

## **Cross-Cultural Study of EFL/ESL Learners' Request Strategies**

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### **Abstract**

Differences in nonnative speakers' pragmatic performance may lead to serious communication problems. Although previous research has investigated different types of request strategies employed by English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL) learners, little is known whether they use different or similar types of request strategies in the faculty context. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate cross-cultural variation in the use of request strategies by EFL/ESL learners to their faculty. To this aim, the request strategies elicited from 38 intermediate Iranian EFL learners in Iran, 24 intermediate ESL learners in England, and 16 British native English-speaking teachers were examined. A discourse completion test (DCT) was used to elicit the EFL/ESL learners' request strategies to the faculty. Frequency findings suggested preference for the use of conventionally indirect request strategies to their faculty by the participants. Moreover, chi-square results indicated that their first language (L1) had no effect on the choice of request strategies employed by such learners to their faculty. Conclusions are that EFL/ESL learners generally use more negative politeness strategies to mitigate their requests to their faculty.

**Keywords:** Request strategies; English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL) learners; politeness

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Received: 28/05/2017

Accepted: 20/09/2017

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## 1. Introduction

The gradual emergence of pragmatics has been part of a broader paradigm shift in the advent of a relatively old concept (i.e., communicative competence; Hymes, 1971, as cited in Foster, 2014). Fraser (2010) defines pragmatic competence as “the ability to communicate your intended message with all its nuances in any sociocultural context and to interpret the message of your interlocutor as it was intended” (p. 16). Therefore, English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL) learners who aim to become communicatively competent, require knowledge of “the social and contextual factors underlying the English language” (Uso-Juan & Martinez-Flor, 2008, p. 349). This specially holds true in terms of intercultural communication (Sachare, 2009; White, 1993).

Further, an important aspect of communication is politeness. The basic idea of politeness model (Brown & Levinson, 1987) was based on the notion of *face* proposed by Goffman (1967). More specifically, in the negotiation of face, during the realization of speech acts such as request, the notion of *politeness* plays a crucial role. Holmes (2013) argues that requests are intrinsically face-threatening because they are intended to threaten the addressee’s negative face (i.e., freedom of action and freedom from imposition). Thus, in order to minimize the threat, to avoid the risk of losing face, and to smooth the conversational interaction, indirect speech acts are preferred to be used over other strategies (Leech, 2016). The link between indirectness and politeness is, further, supported by Searle’s (1979) observation who contented the root cause of using indirect strategies concerns the politeness issue in that it is considered the most prominent motivation for indirectness in requests.

As mentioned, one of the basic challenges for research in pragmatics, especially relevant in the context of speech act studies, is the issue of universality (Levinson, 1983; Yu, 2003). Though speech acts operate by universal pragmatic principles (Barron, 2003; Leech, 2016), they are different in conceptualization and verbalization across cultures and languages (Hashemian, 2014; Vaezi, 2011; Wierzbicka, 1985). Therefore, EFL/ESL learners should be able to utter expressions considered as contextually suitable and be aware of what constitutes proper linguistic behavior in different social contexts, which highlights the link between pragmatic competence and culture (Sachare, 2009).

The potential for the majority of errors committed by EFL/ESL learners root in the negative pragmatic transfer, which is the use of first language (L1) pragmatic feature that leads to the inappropriate form in EFL/ESL contexts, hence miscommunication (Atashaneh & Izadi, 2011). Therefore, EFL/ESL learners should have the knowledge of both linguistic and cultural variations between languages (Hassani, Mardani, & Hossein, 2011). Hence, the present study was undertaken to reveal whether L1 effects on EFL/ESL learners’ request strategies in their L2 (i.e., English) to their faculty are consistent or not. Further, this study intended to examine the potential similarities and differences between EFL/ESL learners’ request strategies in the faculty setting.

## 2. Literature Review

Interlocutors engaged in the negotiation of face relationships during the course of social interaction employ different strategies to express a series of communicative acts in conversations, such as requesting, complaining, refusing, or accepting (Scollon & Scollon, 2001). Request, according to Byon (2004), is “a directive that embodies an effort on the part of the speaker to get the hearer to do something” (p. 1674).

Politeness, which is a form of social interaction, is conditioned by the sociocultural norms of a particular society and can be expressed through communicative and noncommunicative acts (Shahidi Tabar, 2012). One of the fundamental tenets of pragmatics is that utterances and verbal communication should be interpreted based on the sociocultural context (Kasper & Rose, 2002). In fact, intracultural sources of variability account for the actual use in each language and the ways in which patterns of politeness differ from one language to another.

