

Pragmatic (Im)Politeness and Group Gender Composition in Face-to-Face and Virtual Communication: Tunisian Undergraduate Students as a Case Study

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Abstract

Although the literature on group gender composition in the classroom derives from a variety of research disciplines, including sociolinguistics and educational psychology, little attention has been paid to approaching this contextual factor pragmatically. This study, therefore, makes use of Brown and Levinson's (1987) and Culpeper's (1996) pragmatic theories of (im)politeness to investigate the extent to which group gender composition conditions (male-only (MO), female-only (FO), and evenly-mixed (MIX) groups) and communication modalities (face-to-face and online communication) influence undergraduates' linguistic choices in the Tunisian context. Twenty-four participants were divided into six groups of four participants each. Half of these groups met face-to-face, whereas the other half got in touch using *Hipchat* as a text-based online chat utility. Each group was assigned a problem-solving task on which they had to reach a consensus, with English as the communication medium. Afterwards, each participant was invited to rate their satisfaction with the group discussion process on a 7-point Likert scale. The findings reveal that gender composition, across face-to-face and online modes of communication, affected the participants' linguistic choices. FO groups were the most supportive and polite, followed by MIX and MO groups. Contrary to our expectations, both genders proved to be less impolite and confrontational online than in face-to-face encounters. They also showed satisfaction with the overall discussion process, regardless of the communication modality and the gender composition of the group to which they had been assigned. The significance of the results lies in informing the teachers of the modes of communication and group gender composition conditions that are more likely to enhance their students' learning experience.

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Introduction

Over the past three decades or so, gender-related issues have prompted a large body of research in the educational context. Researchers and scholars from a wide range of academic disciplines, including sociology (e.g., Mahony, 1985; Swann, 1992), sociolinguistics (e.g., Wilkinson, Lindow, and Chang, 1985), educational linguistics (e.g., Jones, 1993; Lee, 1996), and social psychology (e.g., Baron, 2004), have addressed gender inequalities among students in the hope of finding practical measures to prevent, or reduce, their occurrence. Broadly speaking, their interest in the gendered aspects of language education boils down to two major lines of inquiry: teaching materials and classroom interaction (Spender, 2002). With regard to teaching materials, language textbooks tend to reproduce gender biases, such as men holding both more powerful and a wider range of occupational positions than women (see Boxer and Tyler, 2004). Research undertaken on classroom interaction, on the other hand, addresses the role of gender in affecting the type and amount of talk. Decke-Cornill (2007) points out that these studies basically focus on three types of classroom discussion: teacher-student¹, student-teacher², and student-student.

This paper, however, concerns itself with investigating student-student talk in the classroom, with a special focus on gender-related practices in three different group gender composition conditions (male-only, female-only, and evenly-mixed groups)—both face-to-face (F-t-F) and through synchronous text-based computer-mediated communication (CMC). Although quite a few studies are unanimous in their assumption that the ‘gender’ variable yields much influence on the type of language male and female students use (e.g., Piliavin and Martin, 1978; Mulac et al., 1988), they do not seem to share the same findings as to the way students behave in either same-sex or mixed-sex groups. As will be discussed later in the paper, the inconsistency of their findings is partly attributed to the fact that the social, cultural, and situational contexts in which each study is conducted may differ considerably (see Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003). This implies that any attempt to make broad generalizations is prone to criticism and rebuttal. Such an argument, therefore, seems to act in favour of investigating the linguistic behaviour of male and female Tunisian undergraduates, as little or no attention has been paid to the Tunisian context. Furthermore, this study makes use of the community of practice (henceforth CofP) approach to keep any generalizations obtained relative to the community of Tunisian undergraduates only.

It should also be noted that, despite the vast amount of research conducted on the role of ‘gender’ in the classroom, there seems to be a paucity of research approaching this contextual variable pragmatically (see Bacha et al., 2012). Further still, lack of pragmatic research on language and gender in the classroom in the Arab

¹ Such as investigating the criteria teachers use to evaluate male and female linguistic competence (e.g., Dweck et al., 1978), and the level of attention they pay to either gender in class (e.g., Kelly, 1988).

