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Assessing the Impact of Individual Differences in the Production of Speech Act of Requests in Institutional Discourse

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Abstract

This paper, anchored in interlanguage pragmatics, studied the effects of individual differences such as language proficiency, gender, and age on the production of speech act of requests in institutional discourse. To this end, 187 Persian EFL university students at three academic levels (undergraduates, postgraduates and PhD students) participated in this study. Triangulation was undertaken to collect and analyze the data in three phases. In phase one, through convenience sampling, the Oxford Placement Test was employed to identify the proficiency level of the students. In phase two, a three way ANOVA between subject analyses showed quantitative differences among the three groups. In the third phase, in-depth qualitative analyses of test items and retrospective verbal reports (RVRs) revealed developmental information about the cognitive and individual traits followed in pragmatic awareness. Results showed that sociocultural, socio-psychological, and socio-affective aspects of the discourse situations influenced not only students' pragmalinguistic and sociolinguistic choices but also their negotiation of lexical and grammatical forms in planning the requests. One significant implication is that not only linguistic competence is essential for the EFL learner, acquiring pragmatic competence is also important.

Keywords: Individual difference, Institutional discourse, Interlanguage pragmatics, Requests, Speech acts

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1. Introduction

In Interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) Kasper & Rose (2002) focus on language use among learners in EFL contexts. The focus is on the ways nonnative speakers' (NNSs) pragmalinguistic (i.e., linguistic knowledge for realizing and understanding the speaker) and sociopragmatic knowledge (i.e., social perceptions underlying participants' interpretation and performance of communicative action) differ from that of native speakers (NSs) and that of learners with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996). In addition, there has been growing interest in examining the effect of individual differences (IDs) on developing pragmatic competence in a second language (Taguchi, 2013). Research has found that these multi-component traits are distinct constructs but are not discrete from each other.

This study, anchored in the field of interlanguage pragmatics, explored L2 speakers pragmatic development and pragmatic awareness at different educational levels in relation to their IDs like language proficiency, gender, and age on the speech act of requests in institutional discourse. The special interest in institutional discourse is purely on how L2 learners' pragmatic development is portrayed on their pragmatic behavior that reflects one's linguistic competence and performance.

Pragmatic development is the manifestation of one's personality and character, because the interaction that takes place between the faculty and the student depends largely on how the EFL student comprehends the asymmetrical situations and selects the language to address the interlocutor. Therefore, the main focus of this study is (a) to reveal what EFL learners *know* and what they can *do* under communicative conditions, (b) to identify what psycholinguistic and cognitive processes are involved in L2 acquisition, (c) to find out what motivates individual learner selectivity, and how selectivity and processes interact in the performance of pragmatic tasks.

The present study was motivated by gaps in previous research and the lack of well-organized academic evidences in the Iranian context centering on how EFL students IDs can affect their ILP and their relationships and intentions with their addressees.

Unfortunately, limited attempts have been made to study the impact of IDs in pragmatics in institutional discourse as factors that might enable us to specify the nature of the input that best suits EFL learners' comprehension, and to understand the nature of the output that they produce at a particular stage of learning. Pragmatics as a separate course

has so far not been explicitly included in the Iranian curriculum and learners in this EFL environment lack opportunities and have no potential for interaction in the L2; the target language (TL) they encounter is limited either to textbooks, classrooms, or the media. Very often, they have no clear explanations as to why L2 speakers commonly use the language as they do, why certain meanings are conveyed differently in the L2, and how underlying L2 ideologies and shared cultural values influence L2 speakers' pragmatic behavior. The problem arises only when intentional deviations from TL pragmatic norms are observed.

2. Literature Review

At universities, institutional discourse, which is purely academic in structure, refers to the important communicative interaction that takes place between students and faculty in colleges and universities (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 2005). It is the type of discourse, which is authentic and consequential, and at the same time can be compared to many other samples taken from the same setting. This type of interaction involves an orientation by at least one of the participants to some core goal, task or identity (or set of them) conventionally associated with the institution in question (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 2005). They believed that very often, the status-appropriate input is limited or absent from the status-unequal encounters and rules of interaction between the faculty and the student.

Evidently, language learners who have the opportunity to study in the target language community have potentially extensive opportunities to access authentic pragmatic input and use of the target language. However, in an EFL context to what extent their use of the target language become more target-like remains largely unanswered. Therefore, there is need for a developmental study (Haji Maibodi, Fazilatfar, Allami, 2016).

