

## What is behind Language Learners' Failure to Request Politely? A Case Study

ما سبب اخفاق طلبة اللغات في الامتثال لآداب الطلبات المهذبة؟ دراسة حالة

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Rec. Day :20/04/2020	Acc. day: 08/05/2020	Pub. day: 15/09/2020
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### Abstract:

The present study aimed to investigate why second year students of English at Batna2 University often fail to use polite requests properly. Methodologically, the researchers opted for a qualitative approach, and a case study strategy. To collect data, two tools were used: a classroom observation and interview. As for the sample, first year teachers of grammar were chosen purposefully. Ultimately, the findings revealed that the teachers of grammar focus on the linguistic structure, rather than its use and function in real life situations, and often neglect the pragmatic dimension. Accordingly, it was suggested that EFL teachers and learners should be aware of the importance of learning and using the linguistic form and relevant social and contextual features.

**Keywords:** Linguistic Form, Polite Request, Pragmatic Dimension, Pragmatic Failure, Social Features, Context Features.

مَلِكُ الْجَمْعِ

هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى التحقيق في سبب فشل طلاب السنة الثانية للغة الإنجليزية في جامعة باتنة2 في كثير من الأحيان في استخدام الطلبات المهذبة بشكل صحيح. من الناحية المنهجية، اختار الباحثان نهجا نوعيا، واستراتيجية لدراسة الحالة. ولجمع البيانات، استخدمت

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أداتان أساسيتان: مراقبة الفصول الدراسية ومقابلة شفوية. أما بالنسبة للعينة، فتم اختيار أساتذة قواعد اللغة للسنة الأولى.

وفي نهاية المطاف، كشفت النتائج أن أساتذة قواعد اللغة يركزون على البنية اللغوية، بدلاً من استخدامها وتوضيها في مواقف الحياة الحقيقية، وغالباً ما يهملون البعد العملي. وبناء على ذلك، اقترح أن يكون معلمو ومتعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية على وعي بأهمية التعلم واستخدام الشكل اللغوي والسمات الاجتماعية والسياقية ذات الصلة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** التركيبة اللغوية، البعد العملي، ملامح اجتماعية وسمات سياقية، البعد البراغماتي، آداب الطلبات المهذبة.



### Introduction

The basic aim of teaching any foreign language is the development of learners' communicative competence. Henceforth, being competent in the target language entails the control of knowledge or skill that goes beyond the correct use of the grammar and pronunciation rules of that language. This simply means, it includes the ability to understand how language is used in different contexts to be able to produce different results. In this way, the pragmatic ability cannot only enable learners to go beyond the literal meaning of what is said, and interpret the intended meaning, but also to use appropriate language to avoid misunderstandings or being considered impolite or rude.

Politeness, however, is an essential element in daily life relations. It gives members of a given community boundaries, rules of conduct, and grounds to stand on. That is, politeness involves considering the feelings of others and making them feel comfortable. It is a universal phenomenon, even if it is expressed differently in different cultures. According to Brown and Levinson's (1978), for politeness theory, "people tend to choose indirect forms over direct ones to show politeness, since being direct is face-threatening" (p.78). Illocutions that are more indirect are to be used to increase the degree of politeness, added Leech (1983).

In the same line of thought, using direct speech acts, in

many cases, can be considered impolite or rude. On that account, to mitigate or soften the effect of speech acts, speakers are supposed to choose to state their utterances indirectly; and thus, higher levels of indirectness are believed to result in higher levels of politeness. This is because of the ignorance of politeness strategies in a given language that will often lead to misunderstanding and communication breakdown. This is for the simple reason that what is considered to be polite or impolite in one culture can be different in another.

Based on what has been stated so far, it has been noticed that the inability to use indirect speech acts when necessary by second-year students of English at Batna2 University, although considered of advanced level, is beheld as a pragmatic failure. The latter includes mistakes and a failing to fulfil communication because of incompatible expressions and improper habits. Pragmatic failure is an area of cross-cultural communication breakdown, which we believe, has received very little attention from the part of teachers, and more precisely, the teachers of grammar. The latter, because of their current practices, their habits have made of them mere suppliers of language rules, rather than functions, targeting chiefly language accuracy rather than language proficiency.

