

ANALYSIS OF APPROPRIATENESS IN A SPEECH ACT OF REQUEST IN L2 ENGLISH

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Abstract

Fifty-nine Japanese college students of English at two different proficiency levels were evaluated for their ability to produce a speech act of request in a spoken role play task. Learners' production was analyzed quantitatively by rating performance on a six-point scale for overall appropriateness, as well as qualitatively by identifying the directness levels of the linguistic expressions used to produce requests. Results revealed a significant L2 proficiency influence on overall appropriateness, but only a marginal difference in the types of linguistic expressions used between the two proficiency groups. Moreover, grammatical and discourse control encoded in the rating scale seemed to have affected the quality of speech acts.

Keywords: L2 pragmatic competence; Appropriateness of speech act production.

1. Introduction

With the explicit recognition of the role of pragmatic competence in communicative ability (Bachman 1990; Bachman & Palmer 1996; Canale & Swain 1980), abundant second language (L2) research has examined production of pragmatic function. Pragmatic production refers to the ability to perform speech functions appropriately in social contexts (Thomas 1995). In L2 pragmatic production, 'appropriateness' is reflected at multiple levels. It reflects the knowledge of the conventions of communication in a society, as well as linguistic and abilities that enable learners to communicate successfully in L2. When examining appropriateness, these multiple criteria should be defined clearly in order to understand what a successful pragmatic production entails.

This study investigated the appropriateness of L2 speech act production, a type of pragmatic production. The study analyzed audio-taped native speaker-L2 learner role play interactions to examine appropriateness of a speech act of request produced by L2 learners at different proficiency levels (beginning and upper intermediate levels) determined by their TOEFL scores and teacher ratings of oral proficiency. Appropriateness was examined quantitatively by native speaker raters rating learner performance on a six-point scale, as well as qualitatively by identifying linguistic expressions used to perform requests. Using the two evaluation methods, the study examined whether more and less proficient learners differ in their speech act production, and what features of production differentiate the performance between the two groups of learners.

2. Background

With the emergence of several theoretical models of communicative competence (Bachman 1990; Bachman & Palmer 1996; Canale & Swain 1980), second language (L2) learning is no longer viewed as mastery of grammatical forms alone. Acquisition of functional and sociolinguistic control of the forms has come to be regarded as an indispensable aspect of L2 learning. Thus, pragmatic competence, the ability to perform language functions appropriately in social context, forms an indispensable component of L2 communicative competence, and has attracted much research interest in L2 learning.

Appropriateness of pragmatic performance depends on sufficient linguistic and pragmatic knowledge, as well as on overall strategic capacities to implement the knowledge in communicative interaction. Bachman and Palmer's (1996) model emphasizes two major subcomponents of communicative ability: Language knowledge and strategic competence. Language knowledge includes organizational knowledge (i.e., grammatical and discourse knowledge) and pragmatic knowledge (i.e., functional and sociolinguistic knowledge). Strategic competence is a metacognitive component that encompasses three areas: Goal setting, assessment, and planning. Thus, these subcomponents, namely organizational knowledge (grammar and discourse), pragmatic knowledge, and strategic competence, jointly contribute to the effectiveness of L2 pragmatic performance.

However, traditionally, appropriateness of L2 pragmatic performance, elicited through speech act production, was analyzed solely at the directness levels of linguistics forms used to produce speech acts, without consideration to other aspects of communicative ability. In the 1980s and 1990s, cross-linguistic variation in how to perform speech acts attracted considerable interest. Researchers gathered information on the directness levels of speech act expressions used across languages (e.g., Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper 1989). For instance, saying "Please write a reference letter for me." to a professor when requesting for a letter of recommendation is considered too direct and thus considered inappropriate for the situation. Native and non-native speech act expressions were gathered through written questionnaires (discourse completion tasks or DCTs). Then, types of speech act expressions gleaned from the DCTs were compared based on a coding system.

One of the most widely used coding systems came out of the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989). The CCSARP analyzed requests and apologies in eight different languages by using the same coding framework. The coding framework for requests distinguishes nine types of expressions that differ according to the level of directness. The nine expression types were classified into three main categories: Direct requests, conventional indirect requests, and non-conventional indirect requests. A direct request was indicated in the utterance by grammatical, lexical, or semantic items (e.g., "Please lend me a pen."). A conventional indirect request expresses the illocutionary force by using fixed linguistic conventions (e.g., "Could you lend me a pen?"). A non-conventional indirect request is expressed by speakers making partial reference to the requested act (e.g., "Do you have a pen?").

The level of directness is determined by contextual factors such as power and social distance between the interlocutors, and the degree of imposition involved (Brown & Levinson 1978; Thomas 1995). In a more formal situation, a speech act involves a high-degree of imposition and is addressed to a person who has more power. In such a situation, the greater degree of indirectness is required to protect the face of the interlocutor. In contrast, when the speech act involves a low-degree of imposition and is produced for a person in equal relationship, the degree of required indirectness is smaller.

Following the comparative linguistic trend launched by the CCSARP, many studies documented differences in speech act expressions among learners of different L2 proficiency levels (e.g., Cohen & Olshtain 1993; Felix-Brasdefer 2003; Hill 1997; Maeshiba, Kasper, & Ross 1996; Rose 2000; Takahashi 1996; Trosborg 1995). These studies mainly addressed whether proficiency affects speech act production, as manifested in the types of linguistic expressions used in production. Trosborg (1995) used a role play method to elicit speech acts of requests, complaints, and apologies, and compared linguistic expressions over three L2 proficiency groups. Results showed that advanced learners used more mitigating expressions to reduce the potential threat, thereby approximating native speaker patterns.

