Developing Pragmatic Competence at A1, A2, B1 and B2 Level Requests

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This paper reports on the results of a corpus study on the development of pragmatic competence of Macedonian learners of English at A1, A2, B1 and B2 level, as defined by the *Common European Framework of Reference Levels* (CEFR). Pragmatics is the study of language for communication. With the introduction of the communicative approach, it has become obvious that learning the rules of lexicon, grammar and phonology is not enough for successful communication. For the realization of their communicative intentions in the second/ foreign language, learners have to learn both the social rules and the linguistic forms appropriate in certain situations.

Central to developing pragmatic competence are the speech acts. In this study, we will be focusing on the speech act of requesting. Even in such restrictive environment as the classroom, it is among the first speech acts that students are exposed to. Data for analysis was drawn from the Macedonian English Learner Corpus (MELC) which was compiled in 2011-2012 as a part of a joint project of FON, UKIM and UGD.

Key words: pragmatics, competence, speech acts, requests, CEFR, corpus analysis

In this study we will look more closely at the development of pragmatic competence at A1, A2, B1, and B2 level. In particular, we will look at how the speech act of requesting is acquired across different levels. The aims of the study are as follows:

1. to describe the request strategies used by learners at different levels and compare the results with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

2. to describe the modification of the requests at different levels

3. to draw some conclusions about request development across different levels

1. Data

The research described here is based on students' conversations from the Macedonian Corpus of English Interlanguage - http://mkam.app.fon.edu.mk/Default.aspx. This corpus was compiled as a result of a two year project (2011-2012) jointly realized by FON, UKIM and UGD. The materials were produced by students from state schools, language centers and universities. Unfortunately, the corpus does not contain spoken language. Data for studying spoken language were elicited by a Discourse completion task (DCT). The aim of this task was to provide insights about speech act production. The DCT consists of four situations, some of which elicit requests. We analyzed the following situation in particular:

You belong to a small tennis club. Next weekend you are going to have a tennis match with another team out of town. You do not have a car and you need a ride. You find out that another club member, Daniel, is going to drive there. You are not exactly on his way, but you think he lives closest to you. Even though he is older than you and you are not very close, you decide to ask him to give you a ride.

You:

Daniel:

You:

Daniel:

You:

The elicited conversations were divided in two groups according to learners' age: 5-15 and 16-60. They were first analyzed separately and then in relation to one another.

2. Methodology

The requests obtained from the corpus were analyzed in relation to the following aspects:

1. occurrence of the request strategy in the head act

2. internal modification inside the head act

3. the use of the politeness marker *please*

The following request classification was adopted (Hendriks, 2008):

Direct requests

Imperative

Performative

Obligation statement

Want statement

Suggestion

Conventionally indirect requests

Non-obviousness

Willingness (when the speaker questions the willingness of the hearer to comply with the request. Those are speech acts formulated with *will, would, would like*)

Ability (when the speaker questions the ability of the speaker to comply with the request. Those are speech acts formulated with *can, could, be able to*)

Hint

Point of departure for this analysis was the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) which primary aim is developing communicative competence. The CEFR discusses communicative competence at length, including pragmatic competence. While the descriptors in the CEFR about the pragmatic competences are too general, the T-books, related to the CEFR levels, give more detailed descriptions: Breakthrough (Trim, 2009) is related to A1 level, Waystage (van Ek & Trim, 1998) to A2, Threshold (van Ek & Trim, 1998) to B1, and Vantage (van Ek & Trim, 2001) to B2. Table 1 gives the exponents for each of the levels.

