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Research Article

Improving Grade Nine Students' English Language Speaking Skill of Polite Requests: Misrak Chora Secondary School

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Abstract

Most commonly it is agreed that politeness is reflected in the pragmatic use of language. Although the politeness phenomenon is universal, with many expressional similarities, each language possesses norms and ways of expressing politeness within a given cultural context. Politeness has connection with everyday life such as with greeting, inviting, helping, apologizing, opinions, advice, questioning and suggesting information etc. English speaker tourists most frequently visit and resident in Hawassa City-Ethiopia and have cultural and communication exposure. However, many Ethiopian students are observed incompetent in this regard. Thus, the current study was intended to improve EFL learners' polite requesting skills in some selected situations both in classroom contexts and outside contexts. For this purpose, the pre-experimental research design was employed to the study, and twenty students (10 females and 10 males) were randomly selected by lottery system from the 9th B classroom. This makes 22.2% of the population in the class. Six politeness genres were selected from the students' English textbook for explicit lesson intervention. Based on Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT) instrument prepared from these contents, both pretest and posttest conditions were administered to the selected students. Also cooperative learning strategies such as role play, pair work, group discussion, extemporaneous speeches on situations, cooperative jigsaw, interactive discourse, timed interview, Think-Pair-Share (TPS) were utilized during the lesson sessions. Then, frequencies, means, standard deviations, variances and percentages were used to obtain the main findings. On pretest, students have scored the overall 27.16% (mean, 8.15) regarding all polite request situations. However, it was found that the posttest scores showed great difference about 78.3% (mean, 23.5) in all situations. The study has also sought which request contexts grade nine students improve best as a result of the explicit instruction. Although students have improved performance in all tested situations, they had showed very significant change on request for apology followed by for help. In apology situation the students have achieved 90% and the least in preference scenario which is 65%. Thus, it is recommended that learners have to be explicitly taught in context of these language genres to develop learners' communicative abilities in the area. Teachers should devote time to instruct on this language content [polite request] as it is everyday encounter in one's life. Syllabus designers also should allot much time and tasks on the area so that school teachers give attention to areas.

Keywords

Speaking, Polite Request, Productive Skills, Politeness Pragmatics, Discourse Competence

1. Introductions

English language is a lingua-franca of the world in which almost all international communication takes place. This being the case, many educators, governments, employers, companies and organizations want staff who can speak English well. Students who can speak English well have a greater chance of further education, of finding employment and gaining promotion. The primary goal of teaching learners the language skills is to enable students to have a good command of both spoken and written communications [1, 5, 9, 10, 22]. In real life, people generally may need to inform, convince, or share ideas. They are also required to take notes, write diaries, write emails, letters, reports, stories and write scripts for entertaining purposes. Most of these skills are learnt in schools as students educated and developed.

Politeness is one of the most language skills area to be developed [3, 11, 14, 16]. This language skill has strong tie with everyday life in our communities that exist in different world languages as well as cultures. That is why many student textbooks and modules pursue to incorporate from this genre of language. Brown and Levinson [6] has defined 'politeness' as a social phenomenon that can be demonstrated by means of language, manners, and etiquettes or behaviours. Leech [13] also explains that politeness is considered as indispensable skill for a successful social interaction. Kasper and Rose [11] stated that early theories view politeness as a conflict avoidance strategy which functions as a linguistic tool in maintaining healthy relationships among interlocutors during social interaction. For example, [11] defines politeness as a tool for strategic conflict avoidance. According to [6] politeness is a means of avoiding antagonism between interlocutors in face-threatening situations.

Black [2] defines politeness as a conversational contract that has a set of rights and obligations that participants must follow and can be negotiated and rearranged during a conversation. It meant that the conversational contract is based on the expectations of the members involved in a conversation and determined by the participants. The author states that there are two definitions of politeness (a) how language expresses the social distance between speakers and their different role relationship (b) How to create, insist, and keep face during conversation carried out in speech community).

Furthermore, indirectness scale shows the indirectness utterance is more polite than directness utterance. It means that the more utterances are indirect, the more the utterances are polite. On the other hand, the more utterances are direct, the more utterances are not polite [14].

Black [2] also states that Brown and Levinson developed a widely accepted theory of politeness, which they consider is cross-culturally valid. Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness has informed recent research by offering discerning explanation of societal mechanisms. The theory holds that people are motivated by their need to maintain their 'face'-the need to be approved of by others, and to maintain a sense of self-worth. Polite request, therefore, laid its principles and theories around cooperativeness among people. It is one of pragmatics of language field that most researched around the world in various cultures, languages and interlanguage aspects.