Rose (2000) used an oral production task to examine the speech acts of requests, apologies, and complaints by L2 English learners of three age groups: Seven, nine, and eleven years old. The comparison of linguistic expressions using the CCSARP coding framework provided evidence of pragmatic development, in the movement from the use of direct to more indirect expressions. The oldest group applied more indirect expressions and supportive moves to frame their speech acts, approximating native speaker patterns.

These studies generally confirmed that, compared with lower proficiency learners, higher level learners were closer to native speaker patterns in their choice of linguistic expressions in speech acts. While these studies provided a reasonable claim that the choice of native-like expressions indicates quality speech act production, it is questionable whether learners' production can be evaluated solely by the choice of particular linguistic forms. Types of linguistic expressions are certainly an indicator of approximation toward the target language norms. However, the approximation can be inferred from other features such as grammaticality, discourse management techniques, and strategic devices that are also evident in native speaker production in real life language use. These features together could contribute to the overall appropriateness of speech act production, as they are reflected in the theoretical model of communicative competence (Bachman & Palmer 1996). As Wesche (1987) claimed, analyses that do not consider propositional development beyond the sentence level are tapping only a part of communicative competence. Thus, pragmatic competence should be examined beyond the sentence-level to understand whether learners can produce speech acts with an acceptable degree of efficiency, including considerations such as discourse management, grammaticality of expressions, and strategic skills.

Only a small number of studies to date have examined the features beyond the sentence level and analyzed overall discourse management and interaction skills as indicators of a successful speech act production (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford 1991, 1993a, 1993b; Gass & Houck 1999; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig 1992). Using open role plays with eight hypothetical situations, Gass and Houck (1999) investigated a speech

act of refusals performed by three Japanese students of L2 English. Their analysis went beyond the linguistic categorizations of refusal expressions and extended to the analysis of non-verbal features, vocal characteristics, turn-taking sequences, and communication strategies. The study revealed that L2 learners negotiated their way through the completion of refusal by using various means to establish solidarity with the native speaker interlocutor. For instance, learners often used communication strategies such as backchannel cues (e.g., nodding, affirmative responses) as an emphatic response to mitigate the negative effect of refusals. Another example of communication strategies identified in the data included indications of linguistic and sociocultural inadequacy. When performing a refusal, learners sometimes called the interlocutor's attention to their non-nativeness (e.g., reference to their lack of linguistic and sociocultural knowledge), in order to solicit support from the interlocutor. These instances of negotiation invited a great number of turns. The findings have important implications for understanding speech acts as a whole discourse unit rather than a fragmental exchange. Speech acts are derived from communicative goals and negotiations toward the goals between the interlocutors. L2 speakers' performance should be analyzed in a wider range of communicative resources such as grammar, discourse tactics, and turn takings, in addition to the types of linguistic expressions, in order to capture the features of performance encoded in speech act production.

In the field of language testing, a small number of studies addressed features other than the types of linguistic expressions, and incorporated them into rating scales to evaluate L2 speech act production (Brown 2001; Hoffman-Hicks 1992; Hudson, Detmer, & Brown 1995; Roever 2005; Sasaki 1998; Yamashita 1996). The scales used in these studies attempted to quantify learner production, rather than simply comparing it to native speaker production. Roever (2005), for instance, assessed L2 English learners' speech acts of requests, refusals, and apologies based on a four-point rating scale, ranging from "fail" to "immaculately perfect." In the studies of pragmatic assessment, the criteria in the rating descriptions addressed overall effectiveness of speech acts, including features such as grammaticality, coherence of discourse, strategic management, and directness and politeness of the expressions used. Because the use of rating scales is still underrepresented in speech act analyses, more studies should evaluate speech acts from multiple perspectives, including linguistic and pragmatic knowledge, as well as capacities to utilize the knowledge effectively in communication interaction.

In summary, the mainstream practice in L2 speech act analyses has been largely categorical, by classifying linguistic expressions and comparing them across L2 learner groups of different proficiency levels. As a result, other features that may contribute to the effectiveness of speech acts have been neglected, consequently limiting the analysis to syntactic features. Although previous studies confirmed that L2 proficiency positively affects speech act production, conclusions were usually drawn based on the analysis of types of linguistic expressions used. Thus, it is questionable whether the proficiency impact on speech acts is entirely attributable to the choice of linguistic expressions, or whether other linguistic abilities, such as discourse management skills and grammaticality of utterances, jointly contribute to superior speech act production of higher proficiency learners. In order to answer these questions, appropriateness of L2 speech acts should be investigated with multiple perspectives in tandem.

Appropriateness should be evaluated quantitatively by native speaker raters rating learner performance, as well as qualitatively by identifying specific linguistic expressions used to perform the speech acts. Combination of multiple methods could help us identify specific features that contribute to the overall appropriateness of speech acts, as well as the features that distinguish between learners of different proficiency levels.

3. Research questions

This study aimed to examine appropriateness of L2 speech act production with two methods combined – rating overall appropriateness of speech acts and analyzing linguistic expressions used in speech acts. The following research question guided this investigation:

How do appropriateness ratings and linguistic expressions compare to each other in capturing the quality of speech act production between learners of different proficiency levels?

4. Methods

4.1. Participants

Twenty native speakers of English and 59 Japanese learners of English took part in the study. The native speakers (10 males and 10 females) were college students in the U.S.A. Their average age ranged from 19 to 31 (mean age = 22.5). Native speakers provided baseline data.

