THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PRAGMATICS WITHIN SLA INSTRUCTION WITH FOCUS ON THE SPEECH ACT OF REQUEST

Edgar Zardaryan[*]

https://orcid.org/0009-0007-3203-6226
Glendale Community College

This comprehensive report illuminates the profound significance of pragmatics within the realm of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), with a specific emphasis on the speech act of requests. By examining studies rooted in Speech Act Theory, we can further investigate the critical role of pragmatic competence within the ESL/EFL classroom setting. This paper centralizes student perceptions of pragmatics while taking into consideration both cross-linguistic and extra-linguistic factors. Furthermore, the report will present novel innovative pedagogical practices that seamlessly integrate Task-Based Learning Theory and Data-Driven Learning, facilitating the effective enhancement of pragmatic language skills.

Keywords: *Second Language Acquisition, Speech Act Theory, Pragmatic Competence, ESL/EFL, Task-Based Learning Theory, Data-Driven Learning, Communicative Approach*.

Introduction

The landscape of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories has witnessed dynamic evolution, with an increasing recognition of the pivotal role played by pragmatics. This report aims to examine the integration of pragmatics, spotlighting the speech act of request, within the ESL/EFL education milieu. Anchored in The Communicative Approach, which champions student-centered learning and authentic communication, this investigation brings to the forefront the undeniable relevance of Speech Act Theory within the communicative classroom paradigm.

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[*] edgar.zardaryan@csun.edu

Considering the foundational tenets of the Communicative Approach, it becomes unmistakably evident that Speech Act Theory, an indispensable facet of pragmatics, is inherently intertwined within the communicative classroom milieu. The very essence of student interaction assumes paramount importance in shaping speech acts, which in turn, become emblematic of the intricate interplay between social, cultural, and contextual dynamics. Schmidt (1983) expounds upon this notion, encapsulating speech acts as a diverse array of verbal actions encompassing invitations, requests, apologies, and compliments (Bazyar, Taghinezhad, & Nekouizadeh, 2016). Schmidt and Richards (1980) further delineate the contours of Speech Act Theory, illuminating its focus on the functional utility and applications of language. Particularly, the speech act of requesting stands out as a directive channeling the speaker's intent towards eliciting a specific response or action from the listener, often aligned with the speaker's overarching purpose (Yang, 2009).

In the light of this conceptual framework, empirical investigations uncover substantial variations in the utilization of the speech act of requests across diverse linguistic and cultural spectra. Furthermore, scholarly exploration within the realm of pragmatics accentuates a constrained positive correlation between students' advancements in grammar and vocabulary proficiency and their pragmatic competence. Interestingly observations underscore a prevailing deficiency in students' ability to effectively convey information within the intricate tapestry of communicative contexts (Sadighi, 2018). Given this intricate interplay, it is not merely a notion but a compelling necessity to elevate the instruction of pragmatics within the ambit of ESL/EFL course curricula. Such a strategic shift is poised to bestow upon students an enriched comprehension of speech acts, culminating in an elevated prowess encompassing overall fluency, heightened pragmatic acumen, and the finesse to navigate the nuances of sociocultural communication dynamics. The symbiotic relationship between pragmatic competence and effective communication becomes undeniably apparent, emphasizing the pivotal role that comprehensive pragmatic instruction plays in nurturing well-rounded language proficiency.

Pragmatics & SLA

As noted by Diane Larsen-Freeman viewing language within the chaos complexity theory perspective assumes language as a multidimensional concept in which progression is not linear. Much research in pragmatics and second

language acquisition has primarily focused on production of speech acts with the use of discrete language structures. EFL/ESL classrooms neglect various dimensions and sub-dimensions of language focusing primarily on grammar, reading, writing, and phonetics. "First, it is often the case that a particular speech act, or language function is not represented at all. Evidence is lacking. This is quite frequent. Next, other speech acts are poorly represented, that is they are not realistic" (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996). Primarily focusing on linguistic competence with minimal or no representation of accurate use of speech acts confines students to a very shallow level of fluency. Attention to speech acts within SLA is essential in providing students with a comprehensive view of language taking into consideration the cultural and social practices of the target language. With pragmatic knowledge students can obtain higher levels of fluency in the target language with the ability to communicate using and understanding appropriate cultural and social constructs of the target language.

The notion of pragmatic competence within language education is not exclusive to adult ESL/EFL students; it is quite the contrary. Sadighi et al., further explore pragmatics within elementary ESL/EFL education on the premise that interaction in the elementary school environment is rich in pragmatics. Communication amongst teachers and students generally utilizes explicit instruction, use of gestures, and other pragmatic features of language to convey meaning. (Sadighi et al., 2018) Age of onset, although not the exclusive determinant of a student's capacity to learn a language, has been a subject of study. Research suggests that early age of onset is rarely a deterring factor for SLA. Proponents of the Critical Age Hypothesis argue that it is an absolute determining factor for learners' capacity for fluency in a second or subsequent language, further validating the potential focus on pragmatics in early childhood SLA education. Nevertheless, it is highly plausible that modifying elementary curriculum to include implicit or explicit instruction of pragmatics will allow for an increased quality of communication within elementary ESL/EFL education, in addition to enhancing the student's sociocultural linguistic awareness in early developmental stages.

