

REQUESTS IN EFL: INTERLANGUAGE PRAGMATIC STUDY ON INDONESIAN LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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Abstract

This paper is a part of a larger scale of interlanguage pragmatic study on Indonesian EFL learners in expressing request strategies. The research participants were forty students of Junior High School in Central Java, Indonesia. Data for this study were elicited from the respondents by written Discourse Completion Tasks (DCT), which consisted of nine situations in different social situations. The findings of the study showed the EFL learners employed both direct and indirect strategies of requests. Nevertheless, they mostly utilized conventionally indirect (hearer-oriented condition) strategies in the form of ability/willingness/ permission. Regarding direct request, they employed obligatory, performative and imperative requests. It was also found that the more familiar the interlocutors the more direct they will make requests.

Keywords: *request strategies, interlanguage pragmatics, indirectness, directness*

Abstrak

Artikel ini merupakan bagian dari riset pragmatik interlingual pada penggunaan tindak tutur meminta yang dilakukan oleh pembelajar bahasa Inggris di Indonesia. Partisipan penelitian ini adalah siswa sekolah menengah pertama di Jawa Tengah. Data penelitian diambil dengan menggunakan angket isian wacana yang terdiri dari sembilan situasi sosial yang berbeda. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pembelajar bahasa Inggris dalam penelitian ini menggunakan strategi langsung dan tidak langsung ketika menggunakan tindak tutur meminta dalam bahasa Inggris. Namun demikian, strategi yang paling banyak digunakan adalah strategi tidak langsung dengan sub strategi kemampuan/kesediaan/memberi ijin. Dalam hal strategi langsung, mereka menggunakan beberapa strategi, yaitu strategi kewajiban, imperatif dan performatif. Penelitian ini juga menemukan bahwa semakin akrab penutur, semakin langsung mereka mengekspresikan tindak tutur meminta.

Kata kunci: *tindak tutur meminta, pragmatik interlingual, strategi langsung, strategi tidak langsung*

1. Introduction

In the last decade, pragmatic competence of foreign or second language learners has been increasingly studied under a new field of second language learning: Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP). Through the scope of ILP, the variety of research interest and development seek to investigate three basic concerns: the production of L2 pragmatics by learners, pragmatic comprehension or understanding by L2 learners, and the development of their pragmatic competence. One of the basic challenges for research in ILP has been the issue of the production of speech acts in relation to Leech's (1983) two modules of pragmatics: sociopragmatics and pragmalinguistics. The former relates to the social perception underlying the production and comprehension of illocution, while the latter concerns the linguistic forms to express illocution. For second or foreign language learners, especially for those concerning with communicative language learning and teaching, both elements are essential for surviving in cross-cultural communication.

Under the study of speech act production, request has been the most important act studied in interlanguage pragmatics. Although request is the most common of speech act used by people to ask someone doing something in daily basis, it is not easily done by L2 learners. A number of studies have examined how learners produced request expressions in second language and they have shown that learners opted for different request strategies. As reported that as proficiency increases, learners develop request strategies from a less direct level to a more direct level. In Indonesian EFL learning context however, ILP study has been very limited, in particular the one which investigates speech act of request. The present study aims to fill in this understudied area

by observing pragmatic competence of Indonesian learners of English regarding the application of request strategies at the levels of increasing directness and the power relation between collocutors.

2. Literature Review

This study is not the first that concerns with interlanguage request as there have been a number of studies investigating this speech act. One of the studies was conducted by House and Kasper (1981) who compared requests in German and English. They distinguished eight levels of directness in requests, ranging from the least indirect (mild hints) to the most direct (imperative). They hypothesized that the social norms in phrasing requests would be different in the two communities. The study showed that non-native speakers (the German) tended to choose the direct levels in making requests, while native speakers (the English) tended to be more indirect. The German speakers were judged by English natives as being less polite in their requestive acts.

