Indirect Requests for Students of English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

This article provides part of the results of the investigation project B4279 *"Acquisition of indirect requests in students of English as a foreign language"*. This study explores the most appropriate types of requests for students of extension courses of the Project ED-2884 and the English Teaching Major, both from the Pacific Regional Campus of University of Costa Rica. The instrument for the analysis was based on Keburise (2012). It is composed of five communicative situations with five different requests each. The purpose of the instrument is for the students to select the ones they consider the most appropriate for each case. The research establishes the preference of interrogatives through concealed imperatives and directive requests.

Key words: linguistics, English, speech acts, pragmatics

Resumen

El artículo informa parte de los resultados del proyecto de investigación B4279 *Adquisición de peticiones indirectas en estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera.* Dicho estudio explora los tipos de peticiones considerados más apropiados para el estudiantado de los cursos libres de inglés del proyecto de Acción Social ED-2884 y de la carrera de Enseñanza del Inglés, ambos de la Sede del Pacífico de la Universidad de Costa Rica. Este análisis se realizó mediante un instrumento basado en Keburise (2012), compuesto de cinco situaciones comunicativas con cinco tipos de peticiones distintas, cada una con el fin de que los sujetos del estudio elijan las que consideren más apropiadas para cada caso. La

investigación señala la preferencia de fórmulas interrogativas para solicitar lo deseado, por medio de fórmulas imperativas encubiertas y peticiones directivas.

Palabras claves: lingüística, inglés, actos de habla, pragmática

Introduction

The study of requests belongs to the speech act theory, which was developed by the language philosopher John Austin (1991). After him, many other authors have contributed to the research of the speech act theory; for instance, Owens (2008) claims that speech acts belong to the pragmatic functions of language, such functions are divided into intrapersonal and interpersonal functions, the former deals with internal language, like memory, whereas the latter has to do with communication, which includes the speech acts, these transmit mental representations as well as the speakers' intentions.

Moreover, one of the broadest speech act theories was developed by Searle (1986) who extended the theory originally proposed by Austin (1991) and defines the speech acts as the basic units of linguistic communication. In other words, what this theory proposes is that speaking is to be part of a behavior governed by rules. That is to say, that speakers manage a series of conventions that are developed every time a linguistic action takes place; also, that in every opportunity one makes use of language is, at the same time, making use of speech acts; according to Searle (1986), some of the most common speech acts include commands, questions and promises.

Furthermore, it is important to establish that every linguistic act is not only an action within itself but it carries a communicative function with it; that is to say, that everything we say, has a communicative intention, every speech act intends to accomplish something more than just uttering a sentence or asking a question.

Specifically, in the case of requests, the speaker intends to make the listener do something; however, any competent speaker would understand that a direct way to ask for things might be considered rude by the interlocutor; therefore, indirect requests take place, mainly because of a matter of politeness.

Indeed, when acquiring the first language, children go through a process in which they develop certain strategies of politeness with the help of the context around them and the adults near them. In a similar fashion, when it comes to learning a foreign language, people need to develop a similar process that implies acquiring different cultural and pragmatic rules. Then, this study intends to analyze the indirect requests preferred by a population of students of English as a foreign language, to determine if these students possess the necessary pragmatic awareness for using that kind of speech acts.

Theoretical framework

The speech act theory

Austin (1991) proposes that a speech act is simultaneously composed of three differect forces, also known as acts: locutionary, ilocutionary and perlocutionary. First of all, the locutionary force is the speech act per se, the ilocutionary force or act reflects the speaker's intention whereas the perlocutionary stands for the effect of the speech act.

Furthermore, speech acts are categorized according to their aim; correspondingly, Schlieben-Lange (1987) divides the speech acts based on the distinction previously established by Searle (1986), in her distinction, there are five different categories divided according to their linguistic function: representatives, directives, commissives, expressives and declaratives. On this matter, López (2015) sumarizes such categories:

> requests and orders belong to the category of directives, assertions and claims fall under the category of representatives, commisives include promises and threats, declaratives include acts like declaring a war or marrying a couple and expressives cover acts such as apologies, complaints and expressions of gratitude (p. 139).