² Such as addressing male and female frequency of participation in oral communication in the classroom (e.g., Chavez, 2001).

world³, in general, and the Tunisian context, in particular, is another motivating reason for this study to embark on a quest for the linguistic behaviour of Tunisian undergraduates of English at the Faculty of Letters and Humanities of Sfax, Tunisia. To that end, it makes use of two modified versions of Brown and Levinson's (1987) and Culpeper's (1996) pragmatic theories of (im)politeness and assesses the degree of (dis)satisfaction of the participants with the group discussions based on a post-experiment questionnaire.

The present study formulates the following set of hypotheses and sub-hypotheses:

H1: In both face-to-face and synchronous text-based CMC environments, the level of (im)politeness evidenced in the linguistic behaviour of undergraduates is largely contingent on the gender composition of the group to which they are assigned.

H1.1: Male-only groups disclose more linguistic impoliteness than female-only groups do.

H1.2: Female-only groups disclose more linguistic politeness than male-only groups do.

H1.3: Balanced groups of males and females fall between single-gendered groups in terms of the degree of linguistic (im)politeness featuring in their conversational exchanges.

H2: Group members across the three gender composition conditions tend to be more uninhibited and aggressive in synchronous text-based CMC than in F-t-F communication.

H3: Participants show most satisfaction with the discussion process in single-gendered than in mixed-gendered groups in both communication modalities (i.e., F-t-F and through CMC).

Group Gender Composition in Face-To-Face Talk

A considerable proportion of research that has dealt with the effect of group gender composition on students' linguistic choices concurs that males' and females' styles differ substantially in same-sex and mixed-sex groups (e.g., Piliavin and Martin, 1978; Sgan & Pickert, 1980; Lockheed & Harris, 1984). Piliavin and Martin (1978), for instance, observe that, with regard to undergraduates at the University of Wisconsin, all-female groups are more associated with "socio-emotional" aspects of talk than are all-male groups, whereas all-male groups are more in favour of engaging in "task-oriented" behaviours than are female-only groups (1978: 293). Nonetheless, later in the same study, the same researchers come to realize that, when arranged in mixed-sex groups, male and female participants become less sex-role stereotyped.

Although some of the studies on gender in the classroom provide some in-depth analyses of student-student talk, they seem to turn a blind eye to a host of social, cultural, and situational variables that may have been accountable, in part or in full,

³ See Bacha et al., (2012).

for influencing male and female linguistic choices. As Decke-Cornill (2007: 81) puts it, by ignoring external influences, researchers “stay within the horizon of observable classroom interactions, thus mapping only the tip of the iceberg”. Consequently, generalizations drawn from different gender composition conditions are susceptible to contradiction by other research findings (as they are not necessarily sharing the same contextual variables). Indeed, contrary to Piliavin and Martin’s (1978) conclusion mentioned earlier that male students are in favour of adapting their linguistic choices in the direction of females’ in mixed-sex groups, Aries (1976) observes that, in this particular gender composition condition, male undergraduates in his study rather dominate interactions and receive more turns at talk than their female counterparts do.

As a matter of fact, to avoid falling into the trap of de-contextualising and generalizing gender-related behavioural differences, this study assumes a constructionist view to gender as a performative social construct by using the CofP approach.

The Community of Practice as a Constructionist Approach

Rather than identifying gender as stable, stand-alone, and dichotomous, the constructionist view conceptualizes gender as under constant construction, a series of practices that interplay with different contextual variables, such as age, culture, and situational context (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992; Sadiqi, 2003; Cameron, 1998). The notion of ‘community of practice’, as a constructionist approach, was initially put forward by Lave and Wenger (1991) as a social theory of learning, before being broadened in scope by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) in order for it to apply to all sorts of common interest groupings (e.g., a workplace, a sports team, a neighbourhood playgroup, etc.) (see Eckert, 2006). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992: 464) hold the view that a CofP investigates the emergent features of the gendered identities of “an aggregate of people” (both males and females) “who come together around a mutual engagement in an endeavour”. That is, members who are brought together by a common interest within a CofP develop their own system of values and beliefs over the course of regular joint activities.

