



Request Strategies: Cross-Sectional Study of Iranian EFL Learners and Australian Native Speakers

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Abstract

This study was a cross-sectional investigation into the request strategies used by Iranian learners of English as a Foreign Language and Australian native speakers of English. The sample involved 96 BA and MA Persian students and 10 native speakers of English. A Discourse Completion Test (DCT) was used to generate data related to the request strategies used by each group. Selection of request situations in DCT was based on two social factors of relative power and social distance. Although results revealed pragmatic development, particularly in the movement from direct to conventionally indirect strategies on the part of EFL learners, learners with higher proficiency displayed overuse of indirect type of requesting; whereas the native group was characterized by the more balanced use of this strategy. The lower proficiency learners, on the other hand, overused the most direct strategy type. In terms of the influence of the social variables, the findings of this research revealed that as far as social power is concerned EFL learners display closer performance to native speakers. But considering social distance, it seems that Iranian EFL learners have not acquired sufficient sociopragmatic knowledge to display proper social behavior.

Keywords: Request, Social distance, Directness level, Politeness

1. Introduction

Successful communication entails knowledge of grammar and text organization as well as pragmatic aspects of the target language. Pragmatic competence is specifically defined by Koike (1989) 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" (p.279).

Austin (1962) defines speech acts as acts performed by utterances such as giving order, making promises, complaining, requesting, among others. When we utter a sentence or a phrase, we are performing an act to which we expect our listeners to react with verbal or nonverbal behavior (p.65). According to Kasper (1984), what second language (L2) learners must know for successful speech act performance has been presented in a "top down processing" manner: Learners first have to recognize the extra-linguistic, cultural constraints that operate in a native speaker's choice of a particular speech act appropriate to the context. They also have to know how to realize this speech act at the linguistic level and in accordance with the L2 sociocultural norms (p.3).

The study of requests has attracted more attention in the study of speech acts. Considering Searle's (1969) classification of illocutionary acts (i.e., representatives, directives, expressives, commissives, and declarations), researchers let requests fall under the second category, that of directives, which have been regarded as "an attempt to get hearer to do an act which speaker wants hearer to do, and which it is not obvious that hearer will do in the normal course of events or of hearer's own accord" (p. 66).

Based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, requests are Face Threatening Acts (FTAs), since a speaker is imposing her/his will on the hearer (p. 65). Brown and Levinson (1987) propose that when confronted with the need to perform a FTA, the individual must choose between performing the FTA in the most direct and efficient manner or attempting to mitigate the effect of the FTA on the hearer's face. The strategy an individual chooses to employ depends upon the *weightiness* or seriousness of FTA. Weightiness is an assessment of the social situation calculated by the speaker (p. 76).

The speaker considers three variables when assessing weightiness. First, the speaker appraises the *degree of imposition* associated with the FTA. Brown and Levinson (1987) define the degree of imposition as "a culturally and situationally

defined ranking of impositions by the degree to which they are considered to interfere with an agent's wants of self-determination or of approval" (p. 77). Second, the speaker considers the relative *power* of the hearer, defined as "the degree to which the hearer can impose his own plans and his own self-evaluation (face) at the expense of the speaker's plans and self-evaluation" (p. 77). Third, the speaker evaluates the *social distance* between the speaker and the hearer which Brown and Levinson (1987) call the "symmetric social dimension of similarity/difference within which" the speaker and hearer "stand for the purpose" of an act and the kinds of goods exchanged between them (p. 76).

Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989 cited in Francis, 1997) distinguished three degrees of directness in requests, depending on the extent to which the illocution is transparent from locution: direct requests, conventionally indirect requests, and non-conventionally indirect requests. In direct requests, the illocutionary force of the utterance is indicated by grammatical, lexical, or semantic means (for example, "Leave me alone."). Conventionally indirect statements express the illocution via fixed linguistic convention established in the speech community (for example, "How about cleaning up?"). Non-conventionally indirect requests require the addressee to compute the illocution from the interaction of the locution with its context (for example, "The game is boring.>").

The request strategies in the following classification are ordered according to decreasing degree of directness. Blum-Kulka, et al. (1989 cited in Francis, 1997, p.28) summarize a combination of level of directness and strategy types in CCSARP project as follows:

a. Direct level

1. Mood derivable: Utterances in which the grammatical mood of the verb signals illocutionary force (for example, "Leave me alone.>").
2. Performatives: Utterances in which the illocutionary force is explicitly named (for example, "I tell you to leave me alone.>").
3. Hedged performatives: Utterances in which naming of the illocutionary force is modified by hedging expressions (for example, "I would like to ask you to leave me alone.>").
4. Obligation statements: Utterances which state the obligation of the hearer to carry out the act (for example, "Sir, you'll have to move your car.>").
5. Want statements: Utterances which state the speaker's desire that the hearer carries out the act (for example, "I want you to move your car.>").

b. Conventionally indirect level

6. Suggestory formulae: Utterances which contain a suggestion to do something (for example "How about cleaning up?")
7. Query-preparatory: Utterances containing reference to preparatory conditions (e.g. ability, willingness) as conventionalized in any specific language (for example, "Would you mind moving your car?").

c. Non-conventionally indirect level

8. Strong hints: Utterances containing partial reference to object or element needed for the implementation of the act (for example, "The game is boring.>").
9. Mild hints: Utterances that make no reference to the request proper (or any of its elements) but are interpretable as requests by context (for example, "We've been playing this game for over an hour now.>").

During the last decade, requests are one of the most commonly researched speech acts in both cross-cultural and interlanguage studies. Cross-cultural pragmatic researchers analyze speech acts across a range of languages to investigate whether there are universal pragmatic principles in speech act realization, and if so, what the characteristics of these universals are (Chen, 2007; Eslamirasekh, 1993; Rinnert & Kobayashi, 1999).

