

Investigation of the Use of Politeness Strategies by Japanese Students when Requesting in English

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1. Introduction

It may have come to the notice of many English teachers in Japan that when a Japanese student asks for a favour in English, the actual utterance significantly differs from what may be expected between native English-speaking interlocutors. Haisa (2001) and Ohyama (2006) found that while Japanese learners of English were cognizant of politeness, they were often limited in their performance of the speech act of requesting due to a lack of grammatical and sociolinguistic competence. According to Hymes (1986), to complete a speech act, both linguistic form and awareness of social norm are necessary. To this, McCarthy (1991) adds phonological forms. It could be assumed therefore that the students' requests which do not match the expectations of native speaker requestees could result from a combination of a lack of sociolinguistic awareness, a lack of linguistic knowledge in requesting forms or possibly a phonological problem. Whatever the reason for the difference between student utterances such as "I want you to give me a handout." and the expected form, for example "Could you give me a handout?" the effect on the listener may negatively influence the students' desired outcome. In other words, the student may be faced with a pragmalinguistic failure if she uses a linguistic form which does not match her intention (White 1993). For example, White's (ibid) research found that offers and requests from Japanese students in English can sound rather abrupt as only "please" is added to make a request more polite. This may be due to a direct translation from [～てください] in Japanese but as Bardovi-Harlig et al. (1991) point out, a one-to-one transferal of speech acts between languages is not always possible.

This study investigates the use of politeness strategies by Japanese students in a university intermediate level listening and speaking class when performing the speech act of requesting a favour in English and compares their strategies with those used by a sample of native speakers. Brown and Levinson (1987) propose that politeness strategies, for example when requesting, are dependent on three things: the relative closeness or distance of relations between speakers, their relative status and the amount of imposition involved in the request. Because the study was done using role-play situa-

tions, the relative closeness or distance of relations between the speakers could not be estimated. However, by varying the relative status of the participants in the role play and by changing the favours requested to involve different levels of imposition, it was hoped that it would become apparent as to whether the students are able to use the register and form of their request which might be expected by their English-speaking interlocutors.

As the speech act of requesting is, as mentioned above, inclusive of both linguistic form and social norm, whether the students have the linguistic competence to make the requests or not, it was also hoped that the study would be able to determine the level of awareness among students concerning the necessity for varying their strategies when requesting different favours of different people. This was done by asking them in L1, after conducting the role play, what they would have liked to have said in English.

Finally, assuming that the speech act of requesting is a practical and basic need for students from actions ranging from studying abroad to effectively communicating a need with their native English speaking teachers, if students are incapable of this skill, it may be necessary to review the introduction of pragmatic awareness in English classes in university. Thus this study considers the implications of any noticeable differences between the native speaker and non-native speaker performance for language teaching in a university context.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

22 Japanese students and 7 American native speakers of English were asked to participate in this research project. The Japanese students attend a national University, have TOEIC IP scores above 500 and are non-English majors enrolled in an elective intermediate English class. Each has a background of around 380 hours study of English in Junior High and High School together with a minimum of 30 hours' English instruction in university first year classes. The native speakers are English speaking instructors living in Japan.

2.2 Data Collection Procedure

Participants were asked to cooperate on this research project and agreed to be recorded completing short role-plays conducted with the researchers. Specifically, the study asked students to participate in role plays requesting favours from two different people: firstly with "a friend" and secondly with "a professor". For each interlocutor, a favour was requested at two different levels of imposition; one involved a request that could be done immediately at little cost to the requestee and the other involved much

more cost to the requestee, both in time and effort. Thus, each participant was involved in four short role-plays requesting favours. The role of the friend and the professor was played by a native speaker teacher or a Japanese teacher of English.

The students were not told in advance of the content of the role-play but were asked to go individually to the researchers' rooms to participate in the role-play. Once in the room, the students were asked to read a short rubric outlining the situation in Japanese and the request required. After reading the paragraph, they were given as much thinking time as they needed and then started the role-play. For the complete rubrics given to the students, refer to Appendix A.