However, a CofP still does not lose sight of the significant role of social stereotypes and practices in affecting—to a certain extent—the judgement of most (if not all) participants in a CofP, due to their being members of the broader social community (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992). For instance, Yopez (1994) makes the point that students come to the classroom with a set of values and prejudices that their families and society as a whole have already engraved in their mind. Accordingly, it can be concluded that the specificity of the Tunisian context in this study (as opposed to many western research findings on western undergraduates) shall yield specific findings about the linguistic behaviour of the CofP of male and female

Tunisian Undergraduates⁴ across different group gender composition conditions and communication modalities (CMC and F-t-F contexts).

Group Gender Composition in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)

Similar to face-to-face communication, the literature on CMC asserts that the gender composition variable largely affects students' linguistic choices and attitudes (e.g., Herschel, 1994; Barrett and Lally, 1999; Underwood et al., 2001). With regard to same-sex groups, a large proportion of research concurs that female participants show much satisfaction with the group process and use more personal pronouns; whereas male participants are more likely to produce put-downs, strong assertions, lengthy messages, and abusive language (see Savicki et al., 1996c; Baron, 2004). Moreover, as for mixed-gender groups, many researchers observe that language used by the non-dominant gender is likely to adapt in the direction of the style of the dominant gender. For instance, women in male-dominant groups are more adversarial and less supportive of others' views than are in female-dominant groups (see Cherny, 1994; Herring, 1994, 1996; Monroe, 1999). However, concerning evenly-mixed groups, Savicki et al., (1996c) concede that they take a middle ground in terms of the language used (i.e., neither typically male nor typically female type of language).

The abovementioned observations, however, are also subject to criticism and contradiction by other research findings (see, Soukup, 1999; Hayes, 2008; Fox et al., 2007). One possible reason for this contradiction is that they do not usually share the same social, cultural, and situational contexts, which act as a network of interconnected variables that bear much influence on the language of male and female students across different group gender composition conditions. Hence, for the sake of the accuracy of our research findings, this study does not presume their applicability to any other community beyond the community of Tunisian undergraduates.

Methods

Subjects

Twenty-four Tunisian undergraduate students of English at the faculty of Letters and Humanities of Sfax (ranging in age from 19 to 23 years) were randomly chosen from a list of volunteers to take part in this experiment. Half of them were asked to meet F-t-F, whereas the other half got in touch using synchronous text-based CMC only. For each communication modality, male and female participants were randomly assigned to three types of groups: male-only (MO), female-only (FO), and mixed (MIX) (i.e., equal numbers of males and females). The groups were composed of four participants each.

Task Type

⁴ They represent a CofP in its own right as they are all undergraduates of the same age category (between 20 and 24) who study in a public university.

All six groups in this study were assigned a problem-solving task and asked to discuss it in English, with the aim to reach a consensus within 20 minutes. This type of task requires all groups to arrange fifteen items (which they have to take with them into an underground shelter) in the order they believe best reflects their importance to survive the after-effects of a nuclear explosion⁵. Yet, before embarking on the group discussion activity, participants were invited to individually reflect upon the list of items and suggest a particular arrangement within ten minutes.

