

The Effect of Language Learning Experience on the Appropriate Use of Speech Act ‘Request’

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Abstract—Nowadays emphasizing linguistic competence is not a sufficient path to reach a target-like communicative competence. Pragmatic competence should be put emphasis on as well. The importance of learning speech acts which is one aspect in the pragmatics is clear to those who want to learn a second or foreign language. This study after investigating the interest of language learners in the acquisition of appropriate use of second language speech acts, traces the variation over time in the use of speech act of request in Iranian EFL University students and for further clarification a group of non-language University students. The results showed no effect of time on the appropriate use of speech act “request”.

Index Terms—linguistic competence, communicative competence, pragmatic competence, speech acts, request

I. INTRODUCTION

Emphasizing linguistic competence is not a sufficient path to reach a target-like communicative competence; since learning a language is not merely learning its grammar, vocabulary and other skills and sub skills, great importance should be put on pragmatic competence as well. Pragmatic competence means the comprehension of speech acts and conversational implicatures (Garcia, 2004). Therefore, we should try to appreciate a theory which accounts for language use (other than language usage). In this regard, speech act theory plays a crucial role (Schmidt, 1983). A speech act in linguistics and the philosophy of language is an utterance with a performative function in language and communication. The main contribution of this theory is to explain communicative competence. As Schmidt (1983) puts it, speech act includes all the acts we do while speaking, such as invitation, request, apology, and compliment. Austin, the developer of speech act (1962) and Searle et al. (1980) state: "the theory of speech acts starts with the assumption that the minimal unit of human communication is not a sentence, but rather the performance of certain kinds of act".

Studies done on speech act are not rare. Various researchers from different cultures conducted cross-cultural studies in order to compare one or more types of speech acts in two cultures. For example Taghizade Mahani (2012) studied the speech act of request between Iranian EFL learners and English natives. Hill (1997) carried out a study on speech act of request on Japanese EFL learners in different proficiency levels. Felix-Brasdefer (2007) examined the speech act of request performed by American learners of Spanish as a second language in three proficiency groups.

These studies and many others (e.g. Barron (2003), Kondo (1997), and Trosborg (1995)) were conducted to investigate the variation of speech acts between two cultures, taking into account some factors like gender or proficiency. But based on the author's investigation, little studies have focused on the development and variation in performing L2 speech acts by EFL learners especially in the academic settings.

This study after investigating the interest of language learners in the acquisition of appropriate use of English speech acts, traces the variation over time in the use of speech act of request in Iranian EFL university students. The researcher aims to investigate how close the L2 learners get to second language cultural norms in using the speech act of request in different stages of their academic span.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Pragmatics is one of the issues involved in discourse studies which have received a lot of attention over the past decades by many researchers from all over the world (e.g. Barron 2003, Barron and Warga, 2007). This issue plays a very important role in the production and perception of language; and this is the reason for interlocutors to use different strategies during their conversations in order to express their intended speech acts.

Research literature in pragmatics has been dominated by the studies which address the ways non-native speakers differ from the native speakers of the target language (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig, 2001), and this owes to the fact that native

speakers of a language have been logically and traditionally regarded as the ideal reference of pragmatic knowledge and performance.

Reaction of people in different cultures is different from each other to various types of speech acts, since their views to pragmatic principles are quite different, and this is the reason for worldwide researchers to have a variety of studies about speech acts.

There are several studies which focus on the effect of proficiency on pragmatic competence (Rose 2000; Trosborg 1995). The findings of these studies indicate that in many cases grammatical and pragmatic competence seems to develop together but relatively independently. Hill (1997) studied speech act of request on Japanese EFL learners in different proficiency levels. The results showed that with increasing proficiency, learners decreased the use of direct strategies and became more native-like speakers. Felix-Brasdefer (2007), examined the speech act of request performed by American learners of Spanish as a second language in three proficiency groups. The findings showed that the production of direct request by beginners was the most, while intermediate and advanced groups produced more indirect requests with a decline in direct request approximating the native speaker patterns. Jalilifar (2009) explored Iranian EFL learners' realization of requestive speech acts. The results showed Iranian language learners' pragmatic development in making requests. However, unlike the native respondents who exhibited balanced production of indirect strategies, the higher proficiency EFL learners manifested overuse of the indirect strategies, while the lower proficiency level Iranian learners excessively produced direct request strategies. Jalilifar, Hashemian, and Tabatabaee, (2011) investigated the request strategies used by Iranian EFL learners and Australian native speakers of English. Although results revealed pragmatic development, particularly in the movement from direct to indirect strategies on the part of EFL learners, learners with higher proficiency displayed overuse of indirect type of requesting. The lower proficiency learners, on the other hand, overused the most direct strategy type.

Research questions and hypotheses

Questions

This study intends to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. Which group of language learners i.e. freshmen, sophomores or seniors is significantly closer to native English speakers regarding the appropriate use of the speech act of request?