The Japanese students were college students in Japan and formed two proficiency groups: 29 higher proficiency students (15 males and 14 females, mean age = 20.48, range = 17-25) and 30 lower proficiency students (15 males and 15 females, mean age = 19.19, range = 18-27). Proficiency was determined based on the institutional TOEFL scores and teacher ratings of oral proficiency¹ The 8-point rating scale of oral proficiency was used to obtain information about learners' general speaking ability from their classroom instructors. The Oral Proficiency Scale was adopted from ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (1986) and the Ontario Test of ESL Oral Interaction Assessment Bands (John 1992; Wesche 1987). The scale had eight bands, ranging from one ("The student cannot communicate in English at all.") to eight ("The student has almost no flaws in spoken English.").

The higher L2 group ($n = 29$) had an average TOEFL score of 508, ranging from 480 to 590. Their average oral proficiency rating was 5.48 on the eight-point scale, meaning that they could express complex ideas comprehensibly with some difficulty.

¹ The higher L2 group had in average of 8.08 years of formal English study ($SD = 1.09$), while the lower group had 6.77 years of average formal study ($SD = 1.38$). The mean difference was significant ($p < .01$). As expected, the length of L2 study and the ITP TOEFL scores correlated significantly ($r = .45$, $df = 57$, $p < .01$), suggesting that the longer the period of formal study, the higher the learners' proficiency.

The lower L2 group ($n = 30$) had an average TOEFL score of 397, ranging from 330 to 457. Their average oral proficiency rating was 2.56, meaning that they could handle simple conversations with some difficulty. The 95% confidence intervals show no overlap between the two groups in the mean TOEFL scores and oral ratings, suggesting distinct proficiency differences.²

4.2. Elicitation of request speech act

A task was developed to elicit participants' ability to understand situational information and to produce speech acts of requests appropriately in role plays. Requests were selected because, as 'face-threatening acts' (Brown & Levinson 1978), they could lead to unintended offense and communication breakdown if they are not performed appropriately. Therefore, requests are considered particularly important for understanding whether and/or how L2 performance patterns deviate from native speaker patterns.

The task elicited requests in two types of situations that differed on three factors: Interlocutors' power difference (P), social distance (D), and the size of imposition (R) (Brown & Levinson 1978). In one situation type, the power relationship was equal, the distance between the interlocutors was small, and the degree of imposition was small ("PDR-low"). In the other situation, the listener had greater power, the interlocutor distance was large, and the degree of imposition was also large ("PDR-high"). The distinction between PDR-low and PDR-high situations was confirmed through a pilot study. Table 1 displays the situations.

Category	Situational Descriptions
PDR-high	You are talking with your teacher in her office. Your test is next Friday, but you have your friend's wedding on the same day. You want to ask her if you can take the test at some other time.
	You work part-time at a city library. You work every Saturday, but you would like to take next Saturday off because you would like to go camping with your friends. You go to your boss's office and ask her.
PDR-low	It's 7:00 PM. You are in the school library studying for tomorrow's English test. A good friend of yours is also studying in the library. Your pen just quit, so you want to ask her to lend you a pen.
	It's Sunday afternoon. You are in the living room in your house watching TV with your older sister. Your sister has just stood up to make herself a cup of coffee. Since she has stood up, you want to ask her to get you the TV remote.

Note. *SD* = standard deviation.

Table 1: Role-play situations selected for the pragmatic speaking task

² These two TOEFL score ranges were selected because they represented approximately the bottom and top one-third of the student population in the institution.

Situation descriptions were given in the participants' L1 to ensure understanding. The situations were presented in written form on a card. The task had one practice item and four test situations (two PDR-high and two PDR-low). The task was piloted with nine Japanese learners of English and six native English speakers prior to the main study.

4.3. Analysis of request speech act

Two methods were used to analyze participants' speech act production: rating of overall appropriateness and coding of linguistic expressions used for speech acts.

4.3.1. Rating scale for appropriateness

Appropriateness was measured with a six-point rating scale ranging from 'no performance' (0) to 'excellent' (5) (Table 2). Appropriateness was defined as the ability to perform speech acts appropriately according to situations. The scale evaluated whether learners could use appropriate linguistic expressions at the proper level of directness and politeness according to situations. Grammatical competence and discourse control (i.e., overall management of speech) were also incorporated into the rating descriptors in terms of the degree to which they interacted with appropriateness. For instance, speech acts received low ratings when they had major grammatical and word choice errors, or poor discourse control, including excessive repetitions, illogical response, or incoherent speech³. Previous rating scales of pragmatic competence served as sources to develop the scale (Cohen 1994; Eisenstein & Bodman 1993; Hudson et al. 1995; North 1995, 2000).

The appropriateness rating scale was piloted with nine Japanese learners of English and six native speakers of English prior to the main study in order to examine the clarity and effectiveness of the speech act rating descriptors. Native speaker data from the pilot data was used in order to refine the descriptors for each rating band of appropriateness. The rating scale was revised based on the results of the pilot study; wordings in each band were clarified, and the number of examples used to illustrate each band descriptors was increased.

³ During the norming sessions, the description in the rating '4,' 'Expressions are mostly appropriate,' was further clarified as: 'Expressions are more direct or indirect than the situation requires, but contain appropriate framing expressions to mitigate the directness.' In the rating '3', the description, 'Expressions are only somewhat appropriate,' was further clarified as: 'Expressions are more direct or indirect for than the situation requires, and do not contain appropriate framing expressions to mitigate the directness/indirectness.'

