



The Investigation of Patterns of Iranian EFL learners' Request Speech Act in Three Different Levels

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Abstract. The present study is an investigation of Iranian EFL learners' request speech act among learners with different English proficiency. This study attempts to find out the request strategies and also the degree of familiarity among three levels of participants according to Lakoff (1973) taxonomy. In order for the Iranian EFL learners' language proficiency in the use of request speech act to be argued, the discourse completion test (DCT) was used. The DCT included six authentic request situations. The total number of students who took part in this study were 231 at three levels of MA (master of art), BA (bachelor of art), and UI (upper intermediate of institute). Based on the Z ratio test, the degree of formality and also the participants' request strategies were analyzed. The results revealed that there are significant differences in the use of patterns among three levels of participants and also the degree of familiarity according to the levels of student changed but significantly most of learners tend to used *deference* taxonomy which showed *medium* degree of familiarity.

Keywords: pragmatics, politeness, request speech act, degree of familiarity, Iranian EFL learners

1. INTRODUCTION

Due to the communication in the community, it should be considered that the pragmatic competence as the knowledge, speech act, and etc. are as important as the linguistic competence as the knowledge of vocabulary and grammatical rules. One of challenging units of pragmatics is request speech act which shows the learners' English language proficiency. Request is define as "an act of asking politely or formally for something". (Balci, 2009, p.10)

The aim of this study is to investigate the patterns of request speech acts that used by Iranian EFL learners and also to compare aforesaid three levels' request sentences with each other. Moreover, another purpose of this research is how learners' level of English language proficiency impact on the way that they communicate in friendly, formal, and high formal situations. Therefore, in order to have a successful communication the learners should be aware of the degree of familiarity and politeness in producing request sentences.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

According to linguistic point of view, language has different definitions which are related to syntax, morphology, phonology, and etc. while, another area of language relates to pragmatics which describe language use and language in context (wide definition), also talks about

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relationship between sign and user (narrow definition). Crystal (1997, as cited in Kasper & Rose, 2001, p. 2) defines pragmatics as “the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication”. Pragmatics has a crucial role in the understanding and production of the language therefore, Thomas (1983) stated that pragmatic competence is the ability to apply language efficiency in order to obtain special purposes and to comprehend language in context and EFL learners must use the knowledge of language and pragmatics.

On the other hand some writers associated definition of pragmatics with communication. Leech (1983) believed that the comprehending of the nature of language is not possible unless, pragmatics is understood. Based on the definition of pragmatics by Paltridge (2006, p. 3) context is seen as one of the pragmatics constructs which try to study meaning in relation of the social, situational, textual and background knowledge context. Paltridge (2006, p. 3) states “Pragmatics assumes that when people communicate with each other they normally follow some kind of co-operative principle”. The writer also states that pragmatics is cross-cultural which suggested that “What may be a culturally appropriate way or saying or doing something in one culture might not be the same in another culture” (Paltridge, 2006, p. 3).

Speech act is defined as “the basic unit of language used to express meaning, an utterance that expresses an intension” (Balci, 2009, p. 16). Austin (1962) stated that speech act is the utterance and whole situations in which the utterance are issued. According to Searle’s classifications (1979) speech act divided into five categories which request speech act put under the *directive* taxonomy.

Politeness is a term used to describe the “... rational, rule-governed, pragmatic aspect of speech that is rooted in the human need to maintain relationships and avoid conflicts” (Janney & Arndt, 2003). Politeness theory was expanded by famous philosophers. Lakoff (1973) who is the founder of politeness theory, defined politeness as a set of “interpersonal reaction” (Lakoff, 1973, p.34). She believed the grammatical rules are not sufficient to explain speaker’s deviation of conversation’s main principles. Therefore, she stated two rules of pragmatic competence: the first is *be clear*, and second is *be polite*. Lakoff states that Grice’s conversational maxims may be put under her first rule, *be clear*, which invite communicative participants to be clear in conversations. Beside this, Lakoff divided her second rule into three branches which include (a) Don't impose, (b) Give options, and (c) Make a feel good -be friendly. Then Lakoff (1975, p. 65) changed her rules name into: (a) Formality: Keep aloof, (b) Deference: give options, and (c) Camaraderie: show sympathy. Brown and Levinson (1987) politeness strategies showed the individual’s self-esteem or “face”, according Model Persons which divided to positive face and negative face. Brown and Levinson consider that negative face refers to “The basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction, in the other word, to freedom of action and freedom from imposition”, and positive face refers to “The positive consistent self-image or 'personality' (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants" (1987, p.61). Leech’s (Leech, 1980: as cited in Eelen, 2001, p. 10) theory of politeness put politeness in a framework of ‘interpersonal rhetoric’. In his theory he focused on distinction between semantics (as the domain of grammar, the linguistic system, the code) and pragmatics (as the domain of rhetoric, the implementation of the code).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

