# A Cross-Cultural Study of Criticism Strategies: Iraqi and Malay ESL Learners

**Shurooq Abboodi Ali (PhD)**

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## Abstract

Criticism, as an evaluative criterion, is a significant speech act for English language learners to improve their speech and actions in their academic life. Yet, it is realized differently across diverse cultures. Few studies have shown that the linguistics forms of one language are different from those available in another language. Hence, this study aims to investigate the cross-cultural similarities and differences between 60 Iraqi and Malay university learners in the use of criticism strategies. The data are collected using a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) and a Focus Group Interview (FGI). The data are coded based on Nguyen's (2005) coding scheme of criticism in terms of the realization strategies. Qualitative and quantitative approaches are used in the analysis of data. The findings evidently uncover that both groups use similar categories of criticism strategies, but Iraqis use more direct criticisms than Malays who opt for indirectness in their criticisms. Finally, some pedagogical implications for teachers of English as a second or foreign language are provided in this study.

**Keywords:** Linguistics strategies, direct criticism, indirect criticism, Iraqis, Malays.

## 1. Introduction

Scholars of pragmatics, particularly cross-cultural pragmatics, have provided much concern to study the speech acts (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989, p.2). An individual can better understand how s/he can use language and interpret it in a given setting via the pragmatics use of language. Thus, an interlocutor is able to act and interact properly via understanding and producing the pragmalinguistic strategies in relation to the sociopragmatic values (Kasper & Röver, 2005, p.318).

Little investigation has been carried out to examine more face-damaging acts such as chastisement (Aktuna & Kamisli, 1997), and criticizing (Al Kayed and Al-Ghoweri, 2019; Jauhari, Purnanto, and Nugroho, 2018; Farnia and Abdul Sattar, 2015; Li and Seale, 2007; Nguyen,

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2005), particularly into the non-western cultures such as Iraqi and Malay cultures. These cultures have their own patterns of communication and conventions when producing the criticism which reflect the structure and values of their societies. Accordingly, the current study aims to investigate Iraqi and Malay ESL (English as a second language) learners' use of criticism in terms of the realization strategies and formulas. Thus, this study contributes to the cross-cultural pragmatics and fills a gap by discerning the similarities and differences between the two groups in the use of criticism strategies. It seeks answers to the following research questions:

1. What types of strategies do Iraqi and Malay university learners prefer to use in their criticisms?
2. What are the similarities and differences between Iraqi and Malay university learners in the use of criticism strategies?

## 2. Literature Review/ Theoretical Background

### 2.1 Speech Act of Criticism

The theory of speech act is originated by Austin (1962) who states that language is not only used to produce utterances but also to fulfil actions. The speech acts are developed and classified into such categories as representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives (Searle, 1979). Searle (1975) recognizes two important types of speech acts: Direct and indirect. The former is that act whose proposed force is a purpose of its intention while the illocutionary denotation of an indirect act has a different meaning from what is intended. It is discussed that the more polite utterance is the more indirect one (Leech, 1983; Brown and Levinson, 1987). In addition, studies conducted on politeness frequently delve into the suitability of speech act formulas (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989).

Criticism is considered one of the speech acts (Austin, 1962) that is usually performed by individuals in their daily life. It is as important as other types of speech acts such as request, apology, advice…etc (Min, 2008). It is defined as an utterance that aims to denote a negative evaluation towards the person's utterances and actions (Nguyen, 2005, p. 7; Tracy, Van Dusen and Robinson, 1987, p. 56). Wierzbicka (1987, p. 36) discusses that the speech act of criticism is performed to improve the hearer's action as criticized or dissatisfied by the speaker but without implying that that hearer's action brings unwanted consequences to the speaker.

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With reference to Goffman's (1967) notion of face, face-damaging acts are either, if probable, avoided or underused by diverse strategies and devices to maintain the speakers' faces. The speech act of criticism is basically a face-threatening act based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) terms as it relates to the cohort that damages the addressee's positive face. The speaker can minimize the imposition of criticism by increasing the politeness level so that his/her criticism could be more suitable to the hearer (Min, 2008, p.74). This is fulfilled using certain strategies and mitigators. The choice of semantic formula is related to the pragmalinguistic aspect because it includes selecting the linguistic structures and indicating which politeness values are assigned to such structures. The semantic formulas differ in occurrence, frequency, and content based on the act of criticism. Besides, the use of such structures is sensitive to the social variables which are related to the sociopragmatic aspect (Nguyen, 2005, pp. 15, 112-114).

Therefore, criticism could be performed in different cultures by direct and indirect strategies alongside mitigators based on the linguistic repertoire of the speaker and the social values of each culture. The direct and indirect strategies of criticism involve a number of categories (Nguyen, 2005, p. 112-114). The linguistic mitigators, in pragmatics literature, are internal and external modifiers used to reduce the impact of the face damaging act (Blum-Kulka, et al., 1989). The criticism mitigators are used to soften the face threatening of criticism and they are either internal or external devices. These modifiers underuse the risks for interlocutors at different levels, e.g. conflict and face (Nguyen, 2005, p 115-116). However, this study only focuses on the criticism strategies used by two groups of ESL learners: Iraqis and Malays.

## 2.2 Selected Studies

The speech act of criticism has not been researched extensively in pragmatics literature so far. One of the recent studies conducted on criticism is that study of Al Kayed and Al-Ghoweri (2019). They examined the production of criticism strategies by 120 Jordanian EFL learners in Jordan. The data are collected by DCT and then analysed in terms of Nguyen's (2005) classification of criticism strategies. The findings reveal that the participants use more indirect strategies than direct strategies in their criticisms.

Besides, Jauhari et al., (2018) recognized the semantic formulas produced to express the criticism in the Javanese Mataram cultural society. The data are collected via questionnaires and a DCT. The overall findings show three forms of criticism: 'total acceptance', 'total resistance', and

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'partial resistance/acceptance'. Yet, the most usual criticism is 'total resistance' and a number of forms used to clarify it while two limited diverse types used for stating 'partial acceptance/resistance'.

Farnia and Abdul Sattar (2015) also investigated 'response to criticism' by 100 Iranians in their Iranian culture. The data are collected using a discourse evaluation test and a structured interview. Nguyen's (2005) model of analysis has been used to code the data with regard to strategies and external modifiers. The findings unveil that the participants use more direct than indirect strategies and they mitigate their responses by mitigators.

Li and Seale (2007) conducted longitudinal study on criticism in supervisor-supervisee relationship. The data are collected using two recorded interactions to analyse conversations. The findings reveal four diverse types of criticism expressed by the supervisor: 'direct criticism' (which is the most common), 'indirect criticism', 'criticism with caution', 'criticism with guidance or support'. However, a cordial relation is developed between the supervisor and the supervisee and continued via warning, advice, reform, humour, and politeness.

