

Saudi EFL Students' Knowledge in Pragmatics - Making Requests

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Abstract

This paper investigates the pragmatic awareness of final-year Saudi students majoring in English; specifically, their interlanguage pragmatics knowledge when making requests. Accordingly, it addresses the following questions: a) how much knowledge do Saudi EFL students have about making appropriate requests? b) To what extent their knowledge differs from that of native English speakers? In this study, data were collected by means of a questionnaire. The findings revealed that both non-native speakers and native speakers showed similar performance in terms of the level of request directness. However, non-native speakers showed limited awareness in employing appropriate direct strategies and syntactic and lexical modifiers compared to native speakers. Finally, this paper highlights the need for further studies to address L2 pragmatics development.

Key words: Direct and indirect requests, L2 pragmatics knowledge, L2 speech acts, Requests strategies, Saudi EFL Learners

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Introduction

The level of competence in second language learning is determined largely by accuracy but also by appropriacy. It is perfecting these factors that make it difficult to develop a high level of proficiency. Canale & Swain (1980) purport that L2 learners should seek to develop overall proficiency and accuracy, as well as pragmatic competence, in the process of second language learning. Accordingly, studies on L2 pragmatics have been undertaken to explore a number of aspects of interlanguage pragmatics, including conversational implicature, discourse markers, pragmatic routines and speech acts (Rose & Kaspers, 2001). Studies on the performance of L2 learners in pragmatics, particularly those on request speech acts, have been conducted by a number of researchers. In the majority of these studies, results showed the differences between native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) from various perspectives, including level of directness (NNSs overuse indirect requests, Jalilifar 2009), internal and external modifiers (overuse of politeness markers, Faerch & Kasper, 1989) and strategy forms (employing different request strategies compared to NSs, Hassal, 2003).

The aim of this study is to investigate the pragmatic awareness of final-year Saudi students majoring in English. Specifically, their awareness in making requests, which is one of the most researched speech act forms. Therefore, the following questions will be considered: how much knowledge do Saudi students of English language have about making appropriate requests? To what extent their knowledge differs from that of native English speakers? Accordingly, this paper will start by a brief discussion of request speech acts including The Cross Cultural Speech Acts Realisation Project (CCSARP), which is the framework adopted in this study for analysing the collected requests, followed by some relevant previous studies investigating L2 learners' pragmatic knowledge, particularly requests. Then, the methodology of the study the analysis of the data and discussion are presented.

Literature Review

In second language studies, pragmatics has been referred to as "interlanguage pragmatics", which is defined as "the study of non-native speakers' use and acquisition of linguistic patterns in second language (L2)" (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993: 3). In the wide subfield of interlanguage pragmatics, the two major areas that have been explored are the study of second language use ('how non-native speakers comprehend and produce action in the target language') and the study of second language learning ('how L2 learners develop the ability to understand and perform action in a target language') (Kasper & Rose, 2002: 5). Since, in this paper, it is aimed to explore the interlanguage pragmatics knowledge of EFL learners when making requests, a brief discussion of request speech acts and a number of previous studies in this area are presented.

Request Speech Acts

'Request' is a form of speech act defined as "attempts on the part of a speaker to get the hearer to perform or to stop performing some kind of action" (Ellis 1994:167). According to Brown & Levinson (1978), orders, commands, requests and reminders are all acts that threaten the negative face of the addressee. Therefore, to use the language appropriately, when variables such as social distance or social power, or degree of imposition are involved in the communicative act, such speech acts, and particularly requests, need to be carefully delivered in order to minimize their imposition and avoid pragmatic failure. The Cross Cultural Speech Acts Realisation Project (CCSARP) conducted by Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper (1989) has developed a framework to classify the various patterns and forms of the speech acts for requests

and apologies. According to the framework, requests are classified based on the sequence (alerter, head act, supportive moves, see table 1) level of directness, strategies and the external and internal modifiers that can accompany the head act of requests to mitigate their imposition force. Request levels of directness, strategies, and internal modifiers (syntactic and lexical) with examples taken from the CCSARP manual coding are included in Appendix A.

