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# The Use of Request Strategies by EFL Learners

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**Abstract**

The aim of this study is to investigate the use of request strategies by English language learners in the Republic of Macedonia. The participants in the study are students of English at an intermediate level of proficiency. The testing instruments include role-plays and discourse completion tasks. The participants' responses were analysed according to the classification of request strategies proposed by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989). The analysis shows that the most frequently used types of strategies in both formal and informal situations are query preparatories which belong to the group of conventional indirect strategies.

*Keywords:* pragmatic competence; request strategies; role-plays; discourse completion tasks.

## 1. Introduction

The primary aim of language learning and teaching today is developing learners' communicative competence. The term *communicative competence* was introduced by Hymes (1972) who wanted to point out that knowing and being able to speak a language involves not only possessing linguistics knowledge, but also an ability to use that knowledge in communication, which requires possessing social and cultural knowledge as well. In other words, knowing the rules of grammar and possessing large vocabulary is not enough. In order to be able to communicate in the target language successfully, learners need to know how to use their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary appropriately depending on the context and the people they are speaking to. This type of competence is called *pragmatic competence* and it is

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an integral part of one's communicative competence. A lot of studies have shown that "second language speakers might fail to communicate effectively (commit pragmatic failures), even when they have an excellent grammatical and lexical command of the target language" (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984, p. 196). Lack of pragmatic knowledge may cause language learners to appear "uncooperative, at the least, or more seriously, rude or insulting" (Bardovi-Harlig, Hartford, Mahan-Taylor, Morgan, & Reynolds, 1996, p. 324). Therefore, it is essential that language learners develop their pragmatic competence alongside their linguistic, discourse and strategic competence.

What is pragmatic competence? Following the definition of pragmatics, according to which "Pragmatics is the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication" (Crystal, 1985, p. 240), pragmatic competence can be defined as the ability to produce socially appropriate utterances in various contexts of language use. However, pragmatic ability does not refer only to the productive use of language through speaking and writing, but also to understanding and interpreting what is said or written by other speakers of the target language (Cohen, 2010). Therefore, it also involves the ability "to go beyond the literal meaning of what is said or written, in order to interpret the intended meanings, assumptions, purposes or goals, and the kinds of actions that are being performed" (Cohen, 2010, p. 5). Having in mind that children learn the social rules of language use while acquiring their mother tongue, people belonging to different ethnic or cultural groups may have different social rules of language use and interactional styles and may interpret things differently which could lead to misunderstandings (Blum-Kulka, 1982). Hence, learning a foreign language necessitates learning the social and cultural norms and values of the target language speakers that would enable learners to interact in the target language successfully by employing the pragmatic rules of that language.

Pragmatic competence can be seen through the realization of speech acts which, according to Yule (1996, p. 47) are "actions performed via utterances" such as requests, apologies, complaints, invitations, and so on. In this paper we focus on requests as one of the most often investigated speech act.

## 2. Requests

According to Brown and Levinson (1978), requests are face-threatening acts in which both the speaker's and hearer's faces are at risk, because "by making a request, the speaker impinges on the hearer's claim to freedom of action and freedom from imposition" (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984, p. 201). In order to minimize the imposition, speakers tend to use more indirect request strategies which sound more polite and preserve the hearer's face. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (ibid.) describe three major levels of directness of request strategies:

a) the most direct, explicit level, realized by requests syntactically marked such as imperatives, performatives and 'hedged performatives';
b) the conventionally indirect level; procedures that realize the act by reference to contextual preconditions necessary for its performance, as conventionalized in a given language;
c) nonconventional indirect level, i.e. the open-ended group of indirect strategies (hints) that realize the request by either partial reference to object or element needed for the implementation of the act ('Why is the window open'), or by reliance on contextual clues ('It's cold in here').

These three levels are further divided into nine sub-levels of request strategy types 'that form a scale of indirectness' (Table 1). The first five strategies belong to the direct level, the next two belong to the conventional indirect level and the last two belong to the nonconventional indirect level.