Ratings	Descriptors
5 Excellent	- Expressions are fully appropriate for the situation. - No or almost no grammatical and discourse errors.
4 Good	- Expressions are mostly appropriate. - Very few grammatical and discourse errors.
3 Fair	- Expressions are only somewhat appropriate. - Grammatical and discourse errors are noticeable, but they do not interfere appropriateness.
2 Poor	- Due to the interference from grammatical and discourse errors, appropriateness is difficult to determine.
1 Very poor	- Expressions are very difficult or too little to understand. There is no evidence that the intended speech acts are performed.
0	- No performance

Table 2: *Appropriateness rating scale for the pragmatic speaking tasks*

Six native speaker raters, all experienced ESL (English as a Second Language) instructors, evaluated speech acts. Experienced ESL instructors were selected as evaluators because of their experience in using holistic assessment guidelines to evaluate L2 learner production (i.e., speaking and writing). The raters were asked to listen to each role play interaction and indicate the rating of appropriateness (0-5) based on the rating descriptions⁴. While rating, they were asked to judge each request independently of the others. After the initial group norming session that lasted one to two hours, a set of 20-25 samples were assigned randomly to each rater and evaluated independently.⁵

Two different raters evaluated each set of samples. Overall interrater reliability was 0.90 using the Pearson correlation coefficient, which was considered satisfactory, $r = 0.89$, $df = 57$, for PDR-high and $r = 0.87$, $df = 57$, for PDR-low speech acts. About 2% of the samples had a large discrepancy in rating (more than one point off). They were discussed in the follow-up meetings, and the average score between the raters was assigned as the final score.

4.3.2. Coding framework for linguistic expressions

In addition to the rating, speech acts were also analyzed linguistically, by identifying the main linguistic expressions used by the participants and classifying them into different

⁴ During the role plays, the native speaker interlocutor was instructed to maintain her demeanour as neutral; she was told to use the same response patterns for every participant and be consistent with her responses. Therefore, the raters were told not to depend on her reaction to the situation when deciding the appropriateness score.

⁵ A few native speaker expressions were judged near perfect, because they did not contain appropriate framing expressions to mitigate the directness (e.g., asking the teacher to reschedule the exam without adequate explanation.)

directness levels based on a coding system adopted from Blum-Kulka et al.'s CCSARP framework (1989), which has been widely used in the field (Table 3).

The CCSARP framework has three major levels of request expressions: Direct, conventional-indirect, and non-conventional indirect. Each level includes several types of request expressions. Direct requests have imperatives, performatives (hedged and explicit), obligations, and want statements. Conventional indirect requests include preparatory and suggestions. Non-conventional indirect requests included strong and mild hint.

The coding framework adopted in this study largely maintained these nine expression types of varying levels of directness, but several expression types were added, yielding a total of 12 expression types. Following Takahashi (1996), preparatory expressions were further subdivided into four types: Preparatory questions (i.e., questions concerning the hearer's will, ability, or possibility to perform a desired action), permission questions, mitigated-preparatory (i.e., query preparatory expressions embedded within another clause), and mitigated-wants (i.e., statements of want in hypothetical situations) (See examples in Table 3). These modifications were made in order to fine-tune the linguistic analysis. Takahashi found that Japanese EFL learners did not have adequate pragmatic knowledge that an English request can be mitigated by making it syntactically more complex, for example, by embedding it within another clause. Because the target participant group in this study was also Japanese EFL learners, inclusion of embedded clausal structures, such as mitigated-preparatory or mitigated-wants, in the coding system was considered important in order to more precisely assess their ability to use appropriate request expressions.

I. Direct Expressions

- | | |
|---------------------------|---|
| 1. Imperatives | e.g., Please lend me a pen. |
| 2. Performatives | e.g., I'm asking you to lend me a pen. |
| 3. Implicit performatives | e.g., I want to ask you to lend me a pen. |
| 4. Obligation Statements | e.g., You should lend me a pen. |
| 5. Want Statements | e.g., I want you to lend me a pen. |

II. Indirect Expressions

II.A. Conventional indirect

- | | |
|--------------------------|---|
| 6. Preparatory questions | e.g., Could you lend me a pen? |
| 7. Suggestions | e.g., How about lending me a pen? |
| 8. Permissions | e.g., May I borrow a pen? |
| 9. Mitigated Preparatory | e.g., I'm wondering if you could lend me a pen. |
| 10. Mitigated Wants | e.g., I'd appreciate it if you could lend me a pen. |

II.B. Non-conventional indirect

- | | |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------|
| 11. Strong hint | e.g., My pen just quit. I need a pen. |
| 12. Mild hint | e.g., Can you guess what I want? |

Table 3: Coding framework for requests based on Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) CCSARP

4.4. Data collection procedures

The participants were scheduled at 15-25 minute intervals for the individual role play task conducted in a room on campus equipped with a microphone and tape recorder. After completing a brief survey and signing the informed consent form, participants started the task. First, task directions were given in writing in their L1 by a female native English speaker assistant who also served as an interlocutor during role plays. The role play descriptions were given in L1 via individual situation cards. The participants were given an unlimited amount of time to prepare mentally for each role play. Following one practice role play, the four role play situations were given. All interactions were tape-recorded.

4.5. Data analysis

This study explored the extent to which the appropriateness ratings and linguistic expressions are related to each other in determining the quality of speech act production between learners of different proficiency levels. In order to address this question, this study completed three separate analyses for the speech act of request: 1) descriptive analysis of appropriateness ratings between learners of different proficiency, 2) descriptive analysis of the types of linguistic expressions used by learners of different proficiency, and 3) comparison between the ratings and linguistic expressions used by the learners.

