

Iranian EFL Learners Request Strategies Preferences across Proficiency Levels and Gender

Saman Ebadi

Assistant Professor, Department of Literature and Humanities, Razi University, Kermanshah, Iran

Narges Seidi

M.A. student of TEFL, Department of Literature and Humanities, Razi University, Kermanshah, Iran

Abstract

Pragmatic speech acts such as invitations, refusals, suggestions, apologies and requests are significant components of communicative competence. The speech act of requesting is of particular interest to second language acquisition researchers. This study aims to examine Iranian EFL learners request preferences. It also tries to uncover whether gender and proficiency levels play a role in the pragmatic competence of the learners. The participants of the study were 34 EFL learners in a private language institute in Iran. The data were collected through a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) having 15 request situations that were translated into Persian and a Proficiency test. The results of the study revealed that linguistic proficiency level and gender are effective in choice of request strategies. It was revealed that females preferred indirect requests in their performances. Besides, directness decreased as linguistic proficiency level increased which means that indirectness increases with linguistic proficiency. The findings of the study can be helpful for EFL teachers and instructors with regard to teaching pragmatic in EFL context.

Keywords: Iranian EFL learners, gender, proficiency level, request strategies

INTRODUCTION

In second language acquisition, communicative competence is one of the interesting issues. Dell Hymes (1967) which is related to the ability of speaker to communicate properly in a specific context (Brown, 2000) first introduced it. Highlighting the importance of communicative competence Brown (2000, P. 250) stated that "Communicative is not merely an event, it is functional and purposive, and communication is a series of communicative acts or speech acts which are used to accomplish a particular purpose". Speech act has influential and illocutionary meaning like complimenting, thanking, commanding, apologizing and requesting". Thomas (1995) believed that just as the same utterances might have different meanings in different conditions or contexts, different words could be used to perform the same speech act. In

the same vain, Mikolic (2010) claimed that beside the role of language as a tool for communication, it can be adopted to express personal and cultural identity that would be based on social circumstances. Also, Drager (2010) pointed out that there is a relationship between social factors and variation in production and perception of speech. It should be noted that cultures are different in their interactional styles and perception of messages, leading to different preferences of speech act behaviors and interpretation of conveyed messages (e.g. Cheung, 2010, Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2010; Fukushima, 1990; Kramsch, 1995; Mills, 2009; Mikolic, 2010; Schröder, 2010; Thorne, 2003; Wierzbicka, 1985; Walters, 1979). According to Brown and Levinson(1987) requests are regarded as face-threatening acts because they made pressure on the interlocutor. Ellis (2001) confirmed that people have to take into account their relationship with addressees and the importance, or the size of the changes they are going to make in other people's lives, so that mutual response is carried out, and the nature of interaction between the speaker and the hearer is not damaged. According to the studies which have been done in pragmatics, individuals adopted indirect speech act in their social relations to be more polite and keep in mind the role of three factors: size of imposition, power and social distance (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2010; Felix-Brasdefer, 2005; Fukushima, 1996; Limberg, 2009; LoCastro, 1997; Marti, 2006; Rinnert & Kobayashi, 1999). Also, Blum-Kulka et al. proposed a general framework of request strategies which divided into direct, conventionally indirect, non-conventionally indirect. Speakers are supposed to keep in their mind when manipulating request actions.

Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989 cited in Francis, 1997) differentiate between three degree of directness based on situation in which the illocution is transparent from locution direct requests, conventionally indirect requests, and non- conventionally indirect requests. The request strategies in the following classification are ordered according to decreasing degree of directness Blum-Kulka, et al. (1989 cited in Francis, 1997, p. 28) summarize a combination of level of directness and strategy types in CCSARP project as follows:

A. direct level

1. Mood derivable: Utterances in which the grammatical mood of the verb signals illocutionary force. (For example, sit on your chair)
2. Performative: Utterances in which the illocutionary force is explicitly named. (For example, I tell you sit on your chair)
3. Hedged performative: Utterances in which naming of the illocutionary force is modified by hedging expressions. (For example, I would like to ask you to leave)
4. Obligation statements: Utterances which state the obligation of the hearer to carry out the act (for example, Sir, you'll have to remove your shoes before enter to house).

5. Want statements: Utterances which state the speaker's desire that the hearer carries out the act (for example, I want you to remove your shoes before enter to house).

b. Conventionally indirect level

6. Suggestory formulae: Utterances which contain a suggestion to do something (for example, (How about playing card?).

7. Query-preparatory: Utterances containing reference to preparatory conditions (e.g. ability, willingness) as conventionalized in any specific language (for example, would you mind take your book away).

c. Non-conventionally indirect level

8. Strong hints: Utterances containing partial reference to object or element needed for the implementation of the act (for example, Playing card is boring).

