

# A Pragmatic Analysis of the Speech Act of Request among Iraqi EFL Students

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This study investigated the EFL students' types of request performed in EFL classrooms. Moreover, the study aimed to explore the pragmatic functions of requests performed by the participants of the study. The study took place in Baghdad University in Iraq and Five EFL classes were invited to participate in the study. The study used classroom observation as a data collection method using an audio and videotape recording. The results showed that the students used all request types namely directly and indirectly. As for the direct type of requests, students used the locution derivable and imperative while they used query preparatory for the indirect type. For the pragmatic function of requests, the students made more requests for want/need and clarification types. This study is significant as it offers a comprehensive understanding of language uses in performing requests, as well as their pragmatic functions in requests in the EFL classroom. Implication and suggestions were drawn.

**Key words:** *Pragmatic analysis, Request strategies, politeness theory, EFL students..*

## Introduction

It was found that Iraqi EFL students, whose mother tongue is Arabic most often have a shortage of competence of pragmatic when the students try to interact in their foreign language which is English. Eventually, the students appear to be less polite in communicating with others using the English language. Specifically, this occurs when the students perform the actions which constitutes the main three face threatening acts (FTA). Cohen (2008) points out that “learners of a language can have all of the grammatical forms and lexical items and still fail completely at conveying their message because they lack necessary pragmatic or functional information to communicate their intent”. Although some students seem pragmatically competent when speaking in the English Language, this competence is not necessarily reflected in their second language. Daskalovska et al. (2016) highlight that second

language speakers commonly do not have trouble with direct strategies when making requests as it is often similar to their first languages. However, problems arise when indirect strategies are involved as they may not always be able to transfer their first language pragmatic competence when speaking in a second language. The challenges faced by second language learners are also highlighted by Pratama et al. (2017) who related the lack of pragmatic awareness to the lack of pragmatic input from second language learning settings. Pragmatic competence plays a significant role in acquiring a second language. ESL speakers display pragmatic competence when the spoken or written language produced is polite and culturally acceptable. Koike (1989) defines pragmatic competence as “the speaker will understand and formulate speech acts”. Being pragmatically sound ensures that the objectives of communication are achieved successfully while avoiding potential miscommunication and misunderstanding. In order to develop pragmatic competence in the second language classroom, it may be a good idea to identify common speech acts that learners employ in their utterances and explore politeness strategies employed by the speakers to achieve their communication goals. This may help second-language speakers become more culturally and pragmatically aware of their own utterances, as well as to provide insight to English as the second language (ESL) teachers in order to develop the pragmatic competence of their ESL learners.

More importantly, it was found that EFL students in a university or institution in Iraq seem to sometimes lack teaching speech act of request when trying to communicate in the English language. This resulted as the students because don't know how the speech act of request may affect the development of their communication. Referring to the study by Cohen (1996) that stated that language learners are not able to convey their message even though they have all of the lexical items and linguistic context. Furthermore, they lack the necessary of teaching speech act of request to convey their intent.

In an Iraqi context, regarding the mother tongue competence, students seem to be competent when interacting in Arabic, but this competence of Arabic language doesn't reflect the competence of the English Language, which is their foreign language. Consequently, they need to learn the speech act of request through using teaching pragmatic, and teaching speech act allows the students to produce the request suitably, and be more culturally aware and realistically when making requests.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***Politeness Theory***

Much of the groundwork in the area of politeness studies have been done by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987). Their Politeness Theory is considered a greatly influential framework

in analysing discourse related to politeness. There have been various criticisms on the theory, even from its beginning stages. The most popular ones were proposed by Japanese linguists Matsumoto (1988) and Ide (1989) and more recent criticism by Intachakra (2012). There has also been an ongoing debate on whether the framework is still applicable in the current trends of sociolinguistic studies. However, many recent studies have also adapted Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework, such as Jalilifar (2009), Elmianvari & Kheirabadi (2013) and Pomerantz & Heritage (2013), which proves its relevance in today's society. Brown and Levinson's (henceforth B&L) framework is based on the notion of 'face' originally developed by Goffman (1967). B&L asserts that interaction is controlled by managing the 'face' of the participants through the application of politeness strategies. The concept of 'face' is then further divided into the 'Negative Face' and 'Positive Face'. B&L defines the 'Negative Face' as "the want of every competent adult member that his action is unimpeded by others" and the 'Positive Face' as "the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others" (B&L 1987). In brief, the 'Negative Face' is the independence of action while the 'Positive Face' is the need to be acknowledged and liked by others in an interaction. It is suggested that in the course of an interaction, this notion is threatened to a certain degree and this is referred to as 'Face Threatening Acts' (FTA) (B&L).