On the other hand, focusing on second language acquisition, many interlanguage researchers study differences and similarities that exist in carrying out communication actions among language learners and native speakers of target languages. Some of them explored the speech act of request in English (Francis 1997; Kaneko, 2004; Kim, 1995; Parent, 2002). Other studies focused on request realization in Spanish (Ruzickova, 2007), and in Japanese (Kubota, 1996; Kahraman & Akkus, 2007).

Most of the studies mentioned above deal with interlanguage pragmatic performance (also see Garcia, 2004) while, as Rose (2000) notes, "unlike performance research, studying pragmatic development requires either longitudinal research with a given group of participants over an extended period of time, or cross-sectional studies with participants at various stages of development" (p.29).

Among the above studies, only Francis (1997) and Parent (2002) attempted to examine developmental pragmatics by comparing data from learners at various levels of proficiency while other studies were in fact "single-moment" research-

they did not compare learners at different levels of proficiency but, instead, just compared non-native and native speakers (Rose, 2000, p.29). These studies are capable of providing information regarding interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) performance, but they say nothing about development. They provide no information concerning the extent to which non-native speakers will approximate native norms of speech act.

In addition, there is little information available about how lower proficiency learners understand different kinds of requests, and in fact they have been ignored in such studies. It is highly likely that lower proficiency learners have problems selecting appropriate request strategies in different situations (Ellis, 1994). Therefore, concerning the importance of this area in second language learning and teaching, this study sets out a cross-sectional research that surveys development of request strategies by Iranian EFL learners at various levels of language proficiency. So the current study attempts to (1) uncover the relationship between students' level of language proficiency and complexity of request strategies and (2) find the possible difference in the type and frequency of the request strategies made by Iranian EFL students and native speakers of English based on social constraints of power and distance.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

The non-native participants in this study were ninety six BA senior and MA students majoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language and English Language Translation. BA students had studied English for at least three years at Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz and had passed several courses in grammar, reading, conversation, and writing up to advanced level. So it was assumed that they had enough proficiency in oral and written production.

MA students were studying at Center for Science and Research in Ahvaz at the time of study. They had already passed National MA Entrance Examination that focuses partly on subject specific courses and partly on English language proficiency. On the other hand, their MA courses required writing classroom papers, so they were supposed to enjoy a good command of language.

All these participants also sat for Nelson Language Proficiency Test (Fowler & Coe, 1976). They were then divided into three groups representing low, mid, and high language learners. Ten native Australian speakers of English also participated in the study via email. They were the employees of a company and none of them had received any university degree up to the time of data collection.

2.2 Instrument

The instruments used in this study were Nelson English language proficiency test (Fowler & Coe, 1976) and Discourse Completion Test (DCT). Nelson test included 50 multiple choice items covering grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. According to Fowler and Coe (1976), all the items in these tests have been carefully pre-tested and cover the most accurate means of measuring the general standard of English which forms the basis for specific skills such as composition writing and comprehension (p.7). Each item was assigned one point, and so the overall score was 50. The motivation for this test was that standard tests are actually very rare, and moreover, the existing TOEFL or IELTS tests in the market are commercial or non-standard, so Fowler and Coe's (1976) test was regarded as appropriate for the purpose of the study.

In DCT the speakers are given a scene or background information, such as what the previous speaker had said and the speakers' relationship with one another. Upon conducting the DCT in this study, twenty four situations were given to participants in written form based on relative power and social distance.

The power variable is treated as a ternary value, that is the hearer is either of lower status (+power), interlocutors are of equal status (=power), or the hearer is of higher status (-power). The distance variable is treated as a binary value, that is interlocutors either know each other (-distance) or they do not know each other (+distance). The combination of these two social variables results in six possible combinations, each realized in four situations which thus resulted in twenty four situations (See Appendix for a sample questionnaire that was devised). The following table demonstrates the six variable combinations and the 24 situations.

Insert Table 1 here

2.3 Procedure

First, the advanced test of Nelson (Fowler & Coe, 1976) was administrated to our 96 participants, and mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) of their scores were calculated. The mean score was 30.38 and the standard deviation was 5.31. The subjects whose scores fell between 0.5 SD (2.65) above or below M were considered as mid level; those whose score fell above or below this area were regarded as high and low learners respectively. So the subjects were divided into three groups: 25 students representing lower group, 43 mid level, and 28 high level students.

Next their pragmatic competence was challenged on the effective use of request strategies by means of DCT in which they had to write down what they would say in the given contexts. Data from the native speakers of English was also

gathered via E-mail. DCT was sent to 25 Australian native speakers with whom the researcher was in contact, but only ten were completed and returned.

To analyze the data gathered from the students and the native speakers of English, the particular coding scheme, Cross Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) was used. This coding scheme is a universally valid scale of directness previously empirically tested and successfully used by researchers (Lwanga-Lumu, 2002; Wouk, 2006).

The CCSARP schematized requesting strategies in three categories: directness level, internal modification, and external modification. The focus of this study was on directness level of requesting strategies which was classified as a nine-point scale: *Mood derivable*, *Performatives*, *Hedged performatives*, *Obligation statement*, *Want statement*, *Suggestory formulae*, *Query preparatory*, *Strong hints*, and *Mild hints*.

The analysis of the data took into consideration only the head acts which were isolated and classified based on the nine levels of directness. The data were then submitted to the SPSS (version 14.0) for frequency analysis and *chi square* test. The frequency analysis was conducted to identify the proportion and percentage of request strategies used by non-native and native speakers in six combinations. Then the data were classified into three main categories of direct, conventionally indirect, and hints, and again frequency of use of these three main categories of request strategies was calculated. *Chi square* test was performed in order to establish whether the differences in the frequency of strategies made by subjects were statistically significant.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Question One

In order to identify the type and frequency of request strategies made by learners, the data were analyzed and the frequency of occurrence and percentage of each category of strategies were calculated and tabulated in table 2. In order to find the relationship between language proficiency levels of Iranian learners and type and frequency of request strategies, the *Chi-square* test was applied. The result of this test is presented in table 3.

