

“Yeah, absolutely and totally”: Boosters and Gender Differences in Student-Supervisor Consultations

Wasan Khalid Ahmed^a

Wasan.khalid@uofallujah.edu.iq

Faculty of Islamic Sciences

University of Fallujah, Iraq

Kesumawati A. Bakar^b

kesuma@ukm.edu.my

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia

Hussein W. H. Alkhawaja

englishspark@gmail.com

Zarqa University, Jordan

ABSTRACT

Student-supervisor consultation is an essential academic requirement for Arab EFL male and female students to pass their postgraduate degree in Malaysian universities. During these consultations, students negotiate with their supervisors about their theses or final projects. However, these consultations form a challenge to these students as they need to demonstrate appropriate linguistic knowledge while corresponding to their supervisors' comments and corrections. One aspect of the linguistic challenge is the use of boosters as any over or misuse of these devices can be interpreted as inappropriate behavior, thus might affect the student-supervisor relationships and cause communication breakdown. The purpose of this study was to determine the types, frequencies, and functions of boosters in relation to gender as used by these students during the academic consultations. The data were collected by means of eight naturally occurring consultations and a pragmatic knowledge questionnaire and then analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The findings showed that the students used a variety of boosting devices with the intensifying adverbs, style adjuncts, and factive verbs being the most frequent. The gender analysis revealed differences in the types and counts of boosters with the male students generally using significantly higher frequencies of boosters than the female students. The pragmatic analysis showed that the Arab students used boosters strategically to reinforce their speech, so that they show their knowledge and appear more convincing. Further, the use of the boosters was not meant by the students to express polite or impolite behaviors, but it was mainly an appropriate politic behavior.

Keywords: Boosters; gender; relational work; EFL Arab students; academic consultations

^a Main author

^b Corresponding author

INTRODUCTION

Boosters are linguistic devices that are used to modify the degree of certainty towards the propositional content of an utterance or the illocutionary force of a speech act by means of reinforcement (Holmes, 1984). Holmes maintained that the use of boosters can operate at four levels of orientation. At the first level of orientation, a speaker uses the booster to reinforce his/her credibility in boosting the illocutionary force or the content of the act that follows:

- (1) “Believe me it was boring” (Holmes, 1984: 353)

At the second level of orientation, the booster is used to reinforce the hearer’s knowledge of the proposition or act that follows:

- (2) “The film as you know was a failure” (Holmes, 1984: 354)

At the third level of orientation, the booster is employed by the speaker to comment in an impersonal way on the proposition being asserted:

- (3) “Undoubtedly I think that’s absolutely right” (Holmes, 1984: 354)

The last level of orientation is the discursal orientation in which the booster is used to reinforce a prior discourse, word or context:

- (4) “As you say there are a number of important issues” (Holmes, 1984: 355)

Functionally, boosters can achieve two main functions. At the propositional content level, boosters, such as ‘of course’, ‘really’, and ‘certainly’ are used by speakers to intensify, upgrade, or increase their commitment and confidence towards the propositional content of their utterances (Holmes, 1984, p. 346). The boosting device in (5) operates at the propositional content of the speech act without the intention to affect the hearer’s feelings either negatively or positively.

- (5) A. Is Jeremy likely to stand then?
B. Certainly he is - there’ll be no stopping him.

At the illocutionary level of the speech act, using boosters is meant to reinforce the pragmatic force in the speech act in order to influence the hearer’s feelings positively to increase the solidarity of their relationship (6),

- (6) Really you are amazingly pretty.

or negatively to increase the distance between the interlocutors (7) (Holmes, 1984, p. 347).

- (7) My god you are such a fool.

In terms of politeness, the use of the booster ‘really’ in (6) meets the hearer’s positive face needs, whereas the use of the boosters ‘my god’ and ‘such’ in (7) might threaten the positive face of the hearer. However, the use of boosters is not always meant to express politeness. Based on the Relational Work Theory (Watts, 2003), interactants build on their previous practices to produce patterns of talk that not only reflect polite behavior, but also reflect appropriate *politic* behavior. Watts used the term ‘politic’ to refer to the “linguistic behavior which is perceived to be appropriate to the social constraints of the ongoing interaction” (p. 19).

Past research on boosters focused on the use of boosters in various academic contexts, such as in academic seminars, group discussions, or interactive lectures. Lin (2015b), for instance, analysed the use of intensifiers in two academic contexts: academic seminars and interactive lectures. The analysis of the audio-recorded transcriptions showed that the intensifiers were used to achieve stance-securing effects, show personal knowledge, and signal a need for opening discussion. However, there were discrepancies in frequencies among the modifiers depending on the speakers’ norms and academic culture. Kashiha’s (2021) analysis of boosters as metadiscourse markers of stance in academic seminars and discussions showed that English native speakers used boosters like ‘obviously’, ‘definitely’, ‘surely’, and ‘very’ to place assertions with the purpose of increasing commitment to the arguments being made.

