

AN INVESTIGATION OF REQUEST STRATEGY EMPLOYED BY ESL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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Abstract

The study explored the pragmatic competence of ESL undergraduate students of a public sector university in Karachi in English language in relation to the use of request strategy as a speech act. It also aimed to explore different request strategies male and female ESL undergraduate students of a public sector university employed. The study was conducted using quantitative method. The data was obtained from forty ESL undergraduate students using Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT). The results showed that the ESL undergraduate students mostly used mood derivable which is a sub type of the most direct request strategy. Gender influence in choosing request strategies was found present in the study. The results indicated that females used more indirect request strategies than males in their speech as men used direct request strategy compared to women.

Keywords: *ESL Gender. Pragmatic competence, Request strategy, Undergraduate students*

Introduction

According to Eshraghi & Shahrokhi (2016), ESL teachers generally give priority to the teaching of grammar and vocabulary rather than communication proficiency which develops respective skills among the learners; however, they lack communicative competence. Pragmatic competence, a component of communicative competence, is the ability to use various speech acts that are actions performed through utterances appropriately to the context such as requests, apologies, invitations, and so on. To enhance the ability to communicate and interact properly, ESL students should learn pragmatic rules.

Statement of the problem

As making requests probes for approval and it doesn't intimidate others, it appears to be strongly embedded in politeness strategies. Out of the various speech acts, request is considered to be one which is repeatedly used in interactions of humans for the exchange of information and for mutual cooperation. As L2 learners interact more using request strategies, it becomes significant to them. The study investigated pragmatic competency through request strategy employed by ESL undergraduate students of a public sector university and the impact of gender in it.

Purpose of the Study

The study explored the pragmatic competence of ESL undergraduate students of a public sector university in English language and what is the type of request strategy that has been most frequently employed by them as well as to what extent Pakistani male and female ESL undergraduate students differ from each other in terms of using request strategies.

Scope of the Study

This study is restricted to the pragmatic competence of ESL undergraduate students of the University of Karachi. The data for this study was gathered during the fall of 2018.

Background to the Study

Speech acts

Jassim and Nimehchisalem (2016) assert that Austin's speech act theory changed the linguistic outlook of language to its function in communication. He points out that some sentences, expressions or phrases perform action whilst they

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are being uttered. According to Deveci (2015), these acts have three aspects that are (a) locutionary, (b) illocutionary, and (c) prelocutionary. Jassim & Nimehchisalem (2016) states that in a society, people do not speak only to share information or for conversation but they utter sometimes when they desire for another person to carry out an action for them. Tabatabaei (2015) Illocutionary acts are also known as speech acts which includes apology, request, promise etc. According to Searle (1976), illocutionary acts are categorized in 6 steps which are namely; directive, commissive, representative, question, declarative and expressive. Istifci and Kampusu (2009) assert that it is necessary for the language learners to achieve competency in speech acts in order to have successful communication in a social context.

Request as a speech act

According to Brown and Levinson, requests are face threatening acts as both the speaker and listener's face are at risk. The listener's agreement to the request hinders his or her freedom of choice; thus, in order to avoid that the speaker uses different politeness strategies when making a request and imposes his or her will on the listener (Tytar, 2015). Kulka cited in (Ebadi & Seidi, 2015) proposed three levels of the utterance of request strategy that are: the most direct level, the conventionally indirect level and the non-conventionally indirect level and further classified the three levels into sub-category. The most direct level is further categorized in five types that are Mood derivable, performative, hedged performative, Obligation statements, and Want statements. Similarly, according to Tytar (2015), the conventionally indirect level is further classified as Suggestory formulae and Query-preparatory. Likewise, the non-conventionally indirect level is further divided into Strong hints and Mild hints.