The findings of this study provide some evidence of correlation between learners' level of language proficiency and type of requesting. As illustrated in table 2, conventional indirectness was the most frequent strategy by the three groups of learners which was conveyed by only one indirect sub-strategy: *Query preparatory*. Almost exclusively this strategy constituted more than half of all requests produced by the learners.

Following Brown and Levinson (1987), higher levels of indirectness may result in higher levels of politeness. So direct requests appear to be inherently impolite and face-threatening because they intrude in the addressee's territory (p. 17). More specifically, Blum-Kulka (1985, cited in Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 19) suggests that in request at any rate, politeness and indirectness are linked for conventional indirectness requests but not necessarily in cases of non-conventional indirectness.

Hassall (2003) mentions formal simplicity as another factor that probably contributes to learners' use of conventionally indirect strategy type. This type of *Modal* question is structurally simple, consisting minimally of *Modal verb+ Agent+ Verb* (e.g. *May I borrow*). So learners are unlikely to be discouraged by considerations of formal complexity in selecting this strategy (p. 1918).

Consequently, Trosborg (1995) remarks on the ability of learner subjects from all proficiency groupings in her study to use the conventionally indirect strategies of politeness. Interestingly, the present finding confirms and extends that of Trosborg (1995). It shows that even the low learners are able consistently to select a polite, conventionally indirect strategy in the L2, when the L2 pragmalinguistic strategy form is formally simple and the same strategy exists in their first language.

In general, the results of this study indicate that with increasing proficiency level, learners use of direct requesting—mainly *Imperative*—decreases and at the same time conventionally and non-conventionally indirect types of requesting increase, while the lower level learners overuse direct requests and the high and mid groups overuse conventional indirectness.

The fact that Iranian lower proficiency learners use direct type of requesting more than other learners can be explained by the notion of *transferability*. Interlanguage and cross cultural pragmatic studies have provided ample evidence that L2 learners' pragmatic knowledge significantly influences their comprehension and production of pragmatic performance in the L2 (Kasper, 1992; Takahashi, 1996). A pragmalinguistic transfer is the influence of the learner's knowledge about the illocutionary force or politeness value assigned to particular linguistic form-functions in native language which, when mapped by learners into the perception and production of a similar situation in target language, sounds different to native speakers.

Since Persian speaking students use significantly more direct strategies compared to English speakers (Eslamirasekh, 1993), the low proficient learners negatively transfer their pragmalinguistic forms of directness levels in request realization. That is, where more indirectness is demanded in English, they prefer direct strategies. In other words, to

achieve requestive goals, the low proficient learners in the present study may resort to a familiar and easy form of requesting which has been experienced in their native language. The higher proficient learners, on the other hand, are found not to transfer the Persian request strategies and thus pose more indirect strategy types in their interlanguage request. So target language proficiency is positively related to pragmatic transfer.

Concerning the correlation between complexity of request strategies and level of language proficiency in EFL learners, the findings of present study, following other studies in this field (Harlow, 1990; Francis, 1997; Parent, 2002), support request development of learners from being direct to indirect and from being simple to complex. On the one hand, there is a positive correlation between the use of indirect strategy types and the English proficiency level. In other words, the higher proficiency group use more indirect strategy types (both conventionally and non-conventionally indirect strategy) than learners with lower language proficiency.

On the other hand, complexity of request strategies is explained in terms of direct strategies with forms that convey requestive force by purely syntactic means, such as grammatical mood or an explicit performative verb. Due to a strong concern with clarity, direct strategies may be considered as the most efficiently and easily expressed utterances. But in conventionally indirect strategies the relationship between the surface form of an utterance and its underlying purpose is not straightforward. Again, requestive hints, as mentioned by Weizman (1993), tend to lack clarity and the speaker exploits their opacity while getting the hearer to carry out the implicitly requested act (p. 71).

Other substantial differences include lower learners' reliance on *Imperative* strategy and other groups' tendencies for varieties of direct sub-strategies other than *Imperative* strategy. It is likely that higher proficiency learners may have attempted to use as many strategies as possible in order to compensate for their lack of L2 proficiency, resulting in the use of different types of requesting. In contrast, the lower proficiency learners are probably not sufficiently competent to use as wide a variety of strategies as the proficient learners and thus they mainly rely on *Imperative* strategy. In other words, linguistic ability correlates with strategy use. The greater use of *Imperative* as the most direct type of requesting by the low learners, as Harlow (1990) suggests, is also probably due to the linguistic deficiency or perhaps lack of attention to the rules of politeness (p. 335). They do not possess enough linguistic ability to employ other types of direct request such as *Want statement* as frequent as the higher groups. So, it may be claimed that learners with lower language proficiency show a particularly strong preference for *Imperative* because this sub-strategy, especially in elided form, does not demand high linguistic proficiency; it is formally very simple (e.g. *Give me the pen*).

Insert tables 2 & 3 here

3.2 Question Two

Addressing the first part of the second research question, concerning request strategies made by Iranian EFL learners and Australian native speakers of English, the study presents the results of comparison between native and non-native speakers. As indicated in table 4, all groups displayed a markedly high frequency of conventionally indirect strategy conveyed by *Preparatory* sub-strategy. However, while the mid and high groups displayed an inclination toward the use of this particular strategy, the native group was characterized by a more balanced use of conventional indirectness. The low group, on the hand, extraordinarily used the most direct type of requesting, that is, *Imperative*.

