**Interlanguage Requests in Academic Encounters**

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**Introduction**

In the field of interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) there is now a substantial body of empirical studies which document how learners and native speakers differ with regard to speech act production (e.g. Blum-Kulka *et al.* 1989, Hassall 2001, Hill 1997, Trosborg 1995). The present study is a ‘single moment’ study (Cook 1993, Rose 2000) which informs on speech act use and focuses on the pragmalinguistic aspects of advanced learners’ pragmatic performance in a status-unequal (student/tutor) scenario.

The study compares interlanguage requests of advanced ESL learners with British native speakers on a written discourse completion task (WDCT). Despite the extensive criticisms of WDCTs in the literature (Bou-Franch & Lorenzo-Dus 2005, Golato 2003, Mey 2004), specifically in relation to the construct validity of such tasks for examining discourse features of pragmatic performance, the present study supports Kasper & Rose’ (2002) contention that: “when carefully designed, WDCTs provide useful information about speakers’ pragmalinguistic knowledge of the strategies and linguistic forms by which communicative acts can be implemented and about their sociopragmatic knowledge of the context factors under which particular strategic and linguistic choices are appropriate” (Kasper & Rose 2002:96). As such, the findings of the study are not treated as findings deriving from actual discourse, but rather as findings relating to what speakers tend to view as being pragmatically appropriate linguistic behaviour.

**Subjects and Procedure**

Two participant groups comprising a total of 187 students took part in the present study. These were 95 ESL learners and 92 British English native speaker students of undergraduate and postgraduate study in UK higher education institutions. More specifically, the learner group consisted of advanced mixed-L1 learners. Eighty three of the ESL learners were native speakers of Greek. The remaining twelve learners taking part in the study comprised three pairs of Japanese and three pairs of German learners who completed the task in pairs. Thus a total of 89 ESL learner responses were documented and analysed. These participants had spent an average of 19.1 months in the target language community and their age ranged from 17-38.

The British sample’s age ranged from 17-46. In order to avoid influences from other cultures, no ethnic-minority students were included in the study. Of the 92 native speaker sample, six of the students completed the tasks in pairs, thus a total of 89 native speaker responses were documented.

The discourse completion task was designed to elicit requests in writing on a status-unequal (student/tutor) scenario. Subjects were given a short description of the scenario, which specified the setting, the familiarity and the social power between the participants and were then asked to complete the dialogue by performing a request for an assignment extension from their lecturer.

**Results and Discussion**

Each of the elicited requests was analysed and coded with regards to internal modification (both lexical/phrasal downgraders and syntactic downgraders), external modification (external mitigating supportive moves added to the head act), and request perspective. The percentage frequencies of this analysis were calculated and statistically tested in order to establish any statistically significant differences. More specifically, Chi-square tests of Independence, being suitable for nominal data, were used for the statistical analyses.

The results which derived from the present study can be summarised as follows:

- Learners overused zero marking, and underused the politeness marker ‘please’, the cajoler and the consultative device in internal modification as compared to NS.
- Learners used fewer apologies but overused imposition minimisers and preparators in external modification as compared to NS.
- Both groups employed the grounder as the most frequent external modification device.
- NS used discourse orientation moves interpersonally to signal shared knowledge, indicate common ground, & focus topic of request.
- NS made more frequent use of impersonal perspective which combined with a range of internal mitigation devices and formulaic constructions.