Table 1. Request categories proposed by Blum-Kulka (1987, p. 133)

| Descriptive category | Examples |
| --- | --- |
| 1. Mood Derivable | Clean up the kitchen. |
| | Move your car. |
| 2. Performative | I'm asking you to move your car. |
| 3. Hedged Performative | I would like to ask you to move your car. |
| 4. Obligation statement | You'll have to move your car. |

| | |
|---|---|
| 5. Want statement | I would like you to clean the kitchen. |
| | I want you to move your car. |
| 6. Suggestive Formulae | How about cleaning up? |
| | Why don't you come and clean up the mess you made last night? |
| 7. Query Preparatory | Could you clean up the mess in the kitchen? |
| | Would you mind moving your car? |
| 8. Strong Hints (A) | We've left the kitchen in a right mess. |
| 9. Mild Hints (B) | We don't want any crowding (as a request to move the car). |

In addition to the main request strategy types, speakers have at their disposal other means of mitigating the request which can be internal, such as request perspective, syntactic and other downgraders and upgraders and external such as adjuncts to the head act (Blum-Kulka and Olhstain, 1984, p. 203-205). In relation to the request perspective, the request can be *hearer oriented* (Could *you* tidy up the kitchen soon?), *speaker oriented* (Do you think/ could borrow your notes from yesterday's class?), *speaker and hearer oriented* (So, could *we* please clean up?) and *impersonal* (So it might not be a bad idea to *get it cleaned up).* Syntactic downgraders include using *interrogatives* (Could you do the cleaning up?), *negation* (Look, excuse me. I wonder if you *wouldn't mind* dropping me home?), *the past tense* (I *wanted* to ask for a postponement), and *embedded 'if' clause* (I would appreciate it if you left me alone). Other downgraders can be *consultative devices (Do you think* I could borrow your lecture notes from yesterday?), *understatements* (Could you tidy up *a bit* before I start?), *hedges* (It would really help if *you did something* about the kitchen) and *downtoners* (Will you be able *perhaps* to drive me?). In the group of upgraders belong *intensifiers* (Clean up this mess, *it's disgusting*) and *expletives* (You still haven't cleaned up that *bloody* mess!). External modifications include *checking on availability* (Are you going in the direction of the town? And if so, is it possible to join you?), *getting a precommitment* (*Will you do me a favor?* Could you perhaps lend me your notes for a few days?), *grounders* (Judith, / *missed class yesterday,* could I borrow your notes?), *sweeteners* (*You have beautiful handwriting,* would it be possible to borrow your notes for a few days?), *disarmers* (Excuse me, / *hope you don't think I'm being forward,* but is there any chance of a lift home?) and *cost minimizers* (Pardon me, but could you give me a lift, *if you're going my way,* as I just missed the bus and there isn't another one for an hour).

For second language learners direct requests do not pose a problem as they are the same in almost all languages. In relation to indirect requests, second language learners may face a problem. Even though they have learned to use indirect request strategies in their mother tongue and they are part of their pragmatic competence in their native language, they are not always transferable to another language. Blum-Kulka (1982, p. 33) points out that "conventional indirect speech acts represent a special case of interdependence between conventions of language and conventions about the use of language" and this interdependence can be different in different languages and cultures. Therefore, when learning a new language, learners need to learn the strategies that are considered appropriate in that language.

The aim of this study is to investigate the use of request strategies by EFL learners in the Republic of Macedonia.

## 3. Literature review

One of the most comprehensive cross-cultural study of pragmatic competence is the study conducted by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) in which they investigated the realization patterns of requests and apologies in eight languages by native and non-native speakers. They focused on three different types of variability: situational, cross-cultural and individual variability for which purpose they used a discourse completion test and the typology of request patterns shown in Table 1. The results of their investigation revealed rich cross-cultural variability and showed that the realization of speech acts is closely connected with the interaction between situational and cultural factors. Moreover, the main differences between speakers with different cultural background were the level of directness and the modifications that were made in the realization of the speech act of requests (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). This study was the basis for many similar studies on the use of request strategies by language learners.

Blum-Kulka (1982) conducted an experiment with adult learners of Hebrew, adult native speakers of Hebrew and adult English native speakers. The instrument that was used in the study was a discourse completion test with 17 items.

The analysis of the participants' responses demonstrated that both native speakers and learners were sensitive to the setting and interpersonal relationships which was seen in the choice of the strategies they used in each dialogue. However, the use of strategies by learners was systematically different than that of native speakers. Another insight from the study is that learners prefer less direct forms than native speakers which, according to the author, is "partly due to transfer of social norms, but in some cases it may also be due to reluctance on the part of the speaker to express emotion directly in a language over which he does not have full control" (p. 47). Opposite findings were reported in the study conducted by House and Kasper (1981) who investigated the use of request strategies by German non-native speakers of English and native English speakers. As a result of using more direct strategies than native speakers, German learners of English were considered less polite in the realization of the speech act of requests.

In a study on the development of pragmatic competence, Francis (1997) investigated the requests produced by adult non-native learners of English in three different settings across nine proficiency levels. The data was collected through observation, audio and video recordings. The results showed that lower level learners used more direct strategies, but as their proficiency level increased, they gradually used more complex and more varied request strategies.

