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Indirectness in Requests in Complaint Letters to the Higher Institution by Turkish EFL Students

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Abstract

One of the defining characteristics of pragmatic competence is the ability to use appropriate lexico-grammatical and syntactic indirectness strategies (Blum-Kulka et al 1989) within a particular situation. Writing a complaint letter to an authority figure requires high pragmatic competence. However, even if learners have a good command of grammar, they fail to express and comprehend the intended illocutionary meaning. This study aims to examine request forms used by Turkish learners of English and NSs of English in complaint letters. The NS informants (N: 38) are mainly teachers teaching in the city of Bursa, Turkey and learners are all Turkish ELT teacher candidates (N:295) studying at Uludağ University. Informants composed a letter where they asked the student registrar of Uludağ University to correct their grade which appeared to be incorrectly entered as FAIL into the electronic records. Majority of NSs made 'conventionally indirect requests' (Blum-Kulka et al 1989) such as 'I'd be grateful if you re-check your records and amend this mistake'. Besides, quite many NSs did use the imperative form. But these are used to ask for notification about the result. On the other hand, NNSs used mainly three strategy types: Explicit Performative (I request from you to correct this mistake), Want Statement (I want you to correct control this mistake (please) and Suggestory Formula (If you can help in this matter, I would be really pleased). The results indicate that teacher candidates have difficulty in choosing the right verb form and using modal verbs to indicate indirectness appropriately.

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1. Introduction

Language is shaped by power relations. In the case where students writing a complaint letter to a higher education institution, they are required to use appropriate language expressing the right degree of formality and indirectness to reflect the 'institutionally unequal relationship' (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011: 3194). Language used in formal correspondence in academic or institutional settings '…is characterized by higher formality, avoidance of imperative requests (preference for conventional indirectness instead), a fairly high level of mitigation and acknowledgement of the imposition involved' (ibid. p. 3194). For this reason, for NNSs achieving this is a challenging task. It requires high levels of pragmatic ability in L2. Pragmatic ability has been defined by Yule (1996) :

> The ability to deal with meaning as communicated by a speaker (or writer) and interpreted by a listener or (a reader) and to interpret people's intended meanings, their assumptions, their purposes or goals, and the kinds of actions (e.g. making a request) they are performing when they speak or write (3-4) .

In fact, they have acquired this ability in their mother tongue. That is, we can expect them to put the preexisting ability into use when they communicate in another language. But it does not happen by default. Nor can they exploit their L2 grammar knowledge in order to use language appropriately (e.g. Felix-Brasdefer and Cohen 2012: 651). Many studies have concluded that learners need their awareness raised so that they capitalize on'transferable L1 pragmatic knowledge in L2 contexts' (Rose and Kasper 2001: 7). This kind of awareness-raising would enable them to put their L2 grammar knowledge into use (Bardovi-Harlig 2001).

Turkish EFL teacher trainees do not have much experience of using English in real contexts. For this reason, they have been observed having troubles in interaction. Nonetheless, these trainees have got a heavily grammar based language learning background. This is partly because Turkish education is excessively test focused as the university entrance exams play a key role in students' lives. Therefore, our teacher trainees have always studied English in order to pass tests.

However, research findings suggest that pragmatic competence can increase only when there is sufficient amount of input exemplifying the use of pragmalinguistic features of language (Bialystok 1993). Thus, the present study aims to investigate to what extent Turkish EFL teacher trainees can make use of their knowledge of pragmatics which is based on Turkish conventions and their knowledge of grammar and appropriate use in English.

2. Method

This study examines request forms used by Turkish learners of English and NSs of English in complaint letters. The aim is not really to see if our students can write a formal letter in the way native speakers do. This particular text type has been selected as it is a real life activity for the students. It is possible for them to find themselves in a position where they have to write such a letter. It gives a natural reason for using of a request and a complaint.

2.1. Research Questions

1. Do Turkish teacher candidates' requests promote more direct or indirect request strategies?
2. Is there a preferred linguistic realization by NSs and my students for different request types?