The first situation was in an American university, when they had missed the previous week's class and had to borrow their friend's notes to study for a test the following week. In the second situation, the students were going to present a two-minute speech about their family in the following week's class. They were required to ask their friend for help checking the English in their speech. The third and fourth role-plays involved the researchers acting as the students' professor rather than a friend. In the third role-play, students pretended to have an English test the following week. Since their class had received some handouts when they did not attend the class in the previous week, they needed the handouts so that they could catch up with the study and prepare for the exam. They needed to visit their professor's office and ask for the handouts. It was supposedly the first time for the students to converse with the professor on a one-to-one basis. In the fourth situation, students needed to visit their professor's office to request assistance correcting their English entry before going to New York for a speech contest the following week.

After the set of role-plays had finished, students were asked in Japanese how they felt about the tasks, whether they had been difficult or not and the reasons for any perceived difficulty. The conversation recorded in each situation and the student self-evaluation after the role-play were later transcribed and analyzed.

3. Results

Several interesting points arose from the data. Firstly, the linguistic forms used for the requests by native speakers and non-native speakers, which can be seen in Appendix B, were noticeably different. One point which stood out was the extent to which the students relied on basic statement forms rather than question forms. For example, the number of students using a question form was only 26 out of a total of 88 role-plays. All of these forms were direct questions. In contrast, with regard to the native speakers, of a total of 26 role-plays, 18 involved the use of interrogative forms. Furthermore, of these forms, 12 were indirect questions such as "Is it all right if I...?" or

“Do you think you can...?”.

Also interesting was the use of “if” by the native speakers. Out of 13 requests made of friends, 8 involved the use of “if” and in the case of requests made of professors, the number increased to 9. This type of request included exponents such as “I wonder if...” and “Do you think it’d be OK if...?”. On the other hand, from a total of 88 role-plays by non-native students, “if” was used once in the utterance “if you OK”.

Finally, the use of direct language such as imperative forms and statements such as “I want...” was also significantly different between the native-speaker and non-native speaker groups. The native-speakers used no imperatives when requesting, whereas, of a total of 88 role play requests by non-native speakers, 21 used an imperative form with “please”, such as in “Please give me...”. In addition, “I want...” or “I want you to...” were used a further 34 times by non-native speakers while the native speakers did not use these forms at all.

As well as the linguistic form itself, the difference in forms used by students and native speakers when speaking with different people was analyzed. “Could you...?” was a form of politeness that some students used with success. It was used twice when asking a friend for a handout and three times for asking a professor as well as six times for requesting for help with a speech from both a friend and a professor. Additionally, the more direct form of “Can” was only used when requesting from a friend, which seems to show that some students are aware of the sociolinguistic functions of these forms. For other forms, however, there seemed to be little difference between those used for different interlocutors or request type. “I want” or “I want you to...” was used a combined 15 times for role-plays 1A and 1B with a friend. What is surprising is that “I want” was also used a combined 23 times for the role-plays 2A and 2B with a professor. Only once was “I want” combined with a conditional “if” statement to soften the request. Similarly, please + imperative” was used 6 times in either role-play with a friend (1A, 1B) and was also used eight times for requesting help for a speech contest from a professor (2B), although only once when requesting a handout (2A).

With regard to the difference in forms used by native speakers in different situations, it seems that the only situation that was different from the others in the forms of request used was the easy request to a friend. Even the forms used in this request were relatively polite; for example, “Is it all right if I...?” or “Do you mind if I...?”. The other request situations were all performed at a high level of politeness, probably reflecting the level of imposition or the relative status difference between the interlocutors.

As mentioned above, the students were also asked about what they would have liked to have said in English after the role plays had taken place. During the follow-up ses-

sions, 16 of the 22 students stated that they were aware that they should be more polite but could not say what they wanted to at the time.

4. Limitations of the study

4.1 Small sample

As can be seen from section 2.1, the number of participants in this study was relatively small. Additionally, the number of native speaker participants was less than half that of the non-native speakers. This necessarily limits the conclusions that can be made from the study to general hypotheses about tendencies of non-native speakers or native speakers when requesting favours.

