

The Speech Act of Request in the ESL Classroom

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ABSTRACT

The Malaysian education system is at a time where effective classroom communication is seen as a vital step in enhancing the teaching and learning of English as a Second Language (ESL). Rural secondary school students in Malaysia seem to be unaware of their level of politeness when communicating in English. This study of the speech act of request which is related to the field of pragmatics and classroom culture, can be beneficial in understanding how students perceive polite interaction when speaking English. This ongoing study aims to identify the types of request strategies employed by the participants in making requests and explore the factors influencing their choice of strategies. The participants of the study are students and two language teachers of a rural secondary school in Kedah. Data collection was done by first recording naturally occurring data in the classroom. The data is then analysed based on Blum-Kulka and Olshstein's (1984) CCSARP framework and Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory. Subsequently, participants identified are administered the Discourse Completion Tests (DCT). Preliminary findings show that students seem to be less polite when speaking to peers and more polite when speaking to teachers. Teachers, on the other hand, speak less politely to students as they have more power. This study provides valuable insights to the study of classroom pragmatics in Malaysia and future research should be conducted in urban school settings to gain more comprehensive data in this area of study.

Keywords: politeness; speech acts; requests; face threatening act (FTA); pragmatics

INTRODUCTION

It was found that students in a rural secondary school in Malaysia, whose first language is Malay, seem to sometimes lack pragmatic competence when trying to speak in English which is their second language. As a result, they seem less polite when communicating in English; more specifically when performing face threatening acts (FTA) such as requesting, disagreeing and apologising. Cohen (2004, p. 3) points out that “learners of a language can have all of the grammatical forms and lexical items and still fail completely at conveying their message because they lack necessary pragmatic or functional information to communicate their intent”. Although some students seem pragmatically competent when speaking in Bahasa Malaysia, this competence is not necessarily reflected in their second language. Daskalovska et al. (2016, p. 57) highlights that second language speakers commonly do not have trouble with direct strategies when making requests as it is often similar to their first languages. However, problems arise when indirect strategies are involved as they may not always be able to transfer their first language pragmatic competence when speaking in a second language. The challenges faced by second language learners are also highlighted by Pratama et al. (2017) who related the lack of pragmatic awareness to the lack of pragmatic input from second language learning settings.

Pragmatic competence plays a significant role in acquiring a second language. ESL speakers display pragmatic competence when the spoken or written language produced is polite and culturally acceptable. Koike (1989, p. 279) defines pragmatic competence as “the

speaker's knowledge and use of rules of appropriateness and politeness which dictate the way the speaker will understand and formulate speech acts". Being pragmatically sound ensures that the objectives of communication are achieved successfully while avoiding potential miscommunication and misunderstanding. In order to develop pragmatic competence in the second language classroom, it may be a good idea to identify common speech acts that learners employ in their utterances and explore politeness strategies employed by the speakers to achieve their communication goals. This may help second language speakers become more culturally and pragmatically aware of their own utterances, as well as provide an insight to English as second language (ESL) teachers in order to develop the pragmatic competence of their ESL learners.

The study of speech acts such as disagreements (Rees-Miller 2000) compliments (Galato 2003) and requests (Jalilifar 2009, Elmianvari & Kheirabadi 2013) have been more popular in the field of pragmatics as they are more commonly found in everyday utterances of common learners. However, the speech act of request was chosen for this study as it is one of the most produced utterances in the second language classroom setting. Hence, identifying the types of requests made in class may help students to be aware of their politeness level and usage of the English language. Studying requests put forward by students is also crucial to teachers as it can help them understand utterances produced by students and respond appropriately. Most studies on the speech act of requests are done by analysing the written requests of students (Najeeb, Maros & Mohd Nor 2012, Woodfield & Economidou-Kogetsidis 2010, Al-Ali & Alawneh 2010, Jalilifar 2009, Biesenbach-Lucas 2007). This study will, however, analyse naturally occurring classroom talk to identify the types of requests made by students before comparing it to written DCTs. This will help us understand the process of making requests in the minds of second language learners orally and in written form.

Data on the speech act of requests is also scarce in the context of second language teaching in rural Malaysian schools, where the first language of participants is mostly Malay. Most of the available data is obtained from second language speakers of the tertiary education level, where participants speak European or Middle Eastern languages as their first language and treat English as a foreign language. Thus, this research will be helpful as it focuses on a rural secondary school context, where the first language of the students is mostly Malay and English, taught as a second language. This new information is believed to be able to add to the existing data pool on politeness, pragmatics and classroom interaction, as well as help in improving context specific teaching and learning of English as a second language in Malaysia.

