

The Realization of Gratitude Speech Act by Algerian EFL Second Year Bachelor Students

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Abstract

The present research lies within the realm of interlanguage pragmatics. It aims at investigating the Algerian English as Foreign Language (EFL) students' performance of gratitude speech act. It also addresses the learners' performances in relation to their gender. Twenty EFL learners participated in this study and completed a written Discourse Completion Task (DCT) containing eight situations that differ in context and relationship type. The findings demonstrated a predominant reliance on using conventionalized forms, mainly through direct thanking, positive feeling and appreciation. Conversely, EFL learners appeared to be limited in the use of more complex strategies, such as indebtedness. The researchers observed a minimal gender difference with a statistically significant variation only on one situation. This suggests that contextual factors, such as social distance and familiarity, may play a focal role in shaping the gratitude strategy choice among male and female informants.

Keywords: speech act, interlanguage pragmatics, gratitude, pragmatic competence, Algerian EFL learners.

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1. Introduction

Lately, learning English as a foreign language (EFL) has been a subject of high interest in the Algerian education. This later has witnessed the integration of the English language in primary schools during the 2023-2024 academic year. This goes back to the position it gained worldwide. No doubt, English is considered as an international language where its mastery became a must to compete in various domains, such as education and economy.

However, it is essential to mention, both Arabic and English languages possess different phonetic, morphological, syntactic and pragmatic patterns and systems. This cannot only cause difficulties for EFL students to learn the language, but also may create cultural misunderstandings and barriers if these learners are not opened to the target culture. As the individual's highest concern is to be understood, the mastery of the pragmatic competence became fundamental for foreign language students. Most straightforwardly, language and culture are inextricable i.e. interrelated phenomena. Therefore, foreign language learners around the globe are not only interested in mastering the linguistic competence, but also eager to adopt some cultural norms of the target language. Wong (2010), for instance, confirms that his Hong Kong participants who speak English lived a cultural gap when producing the speech act of gratitude because of their Chinese cultural norms and their little implication of the English norms.

Expressing thanks is considered one of the core speech acts that reflects the pragmatic competence of interlocutors. Thus, the paper in hand sheds lights on how Algerian EFL students realize the speech act of gratitude. This study aims to identify the strategies used, by focusing on different social variable such as level of imposition, social distance and familiarity. The main purpose of this study is to provide answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the main strategies that Algerian EFL students adopt when expressing gratitude?
2. What are the main differences between male and female productions of gratitude?

2. Literature review

Yule (1996) emphasized that pragmatics is mainly concerned with investigating the factors that govern the language choice of interlocutors in different social interactions and how can this affect the others. It is commonly known that this subfield studies the language utterances bearing in mind the context of their occurrences. In other words, what can truly shape any communicative event is the speaker's real intention behind his/her selection of vocabulary. This may rise the notion of the intended meaning which is conveyed, for instance, through the following utterance: 'the coffee smells

good'. If we take into account the context, we will be aware that the speaker actually intends to ask for a cup of coffee, rather than just giving his opinion about it. One of the core accounts discussed in pragmatics is speech acts. Austin (1962) believes that speakers do not only produce sounds and syllables that need to be grammatically correct, but also perform actions.

Learning to perform different speech acts is much vital as learning to speak. We notice children over the world are regularly advised and asked to say thank you to others. The child's degree or level of his/her well behaviour is, in certain situations, conditioned by expressing gratitude whenever receiving a gift or a favor. Parents put numerous efforts in teaching their children this speech act. Even people when travelling to a country they do not know its language, they may find themselves obliged to learn at least salutation and thanking expressions. Any misuse of it may lead to communication breakdowns. Therefore, gratitude is one of the speech acts that we can barely find a moment of interaction without expressing it. It is one of the common used speech acts in everyday communication. Leech (1983), as cited in Koylu (2018, p. 23), considers "thanking as an appreciation creating a friendly and a polite atmosphere".