Having adequate linguistic knowledge and pragmatic awareness of boosters is necessary not only to express politeness but also to achieve academic needs. However, the use of boosters among non-native speakers of a language still poses a challenge. Arab learners of English, for instance, encounter difficulties mastering boosters in English as they lack the linguistic knowledge and pragmatic awareness of culture and context of the target language (Al-Khateeb, 2009; Alkhalaf, 2006; Alward et al., 2012). Recski (2004), for instance, found that the use of boosters by English as a foreign language (EFL) students lacked variety and attributed this to their limited linguistic repertoire. In the context of academic group discussions, Alkhawaja and Paramasivam (2015) found that Arab EFL learners used boosters, such as ‘of course’, ‘sure’, ‘really’, ‘entirely’, ‘definitely’, ‘entirely’, ‘completely’, ‘very’, ‘big’, ‘always’, and ‘so’ very often to express high levels of commitment to their opinion and higher levels of directness. However, they mixed the functions of boosters with the functions of hedges, making their pragmatic intention vague and difficult to follow.

Boosters are also used during interactions between university students and their academic supervisors. Boosters are used to reinforce speech in these interactions, not only to express politeness, but also to achieve other politic behavior. Such politic behavior can include the students emphasizing their commitment and confidence towards their speech, obtaining approval upon their projects or theses, meeting their supervisors’ expectations, and strengthening the solidarity of the student-supervisor relationship.

The use of incorrect boosters, however, could negatively implicate the student-supervisor relationship. To avoid such negative consequences, it is crucial for these students to possess adequate linguistic knowledge and pragmatic awareness of boosters. This knowledge and awareness are necessary to avoid any communication breakdown and maintain effective consultation process.

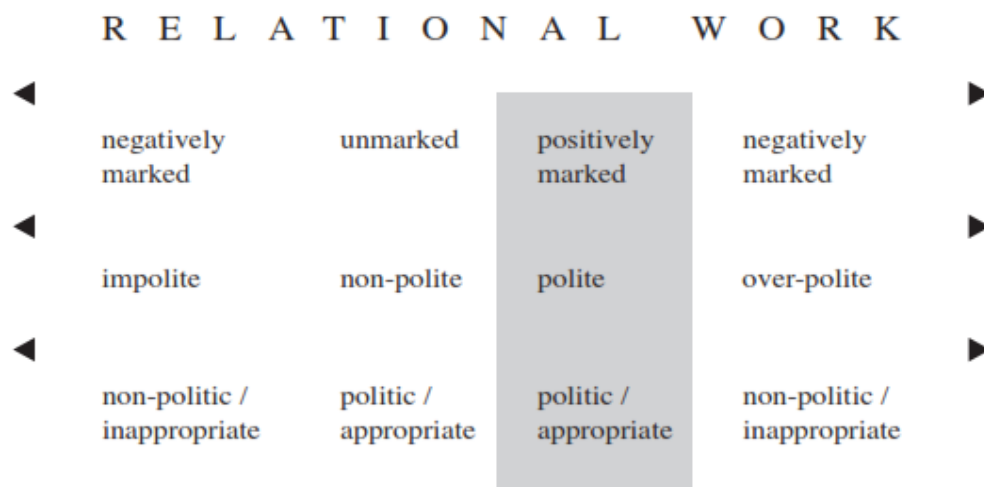
Research on boosters in the context of academic consultations is still limited and there is a need to consider the norms and culture of the participants (Lin, 2015a), hence the decision to focus on Arab EFL students’ use of boosters in academic consultations.

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN USING BOOSTERS

Previous research that looked into the role of gender in the use of boosters (Serholt, 2012; Yeganeh & Ghoreyshi, 2015) showed that gender does play a role in the use of these devices. However, most of these studies were conducted on written discourses. Even the available studies on the gender differences in spoken discourse reached contradictory findings. In Holmes' (1984), males were shown to use boosters more frequently than the females. Additionally, Holmes (1990) found that males used the boosters 'you know', 'I think' and 'of course' more than the females. More recently, Schlyter (2015), found that the booster 'really' was used more by females, whilst 'certainly', was used more frequently by males. Such contradiction might be due to the disregard of the linguistic norms of the participants, a gap that was filled in this study.

RELATIONAL WORK THEORY

Relational work refers to the type of politeness that is interpreted based on the personal or group interpretation. In his Relational Work Theory, Watts (2003, p. 165) maintained that "[t]here are no objective criteria with which we can 'measure' politeness, and the interpretations are always open to discursive struggle" over social practices. In other words, the interpretation of politeness is subject to what is agreed upon among the interlocutors of what is (im)polite and what is non-polite (politic), or over polite. As illustrated in Figure 1, interpreting the interlocutors' behavior can be perceived at the scheme of politeness as impolite, non-polite, polite, and over-polite (Locher & Watts, 2005). The decision on each type of politeness depends on the (un)markedness of the behavior and the (in)appropriateness of that behavior. This interpretation of the politeness behavior is also dependent on the nature of the social situation which is built upon previous practices and the relationship among the participant in the social practice (Locher, 2004).



