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A Pragmatic Study of the Speech Act of Request as Used by Iraqi EFL University Students

A paper

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

"وَقُلْ رَبِّ زِدْنِي عِلْمًا"

“My Lord, increase me in knowledge.”

صدق الله العظيم

DEDICATION

For my great family.

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a pragmatic study of the speech act of request as used by Iraqi EFL university students. There are many different kinds of speech acts, such as requests, orders, commands, complaints, promises. In Iraq there is a lack of usage of speech act of request among students of English as a foreign language which affects the learning process of students. Students spend their valuable years in school or university without learning speech act which is regarded as a type of act of communication.

SECTION ONE

Introduction

1.1 Problem of the Study

The Speech act of request is an essential aspect to boost English communication among EFL learners. Furthermore, in Iraq there is a lack of usage of speech act of request among students of English as a foreign language which affects the learning process of students. Students spend their valuable years in school or university without learning speech act which is regarded as a type of act of communication. Previous studies confirmed that understanding only vocabulary or grammar is insufficient to be a competent language learner in classroom (*Canale, 1983:2; Krasner, 1999: 79*).

As such, teaching pragmatic aspects, particularly teaching speech act, are emerging as the best way to create enthusiasm in learning new languages. Moreover, Many English learners fail to exhibit pragmatic ability on how to understand the speech act of request by relating utterances to their meanings. Most of Iraqi EFL learner face problems when they want to communicate with individuals due to their lack of pragmatic aspects namely, speech act of request (*Mohammed, 2012:55*).

This paper, therefore, attempts to find answers to the following questions:

1. What is speech act theory?
2. What is speech act of request?
3. What are the strategies of speech act of request?

1.2 Aim of Study

The study aims at achieving the following objectives:

1. Shedding light on the theory of speech act
2. Identifying the speech act of request
3. Investigating the strategies of the speech act.
4. Distinguishing direct from indirect requests.

1.3 Hypotheses

It is hypothesized that:

1. Most Iraqi EFL university students lack knowledge about the theory of speech act.
2. The speech act of request is a problematic area for EFL learners
3. Most of Iraqi learners of English are not familiar with the strategies of speech act of request
4. Iraqi EFL university students depend on sentence structure to distinguish types of requests .

1.4 Limits of study

This study is limited to studying the speech act of request as used by Iraqi EFL university students. The sample will consist of 30 fourth year students of the Department of English, College of Education of Human Sciences, University of Babylon.

1.5 Value

The study is hoped to be value to EFL learners, textbook writers, syllable designers, teachers and researchers since it highlights the problematic area of speech act of request, which will ultimately help them in enhancing their communication.

SECTION TWO

Literature Review

2.1 Speech Act Theory

The speech act theory is a theory of language put forward by *Austin (1962)* and his student *Searle (1969)*. Contrary to linguistics and semantics restricting their work to the linguistic structures created, the speech act theory takes into account the non-linguistic communication situations, as well. *Austin (1962)* in this regard focuses on the relationship between language and act. According to this, while using the language people do not produce only an isolated series of sentences, but also perform an action.

Searle (1969) highlights that speech act is presented in real language use situations. Accordingly, he says that the basic assumption on the speech act theory should be that the smallest unit in human communication is the implementation of certain types of acts. According to *Bachman (1990)*, these acts in communication cases are associated with the functional dimensions of language. As opposed to morphological, syntactic and rhetorical dimensions regarding organization of the language structures, pragmatic dimension are associated with producing and understanding speech acts. These two dimensions function reciprocally in communication. Austin makes a distinction related to the speech acts as constatives and performatives. Constatives used to describe an incident or a situation, are statements. Constatives can be qualified as true/false values. However, constatives are used to perform a task and cannot be characterized as true or false (*Coulthard, 1985*). Austin and Searle felt particularly attracted to performatives.

2.2 What is Speech Act?

An utterance as a functional unit in communication. In speech act theory, utterances have two kinds of meaning: a) propositional meaning (also known as locutionary meaning). This is the basic literal meaning of the utterance which is conveyed by the particular words and structures which the utterance contains. B) illocutionary meaning (also known as illocutionary force). This is the effect the utterance or written text has on the reader or listener. For example, in I am thirsty the propositional meaning is what the utterance says about the speaker's physical state. The illocutionary force is the effect the speaker wants the utterance to have on the listener. It may be intended as a request for something to drink. A speech act is a sentence or utterance which has both propositional meaning and illocutionary force. (*Richards and Schmidt, 2010: 542*).