2.2. Informants and Data Collection Tool

Turkish informants are 295 Turkish teacher candidates studying in the ELT Department of Uludağ University, Faculty of Education. Their age range is 20-27 years. NS informants are from various countries: USA, UK, Ireland, Australia and Canada. Their age group is between 20-65 years. The English corpus contains 46 letters.

Data was collected by means of a task. It is based on a hypothetical situation where a university student notices that the grade of one the course s/he has taken in the previous term appears on the university's web-site mistakenly as fail. His/her academic advisor too agrees that it is an error. Students are required to compose a complaint letter to

appeal to the registrar's office. The nature of this kind of complaint letter allows the researcher to collect at least one request per letter.

3. Findings and discussion

The analysis of the requests in both corpuses is based on the coding scheme described in CCSARP.

3.1. Direct Strategies

The analysis of the requests in both corpuses is based on the coding scheme described in Cross- Cultural Speech Act Realisation Poject (CCSARP) (Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper 1989). Some letters contained more than one request statement.

Five direct strategies have been defined:

- Mood derivable (Clean up the kitchen.)
- Explicit performative (I am *asking* you to move your car.)
- Hedged performative (I *must/have* to ask you to clean the kitchen right now.)
- Locution derivable (You'll have to /should/ must/ ought to move your car.)
- Want Statements (I'd like to borrow your notes for a little while.) (Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper 1989: 278-281)

Table 1: Mood derivable (Frq: frequency of occurence)

	Mood derivable (imperative)	Frq	%
NS	a) Please check your records and rectify the situtation forthwith. (request for action)	6	13.04
	b) Please let me know what I can do to help correct this as soon as possible. (requests for info)		
NNS	a) Please check my notes again. (request for action)	17	5.76
	b) Please confirm me about this situation. (request for info)		

Kasper and Rose (2002:146) described four stages of the process of request development. They reported that the imperatives were the characteristic of the second stage. The NSs informants used the imperative only when they wanted to make a request for information (e.g. Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011: 3194).

Turkish students attempted to soften the imperative with politeness marker 'please'. It is the only lexical downgrader NNSs used. However, as Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996) commented that this politeness marker alone is not sufficient to mitigate to soften the force of the imperative when communicating with authorities. Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996) also reported inappropriate and insufficient mitigation and lack of deference in learner language. They concluded that students typically made their requests with the unrealistic expectation that the faculty members were obliged to comply with. The authors have also added that 'requests which do not employ sufficient mitigation or fail to address the precarious balance of the faculty as institution vs. the faculty as (over-worked) fellow humans risk negative evaluation' (*ibid* p. 67).

The next direct strategy type is the use of explicit performative. Requests with a performative verb is regarded as the least polite form after imperatives (Martı 2006:1850).

Table 2: Explicit performative

		Explicit performative	Frq	%
NS		I kindly ask that this be corrected.	4	8.69
NNS	a)	I request you to take your time and have a look at my results.	114	36.64
	b)	I beg you to analyse my lessons results again and correct this mistake.		

As seen in Table 2, NNS informants tended to use explicit performative often. Their choice of performative verb was not always the right one.

Table 3: Performative Verbs

Verb	NS Frq	NS %	NNS Frq	NNS%
Request	0	0	86	30.0
Require	0	0	7	2.37
Demand	0	0	6	2.03
Ask	1	2.22	2	0.67
Beg	0	0	2	0.67
Appeal	1	2.22	0	0

Table 4: Hedged performative

	Hedged performative	Frq	%
NS	I would ask you to treat the matter with utmost urgency and rectify the error.	2	4.34

Turkish learners used no hedged performative. A close look at the example in Table 4 will show the reason why as these two statements are heavily moralized and hedged by means of various lexical items. Our students have never been so crafty in using their existing lexis this way.

Table 5: Locution derivable or obligation statement

		Locution derivable or obligation statement	Frq	%
NS	a)	I should therefore require your office to make the appropriate changes which will I hope set the records straight.	8	17.40

Turkish learners used no locution derivable or obligation statements.