Adopted from Locher (2004) as cited in Locher and Watts (2005, p. 12)

FIGURE 1. Relational work scheme

The use of boosters greatly affects the relational either by increasing solidarity or social distance (Caffi, 2007; Holmes, 1984; Locher, 2004). The present study intends to analyze the types, frequencies, and functions of boosters as used by a group of male and female Arab EFL postgraduate students during academic consultations. The following research questions were formulated for the present study:

- 1) What are the types, frequencies and functions of boosters employed by Arab students during student-supervisor consultations?
- 2) Are there gender differences in the types, frequencies and functions of boosters employed by Arab students during student-supervisor consultations?
- 3) How do Arab postgraduate students perceive the use of boosters during student-supervisor consultations?

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

The data in this study were collected using two instruments; audio-recording of the students-supervisor's consultations and a pragmatic awareness questionnaire. All participants are aged between 22 and 25 years, speak Arabic as the first language, and study English in the Master program of Applied Linguistics at a public university in Selangor. The participants for the first instrument consisted of a purposive sample of eight Arab postgraduate students (four males and four females). Only eight students were recruited because these participants were the only Arab students out of the total population in the faculty who had final projects or theses with their supervisors at the time of data collection. It is worth to mention that the students had consultations with different supervisors who were assigned to them by the faculty. Although the number of participants was only eight, the collected data were enough to reach the saturation point and achieve the aims of the study.

The respondents for the pragmatic awareness questionnaire were selected using a census method by which the entire population was given the opportunity to answer the questionnaire (Creswell, 2012, p. 143). Accordingly, 32 students (16 males and 16 females) who formed the entire population of the Arab postgraduate students in the faculty were selected to collect data about their awareness and knowledge of using boosters.

DATA COLLECTION AND INSTRUMENTS

After obtaining the required permission from the supervisors and the students, the data were collected qualitatively in the form of audio recordings obtained from eight student-supervisor consultations. The total duration of the audio recordings was around nine hours, resulting in a total of 30,666 running words. The students-supervisor's conversations were transcribed to prepare for analysis.

The qualitative data were supported by using a pragmatic knowledge questionnaire which consisted of three questions. The questions and their options were developed based on the objectives of the study and the linguistic and pragmatic functions of boosters as proposed in the boosters' taxonomy. The first question aimed at eliciting the students' perspectives regarding the appropriateness /inappropriateness of using a booster like 'I'm sure'. The second question asked the students to decide on the possible function(s) that can be achieved by using this booster. These

two questions were written in a multiple-selection format, so students could choose more than one option based on their understanding and norms of the use and context of the device. The use of multiple-selection format was also to reduce the influence of guessing by the students or cueing by the researcher (Haladyna & Downing, 1993). For the third question in the questionnaire, the students were asked to decide on the type of politeness expressed as a result of using the same booster 'I'm sure'. This time, they were asked to select only one answer option because the realized politeness strategies can only be either polite, overpolite, impolite, or just politic i.e., no intention to express politeness.

DATA ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK AND PROCEDURES

A discourse analysis (DA) as proposed by Baxter (2010, p. 124) was adopted in this study. This approach can provide logical, meaningful, and regular interpretation of language use. The focus of analysis in DA is to explain how the use of specific forms of language such as boosters can construct different realities of life experiences.

To initiate analysis, the boosters were first identified manually using Holmes' (1984) framework of boosters. Based on this framework, boosters were classified into the following categories and sub-categories depending on their orientation:

- (1) Speaker oriented boosters: the purpose of using this kind of boosters is to reinforce the speaker's reliability and the pragmatic force in his/her speech act using the following sub-categories:
 - intensifying phrases/clauses
 - personalized forms with propositional attitude verbs
 - style disjuncts
- (2) Hearer oriented booster: the purpose of using this kind of boosters is to reinforce the force of speech acts explicitly or implicitly by referring to the hearer's knowledge using the following sub-categories:
 - factive adverbs (naturally, of course)
 - lexical items (you see)
 - lexical expressions (as you know, you know what I mean)
- (3) Content-oriented boosters: the purpose of using this kind of boosters is to boost a focal element within a proposition, increase the force of the speech act as a whole, commenting impersonally on the truthfulness of the proposition, and increasing the illocutionary force of the utterance being asserted. The following sub-categories can be used:
 - intensifying adverbs (just, completely, very, etc.)
 - impersonalized epistemically modal forms (certainly, without doubt, etc.)
- (4) Discoursal boosters: the purpose of using this kind of boosters is to effectively boost the illocutionary force of the speech acts they preface using the following sub-categories:
 - metadiscoursal explicit and self-consciously rhetorical devices (let me stress)
 - metadiscoursal other [third] person devices (as X just said)
 - metadiscoursal linking signals (besides, furthermore)

Following this identification, the researchers developed the following criteria based on Shengming's (2009) to ensure that the devices used by the students was indeed a booster.

- (1) A booster modifies the utterance in which it exists by means of reinforcement that communicates high levels of determined mental state, personal involvement, precise facts, and final measures (e.g., 'extremely', 'none', 'never', etc.)
- (2) It is located at the two far ends of judgment (e.g., 'completely', 'never', 'always'),
- (3) It has the potential of being a source of boosting of the speaker's mental state (e.g., 'we believe', 'I know', 'as they think', etc.)
- (4) It communicates a high level of certainty, confidence towards propositions, readiness to carry responsibility, precision, and explicitness (e.g., 'I'm sure', 'surely', 'for sure').