#### **I. Literature Review**

In language learning, to learn about how to acquire a foreign language (henceforth FL) features is significantly different from learning how to use them in real life situations; hence, communicating efficiently in a FL usually requires both the pragmatic and grammatical competences. The pragmatic ability, indeed, is indispensable for EFL learners to understand and be understood. It interacts, as Kasper (1989) confirmed, with the other types of knowledge, such as world knowledge, grammatical, and phonological knowledge. More definitely, pragmatic competence is the knowledge of the linguistic forms of the target language, the functions of these forms and the social rules that enable the user to comprehend and perform a message (Kasper, 1992). This ability is composed of the pragma-linguistic competence, on one hand, and the socio pragmatic competence,

on the other one. The first refers to the knowledge of the linguistic means and pragmatic strategies needed in particular context; however, the second is about the social knowledge necessary to interpret and produce language in a given speech community, notably, the social distance between interlocutors, degree of imposition, relative rights, and obligations (Leech, 1983).

Correspondingly, an FL learner often manifests his/her pragmatic competence, and therefore, his/her communicative competence through the ability to utter speech acts appropriately in social contexts i.e. utterances that are used to perform actions or, to put it another way, doing things with words.

Being a directive act, the speech act of request, which is at the core of the present study, is the most studied category as it is repeatedly used in daily life situations. The latter is an attempt by the speaker to get the hearer to do something. That is why, it is a face-threatening act. Additionally, requests as noted by Safont-Jorda (2008), are performed by the speaker in order to engage the hearer in some future course of action that coincides with the speaker's goal. Brown and Levinson (1987) suggested that when people want to do a face-threatening act, they might try to mitigate its effect on the hearer's face.

Depending on the seriousness or weightiness of the face-threatening act, the speaker chooses different strategies. As for indirectness in requests, it is more desirable since the speaker's intention is conveyed implicitly. Direct strategies, however, can be awkward in daily conversations and the speaker has better to avoid them in most circumstances. Instead, s/he can use other appropriate forms; otherwise, s/he might look rude or impolite.

Therefore, to minimise the imposition involved in the request, the speaker has to use indirect strategies. On these strategies, in the available body of literature, there are two types: First, there are the conventionally indirect strategies that are used through "could you", "I want you to"... or other forms that help to make a request, but still do not have an imperative form (as cited in Achiba, 2003). Second, the non-conventionally indirect strategies or hints are those open-ended group used to realise a request by either partial reference to the object or element needed

or by reliance on contextual clues. On this point, interestingly, Blum-kulka (1983) explained that, Direct requests for foreign language learners do not pose a problem as they are the same in almost all languages” (p.33).

However, it might be found that it is knotty to form indirect requests appropriately; granting the fact, those learners learn to use indirect request strategies in their mother tongue since they are part of their pragmatic competence in their native language. That is, they are not always transferable to another language. Consequently, the degree of imposition, the relative power of the hearer, and the social distance are variables that the speaker has to consider when uttering his/her request i.e. this concerns choosing direct or indirect strategies.

Hence, the inability to use the appropriate strategy to form an appropriate request in the needed context is considered a pragmatic failure. This simply means, it is a failure to achieve the desired communicative effect. The pragmatic failure, as noted by Ziran HE (2009), does not refer to the general wording and phrasing of errors that can appear in the language use; rather, it refers to the failure to reach the expected result because of speaking improperly, and also expressing ideas in an idiomatic way.

## **II. The Study**

This section is about the fieldwork of the present investigation. First, It displays the methodological framework this research has rested on. Additionally, it identifies the different procedures followed to collect and analyse data. Finally, it sheds light on the targeted population, the selected sample, and the adopted sampling technique.