Politeness may take place in two major strategies-directness and indirectness (conventionality) strategies. Directness has subcategory known as mood derivable, and want statement strategies whereas conventionally indirectness request has query preparatory category-the one which is real request and show more politeness. For example, "Would you open the window for me pleases?". However, in discourse approach it is also classified as positive politeness and negative politeness based on the face-threatening acts (FTA) that may take place between interlocutors.

Moreover, [6] argue that the choice of politeness strategies depends on the seriousness of an FTA which can be determined by assessing three sociological variables in any talk exchange, for example; (i) Social distance (D), which refers to the degree of familiarity between interlocutors (ii) Relative power (P), which refers to the relative degree of power speaker (S) holds over hearer (H). (iii) Absolute rank of Imposition (R) of an utterance refers to the magnitude of the speaker's desire in terms of the expenditure of goods or services by the hearer.

According to [6], speakers determine the seriousness or weightiness of a particular face-threatening act (FTA) by assessing the weightiness of P, D, and R and then choose the appropriate level of politeness while performing an FTA. One of the major characteristics of [6]'s model is that it can be used for cross-cultural and cross-linguistic comparison. It offers a distinction between positive and negative face which can be used as a parameter to measure politeness orientations of different cultures. Because of cultural variations across world, some scholars put polite requests in various levels as follows:

Requesting   Less polite
1. Answer the phone.
2. I want you to answer the phone.
3. Will you answer the phone?
4. Can you answer the phone?
5. Would you mind answering the phone?
6. Could you possibly answer the phone?   More polite
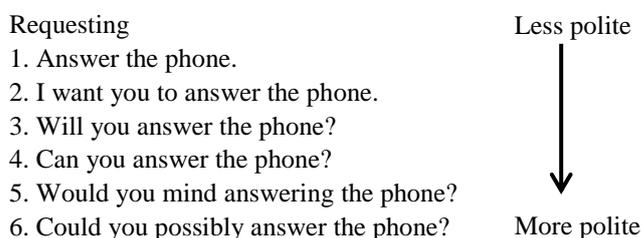
Many authors also explain that modal auxiliaries can be used for expressing the speech act of requesting in politeness. The following examples tell different realizations of this type of politeness in requests: 'Could you help me to move this table?', 'Will you get me some dollar?' and 'Can you move this table with me?' because they may perform various FTA in speech act context. Leech [13] also says that politeness is culture specific as, like all communicative acts, it carries different meanings in different cultures and it will also vary depending on certain circumstances. It meant that politeness

principle does not have standard in the words meaning, depending on the society in some places. Generally, polite request speech act worth further studies as it can be observed as a phenomenon in all cultures. It is used by speakers of different languages. It is also recognized as a norm in all societies. Ethiopian students, in one way or another, fail to equip with such discourse pragmatics.

2. Statement of the Problem

The researcher had been on duty of observing language teaching skills in December 2014E.C or 2021 G.C. at Misrak Chorra High School in Hawassa City. The target grade level for the observation was grade nine teachers. Then, it was conceived that learners' English language skills were below level of expectation, especially in productive skills area even in group discussions. Almost no student can speak in English to ask questions let alone to ask their teachers for unclear task areas. Some students were using their mother tongue language to ask questions to their teachers and I enquired some of the students why this was so. The majority replied to me that they can't request for any information they wanted in English language rather than using their first or second language; mostly common in Amharic. I kept observing this problem in almost the seven sections for five days and come up with the idea to minimize the learners' problem at least improving their baseline request in language (English). The syllabus for grade-9 students on this skill enlisted that students should be able to:

1) contribute to and develop (at a basic level) conversations around the unit topic in pair, group, plenary activities using language that is comprehensible (if inaccurate, limited or hesitant) and which communicates the intended message);
2) talk about themselves, others and their daily lives;
3) ask for information;
4) give reasons for viewpoints;
5) ask for repetition and clarification;
6) express sympathy;
7) express their opinion and support this using basic language;
8) agree, disagree and express simple counter arguments;
9) ask and give simple directions in polite manner;
10) apologize, ask and state clarification requests.

Request genres were widely depicted in the students' textbook in the forthcoming units that they will learn in the second semester. Despite all these claims, researchers indicate that learners' English has been deteriorating over decades. Even though students were observed unable to use polite requests in classroom routines, such as asking for clarifications, questions, suggestions and material needs, notions and functions of such contents sufficiently designed in their textbook:

1) asking for clarification, following instructions, advising (unit-1),

2) asking accustomed group discussion questions such as why, how, what and suggestions (Unit-2, 4 and 5),
3) asking for and expressing opinions (unit-6, 7),
4) apologizing and requesting for help (unit-8).