The identified devices were then grouped and classified into their categories. The functions of boosters were then explained qualitatively using examples extracted from the actual conversation of the students. Finally, the level of appropriateness or inappropriateness of using boosters was explained based on the Relational Work Scheme (Locher & Watts, 2005).

FINDINGS

TYPES AND FREQUENCIES OF BOOSTERS USED IN STUDENT-SUPERVISOR CONSULTATIONS

MAJOR CATEGORY OF BOOSTERS

Overall, there are 236 boosters used in the eight consultations. Table 1 presents the breakdown of boosters into their major categories.

TABLE 1. Breakdown of boosters according to major categories

| Category of Boosters | Frequency | % |
|----------------------|-----------|------|
| Content-oriented | 143 | 60.6 |
| Speaker-oriented | 42 | 17.8 |
| Hearer-oriented | 41 | 17.4 |
| Discoursal | 10 | 4.2 |
| Total | 236 | 100 |

As evident from Table 1, the content-oriented boosters were the most frequently used, i.e. 143 times (60.6%). The findings also showed that the students used the speaker and hearer-oriented boosters for similar number of times, i.e. 42 (17.8%) and 41 (17.4%), respectively. The discoursal boosters were only used 10 times (4.2%). This category was only used by the male students.

SUB-CATEGORY OF BOOSTERS

The 236 boosters used by the students can be further grouped into nine categories. Table 2 presents the breakdown of boosters into their sub-categories.

TABLE 2. Breakdown of boosters according to sub-categories using Holmes' (1984) taxonomy of boosters

| Sub-Categories of Boosters | Frequency | % |
|---|-----------|------|
| Intensifying adverbs | 140 | 59.3 |
| Style disjuncts | 37 | 15.7 |
| Factive adverbs | 22 | 9.3 |
| Lexical items | 14 | 5.9 |
| Metadiscoursal explicit and self-consciously rhetorical devices | 6 | 2.5 |
| Lexical expressions | 5 | 2.1 |
| Intensifying phrases | 5 | 2.1 |
| Metadiscoursal other (third) person devices | 4 | 1.7 |
| Impersonalized epistemically modal forms | 3 | 1.3 |
| Total | 236 | 100 |

As shown in Table 2, the students used the intensifying adverbs the most frequently compared to other sub-categories, i.e. 140 times (59.3%). This is followed by the style disjunct boosters which occurred 37 times (15.7%). Factive adverbs are the third most frequently used sub-category and they occurred 22 times (9.3%). With regards to the less frequently used sub-categories, both the lexical expressions and intensifying phrases were only used five times in the consultations (2.1%). The metadiscoursal other (third) person devices were used four times (1.7%), and the impersonalized epistemically modal forms occurred the least number of times, i.e. three times (1.3%). (See Table 2 for the complete list).

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN THE USE OF BOOSTERS USED IN STUDENT-SUPERVISOR CONSULTATIONS

It has been established previously, that there are, in total, 236 boosters used in all eight consultations. Out of this amount, the male students used 143 boosters (61%), whereas the female students used only 93 (39%). To determine whether there is indeed a significant difference in the frequency of boosters used between the male and female students, a Chi-square test was carried out. The results showed that the male students used significantly more of these devices than the female students when interacting with their supervisors ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 35.318, p < 0.001$).

MAJOR CATEGORY OF BOOSTERS

Table 3 displays the use of boosters by male and female students according to major categories of boosters. Results of Chi-square tests are also included.

TABLE 3. Gender differences in the use of boosters according to major categories

| Category | Frequency | | | χ^2 | p-value |
|------------------|-----------|------|--------|----------|---------|
| | Overall | Male | Female | | |
| Content-oriented | 143 | 90 | 53 | 27.602 | <0.001 |
| Speaker-oriented | 42 | 12 | 30 | 64.585 | <0.001 |
| Hearer-oriented | 41 | 31 | 10 | 56.529 | <0.001 |
| Discoursal | 10 | 10 | 0 | NA | NA |
| Total | 236 | 143 | 93 | | |

As evident from Table 3, the content-oriented boosters were the most frequently used by both genders with the male students using significantly more content-oriented boosters (90 times) than the females (53 times). The second most-frequently occurring booster, i.e. the speaker-oriented boosters, on the other hand, was used by significantly more females (30 times) than the males (12 times). With regards to the hearer-oriented boosters, it appears that the male (31 times) as opposed to the female students used them significantly more (10 times). The least frequently used booster, i.e. discoursal, was only used by the male students and it occurred 10 times.

