Cross Cultural Perspective towards the Realization of EFL Learners' Request Appropriateness and Politeness

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Abstract. *Each culture has its own perspective towards speech acts. What is perceived as a formal context in one culture may be seen as informal in another. This study is intended to find out the importance of knowing cross cultural perspective towards speech acts of request produced by EFL learners. In this study the researcher used descriptive qualitative research. The researcher found that numerous studies conducted did not separate speech acts appropriateness and politeness though actually appropriateness and politeness are two different things, appropriate requests might be impolite to the interlocutor. Since maintaining conversation in cross culture communication is essential, the researcher assumes that it is kind of urgent to conduct a research regarding to request appropriateness and politeness.*

Key words: *cross-cultural perspective; request; appropriateness; politeness*

A. INTRODUCTION

English is currently used by people in the world for interaction and communication with each other in order to do international trade or participate in the academic conferences (McKay, 2002). Moreover, students of second/foreign language education programs are considered successful if they can communicate effectively in the language (Riggenback & Lazaraton, 1991).

In order to communicate effectively, learners need to master pragmatics. Richards and Schmidt (2002) defined pragmatics as "the study of the use of language in communication, particularly the relationships between sentences and the contexts

and situations in which they are used" (p. 412). Leech (1983) said that there are two kinds of pragmatics: pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics. Pragmalinguistics refers to the resources for conveying communicative acts and relational and interpersonal meanings. On the other hand, sociopragmatics refers to "the sociological interface of pragmatics" (p. 15) which means the social perceptions underlying participants' interpretations and performances of communicative action.

Pragmatic knowledge or competence is crucial to successful cross-cultural and interpersonal communication as it will facilitate interlocutors to convey their communicative intention and to comprehend the message as it is intended by other interlocutors (Bachman, 1990; Fraser, 2010). Having an inadequacy of this knowledge could engender pragmatic failure in which speakers could run the risk of appearing uncooperative, rude, and insulting (Bardovi-Harlig, Hartford, Mahan-Taylor, Morgan, & Reynolds, 1991), and interlocutors tend to perceive a pragmatic failure as an offence rather than simply a deficiency in language knowledge (Thomas, 1983). In cross-cultural communication, lacking of pragmatic proficiencies could induce communication breakdown (Amaya, 2008; Lihui & Jianbin, 2010).

One of the subsets lies in pragmatic is speech act. In the field of linguistics, the term 'speech act' has been defined by Searle (1970). The term is used to refer to how the words that a speaker chooses to use affect the behavior of the speaker and the listener in a conversation (Crystal, 1997). A speech act is an activity in communication that refers to the speaker's intentions and the effect that the speech act has on the listeners. Searle (1976) classified speech act into some categories include directives (such as commanding or requesting), commissives (such a promising or guaranteeing), expressives (such as apologizing, welcoming or sympathizing), declarations (such as christening, marrying or resigning) and representatives (such as asserting or hypothesizing).

A speech act of request is a prominent event in daily interactions, one in which the speaker usually manipulates appropriate linguistic forms to make requests according to certain situations. People produce requests for various reasons in everyday interactions, either to obtain information or certain action, to seek support, or to acquire assistance from others; however, the way requests are presented varies from one speech community to another. In a request the speaker to a greater or lesser extent imposes on the addressee hence there is a need to put politeness strategies into action in order to mitigate the imposition, in other words, to soften what the addressee might regard as an impingement on his/her freedom of action (Blum-Kulka, 1984).

The importance of producing appropriate and polite request ability is unquestionable. Non-native speakers (NNSs) who are studying English in an English-speaking environment need to make requests in English every day in order to get what they want or need. These NNSs might have the ability to make their requests in a grammatically correct way, but if their requests are not made appropriately, communication breakdown can result, which can be embarrassing for the student. In addition, If communication breakdown occurs, the relationship between the speaker and the listener can be jeopardized and the NNS may not receive what he or she wanted or needed.