Face and Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs)

Erving Goffman cited in (Gil, 2012) proposed the term face and identifies it as a mask or the self-image of the speaker and the listener. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), people possess two faces which reflect upon the dual nature of humanistic society. They further assert that one face is positive which creates an urge in people for bonding and connectivity; whereas, the other face which is negative makes a person autonomous and independent. The positive face and the negative face are threatened by the face threatening acts (FTAs) which not only pose a challenge to a person's positive face through the use of contempt and disapprovals, but also pose a challenge to negative face through the use of requests for actions. A lot of confusion and failure in communication may result from FTAs. (Gil, 2012)

Pragmatic Competence

Pragmatic competence refers to speaker's capability of the effective language usage to achieve the desired goals and to comprehend language usage contextually. According to Uгла & Abidin, (2016), pragmatic competence refers to both manifestations of language and language utilization ability in social surroundings. Similarly, Abedi (2016) specifies that Pragmatic competence is the capability of the speaker to converse specifically in a particular context. Thus, learners who have acquired a command over grammatical use of the language but did not achieve command in pragmatic competence will not be able to produce speech suitable in a social context (Eshraghi and Shahrokhi, 2016). Muthusamy and Farashaiyan (2016) explained that this lack of pragmatic competence will eventually lead to the problems for an individual to develop or maintain social relationships. Pragmatic competence can be realized through the speech acts such as request, apology, invitations and many more. These speech acts play a very important role in the utterance of a statement that has social and communal significance.

Significance of the study

An adequate amount of research regarding the usage of the request strategy by the ESL learners of Pakistan is not currently available. Therefore, the result of this research will aid teachers and facilitators of Pakistan to understand the undergraduate students' understanding of the pragmatic competence and their usage in a social context.

Limitations

There are certain points that this research was unable to report. It must be noted here that in order for this research to be applicable in a general context, it must be replicated in a wider context. It is only then the research can be generalized to the other parts of the country of Pakistan. In this research, the candidates will be of the age ranging from 19-23 only thus the variation of age of the candidates is not wide.

Literature Review

Communicative and pragmatic competence have achieved significance in the recent years as it has been pointed out by the researchers that learners of second language face most difficulties in using speech acts in the target language as they are not taught the communicative use of language. The ESL learners are not aware of socio-pragmatic competence and the focus of the language teachers is only on the vocabulary and grammar of a language. Gaily (2014)

conducted a research which illustrated that the EFL teachers of Sudan focus only on the linguistic competence rather than the pragmatic or communicative competence therefore the students face difficulty when they are in a real communicative setting. Similarly, Eslami-Rasekh and Abdolnazarpour (2010) study's findings revealed that politeness varies according to the cultural and language thus language learners need to adopt politeness of the language that they are aiming to learn. Thus, an atmosphere should be created for the EFL students in a classroom which will enhance their pragmatic competence. The students should be given satisfactory feedback to assist them comprehend communication which is apt in terms of social norms and transform them in effective communicators. One of the speech acts is request which is a face-threatening act and it requires expertise while making a request as it can easily cause a breakdown in a relationship. Moreover, the research on pragmatic competence of English language especially in relation to request strategies has been usually investigated in the native and non-native speaker context in the light of cross-cultural and cross-sectional studies. Jalilifar (2009) conducted a cross-sectional study and analysed the request strategies used by Iranian foreign speakers of English and Australian native speakers of English. It revealed that Iranian learners with high proficiency in English language overused the indirect request strategy; however, Iranian learners with less English proficiency overused the direct request strategy. On the contrary, the request strategy employed by Australian speakers was more balanced. On the same note, Leopold's (2015) study reflects the difference of request strategy made in emails by native speakers of English and non-native speakers of English as the English native speakers' request were more polite than the non-native speakers of English. It also discloses that composing email particularly involving face threatening acts requires a sophisticated command over pragmatics which may be difficult for ESL learners (Leopold, 2015). Email is a modern tool of communication and due to the lack of competence, learners face difficulties in conveying their messages via email. Yang (2009) conducted a research which compared the pragmatic competence of Chinese and American graduate students in English communicative setting and revealed that there are significant differences between the usage of request strategies among Chinese and American graduate students as there are significant differences between Chinese and English languages. Thus, the non-native speaker will have difficulty in communicating without being impolite. Thus it is important for the learners to acquire good command over speech acts to perform well in a social context.