Several research studies (Rezaei (2020), Bzkirci & Ozbay (2020), Altalhi (2014), Al Khawalda (2013)) have conducted to investigate the speech act of gratitude, but very few conducted in the Algerian society (Benaicha & Al Sharah (2024), precisely investigating the Algerian EFL learners' productions of thanks . Therefore, the present research endeavor is an attempt to spot the light on the production of the speech act of gratitude by Algerian EFL students. This study fills a gap in the general literature by exploring the realization of the speech act of thanking by Algerian EFL students by focusing on whether the acquisition of the target language matches the communicative and pragmatic competence or the influence of the mother tongue remains a significant notion in the foreign language productions.

Previous studies

Benaicha and Al Shara'h (2024) conducted a cross cultural pragmatic study on the differences and the similarities that Algerian Arabic and Jordanian Arabic speakers may exhibit in the production of gratitude speech act. They aimed at investigating gender and social status variables among 80 participants from the two dialects of Arabic through an Oral DCT. The findings show significant gender differences i.e. Algerian males were found to express thanking more than Algerian females, and Jordanian females express more thanks than Jordanian males. Notably, female participants were found more to use apologies while thanking and tend to be more expressive than males. The major similarity characterized in their results is the use of religious formula while thanking, such as 'rabi yahafdak' may Allah protect you.

In an interlanguage study, al-Momani et al. (2017) investigated 30 Jordanian EFL students and 30 natives of American English. The study indeed emphasized the fact that cultural norms govern the speech of both groups. Although they have access to the same gratitude strategies, they show a distinction in the order preference of the used strategy.

Hesabi, Azima (2015) study 60 Iranian EFL students via a standard DCT format where their major interest was the level of proficiency and gender in expressing the gratitude speech act. The findings display that females express more gratitude in order not to threaten the face of their addressee. In addition, in terms of proficiency, advanced subjects used a complex type of thanking strategy, while those who belong to upper intermediate and intermediate category used simpler strategies.

Wong's (2010) research presents worth noting findings. With reference to data collection procedure, the researcher opted for analyzing real-life spoken discourse by Hong Kong speakers of English. The corpus data show that the informants struggle while expressing the speech act of gratitude, as they are not fully aware of the norms of thanking in English. They seldom used intensified expressions of gratitude nor did they use a vast variety of thanking strategies that natives of English would use. Wong (2010) asserts that "possible explanation would be that Chinese people are too reserved to express their gratitude openly and explicitly." (p.1252)

Cheng (2005) examined how native speakers of Chinese and native speakers of English express gratitude via a DCT questionnaire. Her research study truly made a landmark contribution to the interlanguage pragmatic research. Overall, the results demonstrated an evident variance of the thanking strategies use. Although, some participants were able to perform a native like speech, there was an evidence of the mother tongue influence.

Bakırcı and Şükrü Özbay (2020) explored how Turkish speaking EFL learners and non-native European speakers of English produce gratitude. They attempted at looking at the different gratitude strategies used, the gender differences, and the extent to which the choice of the strategy is tied up to the English language proficiency. Data analysis of the DCT questionnaire revealed that the participants used the thanking strategy more frequently, but both groups barely used the apology strategy. Yet, both groups of the subjects appeared to perform thanking differently. The interview analysis confirmed that this divergence can be due to lack of pragmatic competence. Their study, therefore, offers some pedagogical implications and instructions to come align with the needs of the language learners and to enable them to develop the pragmatic competence properly.