The considerable use of conventionally indirect strategy by both native and non-native speakers may be due to the influence of Western language usage with regard to speech act theory. Previous studies (Searle, 1969; Leech, 1983) have mentioned that indirect speech acts correlate with politeness in Western cultures because Western language usage is fundamentally associated with negative politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

The results of this study are consistent with the findings of previous studies such as Byon (2004). First, they support the view that advanced learners appear to develop greater sensitivity to the use of politeness strategies in requesting than is seen in native speakers. Second, the study supports Ellis's (1994) idea that even advanced learners do not acquire fully native-like ways of requesting.

On the one hand, the higher proficient learners in the present study employ more conventionally indirect strategies than native speakers. On the other hand, Brown and Levinson (1987) and Leech (1983) make a strong connection between the indirectness and politeness, arguing that a higher degree of indirectness shows more politeness. More specifically, Blum-kulka (1987, cited in Marti, 2006, p.1839) reports the most polite strategies in English are perceived to be conventionally indirect ones. Therefore, by greater use of conventionally indirect strategies, the higher proficient learners show greater sensitivity to the use of politeness strategies in requesting. Overusing conventionally indirect types of requesting by high level learners may have to do with the fact that high levels of grammatical competence do not ensure high levels of pragmatic competence. However, the majority of studies which have looked at the relationship between grammatical and pragmatic competence show that proficient learners seem to be better at using speech act strategies (Trosborg, 1995), and comprehending illocutionary force (Koike, 1989). In short, the literature presents two generally accepted claims about the relationship between grammatical and pragmatic competence: (1) grammar is not a

sufficient condition for pragmatic competence; however, (2) grammar is a necessary condition for pragmatic competence (Levinson, 1983; Koike, 1989).

The first claim is based on the observation that a learner already knows linguistic structures but has not yet learnt to use them as some pragmatic strategies (Bardovi-Harlig & Dornyei, 1998). The second claim is based on the observation that a learner knows the appropriate pragmatic strategy for a given context, but does not know how to realize it due to limited linguistic knowledge (Takahashi & Beebe, 1993). This fact might be a possible reason behind the overusing of direct strategies by the low learners in the present study.

As a matter of fact, the higher frequency of direct strategies among lower proficiency learners is probably a developmental stage where simpler and also more direct expressions are being used. The low proficiency learners use direct type of requesting because of lack of lexical and syntactic knowledge to produce an indirect request strategy which requires more complex structures.

This tendency among the low group results from L1 transfer since direct request is the common form of request speech act in Persian language (Eslamirasekh, 1993). So it is reasonable to claim that this strategy is used by the low learners automatically in English; since the two other request types used by native speakers of English are more grammatically complex, they may not be automatized in the learners' interlanguage. The low learners, then, seek to mitigate or avoid face-threatening behavior in ways they know best. In this regard Olshtain and Cohen (1991) mention that "second language learners' attempts to translate conventional routines specific to first language verbatim into the second language often result in miscommunication even if the results of their attempts are grammatically correct" (p. 155). A negative correlation is found between the likelihood of transfer and the level of proficiency. Advanced learners excel lower learners at identifying contexts where L1 speech act strategies could or could not be used.

It is important to note that in the present study non-conventionally indirect strategies are the least made request types in all groups. The underuse of this strategy by native speakers might be due to the fact that native speakers of English conceive of this type of requesting as being less polite than conventionally indirect strategy (Blum-Kulka, 1987 cited in Brown & Levinson, 1987). In line with this view, Weizman (1993) affirms that non-conventionally indirect request requires the hearer to deduce the speaker's intention, which can be a burden to the hearer. The highly inferential nature of this strategy may be the major cause for their being regarded as less polite than conventionally indirect strategies (p. 125).

Learners, specially the low proficiency group, are probably not sufficiently competent to use this type of requesting that is considered the most complex and indirect strategy. It is also important to mention that non-conventionally indirect requests require the addressee to compute the illocution from the interaction of the locution with its context (Ruzickova, 2007, p. 1177). Accordingly, it is believed by many researchers, learners acquire the use of utterances with opaque illocutionary meanings later in their pragmatic acquisition. High indirect pragmatic strategies such as hinting require high processing cost and, therefore, such strategies may be more difficult to acquire (Bouton, 1994; Kasper & Schmidt, 1996).

The findings of this study, on the other hand, contradict that of Weizman (1993) and Trosborg (1995) in which learners used non-conventionally indirect strategies more than native speakers. Weizman (1993) suggests that *Hints* have a highly "deniability potential". Accordingly, the overuse of *Hints* by the learners may result from their exploitation of the inferential nature of *Hints* in order to save their own face (p. 95).

Trosborg (1995) suggests that learners get no further than making a preliminary to a request because they are doubtful about how to phrase the actual request. The addressee, however, interprets the preliminary move as *Hints*, eliminating the need for the learner to make real request at all.

Insert tables 4 & 5 here

As for the second part of the second question- difference in the type and frequency of the request strategies made by Iranian EFL students and the native speakers of English based on social constrains of power and distance - the analysis of the distribution of the request strategy types in six combinations of situations is discussed here in the following parts:

3.2.1 Combination A

The analysis of the request strategies used by native and non-native speakers reveals that in combination A (=P +D), the use of conventionally indirect strategies plays a significant role as the most favored for both native speakers and EFL learners (See table 6 for the frequency of strategy types and table 7 showing the difference). According to Blum-Kulka et al. (1989 cited in Chen, 2007, p. 46), the level of directness of a request has strong correlation with the expectation of right and obligations between hearers and speakers. The greater the right of the speaker to ask and the greater the obligation of the hearer to comply with the request, the less motivation for the use of indirectness. Relative dominance also affects the level of indirectness. That is, the greater the speaker's dominance (power) to the addressee, the lower

the use of indirectness is expected. Additionally, as argued by Rue, Zhang, and Shin (2007), when the interlocutors do not know each other, there is a strong trend of employing conventionally indirect strategy type of requesting.

