Interlanguage Request Production of Nigerian Learners of English as a Second Language

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Abstract

Within the Nigerian context, the communicative approach to English language teaching and learning is developing. However, the overemphasis of grammatical competence in the English language curriculum and pedagogy and the dearth of research into the interlanguage pragmatics of Nigerian ESL learners lead to inadequate knowledge of the pragmatic features of the English of Nigerian learners. This provides little basis for the teaching and learning of pragmatic competence, which according to Finegan (2008), is an important factor in the achievement of fluency in an L2. Using a discourse completion task and the CCSARP (Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project) coding scheme (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984), this study investigated the request strategies of Nigerian undergraduate ESL learners whose native language is Igbo. The results revealed a preference for directness in their request production. Recommendations were made as regards the ESL curriculum and classroom practices.

Keywords: pragmatic competence; speech act; requesting

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1. Introduction

According to Finegan (2008) fluent speakers of English are those speakers who possess communicative competence. The concept of communicative competence is based on the idea that knowledge of a language is more than the ability to apply its syntactic rules, lexis, spelling and pronunciation (linguistic competence), and the ability to combine language structures into spoken or written texts (discourse competence). It also includes the appropriate use of vocabulary, register, style and politeness in different situations (sociolinguistic competence), and the ability to apply verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that can enhance effective communication and minimise miscommunication (strategic competence) (Schmitt & Celce-Murcia, 2010). In other words, communicative competence involves both grammatical and pragmatic competence.

Pragmatic competence may be regarded as the ability to use language appropriately in different social situations. Thus, context is an important concept in both the production and interpretation of intended meaning (Finegan, 2008). Mey (2001) defines it as "the total social setting in which the speech event takes place". In considering context therefore, one needs to take into account the general social context in terms of the level of formality and/or privacy of the interaction, such that an interaction may be formal or informal, private or public. In addition, there is a need to consider the specific social context as regards the power relations between the interlocutors; that is their social status and/or social distance in relation to one another (Mey, 2001; Schauer, 2009).

2. Statement of the problem

Within the Nigerian context, pragmatic competence has largely been neglected in the English language curriculum, and the main objective of studies in the English language over the years has been the teaching and learning of linguistic (grammatical) and discourse competence, and the analysis of performance in the two areas. This emphasis on linguistic competence is as a result of the prevalent traditional grammar approach to the teaching and learning of English as a second language in Nigeria. The communicative approach to the teaching and learning of the English language in Nigerian schools may thus be said to be in its early stages of development, as is evident in the existing English language curriculum, in the various English language textbooks currently in use, and in the prevalent classroom practices. Furthermore, there appears from all indications to be a dearth of research in the field of Interlanguage pragmatics from the perspective of Nigerian learners of English as a second language. Consequently, knowledge of the pragmatic features of the English of Nigerian learners is correspondingly inadequate. İf this perceived gap in knowledge continues, there will be little basis for the acquisition of pragmatic competence by Nigerian learners in the future, which as Finegan (2008) avers, is an important factor in the achievement of fluency in a second language. Pragmatic competence in a second language is necessary, for as Linde (2009) points out, pragmatic errors may actually be more serious than grammatical ones since they may be perceived by the hearer as rude or insulting, thereby threatening face, an important concept in communication (O'Grady, Archibald & Katamba, 2011). Thus, linguistic appropriateness is as important as, if not more important than, linguistic accuracy.

3. Purpose of the study

Based on the foregoing, it was the intention of this study to attempt an analysis of the pragmalinguistic and socio-pragmatic features in the request realisation of selected students of Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Owerri, in Imo State of Nigeria. In so doing, the study was aimed at establishing the incidence of use, and constructing the contextual distribution patterns of request realisation in this category of non-native English learners. Specifically, the study was aimed at discovering:

    1. The directness levels of the learners' request realisation in English

2. The contextual distribution patterns of the request realisation of the learners

4. Research questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

What are the directness levels of the learners' request realisation in English?

What is the contextual distribution pattern of the request realisation of the learners?

5. Significance of the study

Given the current emphasis on grammatical competence in English language teaching and learning in Nigeria, and the paucity of research into interlanguage pragmatics from the perspective of Nigerian learners of English as a second language, it is hoped that this study will be of interest to scholars of English language, English language curriculum developers, as well as practising English language teachers and their students. Specifically, it is hoped that the study will contribute to second language learning research by identifying and describing the request realisation strategies of Nigerian learners of English as a second language, and that this will help to increase awareness of the benefits of incorporating pragmatic ability into the English language curriculum at all levels of English language teaching and learning in Nigerian schools.

The study may be especially relevant and timely as the education sector in Nigeria is currently endeavouring to introduce and implement best practices in teaching and learning through the application of collaborative and interactive strategies in teaching and learning, which is clearly the Federal Government's objective, as may be seen in its efforts to actualise the Universal Basic Education programme. Thus, the study also hopes to provide insights and generalisations that may prove useful in this regard. Finally, it is hoped that the study will provide a basis for further research into the issues raised here.