This study composed of three different groups of participants with total number of 231. In MA (master of art) level, there were 50 participants, BA (bachelor of art) level included 100

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students, and UI (upper intermediate) level had 81 participants. All participants of this study were above 18 years of age. The data were gathered from three levels of students (MA, BA, and UI).

3.2. Instrument

The instrument used to gather data was a Discourse Completion test (DCT), which has been designed to elicit request strategies of Iranian EFL learners. There are six request situations in this DCT which are designed in friendly, formal, and high formal situation. First situation, friendly, is created between two friends, second and third situations, formal, are made between known people, fourth, fifth, and sixth, high formal, are created between unknown people. As mentioned before another purpose of this study is to examine the degree of familiarity which it has three levels in the DCT, (1) high: between student and best friend, (2) medium: between student, professor, receptionist, (3) none: between stranger and student. Throughout the DCT, the subjects are asked to consider the situations as real life conditions. The questionnaire is available in appendix (1).

3.3. Procedure

To collect data the discourse completion test (DCT) with six situations was distributed among 231 students in three different levels. The present study is conducted in four different areas. Takestan Azad University, Karaj Azad University, Kharazmi University, and Borj e Zaban institute. The rationale behind choosing four centers for this study was due to limitation in both number of students and time consideration. The data collection process is done in spring semester of 1392-1393 (2014) academic year.

The procedure which was done in this study was on the way that participants received DCT questionnaire with six situations and they were asked to write request sentences for each situation. The data were coded based on the sub variables of three branches of Lakoff (1973) politeness theory. Her politeness theory has three branches; (a) formality, (b) deference, and (c) camaraderie. The *formality* (a) divided into four categories: (a1) the use of last name/ formal way to call somebody, (a2) Passive form, (a3) The use of formal grammar, and (a4) Past tense sentences. The second branch is *deference* (b) which has two sub-categories: (b1) Apologies, and (b2) Hesitancy. The last one is *camaraderie* (c) that include four parts: (c1) The use of first name/ informal way to call somebody, (c2) Description about the reason of request, (c3) Active form, and (c4) Present tense sentences. Coded data were later analyzed across the three groups of participants by the use of Z ratio test.

4. RESULTS

The comparison among three levels of participants to illustrate that in some situations there are significance different between levels.

In the six situations which put under three levels of high, medium and none, the MA, BA, and UI level request sentences showed which feature are used more than the others. In first situations which is in high level, the investigations between MA and BA level showed: BA participants used feature c9 (active and direct form of sentence) more than MA, while the comparison between MA and UI participants, there are not any significant differences in the use of features, moreover study showed that in first situation, between BA and UI, the use of feature a2 (indirect or passive form of sentences), In UI participants are more than BA level.

Consequently, according to the level (high) and situation of sentence the use of feature c9, In BA level is more logical than the others features.

The second and third situations are under medium level. It was expected that the request sentences of students put under the deference and formality's subgroups.

In the comparison between MA and BA level, in second situation there were not any significant difference, but in third situation the use of feature a3 (use of formal grammar) and c10 (present tense sentences) in BA are superior to MA, and the MA participants preferred to use feature a2 (indirect or passive form) more than BA. However, in the second situation between UI and MA, the UI participants used feature a1 (formal way to call somebody) more than MA level, beside this, feature b6 (hesitancy) were used by MA participants more that BA. In situation three, the UI level used feature b6 (hesitancy), c8 (description about the reason of the request), and c10 (present tense sentences), remarkably more than MA, on the other hand the MA level preferred feature a2 (indirect or passive form sentences), and c9 (active and direct form) more than UI level. The inspection of situations two and three, between levels BA and UI were showed that, in second situations the UI participants used a1 (formal way to call somebody), and a10 (present tense sentences) more than BA level, in contrast BA level used a4 (past tense sentences), and b6 (hesitancy) more than UI level.in situation three, the use of feature a2 (indirect or passive form), and feature c8 (description about the reason of request) in UI level is more than BA, and the use of feature c9 (active or direct form) in BA level is superior to UI. In summary, the investigation showed, the participants of levels MA, BA, and UI used variety of patterns among their request sentences, but the use feature b5 (apologies) did not have any significant difference among levels.