There are many different kinds of speech acts, such as requests, orders, commands, complaints, promises. A speech act which is performed indirectly is sometimes known as an indirect speech act, such as the speech act of requesting. Indirect speech acts are often felt to be more polite ways of performing certain kinds of speech act, such as requests and refusals. (*ibid: 543*)

2.3 Classification of Speech Act

The philosopher Searle established a five-part classification of speech acts:

- a) Commissive: a speech act that commits the speaker to doing something in the future, such as a promise or a threat. For example:

If you don't stop fighting I'll call the police. (threat)

I'll take you to the movies tomorrow. (promise)

- b) Declarative: a speech act which changes the state of affairs in the world.

For example, during the wedding ceremony the act of marriage is performed when the phrase *I now pronounce you man and wife* is uttered.

- c) Directive: a speech act that has the function of getting the listener to do something, such as a suggestion, a request, or a command. For example:

Please sit down.

Why don't you close the window.

- d) Expressive: a speech act in which the speaker expresses feelings and attitudes about something, such as an apology, a complaint, or to thank someone, to congratulate someone. For example:

The meal was delicious.

- e) Representative: a speech act which describes states or events in the world, such as an assertion, a claim, a report. For example, the assertion:

This is a German car. (Searle, 1969: 75)

2.4 The speech Act of Request

2.4.1 Definition of Request

In linguistics, Requests are those illocutionary acts belonging to Searle's category of directives. As reported by this author, "these are attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something. They may be very modest attempts as when I invite you to do it, or they may be very fierce attempts as when I insist that you do it" (*Searle, 1969:13*). Therefore, request acts are performed by the speaker in order to engage the hearer in some future course of action that coincides with the speaker's goal. In this sense these are pre-event acts, which anticipate the desired or expected action. Asking somebody to do something for your own purposes bears an impositive nature which may then be regarded as an intrusion into the interlocutor's territory. Following *Brown & Levinson's terms (1987)*, request acts are characterised by their face-threatening nature.

According to *Bach and Harnish (1984:48)*, is a speech act which is used to express the speaker's desire so that the hearer does what the speaker wants. Finally, *Trosborg (1995)* defines a request as an illocutionary act in which a speaker (requester) conveys to hearer (requestee) that he/she wants the hearer to perform a certain act which is beneficial to the speaker. The act may be a request for non-verbal good and services, i.e., request for an object, an action or some kinds of services, or it can be a request for verbal goods and services, such a request for information. (*Trosborg,1995:187*)

2.4.2 Types of Request

Request can be divided into several types. Some scholars have their own types of request. Sometimes, they name the same kind of request differently. For more explanation, here are some scholars with their types of request. The first is proposed by *Zhang (1995:280)* who divides request into direct request and indirect request.

2.4.2.1 Direct Requests

Direct request is often perceived as being aggressive and demanding and it is often preceded by the use of personal pronouns such as “I.” or “You ...” followed by verbs that express the speaker’s wish or desire such as “like”, “want”, and other verbs of action like “give”, “take” and “make.” For example, “*I want my apple.*” In this example, the speaker declares that he/she asks the hearer to get his/her apple.

2.4.2.2 Indirect Request

In this request, the person is making a request to others in implicit way. A person who makes a request indirectly is seen to be diplomatic and tactful. He or she is also perceived more highly than one who makes a direct request. Indirectness displays respect, courtesy and good breeding, for example, “*This place is quite hot.*” By saying so, the speaker implicitly wants the hearer to turn the air conditioner on.

Trosborg (1995:192), on the other hand, suggests four types of requests based on the direction levels. They are unconventionally indirect request, conventionally indirect request (hearer-based), conventionally indirect

request (speaker-based), and direct request. Trosborg adds the term “unconventionally” and “conventionally” to indicate the directness level of a request. “Unconventionally indirect” means that the request is not in the form of utterance. Therefore, it is expected that the hearer pay more attention to the situation i.e. the speech event. In conventionally indirect request, the request is in the form of question or statement based on preparatory condition (hearer-condition) and sincerity condition (speaker-based). Sometimes, the requests are explained in modal verbs, such as can, could, will, would, may and wants statement like I need. and I want. Meanwhile, performative verbs conveying requestive intents such as ask, request, demand, command; obligation containing modal verbs such as such as must, have to, should, ought to; and imperative statements are formed with infinitive verb.