Besides that, many researchers have conducted research on EFL learners' performance with regard to request strategies. Francis (1997) conducted a study that the non-native English speakers use direct request strategies until they acquire good command over the language aspects and as their proficiency in competence grow, they begin to use more complex request strategies. Moreover, as communication has become the most important part of human lives today due to globalization, it is required of English language learners to acquire full command over the pragmatic outlook of the language used. The learners should know in which situation, which sort of level of request strategy has to be used. Kılıçkaya (2010) investigated the request strategies of Turkish learners' pragmatic knowledge using WDCT and the results of the study exhibited that Turkish learners demonstrated linguistic competency in order to operate pragmatically in various contexts while requesting. However, they lack certain level of politeness in the use of the request strategies in certain situations as well as the study also put forwarded few suggestions regarding the issues.

In keeping with the above notion, another take is the performance of ESL learners in relation to request strategy. Kusevska, Ulanska, Ivanovska, Daskalovska, and Mitkovska (2015) conducted a study to improve the skills of English language learners of Republic of Macedonia. This study deduced that the Second language learners may not have problem in making direct request in communication but they may face problems while making conventionally indirect requests and non-conventionally indirect requests (Kusevska et al., 2015). As the learners have command over the request strategies in their own native language but it is required of them to know the strategies in the target language as it is compulsory for them to know how to communicate their feelings or thoughts in the target language (Kusevska et al., 2015). However, fewer studies have examined the request strategies performed by ESL learners in regard to Asian countries. Muthusamy and Farashaiyan (2016) in their research illustrate that conventionally indirect expressions for requests are more frequently used by the international post-graduate students at Malaysian University and the request strategy did not vary when the social factors vary (Muthusamy & Farashaiyan, 2016). The students also faced difficulties in the production of speech acts and mostly used the same request strategies across all the situations though the three social factors affecting the situations that are power status, social status and imposition varies (Muthusamy & Farashaiyan, 2016). Thus, the study believes that the students lack pragmatic competence and linguistic knowledge including grammar, expression, vocabulary and structure (Muthusamy & Farashaiyan, 2016). Similarly, Ueda (2006) observed that the pragmatic competence of Japanese learners of English language evolved with the increase in English proficiency level. The findings of the research indicate that the Japanese learners of

English language used conventionally indirect requests strategies; however, they did not use a variety of strategies as their English proficiency level increased.

Moreover, as request is a face-threatening act, it has been considered a powerful factor in maintaining a relationship between the speaker and the listener as both the speaker and the listener's face are at risk while request is being uttered. The speaker's strategy of request changes according to the position or the stature of the listener. Ao (2005) conducted the research which indicated that the social power affected the composition of the request. When the speaker and listener are of the equal social status, the speaker rarely uses the supportive moves while making request (Ao, 2005). However, the speaker uses a lot of supportive moves in making request when the listener is of the higher social stature. On the same page, the results of Mahani's (2012) study showed that pragmatic development was evident in the Iranian learners' English proficiency while being direct; whereas, compared to native speakers, they employed request strategies differently.

Furthermore, there is a difference between the speech patterns of male and female gender as men and women are the same genus of different worlds with the variation in their style of interaction, their value system as well as the rules they follow (Kakolaki & Shahrokhi, 2016). Both men and women vary in their characteristics including speech. There has been much research about the speech act of request but very little attention has been placed on the aspects of gender difference regarding it. Ebadi and Seidi (2015) explored in their study the request strategies used by the Iranian English language learners and also uncovered the role of gender in the pragmatic competence of the learners. The study revealed that females used indirect requests in their performance as well as found out that indirectness in using request increased with the proficiency in language (Ebadi & Seidi, 2015). Likewise, Bijari, Mehrd and Karimi (2014) discuss the effect of gender on pragmatic competence as both the gender shows in the results of the data that gender affects the student's pragmatic knowledge.