Table 1: Request Sequence according to Kulka, House & Kasper (1989)

Alerter	Supportive Moves (external modifier)	head act (core part of request)	Internal modifier (lexical or syntactic modifier)
Hi John	my car is broken down	could you give me a ride	Please

Several studies have been carried out to investigate EFL learners' interlanguage pragmatics in different areas including instruction and pragmatics (e.g. Rose & Kasper, 2001), relationship between pragmatic knowledge and grammatical competence (e.g. Bardovi-Harlig & Dornyei, 1998). Other studies, several of which will be discussed later in this paper, have been conducted on the different pragmatics performance between NSs and NNSs, either by comparing the pragmatic performance of L2 learners at different levels of proficiency or at similar levels to native speakers. Jalilifar (2009), for example, investigated interlanguage pragmatics realisation of requesting among Iranian learners majoring in the English language and native Australian speakers. The data were collected by means of written completion task (WCT) and analysed according to CCSRAP framework. He found that, based on the level of proficiency, Iranian learners differed from native speakers, indicating that as the level of proficiency increased, similar performance to NSs was observed in employing more indirect requests and less direct requests, though there was a slight overuse of indirect requests. Furthermore, Faerch & Kasper (1989) conducted a study to investigate the request strategies employed by non-native Danish learners of English and German compared to native German and English speakers. They found that non-native speakers used different syntactic and lexical modifiers (less varied and influenced by their L1) compared to native speakers. Yet, on the request level of directness, they showed a similar tendency to native speakers' performance. In another study, by Chen (2007), a method of data collection and analysis similar to that of Jalilifar was employed, to explore the pragmatic performance of the request speech acts of Taiwanese freshmen EFL learners and American native speakers. The results revealed preference of both groups to employ the indirect type of request—'quarry preparatory'.

Accordingly, EFL learners' first languages and level of proficiency seem to have an influence on their L2 pragmatics awareness and particularly in request speech act. To the best of my knowledge, there have been no studies conducted to investigate Arabic EFL learners' pragmatics knowledge; therefore, this paper is an attempt to explore that.

Methodology

Participants and procedure

Twenty-four final-year students majoring in English at King Abdulaziz University, completed the questionnaire. However, because four of them did not answer all of the questions, they were excluded. Thus, only the remaining twenty were included in this study. Of the twenty participants, eight had been to English speaking countries. Moreover, on the scale (1-elementary, 2-intermediate, 3-upper intermediate and 4-advanced), the participants' self-evaluations of their English language proficiency levels indicated that the majority fall between 'advanced' (n=3) intermediate' (n=10), 'upper intermediate' (n=6) and 'elementary' (n=1). Ten university native students, at the University of Nottingham, also participated in the survey; their answers were used as a baseline to measure non-native knowledge. All the data obtained in this study were collected online.

Instruments

The data were collected by a written discourse completion task (WDCT), a method that has been frequently employed in empirical studies of pragmatics along with the other five instruments of pragmatic tests including oral discourse completion tasks, multiple choice completion tasks and others. Six situations for making requests were selected from the elicitation questionnaire developed by Jianda (2006). The reasons request speech acts were targeted in this study is because of their importance as they are main parts of communication and making requests is one of the speech acts that involves a high degree of "face threaten" so employing the appropriate form is essential. The reason that the six situations were particularly chosen from Jianda's elicitation questionnaire is because the aim of her study was to develop a test to assess Chinese ESL learners' pragmatics awareness so she developed eleven situations for making requests which were tested and found to be reliable and valid. Therefore this questionnaire was found to be suitable for the current study as it aims to investigate the learners' awareness of pragmatics and particularly requests. However because the participants in the current study are different (Arab ESL learners), six situations that were considered to be familiar to them (relevant to the situations they encounter in their daily life) and which include variables such as social distance, social power and degree of imposition were selected. Specifically, two situations are those which have a high degree of imposition (items 1 and 2), two situations in social distance where the requester is either familiar with the recipient or not (items 3 and 4), and the last two in social power where the speaker in one situation has higher status than the recipient (items 5 and 6). In addition to the six descriptive situations, two demographic questions were added for the NNSs participants to self-evaluate their level of proficiency and to indicate whether they had been in a native speaking country. (For the description of request situations see appendix B

Data Analysis

A number of studies (e.g. Jalilifar, 2009 & Chen, 2007) have investigated the knowledge of NNSs by comparing their performance in certain aspects of pragmatics to NSs. Of these, particularly on investigating request and apology speech acts, the collected data were analysed according to the CCSARP coding scheme and then, based on the different strategies, levels of directness and external modifiers used, comparisons are made between groups. Accordingly, the data collected in this study will be analysed according to the CCSARP coding scheme, and then the percentage of requests employed, based on the level of directness, strategies used and the external and internal modifiers, will be calculated for both groups of participants and compared.