Pragmatic competence of EFL/ESL students

The current levels of pragmatic competence among EFL/ESL students, when compared with the pragmatic competence of native English speakers, are relatively low. It is important to note the country context in which this

comparison is made. Taking into consideration the speech act of making requests as a metric for assessing pragmatic competence, research findings further suggest non-native-like usage and unfamiliarity with native-like request strategies across various EFL/ESL student populations, including Armenian, Japanese, Chinese, Mexican, and Iranian learners. While such studies focus on the direct investigation of variations in speech acts between two languages, a distinct perspective emerges from the work of Zahra Bazyar, Ali Taghinezhad, and Marziyeh Nekouizadeh. Their study focuses on exploring the correlation between varying language proficiency levels among EFL Iranian students and their corresponding pragmatic competence as compared to that of native English speakers. The findings reveal a limited improvement in pragmatic competence across different grades of EFL Iranian students, underscoring the potential for enhancing learners' communicative competence by addressing the pragmatic aspects of language through curriculum and the design of materials. This, in turn, can foster more authentic language acquisition experiences (Bazyar, Taghinezhad, &Nekouizadeh, 2016).

In order to gain a deeper insight into the intricacies of production and comprehension of the speech act of requests among EFL/ESL students, it is pertinent to consider the coding manual of request strategies identifying three primary types of request strategies: (Blum-Kulka, et al., 1989)

> • *Direct requests - explicitly marked as requests, often employing imperatives.*
> • *Conventionally Indirect requests - referring to contextual preconditions necessary for their performance, as conventionalized within the language.*
> • *Non-Conventional Indirect requests - utilizing hints and partial references to the object, contingent upon contextual cues.*

Research suggests that the variance in the implementation of request strategies between EFL/ESL students and their native English-speaking counterparts can be attributed to the specific types of request strategies chosen by the students. These findings give rise to inquiries regarding the reasons behind the employment of different strategies by non-native speakers in making requests. Possible explanations for such disparities encompass a lack of

exposure to native-like usage, coupled with preexisting strategies ingrained by the students' native language and cultural influences.

Requests: cross-linguistic and extra-linguistic implications

As previously emphasized, the realm of pragmatics and speech act theory transcends the mere literal interpretation derived from spoken expressions. Clearly, the definitions provided earlier for Conventional Indirect and Non-Conventional Indirect strategies underscore that the meaning and intention of such requests are heavily reliant on factors beyond language itself. Particularly for ESL/EFL students, these extra-linguistic factors assume heightened significance. Learners possess pre-existing knowledge of these factors from their native language, which are then juxtaposed with the challenges presented by the same factors in the target language.

A qualitative study conducted by Lusine Madoyan from Yerevan State University sheds light on the impact of extralinguistic factors on the use of direct and indirect speech acts across cultures. Her findings highlight that, within the realm of everyday conversational language, instances of direct speech acts were notably more frequent among Armenians. This trend suggests that, culturally, direct speech acts hold greater appropriateness than indirect ones. Additionally, the prevalence of indirect speech acts was markedly higher in the English context (Madoyan, 2014). This empirical evidence distinctly illustrates the cross-cultural disparities that inevitably influence a learner's utilization and comprehension of the pragmatic nuances of the target language. Consequently, for Armenian ESL/EFL students, the implementation of native-like pragmatic strategies may inherently pose challenges.

An intriguing comparative analysis of Chinese EFL and American students, conducted by Lihong Yang, further corroborates variations stemming from cross-cultural differences in the usage of direct speech. Yang's study, which examines the distribution of request strategies based on nationality, reveals that Chinese EFL students tend to rely on conventionally indirect request strategies when prompted to make requests. In contrast, American English speakers exhibit a more evenly distributed usage of request strategies (Yang, 2009). There is a clear overlap in findings from both Yang's and Madoyan's findings, demonstrating that instances of indirect and direct speech acts within the English language are relatively evenly distributed among different cultures.