As defined by Gass and Selinker, interlanguage (IL) pragmatics is the study of how people learn to speak appropriately in a second language (2001). It is not enough just to learn the grammar rules of a language; it is essential for NNSs to learn to use language that is appropriate for a situation or social context (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005; Taguchi, 2006). For example, if a speaker wanted to make a request to ask for something from a close friend, she would ask differently than if she were making a request to ask for something from a teacher or another authority figure. If learners do not learn to use language in a pragmatically

appropriate way, pragmatic failure or misfits between the speaker's intended meaning and what is actually understood by the listener can occur (Cohen, 2008). Contrary, if a request is made in a pragmatically appropriate way, the burden for the listener is minimized and yet the speaker still receives what he or she wants or needs (Jae-Suk, 1999). If NNSs can learn to make requests politely, their relationship with the listener can be maintained (Kitao, 1988), pathways for communication will remain open and the NNS is more likely to receive the item that she was requesting.

Much attention has been paid to requests in the literature on interlanguage and cross-cultural pragmatics (Blum-Kulka et al, 1989; House, 1989). Past research made considerable effort to describe and analyze requests, social factors that can affect interpretation of this speech act in various situations, the circumstances in which requests are appropriate, the effect of various sociocultural background factors on the perception and production of requests, and commonalities across languages and cultures in their vision of contextually appropriate requests. However, little research has addressed perceptions on both appropriateness and politeness in requests as viewed by EFL learners and native speakers in the context of different social standings of interactant..

B. DISCUSSION

Request

According to Searle's (1976) classification, a request is categorized as a "directive" speech act "whereby a speaker (requester) conveys to a hearer (requestee) that he/she wants the requestee to perform an act, which is for the benefit of the speaker" (Trosborg, 1995, p. 187). Adding another dimension, Blum-Kulka (1991) described requests as being "pre-event" acts that intend to affect the hearer's behavior as opposed to "post-event" acts such as apologies and complaints. According to Blum-Kulka, the motivational, intentional source of a request is the requestive goal, which speakers strive to achieve with maximum

effectiveness and politeness. (p. 257). These goals may vary from the least coercive (e.g., requests for permission, information, and goods) to the most coercive (e.g., requests for action).

The most effective way to perform a request is to be bluntly direct (e.g., "Give me the book" or "Close the window"). However, directness can conflict with politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Leech, 1983). Thus, from a sociolinguistic viewpoint, requests are considered FTAs (Brown & Levinson, 1987) that place both the requestee's negative face (his/her desire to remain unimpeded) and the requester's positive face (his/her desire for approval) at risk. The high social stakes of requests for both the speaker and hearer call for considerable "repressive action" or "face work" to make the request sound more polite and less imposing, typically through the use of mitigating devices that demand advanced pragmatic knowledge of the target culture on the part of the learner.

General characteristics of request

Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) launched the term CCSARP (Cross Cultural Study of Speech Act Realization Patterns) and subdivided these three levels into nine distinct sub-levels called 'strategy types' that together form a scale of indirectness. The categories on this scale are expected to be manifested in all languages studied; the distribution of strategies on the scale is meant to yield the relative degree of directness preferred in making requests in any given language, as compared to another, in the same situation. The nine strategy types are: (1) *Mood derivable*, the grammatical mood of the verb in the utterance marks its illocutionary force as a request, e.g "Clean up this mess" ; (2) *Explicit performatives,* the illocutionary force of the utterance is explicitly named by the speakers, e.g "I'm asking you not to park the car here" ; (3) *Hedged performative,* utterances embedding the naming of the illocutionary force, e.g "I would like you to give your lecture a week earlier" ; (4) *Locution derivable,* the illocutionary point is directly derivable from the semantic meaning of the locution, e.g

"Madam, you'll have to move your car" ; (5) *Scope stating,* the utterance expresses the speaker's intentions, desire or feeling the fact that the hearer do X, e.g "I really wish you'd stop bothering me" ; (6) *Language specific suggestory formula,* the sentence contains a suggestion to X, e.g "So, why don't you come and clear up the the mess you made last night?" ; (7) *Reference to preparatory conditions,* utterance contains reference to preparatory conditions (e.g. ability or willingness, the possibility of the act being performed) as conventionalized in any specific language, e.g "Could you clear up the kitchen, please?" ; (8) *Strong hints,* utterance contains partial reference to object or to elements needed for the implementation of the act (directly pragmatically implying the act), e.g "You've left this kitchen in a right mess" ; (9) *Mild hints,* utterances that make no reference to the request proper (or any of its elements) but are interpretable through the context as requests (indirectly pragmatically implying the act), e.g "I'm a nun (in response to the persistent boy who keep pestering her on the street). *table 1