2.5 Strategies of Request

Trosborg (1995:192) argues that there are eight strategies of request, including: hints, questioning hearer's ability, suggestory formulae, statement of speaker's wishes and desires, statement of obligation and necessity, statements of Speaker's need and demand.

1) Hints

In this strategy, the speaker hides his request and does not mention the request directly in the utterances. By making a statement, for example describing an undesired state of affairs, he or she can imply to the hearer what he or she wants. In this strategy, by asking a question, the requester can imply to his/her listener what he/she wants. When interpreting a hint, it is often necessary to possess intimate knowledge of the other person, to have specific background knowledge, and to be aware of specific situational features, etc., for example, "It's cold here." In this sentence speaker complains about bad weather. *He/she wants someone to set the thermostat.* However, his/her sentence is delivered indirectly since he/she does not explicitly tell that the hearer should set the thermostat. Another example can be seen in the sentence "*The kitchen is a total mess.*" By saying that the kitchen is very dirty, the speaker asks the hearer implicitly to clean the kitchen immediately.

2) Questioning Hearer's Ability/Willingness

When this strategy is applied by the speaker, the hearer is expected to understand that the question asked by the speaker is a request. It involves a transition from a question about ability or willingness to requestive illocutionary force. Therefore, it is up to the hearer whether the request is

compiled or not, for example, “*Can you reach this jar for me, please?*” In the example, the speaker believes that the hearer has the ability to reach jar, yet he/she still asks it. By doing so, the speaker expects the hearer to comply the desired act. Intensification such as *like, kind, mind, and object* can enlarge the willingness pre-condition, for example, “*Would you like to make a contribution to our charity?*” By adding “like” to the question, the speaker expects more from the hearer to comply the request.

Making a request for permission can also be used to ask hearer`s willingness to comply a request. Switching the hearers` attention explicitly can also be applied instead of mentioning the hearer as the agent of the action, for example, “*Can I have the salt, please?*” This request involves a shift of focus alluding explicitly to the speaker as the beneficiary or recipient of an activity instead of mentioning the hearer as the agent of the action.

3) Suggestory Formulae

When employing a suggestory formula, the requester does not feel obliged to question any particular hearer-based condition, rather he/she tests the hearer`s cooperativeness in general by inquiring whether any conditions exist might prevent the hearer from carrying out the action specified by the proposition. By presenting a request by means of suggestory formulae, the speaker makes his/her request more tentative and plays down his/her own interest as a beneficiary of the action, for example, “*How about lending me some of your books?*” In this example, the speaker gives a suggestion to the hearer. However, it contains a request. In this case, the speaker wants the hearer to lend him/her some books which is not mention directly.

Another example is the sentence “*Why don't you sweep the floor?*” By giving a suggestion to the hearer, the speaker actually wants the hearer to sweep the floor in implicit way.

4) Statement of Speaker's Wishes and Desires

In this strategy, the requester's desire is control. It is usually expressed in a polite way so that the hearer does not feel imposed to comply the desired act, for example, “*I would like to have some more tea.*” In this example, the speaker puts his desire as a focal point and adds “would” to make the request sounds polite. In other words, the speaker says his request in a polite way.

Another example is “I would like you to do the cleaning today.” This request is applied by telling the speaker's wish.

The speaker says that he would like the hearer to do the cleaning duty.

5) Statements of Speaker's Need and Demand

The speakers who employ this strategy tend to look impolite since the request contains a high degree of imposition. As a result, the hearers feel imposed by the request. Therefore, the chance of a conflict to occur between the speakers and the hearers is high if the request is not fulfilled, for example, “*I need a book.*” In this example, the speaker states his need and demand clearly by saying that he/she needs a book.

However, this strategy of request can be made to be more polite by adding “Please” or other mitigating device, for example, “*I want the manuscript ready by noon, please.*” In this example the states his/her demand. However, by adding “Please”, he/she makes his/her demand more polite.

6) Statements of Obligations and Necessities

When employing this strategy, the speaker exerts either his/her authority, or he/she refers to some authority outside the speaker (institution, speaker's authority, etc.). In this case, compliance is expected and non-compliance is considered inappropriate behaviour. The use of this strategy employing auxiliary verb such as, *ought to*, *have to* and *must*, marks the utterance as a request. The structures with *should* and *ought to* involve moral obligation. *Have to* may involve some obligation stemming from a source outside the speaker. *Must* often expresses obligation imposed by the speaker, for example, "*You should eat now.*" In this sentence, the speaker imposes his/her authority to the hearer since he/she has a higher position than the hearer. By saying so, the speaker asks the hearer to eat immediately. Another example is "*You have to leave now.*" By saying that the hearer needs to leave immediately, the speaker obliges the hearer to comply with the request.