Table 6: Want statements

	Want Statements	Frq	%
NS	I would like my transcript to be corrected as quickly as possible.	10	21.73
NNS	a) I want the problem to be solved.	93	31.5
	b) Therefore, I would like you to check and correctthis problem.	16	5.42
	c) I am waiting for a solution.	3	1.01
	NNS total	114	38.64

The most striking finding about the 'Want Statements' is the use of 'I want ....'. It occurred 93 times (31.5%). Not surprisingly, none of the NSs used it. Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) also found that NNSs tended to use this form rather than conventionalized indirect forms. Röver and Al-Gahtani (2015) reports that beginner group preferred to use this form.

Of 93 'I want ...' statements, 23 of which look like the Turkish formulaic expression 'Gereğinin yapılmasını (saygılarımla) arz ederim.'.

One linguistic means for expressing deference is using impersonalized and conventionalized formula. Our Turkish teacher trainees may know about conventional language which the register of Turkish formal letter writing tradition requires.It seems that those students created an impersonal form which sounds like the Turkish formula. Cohen says that L1 knowledge is both blessing and a curse. In the process of development of pragmatic skills, learners are able to improvise as their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary increases (Brasdefer and Cohen 2012; Kasper and Rose 2002). Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) points out that particularly learners in EFL contexts are at a disadvantageous position as they have little contact with the culture and its conventions. For this reason, they strive to adapt their existing knowledge of request conventions to a particular situation.

Table 7: Expectation statements (NNS only)

	Want Statements	Frq	%
NNS	a) I hope you will concern my problem.	24	8.13
	b) I wish to be done what is necessary.	11	3.72
	5 different forms (I inform you, I believe, I consult you, I inform you)	9	3.05
	Total	45	15.25

In addition to the categories described in Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989), a category of expectation statements have emerged from the NNS data in the present study. NS informants did not prefer to use any expectation statement. NNS informants made use of their verb repertoire to create different types of expectation statements. It is interesting to note that using this kind of statements does not meet the requirements of Turkish formal letter writing traditions.

3.2. Conventionally indirect requests

There are 2 sub-strategies under the title of Conventionally Indirect Strategies:
- Suggestory formula (How about cleaning up the kitchen.)

- Query preparatory (Can/ could I borrow your notes.)(Source: Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper 1989: 278-281)

Table 8: Suggestory formula

	Suggestory formula	Frq	%
NS	a) I should be grateful if you would alter your records as soon as you can.	10	21.73
	b) I would appreciate it very much if you could at your earliest convenience look into this matter for me to see if / where an error has occurred.		
NNS	a) I would be very grateful if you don't mind you spent some time and deal with it.	42	14.23

'I should be grateful if you would...' is a formulaic expression. Formulaic expressions are used to express the writer's gratefulness for immediate action to amend the mistake and his/her appreciation of the action on his/her behalf. 4 NSs informants used the verb 'appreciate' as the main verb to expresses gratitude. Lin (2009) explains effect of this expression as follows:

'...The modal would together with the conditional clause starting with 'if' make the formula a very indirect query preparatory, which is used in formal and or high-imposition situations... ' (p.1648).

Lin (2009) reported that Taiwanese English majors failed to use this formula. Even if they attempted to create a similar effect by using their language repertoire, they could not use some lexical features appropriately. One of such features is the use of 'will' instead of 'would' as in 'I will appreciate it if you can ...' (p. 1649). Röver and Al Gahtani (2015) refers to if clause without a modal verb as 'bare-if clause' (p. 399).

In the present study, NNS informants too attempted to express appreciation by using verbs like 'I would be glad/ thankful/ pleased'. There are 42 different variations of combination of such vocabulary but none of them is the conventional form.

Table 9: Query preparatory

		Query preparatory	Frq	%
NS	a)	Could you please correct your records accordingly and notify me that necessary change has been made?	11	24
	b)	Could you please set up a meeting with the prof of the classand someone from your office asap to correct this mistake?		
NNS	a)	Would you deal with and make a correction there, please?	3	1.01
	b)	Could you do what is necessary to correct my mark?		

