Investigating Request Strategies between Iranian EFL Learners and Canadian Native Speakers of English in Various Social Situations

Saeideh Ahangari[*] and Masoumeh Shoghli

Department of English Language, Tabriz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tabriz, Iran

Abstract: This study tried to investigate the request strategies used by Iranian learners of English as foreign language and Canadian native speakers of English. The sample involved 27 MA Iranian students and 16 native speakers of Canada. For this aim a discourse Completion Test was used to generate data related to the request strategies by each group. Selection of request situation in discourse completion test was based on three social factors of relative social distance, power, and rank of imposition. To analyze the data, the particular coding scheme, cross cultural speech act realization project (CCSARP) (Blum-Kulka, House,& Kasper,1989) was used. The results displayed overuse of indirect type of request on the part of EFL learners. The finding of the research revealed that as far as social distance, power, and rank of imposition is concerned EFL learners display more indirect use of requests. An interesting result displayed in this study was that both Iranian EFL learners and Canadian speakers mostly use conventionally indirect strategy with subcategory of query-preparatory; however, none of the groups used non-conventionally indirect strategy. It is believed that the present study can have insightful implication for improving pragmatic knowledge in foreign language.

Key words: Requesting strategy, social distance, power, rank of imposition, politeness.

1. Introduction

A number of studies (Becker, Kimmel, Bevill, 1989.; Blum-Kulka & House, 1989; Trosborg, 1995; Fukushima, 1996) have demonstrated how speakers' speech acts and the degree of directness/indirectness they employ in a specific situation are indeed influenced by certain social/contextual variables. The most widely discussed and tested variables are the social variables of social distance (D), social power (P) and rank of imposition (R) proposed by Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987). The author's main argument is that the social variables of D, P and R are the most important factors influencing speakers' linguistic choices. The authors maintained that these factors combine in an additive fashion, thus the bigger the hearer's social distance, power, and degree of imposition, the greater the face threat will be and the greater the degree of indirectness to be employed by the speaker. In other words, according to Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), there is a positive correlation between these variables and the degree of indirectness employed.

According to Cohen and Olshtain (1993), it is expected that non-native speakers are likely to deviate from native speaker form of speech act realizations. They further state that because of the complexity and cognitive demand of speech act sets such as apologies and requests, they are considered to be of some interest in language learning. What further complicates the situation for language learners in selecting and using certain speech acts is that they are influenced by a set of social, cultural, situational, and personal factors. These factors are in fact quite important in the sense that they may simply shape the eventual linguistic output of L2 learners.

Based on Brown and Levinson's politeness theory," requests are Face Threatening Acts (FTAs); since a speaker is imposing her/his will on the hearer" (1987 p. 65). Brown and Levinson (1987) propose that "when confronted with the need to perform a FTA, the individual must choose between performing the FTA in the most direct and efficient manner or attempting to mitigate the effect of the FTA on the hearer's face. A request may vary in strategy type and level of directness. The best-known empirical study of cross-cultural

---

[*] Corresponding Author: Saeideh Ahangari   Tel: +989143115103   *E_mail:* s_ahangari@yahoo.com

pragmatics, the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP), proposed by Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) identified three levels of directness for requests: direct requests, conventionally indirect requests, and non- conventionally indirect requests.

The present study builds on previous studies by focusing on the fact that although FL learning takes place through exposure to comprehensive input, cultures play an important role in learner's choice of requests. Having been an EFL learner, the researcher is interested in finding out the possible difference between the using of request strategies and different social situations.

The research questions of the study are: 1) Are there any differences in the type and frequency of the request strategies used by Iranian EFL learners and Canadian native speakers of English? 2) Are there any differences in the type and frequency of the request strategies used by Iranian EFL learners and Canadian native speakers of English based on social constraints of social distance, power, and rank of imposition?