6. Theoretical framework

The approach to this study was based on speech act theory. Speech act theory, attributable to Austin (1962), is based on the idea that the content of an utterance often does not correspond to its linguistic meaning. Thus, illocutionary acts may be explicit (direct) or implicit (indirect) (Austin, 1962:32). İt is the aim of speech act theory therefore, to account for how speakers use language to accomplish their goals, and how hearers infer the intended meaning of the speaker from what is said in those instances where the speech act is implicit or indirect. From this perspective, the objectives of this study were to identify the request realisation strategies of the subjects on the basis of three categories of speech act sets for requests; namely direct requests, conventionally indirect requests and non-conventionalised requests, and to determine the social contexts in which each sub-set is used.

7. Methodology

7.1 Participants

89 participants took part in this study. The group comprised the final-year students in the Department of English Language and Literature of the School of Arts, a population of 341, and was selected to avoid the possibility of multiple proficiency levels among the participants. Their ages ranged between 20 and 35, and all were of Igbo extraction, with Igbo as their first language.

7.2 Instrument of data collection

Data collection in this study was done mainly through a discourse completion task (DCT). The DCT was designed to elicit requests in writing by means of an open-ended questionnaire. It involved six situations in which each was based on a variation of two socio-pragmatic variables of social power and social distance. Social power in the DCT referred to the power of the speaker over the hearer, and was considered on three levels, as follows:

  i.   The speaker has less power than the hearer [-P]
 ii.   The speaker has more power than the hearer [+P]
iii.   The speaker has equal power with the hearer [=P]

Social distance, on the other hand, referred to the degree of familiarity between the interlocutors. This was divided into two levels:

  i.   The speaker and the hearer are not familiar with each other [+D]
 ii.   The speaker and the hearer are familiar with each other [-D]

The combinations of these two variables of social power and social distance resulted in six possible combinations: [−P +D], [+P +D], [=P +D], [−P −D], [+P −D] and [=P −D], which resulted in the six DCT situations in the questionnaire. Table 1 clarifies the final version of the DCT according to the variable combinations.

Table 1: DCT situations based on socio-pragmatic variables

Situation	Social power	Social distance (familiarity)
1. Getting a lift	-P	+D
2. Retrieving an assignment	-P	-D
3. Getting a spoon	+P	+D
4. Playing somewhere else	+P	-D
5. Studying in the library	=P	+D
6. Dirty roommate	=P	-D

The DCT consisted of a short description of each situation, in which the setting, the familiarity and the social power between the interlocutors were specified. Participants were asked to place themselves in each situation and to write down in the blank spaces provided what they would say as though they were speakers in authentic linguistic interactions. The design of the DCT situations took into account the participants' experience in the tertiary education setting of the location in which the study was carried out. All the scenarios depicted situations in which the participants were placed in roles in which they would naturally be likely to find themselves as students of Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Owerri.

7.3 Data analysis

The data analysis was carried out on the basis of the two research questions that guided the study. Thus, it was aimed at establishing the level of directness preferred by the participants, and the distribution pattern of these request strategies on the basis of social context. The CCSARP coding framework for requests identifies nine request strategies or formulas that may be used to realise the head act, classified into three main categories: direct strategies, conventionally indirect strategies, and

non-conventionally indirect strategies (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). These are illustrated in descending order of directness below with examples from the corpus:

Direct strategies:

Mood derivable - "Give me a spoon."

Explicit performative – "I am *asking* you to keep the place clean."

Hedged performative – "I *want to* beg you for a lift home."

Locution derivable/Obligation statement – "You *ought to* keep quiet."

Want statement – "I *need to* submit the assignment."

Conventionally indirect strategies:

Suggestory formula – "*What about* my assignment?"

Query preparatory – "*Can* you find somewhere else to play?"

Non-conventionally indirect strategies:

Strong hint – "I think you are going my way." (Intent: getting a lift home)

Mild hint – "Be very careful of your customer." (Intent: asking for a spoon in a canteen)

8. Results and discussion of findings

Research Question1: What are the directness levels of the learners' request realisation in English?