SUB-CATEGORY OF BOOSTERS

TABLE 4. Gender differences in the use of boosters according to sub-categories

| Sub-categories | Frequency | | | χ^2 | p-value |
|---|-----------|------|--------|----------|---------|
| | Overall | Male | Female | | |
| Intensifying adverbs | 140 | 87 | 53 | 30.216 | <0.001 |
| Style disjuncts | 37 | 10 | 27 | 64.016 | <0.001 |
| Factive adverbs | 22 | 16 | 6 | 23.374 | <0.001 |
| Lexical items | 14 | 11 | 3 | 25.391 | <0.001 |
| Metadiscoursal explicit and self-consciously rhetorical devices | 6 | 6 | 0 | NA | NA |
| Lexical expressions | 5 | 4 | 1 | 10.800 | 0.001 |
| Intensifying phrases | 5 | 2 | 3 | 2.000 | 0.157 |
| Metadiscoursal other (third) person devices | 4 | 4 | 0 | NA | NA |
| Impersonalized epistemically modal forms | 3 | 3 | 0 | NA | NA |
| Total | 236 | 143 | 93 | | |

Table 4 displays the use of boosters by male and female students according to sub-categories of boosters. Results of Chi-square tests are also displayed. Significant differences in the use of boosters between the male and female students were found for five out of nine sub-categories. These sub-categories are intensifying verbs, style disjuncts, factive adverbs, lexical items and lexical expressions, all *ps* <0.005. No significant differences were observed for the remaining four sub-categories, all *ps* >0.05. (See Table 4 for more details).

FUNCTIONS OF BOOSTERS IN STUDENT-SUPERVISOR CONSULTATIONS

INTENSIFYING ADVERBS BOOSTERS

The findings on the use of boosters in student-supervisor consultations (Table 4) showed that the most frequently used booster is the intensifying adverbs (140 times). These boosters belong to the category of content-oriented boosters. Based on Holmes (1984), boosters, such as ‘completely’, ‘absolutely’, ‘just’, ‘only’, ‘totally’, ‘quite’, ‘very’, and ‘so’ are used to boost a focal element within the proposition and increase the force of the speech act as a whole. Although the use of these devices might appear more imposing on the addressee, in the present research, the use of the intensifying adverbs helped the students to show respect in front of their supervisors as illustrated in Example 1. In this example, a female student (Fst.7) was discussing with her supervisor, Sv5, about the data collection in her research project.

Example 1

Line

- | | | |
|-----|-------|---|
| 515 | Fst.7 | So they will reply spontaneously without thinking that I am trying to test their responses. |
| 516 | Sv5 | Yes, sure and you can find the way to justify the naturalness and representative of the data. But, what I had in mind was a quick way for you to get your data. |
| 517 | Fst.7 | Ok. For sure you are right. I <u>completely</u> agree with you, but I don't know. |
| 518 | Sv5 | Because you already have the data, what I wanted to do was something different. What you are doing is students' prospections and reactions to what is already there. Right? |
| 519 | Fst.7 | Yeah. Actually I think that will be difficult. |

In line 515, the female student (Fst.7) wanted to obtain approval from her supervisor about collecting the data without the participants' previous knowledge to obtain spontaneous responses. The supervisor, in line 516, approved this procedure but reminded the student of the importance of justifying it. To show higher levels of compliance to her supervisor's instructions, the student used the intensifying adverb ‘completely’. Linguistically, the use of this intensifier served as a reinforcing technique and carried the meaning of ‘totally’. Pragmatically, the student boosted the speech act of agreement by limiting its degree to only one option. By doing so, the student wanted to communicate to her supervisor that her agreement with following her advice was final and not negotiable, thus satisfying her supervisor. Using an intensifier was considered by the students in the pragmatic knowledge questionnaire a non-polite behaviour, which is not the case in this example. The intensifying adverbs used by the student in this example were unmarked and did not cause any damage in the conversation. The booster was used by the student politically to obtain her supervisor's agreement. According to the relational work scheme and criteria, this behaviour is considered a politic unmarked appropriate behaviour.

In Example 2, a male student (Mst.6) was discussing with his supervisor, Sv7, the next step of doing his research.

Example 2

Line

- 166 Sv7 What would be good now, if you can and if you have done with the data collection, is to start analysing and run the statistical analysis. Maybe what you can do you can give it to me and start writing up. Because it has to be based on the presentation of the result as well as to be based on the research question.
- 167 Mst.6 Yeah, absolutely and totally based on research questions.
- 168 Sv7 And do that, maybe you can do a few pages of that.

The supervisor, in line 166, was setting a plan for the student to follow regarding the next step in the research. The supervisor recommended that the data analysis and discussion be based on the research questions. In response, the student, in line 167, confirmed this idea with more emphasis using the intensifying adverb ‘absolutely’. This booster linguistically expresses a strong way of saying ‘yes’. Pragmatically speaking, the use of this intensifier was to boost the confirmation by limiting its degree to only one option. Limiting the optionality serves the student to send a reinforced message of full compliance with the supervisor’s recommendations in order to satisfy the supervisor and to show that the student really knows what to do. The student’s linguistic behaviour was consistent with the students’ responses in the pragmatic knowledge questionnaire in which they thought that boosters can reinforce opinion and show speakers’ confidence. However, this example showed that the use of the boosters ‘absolutely and totally’ was not to force the supervisor to accept opinion nor to cause damage to his face, but to express a non-polite behaviour that neither expresses polite nor impolite behaviour that achieves personal academic needs.