A number of studies (e.g., Jalilifar, 2009; Hassall, 2003; Ueda, 2006) have indicated how speakers’ speech acts and the degree of (in)directness they employ in specific situations are, indeed, influenced by certain social and contextual variables. In order to investigate the request strategies used by the Iranian learners of English and the Australian native speakers of English, Jalilifar (2009) conducted a study, the findings of which provided evidence that the more proficient learners had employed more indirect request strategies, whereas the native group had displayed a balanced use of this strategy. In another study, Ueda (2006) investigated request strategies employed by Japanese EFL learners. The research findings suggested that the Japanese EFL learners had preferred to use conventionally indirect request strategies; however, they had not used a wide variety of strategies.

Hassall (2003) conducted a comparative study of requests between Australian learners of Indonesian and Indonesian native speakers. The results indicated that the Australian learners had made a larger proportion of direct requests than the Indonesian native speakers. The second research finding was that all the participants had preferred to use conventionally indirect request strategies in their conversations.

Marquez Reiter, Rainey, and Fulcher (2005) also compared Peninsular Spanish and British English in a study focusing on the participants’ assumed expectation of compliance (i.e., how certain or uncertain speaker was that hearer would comply with the request) when choosing conventionally indirect request strategies. Their findings suggested that, in both languages, the participants were more likely to choose conventionally indirect requests when there was a higher degree of certainty. However, the choice of request strategies by the two groups reflected “different social meanings in Spanish and English based on different social values” (p. 22).

Reinbold (2004) conducted a study of English requests used by Japanese EFL learners and American native speakers. The results showed the

Japanese EFL learners were more indirect than the American native speakers. In a recent line of research, Hashemian (2014) investigated the possible differences between Canadian native speakers and Iranian EFL learners. His findings suggested that the EFL learners had tended to use more direct and positive politeness strategies, whereas the Canadians had tended to use indirect request strategies in a higher percentage.

Different from previous quantitative research designs, Lin (2009) conducted a qualitative study comparing the speech act of requests and compliments between Chinese graduate students and native English speakers in a British university. The purpose of Lin's (2009) study was to investigate the pragmatic failure committed by Chinese students in expressing requests and compliments in intercultural communication settings. The findings were consistent with those of Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) in that both the Chinese students and the native speakers tended to employ conventionally indirect strategies in a higher percentage; however, the Chinese students were less capable of applying more complex syntactic structures to mitigate the degree of request.

Previous studies have been attempts to investigate the relationship between cross-cultural differences and EFL/ESL learners' preferred request strategy types (e.g., Jalilifar, 2009; Hassall, 2003; Ueda, 2006). This study was specifically devoted to explore the possible relationship between L1 and preferred request strategies by EFL/ESL learners. Thus, to bridge the gap, this study was an attempt to find the potential differences and similarities between intermediate EFL/ESL learners' preferred request strategy types. To this end, the following research questions were formulated:

1. Do intermediate EFL/ESL learners use the same set of request strategies to the faculty?
2. Is there any relationship between L1 and request strategies employed by intermediate EFL/ESL learners to the faculty?

### **3. Method**

#### *3.1. Participants*

The participants were 62 intermediate EFL/ESL learners and 16 British native English-speaking teachers. The EFL learners were a convenient sample of 38 intermediate Iranian EFL learners (17 males and 21 females). They were intermediate EFL learners in a language institute in Iran and their ages ranged from 18-27. They were the native speakers of Persian and belonged to the same racial group (i.e., Persian). All the information (e.g., age and L1) regarding the participants were extracted by a demography form.

The ESL participants were 24 intermediate ESL learners studying in five language institute in England (9 males and 15 females). They were chosen based on convenience sampling and their L1 was Spanish. Their ages ranged from 17-38, but the majority were in their twenties. They were Spanish ESL learners who had passed various lengths of courses, varying from 15 hr a week to 25 hr a week, depending on the specific pathway (e.g., general English,

English for special purposes, English for business purposes, and examination preparation). All the ESL participants had arrived in England over the last 2 years as permanent residents and had brought with them some form of tertiary qualification.

Further, 16 (7 males and 9 females) British native English-speaking teachers participated in this study, whose request strategies were considered as the criteria to judge the suitability of the request strategies elicited from the EFL/ESL participants. The teachers' ages ranged from 29-49 and they had more than 5 years' experience of teaching English in ESL contexts. All the teachers were B.A. or M.A. holders.

