



# An Investigation into Iranian High School Students' Use of Request Speech Act

 **Vahid Panahzadeh,<sup>1</sup>**

 **Bita Asadi,<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>English Language and Literature Department, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran

<sup>2</sup>Department of English, Malard Branch, Islamic Azad University, Malard, Iran

**Corresponding Author:** Vahid Panahzadeh

**Phone:** +98-935-8590700

**e-mail:** panahzade.vahid@gmail.com

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## ABSTRACT

The recent advances in technology and increased opportunity for second language (L2) learners to communicate with native speakers make learning pragmatic competence and principles of appropriate language use indispensable to successful language acquisition. In view of the aforesaid fact, the present study set out to explore the most frequent strategy used by Iranian English as a foreign language (EFL) learners regarding the speech act of request and examine the effectiveness of the Iranian mainstream high school textbooks in developing pragmatic competence and language appropriacy. The target population of the study comprised a total of 142 male and female high school students. To tap the data relevant to the learners' pragmatic competence, a Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT) was devised for the speech act of request. It's worth noting that while the original version of WDCT was in English, it was translated into Persian in order to come up with more illustrative and dependable results. The validity of the both versions were checked before their administrations. The findings of the study revealed that though the females proved to be better users of indirect strategies than males, the majority of individuals had problem making appropriate requests in terms of the social status and power of the interlocutors

**Keywords:** Appropriacy; Iranian high school students; pragmatic competence; request speech act.

## 1. Introduction

Modern advances in technology and increased communication opportunities demand that students acquire not only grammatical but also pragmatic competence to maintain successful interaction. In other words, they need to learn appropriate language use in different situations and with different speakers. Given this new perspective, it becomes necessary to direct further attention to this pivotal aspect of language. To accomplish the aforementioned objective, materials should address this issue and there should be some pedagogical interventions aiming at explicit or implicit teaching of the pragmatics and language appropriacy. Fraser (1983) defined pragmatic competence as "the knowledge of how an addressee determines what a speaker is saying and recognizes intended illocutionary force conveyed through subtle attitudes in the speaker's utterance" (p. 29). Likewise Crystal (1985) defined it as "the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they

encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication" (p. 240). Simply put, while grammar is only concerned with structural accuracy, pragmatics deals with appropriate language use in the light of specific situations and speakers. Following Bachman's (1990) Communicative Language Ability model, pragmatic competence consists of illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence. The former relates to the knowledge of speech acts and speech functions, and the latter pertains to the ability to use language appropriately according to context.

Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, and Thurrell (1995) noted the disparity between foreign and second language learners' lexico-grammatical micro level and the macro level of communicative intent and sociocultural context of their communicative competence. Similarly, as Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989, p. 10) outlined, "even fairly advanced language learners' communicative acts regularly contain pragmatic errors, or deficits, in that they fail to convey or comprehend the intended illocutionary force or politeness value." It follows then that pragmatic competence doesn't develop alongside grammatical competence, and it requires explicit or implicit focus inside the classroom to raise learners' awareness of appropriate language use. Takahashi (2001), for instance, studied the effectiveness of explicit instruction on Japanese EFL learners' use of request strategies, and concluded that the explicit group outperformed the other three groups who didn't receive explicit instruction. In fact, curricula and material developed in many second and foreign language settings, keeping in line with aforesaid research study, have included strong pragmatic components or, at least, adopted a pragmatic approach (Rose & Kasper, 2001).

Speech acts have long been central to pragmatic competence studies. According to Richards and Schmidt (2002), a speech act refers to "an utterance as a functional unit in communication" (p. 498). There are different types of speech acts, such as requests, refusal, compliments, and promises. The speech act of request, being the focus of the present study, is a directive act entailing the speaker's effort to get the listener to do something which is of benefit to the speaker (Searle, 1976; Trosborg, 1995). According to Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, request is a face-threatening act (FTA) since it imposes a speaker's will on the listener. They believe that a speaker may mitigate the degree of FTA depending on the degree of imposition associated with the FTA, the relative power of the listener, and the social distance between him/herself and the listener (Brown & Levinson, 1987, pp. 76-77).