Materials

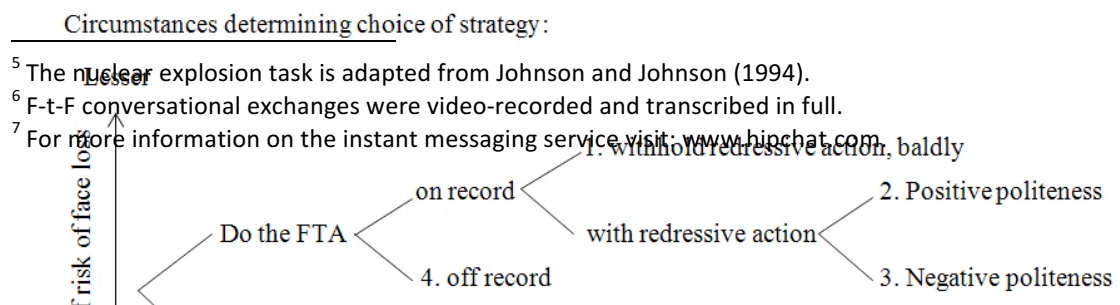
While F-t-F group discussion experiments were held in a classroom setting⁶, participants choosing to discuss the problem-solving task via CMC were emailed private account information to log in to a text-based instant messaging service called HipChat⁷. They were also provided with pseudonyms for the sake of anonymity, and informed of the day and time of the experiment. Moreover, attached to the email was a PDF document including the necessary steps to log in and join the group discussion. A follow-up email was also sent to all the participants providing them with an individual-rating worksheet and a collective-rating worksheet of the fifteen items in the problem-solving task. The same email also invited them to grade their satisfaction level on a 7-point Likert scale, subsequent to the group discussion, by clicking on the hyperlink provided. Participants in the F-t-F experiment were equally invited to grade their satisfaction level on a 7-point Likert scale, but on paper, subsequent to each group-discussion activity.

Analytical Frameworks

Subsequent to transcribing the F-t-F conversational exchanges and reproducing the online chat logs into a word-processing document, the corpus was hand-coded for pragmatic (im)politeness using modified versions of both Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and Culpeper's (1996) impoliteness theory.

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory:

Central to Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory is the notion of *face*. The researchers conceive of face as a basic parameter that helps interactants determine the appropriateness of their speech and downplay any probability of disagreement or offence to the addressee. This theory makes use of Goffman's (1959) notion of *face* to argue that any individual has two types of face: positive face (i.e., the need to be valued and appreciated) and negative face (i.e., the desire to have one's actions unimpeded by others). Any speech act that is likely to threaten positive or negative face is called a 'face-threatening act' (FTA) (1987). Brown and Levinson (1987) assume that interactants are constantly concerned with maintaining both aspects of face during interaction. Based on this assumption, they propose five politeness super-strategies: (1) *Bald on-record*, (2) *Positive politeness*, (3) *Negative politeness*, (4) *Off-record*, and (5) *withhold the FTA*. See figure 1 below.



⁵ The nuclear explosion task is adapted from Johnson and Johnson (1994).

⁶ F-t-F conversational exchanges were video-recorded and transcribed in full.

⁷ For more information on the instant messaging service visit: www.hipchat.com.

Figure 1: Strategies of doing FTAs (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 69)

Nonetheless, the fact that Brown and Levinson (1987) conceive of face as a public self-image that needs to be constantly attended to renders this theory inadequate to account for the diversity of intentional face-threatening acts by the same tokens that explain politeness (See Eelen (2001) and Mills (2001) for an in-depth criticism). As a matter of fact, this study deploys Culpeper's (1996) impoliteness theory as complementary to Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness.

Culpeper's (1996) Impoliteness Theory:

Given the fact that this theory "builds an impoliteness framework which is parallel but opposite to Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness" (Culpeper, 1996: 359), Culpeper suggests five impoliteness super-strategies modelled after Brown and Levinson's politeness super-strategies. They are as follows: (adapted from Culpeper, 1996: 356-7)

- (1) Bald on-record impoliteness: the attempt to be intentionally aggressive, hence to purposefully and directly attempt to damage the addressee's face.
- (2) Positive impoliteness: it is meant to intentionally damage the addressee's positive face wants; i.e., his/her want to be approved of.
- (3) Negative impoliteness: it is generally used to damage the addressee's negative face and attack his/her freedom of action.
- (4) Sarcasm or mock politeness: it is mainly achieved by using a surface realisation of politeness, which is meant to convey an indirect offence.
- (5) Withhold politeness: it manifests itself in situations where 'politeness work' is not performed when expected. One example is not to thank someone for doing you a favour.