There is only one modal initial interrogative request form: 'Could you (please)…?'. This occurred 8 times with 7 different verbs in the English corpus. Six of them are with a politeness marker 'please'. All these requests are with YOU-orientation. This form is described as a conventionally indirect negative politeness strategy. Interrogative form appears to give the reader freedom of action as it seemingly gives the option of saying 'no' to the requester (Vergaro 2002).

'Can you....?' and 'Could you....?' structure is used frequently occurring in classroom environment? However, learners did not tend to use it.

Another form our learners did not use is 'looking forward to hearing from you.'

Maier (1992) says it has 'an optimistic tone. It still invites the authorities to take action and correct the mistake. In all instances it was used by NSs it is the second request. In a sense, it can be regarded as a post-request which is used to highlight the main request. It also asks for a reply. With its conventionalized formulaic structure, it is a good way of rounding up the letter.

It also indicates a different type of relationship between an authority and the people who get service from them. In Turkish situation we do not expect to receive any reply. But Anglo American way apparently indicates that the student can get a reply from the authorities. In formal letters in English, use of modality plays an important role in expressing politeness.

Another category which is not included in the CCSRP is the avoidance strategy. Five NSs and 11 NNSs did not add request statement in the letter. They appeared to expect the reader to make interpretation from the explanation of the problem.

4. Conclusion and implications

In the light of the findings reported above the answer to the research questions will be presented. The research questions are:

1-Do Turkish teacher candidates' requests promote more direct or indirect request strategies?

2-Is there a preferred linguistic realization by NSs and Turkish EFL teacher trainees for different request types?

Table 10: Total distribution of strategy types

Type of Request	NS		NNS	
Direct strategies	Number	%	Number	%
Mood derivable	6	13.04	17	5.76
Explicit performative	4	8.69	114	36.64
Hedged performative	2	4.34	0	0
Locution derivable or obligation statement	8	17.40	0	0
Want statements	10	21.73	114	31.5
Expectation statements	0	0	45	15.25
TOTAL	30	65.21	290	98.30

Conventionally indirect strategies				
Suggestory Formula	10	21.73	42	14.23
Query preparatory	11	24.0	3	1.01
TOTAL	21	32.30	45	15.25
Avoidance strategy	5	10.86	113.72	
GRAND TOTAL	56		346	

Table 10 shows an overwhelming number of students preferred a direct statement. That is, NNS informants show a clear tendency to use direct statements in requests while composing a formal complaint letter. Perhaps due to the severity of the error committed by the faculty registrar in the hypothetical situation, 65 % NSs preferred direct strategies but with their selection of modal verb and form their direct requests are not as blunt as those of the ones in NNSs' letters. They used the imperative to ask for information. Unlike the NNSs , they used want statements with a modal verb.

Our Turkish teacher trainees tend to use direct requests which are 'imperatives' and 'explicit performatives', 'want statements' and 'expectation statements'. Even if they show a tendency towards formulaic forms and usage modal verbs, these have issues regarding accuracy and appropriate vocabulary choice.

NSs also used the imperative form but their purpose was different. They asked for information in these requests. However, NNSs asked for action in these imperative forms. Other forms which are absent in the NNS data are: interrogative form with 'could', asking for feedback at the end of the letter and rounding up the letter with the formulaic expression 'I will look forward to hearing from you soon.'. It is significant that several NSs avoided making an explicit request.

Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) points out that particularly learners in EFL contexts are at a disadvantageous position as they have little contact with the culture and its conventions. Our Turkish teacher trainees may know about conventional language which the register of a formal letter requires in Turkish but as they had not been taught this in English, they failed to make use of their grammar and vocabulary repertoire.

Research findings indicate that a solid grammar and vocabulary knowledge does not necessarily lead to appropriate language use. Brasdefer and Cohen (2012) and Röver and Al Gahtani (2015) argue for explicit teaching about appropriateness so that learners learn to notice functional use of language.

Acknowledgement

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