### **II.1. The Methodology in this Study**

The present study is an exploratory study. It was conducted using a qualitative approach. The choice of this research approach was determined by the nature of the investigation, that is to help seek an understanding of the reasons behind the pragmatic failure of EFL learners in requesting. In relevance to this approach, the researchers opted for a case study research strategy.

### **II.2. Data Collection**

As data collection methods, two data gathering tools were used: First, classroom observations were carried out during a number of sessions. The choice of this research instrument was because it offers the opportunity to collect live data from naturally occurring situations (Cohen, 2007). In this respect, classroom observation often helps investigate a single classroom or a single phenomenon in a small number of classrooms. In the present study, this data collection instrument was utilised to explore, on one hand, the type of teachers' speech acts performed during the lesson; and on the other one, it was suggested to investigate the structure of classroom interaction. Two teachers out of five were selected purposefully to present the same lesson on modals as they are fundamental and crucial elements out of which a request can be structured. The presented lessons by the selected teachers, whose teaching experiences differed from one teacher to another, were recorded, without any interference on the part of the researchers who stood as non-participant observers.

Moreover, an individual interview, which is viewed by a great deal of scholars as a flexible tool to gather valuable information, was conducted to all first-year teachers of grammar in the context under study to explore their attitudes towards, and perceptions of, the researched problem. The latter, is believed, to have an influence on the phenomenon under study. More importantly, this data gathering tool was used to validate and crosscheck the results generated by the observation findings.

As for the targeted students in this exploratory research, the sample comprised two second year groups of students of English at Batna2 University. All of them were aged between 18 and 23 years-old. English language for them is a second foreign language.

### **II.3. Data Analysis**

After transcribing the audio recordings, a discourse analysis of the transcripts was done based on the Sinclair Coulthard's model (1975), IRF. It is thought that this model can provide a comprehensive description of the teacher-learner talk in the classroom. On this point, the speaking patterns were highly structured. Sinclair and Coulthard's model consisted of five ranks. These are lesson transaction, exchanges, moves, and acts. What is

remarkable is that the highest rank in the lesson is built out of transactions. The transactions are formed by of exchanges that are expressed in terms of moves. The latter consist of “one or more acts” (Coulthard, 1985).

Furthermore, discourse research, through Sinclair model, is realised at the level of exchanges. The latter are of two types: boundary and teaching. The boundary exchanges typically signal the beginning or the end of a lesson, transaction, or a change of topic with words like “right”, “alright”, “now”, “ok”. On the other side, the teaching exchanges are “the individual steps by which the lesson progresses” (1992, p.25). In this model, teaching exchanges consist of minimum of one move and a maximum of three: required opening move followed by a potential answering move and then a potential follows-up move (Cook, 1989, p.47). These moves are labelled as follows: Initiation (I), Response(R), Feedback (F). Moves are made up of acts; some moves may consist of a single act. These acts indeed are the lowest ranking in the model.

### III. Results and Discussion

The following section reports the obtained findings. It also discusses the analysis and interpretation of these results. The main aim is to answer the raised questions of this research.

#### III.1. Classroom Observation Transcripts

This sub-section is concerned with the analysis of the transcripts using the IRF model. In its essence, this model attempts to provide a thorough description of the structure of classroom interaction during the modal verbs’ lessons. Besides, it presents and interprets the type of speech acts used by the two teachers that are the main participants in this investigation.

##### a. Lessons Structure

Table 1 in below indicates the different parts that form the lessons (number of floors, number of transactions, and the number of sub-transactions, moves and acts). These two lessons comprised several floors. They were divided into transactions and sub-transactions. First, the transactions refer to the big moments and parts that make up a lesson. Definitely, the observed teacher was expected to cover them successively until the end of the

session. Every one of the transactions contained at least one sub-transaction. It is evident that also each sub-transaction consisted of exchanges. The exchange ends when the point or the idea under discussion is fully covered and followed by the teacher's feedback.

