

## Perception of politeness in English requests by Thai EFL learners

BOONJEERA CHIRAVATE

### ABSTRACT

*Requesting someone to do something that is beneficial to the speaker but costly to the hearer, involves the use of politeness strategies. The present study aims to investigate to what extent Thai EFL learners differ from native speakers of English in the use of politeness strategies and if there is evidence of L1 influence on the learners' use of politeness strategies. The participants were 30 native speakers of American English and 60 Thai EFL learners divided into two groups: high-proficiency (30) and low-proficiency (30). To examine their perception of politeness levels of different English request forms, a judgment task consisted of 12 situations varying in social and psychological factors was developed. Each of the situations had six politeness strategies in making requests. The participants were asked to choose only one politeness strategy which they would be most likely to use in a given situation. The results show that the learners' use of politeness strategies is dissimilar to that of native speakers. The native speakers used more polite strategies, whereas the learners tended to use less polite strategies. Compared to the high-proficiency learners, the low-proficiency learners differed from the NS to a greater extent. In certain situations, the difference in the use of politeness strategies between the native speakers and the learners can be attributed to L1 influence. The analysis shed light on the difficulty experienced by L2 learners in acquiring aspects of L2 pragmatics.*

*Keywords: interlanguage pragmatics; pragmatic transfer; requests; politeness strategies; Thai learners of English*

### INTRODUCTION

Since the emergence of the concept of communicative competence, numerous studies on L2 learners' pragmatic development have been conducted. Best represented in the literature are studies on the development of speech acts, with the majority of work focusing on requests (Kasper and Rose 2002, p.134). As requests put imposition on the hearer and usually involve the use of politeness strategies, there have been a number of studies investigating L2 learners' production of politeness strategies or perception of politeness levels of various request forms. No study to date, however, has been dedicated to scrutinizing Thai EFL learners' perception of politeness levels of different English request forms in a thorough fashion. For this reason, the present study aims to examine the perception of politeness levels of different English request forms by Thai EFL learners.

### POLITENESS AND INDIRECTNESS

Human communication in many ways is guided by certain social principles. One of the social principles that has attracted the considerable attention of pragmatic researchers concerns politeness. For decades, a number of ideas on what constitutes politeness have been proposed. Two influential theories of politeness were put forward by Leech (1983) and Brown and Levinson (1978 and revised in 1987). This section provides a summary of some fundamental concepts found in Leech's and Brown

and Levinson’s theories of politeness, with particular emphasis on indirectness.

Leech (1983) proposes that there exists a set of maxims that guide and constrain the conversation of rational people. Focusing on politeness, Leech suggests that a set of maxims for being polite in social interaction consists of *tact*, *generosity*, *approbation*, *modesty*, *agreement*, and *sympathy*. Dealing with imposition (tact and generosity), power (approbation and modesty) and familiarity (agreement and sympathy), all maxims are maximizing approval and minimize imposing on others (as cited in Fraser 1990, p.222-227).

Each of the maxims has a set of scales which must be evaluated with respect to the speaker and the hearer. Focusing on the Tact Maxim, which states “Minimize hearer costs: maximize hearer benefit,” Leech observes that the scales of Cost-benefit, Optionality, Indirectness, Authority, and Social distance are involved. According to Leech then, the Tact Maxim can be explained as follows:

“As the hearer costs, the hearer authority relative to the speaker, and the social distance increases, the greater will be the need for providing the hearer with options and the greater the need for indirectness in the formulation of the expression conveying the message.” (Fraser 1990, p.226)

Based on Leech’s findings, therefore, expressions may vary in their level of indirectness. Factors such as social distance (familiarity) and social status (power) play a key role in determining the level of indirectness. Different levels of indirectness are associated with different degrees of politeness. For instance, sentences (1a) - (1f), as illustrated below, differ in their level of indirectness and hence yield different degrees of politeness.<sup>1</sup>

- |                                         |              |              |
|-----------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|
| (1) a. Answer the phone.                | most direct  | least polite |
| b. I want you answer the phone.         |              |              |
| c. Will you answer the phone?           |              |              |
| d. Can you answer the phone?            |              |              |
| e. Would you mind answering the phone?  |              |              |
| f. Could you possibly answer the phone? | least direct | most polite  |
- (Intachakra, 2007, p. 147)

In Leech’s (1983) formulation, therefore, indirectness is one mechanism constituting politeness commonly found in everyday conversation.

