Full Length Research Paper

Gender, proficiency level, and social power in English requests by Indonesian EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study intends to find out whether gender, proficiency level, and social power of interlocutor influence the realization of English requests by Indonesian EFL learners. Twenty students (aged 16-17) that use English as a means of communication at school were involved in this study. They were asked to do role plays of four situations which frequently occur at school context. The requests used were then analyzed with Takahashi's request strategy types (1996). The results show that (1) male and female participants used different requests strategy types, (2) higher proficiency level participants used different request strategy types compared to participants with lower proficiency level, (3) Indonesian EFL learners used different request strategy types when they talk to interlocutor with higher social power.

Keywords: gender, proficiency level, social power, request

Introduction

This study is a part of bigger study which attempts to explore the realization of English requests by Indonesian students learning English in an international learning situation. The international learning learning situation provided by the school is characterized by the use of English as a medium of communication between students and teachers and among students (although in most part of the courses, the local language bahasa Indonesia is used as a medium of instruction). This is also supported by the existence of 'international' teachers who come from different parts of the world (America, Australia, the Phillipines, Croatia, etc.). Communications in English are more intense in this school than to communication in English in most private and public high schools in the country.

Because of this intense communication in English, almost all of the students are involved in various communication situations among the students and with the internation teachers. Problems of understanding could occasionally occur during these activities, aspecially when involving teachers from different cultural background. Students may have good English language competence, but they might encounter difficulties expressing their ideas pragmatically.

Pragmatic competence is the ability to communicate ones' intended message with all its nuances in any socio-cultural context and to interpret the message of your interlocutor as it was intended (Fraser, 2010). In other words, pragmatic competence is crucial to successful cross-cultural and interpersonal communication as it will facilitate speakers to convey their communicative intention and hearers to comprehend the message as it is intended by the speakers.

Speakers who do not use pragmatically appropriate language run the risk of appearing uncooperative at the least, or, more seriously, rude or insulting (Bardovi-Harlig et. al, 1991). Pragmatic failure refers to the inability to understand 'what is meant by what is said' (Thomas, 1983). In short, pragmatic failure occurs when the hearers do not understand the illocutionary act and feel offended. Since lack of pragmatic competence can lead to pragmatic failure and, more importantly, to complete communication breakdown (Amaya, 2008), learners of English, especially involved in cross cultural communication, need to improve their pragmatic knowledge and communicative competence.

Pragmatics deals with who speaks to whom and politeness as well. Since there is a tendency that Indonesians use different kinds of utterances when talking to those who are in the same age and those who are older, this study involved the power of interlocutor as one of the issues discussed besides other learner characteristics like gender and proficiency level. For example, if a speaker wanted to make a request to ask for something from a close friend, he/she would ask differently than if he/she were making a request to ask for something from a teacher or another authority figure.

Literature Review

Pragmatic competence and the speech act of request

A speech act of request is a prominent event in daily interactions in which the speaker usually manipulates appropriate linguistic forms to make requests according to certain situations. People produce requests for various reasons in everyday interactions either to obtain information or obtain certain action, to seek support, or to acquire assistance from others. In a request the speaker to a greater or lesser extent imposes on the addressee hence there is a need to put politeness strategies into action in order to mitigate the imposition.

The importance of producing polite request ability and having good perception towards utterances heard is unquestionable. If the requests used by the speaker are considered impolite by the hearer, the relationship between the speaker and the hearer can be jeopardized. The speaker may not receive what he or she wanted or needed and the hearer may feel offended. In short cross-cultural communication requires both speakers' sufficient mastery of the linguistic and pragmatic knowledge of the target language and hearers' pragmatic competence.

This pragmatic competence may vary among person to person. Gender, proficiency level, and social power are among factors that cause differences in the production English requests by non native speakers of English. A lot of studies have been conducted in some countries, e.g Jalilifar et.al, 2011 in Iran, Tabar (2012) in Turkey, Srisuruk, 2011 in Thailand. However, there is a limitation in literature regarding the influence of gender, proficiency level, and social power in English requests by Indonesian EFL learners, so this article tries to fill in this gap.

Literature provides numerous studies on production of requests by non native speakers of English like Jordanian EFL learners (Al-Momani, 2009), Thai EFL learners (Srisuruk, 2011), Iranian and Turkish EFL learners (Tabar, 2012), and Chinese EFL learners (Han, 2013) but the number of studies which show the use of requests strategy by Indonesian learners of English is still limited (e.g. Sofwan and Rusmi, 2011).