Indeed, when it comes to the realization of speech acts, what is important is that the speaker has the intention of performing what the act claims, here is where the term 'performative', purposed by Austin (1991), takes relevance. Such term indicates that every linguistic action implies to perform something; to provide an example, if a person promises something, this person is not only making the promise but is actually compromising him/herself to execute that promise.

Indirect speech acts

When the speech act is indirect, the ilocutionary force is not reflected in the linguistic form (Pérez, 2008), but the interlocutor's pragmatic competence will help them understand what the speaker intends; for example, as Crespo et al (2007) state: in *Could you close the door?*, the ilocutionary force of command is presented in the form of a question. In this case, the speaker does not need to know if the interlocutor has the ability to close the door but needs him/her to execute the action of closing it; so, if the interlocutor were to codify the literal meaning only, it would not be possible to comprehend what the speaker is communicating since the ilocutionary force is not manifested in the linguistic form; therefore, an indirect speech act is produced, which forces the listener to infer the ilocutionary act taking place.

Certainly, the speaker should use various resources avaliable in his/her language to transmit a communicative intention, in most cases, due to respect to the interlocutor; indeed, one of those resources is the use of interrogatives. According to Yule (2014), when an interrogation is used for a function other than a question, such as a request, the result is an indirect speech act. Yule (2014) expands: "We can define a speech act as the action performed by a speaker within an utterance. If you say, *I'll be there at six*, you are not just

speaking, you seem to be performing the speech act of "promising" (p. 131).

The speech act of requesting

Requests constitute one the first developed speech acts in children; hence, people start asking for things they need since childhood; first, through crying and body language and eventually, through a more complex use of words.

Because of the different functions requests accomplish, these are a highly relevant communicative element for both kids and adults; in addition to this, the study of requests is carried out because this speech act implies the knowledge of different rules of politeness since it is the most compromised with the context (Bruner, 1986).

In addition to this, requests belong to the category of directives. These speech acts are aimed at making the interlocutor do something (Searle, 1986), other directives are: invitations, petitions, commands, instructions, advice, proposals and orders. Of course, requests can be performed indirectly; as a matter of fact, they are usually performed as such because of politeness. According to Yule (2014):

> The main reason we use indirect speech acts seems to be that actions such as requests, presented in an indirect way (*Could you open that door for me?*), are generally more polite in our society than direct speech acts (*Open that door for me!*). (p. 132).

Besides, Coulson and Lovett (2010) claim that indirect requests can be classified between conventional and non-conventional; for instance, the example provided by Yule above: *Could you open that door for me?* is a conventional indirect request, "this highly entreched form may be motivated by considerations of politeness, allowing the addressee to opt out of the request by replying to the literal content of the question" (Coulson and Lovett, 2010, p. 108). Regarding this matter, Márquez, Rainey and Fulcher (2005) comment on the preconditions that exist for the realisation of conventional indirect requests, among these are the hearer's ability or willingness to perform the act, the authors take the explanation of Searle -1975- and state that "preconditions of ability are conventionally phrased with modals as in 'can/could' (…), those of willingness with 'would you be willing'" (p. 2).

On the other hand, non-conventional indirect requests need to be more supported by the components of the communicative situation, since they are statements "whose illocutionary force derives not from their form, but rather from the relationship between the speaker, the statement, and the context of the utterance" (p. 108).

Undoubtely, there are different ways to perform requests in English. In the following chart, Serra et al. (2000) detail the requests classification made by Babelot -1998-, and used in this study.

Table 1. Types of requests

Requests types	Agent, action, object	Examples
Imperatives	The action, agent and object of the request are explicit	"Give me the pen" "Tell me, where are the flowers?"
Concealed imperatives: usually interrogatives	Action and object are explicit	"Can you give me the salt?"
Expresion of wish	Agent and action are implicit; the object is explicit.	"I need a pen" "I want water"
Directive requests: interrogative form	Action as well as object are explicit. Agent of the action can be either implicit or explicit.	"Have you taken the pen?" "Do you have the salt?"
Allusions	Action and agent are explicit. Object may or may not be explicit.	"I'm hungry" "It's cold"

Translated by the author

The previous classification will guide this study in the analysis of requests used by students of English as a foreign language.