Differing from Leech’s (1983) conversation-maxim view of politeness, Brown and Levinson’s (1978, 1987) model of politeness is based on the notion of “face.” They say “face” is the public image a person wishes to display. Face is the emotional and social sense of self that everyone has and expects everyone else to recognize. Brown and Levinson distinguish between two types of face wants: negative face wants and positive face wants. Negative face want refers to the need to have freedom of action, whereas positive face want refers to the need to be treated as a member of the same group (as cited in Yule 1996, p.60-62).

According to Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), people usually expect that their public self-image or their face wants will be respected. If a speaker, however, says something that represents a threat to another individual’s expectations regarding self-image, it is described as a face threatening act. The seriousness of a face-threatening act is determined by culturally-sensitive variables including social distance, relative power, and absolute ranking. (as cited in Fraser 1990, p.230-231)

When performing a face-threatening act, a speaker usually uses politeness strategies to lessen the threat. Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) assert that politeness, which is used to satisfy the speaker’s need of approval and belonging (maximizing positive face) is ‘positive’ politeness; politeness which functions to minimize an imposition (negative face) is called ‘negative’ politeness (as cited in Kitao

1987, p.7). Positive and negative politeness strategies interact in complex ways according to the nature of the act and the status of the speaker and hearer.

Focusing on negative politeness strategies, Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) state that they include being conventionally indirect, questioning, hedging, being pessimistic, minimizing imposition, giving deference, and apologizing (as cited in Kitao 1987, p.8). As regards conventional indirectness, utterances are considered to be conventionally indirect if they are routine utterances in which the speaker's intention is implied.<sup>2</sup> Conventionally indirect utterances are usually distinguished from direct utterances, in which the speaker's intention is expressed straightforwardly. Conventionally indirect requests, for example, include fixed linguistic forms such as *I was wondering if you could + verb phrase*, *Do you mind if I + verb phrase*, *Do you think you could + verb phrase* (Blum-Kulka et al 1989, as cited in Taguchi 2005, p. 549), whereas direct requests take the form of imperative as illustrated in (2a) and (2b), respectively.

- (2) a. I was wondering if you could lend me this book for the weekend.  
 b. Lend me this book for the weekend.

For Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), then, indirectness is one of the politeness strategies usually used to decrease imposition on the hearer.

In summary, both Leech (1983) and Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) viewed politeness as a strategy or a series of strategies employed by a speaker to promote or maintain harmonious relationships with a hearer (Thomas 1995, p.157-158). Indirectness constitutes politeness by softening the imposition on the hearer.

Having shown how indirectness is associated with politeness, in the following section, focusing on the speech act of request, we will review a study of requests in Thai.

#### REQUESTS IN THAI

Khahua's (2003) study of speech act patterns of requests in Thai society encompasses information on Thai requests. Khahua discusses two strategy levels of requests: direct and indirect.

A direct request consists of a verb phrase and a final particle (FP), namely *siʔ*, *naʔ* and *nɔj*, as in (1).

- (1) a. phu:t di: di: siʔ  
 speak good good FP  
 "Speak nicely"  
 (Khahua, 2003, p.49)
- b. pɔh diəw phruŋni pluk pɔk ti:ha khrʔŋ naʔ  
 Dad moment tomorrow wake me 5 and a half FP  
 "Dad, Tomorrow wake me up at 5 o'clock."  
 (Khahua, 2003, p.45)
- c. maa maa kep toʔ khaw ba:n haj phi: puu: n j  
 come come get table enter house give sister me FP  
 "Come on, Move the table into the house for me"  
 (Khahua, 2003, p.52)

According to Khahua, the final particles *naʔ*, *siʔ* and *nɔj* are used to soften an order to become a request. Compared to *naʔ* and *siʔ*, the final particle *nɔj* makes the request sound more polite.

An indirect request, on the other hand, is in interrogative form. An indirect request consists of a verb phrase, a final particle (FP) and a question marker (QM). Additionally, status particles (SP) *khrap* (for men) or *kha* (for female) can be added to make the request sound more polite. This is illustrated in (2).

- (2) a. *chuej tho: ha: khun pranɔ:m haj nɔj da:j maj kha*  
 help call Khun Pranom give FP QM SP  
 “Can you call Khun Pranom for me please?”  
 (Khahua, 2003, p.74)
- b. *chuej jip mine:re haj nɔj da:j maj kha*  
 help bring mineral water give FP QM SP  
 “Can you hand me a bottle of mineral water, please?”  
 (Khahua, 2003, p.75)

According to Khahua, the question marker *da:j maj* “whether or not” is used to reduce the level of imposition created by a request, hence expressing politeness.

