

Pragmatic Analysis of Strategies Employed by Iranian EFL Learners in Realization of the Speech Act of Request

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Abstract

The present paper explores the use of pragmatic strategies by Iranian EFL learners in fulfilling the speech act of request. Accordingly, the analytical classification of request strategies suggested by Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1984) and the cross-cultural speech act realization patterns (CCSARP) coding manual (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) were used to examine the corresponding features of pragmatic strategies employed by 22 upper-intermediate Iranian EFL learners in performing the speech act of request. To this end, this descriptive study analyzed the participants' utterances in both informal and formal situations using a Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT). The outcomes revealed that among nine request strategies classified by Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1984), Iranian EFL learners most frequently employed the "query preparatory strategy" as a conventional indirectness strategy on request in informal and formal situations. However, they used the direct strategy of "want statement" in informal contexts.

Keywords: discourse completion task, pragmatic competence, pragmatic strategies, request, speech act

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Introduction

The intense research efforts on second language acquisition in recent years have shifted its focus from possessing linguistic knowledge by the learners to acquiring the ability to use that capacity in communication. Pragmatic competence as the main component of effective communication in a second language was found to be low among second-language speakers compared to their knowledge of structure and vocabulary in the intended language (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). Acquiring pragmatic competence in a second language is a great challenge in both linguistics and the pragmatic realization of speech acts.

Cognitive science has enjoyed eye-catching expansion; for instance, generative grammar has refreshed its plan of structural architecture (Chomsky et al., 2019), but the classic paradox is left intact. In addition to the development of current theories or models of pragmatic competence, the modern scheme has concentrated on idealistic approaches that emphasize cooperation, rapport, common ground, and politeness. Socio-cultural factors are overwhelmingly emphasized, and egocentrism and existing aggression are disregarded. However, it is necessary to clarify current pragmatics research, including intention, speaker meaning, and context sensitivity. Taguchi and Roever (2017) argue that pragmatic competence is the ability that enables and allows learners to understand how to use linguistic models effectively to express and convey their intended meanings and achieve their conversational goals. This ability is influenced by various factors present within the social context.

Pragmatics mainly covers what exceeds the encyclopedic meanings of statements; that is, it deals with what is meant with a statement in practice based on the morals and traditions of the given community or context where conversation occurs. Thus, language and culture are linked and interconnected in pragmatics. Several researchers believe mastering a language involves gathering linguistic power, which involves words and structures, and the pragmatic competence encompassing the use of language appropriately in various settings (Alerwi & Alzahrani, 2020). Hence, learning adequate conventions enables the speaker to maintain influential and proper interaction with the interlocutor (Yule, 1996); this ability is defined as pragmatic competence. Takkaç Tulgar (2016) notes that pragmatic competence has increasingly drawn researchers' attention over the last

two years as a crucial aspect of language potential.

Realizing that a strong command of linguistic knowledge in a target language is insufficient for mastery, an urgent need has emerged to examine the value and significance of pragmatic competence in language education. Lack of pragmatic competence, which results in communication failure by second-language speakers, has resulted in more academic conduct by second-language scholars and researchers to define the nature of pragmatic competence and to classify its components more precisely. Crystal (1991) states that pragmatic competence is a subjective aspect of language, influenced by the choices made by users during communication and social interaction. It is a fundamental communication component within the network community (Taguchi, 2009).

Pragmatic competence encompasses the productive language techniques used by second language users and the receptive language skills used by native speakers in their communication with non-native speakers. Consequently, second language learners have to go beyond the literal meaning of the produced speech and acquire the ability to understand the intended meaning by the speaker (Cohen, 2010). As a consequence, learning a second or foreign language involves understanding the common values and pragmatics of the target language community. Second language learners, accordingly, can have meaningful and effective communication with the target language speakers by acquiring the pragmatic elements of that language (Daskalovska et al., 2016). In a concrete sense, pragmatic competence is realized through different speech acts employed by the second language users (Yule, 1996). Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962) states that speech acts are illocutionary acts or intentions such as requests, apologies, offers, and promises performed through utterances.