Methodology

The purpose of this research is to determine if the population of students of English as a foreign language identifies the level of appropriateness of indirect speech acts when requesting in different linguistic contexts.

Participants

The participants for this study are 112 students from two different study modalities: one is constituted by students of English courses offered to the community through an outreach project, and the other one is made of students of the Major of English Teaching, both from the Pacific Regional Center of University of Costa Rica.

On one hand, the students of the outreach project study English in a series of courses that are part of the project *"Languages for International Communication",* under the code ED-2884. This English program is divided into six different levels of sixty hours each; students must attend three hour sessions twice a week; they are mostly adults with jobs in different areas who make great efforts to attend class and learn the language, and also teenagers or young adults who study something in addition to these courses. At the

time of the study, four levels of the six that comprehend the program, were available: first, second, fourth and sixth.

On the other hand, most of the participants from the English Teaching Major are full-time students who receive most of the courses in the target language and have more hours of extra-class work.

Instrument

The instrument used is based on a questionaire proposed by Kaburise (2012) and the request types included are based on Babelot -1998-, found in Serra et al (2000). Such instrument is composed of five communicative situations requiring a petition in order to be complete. Every situation is followed by five different types of requests. Respondents were asked to rank, in a scale of 1 to 3, the level of appropriateness of the requests for every scenario, where 3 indicates the most appropriate response, number 2 stands for the option with some degree of appropriateness and 1 the least appropriate of the five. In this article, the focus will be directed to the most appropriate answer. Instruments with unclear information or incomplete, were disgarded to avoid wrong results.

Analysis discussion

In order to analyze the information, every communicative situation will be presented individually and followed by a discussion of the request chosen by the participants involved. For clarification purposes, the type of request is indicated in parentheses next to every request. This was not included in the original instrument.

1. You're organizing a birthday party for a coworker and need a friend's help to get the drinks. Which of the following statement/s would you consider an appropriate statement for you to make?

   a. We need drinks. *(expression of wish)*
   b. I am so busy. *(allusion)*
   c. I am sure you can get the drinks. *(concealed imperative)*
   d. Could you be in charge of the drinks for the party? *(directive request)*
   e. Get the drinks. *(imperative)*

Of the possibilities above, option *e* is the only one that represents a direct speech act; it is an imperative sentence, the other four present some degree of indirectness; that is to say, that either the agent, object or action is likely to be implicit and it is up to the interlocutor's competence to understand; therefore, do, what is expected.

In this case, the purpose is to get drinks for a party and the situation is between two friends; the results indicate that 59% of the population agreed in that a directive request was the most appropriate for that purpose; considering the classification on indirect requests by Coulson and Lovett (2010), this option is known as *conventional* since the addresser is leaving the addressee the possibility to respond the question or accept the request's illocutionary force; this happens, as explained by the authors, due to a matter of politeness; and this might explain the selection of this request by the majority of people in the study.

Separated by an evident distance were the rest of the requests: the expression of wish with 15.1%, the imperative with 14.3% and the concealed imperative with 10.7%; the option selected by a minimum number of students as the most appropriate request is the allusion, with a 0.9% of the population. In the light of this information, what is possible to notice is that the allusion differs from the rest of the requests in that it does not specify the object whereas the rest of the options do; therefore, the responses seem to indicate that students need to find the object explicit in the request.

Specifically, in the case of the most appropriate answer, it is a question integrated by the modal auxiliary *could* and by explicit action, object and agent. The fact that the majority of the respondants in many different levels selects this option, makes possible to believe that a structure of this kind looks more appropriate for this communicative purpose according to students.