Khahua (2003) points out that a direct request as in (1) is usually used when the requester is older than the requestee or when the requestee and requester are members of the same family or close friends. An indirect request as in (2a) and (2b), however, expresses politeness and is usually used when the requester and requestee are strangers or people not well acquainted with one another. Status particles *khrap* (for men) or *kha* (for female), which also express politeness, are therefore not usually found in direct requests, but are commonly used in indirect requests.<sup>3</sup>

It is apparent that Thai differs greatly from English in how politeness is expressed in requests. This makes it worthwhile to examine Thai EFL learners’ perception of politeness in English requests. In the following section we will review some of the L2 studies of requests previously conducted.

#### L2 STUDIES OF REQUEST

A number of L2 studies have investigated L2 learners’ production of requests or their perception of politeness level of various request forms. In this section, the studies conducted by Tanaka and Kawade (1982), Suh (1999), Rose (2000), Umar (2004), Taguchi (2007) and Su (2010), which yielded findings relevant to the present study, will be summarized.

Tanaka and Kawade (1982), investigating whether Japanese ESL learners could use politeness strategies in requests in a way similar to the native speakers of English, conducted a study with 53 native speakers of English and 32 Japanese ESL learners. Using a multiple-choice questionnaire, they found that native speakers used more polite strategies in situations where the requester-requestee relationship is distant and less polite strategies in situations in which the requester-requestee relationship is close. Learners did not differ significantly from the native speakers in the use of politeness strategies. However, it was noted that in certain situations where the native speakers employed more polite strategies, the learners tended to use less polite strategies.

Based on their investigation, Tanaka and Kawade (1982) formulated the Distance-Politeness Hypothesis (henceforth referred to as DP hypothesis) which asserts that social status and psychological variables, such as like/dislike, affect the use of politeness strategies in requests. More precisely, the DP hypothesis makes the following predictions:

- i. The more distant the relationship between a requester and a requestee is, the more polite a strategy the requester will use.
- ii. Conversely, if the requester-requestee relationship is both socially and psychologically close, the requester will use a less polite strategy.

iii. Psychological variables play a more important role in the use of politeness strategies than social variables.

Suh (1999), following Tanaka and Kawade's (1982) study, conducted another study investigating whether there is any difference between native speakers of English and Korean ESL learners in the use of politeness in request strategies and to what extent do Korean ESL learners at different proficiency levels differ in the use of politeness strategies in requests. Employing a multiple-choice questionnaire, Sue found that advanced and intermediate Korean ESL learners did not differ in their use of politeness strategies. When comparing native speakers of English to Korean ESL learners, however, it was revealed that in some situations where a requester-requestee relationship was both socially and psychologically close, i.e. an intimate friendship, the Korean ESL learners were not able to use politeness strategies in a way similar to the native speakers of English.

Differing from the previous two studies, Rose (2000)'s study focused on production of requests in an EFL context. Rose examined requests produced by Cantonese-speaking primary-school students at different English proficiency levels. It was found that frequency of conventional indirectness increased with proficiency, and that directness was most frequent in the lowest proficiency group. However, Rose reported that no situational variation in request strategy was found across all learner groups, despite having found evidence of a fairly wide range of request forms. It was concluded that L2 learners' ability to produce appropriate linguistic forms in the L2 does not necessarily increase concurrently with their ability to map L2 forms to social categories.

Umar (2004), on the other hand, compared the request strategies used by advanced Arab learners of English with those strategies used by British native speakers of English. It was found that the two groups employed similar strategies, namely conventionally indirect strategies, when making request to people in equal or higher social status. However, in the situations where the requests were addressed to people in lower status, the Arabic subjects adopted more direct request strategies considerably more than the British subjects.

Taguchi (2007), focusing on situational variation, examined production of requests by native speakers and Japanese learners of English at different proficiency levels in a role play task. The task had 2 situational types based on 3 social variables: interlocutors' power difference (P), social distance (D), and the degree of imposition (R). Results showed that L2 learners produced requests in PDR-low situations significantly more easily and quickly than in PDR-high situations, but little difference was found in native speakers' production. Furthermore, L2 learners and native speakers exhibited different patterns in the choice of linguistic expressions over the two situation types.