From my observation in the classroom, it has been worsened even! As a result of this observation, I have abled to exploit an action study around polite requesting genre especially on those events taking in the classroom situations. On the other hand, this study is its first kind on the area in the country though there were such studies as international contexts [8, 18, 19, 21]. Many of the foreign studies on this genre have been on requesting strategies than skills development. EFL learners should be able to use polite request pragmatics in both for academic situation and in community livelihoods. Therefore, the following major research questions were developed for the study:

1) Can EFL learners' English polite requests be improved by explicit intervention?
2) Is there any significant difference on pretest-posttest scores of grade nine students?
3) Due to explicit instruction, which politeness pragmatics are better improved?

3. Objective of the Study

The major objective of this action study was to improve polite request language skills of the secondary school students in grade 9. On the other hand, as a specific objective, it was planned to identify the request situations that students can better achieve with explicit classroom instructions.

4. Methodology

This action study has been conducted in Misrak Chora Secondary school in Hawassa City, found at the southern region of Ethiopia. By 2014/2021-2022 academic year, the school enrolled students into seven sections (A-F) for the 9th grade education. Each class has 90 students on average. However, only one class has been purposely selected for this study. In section 9B, there were 55 female students and 35 male students enrolled. For this study only 20 students, 10 males and 10 females, were randomly selected after clustering into gender category. In simple mathematics this makes 22.2% of the given population of the study.

As a research instrument, written discourse completion test (WDCT) has been used and the ODCT (oral discourse competence test) because of the time the researcher has for the study. The WDCT model of the test was based on [4]. It was used for both pretest and posttest of the study on six given contents in students' textbook and then developed into situations. WDCTs, as cited in [15, 8], have been used extensively in research into the pragmatic aspects of L2 learning in general and politeness conventions in particular. The scholars consent that the use of DCTs for generating data on

pragmatic competence has been associated with numerous advantages including ease of administration and the feasibility to manipulate factors like age and status differences between interlocutors.

After the WDCT had been prepared and before it was used to gather the data, it was given to two raters who held doctoral degrees in TEFL at Salale University via email and comments suggested to modify if any. They rated the test items and also commented for modifications where there were problems with design. The reliability of the test was detected after the data gathered from the two expert raters. The pretest item has got Cronbach alpha coefficient 0.78 on the rater scales whereas the posttest was rated 0.88. Therefore, these tests were used as major instruments in the study.

5. Scope of the Study

This study had been conducted for the purpose of course accomplishing in one term semester. Therefore, the variables of the study were made to few language contexts in the politeness pragmatics. As it was an action study, it was also used with small sample of populations though large numbers of Ethiopian EFL learners have similar problems especially at primary and secondary school levels. One potential limitation of the study was escaping to investigate into polite request strategies. There were around 9 categories of politeness strategies in request either in writing or in speaking models. Eventhough informal assessments were used during lesson practices, only written test models have been used to accomplish this study.

6. Action Implementation

The present study is a type of action research implemented in classroom setting. The implementation time was from November 2021 to January 2022. Before tests pretests were administered, the researcher had carried out classroom ob-

servations at various sections of grade-9 in Misrak Chora Secondary school. After the experimental class had been identified, pretest was administered with politeness speech contents given in student textbook "English for Ethiopia" grade nine. Then, a teaching manual on the six selected polite request topics from learners textbook was developed for conducting lessons in the classroom. Nevertheless, this manual has been partly adapted on various politeness contexts from [7].

Different cooperative strategies studied by different scholars such as [20, 17, 15, 12] have also been attempted during the action implementation. As the scholars illustrated and researched, a classroom teacher may use techniques such as the information gap, role play, group discussion, pair work, debates, reporting, think-pair-share, round robin, pyramid, jigsaw, question and answer, oral drills, describing, interviewing, narrating, extemporaneous and impromptu speeches, dramas and game techniques. When the teacher implements these in the classroom, be it to speaking session or writing, it is obvious that there are also challenges such as: the learner lack of confidence, topic motivation, peer intimidation, awareness of cultures, linguistic background and teaching style etc. From the aforementioned cooperative strategies role play, pair work, group discussion, extemporaneous speeches on situations, cooperative jigsaw, interactive discourse, timed interview, Think-Pair-Share (TPS) were utilized during the lesson sessions. Each lesson topic has been delivered to the class students for two to three periods, too.

7. Discussions and Results

The present study is an action research based on the implementation of polite request in speaking skills. For this purpose both pretest and posttest were used as instrument of the study before and after the actions. Frequencies, means, percentages, variances and standard deviations were used to analyze data for the major finding as follows.

Table 1. The Descriptive Statistics.

Variables	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Pretest (T1)	20	3	17	8.15	4.32	18.67
Posttest (T2)	20	18	29	23.50	3.22	10.37
Valid N (list wise)	20					

In order to detect the differences on the effect of implementing cooperative and explicit instructions in improving EFL learners' polite requests, descriptive statistics was employed. As can be read from table 3, students have scored minimum 3 to maximum 17. However, the mean average

(8.15), as a whole, demonstrated below average and the deviation of scores were high (4.32). On this test there was also great variance (18.67). When we see the difference between the two tests, we perceive that there is great differences between their minimum-maximum, means, standard deviations

and variances.