RQ2. Is there any significant difference between English language learners and non-language learners in the appropriate use of the speech act of request based on the English native speakers' norms?

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

The participants of this study included 17 English natives as base of the study, 30 Persian natives, 47 freshmen, 32 sophomore, & 38 seniors' learners of English as a foreign language. The English natives were collected from professors in Imam Khomeini university of Qazvin, Tehran University, and searching for tourists in 9 hotels. The other 4 groups were collected from Vali-e-Asr and Narjes Khatun Universities of Rafsanjan. For the first part of the study, the researcher selected 18 EFL participants in the Vali-e-Asr University at random to check their attitudes in the acquisition of speech act in the University, in the second part, a DCT questionnaire including 12 situational descriptions was given to the three groups of English academic learners; furthermore, a Persian translation of the DCT questionnaire was given to the Persian natives. In the last part, she selected 10 persons in each group except the English natives, at random to check their precision in answering to the questionnaire.

B. Instruments

Some researchers have stated that the most authentic data in sociolinguistic research is spontaneous speech gathered by ethnographic observation (Manes & Wolfson 1981). However, there are some documents about the difficulties of relying solely on this method (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper 1989), and have led to the wide use of an elicitation procedure called the Discourse Completion Test (DCT). The instrument used in this study is "discourse completion test" which has a wide use in sociolinguistic and pragmalinguistic studies in order to elicit authentic responses from participants. The DCT (adopted in 1982 by Blum-Kulka, for the purpose of investigating speech acts) is a questionnaire containing a set of briefly described situations designed to elicit a particular speech act. Beebe and Cummings (1985) concluded that this device results in the researcher's ability to collect a very large corpus of data, on a wide range of difficult-to-observe speech behaviors, in a short period of time. The questionnaire is about speech acts of request which is consisted of 12 situational descriptions, followed by a space in which the participants have to provide the appropriate linguistic form of the speech act. The questionnaire is included in the appendix.

An attitude questionnaire was applied to 18 EFL students of Vali-e-Asr University at random check their attitudes in the acquisition of speech acts in the University. The questionnaire was given to 40 students, but only 18 persons answered it. And an interview was conducted to 10 participants from each group to check their precision in the answering to the questionnaire.

C. Procedure

As the first step of the study an attitude questionnaire was given to 18 EFL students at the Vali-e-Asr University at random to know whether they would like to acquire speech acts in the University. Then after this step, in the main part of the study, 17 English natives selected to administer a DCT. This group acted as the base of the study with which the other four groups were compared.

As the next step, the same DCT questionnaire was given to the 3 groups of Iranian EFL students and one group of Persian native students at Vali-e-Asr University. Then 10 students from freshmen, 10 students from sophomores, 10 students from seniors, and 10 persons from non-language students were selected at random and then they had been interviewed in order to understand the precision of their answers to the questions involved in the questionnaire.

IV. RESULT

The results of the attitude questionnaire showed that 11% of the participants were neutral, 44% chose agree, and similarly, 44% selected strongly agree for acquiring the speech act in the University showing the majority of students' inclination toward covering the request speech act in language classes. The finding further inspired the researcher to take the next steps of her investigation. In the next step of the study, after giving the questionnaire to every 4 groups and interview with 10 persons of each groups at random, the result was checked. The following table is a comparison among groups using questionnaire and the interview.

TABLE 1
COMPARISON OF DCT AND INTERVIEW

I G	Item1	Item2	Item3	Item4	Item5	Item6	Item7	Item8	Item9	Item10	Item11	Item12
GQ1	49	47	52	55	67	77	72	42	43	51	67	47
GI1	10	20	20	10	20	30	20	10	12	16	10	19
GQ2	82	78	88	74	57	135	153	59	59	79	127	60
GI2	11	20	23	13	18	21	23	12	20	20	24	18
GQ3	44	51	58	47	54	94	83	40	44	49	59	45
GI3	12	14	16	16	16	18	16	18	16	18	18	18
GQ4	49	64	69	58	66	99	98	50	62	74	89	52
GI4	12	19	19	29	19	35	22	10	10	30	27	35

Table 1 shows the results obtained on the students' responses to the DCT and interview. In this table, "GQ1" stands for questionnaire group 1 (Persian group), "GI1" for interview group 1 (Persian group), "GQ2" for questionnaire group 2 (freshmen group), "GI2" for interview group 2 (freshmen group), "GQ3" for questionnaire group 3 (sophomore group), "GI3" for interview group 3 (sophomore group), "GQ4" for questionnaire group 4 (senior group), and "GI4" for interview group 4 (senior group). The achievement of each group with regard to each item is indicated in the respective row. The result of this part showed that no major differences were noticed in any of the comparisons. The highest score of a situation in one group was almost parallel to the highest score in the other. The results, thus attained, put further confirmation on the precision of the data obtained through the DCT.