Nguyen (2005) also conducted developmental study on the use of criticism and responding to criticism by Vietnamese EFL (English as a foreign language) learners. The participants consist of 36 learners (beginner, intermediate, and advanced learners). The data are collected by a questionnaire, a role play, and retrospective interviews. The data are analyzed with respect to first and second language baselines data gathered from 24 Vietnamese and Australian native speakers. The findings uncover that the learners' criticisms and their responses to criticisms are different from the utterances of English native speakers. The learners have limited proficiency due to their limited pragmatic development in their first language context. Besides, there are evidence of pragmatic transfer, inadequate second language pragmatic knowledge and learning experience.

In conclusion, the earlier studies show that the speech act of criticism needs more in-depth investigation particularly into the non-western societies such as Iraq and Malaysia. A word worth making is that no specific research is conducted on the criticism strategies by Iraqi and Malay ESL learners, which is the core of the present study. Thus, the findings of this study can be added to the cross-cultural pragmatics in general and to the speech acts in particular.

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## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Subjects

A random sampling method is used to select the participants of this study. A background questionnaire written in English is first given to the participants. The data are provided with regard to the participants' personal information such as age, gender…etc. (refer to Appendix A). Thus, 30 Iraqi and 30 Malay university learners have participated in this study. All of them are MA students in different scientific fields. For keeping homogeneity of the participants, the Malaysian Malays are selected. The participants fall in the age range of 25-35. Each group is met separately by the researcher at Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia. Detailed information are provided to the participants about the tasks and each group is given an hour to complete the given tasks. Besides, a consent form is provided by each learner.

### 3.2 Instruments

Based on studies of speech acts, the DCT is used for identifying the semantic formulas of speech acts (Sasaki, 1998; Beebe and Cumming, 1996; Kasper and Dahl, 1991). The current study has adopted Nguyen's (2005) DCT which is designed to elicit the criticism expressions by peer-feedback (refer to Appendix B). The peer-feedback task is normally used between classmates in the academic setting. Before applying the DCT, all the participants are asked to write an argumentative essay of about 200-word in English on the topic 'the pros and cons of public transportation as opposed to private transportation'. Besides, they are asked to support their argument by related examples and information from their own ideas and experience. The given topic is available in the commercially IELTS practice book and it is not difficult to understand because all the participants are acquainted with it. Then, they are asked to check each other's essays. After conducting the peer-feedback task, the DCT is applied and it involves two parts: the introduction and the task. The former clarifies the aim of this study to make sure that the participants understand the task. The task includes four situations organized on topics of criticism ('essay organization', 'quality of argumentation', 'task fulfillment', and 'cohesion'). These topics have been explained by the researcher before applying the task. The variables of power (equal) and distance (neutral) have been controlled alongside the imposition degree. All the situations take place between classmates and the topics are related to writing an argumentative essay. This would make the data more comparable. Moreover, to support the data analysis and to give a clear interpretation of it, a focus group interview (FGI) is conducted on another day. It can be carried

out by interviewing some interviewees (typically 4 or 6) in a qualitative research (Creswell, 2012, p. 218). Thus, 10 learners are selected from each group. The interview has taken 30 minutes and it consists of two parts: guidelines and questions. The former clarifies the aim of the study and whether the participants understand the interview. The second part consists of certain questions related to the participants' expressions of criticism on the given situations. However, before conducting the main DCT and FGI, they are piloted by another different 5 MA learners from each group to confirm the validity and reliability of these instruments.

**3.3 Data Analysis**

Qualitative and quantitative approaches are used in analysing the data. The data are analysed qualitatively based on Nguyen's (2005, p. 112-114) coding scheme of criticism strategies (refer to Appendix C). The criticism expressions are coded in relation to the realization strategies and semantic formulas. An utterance is realized via either direct strategy or indirect strategy of criticism. Quantitatively, Chi-square test is used to show if there is any statistically significant differences between the two groups in the use of criticism strategies. As for the FGI, the data are analysed qualitatively. Moreover, two inter-raters interested in pragmatics have participated in coding the data for checking the reliability and the result is 81%.

**4. Results**

**4.1 Criticisms across Situations**

Overall, Figure 1 reports that there is no statistically significant difference between Iraqis and Malays (50.85% vs. 49.15%) in the use of criticism strategies across situations.
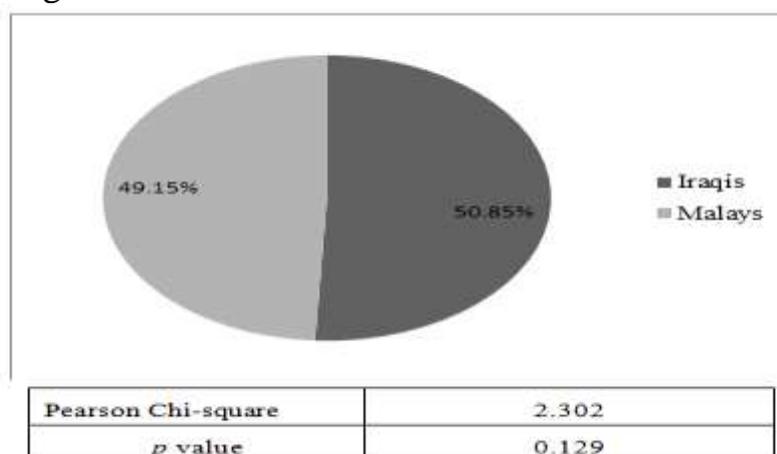


| Pearson Chi-square | 2.302 |
|---|---|
| *p* value | 0.129 |

**Figure 1: Percentages and Chi-square Value of Criticism Strategies across Situations**

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Nevertheless, Figures 2 and 3 show that there are statistically significant differences between the two groups in the use of direct and indirect criticisms across situations. On the one hand, Iraqis significantly ($\chi^2$ 18.491, p=<0.001) use more direct strategies than Malays in their criticisms (66.23% vs. 33.77%). On the other hand, Malays significantly ($\chi^2$ 17.839, p=<0.001) prefer to use more indirect criticisms than Iraqis (65.28% vs. 34.72%).
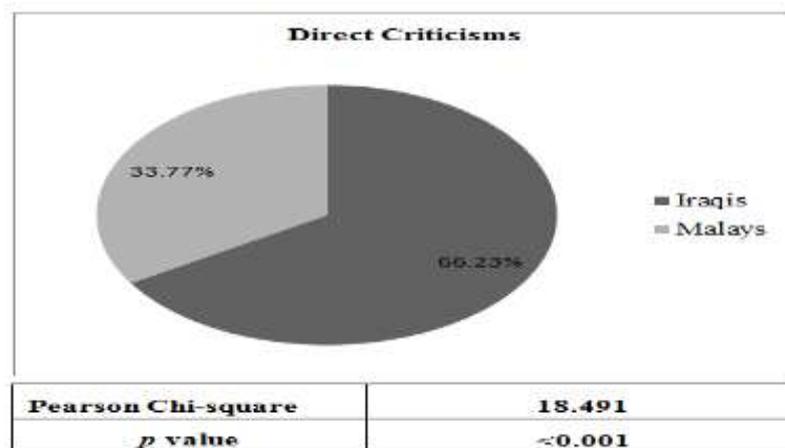