Worthy of note is that both theories have been subject to a number of improvements and modifications (See Culpeper et al., 2003; Bousfield, 2008). One major modification, however, is Bousfield's (2008) criticism and exclusion of the *Bald on-record* super-strategy from both frameworks. He argues that, since bald on-

record utterances are not 'faceless' (as no communication can be held without face considerations), "it seems odd that such utterances would not be captured under the positive or negative im/politeness super-strategies" (Bousfield, 2008: 63).

Apart from the super-strategies outlined above, both theories anticipate a list of positive and negative output strategies. Table 1 below lists the (im)politeness strategies to be utilized in investigating the linguistic behaviour of the participants in this study.

Table 1: The constituent strategies of Brown and Levinson's (1987) and Culpeper's (1996) modified theories of (im)politeness

Brown and Levinson's Politeness theory	Culpeper's Impoliteness theory
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive politeness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Notice, attend ○ Exaggerate ○ Intensify ○ Use in-group identity markers ○ Seek agreement ○ Avoid disagreement ○ Presuppose/ raise/ assert common ground ○ Joke ○ convey understanding of addressee's wants ○ Offer, promise ○ Be optimistic ○ Include the addressee into the activity ○ give (or ask) for reasons ○ assume or assert reciprocity ○ Give gifts to the addressee (goods, sympathy, understanding, cooperation) • Negative politeness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Be conventionally indirect ○ Question, hedge ○ Be optimistic ○ Minimize imposition ○ Give deference ○ Apologize ○ Impersonalize: avoid pronouns "I" and "You" ○ State the FTA as a general rule ○ Nominalize ○ Go on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebting the hearer • Off-record politeness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive impoliteness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ignore, snub the other ○ Exclude the other from an activity ○ Disassociate from the other ○ Be disinterested, unconcerned, unsympathetic ○ Use inappropriate identity markers ○ Use obscure or secretive language ○ Seek disagreement ○ Use taboo words ○ Call the other names • Negative impoliteness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Frighten ○ Condescend, scorn, ridicule ○ Invade the other's space ○ Explicitly associate the other with a negative aspect ○ Put the other's indebtedness on-record • Sarcasm or mock politeness • Withhold politeness

- Withhold the face-threatening act (FTA)

Findings and Discussion

Distribution of Politeness Super-Strategies and Output Strategies across Groups in Both F-t-F and Online Modes of Communication

As shown in Table 2 below, male and female participants across different groups and modes of communication seem to limit their choices of politeness super-strategies to positive and negative ones—as opposed to a total disregard of the *Off-record politeness* and *Withhold the FTA* super-strategies. One plausible reason for the absence of the *Off-record politeness* super-strategy⁸ is that the problem-solving nature of the task requires all participants to be upfront and articulate when it comes to justifying their arrangement of the survival items. The same reasoning may also apply to the *Withhold the FTA* super-strategy (i.e., not to do the face-threatening act), as performing FTAs is part and parcel of disagreeing with others in the group and trying to convince them with different possible arrangements.

Table 2: Distribution of politeness super-strategies

	Modes of communication					
	F-t-F			CMC		
Super-strategies	MO	FO	MIX	MO	FO	MIX
<i>Positive politeness</i>	34	91	67	58	152	113
<i>Negative politeness</i>	28	39	31	36	67	53
<i>Off-record politeness</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Withhold the FTA</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	62	130	98	94	219	166

What is also of interest is that, across F-t-F and CMC modalities, FO groups draw on *positive politeness* almost one and a half times more than mixed-gender groups do and almost three times more than MO groups do. Moreover, as for *Negative politeness*, although the values across groups are not as spread out in both communication modalities as with *Positive politeness* ($SD = 14.88$ vs. $SD = 42.32$), female participants in FO groups seem to be more in favour of maintaining each other's negative face (i.e., by avoiding imposition), followed by MIX and MO groups. These findings are in tune with Savicki et al.'s (1996c) observation that female-only groups are more inclined to focus on collaborative and socio-emotional language than male-only and mixed-gender groups are.