Another study focusing on request making is Su's (2010) study of bi-directionality of language transfer. Su's subjects were English native speakers and Chinese EFL learners at the intermediate and advanced levels. Data were collected via discourse completion test. Results showed that EFL learners at both levels used conventionally indirect strategies significantly less often than English native speakers in making English requests but more often than Chinese native speakers did when requesting in Chinese. It was concluded that bi-directional transfer can occur at the pragmatic level in foreign language learners.

In summary, it is apparent from these studies that despite many similarities between the two groups, differences existed between native speakers' and learners' use of politeness strategies.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

With Tanaka and Kawade's (1982) and Suh's (1999) investigation of differences between English

native speakers and ESL learners in the use of politeness strategies in requests as a point of reference, the present study, focusing on Thai EFL learners' use of politeness strategies in requests, has two objectives.

- to investigate to what extent Thai EFL learners differ from native speakers of English in the use of politeness strategies.
- to investigate whether there is evidence of L1 influence on the learners' use of politeness strategies.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### PARTICIPANTS

Participants in this study were organized into two groups. The first group was 30 native speakers of American English who were living in Thailand (henceforth referred to as NS). They ranged in age from 20 to 30 years. Of the 30 participants, four were female. The second group was 60 Thai EFL learners, who were undergraduate students at a university in Thailand. None of the learners had been in an English-speaking environment for a significant period of time. The learners spoke Thai as their L1 and had learned English in a classroom setting for at least 12 years before being recruited for the present study. Based on their scores from the two foundation English courses the learners had taken in their first year at the university, 60 students were recruited and then divided into 2 groups: high-proficiency learners (30) (henceforth referred to as HiEFL) and low-proficiency learners (30) (henceforth referred to as LoEFL).<sup>4</sup> They ranged in age from 20 to 25 years.

### INSTRUMENT

This study employed a multiple-choice questionnaire based on Tanaka and Kawade's (1982) and Suh's (1999) studies as an elicitation task. The questionnaire consisted of 12 items classified into four categories.

- (1) **The first category** represented situations in which a requester perceived himself/herself as both socially and psychologically distant from a requester. (henceforth referred to as SoD-PsyD). For instance, he/she had to ask an elderly distinguished professor to do something.
- (2) **The second category** represented situations in which the requester-requestee relationship was socially distant but psychologically close (henceforth referred to as SoD-PsyC). For instance, he/she had to ask a young sociable professor to do something.
- (3) **The third category** represented situations in which the requester-requestee relationship was socially and psychologically close (henceforth referred to as SoC-PsyC). For instance, he/she had to ask a long-time close friend to do something.
- (4) **The fourth category** represented situations in which the requester-requestee relationship was socially close but psychologically distant (henceforth referred to as SoC-PsyD). For instance, he/she had to ask a classmate whom he/she disliked to do something.

Each of the four categories consists of three items. The 12 items were randomly presented. Each item, following Tanaka and Kawade's (1982) and Suh's (1999) studies, had six politeness strategies as in (1) to (6), ordered from the least to the most polite.

- (1) Imperative  
(e.g., Lend me this book.)
- (2) I want you to...  
(e.g., I want you to lend me this book.)
- (3) Root of a verb, will you?  
(e.g., Lend me this book, will you?)
- (4) Can you...?  
(e.g., Can you lend me this book?)
- (5) Would you...?  
(e.g., Would you lend me this book?)
- (6) I would appreciate it if you could...  
(e.g., I would appreciate it if you could lend me this book.)

For each item, the participants were asked to choose only one politeness strategy which they would be most likely to use in a given situation, as in the following example.

#### Situation 1

You are talking with an elderly distinguished professor about your research project. After the talk, you want to borrow a book from him for the weekend.

Which request form of the following would you like to use?

- a. I want you to lend me this book.
- b. Would you lend me this book?
- c. Lend me this book.
- d. I would appreciate it if you could lend me this book.
- e. Can you lend me a book?
- f. Lend me this book, will you?

Prior to the distribution of questionnaires, a pilot study was carried out with two groups of 20 undergraduate students whose English language proficiency was approximately the same as that of the learner groups to be tested in the final stage. Based on the results of the pilot study, several items were revised. Using Cronbach's alpha, the internal consistency reliability of the test was 0.78, indicating that the test assessed the respondents' judgments (perception) of the appropriateness of different politeness forms in a reliable manner.