**Direct Criticisms**

33.77%

66.23%

■ Iraqis
■ Malays

| **Pearson Chi-square** | 18.491 |
|---|---|
| **p value** | <0.001 |

**Figure 2: Percentages and Chi-square Value of Direct Criticisms across Situations**



**Indirect Criticisms**

34.72%

65.28%

■ Iraqis
■ Malays

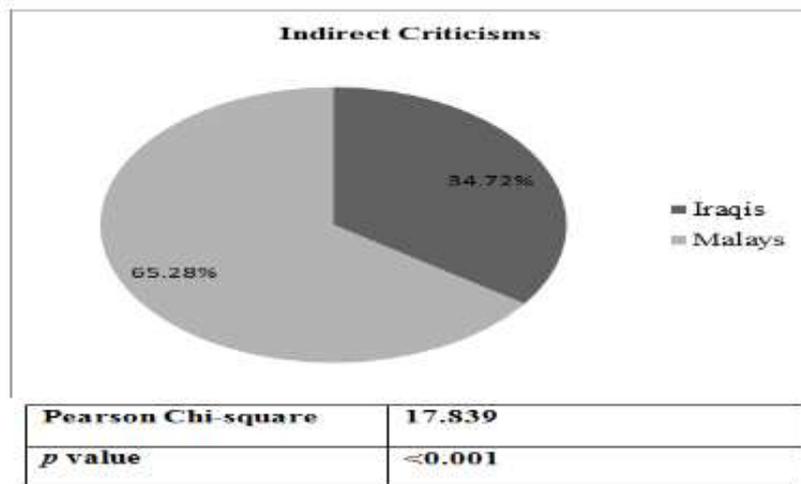| **Pearson Chi-square** | 17.839 |
|---|---|
| **p value** | <0.001 |

**Figure 3: Percentages and Chi-square Value of Indirect Criticisms across Situations**

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In addition, Table 1 displays that Iraqis significantly use 'negative evaluation' ($\chi^2$ 8.397, p= 0.004, 28.0% vs. 23.53%), 'identification of problem' ($\chi^2$ 5.741, p= 0.024, 16.0% vs. 11.76%), and 'expression of disagreement' ($\chi^2$ 5.568, p= 0.018, 14.0% vs. 9.80%) more than Malays. Yet, Malays use 'disapproval' significantly more than Iraqis ($\chi^2$ 6.520, p= 0.001, 17.65% vs. 4.0%). Besides, there are no statistically significant differences between Iraqis and Malays in the use of 'statement of difficulties' (20.0% vs. 19.61%) and 'consequences' (18.0% vs. 17.65%).

Malays significantly show a higher preference for indirect criticisms than Iraqis in such strategies as 'request for change' ($\chi^2$ 8.397, p= 0.004, 24.47% vs. 20.0%), 'hints' ($\chi^2$ 9.722, p= 0.002, 23.40% vs. 4.0%), and 'suggestion for change' ($\chi^2$ 6.186, p= 0.019, 20.22% vs. 16.0%). In contrast, Iraqis significantly prefer to use more 'demand for change' ($\chi^2$ 7.869, p= 0.005, 22.0% vs. 4.25%) and more 'indicating standard' ($\chi^2$ 6.146, p= 0.017, 16.0% vs. 6.38%) than Malays. With respect to 'advice about change', there is no statistically significant difference between Iraqis and Malays (22.0% vs. 21.28) in the use of it. However, both learners avoid using some strategies such as 'correction', 'preaching', 'expression of uncertainty', and 'asking/presupposing' in their criticisms across situations.

**Table 1: Raw Frequencies, Percentages and Chi-square Values of Direct and Indirect Strategies of Criticism across Situations**

| Type | Iraqis (Frequency & Percentage) | Malays (Frequency & Percentage) | Pearson Chi-square | p value |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Direct Criticisms** | | | | |
| Negative evaluation | 28 (28.0) | 12 (23.53) | **8.397** | **0.004** |
| Disapproval | 4 (4.0) | 9 (17.65) | **6.520** | **0.001** |
| Expression of disagreement | 14 (14.0) | 5 (9.80) | **5.568** | **0.018** |
| Identification of problem | 16 (16.0) | 6 (11.76) | **5.741** | **0.024** |
| Statement of difficulties | 20 (20.0) | 10 (19.61) | 2.568 | 0.109 |
| Consequences | 18 (18.0) | 9 (17.65) | 1.272 | 0.212 |
| | 100/150 (66.67) | 51/145 (35.17) | | |
| **Indirect Criticisms** | | | | |
| Correction | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) | 0.400 | 0.429 |
| Indicating standard | 8 (16.0) | 6 (6.38) | **6.146** | **0.017** |
| Preaching | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) | 0.080 | 0.436 |
| Demand for change | 11 (22.0) | 4 (4.25) | **7.869** | **0.005** |
| Request for change | 10 (20.0) | 23 (24.47) | **8.397** | **0.004** |
| Advice about change | 11 (22.0) | 20 (21.28) | 1.683 | 0.168 |
| Suggestion for change | 8 (16.0) | 19 (20.22) | **6.186** | **0.019** |
| Expression of uncertainty | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) | 0.519 | 0.667 |
| Asking/presupposing | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) | 0.256 | 0.438 |
| other hints | 2 (4.0) | 22 (23.40) | **9.722** | **0.002** |
| | 50/150 (33.33) | 94/145 (64.83) | | |

## 4.2 Criticisms of each Situation

Figure 4 reports that there are statistically significant differences between the use of direct and indirect criticisms by each group in situation 1. On the one hand, Iraqis significantly use more direct criticisms than indirect criticisms ($\chi^2$ 15.023, p= 0.001, 69.77% vs. 30.23%) when criticizing the essay organization of their classmates. On the other hand, Malays more often resort to indirect criticisms than direct criticisms ($\chi^2$ 10.569, p= 0.001, 62% vs. 38%) in this situation.



