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ABSTRACT

A preliminary study was conducted to investigate strategies that elementary teachers and students use in responding to requests and to determine whether strategy use varies with request imposition. Subjects were 26 fifth-grade students drawn from six classes in one school district and 17 fourth- or fifth-grade teachers from the same district. Individual teachers were presented with 20 student requests, one at a time, and were asked to respond to each request as they might in a classroom setting. They were also asked not to dwell on each item but to respond spontaneously. Following comparable procedures, investigators provided individual students with 20 teacher requests. Imposition ratings of requests were collected a month later to eliminate potential bias due to selective memory for items. Results indicated that both teachers and students perceived differences in impositions among a set of requests made of them. Since teachers judged requests to be more of an imposition than did students, they were less likely to respond with simple compliance and more apt to comply conditionally or not to comply at all. Students' response strategies did not vary as a function of request imposition; their predominant response was simple compliance. (MP)

Request-Response Strategies Among Elementary Teachers and Students

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Abstract

This study investigated the strategies that elementary teachers and students used in responding to requests of one another and whether strategy use varied with request imposition. Elementary teachers responded to a series of student requests and rated each on imposition; students followed the same procedures with a set of teacher requests. Both groups of subjects perceived differences in imposition among requests. As requests became more imposing, teachers were less likely to respond with compliance and more apt to give qualified compliance or to not comply. Students tended to respond with compliance and their response strategies did not vary with perceived imposition. Future research should examine responses during teacher-student interaction to determine how response strategies vary as a function of the strategies used to make requests.

Request-Response Strategies Among Elementary Teachers and Students

When person A makes a request of person B, the two of them may be thought of as coordinating an exchange of goods or services that costs B time and effort if not real money. Exchanges like this tend to be inequitable, because for the moment at least A benefits at B's expense. Even when B does not comply, A has taken B's time and may have placed B in an uncomfortable position (Schunk & Clark, Note 1). Such exchanges can be viewed in terms of what Goffman (1955, 1967) has called face, the positive social value that people claim for themselves. Face consists of the want to be free from imposition from others and the want to be approved of in important ways. As Goffman illustrated repeatedly, people in everyday situations attempt to maintain or gain face, and to avoid losing face. A's request leads to an inequity, then, to the extent that it threatens B's face.

When faced with a request, B has several options: comply, comply with qualifications, seek additional information, or not comply. We might expect that as requests became more imposing, B would be less likely to simply comply and more apt to exercise one of the other options. In certain situations, however, an uneven distribution of factors such as knowledge, status, and power results in an unequal relationship between A and B (Brown & Levinson, 1978). Where A is superior to B, for example, B's compliance essentially is taken for granted because B does not have the full range of response options available. Thus, a general has the right to make a wide range of requests of a private and generally to take compliance for granted. This is not to suggest that generals' requests cannot be imposing, but only that it likely would be inappropriate for privates to refuse them.

Much the same can be said about the relationship between elementary-school teachers and students; the inherent rank difference could influence both the form and the content of teacher-student communication (Cooper, Marquis, & Ayers-Lopez, 1982; Ervin-Tripp, 1976,1977). Because of the social stratification and rules inherent in the school context, teachers do not always comply with students' requests. Even when they do comply, they often qualify their compliance by setting necessary conditions. Conversely, the rank difference generally should lead students to view teachers' requests as directives to be complied with (Ervin-Tripp, 1976).

The present study was a preliminary investigation of teachers' and students' responses to requests made of one another. Accordingly, we constructed two sets of classroom requests: one set made by students to teachers and one set made by teachers to students. The requests in each set were designed to vary in how much A imposed on B. Groups of teachers and students were presented with their respective set of requests and were asked to respond to each request. Each group of subjects also rated the imposition of the goods or services requested in each situation.

Based on the preceding considerations, teachers were expected to show differentiation in their response strategies and be less likely to comply as student requests became more imposing. On the other hand, students were expected to show less differentiation because they were expected to generally comply with teachers' requests.