Appropriateness was first assessed with a six-point rating scale. Then, the sum of the ratings for both situation categories (range of 0-40) (range of 0-20 for PDR-high and range of 0-20 for PDR-low) was compared between the two L2 groups. For the analyses of linguistic expressions, the researcher identified the main request-making expressions produced by the participants, and classified them into eleven expression types using the CCSRP framework (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989) (See Table 3). Then, frequencies for different types of expressions were tallied according to each situation (i.e., PDR-high or low) and compared between the two learner groups to examine differences in their choices of linguistic expressions.

5. Results

5.1. Analysis of appropriateness ratings

Table 4 displays the descriptive statistics of appropriateness ratings for the two L2 proficiency groups. Ratings for the native speaker group were also provided as base-line data. Native speaker production was judged almost perfect with a mean of 9.92 for PDR-high and 9.97 for PDR-low situation requests⁶. The mean for the higher L2 group

⁶ The author employed transcription conventions from Psathas (1994). For example, a pause that occurred within a speaker's turn was indicated as ((pause)). A gap occurring between turns was indicated as ((gap)). A period indicated a stopping fall in tone. A comma indicated a continuing intonation. Question mark indicated a rising intonation. Marked rising and falling shifts in intonation are indicated by upward and downward of pointing arrows immediately prior to the rise or fall. A colon indicated that the

was greater than that for the lower L2 group. For higher L2 learners, there was little score difference between PDR-high and PDR-low situations, with a mean of 7.16 ($SD = 1.45$) for PDR-high and a mean of 7.26 ($SD = 1.83$) for PDR-low situations. For the lower L2 group, the mean for PDR-low requests was greater (mean = 5.32; $SD = 1.40$) than that of PDR-high requests (mean = 4.60; $SD = 1.26$), although the difference was not statistically significant. An independent sample t-test also confirmed that the between-group difference was statistically significant, $t = -8.77$, $df = 57$, $p < .05$ for PDR-high speech acts and $t = -4.50$, $df = 57$, $p < .05$ for PDR-low speech acts.

Group	Speech Act Type	<i>K</i>	Mean	Median	<i>SD</i>	Min.	Max.
NSs (<i>n</i> = 20)	PDR-high requests	2	9.92	10.00	0.24	9.00	10.00
	PDR-low requests	2	9.97	10.00	0.11	9.50	10.00
Higher							
L2 (<i>n</i> = 29)	PDR-high requests	2	7.16	7.50	1.45	4.50	10.00
	PDR-low requests	2	7.26	7.00	1.83	4.00	10.00
Lower							
L2 (<i>n</i> = 30)	PDR-high requests	2	4.60	5.00	1.26	2.00	6.50
	PDR-low requests	2	5.32	5.00	1.40	2.50	8.00

Table 4: Request appropriateness scores by situations (PDR-high and PDR-low)

5.2. Analysis of linguistic expressions

Table 5 shows frequency distributions of request expressions in PDR-low speech acts (i.e., asking a friend for a pen; asking sister for a TV remote). A notable group difference was found in the overuse of imperatives with 'please,' by the lower L2 group. Almost half of the lower L2 group's requests relied on this expression, while the percentages were about 16% for the higher L2 group and only 2% for native speakers. Among the indirect expressions, similar to native speakers, the higher L2 group used three times more preparatory questions (e.g., 'Would you' + verb) than lower learners.

prior sound was prolonged. Emphasis was indicated by underscoring. When utterances overlapped, the point at which overlap began was marked by a single left-hand bracket.

	NS % (n)	Higher L2 % (n)	Lower L2 % (n)
I. Direct Expressions	2.5% (1)	17.2% (10)	50.0% (30)
1. Imperatives	2.5(1)	15.5(9)	46.6(28)
2. Explicit performatives	0	1.7(1)	1.7(1)
3. Implicit performatives	0	0	0
4. Obligation statements	0	0	0
5. Want statements	0	0	1.7(1)
II. Indirect Expressions	97.5% (39)	82.8% (48)	50.0% (30)
II.A. Conventional indirect	70.0(28)	70.7(31)	45.0%(27)
6. Preparatory questions	47.5(19)	46.6(27)	11.7(5)
7. Permissions	15.0(6)	24.1(14)	33.3(22)
8. Suggestions	0	0	0
9. Mitigated-Preparatory	5.0(2)	0	0
10. Mitigated-Wants	2.5(1)	0	0
II.B. Non-conventional indirect	27.5(11)	12.1(7)	5.0(3)
11. Strong hint	27.5(11)	12.1(7)	5.0(3)
12. Mild hint	0	0	0

Notes. Indirect expressions combine conventional and non-conventional indirect expressions. The numbers in the parentheses show the raw counts. There were 20 native speakers (NS), 29 higher and 30 lower L2 learners. Each participant produced two PDR-low requests, so the total number of requests analyzed was 40 for native speakers, 58 for higher learners, and 60 for lower learners.

Table 5: Percentages and frequencies of request head act expressions, PDR-low situations

Table 6 displays frequency distributions of request expressions in PDR-high speech acts (i.e., asking a teacher to reschedule test; asking the boss for a day off). The major L2 group difference was that lower L2 learners used approximately twice the number of imperatives. A difference between native speakers and L2 learners was that 100% of the native speakers used mitigated-preparatory expressions, requests embedded in clause structures (e.g., 'I'm wondering if' + verb). However, this linguistic form was almost absent in both L2 groups, about 7% in the higher L2 group and zero in the lower L2 group. These findings suggest that the L2 learners in this study were not familiar with mitigated-preparatory expressions. Proficiency could influence more native-like production, but some complex linguistic forms may be difficult even for higher proficiency learners to utilize.