Requests have been one of the most commonly researched speech acts in both cross-cultural and interlanguage studies (Jalilifar, 2009). The majority of the studies in the speech act literature in general and requests in particular have centered on the choice of the various mitigating devices and strategies to reduce the degree of the imposition and maximize politeness (e.g. Abdolrezapour & Eslami-Rasekh, 2012; Li, Raja Suleiman, & Sazalie, 2015; Safont, 2003; Salmani Nodoushan, 2008; Takahashi, 1996). For instance, Abdolrezapour and Eslami-Rasekh (2012) sought to find the effects of the wording of the requests, in general, and the effect of using mitigation devices, in particular, on American and Iranian requestee's compliance. They found that Iranians demonstrated a preference for using external modifications, while Americans made use of internal modifications more frequently. Takahashi (1996), in an attempt to explore the pragmatic transfer and the effects of proficiency on Japanese university students request acts, discovered that both low- and high-proficiency groups resorted equally to L1 request conventions. He proposed that contextual familiarity, rather than proficiency, may be crucial for pragmatic transfer. Similarly, Hill (1997) found that the low-proficiency Japanese learners of English had a heavy reliance on direct requests, whereas the advanced ones employed conventionally indirect requests more frequently than the direct ones. Li, Raja Suleiman, and Sazalie (2015) explored Chinese EFL learners' had difficulties in using appropriate strategies and linguistic features to achieve communicative intentions, and a very serious problem that they encountered was the intended meaning and force of different linguistic forms and strategies.

The research trend on teaching pragmatics in the second language (L2) classrooms has substantiated positive effects of such interventions (e.g., Kasper, 2001). Necessitating the role of instruction on pragmatics, Bardovi-Harlig (2001) contends that second language learners who do not receive such an instruction differ considerably from native speakers regarding pragmatic

production and perception in the target language. Likewise, Koike and Pearson (2005) hold that learners develop pragmatic competence more effectively when they receive instruction on the speech acts. In their study of native speakers of English, the explicit instruction and feedback helped learners to read, interpret, and select the most appropriate pragmatic choices in the multiple choice sections of the tests. On the other hand, the implicit instruction affected those learners' open-ended responses in a dialogic context. In another study, investigating the effects of instruction on English request modification, Safont (2003) surveyed Spanish-speaking university students via written discourse completion task (WDCT) and learners demonstrated a marked increase in their use of internal and external modification on a posttest.

Exploring the effect of explicit metapragmatic instruction on the speech act comprehension of Iranian EFL learners, Eslami-Rasekh, Eslami-Rasekh, and Fatahi (2004) observed that explicit instruction facilitates interlanguage pragmatic development. They argued that pragmatic competence may not be resistant to explicit metapragmatic instruction. In a similar vein, Dastjerdi and Rezvani (2010) investigated the extent to which explicit versus implicit instruction affected Iranian intermediate EFL learners' ability to use the speech act of request in English. It became clear that both explicit and implicit instructions were helpful on the acquisition of the target forms. They argued that using various awareness-raising tasks which are implicit in nature can be as successful as explicit instruction on developing pragmatic competence.

Jalilifar (2009) sought to compare the use of request strategies by 96 Iranian EFL learners and 10 Australian native speakers of English. He utilized DCT to explore participants' use of request strategies in two situations entailing relative power and social distance. It was observed that Iranian EFL learners moved from direct to conventionally indirect strategies. As for the native speakers, it was found that they made a more balanced use of request strategy. Regarding the relationship between learners' language proficiency and use of request strategies, it was revealed that whereas those with higher proficiency displayed overuse of indirect type of requesting, low-proficiency learners overused the most direct strategy type. Finally, the researcher found that Iranian EFL learners were quite negligent of social distance and lacked sufficient sociopragmatic knowledge to display proper social behavior.

Similarly, Hashemian (2014) investigated the use of request strategies by Iranian nonnative speakers (NNSs) of English and Canadian native speakers (NSs) of English through a DCT including 12 situations. It was found that the Persian culture is more direct and positive-politeness oriented, whereas the Canadian culture tends to be indirect and negative-politeness oriented. Also, it was revealed that Iranians, unlike Canadians who were more or less fixed in their strategy use, varied their request strategies in different situations and were more sensitive to power differences.

