L2 English request strategies in Cyprus setting

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Abstract

This study investigated pragmatic competence and awareness of L2 learners of English. The focus was on their request strategies in L2 English, level of (in)directness, request perspective, internal and external modification and the task effect. The participants of the study were 80 Cypriot Greek undergraduate students. The pragmatic tests: discourse completion task, multiple-choice questionnaire and a role-play were used in order to assess L2 learners' pragmatic competence in oral discourse. The tasks had four conditions regarding power and social distance variables: [+social distance/status equals], [–social distance/status equals], [+social distance/hearer dominance] and [–social distance/hearer dominance]. Overall, it was found that social distance, hearer dominance, power, familiarity and imposition affect the degree of (in)directness, request perspective, internal and external modification.

Key words: Requests, (in)directness, perspective, internal, external modification

Introduction

Request speech acts and mitigating strategies in L1 and L2 have been widely and thoroughly studied across languages and cultures revealing cross-linguistic differences (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2013). Appropriate use of the request form in a social context depends on such factors as L1, culture, age and gender of the interlocutors, social distance and power relations as well as the degree of imposition. Native speakers acquire pragmatic competence subconsciously through exposure to native language from birth, which is not the case with L2 learners who need to put a conscious effort in order to learn pragmatic rules in L2 (Webman Shafran, 2019). This study aimed to investigate (in)directness of L2 English request strategies used by L1 Cypriot Greek (CG) undergraduate students, request perspective as well as internal and external modification and whether they are affected by the type of the task: oral vs. written along with power and social distance variables. The focus was on their pragmatic behaviour and interactional practices in different social settings and possible transfer from L1 CG into L2 English (Ogiermann & Bella, 2020; Taguchi & Roever, 2017).

Study

The participants of the study were 80 Greek Cypriot (CG) first year undergraduate students (17-25 years old, 44 male and 36 female, normal speech and hearing), who were learners of L2 English at a private, English-speaking

university in Cyprus. Their L2 English proficiency was from low intermediate to advanced (5-9 IELTS scores, Mean 6.5). The pragmatic tests based on the Speech Act Theory as a theoretical framework. Discourse completion task (DCT) and multiple-choice questionnaire) were implemented in the research. In addition, an oral role-play task was used in order to assess L2 learners' pragmatic competence in oral discourse. The tasks had four conditions regarding power and distance variables: [+social distance, status equals], [–social distance, status equals], [+social distance, hearer dominance] and [–social distance, hearer dominance], see examples (1)-(4) of the four conditions of the DCT:

(1) This is your first day at university. During your class you realize that you have forgotten your pen at home. You don't know the student who sits next to you but you want to borrow a pen from him/her. What would you say? [+social distance/status equals];
(2) It is a lunch time. You are at the cafeteria with your friends. It seems that your mobile phone does not work but you urgently need to call home. You want to use the mobile phone of your friend. What would you say? [–social distance/status equals];
(3) Next week you are going to take part in the university sports competition. You want to ask your professor to extend the deadline for the assignment submission. What would you say? [–social distance/hearer dominance];
(4) You are in an unknown city and you need to go to the city centre. You see a policeman and want to ask him for directions. What would you say? [+social distance/hearer dominance]. The linguistic (socio-economic) background questionnaires were used as well.

Results and discussion

The results showed that the participants had a tendency to use conventionally indirect strategy more than other strategies in all three tasks, which supports the idea of centrality of conventionalization in politeness, which is in line with the frequency-based or habit-based account of politeness and conventionalization that is related to inherent evaluation of the expression, the context and "meta-knowledge about not what expressions mean but how often they mean that." (Terkourafi, 2015: 17), see Table 1.

The participants had an overall strong preference for the hearer perspective due to a possible L1 transfer from CG in terms of pragmatic knowledge and preferred perspective, see Table 2. The findings of our study give a further evidence in support of the general pattern of the underuse of lexical modifiers by L2 English learners in comparison to native English speakers (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2008, 2009), see Tables 3 and 4 regarding internal and external modification.

Table 1. Degree of (in)directness: Total scores in the three tasks.

Task	D	CI	Non-ID	NAR
MCQ (640)	85	446	77	32
	13.29%	69.64%	12.10%	4.97%
DCT (640)	51	545	38	6
	7.96%	85.18%	5.93%	0.93%
ORP (640)	52	452	61	75
	8.18%	70.68%	9.48%	11.66%
Chi-square DCT/ORP	χ^2=12.293, df=1, p=.714	χ^2=39.337, df=1, p=.589	χ^2=5.533, df=1, p=.938	χ^2=2.734, df=1, p=.950
Chi-square DCT/MCQ	χ^2=15.721, df=1, p=.473	χ^2=45.236, df=1, p=.037	χ^2=22.858, df=1, p=.118	χ^2=4.288, df=1, p=.368
Chi-square MCQ/ORP	χ^2=13.104, df=1, p=.665	χ^2=38.715, df=1, p=.306	χ^2=11.884, df=1, p=.455	χ^2=9.139, df=1, p=.331

*MCQ=Multiple Choice Questionnaire; DCT=Discourse completion task; ORP=Oral Role Play; D=Direct; CI=Conventionally Indirect; Non-CI=Non-Conventionally Indirect; NAR=No Act of Request.

Table 2. Request perspective: Written vs. oral task.

Request Perspective	Hearer	Speaker	Inclusive	Impersonal
DCT (634)	347	226	12	49
	54.73%	35.64%	1.89%	7.74%
ORP (565)	345	121	5	94
	61%	21.33%	0.86%	16.81%
χ^2	72.703	36.017	.995	9.828
df	1	1	1	1
p	.066	.142	.319	.875

*DCT=Discourse completion task; ORP=Oral Role Play.

Table 3. Internal modification: Written vs. oral task.

IM	ZM	MP	CD/O	D	U	H	S	C	A
DCT (634)	346	203	59	12	5	0	5	2	2
	54.57	32.01	9.35	1.89	0.78	0	0.78	0.31	0.31
ORP (565)	332	188	29	3	7	4	1	1	0
	58.83	33.18	5.17	0.45	1.29	0.64	0.22	0.22	0

χ²	41.74	44.16	13.39	.195	.631	N/A	–	–	–
df	1	1	1	1	1	N/A	–	–	–
p	.759	.669	.572	.907	.427	N/A	–	–	–

*IM=internal modification; ZM=zero marking; MP=marker 'please'; CD/O=consultative devices/openers; D=downtoners; U=understaters; H=hedges; S=subjectivizers; C=cajolers; A=appealers/ *DCT=Discourse completion task; ORP=Oral Role Play.

Table 4. External modification: Written vs. oral tasks.

EM	ZM	G	D	P	G/P	PR/MP	I/M	A
DCT (634)	176	289	2	30	7	3	10	117
	27.76	45.58	0.34	4.73	1.1	0.47	1.57	18.45
ORP (565)	358	114	1	0	3	6	3	80
	63.36	20.28	0.21	0	0.43	1.07	0.43	14.22
χ²	41.56	45.98	.018	–	.153	.195	.284	27.45
df	1	1	1	–	1	1	1	1
p	.925	.556	.894	–	.695	.658	.867	.493

*EM=external modification; ZM=zero marking; G=grounders; D=disarmers; P=preparators; G/P=getting a precommitment; PR/MP=promise of a reward/make a promise; I/M=imposition minimizer; A=apology.

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