3. Methodology

a. Research design:

The present research attempts to gain comprehensive understandings and find generalizations about the status of gratitude speech act used by Algerian EFL

university students. For this purpose, the researchers arranged a DCT questionnaire to measure the frequency and the distribution of gratitude strategies.

b. Participants

The subjects of this study are Algerian EFL learners at the University of Djillali Liabes (UDL), Sidi Bel Abbès, Algeria. The researchers opted for purposive and convenience sampling to collect data. The sample was mainly designed for undergraduate students, precisely second year Bachelor students at the department of English language. The reason behind this choice is due to the syllabus they are pursuing where only General Linguistics is taught i.e. their knowledge of pragmatics and its topics (such as gratitude speech act) remains superficial. Furthermore, as the researchers are EFL university teachers, the participants are chosen based on availability and accessibility. The researchers explained the purpose of this study and confirmed the voluntary participation of the informants. Twenty EFL students took part in this research divided equally between ten male and ten female participants. Their age ranged from 19 to 32 years. In the current research, age was not considered as a variable. Future research should focus on the different ages of informants while producing thanks.

c. Data collection procedure

The researchers employed a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) for collecting data. DCTs are considered as the most common instruments of data elicitation. This research study's written questionnaire contains eight situational descriptions where respondents were asked to express the speech act of gratitude. Chang (2006) argued, "this technique allows the researcher to control for situation, the researcher can manipulate the variables of interest (e.g., gender, social distance, age)". (p, 4-5)

The initial part of the questionnaire served to provide personal information about the subjects such as age and gender. In addition, the researcher aimed at discovering how the EFL students are exposed to the target language outside the classes to better interpret their responses. Notably, the DCT questionnaire encompasses eight different scenarios that generate gratitude utterances to other interlocutors from different status (e.g. peers, teachers), and participants responded as spontaneously as possible in a classroom setting.

d. Data analysis procedure

The researchers analyzed the data of the current study quantitatively and qualitatively. Following Cheng's (2005) framework, the collected data were classified according to distinct strategies when expressing gratitude, such as thanking, appreciation, positive feeling, apology, recognition of imposition, repayment, alerts and other. This is illustrated in the following table (1).

Table 1. The Eight Gratitude Strategies.

Number of strategy	Gratitude Strategy
1	Thanking. 1.1.Using the expression thank you. 1.2.Thank you + stating the favor. 1.3.Thank you+ mentioning the imposition.
2	Appreciation. 2.1. Using the expression I appreciate. 2.2. Using appreciate and stating the favor.
3	Positive feeling. 3.1. Expressing a positive reaction to the hearer. 3.2. Expressing a positive reaction to the object. 3.3. Expressing a positive reaction to the outcome.
4	Apology. 4.1. Using sorry. 4.2. Using sorry+ mentioning the favor. 4.3. Using sorry + criticizing or blaming oneself. 4.4. Using sorry + mentioning the imposition caused by the favor. 4.5. Expressing embarrassment.
5	Recognition of imposition. 5.1. Acknowledging the imposition.
6	Repayment. 6.1. Offering or promising service, money or food. 6.2. Indicating indebtedness. 6.3. Promising future self-improvement.
7	Alerts. 7.1. Attention getter: oh my god, oh, hey... 7.2. Titles: miss, teacher ...
8	Others. 8.1. *Religious formula. 8.2. Joking. 8.3. Leave taking. 8.4. No gratitude

*Religious formula is the only strategy that is not adopted from cheng's (2005) classification.

The researchers used a specific coding key for each participant (1 to 20), gender (female=1, male=2), social status (higher=1, equal=2, lower=3), situation or scenario (1 to 8), and the realized strategy (1 to 8). As the main aim of this research is to identify the main employed strategies when expressing gratitude, the statistical analysis truly served this purpose using the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) version 30.0.0.0(172). Percentages and frequencies are provided to compare male and female production on the use of these thanking strategies. Moreover, the