## RESULTS

The present results show that EFL learners' use of politeness strategies is not always similar to the native speakers. Level of proficiency and rules from the L1 culture seem to play important roles in the use of politeness strategies, as shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Comparison of the NS with the Thai EFL learners according to proficiency level

		I'd appreciate...	Would you...?	Can you...?	Root of a verb, will you?	I want you to...	Imperative
1 <sup>st</sup> Category (SoD-PsyD)	NS	58.88	30.00	11.11	0	0	0
	HiEFL	55.55	31.11	13.33	0	0	0
	LoEFL	12.22	28.88	56.66	2.22	0	0
2 <sup>nd</sup> Category (SoD-PsyC)	NS	14.44	56.66	28.88	0	0	0
	HiEFL	3.33	31.11	61.11	4.44	0	0
	LoEFL	3.33	31.11	62.22	3.33	0	0
3 <sup>rd</sup> Category (SoC-PsyC)	NS	0	0	70.00	23.33	2.22	4.44
	HiEFL	0	3.33	20.87	16.66	12.22	46.66
	LoEFL	0	2.22	18.88	15.55	12.22	51.11
4 <sup>th</sup> Category (SoC-PsyD)	NS	31.11	50.00	16.66	2.22	0	0
	HiEFL	28.88	47.77	16.66	4.44	2.22	0
	LoEFL	0	25.55	54.44	16.66	2.22	1.11

In the first category (the SoD-PsyD situations), it was found that NS group used *I'd appreciate...* and *Would you...?* strategies, which are the most polite strategies, more often (58.88% and 30.00%, respectively) than other strategies. Similarly in the HiEFL group, these two strategies were used with the highest frequency (55.55% and 31.11%, respectively). The LoEFL group, however, differed from the two groups in the use of politeness strategies. They preferred to use a moderate politeness strategy *Can you...?* at a rate of 56.66%, followed by *Would you...?* at 28.88%.

In the second category (the SoD-PsyC situations), results show that NS group used *Would you...* strategy more often than other strategies. It is used 56.66% of time while the use of *Can you...* came in at 28.88%, followed by *I'd appreciate...* at 14.44%. The EFL groups, however, displayed different rates of use of politeness strategies. Both the HiEFL and LoEFL groups used *Can you...* most of the time (61.11% and 62.22%, respectively). The *Would you...* strategy, which was most frequently used by the NS group, was used only 31.11% of the time.

Situations in the third category (the SoC-PsyC situations) turned out to be where the NS and the EFL groups differed most in their use of politeness strategies. Although the two groups were similar in that they preferred to use lesser strategies such as *Can you...*, *Root of a verb, will you?*, *I want you to...* and *Imperative*, they displayed strikingly different rates of use of these forms. In the NS group *Can you...* was used with the highest frequency (70.00%), followed by *Root of a verb, will you?* at 23.33%. In contrast, the EFL groups, both HiEFL and LoEFL, exhibited a clear preference for the use of the least polite strategy *Imperative* (46.66% and 51.11%, respectively). As the imperative is a direct request which, in Thai culture, is usually used in requesting in an intimate friendship, this clearly shows L1 influence on the learners' use of politeness strategies.

In the fourth category (the SoC-PsyD situations), it was found *Would you..* was most frequently used by the NS group (50.00%), followed by *I'd appreciate...* at 31.11%, and *Can you...* at 16.66%. Similarly, the HiEFL group used *Would you..* more often than other strategies (47.77%). The use of *I'd appreciate...* and *Can you...* came in at 28.88% and 16.66%, respectively. The LoEFL group, however, showed different rates of use of politeness strategies as *Can you...* was used with the highest frequency (54.44%), while *Would you..* and *Root of a verb, will you?* were less frequently used (25.55% and 16.66%, respectively).

From the results reported above, the difference between the NS and the EFL learners in the use of politeness strategies can be summarized as in Table 2, where the three most frequently used politeness strategies in each category are listed.