Moreover, in each communication modality, the MIX group is closer to the FO group in terms of the frequency distribution of the positive and negative super-strategies used. We presume, consistent with previous studies (e.g., Piliavin and Martin, 1978; Savicki et al., 1996a) that this is down to males' tendency in mixed groups to adapt their linguistic choices to those of their female counterparts, such as being less

⁸ It has to do with performing a speech act by means of an implicature (indirectly).

confrontational and more supportive of others' views and beliefs. Yet, the considerable disproportion between MO and MIX groups in terms of the frequency of occurrence of both super-strategies shows that the females are the least willing to modify their linguistic behaviour in the presence of the opposite gender. This finding, however, runs counter to quite a few research findings (e.g., Piliavin and Martin, 1978; Savicki et al., 1996a) of the sort that females become markedly less sex-role stereotyped in the presence of the opposite gender.

Table 3: Distribution of politeness output strategies

Output strategies		Modes of communication					
		F-t-F			CMC		
		MO	FO	MIX	MO	FO	MIX
Positive output strategies	Exaggerate	2	7	4	3	14	7
	Seek agreement	11	27	17	29	72	56
	Avoid disagreement	4	11	8	6	14	9
	Joke	0	5	2	1	6	4
	Include the addressee into the activity	15	36	28	19	44	36
	Give gifts to the addressee	2	5	8	0	2	1
Negative output strategies	Question, hedge	28	36	30	34	55	48
	Apologize	0	3	1	2	12	5

With regard to the output strategies, Table 3 above demonstrates that, throughout the different group gender composition conditions and modes of communication, the strategy *Question, hedge* is the most frequently in use (N = 231), followed by *Seek agreement* (N = 212), and *Include the addressee into the activity* (N = 178). The frequency of occurrence of the remaining five strategies put together, however, does not amount to more than 24% (N = 146) of the total strategies used.

The predominance of these three output strategies across all groups could reasonably be ascribed to the nature of the activity (a problem-solving task). Indeed, the activity requires the participants to work as a team (hence the recurrence of the *Include the Addressee into the activity* strategy) and reach a consensus on the appropriate arrangement of a list of survival items (hence the recurrence of the *Seek agreement* strategy). Furthermore, the recurrence of the *Question, hedge* strategy may have been the product of inviting the participants at the beginning of each experiment not to be categorical in their assumptions in the hope of reaching a consensus that gains the satisfaction of all the members in the group. Once again, by making abundant use of these output strategies, women in FO groups are in favour of having language be attenuated and supportive. They are, then, followed by MIX and MO groups.

⁹ Due to space constraints, only the output strategies used during the group discussion activities have been mentioned.

The modes of communication also play a major role in having male and female participants attend more or less to each other's face needs. Participants across the three group gender composition conditions seem to make less use of the strategies of politeness when not meeting face-to-face (see Table 3). Siegel et al., (1986) explain that the absence of audio-visual cues in text-based online communication makes the interactants more absorbed in sending and receiving messages and, consequently, less willing to attend to each other's face-wants and expectations.

Distribution of Impoliteness Super-Strategies and Output Strategies Across Groups in Both F-T-F and Online Modes of Communication

As outlined in Table 4 below, all participants across different groups and modes of communication show much impoliteness in their conversational exchanges. Yet, they seem to limit their choices of impoliteness super-strategies to positive and negative ones only. Throughout both communication modalities, the type of language in MO groups is much more uninhibited (N = 65) than in MIX (N = 54) and FO (N = 32) groups.

Table 4: Distribution of impoliteness super-strategies¹⁰

	Modes of communication					
	F-t-F			CMC		
Super-strategies	MO	FO	MIX	MO	FO	MIX
Positive impoliteness	11	8	10	7	4	8
Negative impoliteness	54	24	44	34	11	20
Sarcasm or mock politeness	0	0	0	0	0	0
Withhold politeness	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	65	32	54	41	15	28

This finding is congruent with Savicki et al.'s (1996b: 209) observation in their study that undergraduates in MO groups "used more coarse language. . .and were the least satisfied with the group process". Moreover, following Piliavin and Martin (1978) and Savicki et al. (1996b), one possible explanation for having MIX groups take a middle ground in terms of the recurrence of the strategies outlined in Table 4 is that males tend to behave themselves more properly at the presence of the opposite gender. Yet, they also point out that female participants are in favour of adapting their linguistic choices in mixed groups in such a way as to become less sex-role stereotyped and more aggressive than they are in FO groups. This may reasonably explain the disproportionately higher frequency of occurrence of both super-strategies in the MIX groups (almost two times as frequent) compared to the FO groups.