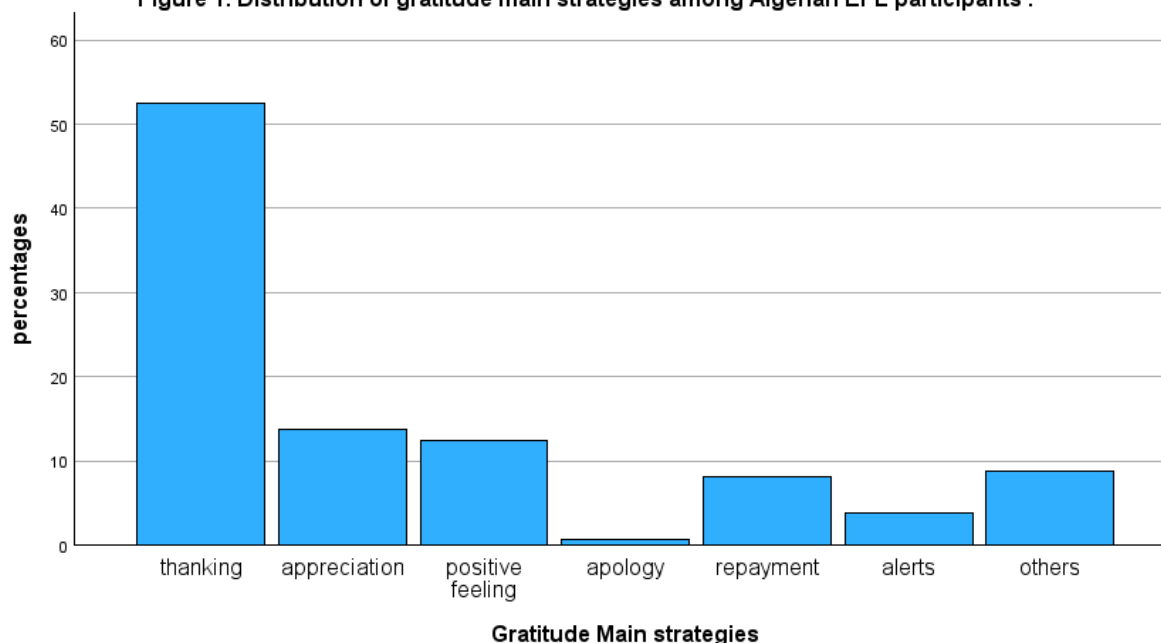
researchers opted for a qualitative analysis to explain the percentages. This allows to shed light on how certain contextual variables, such as power, affect the EFL learners' realization of gratitude.

4. Results and Discussion

Data analysis of EFL responses demonstrated that the participants employed a variety of gratitude strategies. To answer the current study's first question, a written DCT was conducted with the selected participants where they were asked about their exposure with the target language. Their exposure to English falls within the use of target language in social media, at a very big extent, with natives and non-natives of English. All the informants revealed that their English language use encompasses video games, TV movies, and YouTube channels. The researchers confirm that all participants share a common level of proficiency in English. All participants are intermediate EFL students. Therefore, this level of proficiency is not considered as a significant variable in this study.

As shown in figure (1) below, the most frequent used strategy was thanking (52.5%). This was subsequently followed by appreciation (13.8%), positive feelings (12.8%), repayment (8.1%), others (8.8%), alerts (3.8%), and apology (0.6%). Algerian EFL participants tend to heavily rely on the thanking strategy with a frequency of (n=84) out of 160 responses. This may suggest their tendency towards using a direct and a simple linguistic utterance of gratitude. This finding is consistent with Al Khawaldah (2013), as she found her Jordanian participants using the thanking strategy, regardless the gender. The Algerian participants tend to rely mostly on realizing straightforward 'thank you' (19.4%) and thanking the interlocutor and stating the favor (32.5%).

Figure 1. Distribution of gratitude main strategies among Algerian EFL participants .



In addition, figure (2) and table (2) show that Algerian EFL participants utilized 'appreciation + stating the favor' (11.9%). Although this subcategory is not marked at all in Benaicha and Al Shara'h's (2024) research among their Algerian speaker participants, we may explain this result that our informants, despite being at an intermediate level, could develop some pragmatic awareness of how gratitude is realized in English language. Knowing that, Jung's (1994) study of thank you expression in American English pointed out that these expressions' basic function is appreciating the benefit.

To a lesser extent, our participants performed the speech act of gratitude through expressing a positive reaction to the hearer (6.3%), to the object (3.1%), and to the outcome (3.1%). The following data are illustrations of the participants' responses. Findings also revealed that substrategies were used less frequently, as attention getters (3.8%) and offering service or food (5%). Algerian EFL participants were rarely observed to use apology strategy i.e., only one participant replied in data (4) using this strategy.