Blum-Kulka (1982) studied the domain of pragmatic failure by comparing request realizations of native and non-native speakers. They used Hebrew and English native and non-native CCSARP data concerning request situations. The data analysis revealed that there was a systematic difference between native and non-native speakers of English in terms of the length of verbal utterances. Hebrew speakers used more words when making a request than did native English speakers. The investigators interpreted the conflict in cultural norms of conversational interaction as a source of pragmatic failure, which caused native English speakers to react with irritation to the Hebrews verbosity.

Kim (1995) studied requests performed by Korean non-native speakers

of English. Oral Discourse Completion Test was used as an instrument to elicit the data of the study. The participants of the study were composed of native Americans, non-native Koreans, and native Korean respondents. The results indicated that the sociopragmatic features of the situational context of the three language groups determined directness levels and supportive moves in request. However, the non-native speakers' requests deviated from the norms of native speakers of English due to negative transfer to their L1 pragmatic rules.

Fukushima (1996) studied request strategies of British and Japanese speakers. Fukushima hypothesized that situations with higher degree of imposition required more politeness strategies, both in English and Japanese. The results confirmed the hypotheses that higher degree of imposition required more politeness strategies in both languages. Both groups seemed to be influenced by the degree of imposition, social distance and relative power between the speaker and the hearer, yet there were differences in terms of strategies. While the British tended to use conventional indirect forms, the Japanese seemed to prefer the more direct ones.

Umar's (2004) study observed request strategies used by advanced Arab learners of English as compared to those used by native speakers of English. The results showed that the native speakers of English used more semantic and syntactic modifiers than their Arabic counterparts and hence their requests sounded more polite and tactful. The investigator attributed this to the linguistic superiority of the native speakers group. The study ended up with some theoretical and pedagogical implications. As reported the Arab students of English, even at advanced levels, felt back on their cultural background when formulating their requests strategies.

Al-Marrani and Sazalie (2010) looked into the pragmatic competence of Yemeni Arabic speakers in making requests. The findings of the study showed that there was a general trend in Yemeni Arabic for higher level of indirectness in male-female interaction. The result of the study showed that male speakers of Yemeni Arabic preferred using direct strategies frequently with or without softener because they considered it as an effective way of expressing a polite request particularly with junior or acquaintances.

Sofwan and Rusmi (2011) studied the realization of request strategies by non-native of English. They used nine strategy types of request combined into three major levels of directness. They analyzed the request strategies based on CCSARP (Cross Culture Speech Act Realization Project) categories by Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989). The respondents of the study were non-native speaker of English teachers. This study found that there was a different distance between the interlocutors; there was also different preference of making request strategies. With respect to the power relation between the interlocutors, the lower the requesters' power, the more varied the preference of request strategies will be. The higher the requesters's power, the less different types of request strategies they will use.

The previous studies above examined the use of requests in various contexts. For example, they compared the use of requests by two or more groups of speakers of language such as non-native German-native English, non-native Korean-native American-native Korean, Hebrew-English, and so on. The present study examined the use of request by a group of non-native English speakers, male and female English students in Indonesian EFL learning context. This study employed

request strategies presented at a level of increasing directness proposed by Trosborg (1995).

3. Method

This study applied a descriptive qualitative approach to explore request strategies used by the Indonesian learners of English to determine the types and the choice of request strategies. Forty (40) respondents took part in this study. They were taken randomly and classified into two groups consisting of male group ($n=20$) and female group ($n=20$).

The data for this study were elicited from the English learners by means of written Discourse Completion Test (DCT). DCT is a form of test depicting some natural situations to which the respondents make responses according situation of requests. This test was originally designed by Blum-Kulka (1983) which has been widely used since then for collecting data on speech acts realization both within and across language groups. The DCT used in this study involved nine written situation. Each DCT situation involves a brief description that illustrates the relations between the participants (acquaintance or stranger) and their dominance over each other (high, equal or low). The following are the DCT situations.