### *3.2. Instruments*

A demography form was utilized to elicit all the information (e.g., age and L1) related to the participants. Further, an open-ended discourse completion test (DCT; adopted from Birjandi & Rezaie, 2010), was utilized to elicit the participants' responses. DCT is one of the best means of collecting data in the situated speech and represents norms of appropriateness (Nelson, Carson, Al Batal, & El Bakary, 2002). The DCT employed in the current study was a written role-play questionnaire. It included eight request situations to the faculty. The power and distance variables were controlled.

### *3.3. Procedure*

In the first step, the demography form was distributed among the participants. The form elicited the required information (e.g., age, race, L1, etc.). They were, then, asked to fill in the DCTs. The participants were required to read short descriptions of each situation in English and, then, write their answers in English. The allocated time to complete the DCT was between 20-30 min. The ESL and British native English-speaking data were collected by an English teacher in one of the institutes in which the ESL participants were studying English. The DCT was mailed to the English teacher. He distributed the printed version of the DCT among the ESL participants and the teachers. Then, the scanned filled DCTs were mailed to the researchers of the current study. Seventy-eight DCTs were gathered. In the next step, 624 requests were examined and coded by the researchers. The intrarater reliability found through Spearman Brown's correlation coefficient was .97.

### *3.4. Coding Scheme*

As suggested by a number of scholars (e.g., Reiter, 2000; Sifianou, 1999; Trosborg, 1995), requests consist of two main parts: head act and peripheral modification devices. However, the head act consists of the main utterance which has the function of requesting and can stand by itself. For example, the request head act *Is it possible for you to meet me and discuss about my term project?* is used as a conventionally indirect request.

In this study, the head act of the elicited request strategies by the participants were categorized based on the taxonomy developed by Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) to recognize the participants' request strategies:

- Direct Strategies
  1. Mood Derivable
  2. Performative
  3. Hedged Performative
  4. Locution Derivable
  5. Want Statement
- Conventional Indirect Strategies
  6. Suggestory Formula
  7. Query Preparatory
- Nonconventional Indirect Strategies
  8. Strong Hint
  9. Mild Hint

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### *4.1 Results*

The purpose of this study was to determine the possible similarities and differences between EFL/ESL students in the use of request strategies to the faculty. To this aim, the request strategies elicited through the DCT were analyzed. To answer the first research question, the frequency and percentage of occurrence of each situation were calculated.

The results indicated that the EFL/ESL participants both used negative polite strategies in a higher percentage. For the EFL (74.35) and ESL (81.25) participants, the conventionally indirect strategy was the most employed request strategy; however, the conventionally indirect strategy occurred in a higher percentage in the requests performed by the ESL participants. Further, the frequency findings manifested that the EFL participants opted to employ direct strategies (16.75) more than their ESL counterpart (10.42). Finally, the distribution of the nonconventionally indirect strategies was marginal for the EFL/ESL participants. The nonconventionally indirect strategies made up 8.9 of the EFL participants and 7.81 of the ESL participants' requests. As for the British native English-speaking teachers, a strong distribution of conventionally indirect strategies was found (97.66). The distribution of the direct strategies and nonconventionally indirect strategies was 1.56 and .77, respectively. The detailed description of the analyses is presented in Table 1:

As Table 1 shows, the query preparatory strategy was the mostly employed type of strategy by the participants. However, the ESL participants used this strategy in a higher percentage. The magnitude percentage of the obligation statement, hedged performative, and locution derivable strategies was zero. Further, the performative strategy was only used once by one of the EFL participants (2.6; situation # 4), and only two ESL participants (8.3)

employed the suggestory formula strategy to mitigate their requests (situation # 8).

