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The Use of Request Strategies by EFL Learners

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate the use of request strategies by English language learners in the Republic of Macedonia. The participants in the study are students of English at an intermediate level of proficiency. The testing instruments include role-plays and discourse completion tasks. The participants' responses were analysed according to the classification of request strategies proposed by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989). The analysis shows that the most frequently used types of strategies in both formal and informal situations are query preparatories which belong to the group of conventional indirect strategies.

Keywords: pragmatic competence; request strategies; role-plays; discourse completion tasks.

1. Introduction

The primary aim of language learning and teaching today is developing learners' communicative competence. The term *communicative competence* was introduced by Hymes (1972) who wanted to point out that knowing and being able to speak a language involves not only possessing linguistics knowledge, but also an ability to use that knowledge in communication, which requires possessing social and cultural knowledge as well. In other words, knowing the rules of grammar and possessing large vocabulary is not enough. In order to be able to communicate in the target language successfully, learners need to know how to use their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary appropriately depending on the context and the people they are speaking to. This type of competence is called *pragmatic competence* and it is

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an integral part of one's communicative competence. A lot of studies have shown that "second language speakers might fail to communicate effectively (commit pragmatic failures), even when they have an excellent grammatical and lexical command of the target language" (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984, p. 196). Lack of pragmatic knowledge may cause language learners to appear "uncooperative, at the least, or more seriously, rude or insulting" (Bardovi-Harlig, Hartford, Mahan-Taylor, Morgan, & Reynolds, 1996, p. 324). Therefore, it is essential that language learners develop their pragmatic competence alongside their linguistic, discourse and strategic competence.

What is pragmatic competence? Following the definition of pragmatics, according to which "Pragmatics is the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication" (Crystal, 1985, p. 240), pragmatic competence can be defined as the ability to produce socially appropriate utterances in various contexts of language use. However, pragmatic ability does not refer only to the productive use of language through speaking and writing, but also to understanding and interpreting what is said or written by other speakers of the target language (Cohen, 2010). Therefore, it also involves the ability "to go beyond the literal meaning of what is said or written, in order to interpret the intended meanings, assumptions, purposes or goals, and the kinds of actions that are being performed" (Cohen, 2010, p. 5). Having in mind that children learn the social rules of language use while acquiring their mother tongue, people belonging to different ethnic or cultural groups may have different social rules of language use and interactional styles and may interpret things differently which could lead to misunderstandings (Blum-Kulka, 1982). Hence, learning a foreign language necessitates learning the social and cultural norms and values of the target language speakers that would enable learners to interact in the target language successfully by employing the pragmatic rules of that language.

Pragmatic competence can be seen through the realization of speech acts which, according to Yule (1996, p. 47) are "actions performed via utterances" such as requests, apologies, complaints, invitations, and so on. In this paper we focus on requests as one of the most often investigated speech act.

2. Requests

According to Brown and Levinson (1978), requests are face-threatening acts in which both the speaker's and hearer's faces are at risk, because "by making a request, the speaker impinges on the hearer's claim to freedom of action and freedom from imposition" (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984, p. 201). In order to minimize the imposition, speakers tend to use more indirect request strategies which sound more polite and preserve the hearer's face. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (ibid.) describe three major levels of directness of request strategies:

a) the most direct, explicit level, realized by requests syntactically marked such as imperatives, performatives and 'hedged performatives';

b) the conventionally indirect level; procedures that realize the act by reference to contextual preconditions necessary for its performance, as conventionalized in a given language;

c) nonconventional indirect level, i.e. the open-ended group of indirect strategies (hints) that realize the request by either partial reference to object or element needed for the implementation of the act ('Why is the window open'), or by reliance on contextual clues ('It's cold in here').

These three levels are further divided into nine sub-levels of request strategy types 'that form a scale of indirectness' (Table 1). The first five strategies belong to the direct level, the next two belong to the conventional indirect level and the last two belong to the nonconventional indirect level.

Table 1. Request categories proposed by Blum-Kulka (1987, p. 133)

Descriptive category	Examples
1. Mood Derivable	Clean up the kitchen.
	Move your car.
2. Performative	I'm asking you to move your car.
3. Hedged Performative	I would like to ask you to move your car.
4. Obligation statement	You'll have to move your car.