Situation One: You want your younger sister to tell your parents that you want to go to your friend's house this afternoon. Because your parents are not at home, you ask her to tell them when they go back home. *What would you say to her?*

Situation Two: You want your classmate whom you know very well to accompany you to submit your report book to the teacher. *What would you say to him/her?*

Situation Three: You ask your father to fix your bike when he is reading a newspaper

in the living room. *What would you say to him?*

Situation Four: You are the chairperson of School Organization (OSIS). You ask your junior as a students' activity section to prepare an attendance list and agenda in the reorganization of OSIS. *What would you say?*

Situation Five: You want your schoolmate to give you a lift to the hospital. You want to visit a sick classmate in the hospital. *What would you say?*

Situation Six: Your teacher has explained the lesson twice but you still do not understand it very well. You ask your teacher to explain it once again. *What would you say to your teacher?*

Situation Seven: You are a committee of The Student Orientation activity in your school. One of the freshmen comes late in the first session of the Student Orientation Program. You ask him/her to get a permission form from the counseling office for being late. *What would you say to him/her?*

Situation Eight: You join an English Reading competition and you do not know to how to fill in registration form provided by the committee of the competition because you come late and you miss the explanation from the committee. You ask one of the participants next to you who is also filling the same form to help you. *What would you say to him/her?*

Situation Nine: You have graduated from SMP 3 Pati and wanted to continue studying at SMA 1 Pati. You do not know the requirements you have to meet to study at the school. You go there and meet one of teachers of SMA 1 at the front office and you ask him/her a brochure about the requirement. *What would you say to him/ her?*

Table 1. The Summary of the Nine Situations of the DCT

DCT	Listener	Pragmatic situation	Power	Distance
1	Younger sister	Requesting to tell to parents that you want to go out	+P	-D
2	Classmate	Requesting for companion	-P	=D
3	Father	Requesting to fix abroken bike	-P	-D
4	Junior	Requesting to prepare the attendance list and agenda	+P	+D
5	Schoolmate	Requestingto give a lift	-P	=D
6	Teacher	Requesting to explain the lesson once more	-P	-D
7	Freshman (new student)	Requesting to take a permission form	+P	+D
8	Participant	Requesting for help to fill in a registration form	-P	+D
9	One of SMA 1 teacher	Requesting for a brochure about the re-quirement	-P	+D

The data elicited via DCT were then analyzed based on Trosborg's (1995: 205): the 8-level of request strategies summarized below.

Table 2. Request Strategies

	Level of Directness	Stratey Types
Cat. I	Indirect Request	(1). Hints -Mild -Strong
Cat. II	Conventionally Indirect (hearer-oriented condition)	(2).Ability -Willingness -Permission (3). Suggestory Formulae
Cat. III	Conventionally Indirect (speaker-based condition)	(4). Wishes/desires (5). Needs/demands
Cat. IV	Direct Request	(6). Obligation (7). Performatives -Hedged -Unhedged,(8). Imperatives -Elliptical Phrases

4. Results and Discussion

This section discusses the impacts of familiarities (close, familiar, and unfamiliar) on the choice of request strategies. This part discusses the impacts of different combinations of familiarities on the ways in which request strategies are conducted by the research participants.

4.1. Request strategiesused in situation 1, 2, and 3

This research found six request strategies, namely: (a) ability/willingness/permission , (b) needs/demands , (c) obligations, (d) performative request, and (e) imperatives, (f) hint.

Table 3. Frequencies of Request Strategies Used in Situation 1, 2, and 3

Strategies	Situation 1		Situation 2		Situation 3		Total	
	Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%
Hints	0	0	3	7,5	3	7,5	6	5
Ability/Willingness/Permission	10	25	20	50	30	75	60	50
Suggestory formula	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Wishes/Desires	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Needs/Demands	1	2,5	6	15	5	12,5	12	10
Obligation	2	5	0	0	0	0	2	2
Performatives	3	7,5	0	0	2	5	5	4
Imperatives	24	60	11	27,5	0	0	35	29
Total	40	100	40	100	40	100	120	100