**Table 1: Lessons Structure**

N° of Lessons	Floors	T. Floors	S. Floors	Transactions	Sub-transactions	Moves	Acts
01	83	46	37	09	17	I.35 R.36 F.12	117
02	245	197	123	08	14	I. 108 R. 122 F. 89	350

**Note:**

**I:** Refers to Initiation turn, which indicates the start of a new exchange.

**R:** Refers to Response to a previous initiation turn.

**F:** Refers to Feedback that closes the exchange.

**b. Discussion Transactions**

Tables 2 and 3 in below show that the different transactions and sub-transactions of each lesson, in addition to the number of floors in one transaction, aim to check whether or not the different transactions had been assigned equal importance. Furthermore, these tables indicate whether or not one element of the whole ones had been given more focus. In line with these assumptions and in more practical terms, in lesson one, there were nine transactions, and 17 sub-transactions while lesson two consisted of eight transactions, which included 14 sub-transactions. Overall, the number of floors in lesson two was high compared to the number of floors in the first lesson since T1 was just informing, and giving rules to the students. Contrarily to this teacher, T2 gave more opportunities to the students to participate and share what they had known through these exploratory questions. In what followed, lesson two was delivered in a more dynamic way wherein the students showed more commitment to what they were taught.



In these two observed lessons, more focus was paid to the last transaction of request compared to the other communicative functions of modal verbs, such as ability, offer, and permission (See Tables 3 and 4). According to the two teachers, requesting is the most important communicative function expressed by modal verbs since it is used frequently in classrooms. The transaction of request was divided into two sub-transactions. In lesson one, the sub-transactions were “What is a Request?” and “Formal and Informal Request”, while in lesson two there were “Degrees of Formality” i.e. “Politeness of Request” and “Practice Phase” since the sub-transaction of “What is a Request?” was introduced in transaction three.

### c. Interactive Roles

In this section, attention will be addressed to the examination of classroom interaction with the intention to investigate the extent to which involvement into real discussions is realised. It also attempts to identify to what extent the opportunities were given to the observed students by their teachers to interact.

**Table 2:** *Teachers' Interactive Roles*

	I	R	F
T1	71.73%	2.17%	26.08%
T2	54.82%	0%	45.17%

### d. The Teachers' Interactions

Table 2 shows a clear difference between T1 and T2 in types of acts produced. For T1, there is a higher percentage of initiations compared to T2 i.e. 71.73 % for T1 and 54.82% for T2. Henceforth, both teachers were highly engaged in providing initiations for their students since it is a grammar lesson and it is the teacher's role to introduce rules. Moreover, R results indicate the absence of exchange and negotiation between the teachers and students. As for the relevant feedback F, higher rate is remarked particularly for T2 with 45.17% as she provided more feedback to her students' responses than T1 with 26.08%.

### e. The Students' Interactions

Concerning students' interaction, it has been remarked that initiations of the students of group one were very low and totally absent in group two. The students did not initiate new topics. The observed teachers were exclusively initiators. As a matter of fact, the turn taking system was managed, structured, and controlled only by the teachers. However, at another level, the two groups reflected high rates of responses R. This simply means that they were highly engaged in classroom participation, taking into consideration that much of their responses were answers to the teachers' initiations of comprehension check.

**Table 3:** *Learners' Interactive Roles*

	I	R	F
Gr1	2.70%	96.29%	0%
Gr2	0%	100%	0%

### f. The Teachers' Acts in Teaching Requests

As it has been showed so far, requesting has been assigned a more focus at the expense of the other communicative functions of modal verbs. In what is coming, the present section reports the analysis of acts, performed by the two selected teachers in teaching requests. In fact, there was a dire need to examine the teachers' acts to figure out whether or not they served the teaching of grammar as a linguistic system (structure) or as a tool to be used in communication.

### g. Teacher's Acts in Lesson One

The function of request in lesson one was introduced in transaction nine. It comprised two sub-transactions (What is a Request? / Formal and Informal Requests). This part of the lesson consisted of 18 floors, nine floors were performed by T1, and the other nine floors were initiated by the students in group one. Table 4 comprises the analysis of the transcript of the previous acts.