Various studies indicate that second language learners experience pragmatic failures in performing illocutionary acts despite their good grammatical and lexical command of the second language due to improper speech acts resulting in miscommunication (Cohen, 2008). Considering the speech act of request, second language speakers with proper linguistic competence were found not to have trouble using direct strategies, while they face serious challenges using indirect strategies (Daskalovska et al., 2016). Insufficient proper pragmatic data in the second-language mastering context was found to be responsible for second-language

speakers' failure to acquire appropriate pragmatic competence (Pratama et al., 2017). The issue is even more grave in the EFL context, where foreign language learners do not have any chance to interact directly with the native culture and speakers (Al-Shar, 2017; Hassaskhah & Ebrahimi, 2015).

The studies conducted by a large number of Iranian scholars also found problems faced by Iranian EFL learners in using proper pragmatic strategies and performing different speech acts (Derakhshan & Eslami, 2020; Jalilifar, 2009; Jalilifar et al., 2011; Shakki et al., 2021). For instance, regarding the speech act of requesting, Hashemian (2014) found that Iranian EFL learners do not conform to the cultural norms of the target language as they use various direct strategies, observing the issue of power relations, while the native English speakers employ conventional indirectness strategies regardless of the situation. Lack of encounter and communication with native speakers in the Iranian EFL context has resulted in their failure to understand the socio-cultural norms and rules of requesting in the target language, and so a high rate of misunderstanding in performing the speech act of requesting has been observed (Hashemian, 2014). The frequency of requesting applications and their significance in terms of form, meaning, and illocutionary force in social communication have made this speech act of request as many researchers' investigations focus on identifying its various aspects to inform learning and teaching processes. The present paper, therefore, intends to investigate the pragmatic strategies employed by Iranian EFL learners in performing the speech act of request.

Background

Making a request is an essential act in people's daily lives. Many people view requesting as a platform which enhance social relationships. To perform this, individuals from various communities employ different tacit norms to perform this speech act. The variation of norms across communities is the source of miscommunication and interaction disruptions, primarily when multi-ethics communication occurs. It is argued that native speakers consider pragmatic errors more serious than phonological or syntactic ones. Pragmatics defines language based on its users' ideas, given their priorities, and the impact of setting and context on individuals involved in the communicative act.

The unprecedented rise of cross-cultural communications in the modern world has highlighted that speech acts as the main component of effective communication. Pragmatics includes moving beyond the literal meaning of utterances to understand the intended meanings, objectives, or purposes, assumptions, and actions conducted (Cohen, 2010). Speech act means the action done by the utterances. In other words, utterances are communicative acts (Hidayat, 2016). According to Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962), an utterance is composed of three speech acts: the locutionary act (what is said), the illocutionary act (what is intended by the speaker), and the perlocutionary act (the impacts an utterance has on the listener). The illocutionary acts are the language functions, such as requests, apologies, commitments, and suggestions, performed by an utterance (Achiba, 2003). The illocutionary speech acts, as classified by Searle (1975) and Cohen (1996), include:

- *Representatives* (confession, statement, assertion, etc.)
- *Directives* (requesting, commanding, warning, etc.)
- *Commissives* (promises, offers, pledges, etc.)
- *Expressives* (thanks, complaints, and apologies)
- *Declaratives* (declarations and decrees)

According to the Speech Act Theory, direct and indirect styles can do the same act. Among the various illocutionary speech acts, requests play a leading role in daily interactions as they are usually employed to begin communication (Alfghie & Mohammadzadeh, 2021). A request act is a non-verbal or verbal act expressing the speaker's expectations of the listener about a prospective action (Ayuningtias, 2012). In pioneering research, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) studied the recognition pattern of requests and apologies across eight languages. Accordingly, they classified pragmatic strategies used to perform the speech act of requesting into nine categories from the most direct to the most indirect ones as below:

Direct Request Strategies

- *Intention derivable* (the illocutionary force of request signaled by the structural mood of the verb in the expression);
- *Open and transparent performative* (the illocutionary force of request explicitly designated by the speaker);

- *Hedged performative* (the illocutionary force of request named embedded in the utterance);
- *Locution derivable* (the illocutionary force of request directly derivable from the semantic meaning of the utterance); and
- *Want statement* (the illocutionary force of request expressed by the speaker's intention through the fact that the listener does X).