Table 3 shows that in the first three categories, Conventionally Indirect (hearer-oriented condition) in the form of ability/willingness/ permission was the most frequent strategy used by the respondents in the first three situations. Half of all the respondents (50%) included this strategy, and the next most frequent strategies were imperatives (29%), needs/demands (10%), hints were used by 5% of the respondents, performatives (4%), and the rest 2% is obligations. Nevertheless, the distribution of frequency was very different for each situation level. In situation 1, 60% of the respondents used direct request in the form of imperatives and 7.5% of them were in the form of performative, followed by Conventionally Indirect (hearer-oriented condition) in the form of ability/willingness/permission (25%), around 7.5% of the respondents used performatives strategy, and 5% of them used obligation. In situation two, many respondents used ability/willingness/ permission strategies to request (50%), 27.5% of them used imperatives, 15% used needs/demands, and the rest used indirect request in the form of mild hints. In situation 3, the request strategies used by the respondents were mostly Conventionally Indirect (hearer-oriented condition) in the form of

ability/willingness/ permission (75%), and Conventionally Indirect (speaker-based condition) in the form of needs/demands (12.5%). Almost 12.5% of respondents applied Indirect request in the form of hints and the rest used direct request in the form of performative strategy.

a. Ability/willingness/permission

To do this strategy, the respondents mostly used interrogative sentence with modality *can*, *could*, *would*, etc. The following are the examples:

- (1) *Sister, can you help me to say father when he back home, if I go to my friend's house? (Situation 1)*
- (2) *Hifriend,wouldyouaccompany me to submit my report book to my teacher?(Situation 2)*
- (3) *Father, would you like to repair my bicycle in the garage?(Situation 3)*

b. Needs/demands

The EFL learners expressed their request by showing their needs. This strategy is commonly called *wants-statement*. To do needs/demands strategy the respondents used transitive verb "need". For example:

- (4) *I need you to tell Daddy that I will go to my friend's house this evening. (Situation 1)*
- (5) *I need you to accompany me to submit the report book to the teacher. (Situation 2)*
- (6) *Dad, my bike is broke, I need your help to repair it. (Situation 3)*

c. Obligations

To do this strategy, the respondents employed a statement of necessity and they exerted their own authority. They commonly showed their necessity by using *must* and used conditional *if*, for example:

- (7) *I want to go to my friend's house this afternoon. Next time, if daddy go back home, you must tell him. Okay! (Situation 1)*
- (8) *I want to go to my friend's house. You must tell father when he go back home. (Situation 1)*

d. Performative

Regarding this strategy, the research participants conveyed requestive intention using performative verbs, e.g. ask, request, order, etc. The respondents applied conditional "if" to request the requestee, for example:

- (9) *When father go back home, I ask you to tell if I go to my friend's home. (Situation 1)*
- (10) *Dad, I would like you to ask you to fix my bike now, please. I can't fix it. (Situation 3)*

e. Imperative

Imperatives requests are in the form of imperative sentences and the respondents applied action verbs to request. To do imperative strategy some respondents opened the requests with attention getters e.g., "hi" and addresser "my sister" and they also employed conditional "if", for example:

- (11) *Hi my sister, if father go back home, please tell him if I go to my Friend's house this afternoon. (Situation 1)*
- (12) *Please accompany me to submit my report book to the teacher! (Situation 2)*

f. Hints

Through this strategy, the respondents did not want to state their intention explicitly, for example:

- (13) *Let's go to the teacher's office! I want to submit my report book. (Situation 2)*
- (14) *Dad, I must go to school, but my bike is broken. (Situation 3)*

4.2. Request strategies used in situation 4, 5, and 6

The research participants employed 8 strategies of request across the three situation with different frequencies.

However, there are strategies which were used in a particular situation, for example obligation only occurred in situation 4, demand in situation 5, etc. (see Table 4 below).

Table 4. Frequencies of Request Strategies Used in Situation 4, 5, and 6

Strategies	Situation 4		Situation 5		Situation 6		Total	
	Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%
Hints	0	0	3	7,5	0	0	3	3
Ability/Willingness/Permission	11	27,5	18	45	39	97,5	68	57
Suggestory formula	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Wishes/Desires	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Needs/Demands	0	0	5	12,5	0	0	5	4
Obligation	10	25	0	0	0	0	10	8
Performative	5	12,5	2	5	1	2,5	8	7
Imperatives	14	35	12	30	0	0	26	22
Total	40	100	40	100	40	100	120	100

Table 4 shows that the respondents are liable to use Conventionally Indirect (hearer-oriented condition) in the form of ability/willingness/ permission to express request in asking someone to prepare the presence list and agenda, asking someone to give a lift, and asking to repeat the explanation of a lesson. Most of them apparently tended to use Conventionally Indirect (hearer-oriented condition) to express politeness. The second strategy to choose was direct strategies in the form of imperatives. In these situations, the respondents used direct strategies in the form of imperatives twenty seven times (22%).