Results

Table 2: Proportion of request level of directness in each situation

Situation items	Direct Strategy		Conventionally Indirect Strategy		Non-conventionally Indirect Strategy	
	NSs	NNSs	NSs	NNSs	NSs	NNSs
1	0%	10%	100%	90%	0%	
2	0%	0%	100%	100%	0%	
3	10%	20%	90%	80%	0%	
4	0%	15%	100%	85%	0%	
5	0%	5%	100%	95%	0%	
6	20%	35%	80%	65%	0%	

(1-2) Degree of imposition:

- 1- A student asking a teacher to repeat what she said.
- 2- A student asking a classmate, whom the student does not know well, to study with him for a test.

(3-4) Social distance:

- 3- An employee in a meeting asking another employee, whom he knows, for a spare paper.
- 4- A student asking another student, whom he does not know and lives in the same hall, to turn the music down.

(5-6) Social power:

- 5- An applicant wanting to reschedule an interview appointment.
- 6- An owner of a bookstore asking his employee to work extra hours.

Table 3: Proportion of request strategies

Request strategies	NSs	NNSs
Direct strategy		
Mood Derivable	1.7%	8.6%

Explicit performative	0%	1.1%
Hedged performative	3.3%	0%
Want statement	0%	11.1%
Conventionally indirect strategy		
Suggestory formula	1.7%	0%
Query preparatory	93.3%	79%

As Table 2 shows, with regard to the request level of directness, NNSs showed an almost similar tendency to NSs in using direct and indirect requests in different situations. However, in their performance of the direct request strategy (see Table 3) and lexical and syntactic modifiers, some differences (e.g. the preference to use mood derivable and want statement by NNSs) were observed.

Thus, non-native speakers seem to have good knowledge in employing a similar level of directness to NSs; but in regard to the strategy choices, particularly the direct strategy of making a request, and lexical and syntactic modifiers, they revealed some differences compared to NSs.

For example, in situation (6) where the speaker has a higher status than the recipient, both groups used the direct request form, but the strategy used by NSs (mostly on hedged performative) was different to NNSs (want statement and mood derivable), which are considered to be the highest direct strategy forms, according to Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) (see table 4).

Table 4: Examples of Request Strategy

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Examples</i>	<i>Types of Request Strategy</i>
NSs	1- <i>I would like you to stay after the finish of your shift to help me</i>	Hedged performative

NNSs	1- <i>I want you to work</i> for more hours because we have lots of work.	Want statement
	2- Today we have lots of work so <i>stay for extra hours...</i>	Mood derivable

The results also show that both NS and NNS employed a high frequency of indirect requests, particularly using the 'query preparatory' strategy. A substantial difference was noted in the degree of variation of the syntactic and lexical modifiers used. NSs showed a wide range of variation in the syntactic modifiers, including interrogative, past tense, combination of past tense and conditional clause, and negation (for explanation see Appendix A). For example, based on situations (e.g. situations 1 and 2) where a high degree of imposition is involved in the act of request, high variation in the use of syntactic modifiers was observed in NS requests (see table 5). On the other hand, very few syntactic modifiers were employed in NNS requests in the 'interrogative formula'; (Could I? Can I? Would you? Do you?) were almost the only syntactic modifiers used, which reveals NNSs' limited awareness compared to that of NSs.

Table 5: Examples of Syntactic modifiers

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Examples</i>	<i>Types of syntactic modifiers</i>
NSs	1- <i>Can I</i> borrow some paper please. 2- I would like you to stay after the finish of your shift to help me 3- It <i>would</i> be great <i>if</i> you could stay for a few extra hours tonight. 4- Hey, <i>I know you've put in extra hours over the past couple of days</i> but could I be really annoying and ask for an extra one again at the end of today's shift?	Interrogative past tense Combination of past tense and conditional Negation
NNSs	1- <i>can you</i> stay in the store for couple of hours? 2- <i>Would you</i> please repeat what you said?	Interrogative

	3- <i>Do you</i> like if I study with you for math exam?	
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In regard to the lexical modifiers, a similar result was noted as more variation of lexical modifiers, including politeness markers, downtoners, intensifiers, appealers, understaters and subjectivezers (see appendix 1 for explanation) were employed by NSs (see examples in the table below), whereas the lexical modifier of the politeness marker ‘please’ was mostly the only modifier employed by NNSs.