In the level none familiarity, in situations four, five, and six, the studies showed that in situation four between MA and BA level just in the use of b6 feature (hesitancy) BA level is more superior to MA level. In situation four and five between MA and BA level there weren't any significant differences. The studied between MA and UI level, in situation four the use of features a1,a2, b5, b6, c8, and c10 in UI level are more than MA level, and the MA participants used features a3, a4, and c9 more than UI level. In fifth situation the UI level used a1 and c10 more than MA level, while MA level situation six used features a3,b6, and c8 more than UI level. Finally, the investigation between BA and UI level showed, the use of features a1, a2, c7, c8, and c10 in UI level is more than BA level and BA level used features a3, a4, b6, and c9 more than UI level, in situation five the use of feature c10 in UI level is more than BA level and the use of features a4 and b6 in BA level are more common than UI level. In sixth situation the use of feature a2 is superior to BA, and BA participants used features b6 and c8 more than UI participants. The tables are available in appendix B (table 3-1, table 3-2, and table 3-3)

The results of stage three of comparison which is between three formats of; a (formality), b (deference), and c (camaraderie) showed the following conclusions:

In the first, third, fifth, and sixth situations there were not any significant differences between levels MA and BA, MA and UI, and BA and UI, in three formats of formality, deference, and camaraderie. While, in second situation just in the use of format (b), *deference*, level BA is superior to UI level, but in the other levels had not seen any significant differences. In situation four, UI level used format (b) more than MA level, beside this there are significant deference between levels BA and MA in the use of format (b), BA is superior to MA level. (Table 3-4, 3-5,and 3-6)

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Table (3.4). Comparing the degree of formality between MA & BA level.

	a	b	c
Q1	-0.39	0.50	-0.26
Q2	-0.06	-1.50	0.43
Q3	0.32	-0.84	-1.12
Q4	-0.23	-4.07**	-0.21
Q5	-0.20	-0.51	-0.27
Q6	0.38	-0.07	-0.30

Table (3-5). Comparing the degree of formality between MA & BA level.

	a	b	c
Q1	0.08	-0.42	0.20
Q2	0.00	0.54	-0.34
Q3	0.92	-1.58	-0.65
Q4	0.32	-2.56*	-1.83
Q5	0.20	-0.02	-0.83
Q6	0.39	0.01	0.16

Table (3-5). Comparing the degree of formality between BA & UI level

	a	b	C
Q1	0.54	-1.08	0.54
Q2	0.06	2.37*	-0.91
Q3	0.76	-0.90	0.50
Q4	0.65	1.44	-1.93
Q5	0.48	0.57	-0.67
Q6	0.02	0.09	0.54

*Significant difference at 5% level - **Significant difference at 1% level

In general, the results revealed that there are significant differences in the use of patterns among three levels of participants and also the degree of familiarity according to the levels of student changed but significantly most of learners tend to used *deference* taxonomy which showed *medium* degree of familiarity.

5. CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to investigate the patterns of request speech act in three levels of students and also to probe the degree of familiarity which show how the participants were polite in making the request sentences in three levels of high, medium, and none.

First part of this article revealed the patterns of request speech act that participants are used in different situations. The results pretended the use of passive form and high formal grammar are less common among Iranian EFL learners, while the participants repeatedly in all situation tend to use past tense sentences which began with an apology phrases. Another pattern that the participants wrote in the initial part of request sentences was formal or informal names and titles that according to level of situations they used. In learners' native language (Persian) they always begin their conversation with *hello* and *hi* but none of students used this words for initiating their conversations.

The second section of this research was about the degree of familiarity which discussed about how the designed situations able to impact in altering the request strategies that they were chosen. The MA level participants request sentences were under formality, most of the BA level students answer were under deference, and UI level used camaraderie in the most of the mentioned situations. The result shows that the level of training impact on their comprehending skill and also learners comprehending had direct influence in the use of semantic and syntactic principles. Therefore, the learners' linguistic and pragmatics knowledge are two rules which can affect the appropriateness and politeness of EFL learners in the use of language.

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Appendix (A): questionnaire

English questionnaire:

Thank you for participating in my survey. We have created 6 situations. Please try to imagine that these situations are real and please write down what you would say in these situations in real life.