The main goal of teaching ESL learners is to prepare them for effective communication in the target language. For decades, attention has been drawn to the fact that lexical knowledge and rules pertaining to grammar are not sufficient for the transformation of learners into an effective communicator. A proper training needs to be provided to the learners for the selection of appropriate linguistics means in relation to their relationship with their interlocutors. Thus, instructions should be provided to the ESL learners for developing them into individuals who are more sensitive and aware towards the target language. Therefore, learners should be reminded about the importance of practicing sociolinguistic rules in order to have effective and successful communication. Not many studies on Pakistani ESL learners' context have been conducted and this research attempts to investigate the pragmatic competency through request strategy employed by ESL undergraduate male and female students of the public sector university.

Research Methodology

Research Method

The study was conducted using quantitative method as the data was analysed statistically. The quantitative research is usually conducted in social sciences for the collection of a larger data (Abdolmalaki & Ghani, 2016). The approach to this research was Deductive as the data was objective. The strategy that this research used was Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT).

Participants

The data was collected from the participants who were ESL undergraduate students of a public sector university. These participants were selected through simple random sampling. The participants varied in age from 19-23 years. The sample of the participants consisted of 400 students including 200 male participants and 200 female participants and they were students from Social Sciences and Humanities faculty excluding those majoring in English. This is to reduce the impact of familiarity with linguistics pragmatics on their responses.

Instrument

In order to carry out the research, the instrument used was Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT). WDCT is a questionnaire, typically contains a written description of a hypothetical scenario. The WDCT consists of situations that require the participants to suggest as to what they might say if they find themselves in such situations (Labben, 2016). The Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT) is frequently used in research in regard to pragmatic competence. According to Xu and Wannaruk (2015), this instrument is suitable and widely used for measuring speech acts performance as well as it is reliable, easy to transcribe and manageable, and it is time saving to collect a large

amount of data. However, there are limitations to these questionnaires such as the appropriateness of certain scenarios for specific participants. In this research the scenarios are created in accordance with the educational setting so that students can relate to the hypothetical situations. In the study, this method of data collection is used because it is economical, easy to manage which make it possible to quickly gather a large amount of data.

Data Collection and Analysis

In view of ethical norms, the consent of the students was taken and afterwards they were asked to write their personal information on sheets. After that, a WDCT questionnaire was given to the participants, in which 10 hypothetical situations were given in reference to educational setting. The participants wrote their responses supposing as to what they would do if they were faced with such situation. The situations in the WDCT were according to the several studies that the researcher went through but they were all adapted and modified according to the Pakistani context as well as in accordance with the public sector university. The gathered data was analyzed through descriptive statistics like percentage and inferential statistics.

Taxonomy for Request Strategy

- Blum Kulka proposed various levels of the utterance of request strategy. The following is a summary of these levels. (Ebadi & Seidi, 2015)
- The most direct level (Request explicitly realized) includes; Mood derivables, performative, hedged performative, obligation statements and want statements.
- The conventionally indirect level (procedures that realize the act by reference to contextual preconditions necessary for its performance) includes; suggestory formulae, and query-preparatory,
- The non-conventionally indirect level (the open-ended group of indirect strategies or hints) includes; strong hints and mild hints.