STYLE DISJUNCTS BOOSTERS

The second most frequently used type of boosters, which occurred 27 times, was the style disjuncts. The female usage of these boosters was significantly more than the male students. The style disjuncts, such as ‘I’m sure’, ‘I’m quite sure’, ‘sure’, ‘surely’, and ‘for sure’ belong to the speaker-oriented boosters. They are used to boost the illocutionary force of a declarative statement they modify by displaying certainty as the basis for the boost (Holmes 1984). In this research, the use of the style disjuncts indicated that the students, especially the female ones, were in need to use such boosters to obtain their supervisors’ assistance and cooperation. In Example 3, a female student (Fst.1) was asking her supervisor (Sv3) for help to find some good references.

Example 3

| Line | | |
|------|-------|---|
| 018 | Sv3 | Ok, I will be on leave this week. We need to meet next week, and try to arrange the important ideas, ok? Tell me about your troubling, maybe we can get deal. Also we need to talk about this matter. |
| 019 | Fst.1 | Actually, I am doing my best, but in order to save time. I need to read more and more references specifically those references regarding methodology. I find sometimes the references which I need. <u>I'm sure</u> you will help me in this issue. |
| 020 | Sv3 | Ok. Don't worry. I will do my best. |

The supervisor, in line 018, was planning the next meeting with his female student. He also expressed his readiness to offer the student any help. The female student in line 019 explained her situation and her need for her supervisors' assistance to suggest some good references to read in order to write her methodology section in her thesis. To achieve this purpose, the student used the style disjuncts booster 'I am sure'. The use of this booster helped the student to reinforce her indirect request of help. Linguistically, this booster reflects the student's certainty. Pragmatically speaking, the use of this booster helped the student show a high level of confidence towards the supervisor's offer of help. By doing so, the female student boosted the illocutionary force of her request "I'm sure you will help me in this issue" to stress on the supervisor's readiness to help her as the basis for the boost. This pragmatic behaviour was effective as it was approved by the supervisor in the next turn (line 020). This behaviour by the student was unmarked appropriate politic behaviour (Locher & Watts 2005). This is in disagreement with the students' responses in the pragmatic knowledge questionnaire in which 22 of the students considered using boosters as inappropriate impolite behaviour as it imposes on the hearer and damages his or her face.

The male students in the present study also used the style disjunct 'for sure' in an attempt to emphasize and reinforce their speech to show full compliance towards the suggestion of the supervisor and politically achieve their academic needs. In Example 4, a male student (Mst.6), in line 043, was consulting his supervisor (Sv7) about making comparisons in the literature review in his study.

Example 4

| Line | | |
|------|-------|---|
| 043 | Mst.6 | Yes and I have to make comparison here, right? |
| 044 | Sv7 | And say what's reviewed and how, rather than what the paper contains per se. You know in the study a comparison is made between theories, so to say actually what the review is all about and what you have done. |
| 045 | Mst.6 | Ok, <u>for sure</u> I will do all your comments. |

The supervisor, in line 044, gave his opinion by mentioning a number of things that the student should do beyond just comparing the reviewed studies, such as answering the questions as to what and more importantly, how. In response, the student, in line 045, intended to show full compliance towards his supervisor's suggestions. To achieve this purpose, the student used the style disjunct 'for sure' to linguistically modify his compliance by means of reinforcement. The

student's use of 'for sure' displayed higher levels of certainty and commitment towards his promise, which is in disagreement with the students' responses in the pragmatic knowledge questionnaire. Although two thirds of the students in the questionnaire considered using boosters as inappropriate impolite behaviour, this example demonstrated the opposite. The student's behaviour in Example 4 does not in any way reflect an impolite behaviour. What is expressed in this example is a politic behaviour that is unmarked. This is because it went unnoticed by the supervisor and the main purpose behind using it was only to communicate an academic need of showing full compliance and respect to the supervisor.

It is important to mention that the style disjuncts 'I'm sure', 'I'm quite sure', 'surely', and 'for sure' are not within Holmes' (1984) taxonomy of speaker-oriented boosters. The newly discovered boosters used by the students were added to Holmes' (1984) Taxonomy of Boosters.

FACTIVE ADVERBS BOOSTERS

The findings about the use of boosters in student-supervisor consultations (Table 2) showed that that the third most frequently used types of boosters by the students was the factive adverbs (22, 9.3%). Out of this total, the male students used 16 devices which was more than the female students who only used six devices. Factive adverbs, such as 'of course', 'naturally', 'you know that' belong to the hearer-oriented boosters. The students used these devices to reinforce the illocutionary force of speech acts by explicitly displaying high levels of certainty towards the utterance being said and relying on the hearer's knowledge of the situation as the basis of boosting. In Example 5, the female student (Fst.9) was discussing the data collection procedures with her supervisor (Sv6). The supervisor aimed to check whether the student would allow the participants to listen to the tape or read a text to answer the questions in the instrument.