First part: Your information	
Age: 18 <input type="checkbox"/>	19 <input type="checkbox"/> 20s <input type="checkbox"/> 30s <input type="checkbox"/> 40s <input type="checkbox"/> 50s <input type="checkbox"/>
Gender: Male <input type="checkbox"/>	Female <input type="checkbox"/>
Level of universities' participants: PhD <input type="checkbox"/>	MA <input type="checkbox"/> BA <input type="checkbox"/>
Level of institute's participants:	
Level Upper intermediate <input type="checkbox"/>	Intermediate <input type="checkbox"/> Advanced <input type="checkbox"/>

Second part: The 6 created situations:

1. You are a student. Your best friend has just bought an expensive new camera. You are asking your best friend to lend it to you, since you are going to a club activity this weekend. What would you say to your best friend?

.....

2. You need a letter of recommendation for a job application, and you would like to ask your instructor who is a male professor if he would write a letter of recommendation for you. What would you say to him?

.....

3. You are a student. You are asking a female staff member working in the Department Chair's Office if the Chair is in the office right now. What would you say to her?

.....

4. A friend from out of town is visiting you at school, and you are showing your friend around the campus and city. You want someone to take your picture together. You see a man dressed in a suit carrying a briefcase and you want to ask him to take your picture. What do you say?

.....

5. You go to the library to return a lot of books, and your hands are full. There is a man who looks like a professor standing near the door of the library. How do you ask him to open the door for you?

.....

6. You want to make some copies on the machine down the department hall but find the instructions confusing. Just then you see one of the department's professors whom you haven't spoken to before passing by. You want to ask for help. What would you say?

.....

Appendix (B): Tables

Table (3-1). MA and BA level, Comparison of the levels of all people- all elements

	a1	a2	a3	a4	b5	b6	c7	c8	c9	c10
Q1		-0.88	-1.97*	-1.76	0.36	1.49	2.29	1.40	0.88	1.76
Q2	0.56	-1.42	-1.70	-1.70	-1.69	-0.49		0.31	1.10	2.17*
Q3	-0.67	-0.03	-2.55*	-3.35**	0.43	-1.80		-1.01	-0.56	2.27*
Q4	0.09	-1.54	0.89	-1.70	1.46	1.38	-1.01	-1.01	0.34	1.95

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Q5	-1.93	-0.49	-2.76**	-2.41*	-1.01	1.45	1.26	0.04	2.49*
Q6	1.03	-1.96*	-1.01	-1.46	1.93	1.01	-0.67	1.39	1.24

*Significant difference at 5% level - **Significant difference at 1% level

Table (3-2). MA and UI level, Comparison of the levels of all people- all elements

	a1	a2	a3	a4	b5	b6	c7	c8	c9	c10
Q1		1.79	-0.46	-1.59	-0.38	0.95	-1.82	0.25	-2.36*	1.33
Q2	-0.53	-1.29	1.44	-0.70	-1.66	-1.51		0.90	-0.59	1.45
Q3	-1.31	6.02**	-2.16*	-1.42	-0.26	-1.54		-1.26	0.13	-4.17**
Q4	-0.71	1.01	-0.98	0.36	-0.72	-9.11**	1.01	-0.72	-0.80	-0.49
Q5	-1.56	1.77	0.00	-0.24	-0.35	-0.84		-0.59	-0.75	-0.13
Q6	0.00	1.53	0.76	0.00	-0.59	0.70		-0.85	-0.78	0.24

*Significant difference at 5% level - **Significant difference at 1% level

Table (3-3). BA and UI level, Comparison of the levels of all people- all elements

	a1	a2	a3	a4	b5	b6	c7	c8	c9	c10
Q1		-0.32	0.79	-0.40	-1.80	0.29	-1.73	1.71	0.75	0.16
Q2	-2.94**	-1.25	1.77	1.43	-1.49	2.21*		1.34	-1.76	-1.06
Q3	-0.46	5.02**	-0.90	-0.25	-0.15	-3.17**		-4.02**	2.66**	-2.66*
Q4	-3.12**	-2.04*	3.09**	2.38*	-2.19*	-3.40**	-4.38**	-4.66**	2.29*	-3.33**
Q5	-2.79**	0.39	1.64	1.67	-1.10	1.94		-0.76	-0.37	-2.51*
Q6	-1.55	-0.83	2.39*	1.29	-1.43	2.52*		2.24*	-0.10	-1.25

*Significant difference at 5% level - **Significant difference at 1% level