The Effect of Explicit Metapragmatic Instruction on Request Speech Act Awareness of Intermediate EFL Students at Institute Level

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Abstract   This study deals with the application of the pragmatics research to EFL teaching. The need for language learners to utilize a form of speech acts such as request which involves a series of strategies was significance of the study. Although defining different speech acts has been established since 1960s, recently there has been a shift towards empirical studies which focus on perception and production of various speech acts by EFL or ESL learners. The present article reveals the researcher's interest in a set of strategies in which native speakers of target language use for performing speech activities. The study intended to enhance EFL learners' awareness of request speech act by teaching the materials used for speech acts. To achieve the aim, the teacher used some sorts of educational activities such as teacher-fronted discussions; role plays, cooperative grouping, and other pragmatically oriented tasks were used to increase the learning of speech acts. Discourse Completion Test was developed as a pretest and posttest to measure the effects of instruction on the pragmatic awareness of the students. The results revealed a significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores of the use of request speech act in experimental group.

Keywords Sociolinguistics, Pragmatics, Metapragmatic, Speech act, Request

1. Introduction

The notion of speech act is one of the most compelling notions in the study of language. A speech act is created when speaker/writer S makes an utterance U to hearer/reader H in context C. It is agreed upon that speech act theory is built on the foundation laid by Wittgenstein and Austin. Speech act theory originated directly from the work of J L Austin, and particularly from William James Lectures delivered at Harvard in 1955, and published later as How To Do Things With Words in 1962. John Searle then improved this theory. According to [25], to understand a language, one must understand the speaker's intention. The speech act is an utterance that expresses an intention. The speech act can be a sentence, a word or a phrase. When somebody speaks, they perform an act. So speech does something and speech act stresses the intent of the act as a whole. Searle believes understanding the speaker's intention is essential for capturing the meaning. Without the speaker's intention, it is impossible to understand the words as a speech act.

Searle proposes that there are five basic kinds of action that one can perform in speaking, by means of the following five types of utterance:(1) representatives (example: asserting, concluding, etc) (2) directives (example: requesting, questioning) (3) commissives (example: promising, threatening, offering) (4) expressives (example: thanking, apologizing, welcoming, congratulation) (5) declarations (example: declaring war, christening, firing from employment). Likewise, apologizing and requesting, two of the specific forms of utterance, have taken a lot of attention among linguists and those who are concerned with pragmatic studies.

In fact, most works of apologizing and requesting up to now have been done in the field of cross-cultural pragmatics, as part of the CCSARP (Cross Cultural Speech Act Realization Patterns) project. The project was done by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984), aiming at investigating the realization patterns of two speech acts (requests and apologies) in different languages and cultures in order to establish similarities and differences in these patterns linguistically and between native and non-native usage to the same social constraints. The investigated languages were English, French, Danish, German, Hebrew and Spanish.

Trying to get the meaning across, nonnatives may simply translate speech acts from their mother tongues to the second language. The communicative aspect of the language can be

said to be realized as 'pragmatic competence', which refers to "the ability to perform language functions in a context" [30].This competence involves the contextual meanings and purposes of the utterances, that is, the speaker's intention and the hearer's interpretation [19, 33]. identified three factors causing pragmatic failure, namely, cultural differences, pragmatic transfer, and the lack of pragmatic knowledge. The first factor, the differences between the L1 culture and the target culture, may cause negative transfer, or errors induced by the speakers' mother tongue. The next factor, pragmatic transfer, involves the effects of L1 speech patterns used when producing L2 utterances; for example, using a direct speech act where a native speaker may use an indirect one. The third factor, the lack of pragmatic knowledge, is mainly an important factor affecting the inefficient communication. To achieve the communicative goals efficiently, therefore, both linguistic and pragmatic competence are required. Pragmatic failures often pass unchecked by the teachers or, worse, they are attributed to some other causes, such as rudeness. So language teachers teach the rules of appropriate language use.

Pragmatic competence is considered to be "an understanding of the relationship between form and context that enables us, accurately and appropriately, to express and interpret intended meaning" [20]. Mastery of pragmatic competence, therefore, involving ability to "employ different linguistic formulae in an appropriate way when interacting in a particular social and cultural context" [32], is very challenging for students, especially in EFL contexts. "Learners of high grammatical proficiency will not necessarily possess comparable pragmatic competence" [4, 7, 18]. Even advanced learners who are competent in grammar may use language inappropriately and show differences from target-language pragmatic norms. "The development of communicative competence should be the goal of language teaching" [6]. He proposes three major directions that researchers can take in order to further contribute to the theory of communicative competence: (1) the refinement of the study of speech acts which occur in different cultures, (2) an investigation to determine the extent to which explicit instruction can increase the rate at which nonnative speakers develop different factors of their pragmatic competence, and (3) the contribution pragmatics can make to the presentation of different functions of a language in textbooks designed for second language learners.