4.2 Use of role play

Richards (2001) points out that Hymes' speaking model of a speech event can be reduced to a mere three elements: namely situation, participants and purpose. If we look at the role-play as reproducing a speech event – incorporating the speech act of requesting a favour – it is possible to see that all three of these elements may adversely affect the authenticity of the speech act. The first situation in the rubric was speaking to a friend about borrowing their notes. The fact that the setting was a faculty member's office would possibly have been much more intimidating to a student than the cafeteria or corridor in which the speech act might normally occur. However, the second situation in the rubric did take place in the teacher's office so in this case the setting was appropriate. Secondly with regard to participants, the second role-play was similar to an authentic situation in that the person asking the favour was a student and the person being asked was an English teacher. This of course meant that the participants were not the same as those in an authentic friend-friend request which was probably also intimidating. Finally, the purpose of the role-play had already been explained to the students as helping researchers with their research. This publicly stated purpose was at odds with the purpose of the role-plays themselves which was to make a request. Basically, "role-plays are often compromised in terms of the range and authenticity of the conduct that emerges within them" (Heritage 1995:397).

4.3 Exclusion of Pronunciation from data.

McCarthy (1991) stresses the need for a combination of grammatical form, phonological form and context – participants, setting and roles – when deciding on the function of any utterance. Thus, prosodic features such as intonation and pitch will have an impact on how the listener perceives the speaker. For example, as Gumperz (1982) points out, if a politeness tag "please" is stressed and carries a falling tone, it is "counter to English prosodic conventions which associate falling tones with definiteness and finality" (ibid 169). Unfortunately, it was not within the scope of this investigation to

include the prosodic features of student utterances; and therefore, we did not reflect on the extent to which the students' pronunciation affected their performance.

5. Discussion

There are a number of conclusions that could be tentatively drawn from this study. Firstly, it became apparent that the students' linguistic proficiency had a severe impact on the extent to which they were able to express themselves. Intermediate English I students must have a minimum of 500 in TOEIC. This roughly is equivalent to around 4 – 4.5 in IELTS which is a "limited user" or B1, which is the lowest intermediate level, in the Common European Framework. Many of the students commented that they were impeded by worries about vocabulary or grammar. Most students stated that they were not accustomed to thinking in English and speaking in English. While participating in the role-plays, they had an idea of what to say in Japanese, but it was difficult to translate it into English. One student indicated that he did not have any confidence since he could not find clear different meanings between "borrow" and "lend." This led to a request using "please borrow me". Another student commented, "When I speak English, I have to think about the grammar principles and where to place the correct prepositions to construct my sentences." It seems that the students were very concerned to use a grammatically and lexically "correct" request form and this may have led them to produce a very basic form which they were confident to use. One student said, "I could not convey my intention of asking for his help in correcting my English, so I just ended up using a simple sentence stating my real needs." As can be seen from Appendix B, simple forms using "Can" (8 times) "Could" (8) "want" (16) and "Please" + imperative form (12) were used for requesting from friends and "Could" (10), "want" (23) and "Please" +imperative (9) for requesting from professors predominate. In comparison to the non-native speakers, the native speakers used a wide range of linguistic forms to realize the objective of making a request.

However, an assessment of the students' linguistic ability was not the only objective of this study. We also hoped to some extent to estimate how aware students were of the necessity to use different levels of politeness when requesting favours of differing levels of imposition and with different participants. This pragmatic awareness was estimated by firstly, the actual language used to make the requests and secondly, bearing the students' language levels in mind, student feedback in L1 on the necessity for polite language. From the data collected it appears that in some cases, the students' linguistic proficiency is not equal to their sociolinguistic awareness.

It was found that when requesting a favour from friends and from professors, a total of 4 students in each case were able to use a greater level of politeness when making a

more troublesome request. Two students were able to vary their request forms according to level of imposition both when talking to a “friend” and to a “professor”. In addition, three students were able to use a more polite form when making a request of their “professor” compared to the request made of their friend. This is not a great percentage of the 22 students who participated in the study. However, when asked, 16 of the students replied that when talking to the professor they should have used more polite language than when talking to their friend. One student stated, “since I did not know how to express my intention politely to my professor, I might have been rude when asking to receive handouts from him.”