9. Mild hints: Utterances that make no reference to the request proper (or any of its elements) but are interpretable as requests by context (for example, we've been watching this movie for more than one hour).

Most of the researchers (e.g. Bardovi-Harlig, 2003, Kasper, 2001, Kasper, 2008, Kondo, 2008) believe that pragmatic knowledge is teachable, but their methods for teaching pragmatics is different. For example Bardovi-Harlig (2003) argues that the classroom is a place where pragmatic instruction can occur. As Kim (2007) pointed out, "Each culture has a tendency to choose a specific perspective in using request strategies" (p. 60). This study offers insight into how EFL learners utilize request which is interculturally crucial, and aims to investigate the relationship between request strategies and learners' proficiency level and gender by answering to the following questions :

- Is there any relationship between learners' proficiency level and their choice of request strategies?
- Is there any relationship between gender and adopting request strategies?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Some studies regarding speech act production by non-native speakers have already been carried out. House and Kasper (1987) studied request realization strategies by 200 German. They revealed that learners used much more direct request than native speakers of English did, while native speakers used most indirect forms. In another study, Tanaka and Kawade (1982) studied the understanding politeness by native speakers of English and advanced learners of English whose native language is Japanese. It was found that 14.2 percent of advanced learners used direct expression or less polite strategies such as "I want to borrow your car" or "lend me you pen. Bardovi, Harlig and Harford (1991) revealed that grammatical ability or general language proficiency scaled by standardized tests such as TOEFL does not necessarily guarantee the learners' pragmatic ability.

Bulut and Rabab'ah (2007) examined the politeness of Saudi female students' requests when communicate with their male university professors via email. They showed that the students employed negative politeness strategies to address their professors and positive politeness to perform the speech act of request. Alffatah (2009) examined the request strategies employed by

Yemeni EFL learners. The results indicated that query-preparatory, mood-derivable and want/need statements to request were the most frequent request strategies, and politeness was achieved through such politeness markers as 'please', 'sorry', 'pardon' and 'excuse me'. Accordingly, Martinez-Flor (2009) investigated the role that 'please' played as a mitigating device to soften a request. The results revealed that the participants of the study, Spanish EFL learners, and employed 'please' only at the end of the request move. He claimed that this pattern of use could be changed by presenting rich sources of pragmatic input such as film scenes to the learners.

In Iran's context, Jalilifar, Hashemian and Tabatabaee (2011) in a cross-cultural study, compared 96 Iranian EFL learners with 10 Australian native speakers of English. The results indicated that there existed an imbalance in the form of overuse of direct requests and underuse of indirect request of the former group, the latter were balanced in their use of direct and indirect strategies. Much in the same, Ahangari and Shoghli (2011) also carried out a comparative study of the request strategies of Iranian EFL learners and Canadian native speakers of English. The study confirms that both groups made use of conventionally indirect strategies, which were encoded through query-preparatory and Iranian group, overused indirect strategies. (Alemi & Razzaghi, 2013) examined the politeness markers utilized in business ESP textbooks produced by native speakers. The results of this study indicated there were an inadequate number of politeness markers in the textbook.

METHOD

Participants

The participants of the study were 34 (16 females and 18males) EFL learners. Their ages ranged 21-35 years. They were studying Top Notch course books in a private language institute in Kermanshah, Iran.

Instruments

A placement test contains 60-item multiple-choice test that includes cloze passages, vocabulary structure and pronunciation was used. The next instrument was a simple Discourse Completion Task (DCT) prepared by the researchers in which the students were supposed to complete by putting themselves to that particular situation based on their immediate reaction. The participants translated the questionnaire to Persian to avoid any misunderstanding.

In order to determine the internal consistency of the translated questionnaire, Cronbach's Alpha (α), an appropriate reliability index for reliability check was used. The validity and reliability of this questionnaire were determined through a pilot study on 10 students. The reliability index was reported as 0.88. The same procedure was taken in order to pilot the English proficiency test and the reliability index was 0.76 which indicates that this test is a reliable one, too. The researchers briefly explained to the participants how to answer to the questions with some examples.

Procedure

Prior the study, in order to determine students' proficiency level of participants the placement Test was run. As a results of the participants' scores. They were divided into three groups of low (n=10) intermediate (n=11), advanced (n=13). After dividing the participants into three groups based on their proficiency scores, DCT was distributed among them to be filled out.