After collecting the data of DCT questionnaire, it was analyzed. First the assumptions were checked. There were no violation of assumptions of normal distribution and homogeneity of variance in the data. Then, in the descriptive part, the means of each group were obtained. This is clarified in the table 2. As the table shows, mean scores of 4 groups were close to each other and the total mean score was 22.03.

TABLE 2
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

speech act request								
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
English term 1	47	22.28	2.872	.419	21.43	23.12	12	26
English term 4	32	20.97	3.881	.686	19.57	22.37	10	27
English term 8	37	22.46	3.228	.531	21.38	23.54	17	29
Persian group	30	22.27	4.042	.738	20.76	23.78	16	32
Total	146	22.03	3.467	.287	21.47	22.60	10	32

From the samples mean scores, it could be expected that no difference would be existed between all groups of the study. This expectation is proved by the next table, the ANOVA table.

TABLE 3
ANOVA

ANOVA					
speech act request					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	47.400	3	15.800	1.323	.269
Within Groups	1695.429	142	11.940		
Total	1742.829	145			

ANOVA table is the main table in the study which tells whether the null hypothesis is retained or rejected. The significance value should be less than the critical value 0.05 in order that the null hypothesis be rejected, meaning there is a difference between groups of the study. Here, the magnitude is 0.269 which is more than the critical value 0.05. Therefore, the 3 null hypotheses of the study were retained. In other words, the Iranian EFL learners exhibit no variation in performing L2 speech act during their 4 years of academic career, and also, seniors, sophomores, and freshmen do not show significant difference in appropriately performing the speech act of request with regard to the native speakers' norms. And finally, there is no significant difference between Persian natives' students and EFL university learners in appropriately performing the speech act of request based on the English native speakers' norms.

V. DISCUSSION

The present study was an attempt to find the effect of the length of academic education on EFL learners' enhancement of using the speech act of request in English. As the results of the analysis showed, there was not a significant difference among the 3 groups of EFL learners. The findings also indicated no significant difference between EFL learners and non-English language learners in this regard.

Nearly the articles conducted about the speech act revealed the effect of proficiency on the use of specific kind of speech act (Trosborg, 1995; Hill, 1997; Felix-Brasdefer, 2007; Taguchi, 2011; & Jalilifar, 2009). The belief is that with increasing proficiency the appropriate use of certain kind of speech acts increase and get closer to the target language native's norms. But in this study, the result was contradictory by showing no effect of time and proficiency on the use of speech act and that the Persian native students had the highest amount of nearness to the norms of the English natives. In this study, 3 hypotheses were retained which means that Iranian EFL learners exhibit no variation in performing L2 request speech act during their 4 years of academic career, and that also, seniors, sophomores, and freshmen do not show significance difference in appropriately performing the speech act of request with regard to the native speakers' norms, and that there is no significant difference between Persian natives students and EFL university learners in appropriately performing the speech act of request.

The findings of this study are in contrast with some other findings such as a study done by Trosborg (1995) to elicit speech act of request, complaint, and apology in the performance over three proficiency levels of EFL learners. The result was that with increasing proficiency, the use of internal and external modifications improved, approximating the learners to the native speaker patterns. Another study done by Hill (1997) showed that with increasing proficiency, Japanese EFL learners became more native-likes, and findings of the study by Felix-Brasdefer (2007) showed that with increasing proficiency, American learners of Spanish approximated native-like patterns. However, there are some other studies with findings somehow in agreement with the finding of the current study. For example, Beal (1998) in a study investigated the developmental patterns in the requestive behavior of foreign language learners of Greek, at lower intermediate, intermediate, and advanced levels, and found that although several aspects of the learners' pragmatic competence develop with increasing proficiency, the advanced learners' performance lags far behind native speakers in several respects.

The results of the study indicated no significance difference between EFL learners with different lengths of academic experience. One of the justifications to make is that this study focused on the length of academic experience not the language learners' proficiency level. But on one hand, we expect the seniors of a particular course of study to be higher in their own field compared with freshmen, sophomores or juniors, and on the other hand, even the non-English language students didn't differ significantly from EFL students in appropriately using the speech act of request. Such a finding could be justified based on a cross-cultural comparison of a particular speech act. One reason to offer here for such a closeness of performance of the 4 groups could be closeness of the way the speech act of request was dealt with by native speakers of English and native Persian speakers. This similarity or closeness may not necessarily exist regarding other speech acts.

Some limitations of the current study would be that it included relatively small sample sizes while large samples can lead to more reliable results. Besides, the present study resorted to a baseline of both American and British speakers. Cultural factors may make changes in the norms of English used by either of the two groups. Finally, the present study due to the practicality reasons didn't distinguish between the male and female responses, while when dealing with such aspects of language, gender may play an important role.