Conventional Indirectness Strategies on Request

The following are conventional indirectness strategies on request employed by interlocutors.

- *Suggestory formula* (the illocutionary power of request stated through the statements containing an indicate to X); and
- *Query preparatory strategy* (the illocutionary force of request expressed through the utterance; containing a reference to the preparatory condition).

Non-conventional Indirectness Strategies on Request

The following are non-conventional indirectness strategies on request employed by interlocutors.

- *Strong hints* (the illocutionary force of request expressed through the utterance containing a partial reference to the elements needed to perform the act); and
- *Mild hints* (the illocutionary force of request interpretable through the context of utterance).

Different studies investigated the speech act of requesting based on this framework. Jalilifar (2009) dealt with the request strategies used by EFL learners in Iran compared to Australian native speakers of English as a baseline group. To collect the data, ADCT was administered regarding request strategies related to social distance and social dominance factors. The research results revealed pragmatic development, particularly in the movement from direct to conventional indirectness strategies on request by EFL learners. Learners with higher proficiency displayed overuse of indirect requesting, whereas the native speaker group was characterized by the more balanced use of this strategy. The lower proficiency learners, on the other hand, overused the most direct strategy type. A cross-sectional study conducted by Taghizade (2011) examined the pragmatics competency of

language learners in terms of employing request strategy compared to a baseline of British native speakers. These findings are consistent with those of Jalilfar (2009), who supported the improvement of pragmatic competency in elementary to advanced-level English learners. The study also showed that indirect speech acts were problematic for EFL speakers. In a comparative study, Ahangari and Shoghli (2011) investigated the use of request strategies by Iranian EFL learners and Canadian native speakers. It was explored that all the participants used conventionally indirect strategies. In general, previous research findings show the significant role of request strategies and their influence on enhancing learners' use of the request in various contexts. Yousefi and Nassaji (2019) studied the impact of corrective feedback and instruction on L2 pragmatics. They reviewed 39 studies and found less influence of face-to-face instruction than computer-assisted instruction. In addition, the study declared higher effectiveness of instruction for comprehension than production, compared to production and comprehension.

Conducting the most recent research reviewing the influence of pragmatics training in an Iranian context, Shakki et al. (2020) found that during the last two decades, the most frequent type of intervention employed by Iranian speakers was the explicit/implicit one. Hilbig (2009) examined the request strategies used by Lithuanians at the three primary universal directness levels and their negative and positive politeness, using Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) framework. Accordingly, an open-ended questionnaire of 12 situations was used for data collection. 100 English and 100 Lithuanian University undergraduates participated in this study. Results demonstrated that although conventionally indirectness strategies on request were mainly used by both groups, the Lithuanian responses were more scattered along the directness-indirectness continuum. Besides, the participants significantly used more direct and non-conventionally indirect strategies. It was also found that the Lithuanians employed more positive-politeness-oriented strategies than other participants.

Reviewing 49 studies, Takahashi (2010) found that apart from the advantage of implicit instruction over explicit instruction, the latter is superior in pragmatic interventions. Besides, as argued by Takahashi, pragmatic teachability can be enhanced by some factors, such as higher proficiency and motivation. Al-Oqaily and Tawalbeh (2012) explored the concept of politeness and directness in

requests performed by native Saudi Arabic EFL speakers compared to Native American English speakers. A DCT with 12 different situations was given to thirty American and Saudi undergraduates. Findings showed that Americans mainly employed conventional indirectness strategies. Similarly, Taguchi (2015) reviewed 58 intervention studies and found that the direct teaching group performed better than the indirect teaching group. Taguchi argued that L2 teachers can succeed in indirect instruction by designing the noticing and processing activities. The impact of pragmatic instruction regarding comprehension and production was examined by Badjedi (2016) in a review of 24 articles. Badjedi found a significant effect of treatments engaging the participants in a meta-pragmatic issue. In addition, the tasks providing recast indicate a larger effect size. The effects were of various sizes, ranging from small to very large, and depended on the comprehension and production tools. In a meta-analysis, Zhuang and Plonsky (2019) reviewed 50 studies and showed the effectiveness of pragmatic instruction. They also found that more extended instruction, compared to a conventional classroom, provides more opportunities for the learners. Also, Tajeddin and Malmir (2015) concluded that EFL learners may have inadequate control over the special speech acts condition and may not know how to act regarding the context of language use.