Method

Subjects were 26 fifth-grade students drawn from six classes in one school district and 17 teachers from the same district who taught grades 4 or 5. An equal number of boys and girls were included in the student sample, which represented different socioeconomic backgrounds but was predominantly middle class. All but two of the teachers were women.

Teachers individually were presented with 20 student requests one at a time; order was counterbalanced across subjects. Requests are shown in Table 1. Each began with A student asks to. Teachers were asked to respond to each request as they might in a classroom setting. They were asked not to dwell on each item but to respond spontaneously. Similarly, students were individually given 20 teacher requests (Table 2) following comparable procedures. Each request began with Your teacher asks you to. All data were collected by a female adult experimenter who recorded subjects' responses.

Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

Imposition ratings of the requests were collected one month later to eliminate potential bias due to selective memory for items. Teachers were presented with the 20 student requests in counterbalanced order and rated each on imposition, which was defined as the degree of disruption, energy, or effort that statisfying the request would entail. The 0-100 scale ranged in 5-unit intervals from 0(not at all imposing), to 100(highly imposing). Students were interviewed individually by a female experimenter who recorded their imposition ratings of the teacher requests.

Results

Tables 1 and 2 show the mean imposition ratings for the request situations assigned by teachers and students, respectively. The differences among each set of 20 requests were significant ($ps < .01$).

Teachers' and students' responses to the request situations were classified by two raters independently. Interrater reliability was 95%. Where raters disagreed on the classification of a response it was discarded. The following response categories were obtained (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Clark & Schunk, 1980; Garvey, 1975).

Compliance only. Responses included in this category unambiguously indicated consent and included no extraneous information. Examples were Yes; Yes, you may; OK; Sure; Go ahead; All right; and the informal Take off and Have at it.

Compliance + conditional. These responses indicated complaiance but qualified it. Qualifiers generally began with words such as but, when, and if (Yes, but come right back; Sure, when you finish your math; Yes, if you can work quietly).

Clarification. Clarified responses neither complied with nor refused a request but rather sought further information. Examples included Are you having difficulty? and Is it important?

Noncompliance only. These responses clearly indicated noncompliance and included no extraneous information, such as No; No, you may not; Nope; No way.

Noncompliance + explanation. Included in this category were responses that clearly indicated noncompliance and that contained an explanation for why the request was not complied with. Explanations focused on rules (No. Sharpen your pencil before class), inappropriate timing (No. Wait until later), inability (No. I can't do that), and unwillingness (No. I do not lend money).

Means and standard deviations of response strategies across requests are shown separately for teachers and students in Table 3. Whereas students tended to simply verbalize compliance, teachers were more likely to comply conditionally. Neither teachers nor students sought clarification often. Although noncompliance was infrequent, when subjects did not comply they were more likely to include an explanation.

Insert Table 3 about here

To explore the relationship between request imposition and response strategies, product-moment correlations were computed by items between mean imposition ratings and the frequency of use of each of the five response strategies. Teachers' ratings of student requests revealed that items judged more imposing were less likely to receive simple compliance as a response, $r(18) = -.73$, $p < .001$, and more apt to receive conditional compliance, $r(18) = .38$, $p < .05$, or noncompliance, $r(18) = .38$, $p < .05$. As expected, the correlations between students' ratings of teacher requests and students' response strategies yielded nonsignificant results.

Discussion

The results of this investigation may be summarized as follows. Teachers and students perceived differences in imposition among a set of requests made of them. As teachers judged requests to be more imposing, they were less likely to respond with simple compliance and more apt to comply conditionally or not comply. Students' response strategies did not vary as a function of request imposition; their predominant response was simple compliance.