The findings of this study are significant to course designers, syllabus designers, and English language teachers at different levels. Course designers by defining L2 cultural elements that the learners may find interesting in the course, identifying teacher's cultural competence, and including cultural elements, can enhance the learning of the L2 cultural norms of the target language as much as possible. Syllabus and material designers can make learners proficient speakers by addressing the non-verbal as well as the verbal components of language and how these may be incorporated into language lessons by teachers. This type of syllabus which is called cultural syllabus, leads to the increasing of the communicative competence of the learners, allows more authentic language learning, motivating learners to learn languages, and instilling an intercultural competence for the learners.

And finally, English language teachers should be informant of these cultural norms, due to being in direct contact with the students.

There are some suggestions for further research about this study: the result would be better if more amount of target language natives would be applied; there may be a more precise and acceptable result if the amount of samples in each groups increase; The current study focused on the perception of speech acts while other studies are needed to explore the effect of the length of academic experience on the production of the requestive speech act; The present study dealt with the speech act of request while further studies can investigate other speech acts; Studying the acquisition of the speech acts of other languages can also lead to different results; Furthermore, besides DCT, prospective researchers can employ other data collection tools such as recording authentic interaction, elicited conversations (open and closed role-plays), multiple-choice questionnaires, and scaled-response formats in order to obtain a comprehensive set of data on Iranian EFL learners' pragmatic perception, comprehension, interpretation as well as production.

APPENDIX

Thank you for participating in this survey. 12 situations have been created for this study. Please try to imagine that these situations are real and please write down what you would say in these situations in real life.

First part: your information:

Age:

Gender: Male Female

Second part: The 12 created situations:

Situation 1

You really have to take this course in order to graduate, but you found that the course is already closed. So, you decide to ask the professor, whom you DO NOT KNOW personally, to allow you to take this course. What would you say to get this professor to grant you permission to participate in this course?

Situation 2

You are going to visit your friend, who lives in the college dormitory. You are on campus, but don't know where the dorm is. You are going to ask a student, who is passing by, for the location of the dorm. How will you ask the student?

Situation 3

You are a senior and the vice president of a campus club/organization. You need to get the phone number of Mary, another member of the club. You think that a new member (who seems to be a FRESHMAN and whom you DO NOT know personally), sitting next to you may know Mary's number. So, you decide to ask the new member Mary's phone number. How would you ask?

Situation 4

You are very much interested in auditing a class taught by Professor Kim. You already have taken two classes from Professor Kim, and you KNOW him personally very well. So you decide to ask this professor's permission to audit. What would you say to get this professor to allow you to audit this class?

Situation 5

You and your best friend are members of the college skiing club. You are riding the bus and have just arrived at the mountain. You see that your BEST FRIEND, seated next to you, is applying sunscreen lotion. You want to use that lotion because you have forgotten to bring your own. You turn to your best friend. How would you ask?

Situation 6

Your roommate is your best friend's younger sibling, who is your high school junior. Your computer is out of order because of a virus, but you have a paper due tomorrow. You decide to ask your ROOMMATE whether you can borrow his computer tonight. What would you say to get your roommate to do this favor for you?

Situation 7

Your history mid-term exam is approaching and you find that the scheduled date of the test is the same date as that of your brother's wedding. You can't do both on that day and you prefer to join this unforgettable moment of your family, so you decide to ask the professor (whom you DO NOT know personally) to rearrange another day especially for you to take this test. What would you say to get this professor to allow you to take the exam on another day?

Situation 8

A friend of yours from out of town is paying you a visit. You are showing your friend around campus and both of you would like to take a photo together to remember this happy moment, so you decide to ask a nearby person (who is a STRANGER to you) to do you this favor. What would you say to get this student to take your picture together?

Situation 9

You are a senior member of a student organization. You are in a meeting now. You need to borrow a piece of paper in order to take some notes. A unfamiliar member, who seems to be a FRESHMAN and whom you DO NOT know personally, is sitting next to you and might have a piece of extra folder paper. How would you ask this new member for a piece of paper?

Situation 10

You are applying for a scholarship, and you decide to ask Professor White, who knows you very well as your ACADEMIC ADVISOR, to write a recommendation letter for you. What would you say to get Professor White to do this favor to you?

Situation 11

Because of the stomach flu, you were absent last Friday history class that you are enrolled in. So you decide to borrow your INTIMATE classmate's notes to catch up with the rest of the class. What would you say to get this friend to lend you notes for the class you missed?

Situation 12

You are a senior and the president of a student organization. You are in a meeting now. You would like to take some notes, but you don't have a pen. A close junior member (who is a sophomore, and whom you KNOW very well personally) of the organization is sitting next to you and might have an extra pen. What would you say to get this close junior member to lend you a pen?

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