2. You were playing very loud music when your neighbors came home. Which of the following statement/s would you consider an appropriate statement for them to make?

    f.   Our baby is sleeping. We'd like to get some sleep. *(expression of wish)*
    g.   Is the music coming from here? *(directive request)*
    h.   Turn the noise down. *(imperative)*
    i.   Would you mind turning down the music? *(concealed imperative)*
    j.   I have a report to finish by tomorrow. *(allusion)*

In this scenario, the relationship between the participants of the communicative situation are not as close as in situation number one; in this case, they are neighbors who need to agree on a solution for the loud music. The results reveal that 62.5% of the respondants considered the concealed imperative as the most appropriate option for this to happen, such option is presented in the form of a question with an explicit object, just as in the previous situation.

In the case of the second most appropriate request, 11.6% of the population chose the expression of wish and a very close 10.7%, the directive request. Furthermore, the percentage that considered the imperative as the most appropriate possibility to make a request was 9% and only 6.2% considered the allusion as the most appropriate option.

Even though the selection for this situation is different from the request in situation one; it is also an interrogative and conventional request; so, once again, these appear to be the appropriate form to request for English students. Additionally, the request selected by fewer people in both this situation and the previous one is the allusion, which might indicate a pattern for the requests, selection. Equally important is that requests such as allusions are an example of what Coulson and Lovett (2010) describe as *non-conventional* indirect requests which might be useful to explain why fewers students chose it.

In sum, option *i*, concealed imperative, was considered the most appropriate for participants; it seems that not only questions, but questions with a modal auxiliary are perceived as pragmatically appropriate, which makes a lot of sense when considering

that the students are taught formally about the different grammatical structures and the contexts in which they should be used; they may be trying to apply those rules into the communicative contexts.

3. You urgently need money. Unfortunately, you'll get your paycheck until Friday/ your parents are not around so you need to ask a family friend for the money. Which of the following statement/s would you consider appropriate to make?

    k. Can you lend me some money until Friday when I get my paycheck/ when my parents come back? *(concealed imperative)*
    l. I was not able to pay for my registration for the English course and Friday is the last day. *(allusion)*
    m. Do you have any money? *(directive request)*
    n. I urgently need some money. *(expression of wish)*
    o. Lend me some money. *(imperative)*

Situation number three deals with a need of money. Once again, the majority of the population, represented in 74%, took the concealed imperative as their best choice. With a considerably lower percentage, 10.7% agreed in that a directive request would be the best way to ask for the money. Even though, there is a noticeable distance between the people who selected the concealed imperative and the people who selected the directive request, these are the two most appropriate requests for the subjects of the study, making, one more time, the conventional requests the most appropriate indirect petition according to students.

Following this, 8% considered the expression of wish as the most proper request while 4.5% thought of this for the allusion. Last, but not least important is the imperative, which was selected 3.7% of the times. In this scenario, it was not the allusion but the imperative that was considered appropriate by the lowest percentage of the population, perhaps the object in this particular scenario, the money, contributed to this election since the respondants might find it too straightforward to ask for a money loan with no indirectness whatsoever.

In sum, to ask for money does not seem to be something they would require directly; therefore, they chose the imperative as appropriate the least number of times while the concealed imperative, in which the object is required through a respectful question, is the most appropriate for the entire population. Also, this specific request provides a reason along with it, which might be something common for Spanish speakers when producing speech acts in which their negative face, which is their desire for their actions to be approved (Haverakte, 1994), might be threatened so they need to protect their own image and "a way to do so, is to offer a justification" (López, 2015, p. 145); as a matter of fact, this is reinforced with the findings in López (2015) where Spanish speakers studying English as a foreign language also provided reasons as a strategy to refuse offers and requests where their negative face needed to be protected.

4. You need to borrow an outfit from your younger sister/brother to go to a job interview. Which of the following statement/s would you consider appropriate to make?

   p. Don't you have an outfit I can borrow? *(concealed imperative)*
   q. Give me your suit. *(imperative)*
   r. I'd really like the suit you have in your closet. *(expression of wish)*
   s. I don't have anything to wear for my interview. *(allusion)*
   t. Is it ok I wear that suit you have? *(directive request)*

In the situation above, 45.5% took the concealed imperative as the most appropriate answer for the situation exposed. In addition, the directive request was selected by 27.7% of the population; as can be seen in this case, the two most appropriate requests according to students are not so distant from one another as in the previous situations but they still have the structure of a question and are conventional indirect requests. Such situation indicates that students find interrogations as the most polite structures for requesting in this situation as well.