Table 6: Examples of lexical modifiers

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Examples</i>	<i>Types of lexical modifiers</i>
NSs	1-Is there any chance you would <i>possibly</i> be free for an interview on Thursday instead. 2-...I'd <i>really</i> appreciate your help if you can stay an extra hour tonight. 3-... <i>Would that be OK?</i> 4-would you mind turning down your music <i>a little bit</i> 5- I was wondering if it was possible to.....	Downtoner Intensifier Appealer Understater Subjectivezer
NNSs	1-... <i>please</i> would you speak slowly?	Politeness marker

Discussion

According to the results of this study, it seems that, in terms of the level of directness, Saudi learner and NSs both show a high tendency to employ the conventionally indirect form of request, particularly the “query preparatory” form. Such findings actually correspond to the studies of Chen (2007), where both NNSs and NSs show similar tendencies to employ conventionally indirect request form. One possible explanation for such a result has highlighted by Hassal (2003), who points out that learners’ ability to use the conventionally indirect strategy can be explained by the fact that the indirect formula ‘Modal verb + Agent + Verb’ (e.g. May I

borrow) is simple. Accordingly, judging the participants knowledge of pragmatics cannot only be based on the learner's ability to employ indirect requests, as do NSs, as it seems to be relatively less complicated, especially when compared to choosing strategies and lexical and syntactic modifiers based on context. In other words, to realize that the formula (Can I) is more appropriate to use than a direct request seems easier than to comprehend and produce various strategies and syntactic and lexical modifiers to mitigate the force of the request, which may require a higher degree of knowledge. That was observed in the NNSs reliance on the interrogative form 'Could I, Can I', which seems to be simpler and clearer compared to 'I was wondering, would you mind, is there any chance', which were employed by NSs.

Another possible reason for the similar performance of NNSs on the level of directness may be related to the nature of the assessment (WDCT). The adopted assessment method in this study was WDCT, where respondents had the opportunity to read the situations and think before making the request, whereas if another method of assessment, such as role play, had been used, results may have been different. This was noted in Gu's (2011) study, as the participants' performance on making request was better in the written task assessment method than in role play.

Having demonstrated the possible reasons behind the similar performance of NNSs to NSs in the level of request directness, the differences in employing some direct request strategies and lexical and syntactic modifiers are discussed. It was noted in the results, for example, that NNSs employ different forms of the direct strategy (mood derivable and want statements) compared to NSs (hedged performative). Also, results showed a lack of consideration for social variables, including social distance, social power and degree of imposition embedded in the situations, and accordingly, employment of different lexical and syntactic modifiers to minimize the request force in situations where the speaker is unfamiliar with the recipient. Jilifar (2009: 50) attributes the tendency of low proficiency learners to mainly employ the imperative form (mood derivable) of indirect request strategies to the fact that "they do not possess enough linguistic ability to employ other types of direct request ... because this sub-strategy, especially in elided form, does not demand high linguistic proficiency; it is formally very simple (e.g. Give me the pen)". This might be the cause for the different performance between NSs and NNSs, especially since they are still EFL students.

Finally, one major possible factor, which has also been highlighted in several studies on L2 pragmatics knowledge, is the pragmatic transfer of L1. In this regard, Lihui (2010), in her study of pragmatic failure among Chinese EFL learners, points out that negative transfer of L1 can take place by transferring L1 linguistics knowledge (i.e. semantic, syntactic knowledge) and/or cultural convention (norms of interaction in L1) to the target language. In NNSs performance, negative transfer of the native cultural convention was noted in the use of the imperative form (mood derivable) and adding 'Ok'. (e.g. Please turn the music down, OK?), which is a common way to make a request in the Arabic language. That was also noted in Jalilifar's (2009) study, as the low proficiency Iranian learners of the English language employ the imperative form of direct request strategies; he attributes this tendency to the transfer of their L1.

Accordingly, it appears that, when a deeper level of awareness is required in order to be able to employ the appropriate direct strategy and syntactic and lexical modifiers, NNSs show slightly limited awareness of pragmatic knowledge, whereas their level of request directness is almost similar to that of NSs.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the amount of knowledge that final-year Saudi students of English Language have about making appropriate requests in order to identify to what extent their knowledge differs from that of native English speakers. Results showed that students' awareness of making requests based on the level of directness was almost similar to NSs. However, the differences noted in employing different direct request strategies (e.g. mood derivable and want statement) and lexical and syntactic modifiers compared to NSs indicates their limited knowledge of these two aspects of L2 pragmatics. Yet, overall it appears that NNSs' interlanguage pragmatics knowledge about making requests is relatively good considering they are still EFL students.