After collecting DCT, the data were analyzed to clarify the role of gender in learners' production request speech act and the relationship between learners' L2 proficiency levels and their use of request strategies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to place the participants in three groups of low, intermediate, and advanced, the participants took a proficiency test. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the participants' Proficiency test scores.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of participants' proficiency test scores

	low	Intermediate	advanced
N	9	16	9
Mean	11.00	33.69	56.33
Std. Deviation	3.77	11.37	2.29
Minimum	2	16	54
Maximum	14	49	60

As it is clear, the participants were classified into three groups of low (n=9), intermediate (n=16), and advanced level (n=9). By considering one standard deviation above and below the mean.

Table 2. Percentage and frequency of preferred request strategies in three groups

Group	% F	Direct	Conventionally-Indirect	Non-conventionally indirect	total
Low	%	30.30	36.97	32.73	100
	F	50	61	54	165
Mid	%	29.69	40.01	30.30	100
	F	49	66	50	165
High	%	16.66	56.66	26.68	100
	F	30	102	48	180

According to Table 2, the most frequent request strategies in low proficiency group were direct strategies; 30, 29 and 16 percent in low, mid and high proficiency level, respectively. It can be seen that as the level of directness decreased proficiency level increased as well. Accordingly, with regard to the conventionally- indirect utterances, the most frequent conventionally –indirect strategies were preferred by high proficiency group; 56 percent, and its level decreased along with proficiency level, which indicates that participants with high proficiency level are aware of manipulating the indirect utterances appropriately. Considering non-conventionally indirect utterances, they were preferred by 32 percent of the participants in the low proficiency level, 30 percent by the mid and 26 percent by the high proficiency level respectively.

Regarding the second question of the research, table 3 shows the percentage and frequency of the request strategies in male/female participants.

Table 3. Percentage and frequency of request strategy by gender

Group	% F	Direct	Conventionally-Indirect	Non-conventionally indirect	total
Male	%	31.25	29.16	35.59	100
	F	75	70	85	240
Female	%	33.33	55.65	25.92	100
	F	90	150	70	270

According to table 3. 31 percent of males preferred direct strategies while 33 percent of females chose the direct strategies. Regarding the conventionally –indirect strategies, it can be seen that the females tend to choose the conventionally –indirect strategies more than males. (55 percent of females and 29 percent of males). Another worth -mentioning point is that, males preferred the non-conventionally-indirect strategies more than the females. (35 percent of males and 25 percent of females).

The results of the study revealed some significant hints with regard to the relationship between participants 'level and the use of request strategies. According to Table 2 the participants in the high proficiency group preferred the conventionally-indirect strategies. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), higher levels of indirectness leads to higher levels of politeness, so “direct requests appear to be inherently impolite and face-threatening because they intrude in the addressee's territory” (p. 17). Hassall (2003) states that formal simplicity is another factor that probably contributes to learners' use of conventionally indirect strategy type. This type of *Modal* question is structurally simple, consisting minimally of *Modal verb+ Agent Verb* (e.g. *May I borrow*). So learners are unlikely to be discouraged by considerations of formal complexity in selecting this strategy (p. 1918). The results of this study are in line with Byon (2004) in which advanced learners tend to use polite strategies in their language production.

It has been observed that the participants in low proficiency group preferred the direct strategies, this is probably because they were not knowledgeable enough either in choice

of proper words or syntax to produce an indirect request strategies which demands more complex structures.

Regarding to the second question, the relationship between gender and choice of request strategies, it was observed that females use conventionally-indirect strategies in their production more than males. It revealed the fact that females tend to be more polite than the male in their language performance. Holmes (1995) characterizes women's speech as more polite than men's. The results of this study are in line with other researches (e.g., Fishman 1978, 1980; Tannen 1984, 1990; Zimmerman & West, 1975) about language and gender, women are more likely than men to express positive politeness and to use mitigating strategies to avoid or minimize threatening their interlocutors' face. It is probably in line with research that has shown societal expectations that women must "behave nicely" do have an impact on their "front stage" performances of their gendered identities (Coates 1999).

CONCLUSION

The present study investigated the preferred request strategies by Iranian EFL learners across different proficiency levels. It also examined the effect of gender on pragmatic competence of the EFL learners. The results of the study showed that proficiency level and gender are effective in participants' request strategies use. The participants in high proficiency level adopted the indirect strategies in their production which indicates that linguistic development is effective in request strategies use. Concerning to the effect of gender, it was found that females tend to use indirect strategies. It means that they are more polite than their male counterparts.

However, this study conducted in a private language institute with limited number of students. Hence, this limited number of participants limits the generalizability of the findings of the present research, so the findings of this study need to be reported cautiously.

From a pedagogical point of view, it can be said that proficiency level has an effect on the pragmatic competence. So, exposure to target language instruction can help learners to attain pragmatic competence. Therefore, it is suggested that by exposing EFL learners to authentic target language in the classrooms, learners are introduced with socio-cultural differences between languages. Further research should be done to investigate the other speech act strategies. Besides, since this study has been done in a private language institute with limited number of students, other researches can be carried out with more participants.