Moreover, the allusion was the option for 17% of the participants, the indirectness in this case falls in that the speaker does not need to explicit the object in any way, it depends on the addressee to infer what the speaker wants and to proceed with an offer of the required object, it is a non-conventional indirect request. Finally, the requests chosen by the least amout of people were the expression of wish and the imperative, with 5.3% and

4.5% respectively. Undoubltely, as Ruytenbeek (2012, p. 1) claims, "in English, the most straightforward and, arguably, pragmatically unambiguous way to ask someone to close a door would be to utter the imperative sentence *Close the door*"; indeed, this indicates why imperatives are still considered by some as the most appropriate request, in spite of being direct.

5. You are eating in a restaurant and need an extra chair. You ask for it to the people on the next table. Which of the following statement/s would you consider an appropriate statement for you to make?

   u. Can I use your chair? *(concealed imperative)*
   v. Give us that chair. *(imperative)*
   w. Do you have an extra chair? *(directive request)*
   x. We need a chair. *(expression of wish)*
   y. We don't have a place to sit. *(allusion)*

The directive request as well as the concealed imperative have been chosen as the two most appropriate requests in this context by 43.8% the former, and 39.2% the latter. This selection is repeated through all the situations, either one or the other is selected as the most appropriate indirect request; notably, questions are conceived as the most polite form to request, independently of the situation.

In addition, the other forms of requests were selected with the following percentages: the expression of wish was selected by 10.7%, the imperative by 3.6% and the allusion by only 2.7%, such results are not too

different from the results analyzed in the previous contexts, which indicates a pattern for this population: requests in the form of declarative statements are not usually perceived as the most appropriate requests.

Definitely, to be pragmatically aware is an aspect of high importance for learners of other languages, as Hasbún (2004) claims: "pragmatic competence is indispensable in face-to-face interactions in a foreign language" (p. 264). However, pragmatics is not always taught explicitly in language classrooms but instead, it is something that learners acquire through time, as they gain practice.

Conclusions

After this study, it is possible to conclude that questions including modal auxiliaries, such as *Would you mind…*, or *Could you…*, are thought as more polite, because even though all types of questions carry some degree of indirectness, these are usually chosen as the most polite by the students. This can be supported in the explanation provided by Coulson and Lovett (2010) about the reason why speakers tend to choose conventional indirect requests: due to politeness. Also, this choice indicates that respondents consider that for this requests to take place, the addressees have the ability to understand the implicit act and perform it.

Additionally, allusions and expressions of wish are indirect requests as well; however, they have proven to be considered appropriate by just a small amount of the English learners; on the contrary, interrogatives are rarely chosen by few people.

Furtheremore, the imperative, in spite of being the only direct request included in every situation, was always chosen by a number of people, even though these people were never majority, the important thing to highlight here is that direct requests may also be considered appropriate requests for some students, perhaps their English level influences this choice.

On the whole, the purpose of this study was to see if students were able to identify the appropriateness based on their selection of the different requests and this, at the same time, would demonstrate their level of pragmatic competence. Undoubtely, results show that most students from the study have developed some pragmatic competence independently of their study modality; however, the fact that requests in the form of interrogatives happen to be the most frequently chosen requests can also be an indicator of the influence of their native language since in Spanish, one of the ways to request indirectly is also through the use of questions (Martin, 2011).

Lastly, it is important to point out that the study of pragmatics should be included in all language instruction; learners need to be aware of the proper ways to communicate in their target language. Particularly, when it comes to speech acts, indirect language is more polite and it will contribute to get what is intended. Through this study, it has been proven that students manage some degree of pragmatic awareness in this matter since they chose indirect requests most of the times; moreover, this analysis provides helpful insights in the understanding of indirect requests in students of English as a foreign language.

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