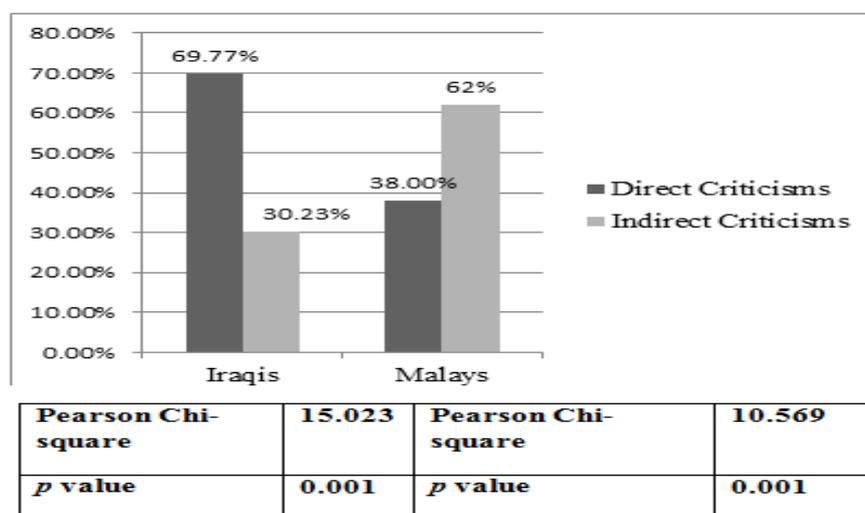| Pearson Chi-square | 15.023 | Pearson Chi-square | 10.569 |
|---|---|---|---|
| *p* value | 0.001 | *p* value | 0.001 |

**Figure 4: Percentages and Chi-square Values of Direct & Indirect Criticisms in Situation 1**

As presented in Appendix D, Iraqis and Malays use similar categories of direct criticisms in situation 1 but they differ in their preference for specific types. For instance, Iraqis mainly rely on 'negative evaluation' (26.66%), 'statement of difficulties' (20.0%), 'expression of disagreement', 'identification of problem' and 'consequences' (which have a similar occurrence 16.67%) and much less on 'disapproval' (3.33%). In contrast, 'negative evaluation', 'disapproval', and 'consequences' (which have a similar occurrence 21.05%) constitute the most common strategies used by Malays. They also tend to use 'statement of difficulties' (15.79%), 'expression of disagreement' and 'identification of problem' (10.53% vs. 10.53%).

The results also unveil that 'request for change' and 'other hints' (29.03% vs. 29.03%) constitute an extent where Malays show most salience. These learners also tend to use 'advice about change' and 'suggestion for change' (16.13 vs. 16.13) while they less often use 'indicating standard' (6.45), and 'demand for change' (3.23%). Iraqis have tendency to use

'request for change' (30.78%) more commonly than other types, but they avoid using 'other hints'. They also resort to 'demand for change' (23.08%), 'indicating standard', 'advice about change', and 'suggestion for change' (which have the same occurrence 15.38%). Here are some elicited responses about the essay organization by Iraqis and Malays:

Iraqis: - *... please it is not a good way to organize the essay...* (Negative evaluation)
- *I think there is problem in your organization.* (Identification of problem)
- *Can you organize it in another way? ...* (Request for change)
- *...you have to organize it correctly...* (Demand for change)
Malays: - *...The organization is not really good...* (Negative evaluation)
- *Could you organize it properly?* (Request for change)
- *Please your organization is subjective and not academic.* (Hint)
- *...it would have been better to break up one long paragraph into three or four paragraphs...* (Suggestion for change)

Figure 5 displays that there are statistically significant differences between the use of direct and indirect criticisms by each group in situation 2 which is about the quality of argumentation. Iraqis considerably use more direct than indirect criticisms ($\chi^2$ 12.233, p= 0.001, 64.87% vs. 35.13%). Yet, Malays have tendency to use more indirect than direct criticisms ($\chi^2$ 10.172, p= 0.006, 63.16% vs. 36.84%) in situation 2.



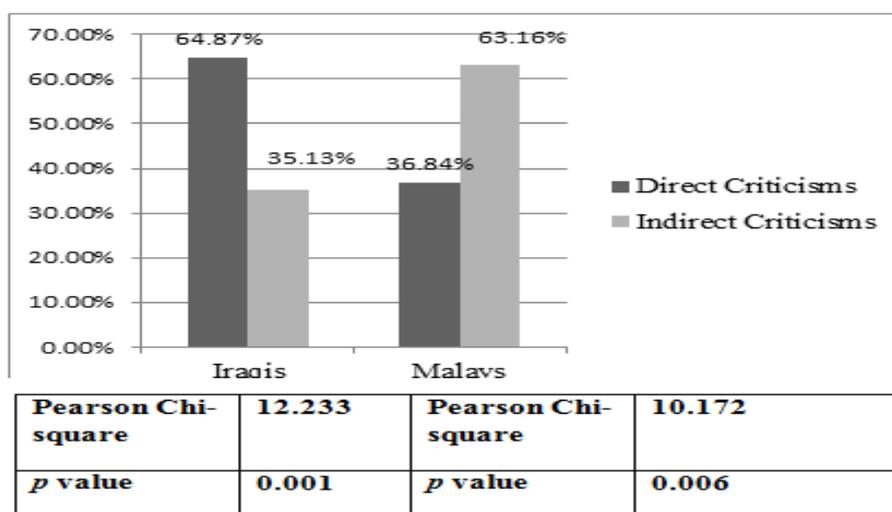| Pearson Chi-square | 12.233 | Pearson Chi-square | 10.172 |
|---|---|---|---|
| *p* value | 0.001 | *p* value | 0.006 |

**Figure 5: Percentages and Chi-square Values of Direct & Indirect Criticisms in Situation 2**

As shown in Appendix D, the direct criticisms used by Iraqis in situation 2 ranged from the most to the least common involve 'negative evaluation' (33.33%), 'consequences' (20.83%), 'identification of problem' and 'statement of difficulties' (16.67% vs. 16.67%), and 'expression of

disagreement' (12.5%). As for 'disapproval', it is totally avoided. Malays' highest use of direct criticisms involves 'negative evaluation' (21.44%) and 'statement of difficulties' (21.44%) while their lowest use includes 'disapproval, 'expression of disagreement', 'identification of problem', and 'consequences' (which have a comparable occurrence 14.28%).

Moreover, Malays mostly depend on 'request for change' (29.16), 'suggestion for change' (25.0%), 'advice about change' (20.83%), 'other hints' (16.67%), and much less on 'indicating standard' and 'demand for change' (4.17% vs. 4.17%). Iraqis' use of indirect criticisms from the highest to the lowest common comprises 'demand for change' (30.77%), 'request for change' and 'advice about change' (23.08% vs. 23.08%), 'suggestion for change' (15.38%), and 'indicating standard' (7.69%). 'Other hints' strategy is quite avoided by Iraqis in situation 2. Here are some elicited responses about the quality of argumentation by Iraqis and Malays:

Iraqis: - ...*please it is not a good argument*... (Negative evaluation)
- *I don't agree with you in the points that you have discussed about public transportation*... (Expression of disagreement)
- *... I think the problem is that your argument about transportation is weak*... (Identification of problem)
- *...please you must develop your argument well please by more examples about transportation ....* (Demand for change)
- *My advice to you is to be more logical in discussion ...* (Advice about change)
Malays: - *Please but this is not a well-illustrative argument*... (Negative evaluation)
- *I wouldn't quite agree as you discuss it now*... (Expression of disagreement)
- *I would still have said that I disagree with you ...* (Expression of disagreement)
- *Would you add some more sentences to your argument? ...* (Request for change)
- *Could you consider some questions?* (Request for change)
- *I suggest that you develop your argument based on more evidence.* (Suggestion for change)