This paper aims to report the preliminary findings on pragmatic awareness in a second language classroom through the speech act of making requests. The data was first collected through observation and then analysed. The objectives of the study are (a) to identify the types of strategies employed by participants to strengthen or mitigate their requests and (b) to explore the factors influencing their choice of strategies. A discourse completion task (DCT) will be administered in the later stage of this ongoing study in order to achieve (b).

THE MALAYSIAN CONTEXT

The Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025), which is the latest blueprint for teaching and learning in Malaysian public schools, is currently (in 2017) on its second wave of implementation. This blueprint lays out 11 intensive shifts to transform the Malaysian education system; one of which is to ensure that every child is proficient in Bahasa Malaysia and the English Language. It aims to boost the literacy levels of students in both these

languages, setting a target of 70 percent of students scoring credits in English language when completing their SPM examination in Form 5.

This study, which is being conducted in a rural secondary school in Malaysia, comprises of students in Form 5 who are second language learners of English and two English language teachers who co-teach in the target classroom. The student participants speak Bahasa Malaysia as their first language and have learned English as a second language for a minimum of 6 years in primary school, as well as 5 years in secondary school. These students only speak in English in the classroom and occasionally, with peers. Most of the students do not speak English at home or outside the school setting. Therefore, English Language teachers are constantly looking for ways to enhance second language teaching in the Malaysian classroom, through communicative approaches.

There is a critical need to identify naturally occurring communication problems in the classroom and address these promptly. It is crucial for teachers and curriculum writers to be able to gauge communicative issues in the ESL classroom and one such way to do it is through identifying commonly occurring speech acts such as requests and the strategies employed by ESL students in mitigating their speech. In doing so, teachers may be able to identify sociocultural pragmatic issues that may arise and tailor spoken activities by taking these issues into consideration. It is also important for students to be aware of their own perception of politeness as this may help them to consciously build their pragmatic awareness when learning English in the classroom. Mahalingam and Yunus (2017) emphasise that learners employ various language learning strategies to facilitate their learning of the language and improve their proficiency level. Following that notion, being pragmatically aware of their own level of politeness may help these students establish their own strategies to become pragmatic speakers of English.

LITERATURE REVIEW

POLITENESS THEORY

Much of the groundwork in the area of politeness studies has been done by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987). Their Politeness Theory is considered a greatly influential framework in analysing discourse related to politeness. There have been various criticisms on the theory, even from its beginning stages. The most popular ones were proposed by Japanese linguists Matsumoto (1988) and Ide (1989) and a more recent criticism by Intachakra (2012). There has also been an ongoing debate on whether the framework is still applicable in the current trends of sociolinguistic studies. However, many recent studies have also adapted Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework, such as Jalilifar (2009), Elmianvari and Kheirabadi (2013) and Pomerantz and Heritage (2013), which proves its relevance in today's society.

Brown and Levinson's (henceforth B&L) framework is based on the notion of 'face' originally developed by Goffman (1967). B&L assert that an interaction is controlled by managing the 'face' of the participants through the application of politeness strategies. The concept of 'face' is then further divided into the 'Negative Face' and 'Positive Face'. B&L define the 'Negative Face' as "the want of every competent adult member that his action be unimpeded by others" and the 'Positive Face' as "the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others" (B&L 1987, p. 62). In brief, the 'Negative Face' is independence of action while the 'Positive Face' is the need to be acknowledged and liked by others in an interaction. It is suggested that in the course of an interaction, this notion is threatened to a certain degree and this is referred to as 'Face Threatening Acts' (FTA) (B&L,

1987, p. 65). Participants in an interaction resort to using politeness strategies to ensure that they protect each other's 'face' from being damaged in the interaction.

As requests are categorized as a Face Threatening Act, a participant would choose a suitable strategy to either strengthen or mitigate the effects of FTA on a participant's face. B&L propose that the participants' choice of strategies depends on the gravity and seriousness of the particular FTA, which can be assessed by the speaker, based on three variables; namely, the social distance between the participants (D), the relative power of the hearer (P) and the rate of imposition on another person's actions (R). For instance, requesting to borrow money from a peer would be a less serious FTA as compared to requesting to borrow money from a teacher. This is because the person making the request would have lower relative power over the teacher and the social distance between them is wider. As such, the rate of imposition is considered higher.