EFL learners display developmental patterns in using indirectness in these situations. In other words, a decline in direct request is observed with increasing proficiency. The main reason might be their sufficient pragmatic competence in relation to the effect of social power on choosing the contextually proper type of requesting. However, the higher proficiency learners in this study are more indirect than native speakers. Similarly, in the previous ILP studies (Byon, 2004) the advanced learners appear to develop a greater sensitivity to the use of politeness strategies in requesting than native speakers. That is, EFL learners sometimes experience communication breakdown due to over generalizing stereotypes of the target language culture. In this case, they tend to overuse conventionally indirect strategy which is considered as the most polite type of requesting.

Insert tables 6 & 7 here

3.2.2 Combination B

Considering the correlation between the level of indirectness of requesting and expectations of rights and obligations between the interlocutors, native speakers show less motivation for the use of indirectness. Since there is equal social status between the speaker and the hearer (e.g. friends), the requester is not endowed with a contracted right to make his/her request, just as the requestee who is by no means obligated to comply with it. Therefore, the request may be performed without abundance of politeness and as compared with addressing the familiar equal person; the native subjects seem to be more direct by employing direct sub-strategies as the second preferred type of requesting (See table 8 for frequency of strategy types and table 9 showing the difference).

On the contrary, EFL learners mainly rely on the conventional indirectness which implies the fact that they do not acquire the sociopragmatic knowledge necessary to perform appropriate request type which is contextually proper under the varying social distance. In other words, by keeping the same trend of in two combinations, EFL learners are not sensitive enough to the effect of social distance to utilize more variation in the types of request strategy.

It is likely that Iranian EFL learners are not taught how to perform appropriate speech act under varying situational features. So they may produce grammatically correct utterances, but inauthentic performance in terms of real language use.

Insert tables 8 & 9 here

3.2.3 Combination C

In addressing unfamiliar people in the lower position, non-native speakers are more direct than native speakers. While the native speakers use both direct and indirect strategies as the preferred type of requesting, EFL learners choose direct request as the preferred strategy. Among them, the low level learners show strong tendency towards the use of the most direct type of requesting, *Imperative*.

In general, both native subjects and EFL learners are more direct in comparison with the previous situations in which they are requesting someone with equal power. In situations of this type, the requester (e.g. customer, teacher) has authority over the requestee (e.g. waiter, student). The greater the right of the speaker to ask and the greater the obligation of the hearer to comply with the request, the greater the likelihood of licensing direct request. Regarding the social distance between the interlocutors, the speaker and the hearer do not know each other, and so there is a strong trend of employing conventionally indirect strategy type.

Obviously native speakers show sensitivity to both social power and social distance by utilizing more variation in the types of requesting. Thus, they use both direct and indirect strategies. Overuse of direct request might display learners' sensitivity to social power but their unawareness of the effect of social distance.

The overuse of *Imperative* by the low learners might suggest their insufficient pragmatic competence which makes them unable to use the necessary pragmalinguistic means to express an appropriate request. Moreover, the fact that the higher learners display closer performance to native speakers in terms of indirectness demonstrates a developmental pattern in their interlanguage request. This finding supports grammatical competence as a necessary condition for pragmatic competence (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999).

Insert tables 10 & 11 here

3.2.4 Combination D

In the realization of requests with familiar juniors in combination D, native speakers employ various direct strategies. They apply indirect strategy as the second preferred type of requesting. Unlike the previous combinations, the native speakers chose various types of direct sub-strategies such as *Imperative*, *Want statement*, and *Hedged performative* attesting to the fact that the speaker's (e.g., professor's) social status is higher than the addressee's (e.g., student's), and therefore, he has the right to make a request and the hearer has the obligation to obey. Accordingly, face-saving

strategies are not required and the choice of strategy tends to move toward directness. Like native speakers, the higher proficient learners showed productive and varied forms of direct sub-strategies whereas the low proficient group still focused on the most direct sub-strategy, *Imperative*. This implies that the higher learners show sensitivity to the change of social distance, and in this regard they have developed sufficient pragmatic competence to display target-like behavior. Accordingly, they realize different forms of direct request such as *Want statement*, *Hedged performative*, and *Imperative* (See table 12 for frequency of strategy types and table 13 showing the difference).

Insert tables 12& 13 here

3.2.5 Combination E

In this particular combination native speakers are prone to use *Preparatory* as the most appropriate way to realize requests in the situations in which the addressee has a higher power rank and there is little familiarity between the interlocutors. The next preferred formula of head acts for native speakers is *Strong hints*. In other words, they almost exclusively rely on indirectness.

According to the notion of dominance and obligation mentioned earlier, the speaker (e.g., student) has little right to ask the hearer (e.g., professor), and also the hearer has no obligation to comply with the request. On the other hand, since the interlocutors' social distance is greater, the greater use of indirectness is expected.

EFL learners do not display the native-like performance. They tend to choose various direct sub-strategies as the second preferred type of requesting. Thus, they are much more direct than their native

counterparts. This might be the reflection of lack of well-developed pragmatic competence in addressing someone in higher status. In other words, in spite of having a good command of grammatical competence, EFL learners show little evidence of situational variation (See table 14 for frequency of strategy types and table 15 showing the difference).

As most Iranian learners overgeneralize the use of direct requests, it appears that Iranian learners rely on their L1 sociopragmatic knowledge while speaking to unfamiliar superiors. In Eslamirasekh's (1993) study Persian speakers used significantly more direct strategies in all situations compared to English speakers. That is, the two cultures disagree on the specific directness level appropriate for a given situation (p.96).

However, the use of indirectness by the speakers of one language does not imply that they are more polite than the speakers of another language. According to Brown and Levinson's (1987) notion of positive politeness, "although the FTAs are performed with redressive action when adopting positive politeness, indirectness is not included among these strategies" (p.130). So Eslamirasekh (1993) concludes that the overuse of direct strategies does not imply that Persian speakers are less polite than English speakers because they use direct strategies by the use of mitigating elements (e.g., excuse me, dear friend, ...) (p. 97).