REFERENCES

- Ahangari, S., & Shoghli, M. (2011). Investigating request strategies between Iranian EFL learners and Canadian native speakers of English in various social situations. *IPEDR*, 26, 173-176.
- Alemi, M., & Razzaghi, S. (2013). Politeness markers in English for business purposes textbook. *International Journal of Research Studies in Language Learning*, 2(4), 109-123.
- Alfattah, M. H. A. (2009). Politeness strategies in the English interlanguage requests of Yemeni learners. *Iranian Journal of Language Studies (IJLS)*, 3(3), 249-266.
- Bardovi-Harlig, K., & Taylor, M. R. (2003). Teaching pragmatics. Retrieved on November 22, 2007 from <http://exchanges.state.gov/education/engteaching/>
- Blum-Kulka, Sh. House, J. (1989) Cross-cultural and situational variation in requesting behavior. In: Blum-Kulka, S., House, J., Kasper, G. (Eds.), *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies*. Ablex, Norwood, NJ, pp. 123-154.
- Blum-Kulka, Sh. House, J. Kasper, G. (1989a). Investigating cross-cultural pragmatics: an introductory overview. In: Blum-Kulka, S., House, J., Kasper, G. (Eds.), Ablex, Norwood, NJ, pp. 1-34.
- Brown, H. D. (2000). *Principles of language learning and teaching*. New York: Pearson Education.
- Brown, P. & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Bulut, D., & Rabab'ah, G. (2007). Pragmatics of email communication between Saudi female students and male professors. *The JALT CALL Journal*, 3(3), 49-73.
- Cheung, M. (2010) the globalization and localization of persuasive marketing communication: A cross-linguistic socio-cultural analysis. *Journal of Pragmatics* 42, 354-376.
- Coates, Jennifer. (1999) "Women behaving badly: female speakers backstage." *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 3(1) 65-80.
- Drager, K. (2010). Sociophonetic variation in speech perception. *Language and Linguistic Compass* 4 (7), 473-480.
- Economidou-Kogetsidis, M. (2010) Cross-cultural and situational variation in requesting behavior: Perceptions of social situations and strategic usage of request patterns. *Journal of Pragmatics* 42, 2262-2281.
- Ellis, R (2001). *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford University Press, Hong Kong.
- Felix-Brasdefer, C. J. (2005). Indirectness and politeness in Mexican requests. In: Edington, D. (Ed.), *Selected Proceedings of the 7th Hispanic Linguistic Symposium*. Cascadilla Press, Somerville, MA, pp. 66-78.
- Fukushima, S. (1996) Request strategies in British English and Japanese. *Language Sciences* 18 (3-4), 671-688.
- Jalilifar, A. R., Hashemian, M., & Tabatabaee, M. (2011). A cross-sectional study of Iranian EFL Learners request strategies. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 2(4), 790-803. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4304/jltr.2.4.790-803>

- Kasper, G., & Rose, K.R. (2001). *Pragmatics in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kim, H. K. (2007). The role of the learner subjectivity and pragmatic transfer in the performance Of Requested by Korean ESL learners. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Texas A & M University.
- Kondo, S. (2008). Effects on pragmatic development through awareness-raising instruction: Refusals by Japanese EFL learners. In E. Alcón Soler & A. Martinez- Flor (Eds.), *Investigating Pragmatics in Foreign Language Learning, Teaching and testing* (pp153- 177). Great Britain: Cromwell Press.
- Kramsch, C. (1995). The cultural component of language teaching. *Language, Culture and Curriculum* 8 (2), 83-92.
- Limberg, H. (2009). Impoliteness and threat responses. *Journal of Pragmatics* 41, 1376-1394.
- Mikolic, V. (2010) Culture and language awareness in the multicultural environment of Slovene Istria. *Journal of Pragmatics* 42, 637-649.
- Mills, S. (2009). Impoliteness in a cultural context. *Journal of Pragmatics* 41, 1047-1060.
- Rinnert, C., & Kobayashi, H. (1999). Requestive hints in Japanese and English. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 31, 1173-1201.
- Schroder, U. (2010) Speech styles and functions of speech from a cross-cultural perspective. *Journal of Pragmatics* 42, 466-476.
- Thomas, J. (1995) *Meaning in Interaction: An Introduction to Pragmatics*. Longman, London.
- Thorne, S. L. (2003) Artifacts and cultures-of-use in intercultural communication. *Language Learning and Technology*, 7(2), 38-67.
- Walters, J. (1979). Strategies for requesting in Spanish and English: Structural similarities and pragmatic differences. *Language Learning*, 29(2), 277-293.