CROSS CULTURAL SPEECH ACT REALIZATION PROJECT (CCSARP) FRAMEWORK

In analyzing and researching the speech act of requests, the CCSARP framework by Blum-Kulka and Ohshtain (1984) is not outdated. The framework serves as a fundamental guide in analyzing requests across cultures (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007, Jalilifar 2009) as well as in many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts (Rue & Zhang 2008, Daskalovska 2016, Cunningham 2017). Since requests are seen as serious FTAs, speakers employ many strategies to either strengthen or mitigate their requests. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) CCSARP framework distinguishes the three levels of directness in requests: direct level requests, conventionally indirect requests and non-conventionally indirect requests. It further highlights request strategies that speakers employ in each of the three levels of directness (See Table 1 below). It is also worth noting that the more direct a request is, the less polite it seems. Hence, it will be interesting to explore the request strategies employed by ESL learners in a rural Malaysian secondary school context when making requests. This would also provide some insight to their level of pragmatic competence.

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

Descriptive Category	Examples
Direct level	
1. Mood Derivable The grammatical mood of the verb in the utterance marks its illocutionary force as a request.	Clean up the kitchen. Move your car.
2. Performative The illocutionary force of the utterance is explicitly named by the speakers.	I'm asking you to move your car.
3. Hedged Performative Utterances embedding the naming of the illocutionary force.	I would like to ask you to move your car.
4. Obligation statement The illocutionary point is directly derivable from the semantic meaning of the locution.	You'll have to move your car.
5. Want statement The utterance expresses the speaker's intentions, desires or feelings vis-à-vis the fact that the hearer do X.	I would like you to clean the kitchen. I want you to move your car.
Conventionally indirect	
6. Suggestive Formulae The sentence contains a suggestion to X.	How about cleaning up? Why don't you come and clean up the mess you made last night?
7. Query Preparatory 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 clean up the mess in the kitchen? Would you mind moving your car?

Non conventionally indirect

8. Strong Hints

Utterance contains partial reference to object or to elements needed for the implementation of the act (directly pragmatically implying the act). We've left the 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). We don't want any crowding (as a request to move the car).

METHODOLOGY

DATA- COLLECTION TECHNIQUES

The primary method of data collection in this small-scale qualitative study is the observation of naturally occurring interaction in the English language classroom and the administration of discourse completion tests (DCT). Observational data on classroom interaction was collected through audio recordings, as well as recording naturally occurring data using the pen and paper method. The idea of audio recording is feasible as it provides tangible evidence of data collection which can be used for the purpose of triangulation and cross checking. This would help to ensure the validity of the study by eliminating the chance of overlooking minute details during the observation and analysis of data.

A DCT, which is a set of prompts given to the participants to elicit responses on a particular speech act, was administered to selected participants, 4 weeks after the observation. Buffer time was allotted in between the observation and administering the DCT to ensure students were not aware that the requests had already taken place in class. Billmyer and Varghese (2000) explain that DCTs have many administrative advantages, including allowing the researcher to control a certain variable; for instance, the features of the situation or prompt given, in order to elicit the target speech act. For this study, the scenarios for the prompts would be replicated from real expressions of requests that have occurred earlier in the classroom.

PROCEDURE

The participants were chosen using purposive sampling to suit the needs of this study. The participants of this study consist of 30 students of a Form 5 class who are of intermediate proficiency and two English language teachers. The student participants are able to communicate in English, in the classroom, with minimal errors. These students come from families that speak Malay as their first language. An interactive English lesson was observed over a double period, which was about 80 minutes. An audio recorder was set up and the data involving speech acts of requests made during the lesson was collected using the pen and paper method in order to be less intrusive during the lesson. The recorded data was cross-checked in order to maintain the validity of the study before analyzing the expression of requests, based on the Cross Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) framework, outlined by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984).