Yule (1996) said that pragmatics is the study of speaker meaning and contextual meaning. Hymes (1972) said that competence is the most general term for the capabilities of a person. So, pragmatic competence is the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context (Thomas, 1983). In Interlanguage Pragmatics -the study of nonnative speakers' use and acquisition of L2 pragmatic knowledge (Kasper, 1996), pragmatic competence is the ability of a non native speaker to speak, listen and understand the meaning of what is happening in a social interaction. According to Searle's classification (1976) a request is categorized as a "directive" speech act whereby a speaker (requester) conveys to a hearer (requestee) that he/she wants the requestee to perform an act, which is for the benefit of the speaker.

Request frameworks

On the basis of empirical work on requests in different languages, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) launched the term CCSARP (Cross Cultural Study of Speech Act Realization Patterns) and subdivided the three levels of directness into nine distinct sub-levels called 'strategy types' that together form a scale of indirectness.

The nine strategy types proposed by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) are: (1) *Mood derivable*, the grammatical mood of the verb in the utterance marks its illocutionary force as a request, e.g "Clean up this mess" ; (2) *Explicit performatives*, the illocutionary force of the utterance is explicitly named by the speakers, e.g "I'm asking you not to park the car here" ; (3) *Hedged performative*, utterances embedding the naming of the illocutionary force, e.g "I would like you to give your lecture a week earlier" ; (4) *Locution derivable*, the illocutionary point is directly derivable from the semantic meaning of the locution, e.g "Madam, you'll have to move your car" ; (5) *Scope stating*, the utterance expresses the speaker's intentions, desire or feeling the fact that the hearer do X, e.g "I really wish you'd stop bothering me" ; (6) *Language specific suggestory formula*, the sentence contains a suggestion to X, e.g "So, why don't you come and clear up the the mess you made last night?" ; (7) *Reference to preparatory conditions*, utterance contains reference to preparatory conditions (e.g. ability or willingness, the possibility of the act being performed) as conventionalized in any specific language, e.g "Could you clear up the kitchen, please?" ; (8) *Strong hints*, utterance contains partial reference to object or to elements needed for the implementation of the act (directly pragmatically implying the act), e.g "You've left this kitchen in a right mess" ; (9) *Mild hints*, utterances that make no reference to the request proper (or any of its elements) but are interpretable through the context as requests (indirectly pragmatically implying the act), e.g "I'm a nun (in response to the persistent boy who keep pestering her on the street).

Takahashi (1996) then developed the framework of request by adding several types on preparatory expression: preparatory questions (i.e., questions concerning the hearer's will, ability, or possibility to perform a desired action), e.g "could you lend me a pen" ; permission questions, e.g "may I borrow a pen" ; mitigated-preparatory (i.e., query preparatory expressions embedded within another clause), e.g "I'm wondering if you could lend me a pen" ; and mitigated-wants (i.e., statements of want in hypothetical situations), e.g "I'd appreciate it if you could lend me a pen".

Table 1: Request Strategy Types (Takahashi, 1996)

No	Request Strategy Types	Examples
1	Mood derivable	"Clean up this mess"
2	Explicit performatives	"I'm asking you not to park the car here"
3	Hedged performative	"I would like you to give your lecture a week earlier"
4	Locution derivable	"Madam, you'll have to move your car"
5	Scope stating	"I really wish you'd stop bothering me"
6	Language specific suggestory fomula	"So, why don't you come and clear up the mess you made last night?"
7	Preparatory questions	"Could you lend me a pen"
8	Permission questions	"May I borrow a pen"
9	Mitigated-preparatory	"I'm wondering if you could lend me a pen"
10	Mitigated-wants	"I'd appreciate it if you could lend me a pen"
11	Strong hints	"You've left this kitchen in a right mess"
12	Mild hints	"I'm a nun (in response to the persistent boy who keep pestering her on the street).

Method

The requests analyzed were taken from a set of role play activities. These role plays were chosen because it is an effective tool elicitate students' realization of request in various communication settings (Trosborg, 1996). Four coommunication situations were designed to attract students producing requests in English. The four situational setting are: first, *asking a classmate to move his or her bag;* second, *asking a teacher to repeat his or her lesson*; third, *asking a classmate to lend his or her biology notes; and four*th, *asking a teacher to extend a due date of paper submission.*

Twelve grade students an international base high school in Bandar Lampung, Indonesia, were recruited as the participants for this study. The participants took part in the role plays. Their interactions were recorded using mobile phones, then were transcribed and analyzed based on requests strategy types proposed by Takahashi (1996). Gender, proficiency, and social power, variables assumed to influence the production of request strategy were then analyzed throughout the study.