Effective teaching methodology

A recent study by Bouzekria, Bassil, Eman, and Anas (2023) using a pre- and posttest design to examine the effectiveness of corpus-based instruction on the production of pragmatics for Albanian EFL learners concluded that students in the experimental group who had received extensive instructional material using corpus based instruction significantly outperformed students in the control group in the area of pragmatic routine production (Bouzekria, et al., 2023). The nuanced understanding of cross-cultural linguistic differences enriches students' linguistic repertoire, equipping them to deploy appropriate strategies when needed. To furnish students with natural and apt examples of requests, course content should exemplify authentic, native-like usage of direct, conventionally indirect, and non-conventionally indirect requests. Data-Driven Learning (DDL) emerges as a powerful pedagogical approach that seamlessly exposes students to authentic native-like content sourced from Corpus Data. Illustrating this methodology, consider the following activity:

> *1) Utilize the Corpus Query Processor offered by Lancaster University to construct worksheets encompassing the three distinct types of request strategies (e.g., samples of direct requests, conventionally indirect forms, and more See Appendix A).*
> *2) Task students with collaboratively categorizing each request (e.g., direct, conventionally indirect, and so forth) within groups.*
> *3) Once students have discerned the strategy in each case, facilitate a class-wide discussion of their findings, posing questions such as:*
> *i) What linguistic similarities do you observe?*
> *ii) How do lexical variations or patterns manifest in the different applications of requests?*
> *iii) In what ways do contextual factors influence the choice of request type?*

By strategically highlighting specific words within the worksheet (Appendix A) – a technique known as Input Enhancement – we can effectively capture students' attention to pivotal linguistic features embedded within the

content. The overarching aim of this activity is to empower students to better comprehend and distinguish the natural use of form and common lexical elements within spoken or written English, particularly as they pertain to request strategies. Moreover, modified cloze tests can be employed to craft 'fill in the gap tasks' that isolate specific word classes (e.g., modal verbs), thereby engendering tasks demanding heightened cognitive engagement.

Leveraging authentic listening materials proves remarkably efficacious, affording students exposure to language as wielded by diverse native speakers. I would recommend incorporating a video excerpt from a sitcom rich in instances of requests. Post-viewing, students can collectively dissect the video, directing their focus towards pragmatic nuances. A sample video link is furnished in (Appendix B). Regarding authentic language production, once students have been adequately immersed in the meaning and application of a given request strategy, they can proceed to employ these strategies in diverse contexts. Specifically, in the context of speech acts related to requests, where various social scenarios like ordering a meal at a restaurant or attending a movie, role-playing and presentation exercises come to the fore. These activities empower students to embody the language, drawing from their semantic acumen and linguistic experiences within diverse social settings. During such activities, educators can seamlessly employ formative assessment techniques, delivering real-time feedback to students. Furthermore, these activities lend themselves to honing specific language structures like 'lexical chunks' and 'collocations,' thereby furnishing students with concrete linguistic tools adaptable to a plethora of contexts.

Limitations

While this research paper seeks to provide comprehensive insights into the significance of pragmatics within Second Language Acquisition (SLA) instruction, particularly focusing on the speech act of requests, there are certain limitations that need to be acknowledged:

Scope and Generalizability:

This study primarily concentrates on the speech act of requests within the context of ESL/EFL education. The findings and pedagogical recommendations may not be universally applicable to all speech acts or language learning settings. Different speech acts might exhibit variations in pragmatic features,

and the efficacy of the proposed pedagogical approaches may vary depending on the specific speech act under consideration.

*Cultural and Contextual Specificity***:**

The discussions and empirical findings in this paper are based on specific cultural and linguistic contexts, such as Armenian, Chinese, American, and Iranian learners. It is important to recognize that the usage of request strategies and pragmatic competence can vary significantly across different languages, cultures, and social contexts. Therefore, the conclusions drawn from one cultural context might not necessarily be transferable to others.

Language Proficiency Levels:

This paper touches upon pragmatic competence in relation to varying language proficiency levels among EFL/ESL students. However, the impact of pragmatic instruction and the proposed pedagogical approaches might differ depending on the proficiency level of the learners. Different strategies and activities might be more suitable for beginners, intermediate learners, and advanced speakers.

Pedagogical Feasibility:

While the proposed pedagogical practices, such as Data-Driven Learning and authentic materials integration, hold potential for enhancing pragmatic language skills, the actual implementation of these approaches might present challenges in terms of resource availability, teacher training, and classroom dynamics. The feasibility and practicality of incorporating these methodologies need to be carefully considered.

Assessment and Long-Term Impact:

The paper discusses various pedagogical strategies to enhance pragmatic competence, but it does not delve deeply into the assessment of students' progress in this aspect. Long-term studies tracking the impact of these pedagogical interventions on students' pragmatic skills and their ability to navigate real-life communicative situations would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of these approaches.

Single Speech Act Focus

The research predominantly concentrates on the speech act of requests. While this is valuable in highlighting the importance of pragmatics, it is important to acknowledge that language learners encounter a wide array of speech acts in various contexts. The findings and recommendations may not cover the entire spectrum of pragmatic language use.