Aliakbari and Gheitasi (2014) sought to explore Iranian EFL students' awareness of the appropriate use of request speech act in English speaking contexts in terms of formality, politeness and indirectness. Utilizing a discourse completion test (DCT) including 16 scenarios, they found that the majority of the students adopted formal or highly formal requests, most requested politely and performed indirect requests quite often. Also, a significant relationship between the three variables, i.e., formality, politeness and indirectness was observed; in other words, the students who were careful about using appropriate degrees of formality tended to act politely and preferably indirectly.

Khatib and Baqerzadeh Hosseini (2015) explored the possible contribution of plays to the pragmatic development 80 Iranian EFL university students through either explicit or implicit mode of instruction. It was found that the groups receiving explicit instruction outperformed their implicit counterparts. The authors concluded that although exposure to enhanced input followed by some awareness-raising tasks (implicit instruction) may be effective in pragmatic development, the contribution of explicit instruction pragmatic development is quite substantial.

## **2. Purpose of the Study**

Lack of opportunity to use authentic language and communicate with native speakers (NSs) and, as a result, limited chance to learn the sociolinguistic rules of the L2 have negatively impacted

on EFL learners' acquisition of pragmatic competence (Hashemian, 2014). According to Alemi and Khanlarzadeh (2017), authentic samples of target language in various situations should be used in classrooms to help students acquire pragmatic competence. The Ministry of Education in Iran has long allotted some minimal segments in the high school course books to the instruction of such pragmatic aspects (e.g., requests); yet, as the investigation of the status of learners successive to graduation may help reveal, they still fall short of meeting the communicative requirements toward which the courses had originally been targeted. Rose (1999) already attributed this failure to large classes, limited contact hours, and little opportunity for intercultural communication where a narrow range of speech acts strategies are practiced by learners. In view of the aforesaid facts, the present study seeks to explore the most frequent strategy used by Iranian learners regarding the speech act of request and examine the effectiveness of the high school textbooks in developing pragmatic competence and language appropriacy in particular. Hence, the following research questions are to be answered:

1. What is the most frequent request speech act strategy used by Iranian high school students?
2. How effective are the mainstream high school textbooks in teaching pragmatic appropriacy?

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. Participants**

The design of the present study comprised eight classes from two state high schools in Urmia, Iran. The participants in the present study comprised of 78 males and 64 females who were all second-year high school students. They were all more or less the same age. The students were of different cultural backgrounds, i.e. they spoke Turkish, Kurdish, and Persian languages.

#### **3.2. Instruments**

The data for the present study were obtained through a Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT) which is one of the most frequent forms exerted in interlanguage studies (e.g., Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). It was in the form of a questionnaire and it introduced a number of natural situations, followed by a space in which the respondents were to provide the appropriate linguistic form of the speech act studied. The use of WDCTs is advantageous in interlanguage pragmatic research since it is possible to administer them to a large number of participants and the data analysis is effortless. The WDCT presented a systematic variation of one major contextual variable, that is, the addressees' status, which seems to be a significant factor in affecting linguistic form of the request. This variable was binary: either the interlocutors were equal in status, or the addressee was higher in status. Moreover, the situations in WDCT were attempted to be matched culturally to the context of the study in general and to the school setting in particular.

#### **3.3. Data Collection Procedure and Analysis**

The WDCT was devised in English format which consisted of 12 situations requiring the use of the speech act of request where the requester asks a favor of the other person (e.g., asking to borrow classroom notes). However, in order to reduce the effect of the learners' literacy on responding English version of the questionnaire, it was translated to Persian- the formal language of the Iran. The Persian version was reviewed by 2 professors holding PhD in Teaching of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) to assure its content relevance to the Iranian culture and also to the course book syllabus. Having ascertained the validity of the WDCT, it was administered to the participants who were asked to respond the questionnaire at the presence of the researchers in the class. They were given the instructions in Persian to avoid probable misunderstandings.

The speech act of request may differ in the choice of the strategy and level of directness. To enquire into the requests, it is necessary to utilize a scale of imposition- from the most direct and imposing request to the most indirect and least imposing one. The Cross-Cultural Speech Act

Realization Project (CCSARP) coding scheme (Table 1), one of the widely known pioneer studies on pragmatics by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) specified three levels of directness for requests: direct requests, conventionally indirect requests, and non-conventionally indirect requests. As it has become the most preferred scheme in recent request studies, it was used to analyze data in the present study as well.