Table 1 Request exponents as listed in the T-books

Level	Functions	Exponents
A1 Breakthrough	requesting others to do something	*Please* + VP imperative. *Please can you* + VP infinitive
	requesting assistance	*Help!* *Can you help me, please?*
A2 Waystage	requesting others to do something	*Please, ...(e.g. come over here)* *......, please.* *Will/would/could you ...?* *Would you mind ...?*
	requesting assistance	*Can you ... (e.g. help me), please?*
B1 Threshold	requesting someone to do something	*Please + VP imper. (Please sit down)* *VP imper.+please (Stop talking, please)* *Would/could you (please) +VPinf? (Could you please dose the door?)* *Would you be so kind as to +VPinf (Would you be so kind as to wait?)*

		Kindly + VP imperative +(please) (Kindly make less noise, please)
		Would you mind + VP gerund (Would you mind opening the window?)
		Can I have + NP + VP past (Can I have my shirt washed?)
	Requesting assistance	*Can/Could you help me please?*
B2 Vantage	making polite requests	□*Please+ VP imperative (Please sit down.)*
		VP imperative, please (Come in, please.)
		Would/can/could you (be so kind as to) VPinf, please? (Could you close the door, please?)
		Do/would you mind+ VPgerund, please (Would you mind waiting, please?)
		I wonder if/do you think you could (be so kind as to VPinf), please (I wonder if you could be so kind as to open the window, please.
	dropping hints for someone to act on	*declarative sentences+ tag (falling) (It's _cold in here, _ _isn't it?__)*
		It would be nice + if-clause (It would be nice if someone could shut the window.)
		I don't suppose + complement clause (falling-rising) (I _don't suppose·someone could ·light the _fire?)
	asking for assistance	*Help!*
		Can/could you help me, please?
		Do you think you could give/lend me a hand?

The A1 section on requests illustrates that at this level the learners are expected to use the direct strategy of requesting with imperative constructions and the conventionally indirect (CI) strategy of questioning the ability (ability strategy) of the hearer to comply with the request. They are also expected to be able to mitigate their speech acts with the politeness marker *please*.

The expectations of the CEFR for A2 learners is expended to a certain extent. In addition to formulating their requests with imperatives and with the conventionally indirect strategy of questioning the ability of the speaker to comply with the requests, learners are also expected to use the CI strategy of questioning the willingness (willingness strategy) of the speaker to comply with the request.

The CEFR expects learners to use the same requesting strategies at B1 level. What learners are expected to improve at is modification of the speech act. Learners are expected to modify the speech act both lexically (*kindly*) and syntactically (*Would you be so kind as to…*).

For B2 level, the Vantage book gives a more elaborated display of different types of requests and exponents that learners are expected to be able to use. Thus requests are classified as urgent, giving instructions and orders and asking for assistance. There is a special place for polite requests, which are grouped separately. Additionally, the strategy of dropping hints for someone to act on is given separately and specific exponents are listed for its realization.

We will not go into discussion about this classification. We would just like to comment that urgent requests, instructions and orders can also be polite or impolite. One of the factors that perhaps motivated the authors to emphasize polite requests is the wide-spread criticism that language learners are often too direct, even blunt, in formulating their speech acts and that there is need to make them aware of how they could modify their speech act in order to make it more acceptable for native speakers.

Another thing that is different in the Vantage book in comparison with the others is that it lists exponents for responding to requests. The responses themselves are of different types: agreeing, agreeing with reservations, agreeing with reluctance, demurring, and refusing. This requires developing more sensitivity on the part of the learners for the context that the request is made in.

At this point, it makes sense that we look at requests which are classified by the authors as polite, dropping hints for someone to act on and asking for assistance because the requests obtained from the corpus fall into these categories. In addition to the introduction of wider range of requests and responses, there is wider range of modifiers that learners are expected to use at this level. The dropping hints group is also broadened with more syntactic means that learners are expected to use. The most striking is perhaps the "be pessimistic" strategy, according to which it is assumed that the hearer is not likely to do the act (*I don't suppose +* *complement clause (falling-rising) (I don't suppose·someone could ·light the fire?*).

3. Analysis

3.1. Request strategies used by learners at different levels

The first aim of this study was to describe the request strategies used by learners at different levels and compare the results with the CEFR scale.

In general, very little data was collected for A1 level. A1 learners have very little language for any speech production on their own and most of the time they avoided the task. Only two speech acts were obtained from the A1 adult learner corpus:

Did you want ride me there?