Requests, as pre-events and one of the most face-threatening speech acts (Barron, 2003; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; Eslami-Rasek, 2005; Felix-Brasdefer, 2007; Jalilifar, 2009; Shively & Cohen, 2008, to name a few), is most frequently used in human interactions. Many people view request as a panel to enhance their social relationships. Essentially, requests vary from culture to culture and different cultures have a different view of what is considered a polite request in much the same way they have a different view of the value of contextual factors such as participants' social status and social distance as well as the perception of other factors like imposition, obligation and right. In order to put imposition on the hearer, the speaker may resort to a wide range of linguistic

expressions to pose his/her request appropriately and in accordance with the expected norms of interaction in his/her culture. Thus, interlocutors tend to assess the interaction and direct their attention to the perceptions of polite and impolite behavior (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2008; Eslami-Rasek, 2005; Hassall, 2001; Rose, 2000; Takahashi, 2001; Trosborg, 1995; Woodfield & Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2010) in line with such factors as social distance, power of the interlocutors, and the degree of imposition.

In the field of ILP, numerous cross-sectional studies have compared L2 pragmatic performance across different proficiency levels determined by standardized exams, grade level, or length of formal study (Bardovi-Harlig & Bastos, 2011; Félix-Brasdefer, 2007; Taguchi, 2013; Trosborg, 1995). However, these studies revealed that high level of proficiency generally leads to better pragmatic performance but it does not guarantee a native-like performance. Moreover, gender identity (Holmes, 2008) in all speech communities is one's social identification and ways of speaking is not identified with every individual man or woman but rather are associated with the class of women or the class of men in a given society. In addition, Kasper and Rose (2002) noted that the issue of age is not treated as a neuropsychological trait but as a social category. They believed that the status conferred to different age groups in the host society could have consequences for learners to develop their L2 pragmatic ability.

Taking these perceptions, the current study investigated the following research questions:

1. Is there any significant relationship between ID factors (e.g., language proficiency, gender, and age) on the production of written discourse completion tasks (WDCTs) for speech act situations of requests in the three groups (low intermediate, upper intermediate, and advanced level) of students when interacting in an unequal status?
2. Are there developmental differences among the three groups in the production of speech act of requests in institutional discourse?

3. Methodology

3.1. Design and Context of Study

This study, anchored in the field of ILP, took a speech-act based approach to investigate the impact of IDs, like language proficiency, age, and gender on the Iranian

EFL learner's ILP to perceive and utilize the speech acts of requests in institutional discourse. Therefore, triangulation was undertaken and data analysis centered on quantitative and qualitative data.

3.2. Participants

187 Persian-speaking EFL university students from three different academic levels—undergraduates, postgraduates, PhD were found eligible for this study. They were specializing in English Translation, English Literature, and Teaching English as a Foreign Language and had undergone the basics of English language skills (60 units) as university courses. They were from both genders and their ages ranged from 20 to 35 years. Due to time limits and administrative constraints, participants were selected only from two universities in Isfahan and Yazd making this study a sample of convenience. Demographic information of the students showed that participants had not been to an English speaking country like the U.S.A, U.K or Australia for at least three months. Neither did they have native speakers (NS) as teachers nor had specific instructions in pragmatics or speech acts before or during this study.

3.3. Instruments

For the present research, three major data collection instruments were employed: a general proficiency test—Oxford Placement Test (OPT), the written discourse completion tasks (WDCTs), and retrospective verbal reports (RVRs). The data were collected in three phases.

3.3.1. Data Collection Procedures

In phase one, the proficiency levels of the participants were evaluated through the OPT test. This test was administered with a focus on the structure and vocabulary in two formats—one in the form of five cloze tests and the other in a multiple-choice format. The total number of items was about 60 items. The time allotted was 30 minutes. Although the OPT is a standard measurement, the KR-21 formula, the reliability index for the OPT in the present study was found to be 0.85, which is considered as an acceptable level of reliability.