After identifying the specific exchanges of the speech act of requests, the participants involved were identified in order to administer the second method of data collection, which was the DCT that replicated the classroom scenarios. As this is an ongoing research, students were administered the DCT 4 weeks after the classroom observation took place. They were asked to simply write down their response without any mention about politeness or directness. This information was extracted and compared with the naturally occurring data, recorded earlier in the classroom. The responses received through the DCT received were

analysed again using the CCSARP framework to see if there were any discrepancies between the two types of data. This was to understand the factors that influenced the participants' choice of strategies when making requests.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

TYPES OF REQUEST STRATEGIES AND FACTORS AFFECTING THEIR CHOICE OF STRATEGIES

TABLE 2. The types of requests strategies employed by students

Examples	Descriptive Category
1. Louder, louder. (S1)	Mood Derivable (S-S)
2. Can you come here, sir? (S2)	Query Preparatory (S-T)
3. Three more minutes, please? (S3)	Suggestive formulae (S-T)
4. Teacher, 'kemajuan' in English what? (S4)	Strong hint (S-T)

Table 2 above, shows the utterances produced by the students to students and students to teachers. Student 1's request uses the mood derivable strategy. He repeats the word 'louder' which acts as an illocutionary force that is used to request a fellow classmate to speak louder during a discussion. Although it seems like a random statement, the tone and mood attached to the statement is understood by the hearer as a request and the hearer speaks louder in response to Student 1's request. This falls under the direct level category which according to B&L (1987) is less polite than indirect levels. However, in this particular FTA, although the hearer's negative face is threatened, the request is not considered impolite. This is because the seriousness of the FTA is determined as low by the speaker based on the power, distance and rate of imposition factors. As both the speaker and hearer are classmates, they possibly have a similar level of relative power which means no one has more power over the other. They also have a small social distance between them as they are both students and probably friends. The rate of imposition is also low as the hearer's action was immediately changed without having to think about the consequences of the request. Hence, we can see that the level of politeness is low based on the D, P and R factors as proposed by B&L (1987).

Students 2, 3 and 4 performed the speech act of request to a teacher. Thus, it seems that considering the D, P and R factors, the students have regarded the request as a serious FTA. This is shown through the utterances produced by students 2, 3 and 4. Student 2 requests using the query preparatory strategy in which he requests for the teacher to come physically nearer by saying, 'can you come here, sir?' This request questions the willingness of the teacher to move towards the student. This impacts the teacher's negative face greatly as the teacher now has to decide whether or not he wants to accept the request and move towards the speaker. Realising the seriousness of the FTA, the student then employs the conventionally indirect request to appear more polite.

The strategy chosen corresponds with B&L's (1987) take that the more indirect a request is performed, the more polite it appears to be. The D, P and R factors can also be used to explain their choice of strategies as it is notable that the social distance between a student and teacher in the Malaysian context is perceived as bigger. The teacher is also seen as a person who has more power over the students in this interaction. The rate of imposition is also higher as the students are impeding the teacher's action by requesting the teacher to walk towards them. Similarly, student 3 also employs a conventionally indirect strategy by using suggestive formulae when performing a request in the classroom. He uses a suggestive tone when requesting to extend the time given, to which the teacher has to respond. Student 4 goes a step further by using the non-conventionally indirect request whereby he uses a strong hint

to ask the teacher to explain the meaning of a word in English. The teacher had to then, understand it as a hint that the student is requesting for help and act accordingly.

TABLE 3. Types of request strategies employed by teacher to students.

Examples	Descriptive Category
1. Quickly, we have more to do. (T2)	Mood derivable.
2. Last group, please. (T1)	Mood derivable
3. Can everyone hear her? Focus please. (T2)	Mood derivable
4. Faiz, Faiz. (T1)	Mild hint

In contrast with student-student and student-teacher interaction, the teacher-student requests take a more direct approach and use milder strategies to mitigate the effects of the FTA. Out of three utterances noted, only one request was made by the teacher using the non-conventionally indirect approach of a mild hint. However, this could be interpreted differently based on the context here. While a classroom discussion is going on, a student seems to not pay attention and chats with a friend. The teacher who notices this, utters the name of the student twice in a stern tone as seen in (4) Table 3. This is, in actuality, a request for the student to be silent. Although this technically is a mild hint, it is still impolite if uttered to someone of the same power. In this context, the utterance is acceptable because the teacher has more power over the students and the rate of imposition is low. The student keeping silent when someone else is talking, is expected behavior and does not threaten the student's negative face too much.

