

Special Extended Teaching Note

Incidental Instruction of English Oral Request Pragmatics: Why and How

Liatris Myers, Colegio Colombo Británico

Abstract

Second language pragmatics are not easily acquired by second language learners for a variety of reasons including negative first language transfer, insufficient grammatical competence, and inadequate instruction. For adult learners living in the second language environment, adequate pragmatic knowledge is essential even for beginning level learners in order for them to be able to have positive interactions with speakers of the second language. Unfortunately, ESL curricula may not prioritize pragmatic skills or allow much time for extracurricular instruction. However, incidental instruction is one way to address this problem. This article suggests a number of ways that teachers can integrate English oral request pragmatics instruction into their interactions with learners: using various methods for responding to learners, integrating requests into classroom procedures, highlighting naturally occurring requests, inserting brief materials-light lessons, and connecting with course curriculum. Multiple approaches are suitable for every language level.

Key words: *intensive English program, incidental instruction, language pragmatics, oral requests*

Introduction

Working in an Intensive English Program (IEP) at a university in the U.S., I observed that regardless of language proficiency level, the IEP students often made direct requests, such as “give me”. Knowing that they did not intend to be rude, I ignored the way they spoke until an IEP student told me about a traumatic and confusing experience she had suffered when she made a request using “give me” and received an angry response. Asking around, I heard additional stories including one about a local business complaining to the IEP that IEP students made requests rudely and needed to be educated about it. I realized that how English language learners make requests matters because it can impact their interactions with expert English speakers, access to goods and services,

and success in school and/or work. I decided to investigate why the problem existed and how it could be solved.

A variety of request strategies exists in languages, and these can be described on a scale from direct to indirect (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989). Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) identify three levels of directness:

- impositives (direct), such as “Give me the pencil”
- conventionally indirect, such as “I don’t have anything to write with”
- hints or nonconventionally indirect (p. 18), such as “Could you hand me the pencil?”

Native speakers of American, Australian, and British English generally prefer conventionally indirect request strategies (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989, p. 103, 125; Ishikawa, 2013, p. 61; Tawalbeh & Al- Oqaily, 2012, pp. 89-90; Trosborg, 1994, pp. 225, 276-277) with native speakers of Australian English using *can/could* and *will/would* for the majority of conventionally indirect requests (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989, p. 49). Request strategies may also be accompanied by modifications such as “please” but in English these seem to be optional (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989).

Request strategy choice by expert speakers is related to language pragmatics. In linguistics, pragmatic meaning is the meaning intended, as opposed to the literal meaning (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010, p. 5). For instance, “Give me the paper” literally asks for the item while “Could I have the paper?” literally asks if it is possible to obtain the item. However, pragmatically in American English, in most situations the first will be considered an order that is rude as a request, and the second a polite request. Pragmatic differences between languages can lead to negative transfer which is when second language learners apply rules from their first language to their second language when those rules do not work in the second language. For example, in Arabic, the imperative (e.g. “Give me the paper”) pragmatically expresses solidarity (Alfattah & Ravindranath, 2009; Al-Marrani & Sazalie, 2010) and is generally considered acceptable and often preferred (Alfattah & Ravindranath, 2009; Al-Marrani & Sazalie, 2010; Tawalbeh & Al-Oqaily, 2012), but when Arabic speakers apply this to English they tend to sound rude to expert English speakers.

Grammatical ability can also impact request strategy selection (Francis, 1997). Direct grammatical forms are easier for language learners (consider, “*Give me the paper*” vs. “*Could you hand me the paper?*”) and even speakers of a language that generally uses indirect request strategies may tend to select direct request strategies in a language they are beginning to learn (Koike, 1989). However, advanced ESL learners can still be unable to make pragmatically polite requests in English (Halenko & Jones, 2011) which may be

related to a lack of pragmatic knowledge (Lee, 2011). Unfortunately, second language curricula tend to neglect language pragmatics (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010, p. 201), though learners may take ten or more years to learn second language pragmatics even with continuous exposure to the language (Olshtain & Blum-Kulka, 1985, pp. 310-322). Textbooks generally provide little information on request pragmatics (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010, p. 151) and without revision and practice, request pragmatics knowledge learned may be lost (Halenko & Jones, 2011).

My own IEP followed a packed curriculum focused on preparing learners to succeed in university classes and between the focus on curriculum, lack of time for extracurricular instruction, and tendency of teachers to become accustomed to learner speech and not notice pragmatically rude requests, request instruction seldom occurred. However, two IEP students who had learned English request pragmatics told me separately that they had learned it when a teacher responded to a pragmatically rude request with spontaneous instruction. I realized the problem could be addressed through incidental instruction – instruction inserted opportunistically into interactions with learners, whether part of a lesson or not, whether planned or unplanned.