The findings relating to the learners’ overuse of zero marking through lexical/phrasal downgraders is consistent with findings from other studies (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2008a, 2008b *in press*, Hassall 2001, House and Kasper 1987, Trosborg 1995, Otcu & Zeyrek 2006, Woodfield 2007) which have also supplied evidence that intermediate and advanced learners internally modify their requests less frequently than native speakers. In explaining this finding, appeals were made to the linguistic competence required in internal modification (Bardovi-Harlig 1999), the extra processing effort required to add complex structures to bare head acts (Trosborg 1995) and to the learners’ lack of extra inferencing capacity regarding the mitigating function of syntactic downgraders (Faerch & Kasper 1989).
The result concerning the learners’ underuse of the marker ‘please’, however, contradicted the findings received from Fearch and Kasper (1989), House (1989) and Barron (2003). In these studies the learners were found to overuse the politeness marker, something which was seen as resulting from the marker’s double function as illocutionary force indicator and transparent mitigator. In the present study, the majority of learners were of Greek origin and thus it is possible that cross-cultural influences were at play. The Greek marker ‘parakalo’ (please) is employed more commonly with bald-on-record strategies and more specifically with direct questions and want statements (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2005, 2008a, 2008b in press) in contrast with the use of ‘please’ in English which is commonly used with conventionally indirect requests. The learners were also found to significantly underuse the apology as a supportive move for their requests. This result was also associated with pragmalinguistic transfer as in Greek society, where the emphasis is on the positive rather than negative aspect of face (Brown & Levinson 1978, 1987), overt expressions of apologies and thanks are often seen as unnecessary or reserved for what are considered very serious offences (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2008b, in press).

Significant differences were evident in the use of preparators and imposition minimisers as the learner group this time significantly overused these devices by preparing the hearer for the ensuing request and by trying to reduce the imposition placed on the hearer by their request. It was argued that the learners’ over-reliance on such supportive moves may find its roots in the learners’ lack of confidence resulting from their non-native linguistic proficiency (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2008b in press) and their social role as overseas students.

Results also confirmed that the grounder is perhaps the most frequent supportive move, not only in native English requests but also in interlanguage requests, a finding which agrees with the evidence from several interlanguage studies (Blum-Kulka & Olshitan 1986, Faerch & Kasper 1989, Hassall 2001, Schauer 2007, Woodfield 2004). This result also seems to point towards the fact that the grounder is acquired by learners quite early on, probably due to the fact that offering explanations and/or justifications for the request does not require knowledge of idiomatic (i.e. native-like) use and simply involves the construction of a new, often syntactically simple clause (Hassall 2001:274).

A closer examination of the data collected interestingly revealed qualitative differences regarding the content of the grounder offered. Bardovi-Harlig (2001) notes that content is one of the ways in which NSs and NNSs may differ in their contribution. In the present study, our data reveal that while the native speakers generally employed rather vague explanations and reasons, the learners went into a much greater detail by providing specific reasons and explanations, primarily concerning matters of poor health, family emergencies and so on. Reference to the value of honesty was also made on the part of some learners.

The final finding relates to differences in learner and native speaker frequencies of use of impersonal perspective. The native speakers made significantly greater use of impersonal perspective and a closer qualitative investigation revealed that the native speaker data coded for impersonal perspective related to formulaic patterns around the lexical item ‘chance’ (e.g. ‘Is there any chance for an extension?’). In turn, these constructions in the native speaker corpus were evident in tandem with internal mitigation devices such as negative supposition, past tense/aspect marking, conditional structures or elliptical forms. This finding was in line with Ellis’ (1992, 1997) and Rose’s (1992) studies which also observed very few utterances encoding a joint or impersonal perspective in the learner corpus of their studies.

**Conclusion**

The present study compared the pragmalinguistic knowledge of speech act use of advanced ESL learners and British English native speakers in a status unequal situation and identified significant differences in internal and external modification patterns and in the formulation of perspective in request production. The findings of this study strongly suggest that even at advanced levels of proficiency and in a study abroad context, ESL learners’ pragmatic performance may reveal important pragmatic deviations from that of native speakers. These pragmatic deviations on the part of the non-native speakers can have serious implications for ESL learners, who, by virtue of living in the target environment (e.g., as university students), have an increased need for successful interaction. This study therefore has implications for the learning of pragmatics by advanced learners during study abroad, especially through exposure to the informal learning environment. Implications are also evident for the development of pragmatic competence in ESL pedagogy in more formal settings.

**References**


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