Figure 6 indicates that there are statistically significant differences between the use of direct and indirect criticisms by Iraqis and Malays in situation 3 which focuses on task fulfillment. On the one hand, direct criticisms are more often used than indirect criticisms by Iraqis ($\chi^2$ 13.400, p=0.001, 70.60% vs. 29.40%). One the other hand, indirect criticisms are more frequently used than direct criticisms by Malays ($\chi^2$ 11.129, p=0.005, 60.00% vs. 40.00%).
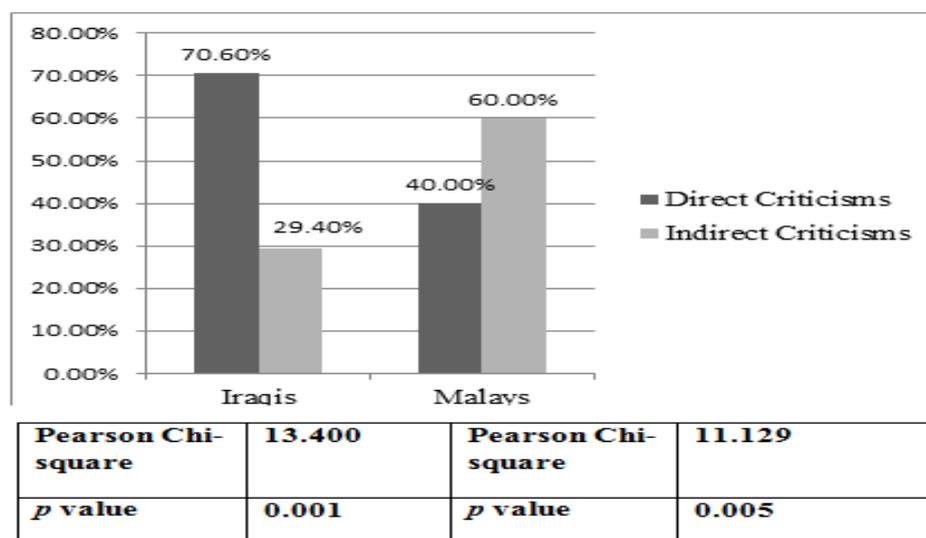
**Figure 6: Percentages and Chi-square Values of Direct & Indirect Criticisms in Situation 3**

As reported in Appendix E, the direct criticisms of Iraqis in situation 3 ranged from the highest to the lowest common involve 'negative evaluation' (29.16%), 'statement of difficulties' (20.83%), 'consequences' (16.67%), 'expression of disagreement' and 'identification of problem' (12.5% vs. 12.5%), and 'disapproval' (8.34%). As for Malays, 'negative evaluation' (30.0%) is the most common strategy used by them. They also resort to 'identification of problem', 'statement of difficulties', and 'consequences' (which have a parallel occurrence 20.0%) and 'disapproval' (10.0%). Yet, 'expression of disagreement' is avoided by Malays in this situation.

With regard to indirect criticisms in situation 3, 'advice about change' and 'other hints' (26.66% vs. 26.66%) constitute the most common strategies used by Malays, followed by 'suggestion for change' (20.0%), 'request for change' (13.33%), 'indicating standard' and 'demand for change' (6.67% vs. 6.67%). On the other hand, 'indicating standard', 'demand for change', 'advice about change', and 'suggestion for change' (which have an identical occurrence 20.0%) are the most common strategies used by Iraqis, followed by 'request for change' and 'other hints' (10.0% vs. 10.0%). Here are some examples of criticisms by Iraqis and Malays in situation3:

Iraqis: - *It is not a correct way in fulfilling it please…* (Negative evaluation)
- *I don't think so in transportation* (Expression of disagreement)
- *…but you need not to wander off your main idea.* (Indicating Standard)
Malays: - *Please couldn't you wander off track! …* (Request for change)
- *…I would advise you to focus on the following points to achieve it properly* (Advice about change)

Figure 7 illustrates that there are statistically significant differences between the two types of criticisms used by Iraqis and Malays in situation 4 which is about cohesion. Iraqis significantly produce more direct than indirect criticisms ($\chi^2$ 10.138, p=0.006, 61.10% vs. 38.90%). Malays evidently use more indirect than direct criticisms ($\chi^2$ 9.802, p=0.002, 75.00% vs. 25.00 %) in situation 4.



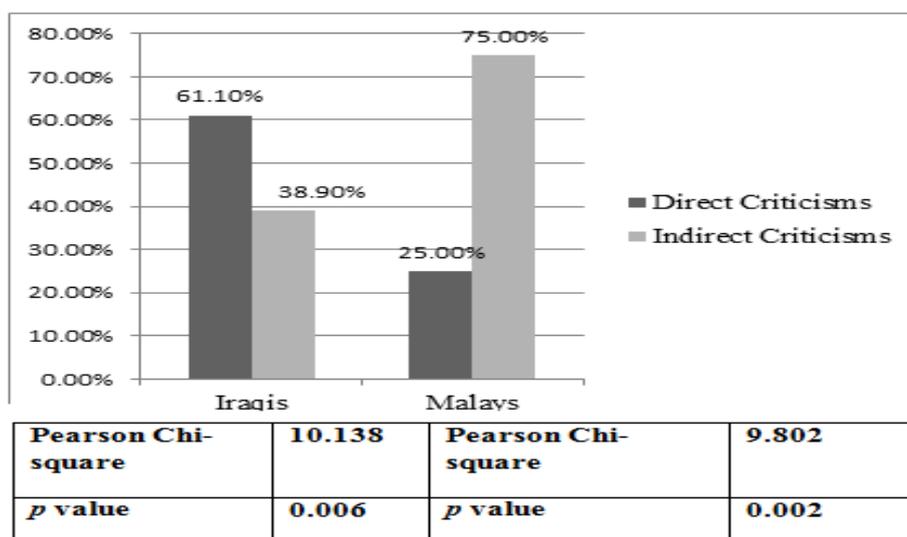| Pearson Chi-square | 10.138 | Pearson Chi-square | 9.802 |
|---|---|---|---|
| *p* value | 0.006 | *p* value | 0.002 |

### Figure 7: Percentages and Chi-square Values of Direct & Indirect Criticisms in Situation 4

As indicated in Appendix E, 'negative evaluation' and 'statement of difficulties' (22.73% vs. 22.73%) constitute the most frequent strategies used by Iraqis in situation 4. These learners also tend to use 'identification of problem' and 'consequences' (18.18% vs. 18.18%), 'expression of disagreement' (13.64%), and 'disapproval' (4.54%). Malays' highest use of these strategies comprises 'negative evaluation', 'disapproval', and 'statement of difficulties' (which have a similar occurrence 25.0%) while their lowest use includes 'expression of disagreement' and 'consequences' (12.5% vs. 12.5%).