Recently, international scholars and practitioners from different foreign language contexts investigated the role of pragmatics for teaching purposes, for learning purposes, as well as for testing purposes [1]. In order to learn pragmatics in foreign language contexts, [10] examined Language Socialization theory in relation to acquisition of pragmatics in FL classrooms. [31] explored opportunities for learning Japanese pragmatics. [13] considered language learners' perceptions in relation to pragmatic performance. Further [21] investigated learning pragmatics in content-based instructional settings, whereas [12] examined computer-mediated learning of L2 pragmatics.

Regarding teaching pragmatics in foreign language contexts, [16] explored the effects of awareness-raising instruction on pragmatic development of refusals by Japanese EFL learners, while[11] were concerned with enhancing of the pragmatic competence of non-native English-speaking teacher candidates in an EFL instructional context. Moreover, [14] considered using translation to improve pragmatic competence.

Concerning testing pragmatics in foreign language contexts, [34] explored testing of interlanguage pragmatic ability. [8] investigated raters, functions, item types, as well as the dependability of L2 pragmatics tests, whereas [22] examined rater, item and candidate effects in Discourse Completion Tests.

Teaching speech acts enables EFL students to become aware of the sociolinguistic conventions of language use and cultural differences which constitutes appropriate use in English as opposed to their first socio-linguistic systems. This study made contribution in the area, namely, effect of instruction on pragmatic competence.

The main aim of the study was to find out the effect of metapragmatic instructions on speech act awareness of intermediate EFL students at institute level. The minor aim of the present research was to show the possibility of teaching pragmatics in an EFL setting with the assumption that this problem can be overcome by giving the students the tools to make the processes of pragmatic decision-making explicit. It is claimed that helping students to make the process of pragmatic decision making explicitly will help in successful communication and appropriate use of the second language and will hopefully promote cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. This study was planned and conducted to investigate strategies of request speech acts dealing with explicit teaching of its behavior. Considering request as an important component of speech act is vital since to understand a language, one must understand the speaker's intention. It is an utterance that expresses an intention. The study is hoped to shed light on the area of speech act and actions to be taken in EFL schools and universities to train potentially intelligible learners. This research is an attempt to present a profound answer to the question whether formal instruction of request speech act enhances Iranian intermediate EFL learners' use of it or not.

2. Methodology of the Research

2.1. Participants

The participants who took part in the study were 60 EFL learners from 4 branches of Shokouh English Institute in Rasht, Iran. Participants of all classes were all above 18 year old, and they were all Persian native speakers. Altogether 60 respondents answered all the required discourse completion questionnaires in written English.

2.2. Materials

Three research instruments were used in the study. The first was the grammar part of the OPT (Allan, 2004) administered at the beginning of the study to ascertain the proficiency levels of the students. The test included 50 items, and the scores above 25 that was the average score of the participants were chosen for the purpose of the study. The second instrument was informative papers prepared by the researcher from different sources. They were downloaded from different sources on Internet or taken from original English text books. During 10 treatment sessions, the participants of the test were asked to become familiar with the important and useful points involved in the articles and use them in their role plays. The third instrument was a questionnaire that consisted of a Discourse Completion Test for the use of request speech act. The DCT-questionnaire (Appendix A) developed by [15] included 20 situations followed by a blank space in which the participants were asked to write a request accordingly. It was in written form so that the learners could give their replies without any language difficulties. While choosing the items composing the task, the most important criterion was the situations' relevance to a university student's life, so that the subjects would not have difficulty in imagining the situations described in the scenarios [3, 17].This questionnaire was designed to explore the realization patterns of the speech act of request in English and the strategies EFL learners used in given situations.

2.3. Research Design

A quasi-experimental design was employed in which a control group, an experimental group and the manipulation of three basic characteristics: 1) a pre-test, 2) a treatment during the course of study, and 3) a final measurement of the treatment (posttest) were used. Teaching metapragmatic instructions as an independent variable divided the participants into two groups, the experimental group that received the instructions, and the control group that was just taught according to the institute's syllabus. The use of the request was measured by the extent to which participants answered the twenty given questions. Each correct item was awarded one mark, and the maximum score a participant could achieve on the test was 20.