Insert tables 14& 15 here

3.2.6 Combination F

Native speakers place more variance in the choice of request strategies when requests are made toward the addressees who are familiar superiors. They use both direct and conventionally indirect strategies as preferred types of requesting. That is, by change of social distance between interlocutors native speakers change their level of directness.

Although the speaker (e.g. customer) has lower social dominance than the hearer (e.g. manager) and therefore there is motivation toward indirectness, the interlocutors know each other and there is strong trend of using direct type of requesting. EFL learners, however, do not utilize their requests in native-like way. They show a decline in the proportion of *Imperative* and a shift to conventional indirectness. Since learners are not sensitive enough to the effect of social distance, they do not display significant change in their choice of request strategies in addressing unfamiliar or familiar superiors. In other words, an anticipated trend toward greater directness does not take place with an increase in familiarity by the learners, especially with higher proficiency.

EFL learners do not notice social distance, so they are producing more indirect strategies in English which is traditionally described to them as being more polite in its request form. That is, it seems that EFL learners overgeneralize stereotypes of the target culture by focusing on conventionally indirect strategies. The fact that the low proficient learners in these situations have used more direct requests may not be considered as emanating from their well-developed pragmatic knowledge but the influence of their first language competence since the pragmatic trend of overusing directness by the low group has been observed in almost all situations (See table 16 for frequency of strategy types and table 17 showing the difference).

Insert tables 16 & 17 here

An ILP research to investigate the sociopragmatic features of Iranian EFL learners, this experiment contributes to the field of interlanguage pragmatics. By enhancing our understandings of the interlanguage features of the EFL learners in

English speech act of request, it is hoped that this study will illustrate the significance of interlanguage pragmatic studies among EFL educators and researchers, and stimulate their research interest in this fast growing discipline.

This type of study not only is useful in supplying teachers and material developers with native speakers' baseline data, but also indicates how and in what situations certain groups deviate from native speaker norms. It should therefore be a major goal to teach relevant general cultural schemata and to make non-native learners aware of differences between their own cultural schemata and those of native speakers.

In line with results of other studies (Alcon, 2005; Bardovi-Harlig & Taylor, 2003; Kasper & Rose, 1999), one of the major findings of the present research is that if teachers in foreign language classrooms provide L2 learners with relevant input, learners can develop appropriate request behaviors similar to those of native speakers. However, the present study merely investigated the directness level of speech act of request and did not look at the length of the requests produced, the use of politeness markers, or external and internal modifications of the request. Therefore, further studies are needed to unveil and explore these issues.

4. Conclusion

This study was designed to address the important issue of pragmatic development of request strategies in Iranian EFL learners in order to determine whether and to what extent interlanguage realization of the speech act of requesting by Iranian learners differs from request realization by native speakers in English.

The conventionally indirect strategy might be a universal method of making request toward the addressees (Ellis, 1994; Trosborg, 1995). The present study suggested a positive correlation between the use of indirect type of requesting and the learners' proficiency level, that is, Iranian EFL learners display developmental patterns of request strategies.

It was observed that the high proficient learners overused the conventional indirect strategy type. So in line with the findings of other interlanguage studies (Byon, 2004; Rue et al., 2007), in the present experiment the higher EFL learners appear to develop a greater sensitivity to the use of more polite strategies in requesting than what is seen in native speakers. This study also supports Ellis's (1994) view that even advanced learners do not acquire fully native-like ways of requesting.

In terms of the influence of the social variables, the findings of this research reveal that as far as social dominance is concerned, EFL learners display closer performance to native speakers. But in terms of social distance many differences are observed between the types of request strategy made by native speakers and Iranian learners. It seems that EFL learners have not acquired sufficient sociopragmatic knowledge to be able to display the proper social behavior. That is, they are not sensitive to both social power and social distance.

L2 learners may have access to the same range of speech acts and realizations as do native speakers, but they differ from native speakers in the strategies they choose. More importantly, L2 learners must be aware of second language socio-cultural constraints on speech acts in order to be pragmatically competent. Following Rose and Kasper (2001), we claim that although highly context-sensitive in selecting pragmatic strategies in their own language, learners may underdifferentiate such context variables as social distance and social power in L2.

It is important to note that, as predicted by politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), power relationship, social and psychological distance, and degree of imposition constrain communicative action universally, but learners' assessment of the weight and values of these universal context factors varies substantively from context to context as well as across speech communities. There is thus a strong indication that instructional intervention may be facilitative to, or even necessary for, the development of L2 pragmatic awareness.

Finally, it is hoped that research in second language pragmatics will not only improve our understanding of pragmatic development in speech act realization and of the nature of strategies but will also enable us to incorporate effective methods of teaching pragmatics in the EFL classrooms.

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Appendix: Discourse Competition Test (DCT)

NAME:

MAJOR:

NATIONALITY:

Please read the following descriptions of situations and write what you would say in each situation.