Furthermore, 'advice about change' (25%) is the most common indirect strategy used by Malays. They also tend to use 'request for change', 'suggestion for change' and 'other hints' (which have an identical occurrence 20.83%), 'indicating standard' (8.34%), and 'demand for change' (4.17). As for Iraqis, their use of indirect strategies ranged from the most to the least common involves 'advice about change' (28.56%), 'indicating standard' (21.43%), 'demand for change', 'request for change' alongside 'suggestion for change' (which have an equivalent occurrence 14.29%), and 'other hints' (7.14%). Here are some criticisms on the essay cohesion by Iraqis and Malays:

Iraqis: - *Your essay has problem in cohesion please ...* (Identification of problem)
       - *... please you have difficulty in connecting the sentences.* (Statement of difficulties)
       - *...you must pay attention to linking words and grammatical mistakes please* (Demand for change)
       - *...but why don't you connect your sentences through linking words...* (Suggestion for change)

Malays: - *...I could find that some of your ideas are rather difficult and incoherent please.* (Statement of difficulties)
       - *.....but would you connect your ideas using cohesive devices?* (Request for change)
       - *I wonder if you could use some more cohesive devices in your essay.* (Suggestion for change)
       - *... It could have been better to use linking words in your essay.* (Suggestion for change)
       - *I would advise providing more connectives, OK? ...* (Advice about change)

## 5. Discussion

With regard to Leech (1983) and Brown and Levinson (1987), politeness is elevated by increasing indirectness. That is, the more polite strategy is linked to the more indirect one. Accordingly, indirect criticism could be considered appropriate in an ESL context because it reduces the face threatening act.

Based on the results and the FGI, both Iraqis and Malays use the criticism strategies according to their cultures. Iraqis tend to use more direct criticisms than Malays who prefer to use more indirect criticisms than Iraqis in all and across situations. Iraqis in the FGI have stated that a classmate is someone familiar to his/her colleague and s/he has the right to criticize and provide comments to help improve his/her colleague's essay. Iraqis' preference for direct criticisms is due to their nature of being direct mainly in their Iraqi culture. This is in line with Ali and Pandian (2016) who reveal that Iraqis mainly opt for directness (i.e. direct customary forms) in requesting issues related to their academic study. Besides, Iraq is related to a

# A Cross-Cultural Study of Criticism Strategies: Iraqi and Malay ESL Learners

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collectivistic culture (Aldhulaee, 2011) and such culture emphasizes directness and positive face (Woodfield and Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2010).

Directness is also used because of the pragmatic transfer. Most of Iraqis in the FGI have clarified that they transfer categories from their mother language into their target language. Therefore, they significantly use 'negative evaluation' (e.g. … it is not a good way …….. هاي مو طريقه جيده...), 'identification of problem' (e.g. I think there is problem… ....اعتقد اكو مشكله), and 'Expression of disagreement' (e.g. I don't agree with you… اني ماتفق وياك) more than Malays across situations. In addition, Malays use 'disapproval' more often than Iraqis due to the issue that Malays prefer it in their Malay culture to clearly show their attitudes towards the hearer's unfavorable choice. The two groups use 'statement of difficulties' and 'consequences' because these strategies are available in their cultures as illustrated in the FGI. However, no remarkable differences are observed between the two groups in the use of them.

On the other hand, Malays show a higher preference for indirect criticisms in all and across situations due to their nature in their Malay culture. They produce fewer direct strategies than Iraqis because indirectness is the main concern in their interaction particularly in exchanges among them. Malays evidently prefer to use more 'request for change' and more 'suggestion for change' than Iraqis across situations. This is congruent with Yassin and Razak (2018) and Khalib and Tayeh (2014) who unveil that Malays mainly produce conventionally indirect strategies in situations where power is equal and social distance is neutral among the participants. It is revealed that the Malay culture follows the theory of Brown and Levinson (1987) on face by which indirectness or politeness is used to keep the negative or positive face on face-damaging act (Khalib and Tayeh, 2014). Malays in the FGI have illustrated that they value indirect criticisms to keep face and maintain their relationships; besides, they are associated with being refined and cultured (see also Farnia, Buchheit, and Salim, 2010). Their frequent use of 'request for change' includes a variety of formulas such as 'would you', 'will you', and 'could you'. In contrast, Iraqis have limited pragmatic competence as they draw solely on the formula 'can you'.

Furthermore, Malays think that a suggestion is more proper than a strong criticism to avoid face threatening. They use a wider range of realization formulas (such as 'I suggest that you …', 'I wonder if you could…', and 'it would/could have been better…') while Iraqis use simpler structures of suggestion (e.g. 'it is better…' and 'why don't you…'). That is

due to a number of reasons such as the role of instruction, curricula, and Iraqis' limited pragmatic competence. Besides, Iraqis rarely use hints because they basically opt for directness while Malays use more hints in order to avoid inappropriate criticisms. Malays take care of their conversations by following the rules of their culture in producing criticisms.

However, 'indicating standard' and 'demand for change' are more often used by Iraqis than Malays due to the point that such structures are available and normally used in the Iraqi culture. Iraqis in the FGI have demonstrated that they use them to highlight important points. That is, when someone has to accomplish something, these strategies are used to make him/her understand that this is the rule. It is an optimal choice for Iraqis when providing feedback on something compulsory such as grammatical mistakes and rules of writing an essay. The formula of demand 'you must/have to… انت لازم ' is preferred by Iraqis because they transfer it from their native language. Malays sparingly use 'demand for change' due to the issue that they consider it inappropriate in their culture because it is an insistent request that damages the face.

Moreover, both groups use 'advice about change' but there is no remarkable difference between them. This is related to the cultural values of their native languages because giving advice is a friendlier way in the Iraqi and Malay cultures. It is used to advise one another such as elders advise beginners or individuals of similar age advise each other. A word worth mentioning is that 'demand for change' and 'advice about change' are unacceptable in English because the former might imply that a speaker dictates the performance of the hearer (Murphy and Neu, 1996) and an advice might be imposing in settings that stress private space (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Iraqis' formulas of advice (e.g. My advice to you is/ I advise you…) could indicate the intention of 'I know more than you' and they are simpler in structure than Malays' formulas which are a bit softer (e.g. I would advise you …/ I would advise providing…). That is due to the limited pragmatic competence of Iraqis in producing such formulas.