Table 4 shows that when the respondents requested to people in higher status but of close or familiar relationship, they preferred direct strategies in the form of imperatives to other strategies. Compared to the direct strategies used in situation one (close-lower status) they used these strategies more in situation four (familiar-lower status). In situation five (familiar-equal status), almost all of the respondents used indirect strategies (hearer-based oriented) in the form of ability/willingness/permission. It is different from those when expressing requests in situation two (close- equal status), in which they tended to use direct strategies in the form of imperatives. In situation six (familiar-

lower status), most respondents applied attention getter "*Excuse me and pardon me Sir*" for example: "*Excuse me, would you explain the lesson once again, Mam*". They applied their reasons before and after the head acts for softening their request. It did not happen in situation three.

a. Ability/willingness/permission

To do this strategy, the respondents mostly used interrogative sentence with modality *can*, *could*, *would*, etc. Following are the examples.

- (13) *Can you prepare the presence list and agenda in OSIS reorganization?(Situation 4)*
- (14) *Can you give me a lift to the hospital? I want to visit my classmate in the hospital. (Situation 5).*
- (15) *Pardon me Sir, could you repeat it once more? I still confuse.(Situation 6)*

b. Needs/demands

The respondents expressed their request by showing *wants-statement*, for example:

- (16) *Hey, Dude. I want you to take me to the hospital. I want to visit my sick classmate in the hospital, can you?(Situation 5)*

c. Obligations

The respondents employed a statement of necessity using an auxiliary verb showing obligation *must*, e.g.,

- (17) *Excuse me, you must prepare the presence list and agenda in the reorganization of OSIS. (Situation 4)*

d. Performative

Trough this strategy, the respondents made requests using performative verbs, e.g. ask, request, order, demand, command, require, etc., e.g.,

- (18) *I ask you to prepare presence list and agenda in reorganization of OSIS.(Situation 4)*
- (19) *I ask you to give me a lift to the hospital, because I want to visit a sick classmate in the hospital,(Situation 5)*
- (20) *I would like to ask you to explain the lesson once again, Mam. I still don't understand. (Situation 6)*

e. Imperatives

Imperatives requests were expressed by imperative sentences, which involved action verbs, for example:

- (21) *Please prepare the presence list and agenda in the reorganization of OSIS!(Situation 4)*

- (22) *Take me to the hospital, please! I want to visit Anggita, our classmate.(Situation 5)*

f. Hints

Through this strategy, the requesters did not want to state their intention explicitly. To do Hints strategy, they used interrogative sentences using modality “*will*” and other strategies. For example:

- (23) *Will you go to the hospital for visiting our sick classmate?(Situation 5)*

4.3. Request strategies used in situation 7, 8, and 9

Like in the previous situations, the English learners of this study involved 8 strategies of request across the three situation with different frequencies. However, there are strategies which were used in a particular situation, for example hint only occurred in situation 8, wishes in situation 9, etc. (see table 5 below).

Table 5. Frequencies of Request Strategies Used in Situation 7,8, and 9

Strategies	Situation 7		Situation 8		Situation 9		Total	
	Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%	Σ	%
Hints	0	0	1	2,5	0	0	1	1
Ability/Willingness/Permission	4	10	36	90	36	90	76	63
Suggestory formula	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Wishes/Desires	0	0	0	0	2	5	2	2
Needs/Demands	0	0	3	7,5	1	2,5	4	3
Obligation	16	40	0	0	0	0	16	13
Performative	4	10	0	0	1	2,5	5	4
Imperatives	16	40	0	0	0	0	16	13
Total	40	100	40	100	40	100	120	100