In phase two, WDCTs was administered. The WDCT is a pragmatics instrument that aims to elicit experimental (simulated) speech-act data under controlled conditions to

measure pragmalinguistic or sociopragmatic knowledge in non-interactive form. It requires students to read a written description of a social situation and asks them to write what they would say in that situation. The WDCTs for this study had five power asymmetrical request situations and represented an area of institutional discourse with the aim that the students may encounter outside the classroom. The scenarios took into account the three-sociopragmatic variables of social power (P), social distance (D) and degree of imposition (R). Such power-asymmetrical social situations are more demanding. Because of the addressee's institutionalized role, the power rests on the addressee rather than the speaker, thus, the likelihood of compliance is not very high. These situations generally require greater pragmatic skills that are particularly difficult for non-native speakers (NNSs). The one enhanced prompt was introduced with the intention of knowing whether providing such prompts with the kind of social and contextual information would result in differences in the responses given by NNSs. Hence, the response space for the enhanced prompt was extended in order to encourage as full a response as possible. The Cronbach alpha of the WDCTs in this study was .78. Table 1 shows the list of situations of requests.

Table 1.

List of Situations of Requests

Situations of requests
Recorrecting paper
Computer to be repaired
Borrowing book
Asking for interview
Asking for extension for term project (enhanced prompt)

Students' performance on the WDCTs was holistically analyzed for grammar, lexicon, and the correct application of the speech acts. In line with Ellis and Yuan (2004), data were also analyzed according to each of the four aspects of the pragmatic task:

- Understanding the prompt,
- Planning the organization of the writing,
- Planning the content,
- Language planning

Appropriateness, according to Taguchi (2006), "should be evaluated quantitatively by NS raters' rating learner performance, as well as qualitatively by identifying specific linguistic expressions used to perform the speech acts" (p. 513). Hence, three experienced NS, all EFL university lecturers who had a full command of both Persian and English were selected as evaluators. They were experienced in using holistic assessment guidelines to evaluate L2 learner production (i.e. writing) and were asked to rate each situation and then explain their rating decisions. Taguchi (2011) believed that "Pragmatics involves linguistic behaviors that are reflective of values and norms of a given culture and addresses a wide range of elements - forms, functions, contexts, social relationships, and cultural conventions" (p. 455). The Cronbach alpha/inter-rater reliability was .92.

The rating scale adapted from Taguchi (2006) was based on a 5-point scale. Raters were asked to give two scores for each production, one for content (sociopragmatic: awareness of the consequences of their own pragmatic language choice) and the other for form (pragmalinguistic: competence to use community norms) on a scale of 1-10 (Excellent: 9-10, Good: 7-8, Fair: 5-6, Poor: 3-4, Very poor: 1-2). Table 2 provides the rating scale.

Table 2.

Appropriateness Rating Scale for the Pragmatic Tasks as developed by Taguchi (2006)

Ratings	Descriptors
Excellent	Expressions are fully appropriate for the situation.
(9-10)	No or almost no grammatical and discourse errors
Good	Expressions are mostly appropriate.
(7-8)	Very few grammatical and discourse errors.
Fair	Expressions are only somewhat appropriate.
(5-6)	Grammatical and discourse errors are noticeable, but they do not interfere with appropriateness.
Poor	Due to the interference from grammatical and discourse errors, appropriateness is
(3-4)	difficult to determine
Very poor	Expressions are very difficult or too little to understand. There is no evidence that
(1-2)	the intended speech acts are performed.
0	No performance

According to Golato (2003), WDCTs are metapragmatic in that, they explicitly require participants to articulate what they believe would be situationally appropriate within possible, yet imaginary interactional settings. Therefore, findings from the study were not treated as those deriving from actual discourse, but rather related to what speakers tend to view as being pragmatically appropriate linguistic behavior without a hearer response. No particular time limit was given and the whole investigation was carried out only in English, and no translations were made to Persian.

In phase three, retrospective verbal reports were administered to investigate the intentional selection of the language of thought for planning and executing a request in asymmetrical situations.

3.4. Data Analysis Procedures

Initially, in order to answer the first research question, the WDCTs were quantitatively analyzed to see whether a particular learner feature is due to lack of knowledge with regard to situational variation or whether students' responses were influenced by their developmental learner characteristics.

In order to answer the second research question, in-depth qualitative analysis of students' performance on the test items (WDCTs) was undertaken and percentage scores were calculated for each of the test items. Special focus was on the amount of information, formality, directness, and politeness used in the speech act situations. Since the speech act situations concentrated only on the discourse that normally takes place between the faculty and the students, retrospective verbal reports (RVRs) helped not only in the analysis of the requests but also on the thoughts they had while they were completing the tasks (Haji Maibodi et al., 2016).