Table 5: Distribution of impoliteness output strategies

¹⁰ Due to space constraints, only the output strategies used during the group discussion activities have been mentioned.

Output strategies		Modes of communication					
		F-t-F			CMC		
		MO	FO	MIX	MO	FO	MIX
Positive output strategies	Be disinterested	2	4	5	0	0	1
	Use inappropriate identity markers	0	0	0	0	0	1
	Seek disagreement	9	4	5	7	4	6
Negative output strategies	Condescend, scorn, ridicule	36	16	28	22	10	15
	Invade the other's space	8	2	7	5	1	2
	Challenge	10	6	9	7	0	3

As for the output strategies shown in Table 5 above, the strategy *Condescend, scorn, ridicule* is the most frequently in use (N = 127), whereas the remaining ones, put together, hardly account for 45% of the total strategies used (N = 108). The predominance of this strategy could possibly be linked to the nature of the local norms of conduct set by the CofP of Tunisian undergraduates, which may tolerate the act of condescending and ridiculing others' views and beliefs as moderately face-threatening (and not as severe as to halt the discussion activity and/or evoke a verbal conflict).

The disproportionately lower recurrence of the other strategies could also be partly attributed to a set of norms typical of that CofP. Yet, following the constructionist view (see Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992), contextual variables may, to some extent, be accountable for participants' decision about which strategies to be used the most (or the least) in their exchanges. For instance, the nature of the task (a problem-solving task), which requires all participants to cooperate and be serious enough in their endeavour to come to a compromise by the end of the discussion, could possibly be accountable for the low recurrence of the strategies *Seek disagreement* and *Be disinterested*, across both communication modalities. Once again, women's language in FO groups is the least impolite—and by the same token the most refined and polite—compared to the language used in MO and MIX groups (see Table 5).

A close examination of the frequency distribution of the positive and negative output strategies across both communication modalities reveals that male and female participants alike seem to be less confrontational and aggressive in online communication. This finding is in discord with the mainstream assumption that online anonymity¹¹ reduces social accountability and makes it easier for online interactants to express themselves more openly and engage in more disrespectful and hostile conduct (see Danet et al., 1997; Suler, 2004).

¹¹ Each participant in this study was assigned a pseudonym for the sake of hiding his/her identity from the rest of the participants.

Satisfaction Levels Across Groups and Modes of Communication

A two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicates that the independent variables *group composition* ($F(2) = 2.751, p > 0.05$) and *communication modality* ($F(1) = .175, p > 0.05$) do not seem to significantly affect the level of (dis)satisfaction expressed by the participants in the post-discussion 7-likert scale questionnaire. These results therefore do not validate the hypothesis that male and female undergraduates show most satisfaction with the discussion process in single-gendered than in mixed-gendered groups across both communication modalities (see Table 6).

Table 6: Two-way ANOVA of satisfaction levels by group composition and communication modality

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Group composition	2	5.250	2.625	2.751	0.88
Communication modality	1	.167	.167	.175	.680
Total	24	818.000			

Overall, with the exception of two MIX group participants who felt neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the experiment, the remaining twenty-two participants expressed their satisfaction (in part or in full) with the discussion process and the general agreement they reached, regardless of the communication modality and the gender composition of the group to which they had been assigned (see Figure 2). These results, nonetheless, are in discord with Savicki et al.'s (1996c) observation that FO groups are significantly more satisfied with the group discussion experiment than either MO or MIX groups.