1. These sessions were really helpful.
2. This is a kind gesture from you.
3. You saved me from a long road trip.
4. Very sorry for annoying you.

Table 2. Distriution of frequencies and percentages of the gratitude sustrategies amog Algerian EFL participants

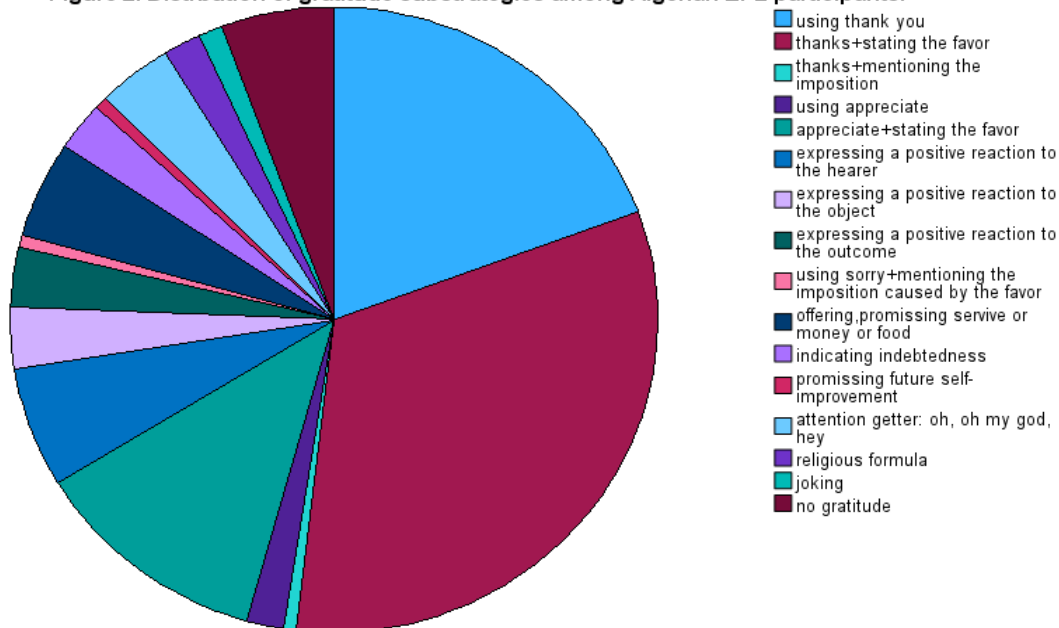
	N	%
using thank you	31	19,4%
thanks+stating the favor	52	32,5%
thanks+mentioning the imposition	1	0,6%
using appreciate	3	1,9%
appreciate+stating the favor	19	11,9%
expressing a positive reaction to the hearer	10	6,3%
expressing a positive reaction to the object	5	3,1%
expressing a positive reaction to the outcome	5	3,1%
using sorry+mentioning the imposition caused by the favor	1	0,6%
offering, promissing servive or money or food	8	5,0%
indicating indebtedness	4	2,5%
promissing future self-improvement	1	0,6%
attention getter: oh, oh my god, hey	6	3,8%
religious formula	3	1,9%
joking	2	1,3%
no gratitude	9	5,6%

Furthermore, (5.6%) out of the responses was characterized as ‘no gratitude’. In scenario 6, certain participants refrained from expressing gratitude. This can be explained by the nature of scenario’s context where social distance and familiarity with the thankee (thanker’s little sister) necessitates not to produce this speech act. The following response (5) is an instance of the absence of gratitude.