Please help me in this?

Obviously, it is impossible to draw any conclusions on the basis of two examples. However it is encouraging that *please* is already there.

The 5-15 group was much more productive and the total number of speech acts that was obtained was 42. The majority of requests produced by this group (29) were formulated with the CI of questioning the ability of the hearer to comply with the request *(Can you pick me up to a tennis match, next weekend? Can you show me the centre next Monday?, Hello Daniel! Can you pick me up to the tennis club in the another town?)*. 4 of the requests were formulated with the willingness strategy *(Do you like to help me for a homework?, do you like to give me an Instructions, Are you helping me with a project?, David, would you let me take it to some beautiful places in your city?)* and 4 of the requests were formulated with direct request strategies, all of which were imperative constructions, modified with the politeness marker *please (Pleays give me a ride?, please give me to small tennis club, pleas help, Please your car)*. The most indirect strategy, hinting, was noticed in 5 of the requests *(Yes, but I have a little problem! I don't heve a ride. I can't car, but I want go to tenis match., Are you going to the car?, I hi going to car?)*.

At A2 level we were able to select 30 requests for the 16-60 group. 11 of these requests were formulated with the ability strategy: *can* (9) and *could* (2). These include some attempts to modify the speech act *(I am calling you to ask you if you can give me a ride this weekend to the tennis metch?)*. In 9 cases the learners used willingness strategy, using would and want, and in 1 example shall *(Would you like to take me with you? Do you want to take me with you, I don't have a ride, Shall you give a ride me?)*. There were also 3 direct requests formulated with the infinitive and 6 hints *(Do you have a car to go there?, Are you going to go to match next weekend?)*.

Younger learners overwhelmingly preferred the CI strategy of questioning the ability of the hearer to comply with the requests, 27 out of 30 *(Can you help me? Could you please*

give me a ride to the tennis match?). The other 3 requests were formulated with *will* (1 - *Will you take me to the tennis match please*), *would* (1 - *Daniel, would you like to gime a ride to the tennis match?*) and directly (1 - *I need somebody who can give me a lift*).

The selection of requests for the 16-60 group at B1 level consisted of 31 requests produced by adult learners and 28 requests produced by younger learners. The preferred strategies by both groups again was CI strategy of questioning the ability of the hearer to comply with the request. Out of 31, the adult group produced 26 by using the verbs can (24) and could (2). The remaining 5 requests were formulated with the CI strategy of questioning the willingness of the hearer by using *will* (1 − *Will you take me?*) and *would* (5 − *Would you give me a ride?*). Out of the 26 ability requests, 10 were syntactically modified with *I was just wondering, I was thinking, I called you to ask you, I (would) like to ask you (I would love to ask you), I wanted to ask you* and 2 with *could* (all past tense forms). One of the *could* forms was additionally modified with a lexical modifier (*Could you possibly…*).

The B1 5-15 group completely relied on the ability strategy (28). 2 of their requests were syntactically modified with *could* and 2 with *I was just wondering/ I wondered*. The 2 remaining requests were prefaced by an explanation or a reason.

Possible explanation for the discrepancy in request modification is that adults are more aware of the sociopragmatic characteristics and they make effort to put their communication in line with this. Now that they have the means they don't hesitate to use them. Younger people's awareness of these factors is lower; the range of people that they communicate with is less varied and is mostly directed towards their friends and family. Therefore, they do not see the need to resort to request modification.

For B2 level, we managed to obtain 27 speech acts from the 16-60 group and 53 from the 5-15 group. Considerable differences could be noticed between the two groups. The adult group showed great preference for the ability strategy which was applied in 22 out of the 27 speech acts. However, only two of these were not modified. 20 of them were internally modified, mostly with syntactic means like *I was wondering if, I wanted to ask, I would like to ask,* etc. All the willingness examples (5) were also syntactically modified with the same means as the ability strategy.