Evolution of Language Learning Theories:

The paper extensively relies on The Communicative Approach as the pedagogical foundation. However, language learning theories and approaches continue to evolve, and there might be emerging perspectives that could contribute additional insights into the teaching of pragmatics within SLA.

Conclusion

While this research paper offers a comprehensive exploration of the significance of pragmatics in SLA instruction, focusing on the speech act of requests, it is essential to recognize the aforementioned limitations. These limitations underscore the need for further research and exploration to provide a more nuanced understanding of pragmatics within diverse linguistic, cultural, and educational contexts. My research serves as an illuminating beacon, casting a resolute spotlight on diverse facets of pragmatics, thereby unequivocally underscoring its profound relevance and paramount significance in the realm of second language instruction. With lucidity, we discern an unmistakable void, a scarcity of genuine and authentic pragmatic content readily accessible to our students. Furthermore, a wealth of empirical evidence unequivocally substantiates a disconcerting reality - a discernible discrepancy in pragmatic competence between ESL/EFL students and their proficient native English-speaking counterparts.

The bedrock of my proposition lies in a meticulously crafted tapestry of teaching strategies, activities, and tasks - a holistic orchestration designed not merely to impart knowledge but to foster cross-cultural communion. At the heart of the instruction, taking into consideration the intricacies of request strategies, lies an intrinsic invitation for students to candidly converse and cogitate on the artistry of speech acts. Encouraging discourse, rich with insights into how these speech acts orchestrate within the tapestry of their native language, becomes a transformative gateway to heightened linguistic awareness.

In the broader educational context, this report underscores the need for curricular and instructional reform that elevates the status of pragmatics within language education. By weaving pragmatic instruction into the very fabric of ESL/EFL curricula, we acknowledge and address a critical aspect of language proficiency that extends beyond grammatical correctness and vocabulary. Our pedagogical practices must mirror the dynamic and holistic nature of language

use, encompassing the rich socio-cultural dimensions that underlie effective communication. Through a multidimensional approach that fuses theory and practice, research and application, we can bridge the pragmatic gap that often separates language learners from native speakers. This transformative endeavor cultivates not only proficient language users but also culturally astute and globally competent communicators who navigate the complex intricacies of intercultural dialogue with finesse and empathy.

As this report traverses the realms of theory, empirical evidence, and pedagogical innovation, it illuminates a path forward – a path that champions pragmatics as an essential pillar of language education. In this journey, pragmatics emerges not merely as an academic pursuit but as a catalyst for transformative learning experiences, enabling individuals to navigate the multifaceted landscape of human interaction with cultural agility and linguistic proficiency.

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Appendix A

(The following activity is mentioned in my report section *Effective Teaching Methodology*)

In your groups, please discuss the following sentences and determine which type of request it is: **Direct Request, Conventional Indirect and Non-Conventional Indirect**. We will share and discuss your answers in class.

1. **Please** pass me the coffee.
2. We **would like** you to meet us here tomorrow.
3. The cafe is **closing** for the night.
4. **Can** you tell me how to get to the post office?
5. I **wonder if** John likes Doe?
6. Leave the door open.
7. **Please** complete your assignments by Monday.
8. The backyard fence **needs to be** painted.
9. You know I always enjoy **eating** dessert when I am **having** tea.
10. Christmas break **is always better** when I get "A"s in school

Appendix B

(The following activity is mentioned in my report section *Effective Teaching Methodology*)

Link to video activity that utilizes speech act of requests (directive) within a natural context.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_tAYhl4wLB4

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Էդգար Զարդարյան

Հոդվածում քննարկվում են օտար լեզվի դասավանդման արդյու-
նավետության և ուսանողներին (մասնավորապես՝ անգլերենը որպես
երկրորդ կամ օտար լեզու սովորողներին) կայուն և խորը գիտելիքներ
ապահովելու հարցեր: Կարևորվում է ուսանողների գործաբանական
կարողությունները զարգացնելու խնդիրը, որը, ըստ հեղինակի, պետք է
իրականացնել՝ ներմուծելով թիրախ լեզվին բնորոշ լեզվամշակութային
բաղադրիչը: Խնդրանք արտահայտող խոսքային ակտի ուսուցումը
լուսաբանող նմուշներով ցույց է տրվում, որ մշակութային իրազեկու-
թյունը մեծապես նպաստում է հաղորդակցական հմտությունների
զարգացմանը և արդյունավետ միջմշակութային հաղորդակցմանը:

Բանալի բառեր՝ *երկրորդ լեզվի յուրացում, խոսքային ակտի տեսու-
թյուն, գործաբանական կարողունակություն, անգլերենը որպես
երկրորդ լեզու/անգլերենը որպես օտար լեզու, առաջադրանքի վրա
հիմնված ուսուցման տեսություն, տվյալների վրա հիմնված ուսուցում,
հաղորդակցական մոտեցում:*