5. Great. Go to sleep now.

Interestingly, the results of this study unveil a low frequency of indebtedness (N=4, 2.5%). This limited use can be linked to some cultural norms of expressing this speech act by the Algerian EFL participants. This finding aligns with earlier investigation conducted by Benaicha and Al-Shara’h (2024). Their data analysis appear to indicate that both Algerian and Jordanian participants did not employ this substrategy (0%) while expressing gratitude in their native languages. Regardless of the minimal presence, as figure (2) shows, of explicit expression ‘I owe you’, this study’s results demonstrate an ongoing development of EFL participants’ pragmatic awareness instead of relying only on simple and familiar phrases when thanking in the target language.

Figure 2. Distribution of gratitude substrategies among Algerian EFL participants.



Noteworthy findings were observed regarding the use of ‘religious formula’ substrategy. Religious expressions are one of the most conventionalized markers and forms of thanking in so many Arabian speech communities, in daily interactions. As any Muslim speaker, Algerian EFL participants express gratitude, in some situations, by using some blessings and prayers. Table (2) shows that this substrategy was used on three occasion (N=3, 1.9%). Though infrequent, this may be attributed to the influence of sociocultural norms on our participants’ realizations. Few participants tended to transfer their native language’s speech act formula into English language, see data (6) and (7) below. This finding supports Kasper’s (1992) report that in the process of performing speech acts in the target language, EFL or ESL learners often transfer their native language’s pragmatic values and norms into the second language or the target language production.

6. May Allah bless you for your help.

7. jazaki Allah Khayran.

Reward 2nd sing fem Allah well-being.

May Allah reward you with well-being.

Among all the analyzed expressions of gratitude, (N=160), joking was employed twice. This restricted number is significantly related to the relationship shared between interlocutors and level of familiarity. In the sixth situation, an EFL participant adopted joking when communicating with her little sister, as in the following (8). EFL participants avoided humor, possibly because their preference for simple formula over complex linguistic utterances. The data supports cheng’s (2005) who found the Chinese EFL informants less frequently using the following sociolinguistically complex strategies such as joking.

8. What did you put in that? Did you poison it?

To answer the second research question (i.e. investigating gender differences), the researchers included in their sample 10 male and 10 female informants. The findings displayed that both males and females used similar forms of gratitude strategies. Overall, thanking strategy was the dominant one between both groups, as table (3) demonstrates. A Chi-square test indicated that the choice of gratitude strategies by both genders is not significant (see table 4). As p value is equivalent to ,091 ($p>,05$), this confirms that gender did not affect the selection and the frequency of gratitude strategies among Algerian EFL participants.

Table 3. Frequency of gratitude main strategies according to gender among Algerian EFL learners

Count		gender		Total
		male	female	
mainstrategy	thanking	39	45	84
	appreciation	10	12	22
	positive feeling	8	12	20
	apology	1	0	1
	repayment	8	5	13
	alerts	2	4	6
	others	12	2	14
Total		80	80	160

Table 4. Chi-square values of gratitude main strategies according to gender among Algerian EFL learners.

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	10,912 ^a	6	,091
Likelihood Ratio	12,106	6	,060
Linear-by-Linear Association	4,797	1	,029
N of Valid Cases	160		

a. 4 cells (28,6%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is ,50.

Nevertheless, only one situation (situation 6) out of the eight situations that elicited thanking expression marked and detected a statistically significant difference between male and female participants, $p=,028$ ($p<,05$), as shown in table 6. This was affected by that particular context of the sixth situation. Qualitative analysis shows that males in this situation avoided explicit thanking strategies as females. Their responses comprised joking and no gratitude utterances, unlike females who tended to show some positive feeling to the thankee or directly saying thank you. This finding is tied up to the social distance shared between the thanker and the thankee. Algerian males may consider gratitude as unnecessary speech act to perform between family members.

However, female participants' nature Forces them to use more warm and expressive expressions when thanking. The researchers believe that gender's influence is situational and mainly relies on intimacy and familiarity. The present study's outcome is in accordance with Al Khawaldeh (2013) who believes that the gratitude style of her male and female participants varies depending on social formality of the situation and level of familiarity between interlocutors.