4. Results

4.1. Results of Phase 1

Based on the scores obtained on the OPT, 187 students from three academic levels—undergraduates (N=73), postgraduates (N=82) and PhD (N=32) were found to be eligible and divided to three proficiency levels—low intermediate, upper intermediate and advanced—according to the standards set by the test itself. Table 3 demonstrates the OPT scores of the participants.

Table 3.

Demographic Background of Participants (N=187)

Group	N	Males	Females	Age	Proficiency levels	OPT scores
Undergraduates	73	37	36	20-25	Lower intermediate	37-47
Postgraduates	82	47	35	25-30	Upper intermediate	48-54
PhD	32	19	13	30-35	Advanced proficiency	55-60

4.2. Results of Phase 2

Table 4 displays the quantitative analysis of the WDTCs through a three-way between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) according to language proficiency, age and gender.

Table 4.

Three-way Between-Subjects Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) according to Language Proficiency, Age and Gender

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects						
Dependent Variable: WDCT						
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	*df*	Mean Square	*F*	*Sig.*	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	22459.129[a]	11	2041.739	46.719	.000	.746
Intercept	474095.445	1	474095.445	10848.138	.000	.984
proficiency	345.212	2	172.606	3.950	.021	.043
age	2467.278	2	1233.639	28.228	.000	.644
gender	1949.726	1	1949.726	44.613	.000	.603
proficiency * age	19.012	1	19.012	.435	.510	.002
proficiency * gender	64.676	2	32.338	.740	.479	.008
age * gender	649.840	2	324.920	7.435	.001	.078
proficiency * age * gender	128.899	1	128.899	2.949	.088	.017
Error	7648.013	175	43.703			
Total	859863.250	187				
Corrected Total	30107.142	186				
a. R Squared = .746 (Adjusted R Squared = .730)						

A three way between groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore the effect of age, gender, and proficiency level on pragmatic development of EFL learners, using WCDTs test. The participants in this study were divided into three groups according to age (group 1: 20-25; group 2: 26-30; group 3: 31-35). The results showed that there was no interaction between proficiency, age, and gender, F (1, 175) = 2.949, p = 0.088. However, proficiency had a significant effect on the performance of the participants F (2, 175) = 3.95, p = 0.021. The effect size of proficiency was small (partial eta squared = .043). In the same vein, age had a significant effect on the performance of the participants F (2, 175) = 28.228, p = 0.000. The effect size for age was large (partial eta squared = 0.644). Moreover, gender had a statistically significant effect on the performance of the EFL learners F (1, 175) = 44.613, p = 0.000. The effect size for gender was also large (partial eta squared = 0.603). Therefore, based on the obtained results the null hypothesis proposed by the research question was rejected. It seems the numerical findings are statistically significant.

4.2. Results of Phase 3

In order to answer the second research question qualitative analysis was undertaken. This was accompanied with in-depth analysis of test items through the collection of students' retrospective verbal reports. Initially, investigations centered on the analysis of request head acts and lexical and syntactic modifiers. Internal modifiers—to soften the imposition and external modifiers like reasons or explanations, preparators, and apologies added to the head act. To provide the possibility of comparison between the groups, the frequencies were converted into percentages

According to Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989), the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) largely maintains the three major levels of request types of varying levels of directness: Direct, conventional-indirect, and non-conventional indirect. Direct requests have imperatives, performatives (hedged and explicit), obligations, and want statements. Conventional indirect requests include preparatories and suggestions. Non-conventional indirect request strategies include strong and mild hints, since they were the least made in all groups they were not included for data analysis.

Table 5 displays the total percentage scores of internal modifications and external supportive moves of requests.

Table 5.

Total percentage scores for WDCTs (requests)

Participants	20-25 (low intermediate) (N=73)		26-30 (upper intermediate) (N=82)		31-35 (advanced) (N=32)	
Gender	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Valid Percent	Valid %	Valid %	Valid %	Valid %	Valid %	Valid %
Internal mitigators	42 %	64 %	46 %	64%	81%	89 %
External mitigators	49 %	75 %	51 %	76 %	89 %	96 %

The request perspective was analyzed according to the role of the speaker such as "*Can I borrow your book?*" or a hearer-oriented-request such as "*Can you lend me your book?*" (Felix-Brasdefer, 2007) or whether a request is avoided using the inclusive *we* or by avoiding the issue using an impersonal construction like "*Is it possible to get an extension?*"

Table 6 gives the percentage scores of the internal modifiers utilized by the three groups according to language proficiency, gender, and age.