	NS % (n)	Higher L2 % (n)	Lower L2 % (n)
I. Direct Expressions	0%	13.8% (8)	
26.7% (16)			
1. Imperatives	0	7.0(3)	21.7(13)
2. Explicit performatives	0	6.9(3)	1.7(1)
3. Implicit performatives	0	0	0
4. Obligations	0	0	0
5. Want statements	0	3.0(2)	3.3(2)
II. Indirect Expressions	100% (40)	86.2% (50)	73.3% (44)
II.A. Conventional indirect	100%(40)	46.6%(27)	20.0%(12)
6. Preparatory	0	10.3(6)	10.0(6)
7. Permissions	0	27.6(16)	10.0(6)
8. Suggestions	0	0	0
9. Mitigated-Preparatory	100(40)	6.9(4)	0
10. Mitigated-Wants	0	1.7(1)	0
II.B. Non-conventional indirect	0	39.6%(23)	53.3%(32)
11. Strong hint	0	39.6(23)	46.7(28)
12. Mild hint	0	0	6.6(4)

Notes. Indirect expressions combine conventional indirect and non-conventional indirect expressions. The numbers in the parentheses show the raw counts. There were 20 native speakers (NS), 29 higher and 30 lower L2 learners. Each participant produced two PDR-low requests, so the total number of requests analyzed was 40 for native speakers, 58 for higher L2 learners, and 60 for lower L2 learners.

Table 6: Percentages and frequencies of request expressions, PDR-high situations

Example (1) below is a sample production of PDR-high requests from the native speaker data (See endnote 6 for transcription conventions.):

Native Speaker (NS) sample, Asking to reschedule the exam:

- (1) NS: *I, look, I have a big favor to ask you. I know our exam is this week on Friday, but my friend is getting married that day. Is there any chance, like, maybe I can take it earlier or later or some other time?*

As shown in (1), 100% of the native speaker expressions were mitigatory-preparatory expressions. Among the indirect expressions, both L2 groups relied heavily on hinting expressions, as shown in (2) and (3) below. About 36% of hinting expressions appeared in the higher L2 group and 50% in the lower L2 group. Using hinting, learners were more implicit in conveying their intent. Often the intent was not immediately derivable from what they actually said. Hints were not conventional and thus required more inferencing on the part of the interlocutor and sometimes more extended negotiations and clarifications.

Higher L2 sample, asking to reschedule the exam

("L" refers to "learner" and "I" refers to "interlocutor"):

- (2) 1 L: *Ah, so I'm here to ah, can you do me a favor? Because I heard there is gonna be test next Friday, but I do need to go to my friend's wedding. ((gap))*
- 2 I: *OK, ah, yeah, ah ((pause)) what kind of favor do you want me to do?*
- 3 L: *Ah, I hope I can do, I can shift the test date.*

Lower L2 sample, asking to reschedule the exam:

- (3) 1 L: *Test, test?*
- 2 I: *Test.*
- 3 L: *Test.*
((gap))
- 4 I: *Ok, ah, so what do you want to do?*
- 5 L: *I want, I want to, I want to go to marriage ceremony, maybe.*
- 6 I: *OK ↑ What do you want to do about your test.*
- 7 L: *Ah ((pause)).other day.*
- 8 I: *Another day?*
- 9 L: *Another day.*

L2 learners' overuse of these indirect, hinting expressions may stem from the combination of their limited linguistic abilities and intentions to appear polite. The learners in this study did not know how to be polite linguistically because they were not familiar with mitigated-preparatory expressions that contain complex embedded sentence structures. As a result, they depended on simpler expressions to request politely. Their inexplicit ways of conveying intentions using hints, whether successful or unsuccessful, could stem from their strategies for being polite and less face-threatening in these formal, high-stakes request-making situations. In more casual, PDR-low situations, on the other hand, the percentages for hinting were low in the two L2 groups, 12% for the higher group and 5% for the lower group.

The use of hinting expressions from PDR-low to PDR-high situations increased by three times for the higher L2 group and by ten times for the lower group. Results of a chi-square test indicated significant frequency difference between the two situations, chi-square = 32.06, $df = 1$, $p < .001$. The increase could reflect learners' sociocultural sensitivity and corresponding style-shifting in their production; learners seemed to be sensitive in assessing situational variables (i.e., power, distance, degree of imposition) and tried to style-shift correspondingly in the kinds of requests they were supposed to make. They used more direct and less elaborated expressions in PDR-low situations than in PDR-high situations when the target requests were ordinary, and thus did not require extensive politeness. When producing PDR-high requests, the learners tended to be less straightforward and less explicit to minimize the possible threat or offense in making the requests. However, their style-shifting with hinting was not successful, and often confusing and ineffective, resulting in lower appropriateness scores in PDR-high requests. The hinting strategies caused inappropriate levels of indirectness and

ambiguity, resulting in clarifications and negotiations until the target illocutionary intent was communicated.

The excerpt (4) from a lower L2 learner also illustrates her strategic intention of being as polite as possible with her limited linguistic ability.