2.4. Procedure

Before starting to fill in the questionnaires, the participants were explained in detail about the main objective of the investigation as well as how to answer each question.30 students were assigned randomly as control group and 30 students as experimental group. The experimental group received teaching materials covering ten classroom sessions of 30 minutes; each was developed on the basis of deviance find in the answers to the questionnaire. These materials consist of six different elements:

a) The researcher's explicit explanation of speech act behaviors in English request realizations;

b) Information sheets presenting the main points of the lessons;

c) Role-play activities with specification pertaining to the request situations and the relations holding between participants;

d) Pair work activities in which participants were expected to discuss appropriateness of request realizations in given situations;

e) Listening to native-speaker dialogues involving the use of requests;

f) Classroom discussions of the ways in which requests are realized in English.

The explicit metapragmatic instructions for the experimental group began by a teacher-fronted discussion of various meanings that a single utterance might convey in different contexts (e.g., the menu please). Examples of request speech acts were provided, emphasizing the fact that a specific form can have several functions in the language, and a function can be realized through different forms depending on contextual variables.

After the teacher started the discussion, students were divided into different groups and asked to come up with examples of the request speech acts in their first language and second language and to discuss the differences and similarities in the realization patterns of the speech acts in their first language and the second language. Volunteer students were asked to do role plays of the intended speech acts for the whole class. Frequent sociopragmatic or paralinguistic deviations, observed in the learners' examples, were taken as teaching points and pertinent metapragmatic information or comments on the intended speech act set were provided to the whole class. Necessary reference was made to the instructional materials which students had in order to further establish and internalize the relevant metapragmatic knowledge for any patterns and strategies of the request speech act. The materialswere prepared by the researcher based on the available literature on the request speech acts. The students were then provided with dialogues in English and asked to extract the request speech acts performed by the native speakers in those dialogues and to compare them with their own strategies. In the control group classrooms, no explicit metapragmatic instruction was given. The students were just taught in accordance with the usual instructional programs of the institute. The post teaching questionnaire was given after ten teaching sessions and was the same as pre-teaching phase of the request speech act. During the investigation, the participants were asked to keep silent and were not allowed to communicate with each other, and no time limit was set for them.

2.5. Data Collection Procedure

The research was conducted based on teaching the request speech act for the experimental group and just instructing the syllabus of the institute (not teaching request speech act) for the control group. During 10 sessions, learners became familiar with different aspects of request and their questions were answered by the researcher. This process helped the participants to have a correct understanding of request speech act. Furthermore, the data were collected by the researcher in the same classes where participants studied in the institute after 10 sessions of practicing. This familiar environment helped the students feel that everything is normal. They were given the test that they received at the beginning of the study and answered them under the same conditions that they had experienced.

2.6. Data Analysis

Two dependent and independent factors were considered in this study. The independent variable was the explicit teaching materials, and the dependent variable was request speech act awareness. Moreover, a set of independent t-tests were utilized to compare the mean scores of the two groups in the pretest and posttest. It also clarified the effect of the instructions on the experimental group.

In order to increase the reliability and stability of the test scores, the researcher used the test and the retest method. The test and the retest were taken at the beginning and at the end of the term.

3. Result

As the participants were selected based on administration of a proficiency test, they were considered to be homogeneous and no pre-existing difference in terms of general English proficiency was taken into account. Apart from general proficiency, participants needed to be tested regarding their request abilities at the beginning of the study to make sure the results obtained from the study was due to the treatment. In analyzing the data, a statistical package (SPSS) was used to generate the frequencies, percentages of each variable and the relationships between them. Independent sample T-test was applied between the scores of pre-test of two groups and the results achieved.

In terms of the use of request speech act, table 1 showed the mean of the pretest of the control group was 16.30 and that of experimental group was 17.10. The p value, a predetermined significance level to be compared with observed level, was 0.05 in the study. The p value (0.070) > 0.05 revealed the fact that the two groups were not significantly different at 0.05 level in terms of the use and awareness of request. It demonstrated that the two groups were not significantly different in both pre-tests for the use of request speech act at the commencement of the study prior to the treatment. It proved that the two groups were homogeneous.