With regard to each situation, 'negative evaluation' is the most common direct strategy used by the two groups. The reason behind its frequency is that these learners normally use it in their cultures. They find it appropriate and one's face can be maintained using internal mitigators (such as 'please', 'think', 'rather'…etc.) and/or external mitigators (such as grounders, steers,…etc.). In addition, Iraqis resort to the formulas 'I don't agree…' and 'I don't think so…' while Malays use 'I don't/wouldn't quite

agree', and 'I disagree'. It is discussed in the FGI that Iraqis have learned the verbs 'agree' and 'disagree' and they just say 'I don't agree…' when they want to express their disagreement to impose their ideas which might not always be acceptable in their culture. Malays do not always prefer to challenge each other and they usually anticipate agreeing while they do not agree with one another which explain the limited use of this strategy by them in each situation. Such behaviour is somehow proper in case we consult Leech's (1983, p.132) agreement maxim which relates politeness to reducing disagreement and highlighting agreement in exchanges between an individual and others. Furthermore, both groups do not prefer to use 'correction', 'preaching', 'expression of uncertainty', and 'asking/presupposing' strategies in all situations. That is due to the learners' preference for other strategies as they have justified that in the FGI.

## 6. Conclusion

This study investigates the criticism strategies used by Iraqi and Malay university learners in an ESL context. In fact, the speech act of criticism should be handled properly in exchanges to maintain the face and relationships. It is culture-specific and could be perceived quite differently from one culture to another. Both learners have shown that criticism is commonly used in their cultures and it is not that greatly esteemed unless it is used for the purpose of help or improvement which is much needed in the academic writing. It turns out to be less strong if it is reduced by mitigators such as syntactic, lexical/phrasal, and external devices which can be studied by another research.

The choice of strategy and level of directness are basically associated with the cultural values of Iraqis and Malays. Overall, both learners use the criticism strategies but they show more differences than similarities in their preference for particular type. Malays basically resort to indirect criticisms because they value indirectness to maintain their face and relationships. Iraqis use more direct criticisms than Malays due to their nature of being direct mainly in their Iraqi culture. On the one hand, they think that peer-feedback is necessary and it can properly be given directly by one classmate to another to learn from each other. On the other hand, that could result into miscommunication (or communication breakdown) an Iraqi learner might experience in an ESL context. In addition, Malays use more developed linguistic structures than Iraqis due to the role of instruction and Iraqis' limited pragmatic competence. However, pragmatic transfer is one of the

reasons behind the tendency of both learners to transfer some of the criticism expressions from their native language into their second language.

Accordingly, teachers of English can use the findings of this study within the contexts of English as a second and/or foreign language. This study highlights the importance of comprehending the use of speech act of criticism across cultures and that comprehending, or lack thereof, could either support or stop interaction exchanges between one culture and another. In fact, the cultural aspects should be taught by teachers to help their learners become successful speakers of second language. That is, contextualized activities must be designed by ESL teachers to expose learners to diverse types of pragmatic knowledge with regard to the linguistic structures and their social values in each culture. Thus, EFL learners can learn how to avoid the cultural miscommunication they may experience in the target setting.

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## Appendix A: Description of the subjects

|  | **Iraqis** | **Malays** |
|---|---|---|
| Gender | 15 males, 15 females | 15 males, 15 females |
| Age | 25-35 | 25-35 |
| 1 am currently enrolled in: | MA | MA |
| Area of study | Engineering, Physics, Computer, Pharmacy, and Management | Engineering, Physics, Computer, Pharmacy, and Management |
| Native language | Iraqi-Arabic | Bahasa Malay |
| How long have you been in Malaysia? (Iraqis only) | 3-6 months | - |

## Appendix B: Description of DCT

| No. of Situations | In reference to an essay your friend has written, what would you say in the following hypothetical situations: |
|---|---|
| 1 | What would you say to your friend if you think her/his essay was not very well-organized, so it was rather difficult to follow her/his ideas? |
| 2 | What would you say to your friend if you think in some instances she or he didn't support her/his arguments with relevant examples and evidence, so these arguments were hard to convince readers? |
| 3 | What would you say to your friend if you think she or he sometimes wandered off the topic? |
| 4 | What would you say to your friend if you think she or he didn't often make use of linking words, so the essay seemed to lack cohesion? |

## Appendix C: Nguyen's (2005, p. 112-114) Coding Scheme of Criticism Strategies

| Type | Characteristics | Example |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Direct criticism | Explicitly pointing out the problem with H's choice/ actions/ work/ products, etc. | |
| a. Negative evaluation | Usually expressed via evaluative adjectives with negative meaning or evaluative adjective with positive meaning plus negation. | "I think ah it's not a good way to support to one's idea (L), "Umm that's not really a good sentence" (NE). |
| b. Disapproval | Describing S's attitude towards H's choice, etc. | "I don't like the way you write that ah "I'm convinced about the idea" or "in my opinion" |
| c. Expression of disagreement | Usually realized by means of negation word "No" or performatives "I don't agree" or "I disagree" (with or without modal) or via arguments against H. | "I don't quite agree with you with some points (.) about the conclusion" (L), "I don't really agree with you <as strongly as> you put it here" (NE). |
| d. Identification of problem | Stating errors or problems found with H's choice, etc. | "And there are some incorrect words, for example "nowadays"(L), "You had a few spelling mistakes" (NE). |
| e. Statement of difficulties | Usually expressed by means of such structures as "I find it difficult to understand... ", "It's difficult to understand... " | "I can't understand" (L), "I find it difficult to understand your idea" (L). |
| f. Consequences | Warning about negative consequences or negative effects of H's choice, etc for H himself or herself or for the public. | "Someone who don't – doesn't agree with you (.) would straight away read that and turn off." |
| 2. Indirect criticisms: | Implying the problems with H's choice/ actions/ work/ products, etc. | |
| a. Correction | Including all utterances which have the purpose of fixing errors by asserting specific alternatives to H's choice, etc. | "safer" not "safe", comparison" (L), "And you put "their" I think t-h-e-r-e" (NE). |
| b. Indicating standard | Usually stated as a collective obligation rather than an obligation for H personally or as a rule which S thinks is commonly agreed upon and applied to all. | "Theoretically, a conclusion needs to be some sort of a summary" (L). |
| c. Preaching | Usually stated as guidelines to H, with an implicature that H is incapable of making correct choices otherwise. | "The following statement is meant to help you. You see, anyone can have an opinion, but the issue is whether they can back it up"". |

| d. Demand for change | Usually expressed via such structures as "you have to", "you must", "it is obligatory that" or "you are required" or "you need", "it is necessary". | *"You must pay attention to grammar", "You have to talk about your opinion in your summary".* |
|---|---|---|
| e. Request for change | Usually expressed via such structures as "will you ...?", "can you ...?", "would you ...?" or imperatives (with or without politeness markers), or want statement. | *"I still want you to consider some points", "What I would have liked to have seen is like a definite theme from the start like you're just TA:LKING about it"* |
| f. Advice about change | Usually expressed via the performative "I advise you ...", or structures with "should" with or without modality | *I would advise that you jot down some bullet points about what you will write about before you do your essay" (NE), "I mean conclusion should have some sort of improvement".* |
| g. Suggestion for change | Usually expressed via the performative "I suggest that ..." or such structures as "you can", "you could", "it would be better if" or" why don't you" etc. | *"I think if you make a full stop in here the ah (.) this sentence is clear is clear", "It could have been better to put a comma (.) so ah ((laugh))",* |
| h. Expression of uncertainty | Utterances expressing S's uncertainty to raise H's awareness of the inappropriateness of H's choice, etc. | *"Are there several paragraphs ah not sure about the paragraphs".* |
| i. Asking/ presupposing | Rhetorical questions to raise H's awareness of the inappropriateness of H's choice, etc. | *"Did you read your writing again after you finish it?"(L).* |
| j. Other hints | Including other kinds of hints that did not belong to (h) and (i). May include sarcasm. | *"I prefer a writing style which are not too personal"(L).* |