7) Performatives

The inclusion of a performative verb conveying requestive intent, for example, *ask*, *request*, *order*, *demand*, *command*, etc, explicitly marks the utterance as request. Performative statements with requestive intention are very direct and usually authoritative, for example, "*I order you to submit the assignment.*" By saying so, the speaker asks directly to hearer to submit the assignment as soon as possible. The request is less polite compared to the statements of obligation and necessity.

However, if the requester wants to soften this form, it is possible to hedge the

illocutionary force of the utterance. The result is a hedged performative, for example, “*I would like to ask you to bring me a drink.*” This request is direct, however, by adding “*Would*”, it sounds more soft and polite.

8) Imperatives

imperative is the grammatical form directly signaling that the utterance is an order. In its unmodified form it is very authoritative. The hearer needs to do what the speaker wants since the speaker has the power over the hearer, for example, “*Get a car!*” This sentence is direct because the speaker says his request in a very direct way. It also sounds authoritative. Therefore, the hearer`s compliance is expected by the speaker.

Imperatives can be softened by adding tags or the marker please and will you, for example, “*Open the window, please.*” Here, the speaker clearly says his request. However, he/she adds “Please” to soften it. Therefore, this request sounds less authoritative and blunt. (*Trosborg, 1995:205*)

SECTION THREE

Data Collection and Analysis

3.1 Test Definition

Black and Wiliam (1998:91) define test as "all those activities undertaken by teachers, and by their students in assessing themselves, that provide information to be used as feedback to modify teaching and learning activities. Such assessment becomes formative assessment when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching to meet student needs".

3.2 Characteristics of Good Test

There are two characteristics of a good test which are:

3.2.1. Validity

Validity is defines as the extent to which the instrument measure and calculates in many ways represents the easiest being the square root of the reliability coefficient *Al-Hamash et al. (1985:200)* state that " test is valid if it measures what it is supposed to measure. It should be related to the content of the course." In fact, there are two kinds of validity but here the researcher is going to shed light on two of them

3.2.2 Reliability

In order to be reliable, a test must be consistent in its measurements.

Heaton (1975:162) states that "reliability denotes the extent to which the same marks or grades are awarded if the same test is marked by two or more different examiners or the same examiner under different occasions".

Reliability is defined as the extent to which a questionnaire, test, observation or any measurement produces the same results on repeated trials.

3.3 The subjects

A random sample of students is chosen from the four stage in the Department of English, College of Education for Human Sciences, University of Babylon, for the academic year 2021-2022. This sample consists of (٢0) students. They are native speakers of Arabic.

3.4 Test Material

The topic of *A Pragmatic Study of the Speech Act of Request as Used by Iraqi EFL University Students* has been used as a test material. The questions have been adopted by the researcher.

3.5 Test Design

The test consists of (2) questions the first measures the recognition level and the second measures the production level. The first question (recognition) consists of (10) items, while the second question (production) consists of (5) items. The students are are required to respond according to their background knowledge.

3.6 Performance of Subjects in the Recognition Question

Question 1 tests the subjects' performance at the recognition level. The following table provides the results obtained on each test item in the question (See Table1).

Table 1: Frequencies and Percentages of the test's items in Q I

No. of item	No. of correct responses	%	No. of incorrect responses	%
1	15	75%	5	25%
2	12	60%	8	40%
3	6	30%	14	70%
4	13	65%	7	35%
5	10	50%	10	50%
6	16	80%	4	20%
7	5	25%	15	75%
8	6	30%	14	70%
9	15	75%	5	25%
10	5	25%	15	75%
Total	103	51.5%	97	48.5%

The findings at the recognition level (table 1) show that only 103 responses (51%) were correct and 97 responses (48.5%) were incorrect. These results indicate that a considerable number of students still encounter difficulty in distinguishing between direct and indirect requests. The items that were answered correctly by most students were (1), (4), (6), and (9), rating 75%, 65%, 80%, and 75%, respectively. It appears that students tested found that it was easy for them to tell the direct from indirect request, given that most of them are direct. Most students know how direct requests are formed.

Items most students failed to answer correctly were (3), (7), (8), and (10). Students tested found it difficult to recognize indirect request because they lack knowledge on what makes a request indirect.