A total number of 435 head acts were indentified in the corpus. Their distribution in terms of direct, conventionally indirect and non-conventionally indirect levels of request is presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Directness levels of request strategies

Type of strategy		Number	Percentage
Direct			
1.	Mood derivable	141	32.41%
2.	Explicit performative	2	0.46%
3.	Hedged performative	3	0.69%
4.	Locution derivable/Obligation statement	16	3.68%
5.	Want statement	63	14.48%
Conventionally indirect			
6.	Suggestory formula	2	0.46%
7.	Query preparatory	176	40.46%
Non-conventionally indirect			
8.	Strong hint	28	6.44%
9.	Mild hint	4	0.92%

8.1 Direct strategies

It is interesting to note that on the whole, direct request strategies were used more frequently than indirect request strategies. The percentage occurrence of direct requests was 51.72%, whereas it was 48.28% for indirect requests. This finding is contrary to Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1984) and Sattar, Lah, and Suleiman (2009), whose results indicate a general preference for indirect requests. The results of the present study show that the mood derivable strategy was by far the most frequently used direct strategy, with a 32.41% occurrence in the corpus. The results here are more in line with Kasanga (2001), who using both naturally occurring data and a DCT, finds that direct request strategies were the most commonly used among his subjects' naturally occurring request utterances. He is of the view that the prevalence of the mood derivable sub-strategy in his results was "simply one of other marks of the poor English language ability or lack of self-assurance in the language of most of the subjects". However, the results of the present study differ from Kasanga's in that his DCT results show a preference for both conventionally and non-conventionally indirect requests. This he attributes to a tendency on the part of his subjects to "make use of translation equivalents of more 'elaborate' formulae, despite the assurances which were given that the exercise did not represent any form of testing or assessment of their academic competence" (Kasanga, 2001). Contrary to this finding, the majority of the responses in the present study seemed quite natural and likely to largely represent what the participants would normally say in actual verbal interactions.

Woodfield (2008) also reports a high level of directness among her Japanese subjects, and states that this is possibly an indication that their proficiency did not approximate that of native speakers because they were at a developmental stage. She goes on to suggest that the preponderance of direct strategies among her Japanese subjects could be the result of the approach used in the teaching and learning of English in Japanese schools, which focuses on the development of linguistic competence, and exhibits a "lack of adequate practice of appropriate forms and structures or lack of exposure to appropriate linguistic devices for polite expressions" (Woodfield, 2008). Her observations in this regard may be applicable to the participants in the present study, who were also products of a language teaching approach that focuses more on linguistic competence than on communicative competence.

8.2 Conventionally indirect strategies

This category of request strategies comprises the suggestory formula, with a 0.46% occurrence in the present study, and the query preparatory strategy, with a 40.46% occurrence. The latter was the single most frequently occurring request strategy in the study. Its conventionalised forms were analysed in accordance with Sattar et al's (2009) categorisation, which is based on the functions of the modals used. The modals used by the participants in the present study are as follows: *can/could, will/would, do/will/would you mind,* and *may.* Table 3 below displays the numbers and percentage frequencies of the use of modals in the query preparatory subcategory of request strategies.

Table 3: Use of query preparatory strategies

Type	Number	Percentage
Can	135	76.27%
Could	17	9.60%

Mind:		
Would you mind …	8	4.52%
Do you mind …	4	2.26%
Will you mind …	2	1.13%
May	10	5.65%
Would	1	0.56%

In line with the results of Sattar et al (2009), the most frequently used query preparatory forms were the ability modals *can/could*, which accounted for 85.87% frequency in the present study. İt is clear from these results that the modal *can* was overused. Sa'd, Hatam and Mohammadi (2014) point out that these ability modals are among the first English syntactic structures learned at school, and hypothesise that their frequent use may be attributable to the influence of classroom language teaching and learning.

The most obvious shortcoming of the participants' use of the query preparatory strategy evident in the above results was their inability to use the past tense of *can*. As noted by Sattar et al (2009), the lack of tense marking in the use of the modal *can* emphasises its pragmatic duality. Thus, while for instance *Can you get me a spoon?* may be interpreted literally, in terms of a question about the hearer's ability, or conventionally, in terms of requesting, the use of the past tense removes this ambiguity and has only the requestive function, as is shown in the example *Could you get me a spoon?* Nevertheless, as it was assumed in the present study that the present tense of this modal was used by participants in its requestive function alone, it was analysed as such. However, Sattar et al (2009) point out that the use of past tense modals tend to soften the force of imposition of a request, and are therefore considered more polite than the present tense forms. It is clear from the results that the majority of the participants were unaware of this pragmatic point, hence the preponderance of the present form *can*.

Research Question 2: What is the contextual distribution pattern of the request realisation of the learners?