Pedagogical Solutions

From the foregoing discussion, several important points emerge:

- Second language learners benefit from explicit instruction on making pragmatically appropriate requests in the second language and need ongoing input and practice to maintain request making skills.
- In American, British, or Australian varieties of English a request beginning with can/could/will/would is generally considered polite and modifications such as “please” are optional.
- Brief and even spontaneous instruction on requests may be adequate to improve request making skills.

What follows are a series of principled and research-based suggestions for integrating incidental instruction of English oral request pragmatics into ESL curricula. They are divided into two main sections: instruction through feedback, and integration of request instruction and practice into classroom procedures and lessons.

Instruction of Requests by Teacher Feedback

Immediate corrective feedback

Language level: Beginning to advanced.

If teachers observe a pragmatically rude request, they can provide immediate

corrective feedback, though this method may not always be appropriate in every situation. Once, when learners were arriving for class, one told me to open the window. I told him it was polite to say, “Could you” and wrote the corrected request on the board. He repeated it and I opened the window. In this case I felt immediate correction was appropriate because the learner was relaxed and focused, the correction did not disrupt an activity, I had a good rapport with the learner, and his classmates were not paying attention. If any of these factors had been different, immediate corrective feedback might not have been appropriate.

If the teacher decides to provide immediate corrective feedback on request pragmatics, there are two approaches that might be used. The first is elicitation of learner self-correction. For instance the teacher might say, “Could you say that again?” or “How do we say that?” or “Can you say that another way?” or “*Give me the paper?*” or simply “*Give me...?*” The other is teacher provision of the corrected language. The teacher may use a *recast* in which the learner’s utterance is rephrased. For example, if the learner says “Give me the paper”, the teacher might say “*Could I have the paper?*” or “*Could I have...?*” Alternatively, the teacher might use an *explicit correction* by stating that the learner’s utterance was incorrect and providing a corrected form. For instance, the teacher might say, “No, *could I have the paper,*” or “You just said *give me*, but that can sound rude in English. Let’s try that again. Repeat after me.”

Recasts and explicit corrections tend to be less effective than elicitations of self-correction (Panova & Lyster, 2002), but if learners cannot produce the desired language, teacher provision of language is necessary. Recasts do tend to be more effective when the learner’s utterance is shortened to emphasize the correction (e.g. “*Can I have...*” rather than “Can I have the paper”), and learner noticing and repairing of errors can be improved by having them repeat the corrected language (Panova & Lyster, 2002).

You said – you meant

Language level: higher beginning and up

While monitoring learners working on an activity, the teacher writes down language errors made by selected learners and provides a correction for the language error, using a “You Said – You Meant” form (see Figure 1). Later, the teacher quietly gives the forms to learners and invites questions (A. Noonan, personal communication, January 2015). This approach is useful for providing individual feedback.

Language feedback time

Language level: higher beginning and up

Some teachers reserve a time, such as the last five minutes of class or a time period on a particular day, to provide feedback on any common language issues they observe.

Figure 1. You Said – You Meant Form Example

Name <u> Ali </u>	
You Said	You Meant
<i>Give me paper. (Impolite)</i>	<i>Could I have a paper? (Polite)</i>

Such time could be used for instruction and practice of the pragmatics of requests. For revision and practice, this could occur on multiple days over time. Teachers can also solicit language concerns from learners by, for example, keeping a basket for learners to leave notes, or putting sticky notes on a page by the door for learners to write on. Teachers can then address these during language feedback time. In this way, learners can raise concerns they have about making requests as well as other topics.

Request Instruction and Practice through Classroom Procedures and Lessons

Dialogue building

Language level: beginning to advanced

Thornbury (n.d.) describes a technique he calls *dialogue building* which could be used to address request pragmatics. Basically, the teacher 1) draws a simple picture on the board which shows a situation, 2) elicits and co-constructs appropriate language from the learners, 3) practices the exchange with one learner, 4) has two learners practice the exchange, and then 5) has all learners practice in pairs simultaneously. To apply this technique to request pragmatics the teacher could, for example, draw a picture showing one learner wanting to borrow a pencil from another. Dialogue could be written off to the side with names before each utterance, like a play transcript. In fact, the play transcript style alone without a picture can be quite effective if the exercise arises from a question or situation that the whole class is privy to, thus eliminating the need to establish context. See Thornbury (n.d) for his variations on dialogue building.