Lower L2 sample, asking to reschedule the exam:

- (4)
- | | | |
|----|----|---|
| 1 | L: | <i>Ah, may I ask a favor of you?</i> |
| 2 | I: | <i>Sure.</i> |
| 3 | L: | <i>Ah, I have to take the test.</i> |
| 4 | I: | <i>Uh,</i> |
| 5 | L: | <i>Term of ((pause)) test, ah ((pause)) term, end of term.</i> |
| 6 | I: | <i>Oh, yes.</i> |
| 7 | L: | <i>On <u>Friday</u>.</i> |
| 8 | I: | <i>Yes.</i> |
| 9 | L: | <i>Ah, but I, I have to go to wedding party.</i> |
| 10 | I: | <i>[Ah, OK</i> |
| 11 | L: | <i>[of my friends</i> |
| 12 | I: | <i>On the same day?</i> |
| 13 | L: | <i>Yeah, the same day ((pause)) what, what will you do?</i> |
| 14 | I: | <i>What will <u>I</u> do ↑ What should <u>you</u> do.</i> |
| 15 | L: | <i>Oh, yeah. Ah, I have to study for((pause)) how ((pause)) how do you think about my learning attitude? My attitude?</i> |
| 16 | I: | <i>Attitude? I think it's good.</i> |
| 17 | L: | <i>Really? I'm glad to hear that.</i> |
| 18 | I: | <i>How about the test? What do you think you should do?</i> |
| 19 | L: | <i>I want to take the test another day.</i> |

By saying 'May I ask a favor of you?' on line 1, the learner first prepared the teacher (i.e., the interlocutor) for the upcoming request. Then, she explained her schedule constraint to provide grounds for her request. Instead of shifting directly to the request, on line 13, the learner asked a question, "what will you do?," to solicit the teacher's suggestions for the given circumstance. On line 15, the learner again asked a question about her classroom attitude. The purpose of this question was to check if the teacher had positive impression to remove any potential objections that the teacher might raise when being confronted with the request. Finally on line 19, after being probed by the teacher, the learner made a request.

This excerpt seems to demonstrate the learner's use of strategic devices. Due to limited knowledge and ability in using appropriate request expressions, the learner probably asked those questions during interaction in order to probe her uptake in request realization. The questions that the learner used served as a set of strategies to maintain a cordial relationship under the tension resulting from the face-threatening request situation. This excerpt also shows that the speech act is jointly established by the interlocutor and the learner. The interlocutor scaffolded the learner's contribution in a way that made the learner appear effective in her conveyance of request intention.

5.3. Comparison between ratings and types of linguistic expressions

This section describes the relationship between the appropriateness ratings and the different types of linguistic expressions used to produce requests. Table 7 shows mean appropriate ratings for the higher and lower L2 groups by expression types for PDR-low requests. Direct expressions received lower ratings for both L2 groups, suggesting that the difference between the directness of linguistic expressions affected the ratings. There was no significant group difference in ratings for the direct expressions.

	<i>K</i>	Mean	Mode	<i>SD</i>	Min.	Max.
Direct Expressions						
Higher L2 Group (<i>n</i> = 29)	10	2.60	2.00	0.74	2.00	4.00
Lower L2 Group (<i>n</i> = 30)	30	2.57	2.00	0.77	1.50	4.00
Indirect Expressions						
Higher L2 Group (<i>n</i> = 29)	48	3.96	5.00	0.91	2.00	5.00
Lower L2 Group (<i>n</i> = 30)	30	3.45	4.00	1.09	1.00	5.00

Notes. *K* = the number of samples. Each speech act was assessed based on a six-point scale.

Table 7: Appropriateness ratings for PDR-low requests by expression type

However, when the means are compared for the same types of linguistic forms used, for indirect expressions, the higher L2 learners received slightly higher scores than the lower L2 group. These observations imply that factors other than the types of linguistic forms used, such as grammatical and discourse features reflected in the rating scale, might have influenced the appropriateness evaluation of requests. Results of an independent sample *t*-test revealed a significant group difference in rating, $t = -2.25$, $df = 57$, $p < .05$.

Table 8 shows mean appropriate ratings for the higher and lower L2 groups by expression types for PDR-high requests. The difference in appropriateness between the two proficiency groups was more pronounced in the PDR-high than in the PDR-low situations, suggesting potential interaction between situation types and L2 proficiency. The PDR-high requests were more difficult to perform than the PDR-low requests due to the greater level of politeness and complex linguistic expressions required to convey request intention. Proficiency impact was more prominent in the PDR-high situations due to the greater amount of linguistic resources that the learners needed to use.

Similar to PDR-low requests, direct expressions received lower ratings for both proficiency groups, implying that the difference between the directness levels of expressions affected appropriateness. However, even when using the same direct expressions, higher L2 learners received much higher appropriateness scores than the lower L2 group. The rating difference between the two groups was statistically significant, $t = -4.80$, $p < .001$. This trend was the same for the indirect expressions; the group rating differed significantly, $t = -5.63$, $p < .001$. These findings suggest that group differences in appropriateness scores did not

seem to perfectly reflect only the types of linguistic forms used for requests. Grammatical and discourse control encoded in the rating criteria seemed to have affected the evaluation of appropriateness of requests.

	<i>K</i>	Mean	Mode	<i>SD</i>	Min.	Max.
Direct Expressions						
Higher L2 Group (<i>n</i> = 29)	8	3.10	3.50	0.79	2.00	4.50
Lower L2 Group (<i>n</i> = 30)	16	1.77	2.00	0.44	1.00	2.50
Indirect Expressions						
Higher L2 Group (<i>n</i> = 29)	50	3.47	3.50	0.78	2.00	5.00
Lower L2 Group (<i>n</i> = 30)	44	2.57	2.50	0.76	1.00	4.00

Notes. *K* = the number of samples. Each speech act was assessed based on a six-point scale ranging between zero and five.

Table 8: *Appropriateness ratings of PDR-high requests by expression type*

6. Discussion

This study examined L2 production of requests in PDR-high and PDR-low situations from two perspectives: Appropriateness ratings and types of linguistic expressions used. Using these two methods, the study also examined whether higher and lower proficient learners differed in their speech act production, and what features of production (i.e., appropriateness ratings or the choice of linguistic expressions) differentiated between the two groups. There was a significant difference in appropriateness scores between the higher and lower L2 groups. In terms of appropriateness ratings, results then support the previous literature that, as proficiency increases, the ability to produce speech acts appropriately improves (e.g., DuFon 2001; Hill 1997; Roever 2005; Rose 2000; Trosborg 1995).