Table 1. *CCSARP Request Coding Scheme (adopted from Blum-Kulka et al., 1989, pp. 278-280)*

	<b>Main category</b>	<b>Subcategory</b>
Most direct	1. Direct	(1) Mood derivable (imperative) (2) Explicit performative (3) Hedge performative (4) Locution derivable (5) Want statement
Least indirect	2. Conventional indirect	(6) Suggestory formula (7) Query preparatory
Least direct	3. Non-conventional indirect	(8) Strong hint (9) Mild hint

The classification was based on the degree to which the illocution is obvious from locution and also on the theoretical claim that, when requests are made, imperatives are less polite than declaratives, which are in turn less polite than questions. In direct requests, the illocutionary force of the utterance is demonstrated by grammatical, lexical, or semantic means (for example, “give me your pen!”). Conventionally indirect requests convey the illocution via fixed linguistic convention (i.e. formulaic expressions) established in the speech community (for example, “could I borrow your pen?”). Non-conventionally indirect requests demand the addressee to work out the illocution from the interaction of the locution with its context (for example, “You don’t use your pen. Aren’t you?”).

Besides the main strategies known as the “head act” (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984), requests can also be coded in terms of modifications such as downgraders (e.g., the use of politeness marker “please”) or supportive moves (e.g., giving a reason), which are aimed at mitigating the force of the “face threatening act” (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

#### 4. Results

The present study pursued two basic aims: (a) finding out the most frequent request speech act strategy used by Iranian high school students, and (b) evaluating the effectiveness of mainstream high school textbooks in teaching pragmatic appropriacy. A total of 1704 requests were elicited from the participants’ responses to the WDCT questionnaires. Table 2 shows the distribution of the three main strategies used by both genders.

Table 2 *Numbers and Frequencies of Request Head Acts Used by Both Genders*

	<b>Males</b>	<b>percentage</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>percentage</b>
Direct (D)	324	34.6	52	6.7
Conventional Indirect (CID)	90	9.6	404	52.6
Non-conventional Indirect (NCID)	0	0	0	0

As can be seen, the preference order of the three main strategies for females was CID > D > NCID; however, the preference order for males was D > CID > NCID. In other words, female learners used conventionally indirect strategy more frequently than the male learners. It was also found that male learners relied more on the modification strategies than female learners. Specifically, male learners utilized the downgrader “please” more frequently (see Table 3).

Table 3 Numbers and Frequencies of Modifications Used by Both Genders

	Males	percentage	Females	percentage
Downgraders	516	55.1	305	39.7
Supportive moves	6	0.6	7	0.9