In general then, it seems that students are often aware of the necessity for politeness but unaware of the means by which to achieve it. Especially in the case of requesting, they are dependent on a sympathetic interlocutor to achieve their goals. In an authentic situation in a British or American university the request form “I want to last week’s print”, may not receive the desired response.

If then students need to acquire a basic level of socio-linguistic skills, they need to be given the opportunity to address these aspects of language in the classroom. White (1993) states, “It is now commonly accepted that language training will focus not only on the form of the language but also on its communicative use”. This means that it is not sufficient to say to students, “If you want to be polite, use the word please”.

One way to focus on communicative use would be to introduce functional formulae to students piecemeal. However, as McCarthy says formulae should form a basic “survival kit” at the most elementary level (1991:122). Thus phrases like “Could you...?” to request may be introduced but more complex forms for higher levels of politeness are beyond the definition of “basic survival kit”. Many of the non-native speaker participants said that they had been introduced to the phrase “I was wondering if...” to request when they were in high school but they were not able to produce the exponent at the appropriate time. As many studies have shown, the presentation of language does not always lead to its uptake. In addition to the dubious nature of the idea that what is introduced is “learnt”, the sheer number of different kinds of function and functional exponent mean that it would be very difficult to introduce all the exponents necessary.

A further possibility for the introduction of pragmatic competence in class would be to adapt Clennell’s (1999) outline. He has the students transcribe their own recorded utterances and then compare the difference in meaning between what they actually said and what they wanted to say. This could then be extended to have the students compare their own requests with those of native speakers doing the same task, as in this study. This has three benefits in that the students have ownership of the texts which may increase their motivation, their attention can be focused on pragmatic as-

pects of the recording, and they can take the role of researcher rather than recipient of information.

6. Conclusion

The native speakers of English were likely to use interrogative forms and the more complex linguistic forms, especially those with an “if” clause such as “I was wondering if it would be OK if...”, to demonstrate politeness.

Although some Japanese students in the intermediate English class noticed that they needed to use different levels of polite forms when requesting, they were generally not able to use appropriate forms flexibly for different situations and different participants.

As a result of comparing Japanese requesting strategies with American ones, the researchers suggest emphasizing sociolinguistic usage when developing these language functions for the English intermediate classes. This development may be best carried out by awareness-raising activities rather than functional exponent presentation.

7. Future research

It may be interesting in the future to investigate the requesting strategies of the students in a higher level English class to clarify whether a higher linguistic level has a positive effect on sociolinguistic competence. Furthermore, future study could involve a more authentic situation with recordings being taken when students actually come to their teachers’ room to make real requests, providing of course that their permission to use those recordings is sought after the conversation takes place.

Other future study could also involve research regarding the use of some kind of framing for the request in the form of lead-in to a request, particularly a request that will require effort from the requestee. Almost all the native speaker participants used a lead-in in the conversation before they made a request. Examples were “You went to class last week, right?” and “I was wondering if I could get some advice.” for a friend and a professor respectively. In contrast, an average of just under 4 out of 22 non-native participants used a lead-in before making their request. On this point, some Japanese students described their difficulty in initiating their conversation with their professor. They thought that it would be appropriate to say, “I’m sorry to bother you,” but they missed the chance to mention it. They commented on their limited knowledge about American customs to start their conversation with their professor and how to convey their intentions properly. One student stated, “I tried to initiate our conversation saying, ‘I need a little bit of your help,’ I directly talked about my purpose of vis-

iting my professor. Unconsciously, I converse with my professor using direct expressions because I did not know how to ask him for a favour appropriately.” This appears to be another area in which there is a gap between student proficiency and sociopragmatic norms.