Table 1. Group statistics of the pre-test scores of experimental and control group

Group	N	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error mean
Control	30	16.3000	1.93248	.35282
Experimental	30	17.1000	1.91815	.35021

In terms of the use of request speech act, table 2 showed the mean of the posttest of the control group was 14.63 and that of experimental group was 18.30. A significant difference was between the two groups in terms of the mean. In addition, the p value of 0.00< 0.05 indicated that the two groups were different significantly. In all of the posttests of the use of request speech acts, the observed t (9.299) exceeded the critical t (2.00) (observed t > critical t = 9.299 > 2.00) as well. Table 3 revealed that by 95% confidence, it was obvious that there were differences between control group and experimental group.

Table 2. Group statistics of the post test scores of experimental and control group

Group	N	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error mean
Control	30	14.6333	1.75152	.31978
Experimental	30	18.3000	1.26355	.23069

Table 3. Use post test score

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed Equal variance not assumed	1.682	.200	9.299 9.299	58 52.75	.000 .000	3.66667 3.66667	.39431 .39431	4.45596 4.45764	2.87737 2.87570

4. Discussions

The results of the data analysis of the study confirmed the claim that explicit metapragmatic instruction facilitates interlanguage pragmatic development. Although the study ignored the 'sequence' of obtaining speech act patterns and strategies, it illustrated that explicit metapragmatic instruction in these specific patterns and strategies makes significant contributions to the students' speech act comprehension processes. The findings showed that pragmatic competence develops as a result of explicit metapragmatic instruction.

In a study by [23] on Persian requests, it was found that Persian speakers used conventionally indirect (CI) strategies in their requestive speech acts. The results supported the claim that L2 learners may not detect relevant input features in purely meaning-based L2 use [26-27]. It is claimed that in order to notice what happens, input might have to be made apparent through input enhancement, which will raise the students' consciousness about the target features.

The results of the study revealed the rather controversial issues of what effects explicit instruction haveon interlanguage development in an EFL setting like Iran. As was shown, findings of the data analysis of the study showed that explicit metapragmatic instruction by providing input enhancement in the L2 classroom, raising L2 students' awareness about the input features, and entangling them in productive class activities and language use precipitated and facilitated interlanguage pragmatic development to a considerable degree. The study appeared the vital role that explicit instruction can play in an Iranian EFL settings.

Although [28], shows that "here has been little discussion of how pragmatic abilities are acquired in a second language", lots of studies have been done in interlanguage pragmatics development since then. A lot of studies have been conducted within the field with the final goal of providing finding answers to such important issues as teach ability of pragmatic competence, the necessity for teaching second language pragmatics, and the best instructional measures to develop pragmatic competence.

5. Conclusions

It was considered to be the statement of the problem that the pragmatic aspects of the speech act including apologies, requests, compliments and complaints can be a negative experience for students. Trying to figure out when, why, and how to make use of an appropriate realization patterns is urgent. Learners often either fail to recognize these patterns or face up limits according to negative transfer in the recognition of various suitable sentences. At the same time, implicit teaching of speech acts leads the subjects astray in choosing a right and proper reply when learners are faced with a particular speech situation.

Teaching speech acts as a factor of socio-cultural skill is ignored in our English institutes, high schools and universities. For this reason, Iranian EFL learners often fail to recognize the correct function of speech acts in EFL educational settings. As the solution to the above-mentioned problem, teachers should help the students learn the appropriate techniques by applying comprehensive teaching methodologies which are considered to be an indispensable part of any EFL teaching programs. Studies to investigate strategies of request is rare in Iran; therefore, it is essential to deal with the problems by examining a communicative method of teaching in which speech acts are explicitly taught with due attention to the cross-cultural differences which are found between Persian and English. Trying to tackle the above-mentioned problems, the present study revealed that at the end of the process there were differences between homogeneous students' pretest and posttest scores. Accordingly, there were differences between students' knowledge of request speech act in experimental group that received the instructions and the teaching materials, and the control group that did not.

To sum up, it should be mentioned that teaching pragmatics enables learners to experience and experiment with the language at a deeper level, and consequently make them able to participate in the purpose of language communication, rather than just words. These kinds of issues have been paid too little attention in Iranian FLT contexts. This research can have very valuable theoretical and pedagogical implications and applications for these underestimated issues. The result of the pretest of the study proved that intermediate learners of English did not have pragmatic awareness of request speech act in the absence of any pertinent instruction. This depicts that some form of metapragmatic instruction-deductive, inductive, explicit or implicit- is essential. [1], in their review of the research to date, summarized that "there is evidence indicating that pragmatics is teachable and that pedagogical intervention has a facilitative role in learning pragmatics in FL contexts".