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants and Instruments

Forty three participants took part in this study. Both sets of participants in the study include male and female individuals who were between the ages of 20 to 30 and studying at the university. Twenty seven non-native learners in this study were MA students at Islamic Azad University in Tabriz Branch majoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language. All the participants had already passed National MA Entrance Examination. Sixteen Canadian native speakers of English also participated in the study. They were university students and were studying at the university in Vancouver. The participants were not trained formally; they were simply given the task instruction.

The instrument which was employed in this study was Discourse Completion test (DCT).

In DCT the speakers were given a scene or background information, such as what the previous speaker had said and the speaker's relationship with one another. Upon conducting the DCT in this study, five situations were given to participants in written form based on relative social distance, power, and rank of imposition. The power variable is treated as a ternary value, i.e., the hearer is either of lower status (+ Power), interlocutors are of equal status (= Power), or the hearer is of high status (- Power). The distance and imposition variables are treated as a binary value, i.e., interlocutors either know each other (- distance) or they don't know each other (+ distance), and rank of imposition is either low or high.

2.2. Procedures

In this study the participants' pragmatic competence was challenged on the effective use of request strategies by means of DCT in which they had to write down what they would say in the given contexts. Participants were asked to complete the DCT as they were in the real situation. To analyze the data gathered from the participants, the particular coding scheme, cross cultural speech act realization project (CCSARP) was used. The CCSARP schematized request strategies in three categories: direct level, conventionally indirect, and non-conventionally indirect. The focus of this study was on directness level of request strategies which was classified as a nine-point scale. The analysis of the data took into consideration only the head acts. The data then submitted to the SPSS (version 11.5) for frequency analysis and Chi-Square test. Chi-Square test was performed in order to establish whether the differences in the frequency of strategies used by participants were statistically significant or not.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Question number one

Addressing the first research question, the study presented the results of comparison between native and non-native speakers. As indicated in table 1, Iranian learners and Canadian speakers displayed a markedly high frequency of conventionally indirect strategy conveyed by query-preparatory sub category.

Table1. Frequency and percentage of request strategies by Iranian EFL learners and Canadian native speakers

	Frequency of the strategies for Iranian	Frequency of the strategies for Canadian	Total

	0	7	7
.00	0	7	7
1.00 mood	9	2	11
2.00 performative	0	1	1
3.00 hedge	12	1	13
4.00 obligation	2	0	2
5.00 want	9	7	16
6.00 suggestion	27	4	31
7.00 query-prepataroty	76	58	134
8.00 strong hint	0	0	0
9.00 mild hint	0	0	0
Total	135	80	

Table2. Chi-square analysis

	Request
Chi-square	447.173
Df	6
Asymp. Sig	0.000

As shown in Chi-Square analysis in table 2. ($\chi2$ =447.173, P=0.000 < 0.05), there is a statistically significant difference between the groups.

3.2 Question number two

In order to answer the second research question the researcher analyzed the distribution of the request strategy in five combinations of situations. The results are as follow:

Table3. Frequency and Percentage of Strategies by two Groups in all Combination

combination	Strategy type	Iranian %	Canadian %	Chi-Square
Combination A	1. Mood 2. Performative 3. Heagde 4. Obligation 5. Want 6. Suggestion **7. Querry-perpratory**	3.7 .0 3.7 .0 3.7 14.8 74.1	.0 .0 .0 .0 25.0 6.3 68.8	0.216
Combination B	00* 1. mood 2. Performative 3. Heagde 4. Obligation 5. Want 6. Suggestion 7. Querry-perpratory	.0 .0 .0 25.9 3.7 11.1 25.9 33.3	37.5 .0 6.3 6.3 .0 18.8 12.5 18.8	0.011
Combination C	1. Mood 2. Performative 3. Heagde 4. Obligation 5. Want 6. Suggestion 7. Querry-perpratory	11.1 .0 .0 .0 3.7 18.5 66.7	.0 .0 .0 .0 .0 .0 100.0	0.080
Combination D	00* 1. mood 2. Performative 3. Heagde 4. Obligation 5. Want 6. Suggestion 7. Querry-perpratory	.0 18.5 .0 11.1 3.7 .0 11.1 55.6	6.3 12.5 .0 .0 .0 .0 .0 81.3	0.215
Combination E	1. Mood 2. Performative 3. Heagde	.0 .0 3.7	.0 .0 .0	0.042