## Literature Review

As any situation of normal life, in EFL classroom, students make a request and all other main constitutions of FTA. Different types of requests, direct and indirect, have been done by students as it was found by the previous study in the field of teaching English as a foreign language (Ellis, 1992; Tseng, 1992; Dalton-Puffer, 2005). 6 ESL children's development of the use of requests in terms of the level of directness in the classrooms as it was observed. Ellis's findings showed that the students usually use an indirect way of making a request such as want statement, elliptical phrase subtypes and imperative. Also, results showed that an indirect way of making the request was used by the students through the use of query preparatory" subtype. Based on Ellis' findings, students don't tend to use the other ways of making requests like an obligation, performative, suggestive formula, statement and hint as to these forms of making request were identified by Blum-Kulka, et al (1989). Lastly, seldom use the utilisation of "please" was found. Based on Ellis, pupils are not able to develop their pragmatic competence, specifically, request competency because they don't have the chance to communicate with the teachers and are not allowed to make many request within the classroom (Razak et al; 2019).

Students perform various pragmatic functions of requests in the classroom as found by Ellis, 1992; Doughty et al,1986; Duff,1986), for instance, comprehension, clarification, confirmation or request, and either in the group or in teacher-fronted discussion in the English classrooms.

As stated by Rulon & McCreary (1986), students perform requests for clarification and confirmation in interaction with each other more than to the teacher. ESL students make requests for, need, help, permission and wish object within the classrooms as found by Ellis. It can be concluded that EFL students' requests performed are "functionally driven." Even though previous studies have shown various ways of making requests by the EFL students, more studies are needed to explain the complex process in making a request by EFL learners in the classroom, especially in the Iraqi context.

More significantly, the speech act of request learning assisted EFL learners to use second language or foreign language successfully and helped them to engage in effective communication (Salehi, 2013). According to (Norizan et al, 2019; Grace, 2010; Abdul Sattar & Farnia, 2014; Bataineh and Hussein, 2015) the acquisition of adequate teaching speech act of request is significant for foreign language use because extensive speech act of request helps EFL learners to use the language and functions for effective and understandable communication. By the same token, speech acts of request is an important act in teaching and learning any language and it is a significant aspect in the development of the English language. (Nivis, 2013; Alinezhad, 2015; Bataineh and Hussein, 2015) stated that speech act of request learning is regarded as the most important aspect in academic achievement for foreign or second language students. Moreover, the teaching speech act of request has a vital role inside the EFL classroom and it can be effective in raising learners' communication skills, and enhance social-culture expressions (Bataineh& Hussein, 2015). In another study by Kasper and Rose (2001), teaching of the speech act of request includes different forms of request, request strategies politeness marks, expressions of request, information, hedges, and conversational structure. These aspects improve language students' awareness of language use inside the classroom environment. Therefore, the teaching speech act of request plays an important role in increasing Iraqi EFL students' awareness of communicative language and it can be used by the instructor to convey the main aspects of the English language.

## **Methodology**

The methodology of the study was classroom observation to observe the students inside the classroom to collect the data from the participants. Classroom observation was used in the study as it gives the researcher the chance to observe the actual use of making a request in the real situation. The study has been done on Five EFL classroom in Baghdad University. All of the respondents' mother tongue is Arabic. The participants are undergraduate (first and third year). This group of students were selected based on the position of the researcher as a lecturer in the university. The study period was 4-weeks, a total of 28 periods were observed, each period is one hour and thirty minutes. Two lessons units were observed. The researcher used audio and videotaped to collect data.

In regard to the data analysis, the researcher developed a framework to analyse the gathered data from the participants developed framework based on previous studies conducted by Blum-Kulka, et al, 2015; Trosborg, 2011; Lee, 2011. The model consists of two major types namely; direct and indirect requests. The first type ‘direct consists of six sub-categories (imperative, locution derivable, hedged performative, want statement, unhedged performative and elliptical phrase subtypes). As for the other type of the framework, indirect requests were further divided into five sub-categories: wish/desire, mild hint subtypes, suggestory formula, strong hint, query preparatory. Applicability and suitability of the framework regarding the current study were considered. The pragmatic function of requests made by the participants formed based on the previous theories and findings have been done by Ellis,1992; Pica, & Long 1986, Chaudron,1988). The direct requests performed by the students were coded based on the past studies of Lin, 2009, Yang, 2009, Alakrash& Razak, 2019). While the indirect requests performed by the participants were coded based on the past study of David (2007). The researcher calculated performance of pragmatic functions and the occurrences of student directness requests.

### **Results and Discussion**

The results showed that all teachers made use of both direct and indirect requests as shown in the table below.