Although the teacher results could be construed as offering some support for the previously discussed ideas on face, it seems more likely that the social context of the classroom was responsible. The rank and role differences between elementary teachers and students would be expected to exert important effects on their interpersonal communication. Qualifying compliance or not complying should be done more often by superiors who are responsible for upholding rules and procedures. Student requests that are viewed as likely to disrupt work flow or time-on-task are apt to be qualified or rejected. Conversely, because children are not encouraged to question teachers' decisions, we might expect them generally to respond to teacher requests with simple compliance no matter how imposing those requests might be. In fact, subordinates

who qualify compliance or do not comply might be viewed as questioning their superior's authority or judgment, which is disrespectful and apt to provoke disciplinary action.

One limitation of the present study was that only the content of requests was presented to the subjects. Although this procedure permitted a fairly straightforward test of the hypothesized imposition-response strategy relationship, it did not capture the ways that people phrase requests. All but the most trivial requests come as part of what has been termed extended requests (Schunk & Clark, Note 1). Thus, to ask B for $100, A might say "Say, Bob, I need $175 to pay the mechanic for fixing my car, and I have only $75. Could you loan me $100, please? I'll pay you back in the morning." The request itself, Could you loan me $100, is only a part of the transaction. Expecially as requests become more imposing, people are apt to add other types of content such as prefaces (Say, Bob), reasons (I need $175 to pay the mechanic for fixing my car, and I have only $75), politeness markers (Please), and obligations (I'll pay you back in the morning) (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Lakoff, 1973, 1977; Schunk & Clark, Note 1). Adding some or all of these different strategies to requests helps to decrease their imposition, and thereby could change the nature of the response and possibly compliance itself.

Future research should examine further how teachers and students respond to one another's requests, perhaps in the context of classroom interactions, to study how responses vary according to the content included in extended requests. Although there is much research on teacher-student interactions, it has focused primarily on academic instruction (Barnes, 1969; Bellack, Kliebard, Hyman, & Smith, 1966; Flanders, 1965; Morine-Dershimer, Ramirez, Shuy, & Galluzzo, Note 2; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). Research on response strategies seems important because teacher communication can serve a teaching and learning function (Shapiro, Note 3). By utilizing a variety of response

strategies, teachers help convey to students knowledge about response strategies that should prove useful in many types of collaborative exchanges.

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Table 1

Student Requests to Teachers with Imposition Ratings Assigned by Teachers

Request	Mean Imposition Rating[a]
Talk with teacher who is busy	62.8
Sit at teacher's desk	55.3
Read during math period	54.8
Borrow lunch money	53.5
Go to office to buy T-shirt	53.3
Look at grade book	49.0
Go see another teacher	47.3
Check answers in teacher's manual	39.5
Draw on chalkboard	38.0
Be first in line	31.0
Use teacher's drawing materials	29.3
Work with another student	25.5
Be team captain	22.5
Go to bathroom	20.8
Pick up mail at office	20.3
Sharpen pencil	20.2
Talk with teacher who is not busy	16.8
Work at learning center	16.5
Play math game	16.3
Erase chalkboard	14.0

[a]Range of scale: 0(low) - 100.

Table 2

Teacher Requests to Students with Imposition Ratings Assigned by Students

Request	Mean Imposition Rating[a]
Locate a student	92.8
Stop bothering another student	68.7
Collect scraps off floor	64.7
Finish worksheets at home	38.9
Sit down	36.4
Reprimand other students	35.0
Straighten games on shelf	30.0
Take attendance to office	28.4
Stop and begin new task	28.1
Escort sick child to nurse	25.9
Ask mother to help at school	17.8
Deliver message to teacher	17.3
Help distribute materials	16.8
Bring souvenirs from home	15.0
Help a student finish work	14.6
Get out math workbook	9.8
Return projector	8.0
Stay after school	4.4
Get mail from office	1.3
Get equipment from gym	0.4

[a]Range of scale: 0(low) - 100.

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations of

Response Strategies (Percentages)

	Teachers		Students	
	M	SD	M	SD
Compliance only	28.4	24.0	77.5	17.6
Compliance + conditional	40.7	28.8	6.6	9.4
Clarification	8.1	8.3	9.3	7.6
Noncompliance only	5.9	7.7	1.2	2.9
Noncompliance + explanation	16.9	13.5	5.4	7.0