Several studies aimed to determine the difference between the request strategies used by native speakers of different languages. For example, Fukushima (1996) studied the differences between British and Japanese native speakers in their use of request strategies and found some similarities and some differences. The degree of imposition as well as social and power distance between the interlocutors had an important influence on both groups of participants in relation to the strategies they used. However, while Japanese speakers preferred more direct strategies, British speakers used more conventional indirect ones. Another study found out that the main difference in the use of request strategies between British and Polish speakers is in the use of interrogatives as a result of cultural differences between these two groups (Wierzbicka, 1985). While interrogatives are frequently used by British speakers because they are considered polite ways of requesting, Polish speakers view them as formal and overpolite and indicate uncertainty on the part of the speaker as to the willingness of the hearer to fulfill the request.

The study presented in this paper is part of a project on the role of explicit instruction in developing pragmatic competence in learning English and German as foreign languages in the Republic of Macedonia.

## 4. The project

The project has the following aims:
1. To research how explicit instructions influence the development of pragmatic competence in foreign language learning; and
2. To investigate the role of the Internet as a platform for foreign language learning.

In particular, the project focuses on the following:
- Realization of the speech acts of requesting, apologizing and complaining in the interlanguage of English and German language learners in Macedonia;
- Comparison of the speech act realization in Macedonian and in learners' interlanguage (English and German);
- Definition of the reasons that bring about pragmatic failure by foreign language learners;
- The role of explicit instructions in the development of the pragmatic competence of English and German foreign language learners;
- The role of the Internet as a medium for learning foreign languages.

The participants of the project are students of English and German at intermediate and advanced level of language proficiency (B1, B2 and C1). Their proficiency of English/German was defined by means of a general language proficiency test. During the first stage, the participants' pragmatic competence was assessed by Discourse Completion Tests (DCT) as well as recorded conversations and discussions. The second stage involves designing e-learning modules for developing learners' pragmatic competence that consist of two types of activities: activities for raising learners' awareness of the meanings conveyed by specific linguistic means which native speakers use, and activities that will enable learners to formulate speech acts with reference to the context, situation, interlocutors, emotional mood, etc. After studying the modules, the participants will do the Discourse Completion Tests and the role plays again in order to assess the extent to which the designed e-modules contributed for raising learners' awareness for the pragmatic principles in the target language and for the development of the learners' pragmatic competence.

**5. The present study**

The study presented in this paper is part of the first stage of the project and its aim is to determine the pragmatic competence of English language learners at an intermediate level (B2) in relation to the speech act of requests. As mentioned previously, the instruments that were used to measure the participants' pragmatic competence were discourse completion tests and role-plays as the most frequently used instruments, despite their drawbacks. McNamara and Roever (2006) point out that having in mind the nature of conversation which consists of various turns and is "co-constructed by both interlocutors" (p. 63), DCTs do not provide authentic conditions for demonstrating the learners' pragmatic ability and that role-plays may be a better choice. On the other hand, role-plays are not practical because they require a lot of time and multiple ratings. Moreover, it is difficult to compare role-play performances because of the uniqueness of each conversation (McNamara and Roever, 2006, p. 64). However, despite their limitations, these two instruments can give us some information about the pragmatic knowledge of language learners and their "potential for performance, as knowledge is arguably a necessary precondition for performance" (McNamara and Roever, 2006, p. 67).

Before administering the DCT, it was piloted with 20 students who were asked to give their opinion on the clarity and appropriateness of the given situations. The DCT contained six request situations:

a)  Requests to a person of superior status:
1.  You have to hand in a project the following day. You have been ill and you haven't finished it yet. You go to talk to your professor, with whom you have a good academic relationship to ask for an extension. You say to him/her:
2.  You belong to a non-profit organisation and you have decided to invite a famous person to give a speech. Members of your group have appointed you so that you speak to this person and ask him/her to give a speech about ecological disasters. You approach the person and you say:

b) Requests to a stranger
3.  The meeting has just ended. Your bus has just left and the next one will not be along for another hour. The couple sitting next to you live on the same street and have come by car. You would like a ride with them and you say:
4.  You are walking in a park. You feel like a cigarette, but you do not have any matches. There is someone sitting smoking on a bench nearby. You approach them and say:

c) Request to a friend (equal status)
5.  You were sick last week and missed two class sessions. Since the exam is coming up soon, you would like to ask Judith, a friend of yours, to borrow her class notes. You say to her:
6.  Ruth, a friend of yours at the university, comes up to you after class and tells you that she has finally found an apartment, but that she must pay $300.00 down payment immediately. At present she only has $200.00. She turns to you and says:

The analysis of the participants' responses was based on the typology of request strategies proposed by Blum-Kulka (1987). Table 2 shows the types of request strategies used by the participants. The total number of responses was 260.