The 5-15 group also showed great preference for the ability strategy, 40 out of 49. However the number of request which were not internally modified was much bigger, 21, and there were 5 examples with *could* (internally modified with past tense). Most of the unmodified cases were externally modified with explanations, other statements or questions. The questions of the type *Can I ask you a favour?* prevailed as external modifier. The rest of the ability

requests (14) were internally modified by the same syntactic means as adult request (*I was wondering if, I thought, I wanted to ask, I would like to ask,* etc.) Willingness strategy was registered in 7 of the requests, all of which were internally modified in the same way as the adult ones. There were only two examples of hinting.

Table 2 Request strategies used by learners at different levels

strategy	A1		A2		B1		B2	
	5-15	16-60	5-15	16-60	5-15	16-60	5-15	16-60
direct	4	1	1	3	0	0	0	0
ability	29	0	27	11	28	26	40	22
willingness	4	1	2	9	0	5	7	5
hinting	5	0	0	6	0	0	2	0
Total	42	2	30	29	28	31	49	27

Table 2 is a summary of the above discussion. It reveals that learners across all levels show preference for the CI strategy of questioning the ability of the hearer to comply with the request. All groups of respondents used both modified and unmodified *can/could* in their requests as in the examples

A2 -   *Can you drive me there?*

     Can you give me a ride please?

     Could you please give me a ride to the tennis match?

B1-   *I wanted to ask if I could come with you.*

     I was just wondering, could you possibly do me a favor and take me to the tennis match since you are going.

     I was wondering if you can show me around.

     I like to ask you if I can go with you.

     I would like to ask you if you can give me a ride.

     I would love to ask you if you can give me a ride.

B2- *I found out that you are going to the same place that I am, so I was wondering if you could give me a ride.*

I was wondering if I can count on you.

I don't have a car and wanted to ask you if you could give me a ride. I would really appreciate it.

I'd like to ask you if I can count on you to take me to the tennis match since it is in another town.

I would like to know if you can take me with you.

All other categories, the use of direct strategies in form of imperatives, the CI strategy of questioning the willingness of the speaker to comply with the request and the indirect strategy of hinting, although found among the examples do not have any prominence.

3.2. Request modification at different levels

The data showed that there is very little modification at A1 and A2 level. It can only be observed in the use of the past tense form *could* and *would*, the use of questions, which are sometimes due to negative transfer *Do you want to take me with you?*; *I need a ride and I was hoping you can give me a lift*; most of the time they are quite abrupt *Hi Daniel, can you drive me to the tennis match?* When modified at B1 and B2 level, the modification is again mostly syntactic rather than lexical. Actually only few lexical modifications have been noticed: *perhaps, possibly, just*. And they have been used scarcely.

Table 3 and Table 4 illustrate the pragmatic ability of learners at B1 and B2 level, respectively. The exponents in black are those that students have used; the exponents in red are those that students have not used; the blue colour indicates the exponents that are not listed by Threshold and Vantage, but students have used them.

Table 3 Pragmatic ability of B1 learners

Level	5-15	16-60
B1 Threshold	*Please + VP imper. (Please sit down)* *VP imper.+please (Stop talking, please)* *Can/Could you help me please?* *Would you (please) +VPinf? (1)*	*Please + VP imper. (Please sit down)* *VP imper.+please (Stop talking, please)* *Can/Could you help me please?* *Would you (please) +VPinf?(1)*

| | *Would you be so kind as to +VPinf (Would you be so kind as to wait?) Kindly + VP imperative +(please) (Kindly make less noise, please) Would you mind + VP gerund (Would you mind opening the window?)* I was just wondering if | *Would you be so kind as to +VPinf (Would you be so kind as to wait?) Kindly + VP imperative +(please) (Kindly make less noise, please) Would you mind + VP gerund (Would you mind opening the window?) (2)* I was just wondering if I would like to ask you if I wanted to ask you if I was thinking that I was asking me if |