Example 5

Line

- | | | |
|-----|-------|---|
| 691 | Sv6 | So, you are going to ask the students to listen to your tape? |
| 692 | Fst.9 | Yeah, <u>of course</u> . This is only my copy. I mean this is mine and they will not read it. Even the answers, I will delete the blogs from it. Yah this is my copy. |
| 693 | Sv6 | And you are going to give A, B, C, right? |
| 694 | Fst.9 | Yes, <u>of course</u> A, B, C and I have 'fill in the blanks'. |
| 695 | Sv6 | Ok, fine, fine. But how are you going to calculate the marks? |

In response, the student used the factive adverb 'of course' twice to boost the illocutionary force of her proposition to show high level of certainty. In line 692, the use of the adverb was to confirm that the student would only use the tape. Linguistically, the use of this adverb achieved the function of assertion, by which the student confirmed the use of the tape. The supervisor in line 693 also wanted to check the type of questions the student wanted to use in testing her participants. The supervisor accordingly asked an indirect question: 'And you are going to give A, B, C, right?'. In response, the female student used the factive adverb 'of course' again to confirm her answer of using the multiple-choice format. Pragmatically, the student's use of the two boosters reflected her self-assurance and confidence in her methods, which was received positively by the supervisor, who granted her approval in line 695. The student's behaviour in this example

was not to express a polite or impolite behaviour, but a politic appropriate behaviour that went unmarked corresponding to their norms in the pragmatic questionnaire.

It is worth to mention that the factive adverb ‘you know that’ was typically used by the student as a hearer-oriented booster although it was not within Holmes’ (1984) framework of boosters. In Example 6, a male student (Mst.3) was discussing with his supervisor (Sv7) the sampling method of respondents. The student was explaining the need for randomizing the selection of respondents in the interview in his study. To provide a reinforced opinion, the student used the factive adverb ‘you know that’ as a hearer-oriented booster. By using this booster, the student relied on the supervisor’s knowledge of the fact being introduced in the coming utterance as an evidence or reference. This linguistic behavior helped the student reinforce his opinion about avoiding using non-random sampling.

Example 6

Line

- 911 Mst. 3 Kindly doctor, your opinion about the sample. I just choose random samples, ok? You know that, because when we use non-random convenient sampling, the results get wrong because this will be the number, but according to the comment I said, I collected data by random sampling.
- 912 S7 It is random within that?
- 913 Mst. 3 Yah yah within that
- 914 S That’s ok. Just make a justification for 10 respondents to make an interview.

PRAGMATIC KNOWLEDGE OF BOOSTERS

The findings in this section are reported to answer the third research question and give support to the findings in the first and second research questions. It is worth mentioning that for the first two questions, the students were allowed to choose more than one option. The first question in the questionnaire asked about the role of a booster like ‘I’m sure’ in serving the speaker. As illustrated in Table 5, the results showed that 25 (78%) of the students considered this booster reflecting speaker’s confidence, while 24 (75%) of the students supported the role of the booster in reinforcement. At lower frequencies, 8 (25%) of the students thought of using this booster for attenuation purposes and only 7 (22%) of the students believed that the use of this booster expressing lack of confidence. These results indicate that most of the students realized that the intensifying expression ‘I am sure’ is used for boosting purposes.

TABLE 5. Students’ responses towards using boosters to serve speaker in consultations

| Use of Boosters | Frequency | % |
|--------------------|-----------|----|
| Confidence | 25 | 78 |
| Reinforcement | 24 | 75 |
| Attenuation | 8 | 25 |
| Lack of confidence | 7 | 22 |

The second question in the questionnaire asked the students to decide on the pragmatic functions achieved by the use of ‘I’m sure’ and how it might affect the hearer (supervisor). The findings (Table 6) showed that 22 (69%) of the students supported the idea that this expression forces the supervisor to accept a student’s proposition. The same number of students (22, 69%) thought that using such a booster would damage the supervisor’s face by means of imposition. Only 10 (31%) of the students considered the use of this booster either giving freedom to supervisor to negotiate opinion or no damage to the supervisor’s face is intended.

TABLE 6. Students’ responses towards using boosters to affect hearer in consultations

| Use of Boosters | Frequency | % |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|----|
| Giving freedom to negotiate opinion | 10 | 31 |
| Force to accept opinion | 22 | 69 |
| Damage face by imposition | 22 | 69 |
| No damage on face is intended | 10 | 31 |

In the third question in the questionnaire, the students were asked to decide on the type of politeness expressed as a result of using the expression ‘I’m sure’ to serve the hearer. They were asked to select only one answer option. The results (Table 7) showed that around two thirds of the students (22, 66%) considered the use of this expression an inappropriate, impolite behaviour when used with a person of higher position, such as a supervisor. Only a third of the students (11, 34%) thought using this expression as neither polite nor impolite, but appropriate to the context. None of the students considered the use of this booster an appropriate polite behaviour, inappropriate over polite behaviour, or appropriate over polite behaviour. This finding indicates that most of the students found using the booster ‘I’m sure’ an indication of impolite behaviour, and unacceptable when conversing with a supervisor of a higher power and wider social distance.