Table 1  
*Distribution of EFL/ESL Learners' Request Strategies*

<i>Situation</i>	<i>Group</i>	<i>Mood</i>	<i>Want</i>	<i>Query</i>	<i>Strong</i>	<i>Mild</i>
Book	EFL	1(2.6%)	3(7.9%)	30(78.9%)	3(7.9%)	1(2.6%)
	ESL	0(0.0%)	4(16.7%)	19(79.2%)	0(0.0%)	1(4.2%)
	NEST	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	16(100%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)
PowerPoint	EFL	2(5.3%)	3(7.9%)	32(84.2%)	1(4.2%)	0(0.0%)
	ESL	1(4.2%)	3(12.5%)	19(79.2%)	1(4.2%)	0(0.0%)
	NEST	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	16(100%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)
Phone number	EFL	0(0.0%)	5(13.2%)	31(81.6%)	2(5.3%)	0(0.0%)
	ESL	0(0.0%)	1(4.2%)	23(95.8%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)
	NEST	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	16(100%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)
Explanation	EFL	1(2.6%)	2(5.3%)	32(84.2%)	0(0.0%)	2(5.3%)
	ESL	0(0.0%)	3(12.5%)	21(87.5%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)
	NEST	0(0.0%)	1(6.2%)	15(93.18%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)
Clarification	EFL	0(0.0%)	4(10.5%)	23(60.5%)	0(0.0%)	6(15.8%)
	ESL	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	13(54.2%)	0(0.0%)	11(45.8%)
	NEST	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	15(93.8%)	0(0.0%)	1(6.2%)
Exam date	EFL	6(15.8%)	3(7.9%)	26(68.4%)	1(2.6%)	2(5.3%)
	ESL	0(0.0%)	2(8.3%)	21(87.5%)	0(0.0%)	1(4.2%)
	NEST	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	16(100%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)
Paper	EFL	5(13.2%)	5(15.8%)	25(65.8%)	2(5.3%)	0(0.0%)
	ESL	0(0.0%)	4(16.7%)	18(75.0%)	0(0.0%)	2(8.3%)
	NEST	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	16(100.0%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)
Appointment	EFL	3(7.9%)	7(18.4%)	25(65.8%)	1(2.6%)	3(5.3%)
	ESL	0(0.0%)	2(8.3%)	20(83.3%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)
	NEST	0(0.0%)	1(6.2%)	15(93.8%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)

\*NETS stands for native English-speaking teacher.

In order to answer the second research question and to see whether there was a relationship between L1 and the request strategies employed by the participants, chi-square was run for each situation. As the chi-square findings ( $\chi^2 = 8.601$ ,  $df = 8$ ,  $p > .05$ ) suggested, there was no relationship between L1 and the request strategies employed by the participants in request situation # 1. In request situation # 2, the chi-square findings ( $\chi^2 = 3.935$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $p > .05$ ) indicated there was no relationship between L1 and the request strategies employed by the participants in this situation, as well.

Similar to request situations # 1 and 2, the chi-square results for situation # 3 ( $\chi^2 = 5.769$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p > .05$ ) indicated that there was no relationship between L1 and the request strategies employed by the participants. For request situation # 4, the results ( $\chi^2 = 5.384$ ,  $df = 8$ ,  $p > .05$ ) showed no relationship between L1 and the request strategies employed by the participants in this situation, as well.

In a similar vein, the chi-square findings ( $\chi^2 = 11.068$ ,  $df = 8$ ,  $p > .05$ ) for request situation # 6 indicated that there was no relationship between L1 and the request strategies employed by the participants in this situation. The chi-square results ( $\chi^2 = 13.991$ ,  $df = 10$ ,  $p > .05$ ) for request situation # 8 also confirmed no significant relationship between L1 and the request strategies employed by the participants in this situation.

However, for situation # 5, a significant relationship between L1 and the request strategies employed by the participants was found through the chi-square ( $\chi^2 = 20.265$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Finally, as indicated through the chi-square ( $\chi^2 = 16.202$ ,  $df = 8$ ,  $p < .05$ ), in situation # 7, there was a significant relationship between L1 and the request strategies employed by the participants in this situation. Overall, no significant relationship between L1 and the request strategies employed by the EFL/ESL participants was found.

#### *4.2 Discussion*

Emerging from the tradition of interlanguage pragmatic studies, the present study was an attempt to investigate the possible differences between EFL/ESL learners' request strategies and to see whether there was a relationship between L1 and request strategies employed by the EFL/ESL learners. The frequency findings suggested that the ESL participants employed negative polite strategies (i.e., conventionally indirect strategies) in a higher percentage than their EFL counterparts; however, the differences between them were not considerable. On the other hand, the EFL participants tended to use direct strategies more than the ESL participants. However, the account of the employed direct request strategies by the EFL participants was not significant (except for two situations). The chi-square findings for six situations suggested that there was no relationship between L1 and the request strategies by the EFL/ESL participants, whereas the significant  $p$  value for two situations (clarification and exam paper) implied there was a relationship between L1 and the request strategies by the EFL/ESL participants. Overall, the results manifested that there was no significant relationship between L1 and the request strategies employed by the EFL/ESL participants.