TABLE 2. The Three Most Frequently Used Politeness Strategies

		Politeness Strategies		
		NS	H-EFL	L-EFL
1 <sup>st</sup> Category (SoD-PsD)	1. <i>I'd appreciate...</i> (58.88%)	1. <i>I'd appreciate...</i> (55.55%)	1. <i>I'd appreciate...</i> (56.66%)	2. <i>Would you...?</i> (28.88%)
	2. <i>Would you...?</i> (30.00%)	2. <i>Would you...?</i> (31.11%)	3. <i>I'd appreciate...</i> (12.22%)	3. <i>I'd appreciate...</i> (12.22%)
	3. <i>Can you...?</i> (11.11%)	3. <i>Can you...?</i> (13.33%)		
2 <sup>nd</sup> Category (SoD-PsyC)	1. <i>Would you...?</i> (56.66%)	1. <i>Can you...?</i> (61.11%)	1. <i>Can you...?</i> (62.22%)	2. <i>Would you...?</i> (31.11%)
	2. <i>Can you...?</i> (28.88%)	2. <i>Would you...?</i> (31.11)	3. <i>Root, will you?</i> (3.33%)	3. <i>Root, will you?</i> (3.33%)
	3. <i>I'd appreciate...</i> (14.44%)	3. <i>Root, will you?</i> (4.44%)	<i>I'd appreciate...</i> (3.33%)	
3 <sup>rd</sup> Category (SoC-PsyC)	1. <i>Can you...?</i> (70.00%)	1. <i>Imperative</i> (46.46%)	1. <i>Imperative</i> (51.11%)	2. <i>Can you...?</i> (18.88%)
	2. <i>Root, will you?</i> (23.33%)	2. <i>Can you...?</i> (20.87%)	2. <i>Can you...?</i> (18.88%)	3. <i>Root, will you?</i> (15.55%)
	3. <i>Imperative</i> (4.44%)	3. <i>Root, will you?</i> (16.66%)		
4 <sup>th</sup> Category (SoC-PsyD)	1. <i>Would you...?</i> (50.00%)	1. <i>Would you...?</i> (47.77%)	1. <i>Can you...?</i> (54.44%)	2. <i>Would you...?</i> (25.55%)
	2. <i>I'd appreciate...</i> (31.11%)	2. <i>I'd appreciate...</i> (28.88%)	3. <i>Root, will you?</i> (16.66%)	3. <i>Root, will you?</i> (16.66%)
	3. <i>Can you...?</i> (16.66%)	3. <i>Can you...?</i> (16.66%)		

## DISCUSSION

Comparing NS with the EFL learners according to proficiency level, this study reveals that the EFL learners' use of politeness strategies is not always similar to the NS. In this section, the results of this study will be discussed with respect to the two research questions mentioned earlier.

### A COMPARISON OF THAI EFL LEARNERS AND NATIVE SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH

#### DEGREES OF POLITENESS

The results of the present study revealed that the HiEFL differed from the NS in the use of politeness in situations where the requester-requestee relationship is psychologically close. They were able, however, to use politeness strategies in a manner similar to the NS in situations where the requester-requestee relationship is psychologically distant. In contrast, the LoEFL differed from the NS to a greater extent since they were not able to use politeness strategies in a way similar to the NS in any situation.

When the EFL learners' use of politeness strategies differed from the NS, the EFL learners tended to employ less polite strategies. This finding is not totally surprising. In Tanaka and Kawade's (1982)

study, as previously discussed, it was also found that in certain situations where the native speakers employed more polite strategies, the learners tended to use less polite strategies. Furthermore, in Umar's (2004) study, the learners were also found to employ less polite strategies (i.e., direct requests) markedly more than the native speakers in some situations.

The EFL learners in the present study differed from the NS in the use of politeness strategies in most situations, unlike the ESL learners in Suh's (1999) study who differed from the NS only in situations of an intimate friendship. This can be explained in terms of learning context. The Korean learners who participated Suh's study had come to the US to learn English in a natural setting for a significant period of time; whereas the Thai learners who participated in the present study had no experience using English abroad for a significant period of time. Since learning context plays a key role in pragmatic development (Kasper & Rose, 2002, p.146), it is not surprising that the learners in the two studies differed in their use of politeness strategies.

#### THE DP HYPOTHESIS

That both the NS and the EFL used a relatively less polite strategy in the third category (SoC-PsyC) is in line with the prediction of the DP hypothesis that "if the requester-reqeetee relationship is both socially and psychologically close, the requester will use a less polite strategy" (Tanaka and Kawade 1982).

The other prediction of the DP hypothesis that "psychological variables play a more important role in using politeness strategies than social variables" (Tanaka and Kawade 1982) proved to be true among the NS and the HiEFL, but not among the LoEFL. As demonstrated in Table 2, for the NS and the HiEFL, the most frequently used politeness strategies in the SoD-PsyC situations (i.e., *Would you...* or *Can you...*) are relatively less polite than that in the SoD-PsyD situations (i.e., *I'd appreciate...*). This is in line with the prediction that the psychologically close relationship between a requester and a requestee has a stronger effect on selecting politeness strategies than the socially distant relationship between them. For the LoEFL, however, the most frequently used politeness strategy in the SoD-PsyC situations (i.e., *Can you...*) is the same as what was used in the SoD-PsyD situations (i.e., *Can you...*), revealing no superior role of the psychological variable.