Takashi (1996) then developed the framework of request by adding several types on preparatory expression: preparatory questions (i.e., questions concerning the hearer's will, ability, or possibility to perform a desired action), e.g. "could you lend me a pen" ; permission questions, e.g. "may I borrow a pen" ; mitigated-preparatory (i.e., query preparatory expressions embedded within another clause), e.g. "I'm wondering if you could lend me a pen" ; and mitigated-wants (i.e., statements of want in hypothetical situations), e.g. "I'd appreciate it if you could lend me a pen". *table 2

Variables Affecting Requests

Many scholars have investigated the realization of request across culture and they found that there were some variables affect the realization of request. In terms of gender, Al-Marrani and Sazalie (2010:63) found that there was a general trend in Yemeni Arabic for higher levels of directness in male-male interaction and higher levels of indirectness in male-female interaction. Lorenzo-Dus and Bou-Franch

(2003:196-197) got, at least, two findings in their study involved Spanish and British undergraduates: both Spanish men and women used mainly direct strategies in their requests, and British women were not more direct than men.

The requests strategies use is also influenced by cultural background of society. Zhu and Bao (2010:850) compared between Chinese and Western politeness in cross cultural communication. They found that in western society, personal interest, individual power and privacy are all believed sacred and inviolable.

Tawalbeh and Al-Oqaily (2012:85) conducted a research regarding to indirectness and politeness in American English and Saudi Arabic requests. The results of their study revealed that conventional indirectness was the most prevailing strategy employed by the American sample. On the other hand, the Saudi sample varied their request strategies depending on the social variables of power and distance.

Power and distance were also found as variables affecting the use of requests strategies (Han, 2013:1104). By contrasting the strategies of head acts both in English and Chinese, we can find that the similarity between native Chinese speakers and native English speakers is that both value conventionally indirect strategies and their difference lies in that native Chinese speakers prefer to use direct strategies i.e. imperatives, in some cases, while native English speakers seldom choose to use imperatives when requesting someone to do something.

Ashoorpour and Azari (2014:39) found that there is significant relationship between grammatical knowledge and pragmatic competence in pre-intermediate and intermediate level students. Those who were in advanced level and have more grammatical knowledge performed better both in grammatical knowledge and pragmatic competence.

Rank of imposition can also be a variable affecting the realization of request. This finding was obtained by Sofyan and Rusmi (2011:78) after they investigated the requests strategy types realized by English teachers of Junior High school in Indonesia. When the imposition of the situation is low, the teachers used three kinds of strategies: direct, conventionally indirect, and non-conventionally indirect strategies, with the mood derivable strategy is the most direct strategies, followed by Query preparatory, and then mild hints. On the other hand when the imposition of the situation is high, all the teachers used conventional indirect strategies to address their requests.

Appropriateness and politeness

Appropriate means suitable or proper in circumstances while polite means having or showing behavior that is respectful and considerate of other people (Oxford dictionary). Thus politeness is a component or part of appropriateness since appropriate on some occasions considers being acceptable impoliteness e.g. help…! (When one is about to drown)