## Appendix D: Raw Frequencies and Percentages of Direct and Indirect Strategies of Criticism in Situations 1 & 2

| Type | Situation 1 | | Situation 2 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Direct Criticisms** | Iraqis (Frequency & Percentage %) | Malays (Frequency & Percentage %) | Iraqis (Frequency & Percentage %) | Malays (Frequency & Percentage %) |
| Negative evaluation | 8 (26.66) | 4 (21.05) | 8 (33.33) | 3 (21.44) |
| Disapproval | 1 (3.33) | 4 (21.05) | 0 (0.0) | 2 (14.28) |
| Expression of disagreement | 5 (16.67) | 2 (10.53) | 3 (12.5) | 2 (14.28) |
| Identification of problem | 5 (16.67) | 2 (10.53) | 4 (16.67) | 2 (14.28) |
| Statement of difficulties | 6 (20.0) | 3 (15.79) | 4 (16.67) | 3 (21.44) |
| Consequences | 5 (16.67) | 4 (21.05) | 5 (20.83) | 2 (14.28) |
| Total | 30/43 (69.77) | 19/50 (38) | 24/37 (64.87) | 14/38 (36.84) |
| **Indirect Criticisms** | | | | |
| Correction | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) |
| Indicating standard | 2 (15.38) | 2 (6.45) | 1 (7.69) | 1 (4.17) |
| Preaching | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) |
| Demand for change | 3 (23.08) | 1 (3.23) | 4 (30.77) | 1 (4.17) |
| Request for change | 4 (30.78) | 9 (29.03) | 3 (23.08) | 7 (29.16) |
| Advice about change | 2 (15.38) | 5 (16.13) | 3 (23.08) | 5 (20.83) |
| Suggestion for change | 2 (15.38) | 5 (16.13) | 2 (15.38) | 6 (25.0) |
| Expression of uncertainty | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) |
| Asking/presupposing | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) |
| other hints | 0 (0.0) | 9 (29.03) | 0 (0.0) | 4 (16.67) |
| Total | 13/43 (30.23) | 31/50 (62) | 13/37 (35.13) | 24/38 (63.16) |

## Appendix E: Raw Frequencies and Percentages of Direct and Indirect Strategies of Criticism in Situations 3 & 4

| Type | Situation 3 | | Situation 4 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Direct Criticisms** | Iraqis (Frequency & Percentage %) | Malays (Frequency & Percentage %) | Iraqis (Frequency & Percentage %) | Malays (Frequency & Percentage %) |
| Negative evaluation | 7 (29.16) | 3 (30.0) | 5 (22.73) | 2 (25.0) |
| Disapproval | 2 (8.34) | 1 (10.0) | 1 (4.54) | 2 (25.0) |
| Expression of disagreement | 3 (12.5) | 0 (0.0) | 3 (13.64) | 1 (12.5) |
| Identification of problem | 3 (12.5) | 2 (20.0) | 4 (18.18) | 0 (0.0) |
| Statement of difficulties | 5 (20.83) | 2 (20.0) | 5 (22.73) | 2 (25.0) |
| Consequences | 4 (16.67) | 2 (20.0) | 4 (18.18) | 1 (12.5) |
| Total | 24/34 (70.60) | 10/25 (40) | 22/36 (61.10) | 8/32 (25) |
| **Indirect Criticisms** | | | | |
| Correction | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) |
| Indicating standard | 2 (20.0) | 1 (6.67) | 3 (21.43) | 2 (8.34) |
| Preaching | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) |
| Demand for change | 2 (20.0) | 1 (6.67) | 2 (14.29) | 1 (4.17) |
| Request for change | 1 10.0) | 2 (13.33) | 2 (14.29) | 5 (20.83) |
| Advice about change | 2 (20.0) | 4 (26.66) | 4 (28.56) | 6 (25) |
| Suggestion for change | 2(20.0) | 3 (20.0) | 2 (14.29) | 5 (20.83) |
| Expression of uncertainty | 0 | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) |
| Asking/presupposing | 0 | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) |
| other hints | 1 (10.0) | 4 (26.66) | 1 (7.14) | 5 (20.83) |
| Total | 10/34 (29.40) | 15/25 (60) | 14/36 (38.90) | 24/32 (75) |

# A Cross-Cultural Study of Criticism Strategies: Iraqi and Malay ESL Learners

**Shurooq Abboodi Ali (PhD)**

## دراسة عن طريق الثقافات لستراتيجيات النقد: عراقيون وماليزيون متعلمون للغة الانجليزية بوصفها لغة ثانية

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## المستخلص

النقد كمعيار تقييمي يمثل كلاماً مهماً لمتعلمي اللغة الانجليزية لتحسين كلامهم وأفعالهم في حياتهم الاكاديمية. ولكنّه يُدرك بشكلٍ مختلفٍ عن طريق ثقافات مختلفة. أظهرت قليل من الدراسات انّ الأشكال اللغوية للغة الواحدة تختلف عن تلك الأشكال الموجودة في لغة أخرى . لذلك تهدف هذه الدراسه إلى تحري التشابهات والاختلافات عن طريق الثقافات بين ستين متعلماً جامعياً عراقياً وماليزياً في استعمال ستراتيجيات النقد. جُمعت البيانات باستعمال اختبار اكمال النص ومقابلة المجموعة. رمُزت البيانات بالاعتماد على موديل نوين للنقد بما يخص ادراك الستر اتيجيات. استُعملت طرائق وصفية وكمية في تحليل البيانات. كشفت النتائج بجلاء أنّ المجموعتين تستعملان ستراتيجيات النقد نفسها ولكن العراقيين أكثر مباشرة من الماليزيين الذين يختارون عدم المباشره في نقدهم. وأخيراً وفرت هذه الدراسة بعض المضامين التربوية لمدرسي اللغة الانجليزية بوصفها لغة ثانية او أجنبية.

**الكلمات المفتاحيه:** ستراتيجيات لغوية، النقد المباشر، النقد غير المباشر، عراقيون، ماليزيون

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