Some additional considerations and variations on the dialogue-building theme, inspired by Thornbury, include the following:

- Practice the request and response sequence by chanting to build automaticity and practice intonation and prosody. Explore how intonation can change a sentence, for example “Could you hand me the pencil.” (flat tone) vs. “Could you hand me the pencil?” and practice the intonation that is most likely to elicit the desired response.
- To raise learner awareness of the speech act, provide a dialogue in which a request received a negative response, and ask learners what the problem is and how to fix it. Once a solution has been reached, practice may follow.
- Present learners with two request scenarios, one of which was successful and the other unsuccessful, and have learners analyze the differences between them to raise learner awareness of the speech act. Analysis can be followed by practice.
- Have a dialogue with the class in which one (the teacher or the class) plays the requester, and the other plays the recipient of the request. This can be used to explore how what one person says influences the other, and to practice an extended dialogue, especially if the teacher plays a reluctant recipient.

Incorporating request practice into classroom procedures

Language level: beginning

Teachers may introduce beginning level learners to request making through the gradual introduction and use of phrases such as

- Can you repeat that?
- Can you spell (that)?
- Can I have (item)?
- Can I borrow (item)?
- Can I join you?

Appropriate responses, such as “Yes,” and “Sorry, no,” can also be introduced. These phrases not only introduce learners to requests but also give them opportunities for revision and practice in the classroom. The teacher may also expose learners to the “Can you [verb] [object]” form, at least passively, by asking learners to perform tasks such as turning the lights off or on.

Highlighting naturally occurring requests to raise speech act awareness

Language level: higher-beginning and up

Another way to instruct and practice requests is to highlight requests that occur naturally. For example, if a story used in the class includes an oral request, the teacher might ask what the requester asked and how the recipient of the request responded. Then the teacher could ask questions about what might have happened if the requester had phrased the request differently, or the recipient had given a different response. This could be followed by having learners practice request sequences in chorus and in pairs. Another approach would be to consider how the teacher makes requests and why, contrasting this with other situations and languages.

Teaching the request continuum to raise speech act awareness

Language level: intermediate and up

To teach the request continuum and raise speech act awareness the teacher can write “direct,” “conventional,” and “indirect” in columns across the board, then give the learners a request scenario and write different types of requests in the appropriate columns. For example, if the scenario is asking for a pencil, “Give me a pencil” might go in the direct column, “Could I borrow a pencil?” in the conventional column, and “I don’t have a pencil” in the indirect column. Once learners are oriented, the teacher asks learners how the teacher makes requests in different situations and writes the learners’ responses in the appropriate columns. Then the teacher asks learners how it might be appropriate for them to make requests in a variety of situations and adds them to the columns. Differences between situations and languages, as well as the role of “please” can also be discussed. Practice can follow. In addition, the same instructional approach could be used to teach culturally appropriate terms of address for gaining someone’s attention before making a request (e.g. “Excuse me,” “Hi,” “Hey,” the person’s name, or nothing), and when and what it is appropriate to request of whom.

Connecting with a curriculum-based activity

Language level: higher-beginning and up

Request instruction can also be connected with curriculum-based exercises. For example, if learners are doing an interview activity, they can be instructed to approach each other and request to ask questions as if approaching strangers to do a survey. First, the teacher explains the task, and then elicits appropriate language from the learners, writing it on the board. If it does not come up naturally, the teacher should cover how to respond politely to a refusal as well as to an agreement, especially if the learners will actually survey strangers in the future. To ensure that all learners practice being both the requester and the request recipient, the teacher can give half of the learners one color of

paper and half a different color of paper. In the first round, one color can interview the other color, and in the second round they can switch. If the learners will actually soon be surveying strangers outside the class, it may be an appropriate time to also cover who and when it is appropriate to approach.

Conclusions

Second language pragmatics take a long time to learn without instruction and their lack can create social problems. Fortunately, even with constraints of curriculum and time there are many ways for teachers to integrate incidental instruction of English oral request pragmatics into their interactions with learners of all language proficiency levels. The key is teacher awareness and an eye for instructional opportunities. Once, in a mid-beginning level class a learner asked me if “Here you go” meant the same as “Give me.” I used this as an opening to explain the pragmatic meaning of “Give me” vs. other request forms. I wrote on the board:

Give me coffee. (Angry face.)

Please give me coffee. (Neutral face.)

Could I have coffee? (Smiley face.)

The class was uncharacteristically attentive and engaged, realizing they had been being accidentally rude, but grateful for the instruction. It only took a couple of minutes and I knew they would be practicing it when they went to the coffee shop.

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Liatrix Myers earned her master's degree in Linguistics, Language Teaching Specialization track, from the University of Oregon. She has been an ESL/ESOL Instructor in Oregon at INTO Oregon State University and Chemeketa Community College, and is now teaching 6th through 11th grade English at Colegio Colombo Británico in Envigado, Colombia.