As the results show, most of the responses in all situations are conventional indirect strategies belonging to the category of query preparatories. Even though there were a large number of different expressions, the five most often used structures were: *Can I/you …(please), Could I/you …(please), I want/ wanted/ would like to ask..., Would you /mind/ like/ be interested/ be kind…*, and *Do you have…*. Some of the other structures that were used fewer times were: *I will be grateful/ be honoured/ be glad/ appreciate..., May I ask..., I would really appreciate / be grateful/ be delighted..., I was wondering if you could..., Is it possible..., Would it be a problem...* and so on.

Table 2. Types of request strategies used by the participants on the Discourse completion test.

| Strategy | DCT 1-2 (formal) | DCT 3-4 (formal/informal) | DCT 5-6 (informal) | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Direct level:** | | | | |
| Explicit performative | 1 | | | 1 |
| | 1.18% | | | 0.4% |
| Hedge performative | 20 | 6 | 8 | 34 |
| | 23% | 6.9% | 9.2% | 13.1% |
| Want statements | 1 | | 2 | 3 |
| | 1.18% | | 2.3% | 1.2% |
| **Conventional indirect level:** | | | | |
| Query preparatories | 63 | 68 | 74 | 205 |
| | 74% | 78% | 85% | 79.1% |
| **Non-conventional indirect level:** | | | | |
| Mild hints | | 13 | 3 | 16 |
| | | 14.9% | 3.4% | 6.2% |

The role-plays included three situations from the DCT: situations number 1, 3 and 5. The types of the participants' request strategies are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Types of request strategies used by the participants in the role-plays.

| Strategy | Role play 1 (formal) n=14 | Role play 2 (formal) n=13 | Role play 3 (informal) n=14 | Total 41 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Direct level:** | | | | |
| Hedge performative | 5 | 1 | 2 | 8 |
| | 35.7% | 7.7% | 14.3% | 19.5% |
| Want statements | | | 1 | 1 |
| | | | 7.1% | 2.4% |
| **Conventional indirect level:** | | | | |
| Query preparatories | 9 | 12 | 11 | 32 |
| | 64.3% | 92.3% | 78.6% | 78.1% |

Again the most often used strategies were query preparatories with 78.1% of all request strategies. Compared to the DCT, the participants used a fewer number of different request strategies. The most frequent structure used in the role-plays was *Can I/you…*. Some of the other expressions included: *I would like to ask you…, Would you like…, I want to ask you…., Could I/you…, I wanted to ask you …* and so on.

According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), learners at B2 level are expected to learn and use the following structures:

- Please + VP imperative.
- VP imperative, please.
- Would/can/could you…, please?
- Do/would you mind…, please?
- I wonder if/do you think you could…, please.
- Declarative sentences + question tags
- It would be nice + if-clause
- I don't suppose + complement clause
- Do you think you could…? (Mitkovska et al., 2013, p. 177)

If we compare these expressions with the ones used by the participants in the study, we can see that the participants used some of them such as *Would/can/could you…, please,* and *Do/would you mind…, please*. Some of the other structures, such as the imperative, question tags, and expressions such as *It would be nice…, I don't suppose*… and *Do you think you could*… were not used at all. On the other hand, the participants used other complex structures not listed in CEFR such as *I will be grateful/ be honoured/ be glad…, I would really appreciate / be grateful/ be delighted…, If I/you could/ would be so kind…, Will you /be willing/ do us a pleasure*…, and so on. The participants in the study also often used the past tense as one of the ways of mitigating the request and showing politeness.

This analysis shows that language learners at an intermediate proficiency level in the Republic of Macedonia prefer conventional indirect strategies for expressing requests and that the repertoire of expressions they use is substantial, but most of them use a limited number of expressions. They use different types of modifications in order to sound polite, but very often there is not a big difference between the expressions they use in formal and informal situations. This indicates that they need more exposure to various situations and more practice of request strategies in order to learn how to use them appropriately to the situation and the people they are speaking to.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper we discussed the importance of developing language learners' pragmatic competence as one of the essential requirements for successful communication. We focused on the speech act of requests as one of the most frequently studied speech act. The study presented in the paper shows that Macedonian EFL learners at an intermediate level tend to use conventional indirect strategies to make requests and that they use a variety of structures employing both internal and external modifications to make their requests more polite, but their choice of request strategies in formal situations does not differ to a great extent from those used in informal contexts.

In the next stage of the project the participants will study the modules and do the activities made available on an e-learning platform for two months, after which they will be tested again in order to determine the role of explicit instruction on the development of their pragmatic competence. We believe that the results and the insights from this project will contribute to shedding more light on learners' pragmatic competence in the Republic of Macedonia and the ways of developing their pragmatic ability that would help them become more competent users of the target language.

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