Many definitions on politeness have been proposed and they go to the same direction that politeness refers to strategies that aim at conflict-free communication and at the self-realization and the self-defense of a speaker in a conversation. Names connected with politeness are Robin Lakoff, Geoffrey Leech, Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson, and Richard J. Watts. Numerous scholars deal with politeness but their theories are considered as the most influential ones.
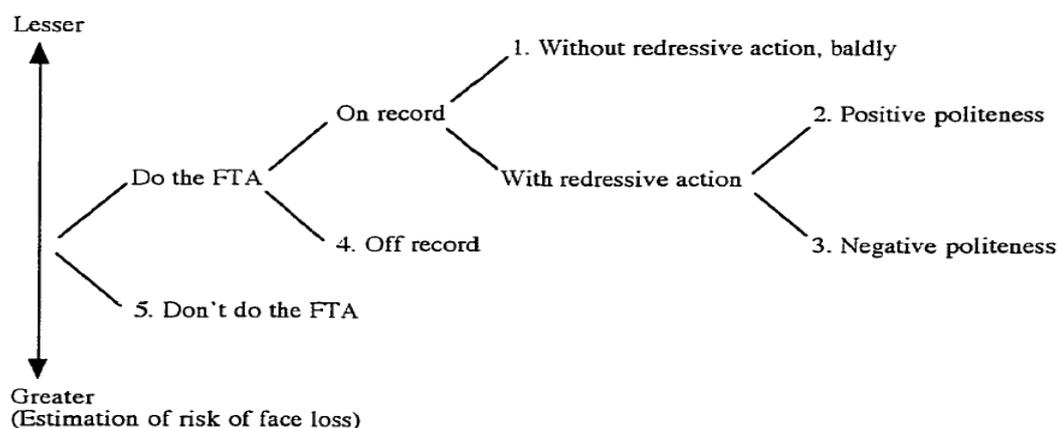
Lakoff (1973) in Subertova (2013:13-14) defines politeness as forms of behavior that have been developed in societies in order to reduce friction in personal interaction. According to her, pragmatic competence consists of a set of sub-maxims, namely: 1- Be clear and 2- Be polite. There are many situations in which the requirement of the first maxim (be clear) is more important than the other one

(be polite), and vice versa. Lakoff clarifies this relationship by asserting that politeness usually supersedes. It is considered more important in a conversation to avoid offense than to achieve clarity. This makes sense since in most informal conversations actual communication of important ideas is secondary to merely reaffirming and strengthening a relationship.

Leech in (1983) in Subertova (2013:14-17) formulates the Politeness Principle by giving us a set of maxims. The six maxims with their corresponding sub-maxims go as follows: 1. TACT MAXIM: a) Minimize cost to *other*; b) Maximize benefit to *other*. 2. GENEROSITY MAXIM: a) Minimize benefit to *self*; b) Maximize cost to *self*. 3. APPROBATION MAXIM: a) Minimize dispraise of *other;* b) Maximize praise of *other*. 4. MODESTY MAXIM: a) Minimize praise of *self;* b) Maximize dispraise of *self.* 5. AGREEMENT MAXIM: a) Minimize disagreement between *self* and *other*; b) Maximize agreement between *self* and *other*. 6. SYMPATHY MAXIM: a) Minimize antipathy between *self* and *other*; b) Maximize sympathy between *self* and *other*.

One of the most influential, detailed and well-known models of linguistic politeness is that of Brown and Levinson (1987) in Subertova (2013:18-21). They were not only inspired by Grice's CP and Austin's and Searle's theory of speech acts, but also by conception of *face.* Face can be threatened in specific situations and such threats are called *face-threatening acts* (FTAs). Taxonomy of strategies that the speaker can follow when intending to do the FTA is illustrated in the following figure:

Figure 1. Strategies for performing FTAs (Brown and Levinson, 1987)

Lesser

On record — 1. Without redressive action, baldly

With redressive action — 2. Positive politeness

3. Negative politeness

Do the FTA — 4. Off record

5. Don't do the FTA

Greater
(Estimation of risk of face loss)

Watts (2003:4-10) classified (im)politeness into two parts: first-order (im)politeness, folk interpretation; and second-order (im)politeness, a concept in a sociolinguistic theory. He says that first-order politeness or politeness 1 reveals a great deal of vacillation on how behavior is evaluated as 'polite' at the positive end of the scale when compared with the negative end. Further whether or not a participant's behavior is evaluated as polite or impolite is not merely a matter of the linguistic expressions that s/he uses, but rather depends on the interpretation of that behavior in the overall social interaction. On the other side, second-order politeness or politeness 2 means something rather different from our everyday understanding of it and focuses almost uniquely on polite language in the study of verbal interaction.

Watts says that the theory of politeness 2 should be based politeness 1, and should also be discursive, i.e. based on how the politeness is perceived by people in real situations. He says that linguistic politeness should be always perceived in this double perspective, from the speaker and the hearer, because the speakers are also the hearers and vice versa. According to his discursive approach to politeness, it is impossible to differentiate polite from impolite behavior without the context of the particular interaction, which happens in a certain environment, in a certain situation, with a specific speaker and addressee. Moreover, we must consider the

perspective of the speaker and also the addressee. Lexical terms such as *please* or *thank you* are not polite inherently or always. They can be interpreted as polite only in certain communication.