Appendix A

Prompt 1A

現在、あなたはアラバマ大学に留学中で、来週の英語の試験の準備をしていると仮定してください。先週その講義に出席できなかったので、級友にノートを貸してもらうため、授業の後で友人のケンに話しかけて尋ねてみてください。

Prompt 1B

現在、あなたはアラバマ大学に留学中で、来週あなたの家族について2分間のスピーチをすることになっていると仮定してください。英文の修正が必要なのであなたの友達に助けてもらい必要があります。今日か明日助けてもらえるかどうか、友人のケンに話しかけて尋ねてみてください。

Prompt 2A

現在、あなたはアラバマ大学に留学中で、来週の英語の試験の準備をしていると仮定してください。先週その講義に出席できなかったので、教官に授業中に配布された用紙を貰いたいと思い、授業の後で教官室を訪問し頼んでください。あなたは今回初めて教官室を訪問し、このように教官と個人的に話をしていると仮定してください。

Prompt 2B

現在、あなたはアラバマ大学に留学中で、来週あなたの家族についてのスピーチ・コンテストに参加することになっています。英文を修正するためにスミス先生のアドバイスを受ける必要があります。ニューヨークでのスピーチ・コンテストに行く前に教官室を訪問し、このように教官と個人的に話をしていると仮定してください。

Prompt 1A

At this moment, you are studying English at Alabama University. You are going to have an English test next week. You need to ask your friend for help because you didn't attend the class last week. Ask your friend, Ken, if you can borrow his notebook to study.

Prompt 1B

At this moment, you are studying at Alabama University. You are going to present a two minute speech about your family next week. You need to ask your friend for help because you need someone to check your English. Ask your friend, Ken, if you can get his help today or tomorrow.

Prompt 2A

At this moment, you are studying English at Alabama University. You are going to have an English test next week. Your teacher gave some handouts in class when you were absent. You need them so that you can prepare for the next exam. Knock on Dr. Smith's office door and ask him for the handouts. This is the first time to converse with him personally.

Prompt 2B

At this moment, you are studying at Alabama University. You are going to talk about your family at a speech contest in New York City next week. You need to ask Dr. Smith for advice regarding your English. Knock on his office door and ask for his help. This is the first time to converse with him personally.

Appendix B

Request Speech Act forms

Role-play 1A	Japanese Students (22)	Native English Speakers (7)
Requesting handouts from a friend	Can I...? (2) Can you...? (2) Could you...? (2) I want to... (5) I want you to... (3) I want to ask you... (1) I would like to... (1) Please + imperative... (6)	Can I...? (1) May I see them? (1) I wonder if I can... (1) Is it all right if I... (1) Do you mind if I... (2) Do you think it would be OK if I... (1)
Role-play 1B	Japanese Students (22)	Native English Speakers (6)*
Requesting help with a speech contest from a friend	Can I...? (1) Can you...? (3) Could you...? (6) I need your help... (2) I want you to... (6) I want...(1) Please +imperative...(6)	Could you...? (1) Do you think you could...? (1) Do you think it'd be OK if...? (1) Do you think you can...? (1) I was wondering if you... (1) I wonder if you could... (1)
Role-play 2A	Japanese Students (22)	Native English Speakers (7)
Requesting handouts from a professor	Could I...? (1) Could you...? (3) I want you to... (3) I want to... (8) I want (noun)... (4) I would like to... (1) Please give me... (1) I couldn't get your print. (1)	Could I...? (1) Do you have...? (1) Do you think it'd be OK if...? (1) (1) If you don't mind, I'd like to... (1) I was wondering if... (2) I would be very appreciative if... (1)
Role-play 2B	Japanese Students (22)	Native English Speakers (6)*
Requesting help with a speech contest from a professor	Could you...? (6) I hope that you could... (1) I want you to... (8) (1 with "If you OK") Please +imperative... (8) (2x including please help me.) **	Could you...? (1) ... if you could... (1) If it's all right, do you think it'd be OK if... (1) I was wondering if... (1) I'd like to ask you for... (1) If you have time, that would be... (1)

*Only 6 speakers participated in role-plays 1B and 2B

** Multiple speech acts by one student account for the 23 speech acts listed

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