The results of this study are in line with a number of studies (e.g., Hassall, 2003; Jalilifar, 2009; Sun & Zhang, 2008; Ueda, 2006) that found that EFL learners tend to use more conventionally indirect strategies. In despite of relatively new findings by Eslami-Rasekh (2005, 2010), who found the Iranian EFL learners to be pragmatically incompetent, the results of this study provide support for the claim that EFL/ESL learners' pragmatic knowledge is acceptable. Eslami-Rasekh (2010) claims that lack of pragmatic knowledge by EFL/ESL learners has frequently been observed. She further argues that Iranian EFL learners can be considered pragmatically incompetent and socially impudent because they use direct strategies as an impolite form of strategy. Also, the findings of the current study are in contradiction with the results of Marquez Reiter et al. (2005) and Hickey (1991, 2005) that indicated the

Spanish-speaking learners tended to be more oriented toward positive politeness.

The strong distribution of conventionally indirect strategies renders support to Chen and Chen's claim (2007) that there is a general tendency to use conventionally indirect strategies for both native and nonnative speakers of English. In the case of the EFL participants, the results indicated that they were more in favor of employing conventionally indirect strategies. It may be that the advent of EFL learners' pragmatic competence is attributed to the development of technology (e.g., access to the Internet) that provides opportunity for EFL learners to get involved in communicative situations. More specifically, with the tools of technology making their way into their life, EFL learners in different parts of the world have access to authentic language. Therefore, they can easily communicate with native speakers through social media (e.g., chat). This makes it possible for EFL learners to communicate with native speakers and, accordingly, develop their pragmatic competence.

However, the slight differences between the EFL/ESL participants may lay in the length of the residence of the ESL participants in an English-speaking country (i.e., England). This can be explained by the Farahian, Rezaee, and Gholami's claim (2012) in that the ESL context is more advantageous than the EFL context for learning pragmatic rules. They claim that ESL learners are completely exposed to ESL norms in their daily life and they have opportunities to use them in appropriate situations. The explanation offered by Bella (2011) concerning the length of residence supports this in that the length of residence has positive effects on the pragmatic competence of EFL/ESL learners who live in the EFL/ESL community. Yamanaka (2003) further lends support to this claim by providing evidence that ESL learners usually have enough opportunity for social contact with native speakers that, accordingly, increases their pragmatic competence. Moreover, he argued that exposure to culturally rich input may provide ESL learners with an opportunity to become familiar with pragmatic rules that native speakers apply in different situations. This, accordingly, may contribute to greater opportunities for ESL learners to be pragmatically competent.

In the case of the EFL participants, the potential sources of the results may root in the fact that, in recent years, the methodology has moved to learner-centered in Iran. This gives EFL learners an opportunity to discuss their ideas freely. As the EFL learning methodology has seen changes and moves into learner-centered in different parts of the world, it is acceptable that the relationship between EFL learners and lecturers has become friendlier, as well. Therefore, in contrast to three decades ago where lecturers and students formed the banner community, it is not uncommon for lecturers and students to have a friendlier relationship (Rahimi & Askari Bigdeli, 2014). Hence, this closeness and intimacy may lead EFL learners to use more direct strategies. A point worth mentioning is that the closer examination of direct strategies in the dataset indicated that it was frequently mitigated by politeness markers (e.g.,

*please*), thus suggesting that the politeness of requests cannot be judged solely by request strategies chosen.

## 5. Conclusion and Implications

One of the issues which is probably of a prominent concern to EFL/ESL researchers and teachers is to examine the employed request strategies by EFL/ESL learners with their instructors. This study was twofold: First, the study was conducted to see whether EFL/ESL learners employed the similar or different request strategies to the faculty. Second, it aimed to see whether there was a relationship between L1 and request strategies employed by EFL/ESL learners. The findings of this study indicated no significance difference between the EFL/ESL participants; however, the EFL participants tended to use direct strategies in a higher percentage.

The findings of this study may be applied to communicative EFL/ESL teaching and the study of intercultural communication. As the focus of this study was on the use of requesting head acts, the outcome of the study may shed some light on the importance of focus on oral communication in the faculty context.

However, this study suffers from a number of limitations. Due to the number of participants and the context of this study, the results cannot be generalized. However, future research should conduct a study with a larger sample so as to increase the validity of the results. Furthermore, considering the employed data collection instrument in the current study (i.e., DCT), future studies can benefit from a triangulation, applying various instruments to achieve more reliable and valid results. In sum, the findings of this study develop our understanding of pragmatic development in speech act realization and of the nature of strategies in different contexts.

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