What was found further in this study is that quality of speech acts, exemplified in the higher L2 group, derived from a combination of factors, including: Overall appropriateness of linguistic expressions, grammaticality of the expressions, and comprehensibility of the expressions. Appropriateness measured in this study constituted a holistic concept including features that were pragmatic, as well as the linguistic and extra-linguistic ability to realize those pragmatic features. These multiple influences were reflected in the rating descriptors used for evaluation and subsumed three major aspects: The pragmatic aspect (i.e., the degree of direct-ness and politeness of expressions perceived by native speaker raters), the discourse aspect (e.g., oral fluency features such as pause length and speech rate, discourse organization features), and the grammatical aspect (accuracy of linguistic forms).

Although appropriateness was a reflection of these multiple aspects combined, comparisons between average appropriateness scores and the choices of linguistic expressions suggests that it was more grammatical and discourse control, rather than pragmatic control, that discriminated between the two L2 groups, particularly for PDR-

high speech acts. On the six-point appropriateness scale, the average rating for PDR-high speech acts was 3.6 ($SD = 0.76$) for the higher L2 group, while that of the lower L2 group was 2.3 ($SD = 0.78$). The main differences in descriptors between these two rating levels was the degree of interference of grammatical and discourse errors in appropriateness. In the 'three' range, the average of higher L2 learners, speech acts were still acceptable, despite the noticeable grammatical and discourse mistakes. In contrast, in the 'two' range, the average of the lower level learners, appropriateness was difficult to determine due to excessive grammatical and discourse errors (e.g., disfluency features such as long pauses, repetitions; lack of coherence). In lower L2 production, these grammatical and discourse problems seriously interfered with appropriateness, resulting in lower mean appropriateness ratings.

These observations also correspond to the analyses of linguistic expressions. In PDR-high situations, the frequencies of the different types of request expressions, classified according to the Blum-Kulka et al. framework (1989), were generally similar between the two L2 groups, suggesting that the groups were similar in the types of linguistic forms used. However, even when using the same types of direct expressions, the higher L2 group received greater appropriateness ratings than the lower L2 group. Findings imply that the L2 group differences in appropriateness ratings cannot be attributed only to the linguistic forms used to realize speech acts. Rather, the differences resulted from grammatical and discourse features that accompanied the forms. For instance, the utterance "Could you lend me a pen?" was labeled as a preparatory question and considered proper in terms of its directness level. However, it was rated as two (i.e., not appropriate) because of unusually long pause involved.

In summary, the present findings lend support to Bardovi-Harlig's (1999) claim that, although high levels of discourse and grammatical competence alone may not guarantee concomitant high levels of pragmatic production, they may serve as necessary conditions for pragmatic appropriateness. As shown in this study, effectiveness of speech act production, as indicated by high appropriateness ratings, was not solely attributed to the directness level of the linguistic expressions used in the production. This study then suggests that a more complete picture on the interaction among learners' overall linguistic competence, discourse management skill, and pragmatic competence needs to be explored in future research in order to better understand the nature of pragmatic competence.

7. Conclusion and implications of the study

This study offers several implications for the analysis of speech acts. First, although the use of appropriate linguistic forms is an indispensable aspect of successful speech act realization, this study has shown that pragmatic performance is more than just utilizing a series of formulaic utterances. It also entails efficient discourse and grammatical management, as shown in the ratings of appropriateness. The significant L2 proficiency effect in appropriateness ratings also indicates that quality speech act performance is related to overall language facility. Thus, this study confirmed that a speech act is best evaluated when embedded in a communicative context. Speech acts should be treated as creative discourse that combines pragmatic appropriateness of utterances,

grammaticality of utterances, and smooth continuity in ongoing talk (e.g., oral fluency, use of repairs, turn-taking ability).

Moreover, native speaker data showed that appropriate speech act expressions were in fact largely categorical according to the coding frameworks. Some expressions never appeared in native speaker data, at least, for the particular role play situations used in this study, suggesting that the previous typology of speech act expressions is too elaborate. Thus, evaluation should focus on the expressions that are most likely to appear in native speaker performance. For instance, in PDR-high requests, 100% of native speakers used mitigated-preparatory expressions (e.g., 'Do you mind if I' + verb?). Because these expressions were absent in the L2 data, the ability to use these particular expressions could indicate higher quality in L2 requests.

The present findings also suggest that, for an effective speech act performance, one should avoid being imposing or face-threatening, but at the same time, one needs to be clear in his/her illocutionary intent in order to reduce the interpretation demands on the hearer. For PDR-high requests, L2 learners used ineffectively inexplicit, ambiguous expressions (e.g., non-conventional indirect expressions or hinting), and consequently failed to convey illocutionary intent. The lack of clarity in intention seemed to have resulted in the lower appropriateness scores of PDR-high speech acts, compared with those of PDR-low speech acts. Therefore, the degree of clarity in illocutionary intent should be emphasized when analyzing appropriateness of L2 speech acts.

Another implication relates to the rating scale of speech act production. Learners' use of communication strategies seems to be an aspect of pragmatic competence. In spoken performance, the use of communication strategies plays an important role because they function as a set of problem-solving strategies to compensate for a lack of linguistic and sociocultural knowledge (Kasper & Kellerman 1997). These strategies were evident in the excerpt 4 in this study. In future research, these coping strategies should receive more emphasis when examining overall appropriateness of L2 speech act production.

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