Table 6.

Internal Modifiers of Requests in WDCTs

Variable	20-25 (low intermediate)		26-30 (upper intermediate)		31-35 (advanced)	
Gender	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Valid Percent	Valid (%)	Valid (%)	Valid (%)	Valid (%)	Valid (%)	Valid (%)
Alerters	24	37	46	54	83	85
Explicit/implicit performatives	56	33	21	14	5	2.5
Lexical downgraders (please)	40	57	67	75	87	81
Consultative devices	38	42	57	60	88	82
Query preparatory	64	81	72	83	79	86

Internal modifiers (Hassall, 2001; Trosborg, 1995; Woodfield & Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2010) make up an integral part of the head act and contribute only to minimal propositional meaning to the speech act; regardless of students' proficiency levels and first language backgrounds it is believed that these modifiers are less likely to be attended to by learners. The underuse of internal modifiers by low proficient learners is that pragmalinguistic rather than sociopragmatic knowledge predominates in the early stages of L2 pragmatic development.

Situation 1: Request for re-correcting paper.

<<Teacher, you should correct my paper again.>>

Situation 2: Request for repairing computer

<<Hello! I want my computer to be checked.>>

Situation 3: Request for borrowing book

<<Sorry, I have lost my book. I have to borrow yours.>>

Situation 4: Request for interview

<<Hello, I have an interview with you today.>>

Analysis of the request head act revealed that these requests did not have *alerters* (Dr., Mrs., Ms., Sir, Miss, Mr.) or *attention getters* (Dear), and *greetings* (Good morning/afternoon, evening; males- 24%; females- 35%). Clearly most of the students were unaware of the academic positions held by the faculty at the university. Schmidt (1993) believed that pragmatic functions cannot be completely learned even if learners notice what specific term is used for addressing someone; learners are required to recognize why that particular form was used in relation to the social context of the interaction. In academic situations, honorifics are desirable when a person at a lower status addresses someone of a higher status. The examples give a speaker oriented (72%) form of making an impositive direct request. As Holmes and Stubb (2003) noted "Direct strategies by nature seem to be face-threatening and are inherently impolite and in institutional settings when directives are targeted upwards (i.e., towards someone with greater authority), politeness considerations typically weigh more heavily" (p. 44). According to Jalilifar (2009), the notion of *transferability* is that, instead of indirectness, learners prefer direct strategies to achieve requestive goals by resorting to a familiar and easy form of requesting which has been experienced in their native language. Therefore, learners may subconsciously reduce modality and focus instead on conveying the message precisely.

<<We had learnt that requests start with 'would you/could you…' I knew I was writing to my lecturer. Mr. Moradi is very strict but also kind>> (RVRs).

Although students were aware of the situations and the interlocutor, the low intermediates admitted that they lacked practice and exposure to naturalistic data that the foreign language classroom provides and it may be very hard for them to develop appropriate strategies.

<<I started with "excuse me" I think I should have written "Dear," How can I say, "Dear Professor, will you do this for me…?">> (RVRs)

Interestingly, female participants (N= 36) of the same age and proficiency level seemed to be more linguistically and pragmatically socialized (57%; 42%) in using more mitigators as requests. The unique, socio-cultural norms of the Iranian society expect more politeness from women. Moreover, as a person matures a growing degree of awareness, responding, and valuing begins to create a system of affective traits that individuals identify with themselves.

<<In Iran, we are very careful when making formal requests. The requests were for my professors. It is difficult to think of the words to be used.>> (RVRs)

Downtoners ("Will you be able to perhaps…because…?") used to modulate the request was missing in responses given by the low proficient learners. But, *Consultative devices/Openers* (males-38%; females- 42%) e.g., "would you mind", "do you think", "would it be all right if…", "Is it/would it be possible…", "Do you think I could …" were used by most of them indicating that a monoclausal English request form "Would/Could you VP?" (48%) was the most common form to be used in the situations where bi-clausal forms (Takahashi, 2001), such as "would it be possible + VP?" could be more appropriate as requests.

Although restricted to institutional situations, results from the formal discourse showed that strategies of requesting are available to EFL learners and when their linguistic knowledge permits they would use the main strategies without instruction. For those asymmetrical requests that are face threatening, the speaker rightly chooses the kind of mitigation strategies that are essentially face protecting by choosing a variety of linguistic expressions in accordance with how the expected norms of interaction are perceived. Learners reported analyzing the situational variables such as the interlocutor's gender, age and status as they were thinking of the utterance quickly in Persian.