Contrary to the suggestions of Kasanga (2001) and Woodfield (2008) that the prevalence of direct strategies among learners was largely owing to their linguistic deficiencies in the target or second language, Mirzaei, Roohani, and Esmaeili (2012) state that "the level of directness of a request has a strong correlation with the expectation of rights and obligations between hearers and speakers". This implies for instance, that learners could rightly use the mood derivable strategy in situations in which they had a strong right to make the request. The results of the present study indicate that the participants were pragmatically aware and did apply their choice of request strategy on their assessment of the two pragmatic variables of power and social distance, as is evident in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Contextual distribution pattern of request strategies

	S1 (-P+D)	S2 (-P-D)	S3 (+P+D)	S4 (+P-D)	S5 (=P+D)	S6 (=P-D)
Mood derivable	1.15% (5)	1.38% (6)	6.44% (28)	6.44% (28)	8.05% (35)	8.97% (39)
Explicit performative	0.23% (1)	0.23% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)

Hedged performative	0.23% (1)	0.46% (2)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)
Locution derivable/Obligation statement	0% (0)	0.23% (1)	0% (0)	1.38% (6)	1.15% (5)	0.92% (4)
Want statement	1.61% (7)	6.67%(29)	2.53%(11)	1.38% (6)	0.46% (2)	1.84% (8)
Suggestory formula	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0.23% (1)	0% (0)	0.23% (1)
Query preparatory	13.79(60)	3.45% (15)	8.05% (35)	7.36%(32)	4.59%(20)	3.22%(14)
Strong hint	1.38% (6)	2.07% (9)	0.92% (4)	0% (0)	1.61% (7)	0.46% (2)
Mild hint	0% (0)	0% (0)	0.46% (2)	0% (0)	0.46% (2)	0% (0)

Table 4 above indicates that mood derivable requests were used in every situation. However, while they were rarely used in the [-P] situations *getting a lift* (1.15%) and *retrieving an assignment*) (1.38%), they were more frequently used in the [+P] and [=P] situations, as follows: 6.44% respectively in the [+P+D] situation *getting a spoon* and the [+P-D] situation *playing somewhere else*, 8.05% in the [=P+D] situation *studying in the library*, and 8.97% in the [=P-D] situation *dirty roommate*. In conclusion, the mood derivable strategy was most frequently used in situations in which the speaker had equal or greater social power over the hearer. It was avoided in situations in which the speaker was in a subordinate social position to the hearer.

The incidence of explicit and hedged per formatives was very low (1.15% in the entire corpus), and they were used only in the [-P] situations. In addition to the above, locution derivable/obligation statements were used in social situations in which the speaker had more social power than the hearer ([+P]), and in those in which the speaker had equal social power with the hearer ([=P]). The locution derivable strategy was also used in one situation in which the speaker had less power than the hearer ([-P]), but was familiar with the hearer ([-D]). It seems clear from the results that the participants used the locution derivable or obligation statement strategy only when the situation indicated a strong right on the part of the speaker to make the request.

As regards the use of the want strategy, in the two [-P] situations, the incidence of want statements in the *getting a lift* situation was significantly less (1.61%) than in the *retrieving an assignment* situation, where the incidence of use was the more frequent, with a percentage occurrence of 6.67%. The frequency of use of this strategy in the [-P-D] situation *retrieving an assignment*, suggests that the participants were aware of their strong right to make the request in that situation, as opposed to their weak right to make the request in the *getting a lift* situation.

Non-conventionally indirect requests or hints are the essence of indirectness by virtue of their open-endedness. The incidence of strong hints was 6.44%, while mild hints had a lower occurrence of 0.92%. The results show that hints were used in every situation; however, their use was not such as would enable the making of a conclusive statement concerning their contextual distribution pattern.

9. Conclusion and recommendations

While the general preference was for direct strategies on the pragmalinguistic level, it was also found that formulaic expressions played a significant role in the learners' request production, especially in the expression of conventionally indirect requests. While various modals were used in such utterances, the results show that the modal *can* was overused. It seemed that the learners were not fully aware of the function of its past form *could* as a device for softening the impositive force of requests.

The results reveal that the socio-pragmatic factors of social power and social distance were found to influence the choice of request production of the participants, such that they were more direct in high power [+P] and equal power [=P] situations than in low power [-P] situations, in which they used less direct strategies to indicate their respect and deference. In the same vein, participants were more direct when the hearer of superior status was familiar [-P-D], than when they were unfamiliar [-P+D]. However, in the [-P-D] situation, which required a certain level of politeness in spite of the lack of social distance,   their success in the use of polite request strategies was relatively unsatisfactory.

This study has attempted to shed light on several pragmalinguistic and socio-pragmatic features of the request production of Nigerian learners that could inform the teaching and learning of appropriateness in the speech act of requesting in English in Nigerian schools. On the basis of the above findings, it is recommended that in the teaching of English as a second language in Nigerian schools, textbook content and classroom practice should incorporate both the linguistic devices and the social strategies available in speech act behaviour. There is definitely a need for the content of such textbooks to be research-based. Furthermore, classroom activities should be aimed at creating awareness of and developing the learners' ability to connect linguistic form with pragmatic function, in terms of language use in different social contexts. Role play and other interactive classroom activities may be useful in this regard. In addition, learners should be given ample opportunity to practise drills on requisite speech act production so as to effectively incorporate such speech acts into their linguistic repertoire.

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