Limitations of this study were the small sample size and the fact that the questionnaire was distributed online, which may have provided the participants with the opportunity to give more thought to their answers or even do some research before responding. The results are best treated as indicators of the study participants' awareness level regarding making requests. Yet, it is hoped that this and similar studies can provide a clear image of second learners' interlanguage pragmatics knowledge to support the need for teaching pragmatics in order to raise learners' awareness about the various strategies and the modifiers that can be used, according to context, to develop proper forms of requests.

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Appendix A

- Request levels of directness and strategies with examples according to the CCSARP Coding Manual (1989: 18/278-280)

Level of Directness	Request strategies	Examples of requests
1-Direct strategy	1-Mood derivable	'Leave me alone', 'Clean up that mess'
	2-Explicit performative	I am asking you to clean up the mess'.
	3-Hedged performative	e.g., 'I would ask you to presentation a week earlier than scheduled'.
	4-Obligation statements	'you'll have to move that car'.
	5-want statements	'I really want you to stop bothering me'
2- Conventionally indirect strategy	6-Query preparatory	Could you clean up the, please?; Would you mind moving your car?
	7-Suggestory Formulae	How about cleaning up?

3-Non-conventionally indirect strategy	8-Strong hints	('You have left the Strategy kitchen a right mess')
	9-Mild hints	'I am a nun' in response to a persistent hassler'

- **The Classification of internal modifiers (lexical and syntactic modifiers) according to the CCSARP Coding Manual (p. 281-288):**

Lexical Modifiers	Syntactic Modifier
1-Politeness marker e.g., clean the kitchen, <i>please</i> .	1- Interrogative e.g. Can/ Could I borrow your notes'
2-Understater e.g could you tidy up <i>a bit</i> ? Is there <i>a little</i> room for me in the car?	2-Tense e.g., I wanted to ask you to present your paper a week earlier .e.g., I was wondering whether you could give your presentation in a week's time
3-Subjectivezer I <i>am afraid</i> you're going to have to move your car. I <i>wonder</i> if you would give me a lift. I <i>think/believe/suppose</i> you're going my way.	3-Conditional clause I was wondering if you could present your paper a week earlier than planned e.g., It would fit in much better if you could give your paper a week earlier.
4-Downtoner E.g., Could you <i>possibly/perhaps</i> lend me your notes?	4-Combination of tense and conditional clause e.g., I was wondering if I couldn't get a lift home with you.
5- Intensifier e.g. the kitchen is in a <i>terrible</i> mess	5- conditional e.g. I would suggest you to leave now.
6- Appealer Clean up the kitchen, <i>will you</i> ?	6- Negation E.g. I don't suppose you'd like to...
7- Cajoler <i>You know</i> , I's really like to present your paper next week	7- Subjunctive e.g. might be better if you <i>were to leave</i> now
8- Hedge I'd <i>kind of</i> like to get a lift if that's all right	8- Aspect e.g. I <i>am wondering</i> if I could get a lift home with you

Appendix B

Below are six situations. Read the description of each situation and write down either what you would say in that situation or what you think the person in the situation would say.

1. You are now discussing your assignment with your teacher. Your teacher speaks very fast. You do not follow what he is saying, so you want to ask your teacher to say it again.

You say

.....
.....

2. For the first time this semester, you are taking a mathematics course. You have had a hard time following lectures and understanding the textbook. A test is scheduled to be held next week. You notice that one student sitting next to you seems to have good background knowledge of math, and is doing well. Since it is the beginning of the semester, you do not know him/her yet. You want to ask him/her to study together for the upcoming test.

You

say.....
.....

3. You are an employee in a company. You are in a meeting with the other members of the employees of the company. You need to write some notes, but realize you do not have any paper. You turn to the person sitting next to you. You know the person very well.

You say

.....
.....

4. You are trying to study in your room and you hear loud music coming from another student's room down the hall. You don't know the student, but you decide to ask him to turn the music down.

You

say.....
.....

5- You are applying for a new job in a small company and want to make an appointment for an interview. You know the manager is very busy and only schedules interviews in the afternoon from one to four o'clock on Wednesday. However, you have to take the final-term exam this Wednesday. You want to schedule an interview on Thursday.

You say

.....
.....

6- You are the owner of a bookstore. Your shop clerk has worked for a year, and you have gotten to know him/her quite well. It is the beginning of the semester, and you are very busy selling and refunding textbooks all day. Today you have a plan to extend business hours by an hour, though you know the clerk has worked long hours in the past few days. You ask the clerk to stay after store hours.