**Table 4:** Analysis of Acts in Lesson 01

I				R		F	
Inf	Elic	App	Comp	Exp	Inf	Acc+ exp	Dis+ exp
37.5 %	12.5%	6.25%	18.75%	6.25%	0%	12.5%	6.25%

What is noticeable is that the rate of information was very high (37.5%), compared to the other acts. It was one of the most important acts performed by T1. Such a fact explains that T1 spent more time giving information or introducing the present function. Besides, the act of comprehension check makes 18.75% from the total proportion. This confirmed that T1 provided information then checked the students' understanding using questions, such as "Clear?", "Right?", and "Key?" To end the initiation. As for eliciting acts (exploratory requests), the rate was 12.5%, which implied that T1 did not engage the students to participate. It is ostensible that there is a rate of 6.25% that indicates that there are some initiations performed by a student followed by T1's response and explanation. The practice phase, or as also called the "Application Act", performed by the students, was ignored by T1. Therefore, these students did not have the opportunity to practise what they had already learnt.

### III.2. The Teachers' Acts in Lesson Two

Teaching requests in lesson two was also presented in the last transaction (transaction 8). It consisted of two sub-transactions, "Degrees of Formality" and the "Practice Phase". This part of the lesson contained 32 floors (This number did not take into account the number of floors performed in the "Practice Phase"). Sixteen of them were performed by T2; and the students of group 2 performed the other 16. These acts were transcribed and are illustrated in table 5.

**Table 5:** *Analysis of Teacher's Acts (Lesson 02)*

Initiation				Response		Feedback	
Inf	Elic	App	Comp	Exp	Inf	Acc	Dis
3.84%	50%	0%	3.84%	0%	0%	38.46%	3.84%

### **Discussion**

Exploratory requests are one of the most communicative roles and negotiation skills that the observed teachers performed. T2's findings revealed a higher percentage in eliciting 50%; contributions were exploratory questions asked by this teacher. This implies that she was playing the role of a guide and facilitator to build on rules. Moreover, T2 gave more opportunities to the students to extend exchanges through raising discussions and debates. Between informing acts and comprehension check, an equal proportion with 3.84% is remarked. Hence, there is an absence of acts in responses that implied the absence of students in building on new initiations. This fact means that the latter were produced only by the teacher. Concerning the feedback, the act of 'Accepts' make 38.46% in comparison with 3.84% for the 'Disagrees'. Ultimately, this confirmed that the majority of students' responses were correct.

### **III.3. The Teachers' Interview**

The interviews with the remaining other group of teachers of the grammar course in the context under study, and who taught first year students, also confirmed that the language elements are much more instructed to reach the targeted language accuracy, rather than language appropriacy although these teachers agreed on the importance of integrating those forms into real contexts . According to these teachers' responses, all of them believed that they were applying the recommendations, stated in the "Socle Common". The latter is designed by the syllabus designers and is supposed to be followed by the teachers at a micro-level. Five teachers out of seven confirmed that when teaching the grammar lessons, they usually focus on the teaching of grammatical

structures to help students produce correct sentences, rather than communicate properly.

In the same vein, two teachers out of seven asserted that they frequently insist on two aspects: helping students communicate appropriately, and produce correct sentences. Similarly, five other teachers out of seven declared that time allotted to the grammar lessons was not sufficient for their students to reach an appropriate use of every aspect of the language. Additionally, all the teachers agreed that the students always fail to use and apply what is learnt in grammar in conversation. This is because when speaking, these students give more importance to the assumption of using language, rather than the correctness of its structure. These teachers, indeed, approved that the main reasons behind this failure were the lack of practice, insufficient time, and the total absence of coordination between the teachers of grammar and those of the oral expression courses. For that, these teachers suggested that coordinating sessions with the teachers of oral expression are of paramount importance since students could have more opportunities to practise what they have learnt. For instance, one of these teachers proposed that the syllabi for both levels (first and second levels) should be revised and adapted to become congruent with the students' needs.