The studies on the speech act of requesting in the Iranian EFL context have mostly taken a comparative approach regarding the techniques employed by Iranian EFL learners to realize requests in informal interaction. However, considering the lack of chance for Iranian EFL learners to communicate with native English speakers using informal speech, they are usually forced to develop their communicative skills in English in formal contexts and through various media types and digital technologies (Xodabande, 2018). However, both formal and informal conditions should be investigated to provide a comprehensive account of the pragmatic techniques employed by Iranian EFL learners in performing requests. Accordingly, the present inquiry aims to analyze the pragmatic strategies used by Iranian EFL learners in utilizing the speech act of requesting in formal and informal situations. The following questions were raised to meet the intended research objective:

1. Which pragmatic strategies are more commonly employed by Iranian male and female EFL learners to realize the speech act of requesting a formal

context?

2. Which pragmatic strategies are more commonly employed by Iranian male and female EFL learners to realize the speech act of requesting in an informal context?

Methodology

This section discusses the research methodology, including research methods and design, sampling, and data collection and analysis methods and instruments.

Participants

The present study aimed to investigate the prevalent request strategies used by Iranian EFL learners in performing the speech act of requesting. The sample size consisted of 22 Iranian EFL learners at institutes during the academic year 2020-2021. According to the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) results, the learners were at the upper-intermediate level at the time of doing the study. The male and female participants were in the age range of 22 to 30.

Instruments

The Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT), adapted by Blum Kulka (1982) and formulated later by Rose (1992), was applied to gather the required information for the study. The WDCT was selected as the research instrument to test EFL learners' pragmatic awareness and their production of certain speech acts. It is a practical, highly effective instrument for quick data collection (Aufa, 2013). WDCT asks the learners to provide appropriate written responses based on the given situational descriptions (involving setting, subject roles, and degree of imposition), allowing for showing the variances in the proficiency level of the participants in terms of pragmatic competence (Jianda, 2006). The outcomes of the previous inquiries indicated its reliability and validity in evaluating the performance of EFL learners in the inter-language speech acts (Xu & Wannaruk, 2015). WDCT used in this study included 12 formal and informal situations that differed in terms of the degree of familiarity of the interlocutors, provided in pairs of sentences to the participants (Hashemian, 2014) (Table 1). The participants were asked to provide proper responses in English.

Table 1*Formal and Informal Request Situations*

Situation	Description
A	requesting a fellowship for paying in cash; demanding an older brother to close the door
B	requesting a hotel owner for dialogue; asking a boss to go home afore
C	demanding some employees to do some additional work; requesting some employees to come sooner
D	asking a classmate to stop talking aimlessly; asking a friend to lend you money
E	asking a waitperson for a menu; inquiring about a housekeeper for extra sugar
F	asking a guest to turn down the music; asking a guest for a pen

Data Collection

Before administering the WDCT, the participants were informed about the data collection procedure. Then, they were given the test on paper and asked to provide their written responses to 12 DCT scenarios, differing in familiarity. The participants were requested to respond to one sentence. The data collection process was then continued by selection and simplification of the collected data. The Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Patterns (CCSARP) coding manual (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) was utilized to code modifiers and recognize the request techniques used by the learners. According to the CCSARP, the request utterances include three constituents: the alerter, head act, and supportive mood. There are also three types of utterances regarding the level of directness: direct, conventionally indirect, and non-conventionally indirect. Moreover, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) nine strategies of request were used to analyze the collected data.