Watts is one of the first linguists to have noticed aspects that earlier authors had not; for example, the above-mentioned fact that abstract theories of politeness are not always reflected in the use of real language, and that politeness is something that every interlocutor can perceive differently.

Unlike politeness, there are no specific names connected with appropriateness. Scholars seem to assume them as the same thing while numerous people keep arguing that they are different. Hence, further investigation presumably the longitudinal one is needed in order to cope with this debatable topic.

The importance of cross-cultural perspective

Perspective across culture plays an important role in categorizing appropriateness and politeness. What is considered in one culture to be polite may seem impolite in another. Meier (1997) stated what is perceived as a formal context in one culture may be seen as informal in another. House (1989) showed that even *please* could be shown to be not polite, because it increases the directness of requests by making their force more obvious.

C. CONCLUSION

Pragmatics deals with who speaks to whom and appropriate and polite utterances as well. Since there is a tendency that one culture use different kind of utterances when talking to those who are in the same age and those who are older, there are differences of speech acts use when it comes to gender, power and distance, pragmatics competence, and rank of imposition, it is an urgent to conduct a study regarding to these topics. Moreover, judging whether an utterance is appropriate,

inappropriate, polite, impolite, or even overly polite surely depends on perspective of people in the area where the utterance is used.

Many studies have been conducted regarding to appropriateness in request, politeness in request, realization of appropriateness and politeness in request across culture, and perspective on appropriateness and politeness in request across culture. Nevertheless, it is kind of rare studies focus on both appropriateness and politeness in speech act, particularly request. Hence a study which is accordingly intended to find out the realization of speech act of request and the perspective of appropriateness and politeness across culture is urgently required.

Table 1: Request Strategy Types (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984)

No	Request Strategy Types	Examples
1	Mood derivable the grammatical mood of the verb in the utterance marks its illocutionary force as a request	"Clean up this mess"
2	Explicit performatives the illocutionary force of the utterance is explicitly named by the speakers	"I'm asking you not to park the car here"
3	Hedged performative utterances embedding the naming of the illocutionary force	"I would like you to give your lecture a week earlier"
4	Locution derivable the illocutionary point is directly derivable from the semantic meaning of the locution	"Madam, you'll have to move your car"
5	Scope stating the utterance expresses the speaker's intentions, desire or feeling the fact that the hearer do X	"I really wish you'd stop bothering me"
6	Language specific suggestory fomula the sentence contains a suggestion to X	"So, why don't you come and clear up the the mess you made last night?"
7	Reference to preparatory conditions utterance contains reference to preparatory conditions (e.g. ability or willingness, the possibility of the act being performed) as conventionalized in any specific language	"Could you clear up the kitchen, please?"
8	Strong hints utterance contains partial reference to object or to elements needed for the implementation of the act (directly pragmatically implying the act)	"You've left this kitchen in a right mess"
9	Mild hints utterances that make no reference to the request proper (or any of its elements) but are interpretable	"I'm a nun (in response to the persistent boy who keep pestering her on the street).

	through the context as requests (indirectly pragmatically implying the act)	

Table 1: Request Strategy Types (developed by Takahashi, 1996)

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1	Mood derivable	"Clean up this mess"
2	Explicit performatives	"I'm asking you not to park the car here"
3	Hedged performative	"I would like you to give your lecture a week earlier"
4	Locution derivable	"Madam, you'll have to move your car"
5	Scope stating	"I really wish you'd stop bothering me"
6	Language specific suggestory fomula	"So, why don't you come and clear up the mess you made last night?"
7	Preparatory questions	"Could you lend me a pen"
8	Permission questions	"May I borrow a pen"
9	Mitigated-preparatory	"I'm wondering if you could lend me a pen"
10	Mitigated-wants	"I'd appreciate it if you could lend me a pen"
11	Strong hints	"You've left this kitchen in a right mess"
12	Mild hints	"I'm a nun (in response to the persistent boy who keep pestering her on the street).

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