Table 5. Frequency of gratitude main strategies in situation 6

Count		gender		Total
		male	female	
s6 ms	thanking	2	3	5
	positive feeling	0	5	5
	alerts	2	1	3
	others	6	1	7
Total		10	10	20

Tale 6. Chi-square values of gratitude main strategies in situation 6.

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	9,105 ^a	3	,028
Likelihood Ratio	11,435	3	,010
Linear-by-Linear Association	5,230	1	,022
N of Valid Cases	20		

a. 8 cells (100,0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1,50.

5. Conclusion and implications

The current research endeavor attempted at investigating how Algeria EFL learners perform the speech act of gratitude across eight communicative situations. In general, findings show a clear tendency toward the use of simple and direct strategies. Algerian EFL students predominantly showed a limited use of complex thanking formulas. This is consistent with Wong (2010) who assumed that her Hong Kong English speaker participants failed to employ a wide variety of thanking strategies.

The major finding of this study brought to light that no significant difference was detected regarding gender. The researchers assume that as long as their participants shared a comparable level of English proficiency, male and female participants performed similarly, to a big extent, the act of thanking in the target language. Given that, one of the eight situations significantly showed gender differences in relation to gratitude strategy choice. Algerian EFL male participants did not only produce simple

forms of thanking in this situation, but also preferred not to be grateful at all to the hearer (little sister), refraining from using any explicit thanking expression. It is worth noting that the level of familiarity among participants can also affect the choice of gratitude strategy. The researchers assume that future research should focus on social distance and power relation while investigating gender differences.

Some pedagogical implications can be drawn from this study. Foreign language classes should prioritize the pragmatic knowledge integration. EFL learners should develop their pragmatic competence alongside their linguistic knowledge. Syllabus design should include a large awareness of how to perform speech acts in general, and gratitude in particular. Classroom activities may foster the learners' pragmatic awareness and reduce transfer in communication, for example using authentic videos of role-plays of gratitude performed by native speakers. The teaching staff should also highlight the relevance of cultural differences and the notion of language misunderstandings and barriers. Ultimately, this study confirms that Algerian EFL learners' gratitude expressions are largely influenced by their linguistic proficiency. Therefore, developing pragmatic appropriateness is a necessity for a better target language use.

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Appendix 1

Dear informant,

You are kindly requested to read each situation carefully. Imagine yourself in that situation. Then, write exactly how you would express yourself by giving the most complete information. The researcher is interested in how you would naturally and spontaneously react to each situation. Therefore, there are no correct or incorrect answers. Thank you so much for your cooperation.

Gender:

Age:

Explain your exposure to English language outside the classroom (e.g. travel, media, interactions with natives, or others)

.....

1. Due to certain circumstances, you were absent for a couple of days. You asked a classmate to share his/her lecture notes. Your classmate could definitely send the notes to you. What would you say to him/her after receiving them?

.....

2. Last week, you had a phonology class at the lab. In an attempt to enter the lab, you could not open its door. It might be a problem with the door handle. A student passed

by and saw you struggling with it. He tried to offer help, and eventually he succeeded in opening that door. Before he left, what would you say?

.....

3. You came to give an excellent presentation to the extent that your teacher brought you the last edition of your favorite book. What would you say to your teacher after unwrapping the gift and seeing the book?
-

4. You lately participated in a study day that took place at a neighboring city. You met some teachers from your university. Once the study day was over, one of your teachers suggested giving you a ride. You accepted without thinking and said to your teacher
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5. Exams were coming up. Some peers organized few study group sessions to get prepared. Those sessions were truly helpful as you could pass the exams. What would you say to your peers?
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6. Your little sister had a problem with an English grammar lecture. After explaining it to her, she brought you a chocolate bar. What would you say to her?
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7. You received a phone call from your head of department where she/he was congratulating you on winning a scholarship. You feel proud and overwhelmed. What would you say to her?
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8. You are the teacher of the literature course. Due to time constraints, you asked one of your junior students to print some needed documents. Fifteen minutes later, the documents were there exactly as you wished. What would you say to him?
-