Result and Discussion

Gender Effect

The following table shows the realization og requests by the partcipants based on their genders.

Table 2: The realization of requests based on gender

Level of Directness	No	Request Strategy Types	Group			
			Male No.	Percent	Female No.	Percent
Direct utterances	1	Mood derivable	9	18.75	2	6.25
	2	Explicit performatives	0	0	0	0
	3	Hedged performative	0	0	0	0
	4	Locution derivable	1	2.08	0	0
	5	Scope stating	3	6.25	0	0
Conventional indirect utterances	6	Language specific suggestory formula	0	0	1	3.12
	7	Preparatory questions	13	27.08	9	28.12
	8	Permission questions	11	22.91	7	21.87
	9	Mitigated-preparatory	0	0	1	3.12
	10	Mitigated-wants	1	2.08	2	6.25
Non-conventional indirect utterances	11	Strong hints	8	16.67	7	21.87
	12	Mild hints	2	4.17	3	9.37
Total			48		32	

Based on the levels of directness, male students used direct utterances more than female students. This finding is similar to what was found by Tabar (2012) in his study which also involved EFL learners. He reported that females use less direct strategies in Persian in comparison with males.

There were four situations in the role play and male tend to use more direct request strategy type than female in three situations. When asking a friend to move his/her bag, male tended to use direct requests like "take your bag" or "I want you to move your bag" while female tended to use indirect requests like "Could you take your bag from my chair" or "why don't you move your bag closer". When asking a teacher to repeat a lesson, male tended to use direct requests like "I want you to repeat that again" or "Miss repeat please" while female tended to use indirect requests like "Could you explain it once more?" or "Would you mind explaining again". When asking a note from a classmate, male tended to use direct strategies like "Lend me your biology notes please" while female tended to use indirect strategies like "I'm wondering if you could lend me your notes" or "do have notes for the next biology test?".

However, it was found that in situation where speakers (students) had guilty feeling or in weak position, like when they forgot their paper and really hoped their teacher would grant their wish to submit it on the other day, both genders tended to use the same type of request, indirect request.

That men and women were physically different is obvious. Their brain functions were different but in terms of linguistics men and women might not be different. That men and women are different in using language have been shown by many studies. Linguists said that the language characteristic of them can be observed and be distinguished. The correlation between language and gender have been investigated by some linguists like Jesperson (1922) and Lakoff (1975). Both Jesperson and Lakoff said that men were more direct than women. Women tended to say what they want implicitly. The data found in the three situations support these studies since the data show that male students used direct utterances more than female.

Unlike in the three situations, when asking a teacher's permission to submit paper on the next day, males did not use direct utterances as they used in the other situations. All males and females used both non-conventional indirect utterances and hints, although in a particular situation, men also used indirect utterances to mitigate their request.

Proficiency level effect

The following table shows the realization on requests by the participants based on thier level of proficiency.

Table 3: The realization of request based on proficiency level

Level of Directness	No	Request Strategy Types	Group			
			Low No.	Percent	High No.	Percent
Direct utterances	1	Mood derivable	8	18.18	3	8.83
	2	Explicit performatives	0	0	0	0
	3	Hedged performative	0	0	0	0
	4	Locution derivable	0	0	1	2.78
	5	Scope stating	1	2.27	2	5.55
Conventional indirect utterances	6	Language specific suggestory formula	0	0	1	2.78
	7	Preparatory questions	6	13.64	16	44.44
	8	Permission questions	13	29.54	5	13,89
	9	Mitigated-preparatory	0	0	1	2.78
	10	Mitigated-wants	0	0	3	8.33
Non-conventional indirect utterances	11	Strong hints	2	4.54	3	8.33
	12	Mild hints	4	9.09	1	2.78
Total			44 Requests		36 Requests	

In terms of proficiency level, the lower proficiency students used direct utterances more than higher proficiency students. This finding is similar to a study involving Iranian EFL learners (Jalilifar et.al, 2011). In the study the EFL learners with higher proficiency displayed overuse of indirect type of requesting whereas the lower proficiency EFL learners overused direct request strategy types.

The lack of grammatical knowledge turns to be the main reason why the lower proficiency students used direct utterances more than higher proficiency students and the higher proficiency students used indirect utterances more than the lower proficiency students.