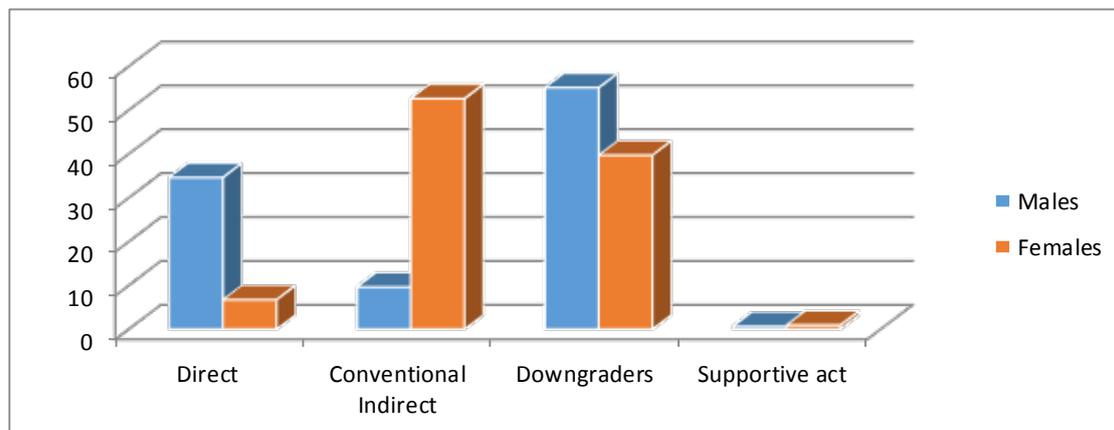


Figure 1. Frequencies of the Four Strategies Used by Both Genders

Chi-square analysis was also used to see whether there is any significant difference in the frequency of different request strategies used by both genders. The analysis revealed a statistically significant difference in the frequency of request strategies as used by male and female learners ( $X^2(3, 1704) = 438.355, p = .00$ ). By conducting a more detailed inspection, it became evident that the majority of the female learners took English classes in some language schools. However, most of the male counterparts didn't have such an extra exposure to language use outside the school. Hence, it can be argued that additional opportunity to receive language input may lead to indirect strategy choice in requests which are face-threatening acts in nature. Although the findings of the present study, as presented in Figure 1, revealed that females outperformed males in using indirect strategy which is conceived to be less imposing, almost all learners lacked appropriacy. That is, the social status and power included in the WDCT situations were completely neglected by both male and female learners. It may lead to the contention that Iranian learners are not much sensitive to both social distance and social power.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

The principal objective of present study was to discover the most frequent speech act strategy used by Iranian second-year high school students using a request WDCT. It was observed that females used more conventionally indirect strategies, while the male made frequent use of direct strategies and downgraders. This finding is in line with those of Macaulay (2001) and Abdolrezapour and Eslami-Rasekh (2012). Macaulay (2001) observed that females are more likely to produce indirect request and males show greater tendency to produce direct requests. She argued that the use of indirect request strategies by females are mainly to ask tough questions, maintain a line of questioning, and maintain their position as speakers who have power. Regarding male students' overreliance on the modification strategies than female learners, Abdolrezapour and Eslami-Rasekh (2012) contended that Iranian requestors make use of more external mitigation devices to assure them of compliance rather than showing politeness or saving face.

The fact that Iranian male learners used direct strategies and downgraders may be explained by the notion of transferability (Jalilifar, 2009); that is, male learners in the present study resorted to the more familiar and easy form of requesting they have experienced in their native language. The female learners, on the one hand, showed greater sensitivity to the use of politeness strategies in requesting through the use of conventionally indirect strategies.

As for the second research question of the study, it was discovered that the sole section,

labelled *Language Functions*, attending to the pragmatic development of the learners takes up only a negligible portion of the high school syllabus; notwithstanding, it is aimed at practicing the conventionally indirect strategy in requesting without any reference to the social distance and social power. This finding is in line with that of Usó-Juan (2007). Studying ELT textbooks, Usó-Juan (2007) concluded that the request strategies taught in the textbooks are mostly of a conventionalized type; still, contextual variables such as social distance essential for choosing the most appropriate request form are not included. He maintained that the textbooks have failed to provide appropriate input to develop desirable pragmatic competence. However, to acquire language appropriacy regarding speech act performance, learners need to be aware of the social function of those acts. Considering the limitations of the EFL context and the paucity of pragmatically appropriate language input to the learners, the role of teachers and material developers become indispensable. Very similarly, Kasper (1996) states learners' lack of appropriate pragmatic competence can be attributed to the insufficient input supplied by pedagogical materials.

The second finding of the study has implications for syllabus designers and material developers. Addressing a niche in the mainstream high school textbooks, it was suggested that not only should the locutionary act be the focal point in the classes, but also the illocutionary act should be brought into focus. According to Gholami Pasand and Ghasemi (2018), textbooks should adopt a balanced view of cultures catering for local, target as well as international cultures in order to help develop intercultural communicative competence in L2 learners. In fact, lack of appropriate intercultural competence can hamper learners' identification with their own culture may lead to serious problems while learners try to communicate with people of other cultures (Tajeddin & Teimourizadeh, 2015).

On the whole, it may be argued that since the language assessment system in Iran is mainly based on grammar-oriented exams and focuses on language usage rather than language use (Widdowson, 1972), both the teachers and learners concentrate mostly on the grammatical competence and pay scant attention to the communicative and social aspect of language. Aliakbari and Gheitasi (2014) contended that teachers should attempt to explicitly teach pragmatics in the classroom in order to raise their pragmatic competence to incorporate language and culture and make decisions about what and how to communicate in English.

By providing further evidence for the need in terms of teaching pragmatic competence and language appropriacy in EFL classes, the findings of the present study appeal to material developers and syllabus designers to attend more to these delicate aspects of language use. It is hoped that more studies be carried out on these social aspects of the language and lead language instructors and learners to engage more in social language practices.

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