TABLE 7. Using boosters to express politeness in consultations

| Use of Boosters | Frequency | % |
|--|-----------|----|
| Inappropriate impolite behaviour | 21 | 66 |
| Neither polite, nor impolite, but appropriate to the context | 11 | 34 |
| Appropriate polite behaviour | 0 | 0 |
| Inappropriate over polite behaviour | 0 | 0 |
| Appropriate over polite behaviour | 0 | 0 |

DISCUSSION

The present research has investigated the use of boosters by Arab postgraduate students during academic interaction with their supervisors at a Malaysian university. The focus of the investigation was on the types, functions, and gender differences. The findings showed that in eight supervisions, a total of 236 boosters were produced. In terms of the type of boosters, the content-oriented boosters were the most frequently used whereas the discoursal was the least used. The analysis of the sub-categories of boosters showed that the students used the intensifying adverbs, style adjuncts, and factive verbs most frequently. These findings suggest that the students possess a linguistic repertoire of boosters and used a wide range of boosters from various categories (Holmes, 1984) unlike Recski’s (2004) findings that found a limited variety of boosters used among students. These findings further lend support to other studies such as Alkhawaja and

Paramasivam's (2015) who found Arab EFL learners using boosters, such as 'of course', 'sure', 'really', 'entirely', 'definitely', 'entirely', 'completely', 'very', 'big', 'always', and 'so' very often to express high levels of commitment to their opinion and higher levels of directness. The findings about the functions of the boosters in the present study are in agreement with Kashiha (2021) who found boosters like 'obviously', 'definitely', 'surely', and 'very' were used to place assertions with the purpose of increasing speakers' commitment to the arguments being made in spoken discourses.

The gender analysis revealed that the male students in the present study used significantly more boosters than their female counterparts. This is in agreement with Yeganeh and Ghoreyshi (2015) who found male students using more of these devices than females to display higher commitments towards their propositions. Gender differences in terms of the usage can also be seen when the different categories of boosters are considered. More males than females used content-oriented, discursal and hearer-oriented boosters. This indicates that they tended to reinforce the propositional content of their speech, use discourse elements as references to provide evidence for their talk and refer to the supervisors' knowledge to support their talk. In contrast, more females than males used speaker-oriented boosters reflecting their inclination and norms to refer to their veracity and reliability as the basis for boosting the illocutionary force of their speech acts to achieve academic goals when conversing with their supervisors.

The pragmatic analysis showed that the Arab students were aware of the formality of the academic situations, which led them to strategically reinforce their speech while talking to their supervisors in a formal academic setting, so that they show their knowledge and appear more convincing. Further, the use of the boosters was not meant by the students to express polite or impolite behaviors, but it was mainly an appropriate politic behavior.

CONCLUSION

The present study aimed at analyzing how Arab EFL students use boosters to achieve politeness and academic functions during their academic interaction with their supervisors. The study investigated the following aspects: (1) the types and frequencies of boosters, (2) the achieved relational work and other pragmatic functions, and (3) the gender differences in the use of this kind of devices. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the Arab EFL students possess the linguistic repertoire of these devices. However, the qualitative analysis revealed that the students' uses of the boosters depended on the norms and the formality of the academic situations which led the students to strategically avoid placing much imposition on their supervisors to accept their opinions. Gender differences can also be observed in terms of the frequency and types of boosters used. With regards to the politeness and relational work, it can be concluded that the use of boosters to modify speech acts does not in itself make the speech acts polite or impolite, but it is conditioned by other factors, such as the appropriateness of behavior. If the participants agreed upon the use of a booster as appropriate to the immediate social context, this usage becomes a norm by the interactants as a polite appropriate behavior. In contrast, if the participants mutually agree upon the use of the booster as inappropriate to the immediate social context, it is received negatively, thus considered inappropriate impolite behavior. This refutes the idea that the higher frequencies of boosters in speech, the more impolite one appears. It is in fact the type of device, type of context, and the norm of participants which steers the interpretation of politeness rather than the quantity.

Although the current study has attempted to extensively examine the use of boosters and politeness, it is still limited in a number of areas. First, the analysis focused on the use of boosters

in student-supervisor consultations only. Analyzing the use of these devices in other academic contexts, such as student-student' interaction would reveal more about how Arab students communicate in other academic communities. Second, the current study compared the use of boosters only in relation to gender. The use of boosters may be related to other factors and individual differences such as proficiency in the target language, level and year of study, to name a few. Examining these variables would provide better insights into the use of boosters by this community of learners.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Wasan Khalid Ahmed (Ph.D) is a lecturer at University of Fallujah at faculty of Islamic Sciences. She specialises in, discourse studies, politeness and interpersonal communication, culture, media, gender and Teaching English as a Second/Foreign language.

Kesumawati A. Bakar (Ph.D.) is a senior lecturer at the Center for Research in Language Studies and Linguistics, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Her research interests include multimodal discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, gender and identity studies.

Hussein W. Alkhawaj (Ph.D) is associate professor at the Faculty of Arts, Zarqa University in Jordan. He specialises in Language in Intercultural Communication, Discourse Studies, English for Specific Purposes, Teaching English as a Second/Foreign language, and Education Technology.