#### SITUATIONAL VARIATION IN REQUEST STRATEGIES

With respect to situational variation in request strategy, the present study revealed that unlike native speaker's use of politeness strategies, the EFL learners' use of politeness strategies were not always varied according to addressees. As demonstrated above, the LoEFL tended to use the same request forms (i.e., the moderate politeness strategy *Can you...?*) in three out of the four categories (i.e., 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> categories). The HiEFL, however, showed more variation in the use of politeness strategies as they tended to employ *I'd appreciate*, *Can you...?*, and *Would you...?* in the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> categories. The results of the present study are, therefore, partially differ from and Rose's (2000) findings that regardless of L2 proficiency levels, L2 learners' use of politeness strategies does not vary according to situational factors.

#### EVIDENCE OF L1 INFLUENCE

The results of the present study have revealed that in some situations where a requester-requestee relationship is socially and psychologically close, i.e., in an intimate friendship, the EFL learners (both the HiEFL and the LoEFL) were not able to use politeness in a way similar to the NS.

While the NS tended to employ a moderate politeness strategy *Can you...?*, the EFL tended to employ the least polite strategies *Imperative*.

The use of imperative in these situations can be regarded as evidence of L1 influence on the learners' use of politeness strategies. As previously discussed, a direct request in Thai society is usually used when the requester-requestee relationship is close (Khahua 2003). A direct request is quite similar to the imperative except that a FP such as *si?*, *na?* and *n j* is added to the right of the VP. The fact that the EFL learners in the present study preferred the imperative in situations where the requester-requestee relationship is socially and psychologically close could have resulted from the transfer of L1 pragmatic knowledge of using politeness to L2 speech performance.

That the cultural difference between L1 and L2 results in an inappropriate use of politeness strategies was also discussed in Suh's (1999) study. Suh, noted that in Korean society, an intimate friendship does not require a polite way of speaking., Speakers who maintain an intimate friendship usually use imperative forms when making a request. This cultural characteristic of requesting in an intimate friendship plays an active role in Korean ESL learners' selection of request form and resulted in a significant difference from the native speakers of English.

The results of the present study are not only in line with Suh's (1999) finding on the effect of cultural difference between L1 and L2 on the use of politeness strategies but also in agreement with Kasper's (1992) idea of pragmalinguistic transfer which refers to the process whereby politeness value assigned to particular linguistic material in first language influences learners' perception and performance of form-function mappings in second language (as cited in Bu, 2010, p. 94). Additionally, the results are congruent with part of Su's (2010) finding on transfer of pragmatic competence in foreign language learning.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study contributes to the body of research on interlanguage pragmatics by revealing that Thai EFL learners' use of politeness strategies is not always similar to the native speakers. Compared to the native speakers, the learners tended to employ less polite strategies. In addition to L2 proficiency, cultural differences between L1 and L2 have been found to play an important role in the use of politeness strategies.

The scope of the present study suggests several possibilities for future research. First, this study focused on situations where social and psychological factors were variables. Future research focusing on other variables such as power difference and degree of imposition is recommended. Second, this study was conducted with EFL learners with only one L1 background, hence there was no comparison between learners of different L1 backgrounds. It would be interesting, therefore, to conduct a study comparing use of politeness strategies of learners of different L1 backgrounds. Third, this study was a cross-sectional study employing a judgment task as a research instrument. Future research may include production data or apply a longitudinal approach for a better understanding of the development of pragmatic competence.

In practical terms, this study has some relevance to the teaching of politeness strategies in requests in EFL classrooms. It is apparent from the study that in some situations, Thai EFL learners' use of politeness strategies departed from the native speakers of English. Ignorance of the cultural difference between L1 and L2 and pragmatic transfer is likely to be the reason why the learners' use of politeness strategies is dissimilar to that of native speakers (Suh 1999, p.199). Therefore, classroom activities that ensure learners are aware of the cultural difference should supplement the introduction

of pragmatically relevant input in instructed L2 learning. Provided that the learners are aware of the cultural difference, they can develop their intercultural communicative competence (Byram 1997, as cited in Houghton 2009, p.70).