Findings and Discussion

In answering the first inquiry question regarding the pragmatic strategies more frequently used by Iranian EFL learners to perform the speech act of requesting at formal conditions, findings of the descriptive-qualitative data analysis showed that most of the participants used conventional indirectness strategies

(88.6%) followed by non-conventional direct strategies (7.79%) and direct strategies (3.57%), respectively (Table 2).

Table 2
Frequency Percentage of the Request Techniques Employed by the Participants at Formal Situations

Request Strategy	Frequency	Frequency Percentage (%)
Direct strategies	11	3.57
Non-conventional indirectness strategies	24	7.79
Conventional indirectness strategies	273	88.63
Total	308	

As Table 2 depicts, most participants focused on conventional indirectness strategies under formal conditions. The indirect or negative politeness strategies indicate a high degree of politeness; the more indirect a request, the politer act it is (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Moreover, the request statements used by the participants in formal situations where the addressee was in a high position were longer, including a formal alerter such as “Sir” and “Sorry” followed by modal verbs and “please” at head act (Would/could you please) and a supportive move mainly of excuse type. An instance of requests in formal situation B (asking a manager to go home earlier) was: “*Sir, would you please grant me a leave? I am sick, and I have to visit a doctor.*” As indicated by this statement, this participant has transferred the cultural norms of the L1 into the L2 request situation, providing a longer and non-conventional way of requesting, though observing the grammatical and pragmatic conventions of requesting a manager at a higher position. Regarding the head act of the statement, the participants primarily used query preparatory strategy in the conventional indirectness strategies of requesting, mainly including structures such as: *Would/Could you please...* (Table 3).

Table 3
Frequency Percentage of the Conventional Indirect Techniques at Formal Situations

Conventional Indirectness Strategies	Frequency	Frequency Percent %
Suggestory formula	75	27.47
Query preparatory	198	72.52
Total	273	

To answer the second research question regarding the pragmatic strategies more frequently used by Iranian EFL learners to perform the speech act of request in informal conditions, findings of the descriptive-qualitative data analysis showed that most of the participants used direct strategies = $252/308 \times 100\% = 81.80\%$), followed by non-conventionally direct strategies (= $51/308 \times 100 = 16.55\%$), and conventionally indirect strategies (= $5/308 \times 100\% = 1.61\%$), respectively (Table 3).

Table 4

Frequency Percentage of the Request Techniques Used by the Participants at Informal Situations

Request Strategy	Frequency	Frequency Percent %
Direct strategies	252	81.8
Non-conventionally direct strategies	51	16.55
Conventionally indirect strategies	5	1.61
Total	308	

As Table 4 displays, most participants used direct strategies (81.8%) to perform the speech act of requesting in informal situations. These results are consistent with the previous findings that Iranian culture is more direct and positive-politeness-oriented than native English-speaking cultures (Hashemian, 2014). Considering the sub-categories of direct request strategies, the participants employed “want statements” with a frequency of 90.18%, which were the most frequent, followed by “hedge performative” (= 9.82%) (Table 5).

Table 5

Frequency Percentage of the Conventional Indirectness Strategies at Informal Situations

Conventional Indirectness Strategies	Frequency	Frequency Percent %
Hedge performative	75	27.47
Want statements	198	72.52
Total	273	

The research findings regarding the formal situation were in contrast to the findings of the previous studies, including Lin (2008), Zhang and Wang (1997), and Blum-Kulka et al. (1984), which found EFL learners preferring conventionally indirect strategies in performing the speech act of requesting. However, they were in line with the study of Daskalovska et al. (2016), Hashemian (2014), and Alemi and

