that takes place in defining pragmatic competence in Saudi kindergarteners, especially in producing politeness strategies in social communications. With these dimensions in view, the research proposed an in-depth examination into the socialization process of the language of children within a diverse cultural context through naturalistic observations, semi-structured interviews, and pragmatic awareness tasks. This discussion is based on an integration of findings, relating them to relevant literature, and considering implications for theory and practice.

#### *A. Cultural and Religious Influences on Shaping Politeness*

The strong impact of Saudi Arabian cultural and religious norms on the pragmatic development of children is echoed in the frequent use of politeness markers by children, for example, "assalamu alaikum" and "jazak Allah khair". The use of those expressions, so deeply rooted in Islamic teachings, reflects not only a linguistic convention but, above all, the internalized cultural identity of children. It corroborates the work of Samarah (2015), which located the dominant place of religious principles in shaping Saudi Arabia's current communicative practices. However, the present study further develops Samarah's observations by demonstrating how such norms are themselves reproduced through adult modeling in the home and school settings, thus revealing a two-tiered process of cultural transmission.

In contrast to the politeness strategies in both Western and East Asian contexts, which often emphasize individual autonomy or indirectness, respectively, those of Saudi children emphasized deference to authority and group cohesion. Such a collectivist orientation is in line with Hofstede's (2011) cultural dimensions theory, which places Saudi Arabia in a nation ranking high in power distance. Frequent use of mitigating language addressing teachers and other authority figures underlines the children's awareness of hierarchical relationships, thus strengthening such a culturally deeply entrenched principle as respect to elders and all sorts of authorities (Almathkuri, 2021).

#### *B. Gendered Patterns in Politeness Use*

Differences in politeness strategies were statistically significant and indicated more uses of linguistic mitigation among girls who also showed more signs of deference than boys. This result confirms the findings of Alzahrani's (2022) study conducted in Saudi classrooms, which reported that girls were more polite and cooperative. Thus, the stronger presence of these gendered patterns in the current study can be associated with the expectations that girls preserve relational

harmony while boys are expected to act out their independence. This is where the distinction underlines the impact of early age socialization according to gender on pragmatic development (Coates, 2015; Mills, 2014). Botana and Peralbo (2024) reported small gender differences for children of comparable ages in the West, while the large differences seen in the Saudi sample are indeed indicative of cultural norms. These findings do call for further investigation into how cultural frameworks interact with gender to impact language development, especially in cultures with specific and sometimes strict gender roles.

The identified changes or improvements in pragmatic awareness align with the established theories concerning language development, especially Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, in which scaffolding and social interaction are considered decisive in the development of linguistic competence. Indeed, the older children seemed to be more sensitive to the aspect of politeness as they were using more indirect and contextually appropriate speech during the experiment. In fact, this coincides with what Botana and Peralbo (2024) established: pragmatic competencies can only develop alongside the ongoing cognitive and social process. This was apparent in, for instance, the many instances where the very young children already picked up on religiously based politeness markers, suggesting that the cultural influences make some linguistic elements easier to acquire.

### *C. Adult Modeling and Peer Interactions*

Adults modeled and reinforced behaviors representing politeness through all data sources. For example, teachers in each classroom consistently imbedded rules of politeness in their classroom routines, and parents provided correction and instruction concerning their child's language use within the home environment. Consistent with Vygotsky's insights (1978), such findings suggest that adults provide the scaffold for children to learn both linguistic and social norms. However, the holistic influence of both domestic and educational settings, which is eloquently represented in this research, becomes unique in the Saudi setting, where home and school settings continuously encourage practical skills among children (Alkhonini et al., 2024; Tawalbeh & Al-Oqaily, 2012). These results concur with previous research that familial relationships, the gender of interactants, their roles, age, and cultural context seem to influence the use of speech acts among Saudi family members. According to Alfaleh (2019), for example, the Islamic culture significantly influenced the selection of request-response strategies, as seen using expressions such as 'Masha Allah' and 'Insha Allah'.

Less routine opportunities to practice and reset politeness strategies were found in unstructured play and group activities, specifically between peers. In that respect, this finding concurs with the results of a study of peer interaction by Botana and Peralbo (2024), who likewise identified it as a key pragmatic development marker. However, the notion of collective harmony that was prominent in the present research in Saudi kindergartens would suggest that qualitatively, peer interaction in collectivist cultures may differ from those in individualistic cultures.

### *D. Contributions to Existing Research*

The research represents significant contributions to research in child pragmatics: it fills one of the lacunas in the literature concerning politeness strategies in Arabic, thus enabling further insight into how cultural and religious norms shape children's linguistic development, and it provides a detailed account of the gendered tendencies that follow in the use of politeness regarding societal expectations in language socialization. Thirdly, methodological triangulation of observation, interviews, and raising children's awareness of politeness strategies makes for a profound step into the research on pragmatic competence among young children.

The findings also challenge established theories' applicability, for example, Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory on politeness, by categorically showing how the realization of politeness strategies is influenced by cultural variables. This once more highlights the need for culturally sensitive approaches toward language development studies, especially in under-researched contexts.

Overall, these findings have important practical implications for teachers and policymakers. Vygotsky (1978) argued that the development of literacy, communication, collaboration, and human development facilitated learning. In this respect, Eun (2010) declares that a teacher's role is to build upon what they know and guide the discussions toward making children think deeply. Therefore, cultural and religious mores can be infused within early childhood education to make instruction both relevant and effective in language and culture. Teacher training needs to focus on modeling politeness and providing opportunities for children to rehearse strategies within social contexts (Al-Qahtani, 2020; Zughabi, 2022).

Further, the established gender variations in politeness use reinforce the call for equal measures that would foster a wide range of pragmatic competence in both males and females (Xia, 2013). Through such an enabling platform, characterized by the promotion of children to be assertive while maintaining relational harmony, the teacher is well placed to facilitate holistic development in all children.

In conclusion, this research clarifies the complex interplay between culture, development, and socialization in shaping the pragmatic competence of Saudi kindergarteners. It focused on the politeness strategies that explained in detail the important role that the previously acquired knowledge of the cultural values played, the adult modeling, and peer interaction during the development of pragmatic abilities. Results of such findings form part of our understanding of child pragmatics and the call for cultural sensitivity in pedagogical practice. Further research is warranted to extend these findings by exploring longitudinal development in politeness strategies and those for effective intercultural communication.

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