<<For me the situation was in an Iranian context. I had to write what I could say in Persian. I was careful that I would not hurt my professor's feelings.>>

Other *syntactic downgraders* like the use of the past tense (e.g., I wanted to ask you to recheck my paper or I am/was wondering…), *clausal downgraders* (e.g., I would appreciate it if…), and *lexical downgraders* (e.g., Can you possibly…) used to mitigate a request were not used equivalently by all the three groups (low- 48.5%; upper intermediates - 71 %; advanced- 84%). This showed a developmental pattern both in the degree of awareness and in the way a request strategy has to be written to a person of a higher status. Indeed, the frequent use of *query preparators* among females (83.3%) was more than males (71.6%): (Can I ask you…../Could you …?). Although politeness is generally preferred universally, learners have a certain level of pragmatic comprehension ability, and any variations in the responses could be due to sociocultural considerations of the task, and to an extent linguistic consideration.

Table 7 displays the external modifiers used as supportive moves. External modifications are a case for justification and explanation and since the prompts in the WDCT cannot instigate the actual situation, respondents used shorter supportive moves that varied according to language proficiency and largely the gender of the EFL learner (males- 43%; females- 82%).

Table 7.

External Modifiers of Requests in WDCTs

Variable	20-25 (low intermediate)		26-30 (upper intermediate)		31-35 (advanced)	
Gender	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Valid Percent	Valid (%)	Valid (%)	Valid (%)	Valid (%)	Valid (%)	Valid (%)
Getting a pre-commitment	58	42	65	43	83	81
Disarmers	33	56	42	21	5	16
Grounders	44	32	62	73	87	71
Imposition minimizer	47	53	52	66	58	64
Attention getter	33	41	63	70	82	85
apology	43	58	32	43	20	23

Table 5 shows that there was minimal use of supportive moves (62%) among the low proficient learners who frequently used a speaker-hearer, need/want statement (72%) together with *implicit performatives* (58%) like "If it is possible *I need to have an interview with you.*" In contrast, the upper intermediate and advanced groups showed a preference for conventional indirectness (84%), and lower degrees of directness and impositions. In situations of unequal power (e.g. asking the professor to lend his book), students knew that indirect strategies would lead to a higher degree of compliance. The greater use of *Committers* (82%) and *Grounders* (79%) showed that they were more willing to compromise with the interlocutors' condition. In that, increases in the power of the addressee are accompanied by increases in indirectness.

<<All the time I was thinking about the reaction of my lecturer. For me the words that I use to make a request are very important.>>

Evidently, identity is much an issue in written discourse as it is in spoken discourse.

Situation 5: Request for extension (enhanced prompt)

<<My paper is due in a few days. I have made good progress, and I believe it will be something that you will like. However, I think it would be perfect if I had a few more days to collect some additional data. Will you please be kind enough to do me this favor?>>

Low intermediate:

<<Hello Dr. Moradi, to tell you the truth, I am almost done with my thesis, and it is quite ready, but not completely. Can you give me an extension?>>

Enhancement of the situation prompt did affect the request strategy and the amount of modification displayed in using indirect requests. Requests realized by means of query preparatory strategies (ability, permission, and obligation) asking the professor to do something for the benefit of the student, occurred more frequently. Most of the requests framed included native forms like, *I was wondering/would really appreciate if you could give me another chance to get a better grade.* The advanced level students' use of appropriate lexical and syntactic downgraders reflected that they did not transfer L1 request strategies. Students RVRs showed that when there is a fear of loss of face or when there is a lower expectation of compliance, formulaic conventionally, indirect requests can be employed. For example, *checking on availability; getting a precommitment* (82%): <<Dr. Heydari, do you have the time to see my paper again, please? The thing is that my average score will be too low>>. Here the speaker indicated the reason for his/her request. For example,

Situation 4: need for interview

<<Excuse me Dr.Musavi may I take up your time for a few minutes? I know how busy you are as the president, but you will have to spare some of your precious time for an interview for my thesis. Will you arrange for this anytime this week?>>

A salient feature evident in students writing was the overuse of the word *please* (82%) probably to mitigate or soften the degree of imposition of their requests. The use of 'please' in English does not demand high linguistic proficiency and seems to be primarily on minimizing impositions rather than emphasizing closeness and involvement.