**Table 1:** Frequencies of Requests employed by students in request types

Types	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5
<b>Direct Requests</b>	65%	70%	58%	60%	78%
Imperative	41%	32%	33%	39%	15%
Unhedged performative	1%	21%	2%	0%	1%
Hedged performative	2%	1%	2%	1%	3%
Locution derivable	42%	47%	44%	29%	59%
Want statement	1%	3%	1%	3%	1%
Elliptical phrase	15%	17%	16%	28%	23%
<b>Indirect Requests</b>	33%	30%	44%	36%	27%
Suggestory formula	23%	8%	22%	19%	15%
Query preparatory	65%	74%	65%	60%	76%
Desire/wish	10%	25%	24%	25%	11%
Strong hint	2%	4%	3%	5%	1%
Mild hint	0%	1%	4%	2%	1%

Based on the findings showed in the table above, students performed more direct requests (65%, 70%, 58%, 62%, and 78%) than indirect type (40%, 30%, 37%, 48%, and 35% respectively). At the directness level, data showed that students used various types of direct

requests (locution derivable, want a statement, elliptical phrase sub-types and imperative). A want statement was the less sub-category type performed by the students even though the students have used all the sub-categories. As the table shows, the majority of the participants used the sub-types of location derivable and imperative. More specifically, in class 3, the students used the sub-type ‘locution derivable’ with a percentage of (59%) while they made little use of imperative sub-type with a percentage of 15%. Moreover, results showed that students make more usage of the sub-type ‘elliptical phrase’. As for the results of the indirect type of request, findings showed the students performed all the sub-types of indirect request in all the classes. The students performed less usage of the sub-type ‘strong hint’ while the extensively sub-type used by the students was ‘query preparatory’ with a per cent of more than sixty.

The results go in line with a result of Pica & Long (1986). They found that EFL students tend to utilise more requests for direct type in EFL classrooms. Furthermore, the findings of the current study in agreement with findings reached by 8, 30. EFL students perform more direct requests because of the cultural pattern nature of the students’ relationship with each other and with their teachers as well. Results showed that students also make use of indirect type because of the use of the mother tongue language inside the EFL classroom or their cultural patterns.

Table 2 shows the pragmatic functions of the requests made by the participants. Various pragmatic functions were performed by the students including permission, confirmation, advice, clarification, suggestion, need/want, curiosity, wish/desire, offer and help.

**Table 2:** Frequencies of Pragmatic Functions of Requests Performed by Students

	A		B		C		D		E	
	I	D	I	D	I	D	I	D	I	D
	7	10	20	1	10	4	2	16	16	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Clarification	43	60	40		20		50	44	38	
Want/Need	14	30	40		30	75	50	56	44	
Permission	14		5			25				
Desire/Wish	29		5							
Suggestion			5							
Help		10								
Curiosity			5							
Confirmation					30					
Offer				100	20					
Advice										18

Note: D means direct requests and I means indirect direct

As the table showed, the requests of clarification and need/want were the highest frequency usage performed by the students. These students make a higher frequency of requests for want/need and clarification. All the respondents in the five classes performed these pragmatic functions of requests (want/need, clarification). The students performed these functions through the use of the direct or indirect type of request. As to Manke, (1990), it's not surprising that students make requests of 'want/need, clarification' in a manner quite similar to those of speakers outside the classroom as the classroom is considered a system of communication where the learners are social actors using the language for communication purposes.

### **Conclusion and Implication**

The findings of the current research showed that all the performed all types of request for different pragmatic functions were performed by the students in the five classrooms. Requests as a sociolinguistic behaviour, the instructors are advised to evoke the students to make use of requests for diverse pragmatic functions consciously and appropriately and consider the class as social context as the same as other social contexts in the normal life. In order to make the educational process more effective, EFL teachers are suggested to make more requests inside the EFL classroom towards communication purposes. For future studies, factors and characteristics of the students "gender and age, English proficiency" should be considered in order to make the findings of the study more generalisable. Furthermore, the direct type of request can be further divided into sub-categories for further understanding of students' complex behaviour in performing requests in the EFL classroom. The current study has focused on the students' behaviours of performing requests and more studies are needed to be conducted on teachers and student-teachers behaviours in making requests. development of language abilities in general.

Students may benefit from specifically tailored ESL lessons where they are taught how to be more polite or more pragmatically competent. On the secondary school level, students need to acquire a basic level of communicative and pragmatic competence before leaving school as this might benefit them in their tertiary education setting as well as in their work setting in the future. The speech act of request is very common in various settings and knowing how to perform these without being blunt or impolite could help them to become effective speakers of English. As noted by Saad et al. (2014), 'although Iraq is not an English-speaking country, it is unique in terms of its language as it provides a hybrid-language environment, where the main language is Arabic, and the second language is Kurdish'. As such, being pragmatically competent when speaking English may help them to excel in their tertiary education settings as well as in their work settings.



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