4.	Obligation	.0	.0	
5.	Want	14.8	.0	
6.	Suggestion	29.6	6.3	
7.	Querry-perpratory	51.9	93.8	

4. Discussion

This study was designed to address the important issue of pragmatic development of request strategies in Iranian EFL learners in order to determine whether and to what extent inter-language realization of the speech act of request by Iranian learners differs from request realization by native speakers in English. For this purpose, 43 participants and 5 different social situations were chosen for this study. The findings in relation to the participants' variation of request strategies clearly showed that P, F and R interact with cultural and other situational factors. While both Iranian learners and Canadian speakers varied their requests by situation, they differed in their specific choices within each situation. This finding agrees with Blum-Kulka and House's (1989) finding whose study of Australian English, German, French, Hebrew and Argentinean Spanish speakers' requests showed that " while the overall distribution along the scale of indirectness follows similar patterns in all languages, the specific proportions in the choices between the more direct and less direct strategies are culture-specific" (p. 133).

In this study among three levels of directness with nine sub-categories the most frequently used one was conventionally indirectness with subcategory of query preparatory. According to Ellis, (1994) and Trosborg, (1995) the conventionally indirect strategy might be a universal method of making request toward the addressees. It is important to note that in the present study non-conventionally indirect strategies were not preferred strategy types in two groups. Not using of this strategy by native speakers might be due to the fact that native speakers of English conceive of this type of request as being less polite than conventionally indirect strategy (Blum-Kulka, 1987 cited in Brown & Levinson, 1987). The findings of this study contradict that of Weizman (1993) and Trosborg (1995) in which learners used non-conventionally indirect strategies more than native speakers. Weizman (1993) suggests that Hints have a highly "deniability potential". Accordingly, the overuse of *Hints* by the learners may result from their exploitation of the inferential nature of *Hints* in order to save their own face.

5. Reference

[1] J.A. Becker, H. D. Kimmel, M. L. Bevill. *The Interactive effects of request form and speaker status on judgments of requests.* Psycholinguistic Research. 1989, 18 (5): 521–531.

[2] S. Blum-Kulka, and J. House. Cross-*cultural and situational variation in requesting behavior*. In: S. Blum-Kulka, J. House , & G. Kasper (eds*.). Cross-cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex. 1989. pp. 123–154.

[3] P. Brown, S. and Levinson. *Universals in language usage: Politeness phenomena*. In: E. Goody (ed). *Questions and politeness: Strategies in social interaction.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1978.

[4] P. Brown, and S. Levinson. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 1987.

[5] CCSARP. The CCSARP Coding Manual. In: S. Blum-Kulka, J. House and G. Kasper (eds). 1989.

[6] A. D, Cohen, & E. Olishtain. Developing a measure of sociocultural competence: The case of apology. *Language learning.* 1983, 31(1): 113-134.

[7] R. Ellis *The studies of second language acquisition.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1994.

[8] S. Fukushima. Request strategies in British English and Japanese. Language Sciences . 1996, 18 (3–4): 671–688.

[9] G. Leech. *Principles of pragmatics*. London: Longman. 1983.

[10] E. Olshtain.. *Learning in society*. In : A. O. Hadley,(Ed.). *Research in language learning: Principles, processes, and prospect.s* Lincolnwood: National Textbook Company. 1993, pp. 47-65.

[11] A. Trosborg. *Interlanguage Pragmatics*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. 1995.

[12] E. Weizman.. *Interlanguage requestive hints*. In: G. Kasper, & S. Blum-Kulka (eds.). *Interlanguage Pragmatics .* New York: Oxford University Press. 1993, pp. 123-137.