Situation 1: (Rechecking paper) <<Please correct my paper again>>

Situation 2: (Fixing computer) <<Will you check my computer? Please.>>

Interestingly, most of the requests started with an apology (excuse me, sorry) indicating the inappropriate pragmatic transfer from L1 to L2. In a Persian request, the formulaic apology expression is used as a mitigating device to maintain the interlocutors' face –excuse me *bebakhshid*; *sharmandeh* –I am ashamed; *ozrmikham* –forgive me, *mozhaeim shodam* –another way of saying *Sorry* for intruding, disturbing, interrupting, etc. (males 31.6 %; females 41.3%).

<<Sorry, excuse me, Dr. G. I have seen my marks and I am not happy with it.>>

In framing a request especially when the hearer or the interlocutor has relative power and also because of the social distance inherent in such situation it is important that the requester prepares the content of the request very carefully without directly imposing too much (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 2005).

<<No, I will never borrow a book from my lecturer. Next semester, I may have some classes with the same lecturer. I cannot be so careless.>>

Students' responses reflected honesty and truthfulness and were more life-like as if they were experiencing the situations and this could be that certain prompts were possibly strong enough to simulate the psychosocial dimensions of live situations.

<<Yes. I have experienced such situations so many times. I knew that I was writing to my lecturer. I think it is much better than being face-to-face with the person.>>

5. Discussion

The pragmalinguistic knowledge of EFL students at three different proficiency levels (i.e., undergraduate, postgraduate and PhD TEFL) was investigated through their

understanding of propositional content, the illocutionary force of speech acts, and the strategies they employed to assess politeness in asymmetrical situations. Their sociopragmatic knowledge was studied through the variables of power (P), social distance (D), and degree of imposition (R). This study was not restricted to only how the EFL learner is capable of using the language to get things done but also focused on their use of the speech act to maintain interpersonal relationships with the addressees in academic talk. Since pragmatic and discoursal knowledge is not always used automatically and unreflectively, requests were evaluated for their overall appropriateness and students' ability to produce them at the proper level of politeness, directness, and formality in the given situations (Taguchi, 2011).

Most of the studies on the speech of act requests (Barron, 2003; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2008; Eslami-Rasek, 2005; Felix-Brasdefer, 2007; Jalilifar, 2009; Rose, 2000; Shively & Cohen, 2008; Trosborg, 1995; Woodfield & Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2010) have compared EFL learners' performance to NSs performance. The focus of this study was exclusively on the pragmatic performance of Iranian EFL learners. In response to both research questions (1) and (2), findings showed that linguistic choices were largely influenced by the social status and power of the addressee. Although students at all three proficiency levels had access to mitigating strategies, supporting (Barron, 2003; Kasper & Rose, 2002; Hassall, 2001; Trosborg, 1995; Woodfield & Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2010) a developmental pattern in the management of discourse strategies was observed clearly indicating that pragmatic knowledge is based on learners' individual needs and preferences, age, gender, and degree of exposure to L2 forms. However, considerable variation was seen in the choice of language evident in participants' negotiation of lexical and grammatical choices in planning the requests showed that grammatical competence often exceeds pragmatic competence (Haji Maibodi et. al., 2016). The developmental factor supported Hassall (2001) and Jalilifar (2009), in that, lower proficient learners overused the most direct strategy type because pragmatics can be particularly challenging for them. On the other hand, for the advanced level, the clear decline in direct requests and hearer-oriented responses was closely related to their proficiency level (Bardovi-Harlig & Bastos, 2011; Félix-Brasdefer, 2007; Shively & Cohen, 2008; Tajeddin & Hosseinpur, 2014; Taguchi, 2013) their attention to the prompts, their pragmatic competence and development and perceptions of status-differences between student and tutor. The request

strategies at this level were convergent to native speaker patterns in their choice of linguistic expressions and they were pragmatically successful. Moreover, since the L2 pragmalinguistic strategy form is formally simple and the same strategy exists in their first language, students at this level used more external modifiers (downtoners) (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986), and downgraders (Trosborg, 1995). This finding contradicted Eslami-Rasekh (2005) who believed that direct request strategies are more prevalent in Iranian society.