black-given and used   red-given but not used   blue-not given but used

Table 4 Pragmatic ability of B 2 learners

		5-15	16-60
B2 Vantage	making polite requests	*Please+ VP imperative (Please sit down.)* *VP imperative, please (Come in, please.)* *Would you (be so kind as to) VPinf, please?* *Can/could you help me, please?* *Do you think you could give/lend me a hand* *Do/would you mind+ VPgerund, please (Would you mind waiting, please?)(1)* *I wonder if/do you think you could (be so kind as to VPinf), please (I wonder if you could be so kind as to open the window, please.*	*Please+ VP imperative (Please sit down.)* *VP imperative, please (Come in, please.)* *Would you (be so kind as to) VPinf, please?* *Can/could you help me, please?* *Do you think you could give/lend me a hand* *Do/would you mind+ VPgerund, please (Would you mind waiting, please?)(2)* *I wonder if/do you think you could (be so kind as to VPinf), please (I wonder if you could be so kind as to open the window, please.*

		I wanted to ask you/ I'd like to know/ I need to know/ I wanted to know *I thought/ I was thinking* *I was hoping that* *Would you like to*	*I wanted to ask you/ I'd like to know/ I need to know/ I wanted to know* *I was hoping that* *Would you like to*
	dropping hints for someone to act on	*declarative sentences+ tag (falling) (It's _cold in here, _ _isn't it?__)* *It would be nice + if-clause (It would be nice if someone could shut the window.)* *I don't suppose + complement clause (falling-rising) (I _don't suppose·someone could ·light the _fire?)*	*declarative sentences+ tag (falling) (It's _cold in here, _ _isn't it?__)* *It would be nice + if-clause (It would be nice if someone could shut the window.)* *I don't suppose + complement clause (falling-rising) (I _don't suppose·someone could ·light the _fire?)*

black-given and used   red-given but not used   blue-not given but used

Table 3 and Table 4 show that learners at both B1 and B2 level show preference for CI strategy of questioning the ability of the hearer. They also show that the more advanced learners did not modify their requests differently than the intermediate learners. When modified at B1 and B2 level, the modification is mostly syntactic rather than lexical. All love verbs have been used to modify the request: *Would you like to do me a favour; I wanted to ask if I could come with you; I would like to know if you can take me with you;* even *love*: *I would love to ask you if you can give me a ride*. Verbs of love are different in English and in Macedonian and they are used differently. This confuses Macedonian learners of English. Other forms of negative transfer have also been noticed in the following examples: *I was asking me if you are going home would you like to take me home; I am sorry for asking but can you please give me a ride next week*. The first example is a direct translation from Macedonian *(Се прашував дали ...)*; the second one illustrates the Macedonian way of prefacing requests with the speech act of apologizing *(Извини, ама ...)*.

Some of the requests are modified with the politeness marker *please*. The use of *please* across the levels is very low and does not follow a developmental path, in spite of all the emphasis that books and teachers put on it. What was surprising to notice was that the younger group uses the politeness marker more often than the adult group.

Table 5 Use of politeness marker please across different levels and age groups

	A1		A2		B1		B2	
	5-15	16-60	5-15	16-60	5-15	16-60	5-15	16-60
politeness marker please in head acts	1/2	7/29 24.1%	8/30 26.6%	3/30 10%	4/28 14.2%	2/29 6,8%	9/49 18.3%	1/27 3.7%

3.3. Some conclusions about request development across different levels

On the basis of the above analysis, we could draw the following conclusions:

1. Learners can use imperative, *can/could* strategies from very low levels. However, the variety doesn't build up. The infinitive is dropped as soon as learners can use the *can/could* strategy. They continue to rely on this strategy across all levels.

2. When learners have acquired more language and are able to produce more complex sentences at B1 and B2 level, they begin to internally modify their requests with syntactic means, most of which are not listed among the exponents of the CEFR. In fact, many of them are due to negative transfer from the mother tongue (Macedonian).

At B1 only fewer attempts have been registered. At B2 level, however, syntactic modification is widely practiced. Most probably they have been constructed by negative transfer on the basis of their mother tongue.