6. Suggestions for Further Research

As a consequence of the results of the current study, some recommendations can be made for future research for a better understanding of the effect of metapragmatic instructions on the request speech acts in Iranian intermediate EFL learners. First, the researcher of this study investigated the request speech acts in female so a further investigation of the study of request speech acts in male, or juxtaposing the use of the request speech acts between male and female might be needed to compare the effects. Second, the present study investigated the effect of metapragmatic instructions on the request speech acts while another study can be done on the effect of metapragmatic instruction on the other speech acts such as apology, refusal, suggestion, thanking or responding to compliments to see whether these instructions can be helpful in those speech acts or not. Third, this study displayed a great deal of information on the basis of certain characteristics. As the participants of the study

were intermediate level, a change can be made to do this study on other levels of learning or it can be done in other educational settings and conditions. One final recommendation can be the investigation of the effect of using corpus linguistic as an authentic source of speech acts patterns.

Appendix A

Discourse Completion Task

Please read the following descriptions of situations and write what you would say in each situation.

1) You are trying to study in your room and hear loud music coming from another student's room down the hall. You don't know the student, but you decide to ask him/her to turn the music down. What would you say?

2) You are at the record store with your best friend. There's a CD you really want to buy, but you don't have any money. How do you ask your friend to lend you money?

3) You are studying at home. Your younger brother opens the window and the cold wind blows right into your face and bothers you. You want to ask him to close it. What would you say?

4) You have bought a shirt from a big store for your father, but he doesn't like its color. You decide to go to the clothes store and ask the manager of the store to allow you to exchange the shirt. What would you say?

5) Your friend and you go to a restaurant to eat. You want to order and need to ask the waiter for the menu. What would you say?

6) You are writing your thesis and need to interview the president of a university whom you don't know. You know the president is very busy, but still want to ask him/her to spare one or two hours for your interview. What would you say?

7) For registration you need to fill out a couple of forms. You search all of your pockets and cannot find a pen. You want to ask another student who is sitting next to you in the department hall. What would you say?

8) You were absent last Friday history class that you are enrolled in. So you decide to borrow your friend's notes to catch up with the rest of the class. What would you say to get this friend to lend you the notes?

9) You are a professor teaching a course in psychology. You want one of the students who is very competent and always contributes to class discussion, to present a paper in a class a week earlier than scheduled. However, midterm exams are next week and she has a heavy course load. What would you say?

10) You really have to take this course in order to graduate, but you found that the course is already closed. So, you decide to ask the professor, whom you don't know, to allow you to take this course. What would you say

to get this professor to permit you to participate in this course?

11) You have a paper due in one of your classes next week. However, you will be very busy this week and don't have any time to write it. You go to your Professor's office to ask for more time to write the paper. How do you request an extension?

12) You are a librarian. Today a student is making a noise and disturbing other students. You don't know that student. However, you decide to ask the student to quiet down. What would you say?

13) A friend of yours from out of the town is paying you a visit. Both of you would like to take a photo together to remember this happy moment. You decide to ask a nearby person who is a stranger to you, to do this favor. What would you say?

14) You and your friend are members of the college skiing club. You have just arrived at the mountain and see that your friend is applying sunscreen lotion. You want to use that lotion because you have forgotten to bring your own. How would you ask your friend?

15) Your English midterm exam is approaching, and you find that the date of the test is the same as that of your brother's wedding. You decide to ask the professor whom you don't know personally to rearrange another day especially for you to take this test. What would you say?

16) Your mother will be visiting from out of town and you want to pick her up at the airport. However, her flight arrives at 3:00 p.m., but you have to work until 5:00 p.m. How do you ask your boss to let you out of work early?

17) You are a teacher. It's the beginning of the semester and you don't know the students yet. In class, the mobile phone of one of your students rings. You want to ask him/her to turn off the mobile phone. What would you say?

18) You are going to visit your friend, who lives in the college dormitory. You are on the campus, but you don't know where the room is. You are going to ask a student for the location of the dorm. How would you ask the student?

19) It is 7:00 a.m. and you want to go to work. You have to leave your daughter alone because her babysitter is late. You decide to ask your friend, who lives in your neighborhood to take care of your little daughter in the meanwhile. What would you say?

20) You are the manager of a company. You are in the meeting with the other members of your company. You need to write some notes, but you realize that you don't have any paper. You turn to the person sitting next to you and you know him/her very well. What would you say?

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