Table 5 shows the frequencies of strategies across the three last situation. As the table indicates, when the respondent (senior respondent) asked a freshman (new respondent) to take the permission form from the counseling room (situation 7), they tended to use direct requests including strategies of obligation, and imperative performative. As the table shows, both obligation and imperative were the most frequent strategies used. Despite the high frequency of direct strategies, the respondents applied the attention getter "excuse me" and sure name "Mam/Sir. The expressions made their requests more polite. It was quite different when they asked someone in an equal and a higher status (situation 8 and 9) they tended to use Conventionally Indirect (hearer-oriented condition) with the strategy of asking ability.

a. Ability/willingness/permission

To do this strategy, the respondents mostly used interrogative sentence with modality *can* and *could*. The following was the example of the head act of request using this strategy.

- (24) *Can you take the permission form from the counseling office for being late?(Situation 7)*
- (25) *Hi, could you help me filling the same form?(Situation 8)*
- (26) *Excuse me, could you give me a brochure about the requirement?(Situation 9)*

b. Needs/demands

The respondents expressed their request by showing their *wants-statement*, for example:

- (27) *I want you to help me to fill this form, please. I missed the explanation from the committee.(Situation 8)*

- (28) *Excuse me sir, I want to ask you a brochure about the requirement, please! (Situation 9)*

c. Obligations

The respondents employed a statement of necessity and they expressed it using obligation "must", for example:

- (29) *You must take the permission form from the counseling room for being late.(Situation 7)*

d. Performative

The respondents expressed requestive intention using performative verbs, mainly *ask*. The examples are as follows. F

- (30) *I ask you to take the permission form from the counseling office because you come late. (Situation 7)*
- (31) *Excuse me Mam, I would like to ask you to give me the brochure about the requirement?(Situation 9)*

e. Imperatives

Imperatives requests involved imperative sentences, for example:

- (32) *Take the permission registration in the counseling office!(Situation 7)*

f. Hints

Through this strategy, the respondents did not want to state their intention explicitly, for example:

- (33) *Excuse me friend, I don't know how to fill in registration form that provided by committee. I don't know it because I'm late to fill the registration.(Situation 8)*

Wishes/desire

By this strategy, the speaker expresses his/her wishes towards the listener when doing the request, for example:

(34) *Excuse me mam, I would like to ask the brochure about the requirements? I didn't know about it. (Situation 9)*

Based on the data of responses to the nine situations above, the respondents tended to use ability/willingness/permission. It was because this strategy is the easiest and the most familiar form they had ever used in their daily activity. The respondents also rarely applied hints to request. It was very difficult for Junior High School students to use this strategy. Moreover, they have not been taught to make sentences in the form of hints. None of the respondents applied Suggestory formula as they hardly advised someone else. They preferred using modality "can", "could", "may", etc. for their simplicity. To sum up, in situation where the lower status interlocutors were familiar each other, the respondents showed a great tendency to use Conventionally Indirect (hearer oriented condition) in the form of ability/willingness/permission. Almost all of the respondents used this strategy. Even though the percentages of using conventionally indirect (hearer-oriented condition) were different, the respondents applied different level of politeness when they were in close-equal status. It means

that when they were more familiar they tended to use more polite requests.

4. Conclusion

This study explored the request strategies and the impact of distance to the choice request strategies. When requesting someone in nine different familiarities, the EFL learners tended to use ability/willingness/permission. Most students applied politeness device "please" even though they requested to someone who was very close. Some learners used formulaic utterances such as apologizing "please" and "sorry" preceding the head acts of requests. They employed some politeness devices above in their request to soften their requests. In using a politeness device "please", the respondents tended to produce requests that could be rated as too polite, especially when they requested to a friend. This research also found that in choosing the request strategies, requesters were influenced by social distance. In general, it can be concluded that most respondents used conventionally indirect strategies. When they had greater social distance and had high power towards the requestees, the requesters utilized all conventionally indirect strategies and so did when the interlocutors had equals distance. However, when the interlocutors were close, the speakers with high power utilized three kinds of strategies: conventionally indirect, direct strategies, and non-conventionally indirect strategies.

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