Results and Findings

As previously mentioned the purpose of this study was to examine the pragmatic competence of ESL undergraduate students. The results obtained from the study revealed relevant information on the use of request strategy by the participants and the findings are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. *Request strategies in English used by ESL undergraduate students of a Public Sector University.*

Request Strategies	Number	Percentage (%)
1. Most direct level		
a) Mood derivable	178	45%
b) Performative	7	2%
c) Hedged performative	135	34%
d) Obligation statements	18	5%
e) Want statements	11	3%
2. The conventionally indirect level		
a) Suggestory formulae	4	1%
b) Query-preparatory	9	2%
3. The non-conventionally indirect level		
a) Strong hints	18	5%
b) Mild hints	20	5%
TOTAL	400	100%

Table 1. shows ESL undergraduate students of the University of Karachi used the most direct level of request strategy, especially Mood derivable (45%) were used more frequently than other strategies. Using Hedged Performative (34%) was the second-highest rank in the frequency of request strategies followed by obligation statements (5%), Strong hints (5%), Mild hints (5%), Want statements (3%), Performative (2%), Query-preparatory (2%) and the lowest request strategy used was Suggestory formulae (1%).

Furthermore, Table 2 shows the results elicited from the WDCT. These results are related to the second objective of this study that is the request strategies used by male and female ESL undergraduate students of the public sector university.

Table 2. Request strategies performed by male and female gender

Group	The most direct level	The conventionally indirect level	The non-conventionally indirect level	TOTAL
Male (%)	178 89%	4 2%	18 9%	200 100%
Female (%)	171 86%	9 5%	20 10%	200 100%

According to table 2. 89% of males preferred direct request strategies while 86% of females chose the direct request strategies. Regarding the conventionally indirect strategies, it has been observed that 9% of females chose the conventionally indirect request strategies whereas 4% of males chose the conventionally indirect request strategies. Moreover, 10% of females preferred the non-conventionally indirect request strategies while 9% of males used the non-conventionally indirect request strategies.

Discussion

It has been observed that the ESL undergraduate students of the public sector university mostly used the direct request strategies even when the interlocutors are of the higher status or position. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), higher levels of indirectness leads to higher level of politeness. Therefore, the free will of the hearer will be respected if the indirect requests are more frequently used. However, direct request strategies were commonly used by the students which is more impolite and free will of the hearer gets intruded as direct requests are face threatening. This is probably because the ESL undergraduate students of the public sector university were not knowledgeable enough either in choice of proper words or syntax to produce an indirect request strategy which demands more complex structures. Concerning the second objective, the association amid gender and selection of strategies, it was witnessed that indirect request strategies were more commonly used by females in the speeches used by them in comparison to their male counterparts. It revealed the fact that female tends to be politer in language performance than male.

Conclusion

The findings conclusively revealed lack of pragmatic competence in the ESL undergraduate students of the public sector university. Most of the ESL undergraduate students used direct strategy. This study also examined the effect of gender on pragmatic competence of the ESL undergraduate students. Thus, it's suggested that teachers of English as second language and educationists pay absolute attention to ensuring that both linguistics accuracy and the utterances of the learners are equally correct and appropriate.

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Appendix

Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT)

1. You want to borrow a pen from your friend. How will you request him/her?
2. You would like to work with a classmate on a project. How would you request him/her?
3. You want to ask a classmate if the teacher has given the homework assignment for today. How will you ask him/her?
4. You are in a hurry and the queue for canteen is very long. How will you request the first person in the queue so that you can buy your lunch first?
5. You want to borrow a book from professor. How will you request him/her?
6. You want to sit beside your friend and there is a person sitting already beside your friend. How will you request that person to leave the chair for you?
7. You receive an emergency call from your home while you are taking a lecture. How will you request your professor to leave the class during lecture?
8. You need to call at home urgently and your cell phone's battery has died. There is a stranger sitting next to you in lobby. How will you request that person to lend his/her cell phone so that you can make a quick call?
9. Due to family vacations, you have not completed your assignment and the day for submission came. How will you request your professor to give you some time regarding the assignment?
10. You are in a classroom, you are feeling a little bit cold and you want to turn off the fan. How will you request your classmates to do you the favour?