English direct utterance like "move your bag" has similar pattern to Indonesian direct utterance "pindahkan tasmu". On the other hand, since they have more knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, the higher proficiency students tended to add their requests with other clause that made their requests indirect. For the same situation a higher proficiency student said "I'm wondering if you could lend me your notes" while a lower proficiency student used simpler request like "can I borrow your science notes?"

Furthermore, the most used request strategy by the learners with higher proficiency level was preparatory questions while the most used request strategy type by

the learners with lower proficiency level was permission question. The higher proficiency learners preferred to use requests that refer to the hearer while the lower proficiency learners tended to use requests that refer to themselves as speakers. For example, in the situation where a student asked a teacher's permission to submit a paper on the following day, the higher proficiency learner expressed "would you mind submit it tomorrow".

Social power of interlocutor effect

The following table summarizes the realization of request produced by the participants based on the interlocutors' social power.

Table 4: The realization of request based on the interlocutor's social power

Level of Directness	No	Requests Strategy Types	Group =P No.	Percent	+P No.	Percent
Direct utterances	1	Mood derivable	9	22.5	2	5
	2	Explicit performatives	0	0	0	0
	3	Hedged performative	0	0	0	0
	4	Locution derivable	1	2.5	0	0
	5	Scope stating	2	5	1	2.5
Conventional indirect utterances	6	Language specific suggestory formula	1	2.5	0	0
	7	Preparatory questions	6	15	16	40
	8	Permission questions	8	20	10	25
	9	Mitigated-preparatory	1	2.5	0	0
	10	Mitigated-wants	1	2.5	2	5
Non-conventional indirect utterances	11	Strong hints	8	20	7	17.5
	12	Mild hints	3	7.5	2	5
Total			40 Requests		40 Requests	

This study shows that social power (P) influences the requests realized by the EFL learners. When the interlocutor had higher social power (+P), the students tended to use conventional indirect utterances. For example, when students wanted to ask a teacher to repeat a lesson they used requests type like "could you explain once more?" On the other hand, when the social power of interlocutor was equal (=P), the students tended to use direct and non conventional utterances.

To sum up gender, proficiency level, and social power (P) influence the request strategy types realized by EFL learners at an international base high school in Bandar Lampung City Indonesia. However, listeners' positive perception is needed in order to counter any possible utterances produced by the speakers. The discussion about to what extend the perception of native speakers differ to non native speakers is elaborated in the following section.

Conclusion

There are several types of utterances that can be used to get a person to perform an action or to ask a hearer to do a speaker's intention which is called by request strategy types. Based on taxonomies of requests developed by Takahashi (1996), in school context, the EFL learners at an international base high school in Bandar Lampung City Indonesia used merely 10 out of 12 request strategy types. In other previous studies which involved variety of context, all types of requests appeared. So context is the reason why not all types of request were applied in a communication.

The data showed some factors influence the realization of requests. First, different genders used different types of request strategy. Males tended to use direct requests while females tended to use indirect requests. Males tended to use more logical thinking in making request so they just think how to send a clear message to the interlocutor. On the contrary, females tended to use their feeling in making requests. They did not want to sound imposing their intention and wanted to sound polite. In other words, the females combined the need for clarity and the need to avoid coerciveness while the males merely focused on the need for clarity. However, when both genders have guilty feeling, in weak position, or have perception that the hearer would not perform an action if they use direct utterances, they tend to use the same type of request, indirect utterances. Second, students who have different proficiency levels used different request strategy types.

Third, the requests addressed to interlocutor who had higher power, teacher (+P), are relatively different from the requests addressed to interlocutor who has equal power, classmate (P=). To sum up gender, proficiency level, the power of interlocutor and perception of speaker influence the realization of request by EFL learners in school context.

This study cannot be generalized as Indonesian EFL learners' request since it only involved one class of students and limited the topic to only in school context. Further this study only involved students at school that use English as means of communication. Other cross sectional and longitudinal studies need to be carried out to obtain empirical evidence to answer questions like what requests applied by students in school that does not use English as a means of communication, would the requests applied similar to the finding shown in this study, and what requests applied by people in Indonesia in terms of more complex context.

The goal of teaching practice in EFL setting in Indonesia is to help students to communicate in the target language. In order to meet the requirement, teachers are widely suggested to focus not only on improving grammatical knowledge and widening vocabulary but also on other beneficial aspects of language like pragmatics competence in order to communicate properly in the right situation especially in school context.

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