3.7 Subjects' Performance of the Second Question

Question 2 is prepared to assess the subjects' acquisition at the production level. Their responses on each of the five items are set down in the following table (See Table 2).

Table 2: Frequencies and Percentages of the test's items in Q II

Item No.	Direct Request	Indirect Request							
		Hints	Questioning Hearer's Ability Willingness	Suggestory Formulae	Statement of Speaker's Wishes and Desires	Statements of Speaker's Need and Demand	Statements of Obligations and Necessities	Performatives	Imperatives
1	3	2	6	8	1	2	3	2	5
2	1	7	7	3	0	5	3	2	0
3	2	2	5	5	5	1	3	2	3
4	4	1	4	2	7	6	4	0	3
5	7	2	4	1	6	2	3	2	4
Total	17	14	26	19	19	16	16	8	15
Per.	11.33%	9.33%	17.33%	12.67%	12.67%	10.67%	10.67%	5.33%	10%
		88.67%							

The findings related at the production question (table 2) shows that most of the students answered these questions using the Indirect request which are 88.67% and most of them use the questioning the hearer's ability and willingness strategy . These results indicate that students face considerable difficulty in the production and they need more information about the types of request since most of the students cannot make the appropriate requests to given situations leading to wrong ways of making requests.

The direct request is used only by few students since the total number is 17 about 11.33%

The indirect request divided into eight strategies and the percentage of using each strategy is the following:

The strategies that get a little percentage are performatives 5% and hints 9.33 since the other students who have no information about these strategies don't use them .

The strategy which is Questioning Hearer's Ability Willingness ,its percentage is

17.33% which is the highest percentage .The fourth strategy is Suggestory Formulae gets 12.67% .The strategy which is called Statement of Speaker's Wishes and Desires gets 12.67% , while the strategy of Statements of Speaker`s Need and Demand and the strategy of Statements of Obligations and Necessities get the same percentage which is 10.67%. The strategy of Imperatives gets 10%.

Conclusion

Request are acts performed by the speaker in order to engage the hearer in some future course of action that coincides with the speaker's goal. There are many strategies for request including: hints, questioning hearer's ability, suggestory formulae, statement of speaker's wishes and desires, statement of obligation and necessity, statements of Speaker's need and demand.

Results of the study show that a considerable number of students still cannot recognize direct from indirect requests at the recognition level, and that more than half of them failed to respond to situation where they are asked to make requests. The results validate the second hypothesis "The speech act of request is a problematic area for EFL learners", and achieved the aim of the study.

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Appendix I: Questions

Q1: State whether the following are direct or indirect requests:

1. Open your book.
2. I am asking you to answer the door.
3. Could you shut the door?
4. I want you to sit down.
5. Get me the car.
6. Would you mind helping me?
7. The place is quite hot.
8. Can you take a picture of us?
9. Make me some coffee.
10. I order you to keep quite.

Q2: What do you say in the following situations?

1. **Situation1:** You want your younger brother to bring some vegetable from the near-by grocery. What would you say?
2. **Situation2:** You are a teacher in a college. One of your students has brought his new laptop. You want to ask him to use it for an hour. What would you say?
3. **Situation3:** You are a university student, and you want to request your teacher to lend you his book to do your assignment. What would you say?
4. **Situation4:** You have got scholarship and you want to ask professor who taught you in the university to write you a recommendation letter. What would you say?
5. **Situation5:** You want your neighbor to drive you to the market because your car has broken, and you want to buy some fruit for your family. What would you say?

Appendix B: Answers

Q1: State whether the following are direct or indirect requests:

1. Open your book Direct
2. I am asking you to answer the door. Direct
3. Could you shut the door? Indirect
4. I want you to sit down. Direct
5. Get me the car. Direct
6. Would you mind helping me? Indirect
7. The place is quite hot. Indirect
8. Can you take a picture of us? Indirect
9. Make me some coffee Direct
10. I order you to keep quite. Direct

Q2: What do you say in the following situations?

1. **Situation1:** You want your younger brother to bring some vegetable from the near-by grocery. What would you say?
2. **Situation2:** You are a teacher in a college. One of your students has brought his new laptop. You want to ask him to use it for an hour. What would you say?
3. **Situation3:** You are a university student, and you want to request your teacher to lend you his book to do your assignment. What would you say?
4. **Situation4:** You have got scholarship and you want to ask professor who taught you in the university to write you a recommendation letter. What would you say?
5. **Situation5:** You want your neighbor to drive you to the market because your car has broken, and you want to buy some fruit for your family. What would you say?