Khanlarzadeh (2016). Regarding the second research question, the findings of the study were consistent with Hashemian (2014) and Daskalovska et al. (2016), who found “want statements” to be the most frequent strategies used by EFL learners in informal situations. Regarding the obtained outcomes, the Iranian EFL learners lack appropriate pragmatic awareness as they use only two sub-categories of strategies to meet their needs for requesting communication. That is, their speech is not rich in terms of diversity of requesting strategies. As Pourdana and Harooni (2017) stated, pragmatically appropriate request behaviors are considered one of the most needed speech acts in learning a foreign language. A request can be manifested in different forms and of a diverse nature. If language learners use inappropriate speech acts of requesting, it can embarrass them or make them look impolite or rude to native speakers (Cohen, 2010). Sometimes, it even leads to breaking down the natural stream of communication and the occurrence of misunderstanding. Therefore, the speech act of requesting should be taught with a more cultural-oriented approach to improve the EFL learners’ pragmatic awareness. When learners recognize the L1 and L2 norms and idiomatic expressions, they can identify the message of the utterances. The research findings showed that the cultural context influenced the request strategies employed by participants. Therefore, as demonstrated by studies on the impact of learning request strategies on language learning, language learning techniques were fundamental in improving learners’ language proficiency, especially in the EFL setting (Yılmaz, 2010; Ersözlü, 2010). Teaching these strategies encourages language learners to organize and formulate their speculations and thoughts and enhance their communicative skills.

Conclusion

The current inquiry dealt with speech acts of request. Indeed, requests are helpful and often occur in everyday speech, especially among fresh language learners. Communication usually begins with a request. Compared to other speech acts, the illocutionary act of requests has been the most frequently researched in second language studies. Requests are expressed by different linguistic structures (e.g., declaratives, interrogatives, or imperatives) and for various purposes or aims. A request is a face-threatening act.

According to Tulgar (2016), communication is a vital segment of any social

life in which individuals perceive the requirement to communicate with each other for some basic logic. It is deemed the concept of language that people can interact with several interlocutors in various environments. Anyhow, while communicating, members are required to follow things beyond utterances. They must know how to express ideas and when, where, and to whom to say it. Accordingly, interaction is more than putting a few utterances in straight arrangements to create a series of things. Language users must follow certain norms to make sense and be appropriate for their conversations. Analyzing how to say the right things and place is basically pragmatic. The present study examined Iranian EFL learners' pragmatic competence in using speech act techniques, concentrating on the speech act of requesting. As revealed by the research findings, EFL learners in Iran tend to utilize conventional indirectness strategies for making requests in formal situations and direct strategies in informal contexts. Their choice of request strategies in formal settings differed considerably from those in informal settings, where they used query preparatory strategy in the former and the want statement in the latter. The concepts of indirectness and politeness greatly influence the face when attempting to realize speech acts such as requests. Indirectness on the speaker's part is preferred for certain reasons, such as to lessen and mitigate the threat, avoid the risk of losing face, or smooth the conversational interaction. Discoveries of the present inquiry would hopefully be convenient for shedding more light on Iranian learners' pragmatic competence and improving their pragmatic competence, considering the cultural difference between L1 and L2. As suggested by Elttayef and Hussein (2018), pragmatic competence is a key dimension of communicative competence for EFL learners, so it is recommended that Iranian EFL teachers and practitioners take a practical and purposeful approach to teaching it. It should be noted that the lack of pragmatic competence of English learners in the Iranian context leads to various communication and interaction problems in performing appropriate speech acts and grasping the intended meaning of what is being said and asked. This matter increases the need for studies to discover the required speech behaviors.

Outcomes of the present work might be profited by English language educators in the ESL/EFL settings. The present report indicates the significance of realizing speech acts within cultures and the reality that realization, or lack thereof, can either delay or strengthen cultural interactions. It is deemed that training the

cultural language aspects, particularly the speech act of requesting, is a crucial part of educators' responsibility to aid their pupils in becoming proficient second language speakers. ESL trainers should plan contextualized, task-based assignments that expose learners to various kinds of pragmatic data and the linguistic means required to perform certain speech acts. Likewise, due to the function of various social variables (e.g., social status) in speech acts, learners should be trained to perform speech acts adequately based on the relative status levels of the interlocutors. Moreover, the current paper only examined the use of speech acts of requesting by Iranian EFL learners, so it is suggested that other speech acts, including orders, greetings, apologies, and the like, can be investigated in future studies. Finally, the research results are expected to direct EFL/ESL learners and instructors to consider pragmatic knowledge in language acquisition and enhance the learners' appreciation of English socio-cultural norms of speech act realizations. This study was limited to only 22 participants and one speech act: requests. The inclusion of more participants and more variables could validate study results much more.

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