- 1-You are trying to study in your room and hear loud music coming from another student's room down the hall. You don't know the student, but you decide to ask him/her to turn the music down. What would you say?
- 2-You are at a record store with your best friend. There's a CD you really want to buy, but you don't have any money. How do you ask your friend to lend you money?
- 3-You are studying at home. Your younger brother opens the window and the cold wind blows right into your face and bothers you. You want to ask him to close it. What would you say?
- 4-You have bought a shirt from a big store for your father, but he doesn't like its color. You decide to go to the clothes store and ask the manager of the store to allow you to exchange the shirt. What would you say?
- 5-Your friend and you go to a restaurant to eat. You want to order and need to ask the waiter for the menu. What would you say?
- 6-You are writing your thesis and need to interview the president of a university whom you don't know. You know the president is very busy, but still want to ask her/him to spare one or two hours for your interview. What would you say?
- 7-For registration you need to fill out a couple of forms. You search all of your pockets and can not find a pen. You want to ask another student who is sitting next to you in the department hall. What would you say?
- 8-You were absent last Friday history class that you are enrolled in. So you decide to borrow your friend's notes to catch up with the rest of the class. What would you say to get this friend to lend you the notes?
- 9- You are a professor teaching a course in psychology. You want one of the students who is very competent and always contributes class discussion, to present a paper in a class a week earlier than scheduled. However, midterm exams are next week and she has a heavy course load. What would you say?
- 10- You really have to take this course in order to graduate, but you found that the course is already closed. So, you decide to ask the professor, whom you don't know, to allow you to take this course. What would you say to get this professor to permit you to participate in this course?
- 11-You have a paper due in one of your classes next week. However, you will be very busy this week and don't have any time to write it. You go to your professor's office to ask for more time to write the paper. How do you request an extension?
- 12-You are a librarian. Today a student is making a noise and disturbing other students. You don't know that student. However, you decide to ask the student to quiet down. What would you say?
- 13-A friend of yours from out of the town is paying you a visit. Both of you would like to take a photo together to remember this happy moment. You decide to ask a nearby person who is stranger to you, to do this favor. What would you say?

14-You and your friend are members of the college skiing club. You have just arrived at the mountain and see that your friend is applying sunscreen lotion. You want to use that lotion because you have forgotten to bring your own. How would you ask your friend?

15-Your English midterm exam is approaching, and you find that the date of the test is the same as that of your brother's wedding. You decide to ask the professor whom you don't know personally to rearrange another day especially for you to take this test. What would you say?

16-Your mother will be visiting from out of town and you want to pick her up at the airport. However, her flight arrives at 3:00 PM, but you have to work until 5:00 p.m. How do you ask your boss to let you out of work early?

17-You are a teacher. It's the beginning of the semester and you don't know the students yet. In class, the mobile phone of one of your students rings. You want to ask her/him to turn off the mobile phone. What would you say?

18- You are going to visit your friend, who lives in the college dormitory. You are on the campus, but you don't know where the room is? You are going to ask a student for the location of the dorm. How would you ask the student?

19-It's 7:00 a.m. and you want to go to work. You have to leave your daughter alone because her baby sitter is late. You decide to ask your friend, who lives in your neighborhood to take care of your little daughter in the meanwhile. What would you say?

20-You are the manager of a company. You are in a meeting with the other members of your company. You need to write some notes, but you realize that you don't have any paper. You turn to the person sitting next to you and you know her/him very well. What would you say?

21-Your class has just finished and you need a ride home. Your fellow classmate who was supposed to give you a ride is absent. As you come out of the class, you see an assistant professor. You decide to ask him/her to give a lift to you. What would you say?

22-You are the president of a university. Something is wrong with your computer. You have to finish some work which is due tomorrow. One of the students is very skillful in fixing computers. You don't know him/her. However, you want to ask him/her to fix your computer. What would you say?

23-You are applying for a scholarship, and you decide to ask a professor, who knows you very well as your academic advisor, to write a recommendation letter for you. What would you say to ask her/him to do this favor for you?

24-You are the owner of a big bookstore. It is the beginning of the semester, and you are very busy. Today you want to extend business hours by an hour. So, you decide to ask your clerk whom you know quite well, to stay after store hours. What would you say?

Table 1. Power and Social Distance Combinations

Combination	P	D	Situations
A	=	+	turning down the music; asking for a pen; taking a photo; asking for an address
B	=	-	lending some money; asking for notes; asking for lotion; taking care of a child
C	+	+	asking for a menu; asking to be quiet ; turning off the mobile phone; fixing the computer
D	+	-	losing the window; presenting the paper asking for some papers; staying more after store hours
E	-	+	asking for an interview; participating in the course; rearranging the exam's day; giving a lift
F	-	-	exchanging the shirt; asking for an extension; being out of work early; writing a letter

P: Power

D: Distance

Table 2. Frequency and Percentage of Request Strategies by Learners

Strategy	Low F (%)	Mid F (%)	High F (%)
Mood Derivable	181 (34.60)	238 (24.48)	119 (18.91)
Performative	0 (0)	7 (0.72)	7 (1.11)
Hedge	18 (3.44)	44 (4.52)	34 (5.40)
Obligation	2 (0.38)	12 (1.23)	1 (0.15)
Want Statement	16 (3.05)	47 (4.83)	41 (6.51)
Suggestory	1 (0.19)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Preparatory	290 (55.44)	570 (58.64)	396 (62.95)
Strong hints	15 (2.86)	52 (5.34)	28 (4.45)
Mild hints	0 (0)	2 (0.20)	3 (0.47)
Total	523	972	629

Table 3. Chi- Square Value of Learners' Request Strategies

	Value	df	Sig.
Chi Square	90.98	18	0.000

P <0.05

Critical Value=28.86

Table 4. Frequency and Percentage of Request Strategies by All Groups

Strategy	Low F (%)	Mid F (%)	High F (%)	Native F (%)
Mood Derivable	181 (34.60)	238 (24.48)	119 (18.91)	48 (21.23)
Performative	0 (0)	7 (0.72)	7 (1.11)	0 (0)
Hedge	18 (3.44)	44 (4.52)	34 (5.40)	5 (2.21)
Obligation	2 (0.38)	12 (1.23)	1 (0.15)	7 (3.09)
Want Statement	16 (3.05)	47 (4.83)	41 (6.51)	19 (8.40)
Suggestory	1 (0.19)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Preparatory	290 (55.44)	570 (58.64)	396 (62.95)	126 (55.75)
Strong hints	15 (2.86)	52 (5.34)	28 (4.45)	21 (9.29)
Mild hints	0 (0)	2 (0.20)	3 (0.47)	0 (0)
Total	523	972	629	226