Three other requests made by two different teachers employ direct strategies. The teachers did not seem to be too concerned about threatening the students' negative face as they have more power over them. Although the social distance remains large, the rate of imposition is fairly low in all three utterances. Request number one is made by a teacher to the entire class, asking them to hurry up as they have other tasks to do. A direct strategy is used, probably because the request is not directed to a particular person and the whole class understands that it does not require a specific individual reaction. Hence, the rate of imposition is low. In the second request, the teacher requests for the last group to present their discussion to the class. Here, the students already know that their turn is next and that they are expected to present. Therefore the rate of imposition is low. In request number 3, the teacher is requesting for a specific group of students to pay attention when a student is talking. The rate of imposition is low as the students know that they are supposed to be paying attention and thus, does not impede their freedom of action.

CONCLUSION

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The preliminary findings show that students seem to be less polite when speaking to peers and more polite when speaking to teachers. Teachers, on the other hand, speak less politely to students. This may be because of the culture associated with Malaysian students, where students are expected to respect teacher, both inside and outside the classroom. Also, teachers tend to take care of their positive face more than the students' negative face. This results in students using more indirect strategies when performing the speech act of requests while the teachers use more direct strategies. The preliminary findings indicate that Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory provides valuable insights to understanding politeness through the speech act of requests in a rural education setting. As this is an ongoing research, the findings will be further solidified after the DCT has been administered.

Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory highlights three main factors that are believed to be universally applicable in various contexts and cultural settings viz social distance, relative power and rate of imposition. There may be other context specific factors which may emerge as highlighted by Jalilifar (2009). These underlying factors may even differ from one culture to another. Previous studies in the field of politeness have indicated that the choice of strategies used in making requests may be influenced by various factors such as status, gender, cultural norms and social distance, among others.

Bardovi-Harlig, (1999) asserts that grammatical competence and linguistic competence are correlated. Inspired by this assertion, future research could be conducted on ESL learners of different proficiency levels to study if the students' types of request strategies and level of politeness correlates to their proficiency level.

IMPLICATIONS

This study of pragmatics and politeness in the classroom can impact the practices and application of theories in the education setting, positively. In our estimation, conducting this study on classroom pragmatics may benefit English as second language teachers in the Malaysian secondary school setting, greatly. Teachers will be able to understand the students' choice of strategies when making requests in the classroom. The level of directness or indirectness deemed appropriate may then be explicitly taught in the ESL classroom, based on the level of the students. Teachers may find it easier to tailor their lessons according to the students' proficiency levels in order to better improve their pragmatic competence and awareness when performing speech acts.

This study also indirectly helps in understanding teacher-student relationships in the classroom through the study of politeness. As noted by Yunus et al. (2011), the quality of the relationship between the teacher and the student, greatly influences their academic achievement and motivation. A study, conducted to identify factors impacting students' motivation in an ESL classroom, demonstrated that students had more motivation when the lecturers fostered an approachable, friendly relationship with the students (Mustapha et al. 2010). Therefore, understanding student-teacher relationship may provide a valuable insight to communication in the ESL classroom.

Studying students' perceived level of politeness can also impact the students' own development of language abilities in general. Students may benefit from specifically tailored ESL lessons where they are taught how to be more polite or more pragmatically competent. On the secondary school level, students need to acquire a basic level of communicative and pragmatic competence before leaving school as this might benefit them in their tertiary education setting as well as in their work setting in the future. The speech act of request is very common in various settings and knowing how to perform these without being blunt or impolite could help them to become effective speakers of English. As noted by Saad et al. (2014, p. 207), 'although Malaysia is not an English-speaking country, it is unique in terms of its language as it provides a hybrid-language environment, where the main language is Malay and the second language is English'. As such, being pragmatically competent when speaking English may help them to excel in their tertiary education settings as well as in their work settings.

On the administrative level, this study may also carry some level of importance as more studies and policies could be developed by the Ministry of Education, based on the current study. In Malaysia, teachers as agents of execution of educational policies are constantly encouraged by the ministry to conduct context specific researches to help gauge the reality in the classrooms. This study could pave the way to more studies on classroom culture and pragmatics, resulting in more context specific policies that might benefit the rural

school communities. In short, it is imperative that all the stakeholders work together to facilitate successful ESL teaching and learning (Cheng et al. 2016).

Further correlation research could be conducted in the future by comparing the findings from this research to urban school settings. This may provide valuable insights to understanding the similarities and differences in interactions in urban and rural schools. Pragmatic studies in primary school settings are also scarce in the Malaysian context and may be an interesting area to be explored in future studies. It may be beneficial to observe how different students with different first languages such as Mandarin, Malay and Tamil perform the speech act of requests.

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