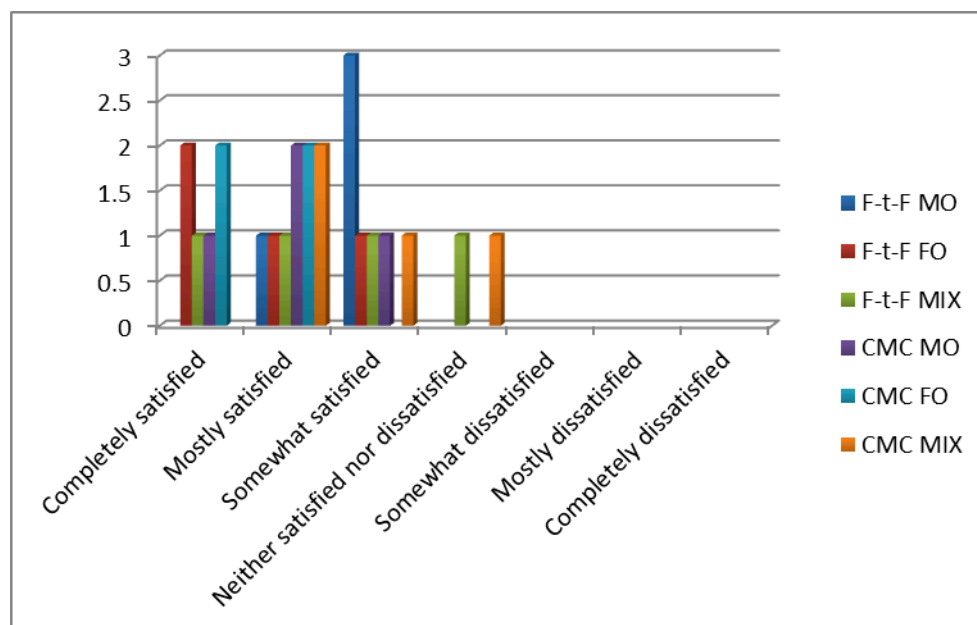


Figure 2: Satisfaction levels across groups and modes of communication

Worthy of note is that such inconsistency cannot be judged as the product of the interference of one particular variable, while turning a blind eye to a whole range of other contextual variables that may equally be suspected of influencing participants' linguistic choices. Moreover, the set of norms regulating the CofP of Tunisian undergraduates may differ considerably from the norms recognized by the CofP of the American undergraduates studied by Savicki et al (1996c). This is because each CofP has its local norms of conduct more or less influenced by the communal values, beliefs and even stereotypes existing in the larger social and cultural contexts (see Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992). Accordingly, the overall level of satisfaction among the participants may in part be ascribed to the mutual sense of respect among Tunisian undergraduates, such as not to discriminate against each other along gender lines.

Conclusion

This study has revealed that gender plays a major role in the way Tunisian undergraduates make their linguistic choices while discussing a problem-solving task. Across F-t-F and CMC communication modalities, FO groups are remarkably governed by polite, friendly, and supportive exchanges—even though they occasionally make use of some strategies of impoliteness. However, this does not deny that MO groups are by far more confrontational and upfront in their exchanges, as evidenced in the statistical findings. Moreover, as expected for mixed groups in either modality, male and female participants adapt their linguistic choices in such a way as to become less sex-role stereotyped and more supportive of the opposite gender's linguistic choices.

It has also been shown that, in line with the constructionist view, gender composition and mode of communication alone cannot be fully accountable for the linguistic decisions undergraduates make in their discussions, mainly because a plethora of other contextual variables may more or less interfere in such decisions. As the interconnectedness of gender with its surrounding contextual variables may render the process of making broad generalizations hard to implement, the CofP approach has been deployed to keep any generalizations obtained relative to the community of Tunisian undergraduates only. As such, the extent to which a speech act is deemed appropriate or inappropriate in the context of discussing a problem-solving task is largely contingent on the system of values and beliefs typical of that particular CofP.

Finally, it has been shown that, regardless of the communication modality and the gender composition of the group to which they had been assigned, all participants expressed their satisfaction with the experiment. This result, nonetheless, is but a preliminary step towards understanding the conditions in small task groups that can improve Tunisian undergraduates' learning experience. Further research, therefore, needs to consider controlling for other contextual variables (such as other types of tasks) to better learn about which group discussion conditions are more appealing for both genders.

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