#### ENDNOTES

1. It is worth noting that in Blum-Kulka's (1987, 1990) analyses, directness and politeness do not always co-vary.
2. Focusing on indirectness, Searl (1975) distinguishes between conventionally indirect utterances and non-conventionally indirect utterances. The first refers to routine utterances in which the speaker's intention is embedded within a predictable fixed pattern of discourse (Taguchi, 2005, p. 547). The latter, however, refers to an idiosyncratic utterance whose meaning is not simply attached to specific linguistic expressions (Taguchi, 2005, p.548). To illustrate, requests such as *Can you pass me the salt?* and *Are you putting salt on my meat?* (Cook & Liddicoat, 2002) are considered to be a conventionally indirect request and a non-conventionally indirect request, respectively.
3. Khuhua's (2003) findings are congruent with Khanittanan's (1988) study on politeness in Thai. According to Khanittanan, polite speech is for public use and it is generally used with strangers or people not well acquainted with one another (p.353).
4. The scores from the two courses were determined as follows: A = 4, B+ =3.5, B=3, C+=2.5, C=2, D+=1.5, D=1. The mean scores and their interpretation were in a range from: high, 6.5-8; moderate, 4.5-6; low, 2-4. To determine proficiency level more reliably, students ranked in the middle section of the proficiency scale were excluded. Only students belonging to the bottom and top sections were selected.

#### REFERENCES

- Blum-Kulka, S. (1987). Indirectness and politeness in requests: Same or different? *Journal of Pragmatics*, 11, 131-146.
- Blum-Kulka, S. (1990). You don't touch lettuce with your fingers: Parental politeness in family discourse. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 14, 259-288.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S.D. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Bu, J. (2010). Study of pragmatic transfer in persuasion strategies by Chinese learners of English. *3L: The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, 16, 93-114.
- Cook, M., & Liddicoat, A.J. (2002). The development of comprehension in interlanguage pragmatic: The case of request strategies in English. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics*, 25, 19-39.
- Fraser, B. (1990). Perspectives on politeness. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 14, 219-236.
- Hill, T. (1997). The development of pragmatic competence in an EFL context. (Doctoral dissertation, Temple University Japan.) *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 58, 3905.
- Houghton, S. (2009). The role of intercultural communicative competence in the development of world Englishes and lingua francas. *3L: The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, 15, 70-95.
- Intachakra, S. (2007). *Fundamental concepts of pragmatics*, Bangkok: Thammasat University Press.
- Kasper, G., & Rose, K.R. (2002). Pragmatic development in a second language. *Language Learning*, 52, viii-x, 1-339.
- Khuhua, J. (2003). *A study of speech act patterns of requests in Thai society*. Unpublished master's thesis, Mahidol University.
- Khanittanan, W. (1988). Some observations on expressing politeness in Thai. *Language Science*, 10 (2), 353-362.
- Kitao, K. (1987). "Difference between politeness strategies used in requests by Americans and Japanese," ED 280118.
- Leech, G. (1983). *Principles of pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- Rose, K. R. (2000). An exploratory cross-sectional study of interlanguage pragmatic development. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 22, 27-67.
- Searle, J. (1975). Indirect speech acts. In: Cole, P. and Morgan, J. (eds.) *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts*. New York, NY: Academic Press, pp.59-82.
- Su, I. (2010). Transfer of pragmatic competences: a bi-directional perspective. *The Modern Language Journal*, 94 87-102.
- Suh, J. (1999). Pragmatic perception of politeness in requests by Korean learners of English as foreign language, *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 37 (3), 195-213.
- Taguchi, N. (2005). Comprehending implied meaning in English as a second language. *Modern Language Journal*, 89, 543-562.

- Taguchi, N. (2007). Task difficulty in oral speech act production. *Applied Linguistics*, 28 (1): 113-135
- Tanaka, S. & Kawade, S. (1982) “Politeness strategies and second language acquisition”, *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 5, 18-33.
- Thomas, J. (1995). *Meaning in interaction. an introduction to pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- Umar, A. (2004). Request strategies as used by advanced Arab learners of English as a foreign language. *Umm Al-Qura University Journal of Education & Social Science & Humanities*, 16 (1).
- Yule, G. (1996). *Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Boonjeera Chiravate  
Department of English,  
Faculty of Arts,  
Silpakorn University, Thailand  
chiravate@gmail.com