3. In framing their requests, learners were influenced by what they perceive polite. The examples that they have produces and which are not on the list of the T-books politeness markers illustrate that they perceive the following language means as polite:

- *Would* is obviously perceived as polite. It is used by both age groups for the strategy of questioning the willingness of the speaker to comply with the request (*Would you give me a ride? Would you like to give me a ride?*)

- The blue examples in Table 3 and Table 4 show that learners perceive past tense as politeness marker and they widely apply it. They have used the past simple tense with verbs which do not

take the progressive form (*want, need*) and past continuous with the rest of the verbs. Hendriks (2008: 347) notices that "Two other syntactic devices that tended to co-occur, especially in the native English data, were (past) tense and (durative) aspect. Both devices have a mitigating effect, although they work along different lines to achieve this effect. The use of the past tense in a request distances the request away from reality..., whereas continuous aspect (*I am wondering*) creates a mitigating effect by making a request more tentative..."

- The adverbs *just* and *possibly* are also seen as polite.

4. At B2 level learners still have problems with the following:

- *Do you think you could...* is not used at all

- tag questions are not used at all

- *It would be nice if ...* is not used at all

- be pessimistic strategy is not used at all

- *Would you mind...* is rarely used and when used it is not used in grammatically correct constructions

- lexical modification is rarely used (*possibly, perhaps, just*)

5. the politeness marker *please* is not used enough and its frequency in learners requests does not follow a developmental path. Its frequency is the highest at the lowest levels. When learners think that they have enough language to modify their requests they drop it even more.

4. Conclusion

This study is limited with respect to the number of speech acts obtained and the instrument used. It is often claimed that the DCT does not produce reliable data as the data obtained is not naturally produced. However, other studies have proven that the results obtained through a DCT can be valid. Kasper and Rose (2002: 96), for example, argue that DCT "can provide useful information about speakers' pragmatic knowledge of the strategies and linguistic forms by which communicative acts can be implemented" (Kasper and Rose, 2002: 96, in Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2013).

Although this is a small scale research, the results obtained in this study coincide with other studies (Hendriks, 2008; Woodfield, 2008; Otcu & Zeyrek, 2008; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2013, etc.). Most of the studies of request acquisition show that learners prefer CI strategy of questioning the ability of the hearer and that fewer show preference for the rest of the strategies. Even for the strategy of CI of questioning the willingness of the speaker to comply with the request. This comes as a surprise because this strategy is quite frequent, even more frequent than the ability strategy. The analysis presented in the studies above also

coincide with our conclusion that English learners prefer to modify their requests syntactically rather than lexically.

Of course, we are very much aware of the limits of our study. The results obtained here need to be checked by means of other research instruments, such as role plays and observation of naturally occurring data. But undoubtedly it can serve as an excellent preliminary or pilot study for further investigation of request development in learners' interlanguage.

Овој труд претставува корпусно истражување на развојот на прагматичката компетенција на македонските изучувачи на англискиот јазик на А1, А2, Б1 и Б2 ниво, според класификацијата на нивоата во *Заедничката европска референтна рамка на јазиците* (ЗЕРР). Прагматика е наука која се занимава со употребата на јазикот во комуникацијата. Со воведувањето на комуникативниот приод, стана очигледно дека учењето на вокабуларот и на граматичките правила не се доволни за успешна комуникација. За реализација на своите комуникативни цели во вториот / странскиот јазик, изучувачите треба да се оспособат да прават правилен избор на јазичните средства во зависност од соговорникот и односот што го имаат со него.

Централно место во развој на прагматичката компетенција имаат говорните чинови. Во ова истражување ќе се фокусираме на говорниот чин на замолување. Дури и во такви ограничени услови како што е училницата, тој е меѓу првите говорни чинови со кои изучувачите на странскиот јазик се среќаваат. Разговорите врз коишто се врши анализата беа земени од Македонскиот корпус на англискиот меѓујазик (МКАМ), кој беше собран во периодот 2011-2012 година, како дел од заедничкиот проект на ФОН, УКИМ и УГД.

Клучни зборови: прагматика, компетенција, говорни чинови, замолување, ЗЕРР, корпусно истражување

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