Table 5. Chi-Square Value of Requests by All Groups

	Value	df	Sig.
Chi Square	125.40	27	0.000

P <0.05

Critical Value=40.11

Table 6. Frequency and Percentage of Strategies by All Groups in Combination A

Strategy	Low F (%)	Mid F (%)	High F (%)	Native F (%)
Mood	23 (24.21)	26 (15.66)	6 (5.45)	7 (17.50)
Performative	0 (0)	2 (1.20)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Hedge	6 (6.31)	8 (4.81)	3 (2.72)	0 (0)
Obligation	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Want	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (1.81)	0 (0)
Suggestory	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Preparatory	63 (66.31)	119 (71.68)	92 (83.63)	31 (77.50)
Strong hints	3 (3.15)	11 (6.62)	7 (6.36)	2 (5.00)
Mild hints	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Total	95	166	110	40

Table 7. Chi-Square Value of Combination A

	Value	df	Sig.
Chi Square	31.16	18	0.02

$P < 0.05$ Critical Value=28.86

Table 8. Frequency and Percentage of Strategies by All Groups in Combination B

Strategy	Low F (%)	Mid F (%)	High F (%)	Native F (%)
Mood	18 (19.56)	28 (16.76)	11 (10.28)	9 (23.07)
Performative	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Hedge	2 (2.17)	6 (3.59)	6 (5.60)	0 (0)
Obligation	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Want	2 (2.17)	4 (2.39)	4 (3.73)	4 (10.25)
Suggestory	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Query	67 (72.82)	118 (70.65)	79 (73.83)	19 (48.71)
Strong hint	3 (3.26)	11 (6.58)	7 (6.54)	7 (17.94)
Mild hint	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Total	92	167	107	39

Table 9. Chi-Square Value of Combination B

	Value	df	Sig.
Chi Square	29.60	15	0.01

$P < 0.05$ Critical Value=24.99

Table 10. Frequency and Percentage of Strategies by All Groups in Combination C

Strategy	low F (%)	Mid F (%)	High F (%)	Native F (%)
Mood	68 (74.72)	82 (49.69)	56 (51.85)	14 (36.84)
Performative	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Hedge	0 (0)	3 (1.81)	3 (2.77)	0 (0)
Obligation	1 (1.09)	5 (3.03)	1 (0.92)	3 (7.89)
Want	3 (3.29)	3 (1.81)	5 (4.62)	1 (2.63)
Suggestory	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Query	15 (16.48)	63 (38.18)	38 (35.18)	17 (44.73)
Strong hint	4 (4.39)	8 (4.84)	4 (3.70)	3 (7.89)
Mild hint	0 (0)	1 (0.60)	1 (0.92)	0 (0)
Total	91	165	108	38

Table 11. Chi-Square Value of Combination C

	Value	df	Sig.
Chi Square	37.41	21	0.01

$P < 0.05$ Critical Value=32.67

Table 12. Frequency and Percentage of Strategies by All Groups in Combination D

Strategy	low F (%)	Mid F (%)	High F (%)	Native F (%)
Mood	44 (53.01)	62 (37.80)	39 (36.44)	11 (29.72)
Performative	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Hedge	3 (3.61)	4 (2.43)	5 (4.67)	3 (8.10)
Obligation	1 (1.20)	4 (2.43)	0 (0)	2 (5.40)
Want	1 (1.20)	17 (10.36)	12 (11.21)	5 (13.51)
Suggestory	1 (1.20)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Query	31 (37.37)	62 (37.80)	41 (38.31)	15 (40.54)
Strong hint	2 (2.40)	14 (8.53)	9 (8.41)	1 (2.70)
Mild hint	0 (0)	1 (0.60)	1 (0.93)	0 (0)
Total	83	164	107	37

Table 13. Chi-Square Value of Combination D

	Value	df	Sig.
Chi Square	44.39	24	0.007

$P < 0.05$ Critical Value=36.41

Table 14. Frequency and Percentage of Strategies by All Groups in Combination E

Strategy	low F (%)	Mid F (%)	High F (%)	Natives F (%)
Mood	10 (12.82)	25 (17.12)	3 (3.26)	3 (9.00)
Performative	0 (0)	2 (1.36)	4 (4.34)	0 (0)
Hedge	4 (5.12)	10 (6.84)	13 (14.13)	0 (0)
Obligation	0 (0)	2 (1.36)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Want	5 (6.41)	4 (2.73)	8 (8.69)	1 (3.03)
Suggestory	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Query	57 (73.07)	97 (66.43)	62 (67.39)	24 (72.72)
Strong hint	2 (2.56)	6 (4.10)	1 (1.08)	5 (15.15)
Mild hint	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (1.08)	0 (0)
Total	78	146	92	33

Table 15. Chi-Square Value of Combination E

	Value	df	Sig.
Chi Square	48.56	24	0.002

$P < 0.05$ Critical Value=36.41

Table 16. Frequency and Percentage of Strategies by All Groups in Combination

Strategy	low F (%)	Mid F (%)	High F (%)	Natives F (%)
Mood	18 (21.42)	16 (9.75)	4 (3.80)	4 (10.64)
Performative	0 (0)	3 (1.82)	3 (2.85)	0 (0)
Hedge	3 (3.57)	13 (7.92)	4 (3.80)	2 (5.12)
Obligation	0 (0)	1 (0.60)	0 (0)	2 (5.12)
Want	5 (5.95)	19 (11.58)	10 (9.52)	8 (20.51)
Suggestory	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Query	57 (67.85)	112 (68.29)	84 (80.00)	20 (51.28)
Strong hint	1 (1.19)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3 (7.69)
Mild hint	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Total	84	164	105	39

Table 17. Chi-Square Value of Combination F

	Value	df	Sig.
Chi Square	74.77	21	0.000

$P < 0.05$ Critical Value=32.67