One essential feature of written communication is the ability to use appropriate communication strategies, perform speech acts, and observe the appropriate level of formality. Enhanced accuracy in writing may be due primarily to the monitoring that occurs when writers revise the output using explicit knowledge of their L1, L2, or both (Ellis & Yuan, 2004). In line with Ellis and Yuan (2004), findings at the advanced level showed that students prioritized formulation and more likely shared composing time with the other processes reflecting their socio-psychological and socio-cultural maturity as they became more familiar with such interactive situations in academic contexts. Nevertheless, this may not guarantee a native like performance because many EFL students do not have the opportunity to address non-intimate or socially distant addressee like their lecturers or professors and are not familiar either with the type of mitigators or supportive moves or the use of elaborate requests. Verbal reports showed that pragmatic knowledge, by definition is highly sensitive to social and cultural features of the context and the context that the student brings to understand a message may differ among individuals because of their internal states and cognitive abilities (Haji Maibodi et al., 2016). As Taguchi (2011) claimed "when learners' L1 and L2 cultures do not operate under the same values and norms, or when learners do not agree with L2 norms, linguistic forms that encode target norms are not easily acquired" (p. 203).

Today modern Persian shares with English a rich repertoire of speech act strategies, which is fully exploited in actual use. Customarily Iranians tend to describe all relevant details, chiefly old known information first and then gradually make their request. The participants preference for Query Preparatory (asking about) and Grounders (reasons, justifications), was also found in Félix-Brasdefer's (2007) and Shively and Cohen's (2008) study of intermediate and advanced learners of Spanish. In line with Bardovi-Harlig (2005), responses showed that students made use of the input in the prompts and viewed

politeness as more important than correctness in order to maintain the status balance, and the full rights and obligations of a graduate student. Verbal reports showed that students must balance the competing postures of compliance and initiative when negotiating with a higher status interlocutor.

Another interesting feature was the overuse of the politeness marker "please" (acquired easily in L2 classrooms) by low proficient learners compared to advanced levels supports previous research (Felix-Brasdefer, 2007; Shively-Cohen, 2008; Tajeddin & Hosseinpur, 2014). This preference for the other-directed strategy by Persian speakers should be seen as motivated by deeper cultural attitudes related to claiming solidarity and common ground in social interactions. Interestingly, RVRs of the students explicitly showed that at a particular level, writers show their command of the subject matter and their ability to reflect critically on the situations.

Students RVRs mentioned the difficulty of sociocultural and sociopragmatic norm of adjusting language forms because the degree of sociocultural accommodation to the L2 culture may be a matter of choice as of ability (Haji Maibodi et. al., 2016). Parallel to Jalilifar (2009) and Felix-Brasdefer (2007), data revealed that L2 learners might have access to the same range of speech acts and realizations as do native speakers, but their assessment of the weight and values of universal context factors together with the strategies they choose varied substantively from context to context as well as across speech communities. It must be noted that the use of language varied even among native speakers, as it is an expression of self that is negotiated in the immediate discourse. In this study, students opted toward positive politeness indicating their attempts not to damage their own positive face.

6. Conclusion

The significance of the current study is that the speech act of requesting is largely governed by sociopragmatic and sociocultural features that are embedded in the situation in which they occur and are used. Initially, learners usually begin with a limited range of pragmalinguistic resources, often symbolized by the overgeneralization of a few forms over a range of functions or the use of formulaic language. However, results showed a bi-directional relationship between IDs factors and the attitudes to the L2 and the communities in which it is used. Moreover, together with an increase in language

proficiency and comprehension learners gradually expand their pragmalinguistic repertoire by adopting a new form-function mapping into their systems. This process is slow, unless learners are exposed to explicit correction/instruction, feedback, or modeling. The RVRs revealed that students' evaluation of the situational variations helped in their assessment of the speech act situations and in their ability to make adjustments in accordance with the contextual variables of social power, social distance, and degree of imposition.

The current study has practical implications for both teachers and learners. Findings showed that as far as the Iranian EFL learners are trying to learn English, it is important that attention be paid to pragmatics. Appropriate instruction on L2 pragmatics will ensure that learners will understand the illocutionary meaning of a range of L2 pragmatic norms typically used and preferred by native speakers. Hence, teacher's first need to be aware of L2 pragmatic norms possibly by familiarizing themselves with current research in pragmatics by clearly focusing on cross-cultural differences. The second implication is that academic writing as one of the basic skills of language in the Iranian EFL curriculum has been neglected both in schools and in universities. This line of research emphasizes the need for raising learners' awareness of lexical and syntactic modifiers in requests through writing.

Although a large sample of data was collected in this study, the results cannot be generalized to all Persian-speaking learners of English.

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