#### **IV. Conclusion and Recommendations**

In sum, one can conclude that the more students are elicited and given opportunities to speak and interact, the more they become proficient to use and apply what they have learnt. In this study, it has been observed that T1 suggested the use of modal verbs and the structure of requests in general because the speech acts were informative. It has also been noticed that the students' use of the target structure is limited to examples, such as "can" and "could" although this teacher often introduced "would" and "will" along with other modal verbs. More importantly, there was nearly a total absence of the students' use of this structure in different situations. This confirms the problem that has been identified so far, which entails that the students were exposed in grammar lessons only to form, rather than language use and functions. To overcome such a failure, it is suggested that through

instruction, the students should be provided with the knowledge of different pragma-linguistic choices that could be employed in classroom conversations.

Therefore, in this study, the pragmatic dimension seems to be absent and neglected. It is also ostensible that the focus was more on how to form formal and informal requests, and what modals to be used. This was opposed to the “how”, “when”, and “to whom” that are required by the students who need to have an access to the language culturally bound pragmatic knowledge. Additionally, it is noted that even when T2 tried to elicit examples on this topic, the students were culturally related to their native language, and not to the target language.

In addition, a preference for the conventional indirect preparatory request strategy (Blum-Kulak et al., 1989) by the students was remarked because most of T1’s acts were direct requests with some use of preparatory requests, such as “Can you give an example?” / “Could you explain that?” In this respect, the students internalised the most frequent structure in the classroom. Hence, indirectness is nearly absent. The two concerned teachers in this study employed the direct requests although the students had to learn that the main form of redress for requests is to be indirect. They also have to know that the more indirect their utterances are, the more polite they will be.

On top of what has been mentioned, in the “Socle Common” (Grammar Section), the instruction is clear enough for teachers of the grammar course. This section recommends that “Pouvoir utiliser cette langue correctement dans les différentes situations du discours”. That is, it is crucial to make students able to use the language correctly in different situations of discourse. That is why, the teachers of the grammar course are supposed to teach not only the grammatical structure, but also how to use this structure in real life situations. Indeed, the application of the linguistic rules in different situations has to be the target of these teachers by the end of the academic year. More interestingly, the differing findings of this investigation revealed that the majority of teachers focus more on the teaching only of the grammatical structure, which entails that teachers of grammar seem to be

unaware of the importance of teaching language forms with integrating the pragmatic dimension. Hence, neglecting the use of grammatical structures in real life situations is one of the sources of second year students' pragmatic failure.

Based on what has been presented, discussed, and obtained as findings in this research study, the following assumptions are recommended:

- First, EFL teachers need to be aware about the necessity to introduce the language system within real contexts as the learning of an FL does not only imply the learning of new linguistic elements, but also gaining new social attitudes to know how these linguistic elements are used. That is, the appropriateness of an utterance is as important as its correctness.

- Second, EFL teachers should make their students more aware of the language practice inside and outside classrooms. This can be realised through awareness-raising activities that could help these students acquire socio-pragmatic and pragma-linguistic information. Socio-pragmatic information can be achieved through structured observations; however, pragma-linguistic information can be attained through strategies and linguistic means.

- Third, EFL teachers should also make their students aware of their acquired knowledge, and the ways to take advantage of it by using their existing pragmatic foundations in appropriate socio-pragmatic contexts. In addition, they need to help these students to attend both the linguistic forms of utterances and the relevant social and contextual features with which they are associated.

- Fourth, EFL students are responsible for their learning process since classroom interaction is too limited to teach every aspect of the language. They need to be aware about the interactional norms of conducting conversations in both formal and informal settings. More importantly, they should be aware of the different natural aspects of the learnt language.

- Finally, EFL teachers should re-consider the pragmatic ability as a teaching goal. This implies to set the pragmatic competence as a teaching objective in classrooms. This is because

the latter is sometimes the only available environment where they can try out what using the FL feels like, and how more or less comfortable they are with different aspects of pragmatics.

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