In the pretest the minimum score had been 3 and in the posttest this was 18 both measured on 30 scores. During the posttest the minimum obtained 18 (fairly good) and the maximum was 29 (excellent). The mean average of test-1 was 8.15 whereas in test-2 it had been obtained 23.50. There was also great difference in variance. Eventhough the percentage was not depicted here, the pretest score showed that students have scored 27.16% from the 100% and 78.3% on the post-test.

Table 2. Paired Samples Statistics.

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	F-value	Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1	students score T1	8.1500	20	4.31978	.981	-.006	.000
	students score T2	23.5000	20	3.22000			

Table 3. Paired Test Differences.

		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	students score t1 - students score t2	-1.535	5.40248	1.20803	-17.87	-12.82	-12.707	19	.000

Apart from these differences on scores, the following tables may also illustrate the differences obtained in each polite request performance especially with the posttest given.

Table 4. Statistics of the pre intervention test (T1) on each request area.

		asking for help	asking for clarity	asking for excuse	asking for permission	ask direction	tell preference
N	Valid	20	20	20	20	20	20
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		1.65	1.55	1.75	2.00	.60	.60
Std. Deviation		.87	.76	1.07	1.02	.99	.82
Minimum		.00	.00	.00	1.00	.00	.00
Maximum		3.00	3.00	4.00	4.00	3.00	2.00
Sum		33.00	31.00	35.00	40.00	12.00	12.00

Table 5. Statistics of the post intervention test (T2) on each request area.

		Help request	Clarity request	Apologize request	Permission request	ask direction	tell preference
N	Valid	20	20	20	20	20	20
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		4.45	3.85	4.50	3.85	3.55	3.25

	Help request	Clarity request	Apologize request	Permission request	ask direction	tell preference
Std. Deviation	.76	.81	.68	.67	1.05	.71
Minimum	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	2.00	2.00
Maximum	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00
Sum	89.00	77.00	90.00	77.00	71.00	65.00

The test scores on each request skills can be also illustrated by percentage other than the above analysis. The following tables can demonstrate the descriptive statistics by using percentage counts.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics on Requesting for help.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	good	3	15.0	15.0	15.0
	v good	5	25.0	25.0	40.0
Valid	excellent	12	60.0	60.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

As figured above in the table, grade nine students, who were tested on politely requesting in help situations, have performed far better than the pretest because of the explicit instruction and cooperative strategies. In pretest scores about 80% (16 students) performed poorly and few never responded to the situation given. However, this was improved to good and above almost 85% ranging between very good and excellent performance.

Table 7. Asking for clarifications.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	good	8	40.0	40.0	40.0
	v good	7	35.0	35.0	75.0
Valid	excellent	5	25.0	25.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

The table shows that there is no below average performance on the situations tested, but it was shown 18 (90%) students on the pretest (T1). Here, the data on learners' performance asking for clarification situations good (8, 40%), very good performance (7, 35%) and excellent (5, 25%). This means that at least each student has scored greater than average on the situation-2.

Table 8. Asking for Excuse.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	Good	2	10.0	10.0	10.0
Valid	V. good	6	30.0	30.0	40.0

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
excellent	12	60.0	60.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Asking for an apology is an important social tradition that requires everyone to acquire the skill be in school experience or in a community. Almost 75% of the students couldn't per-form well in the pretest. On the contrary, students showed very significant performance on the posttest situation-more than 90% as the table supplements!

Table 9. Asking for permission.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	good	6	30.0	30.0	30.0
	V. good	11	55.0	55.0	85.0
Valid	excellent	3	15.0	15.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

From table six one can observe that the vast majority of students (55%) abled to request for permissions. As a sum, 70% demonstrated above good performance. However, this area was not great problem as was obtained during the pretest.

Table 10. Asking for directions.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	poor	3	15.0	15.0	15.0
	good	8	40.0	40.0	55.0
Valid	V. good	4	20.0	20.0	75.0
	excellent	5	25.0	25.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table 11. Telling preference.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	poor	2	10.0	10.0	10.0
	good	12	60.0	60.0	70.0
Valid	V. good	5	25.0	25.0	95.0
	excellent	1	5.0	5.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

These two tables depicted about requests for directions of places and preferences for foods and drinks respectively. In the first situation, some learners have performed below the expected average due to certain reasons. The same is true in

the second situation given by the table. Yet, the overall performance in both situations was not bad or has been improved. May be these were the situations in which the grade nine students performed the least compared to the other tested situations.

In general, it has been illustrated by tabular information analysis that six polite request in the productive skills of English language provided to grade nine students. All these spoken language: help, apology, permission, direction, preference and clarification play great roles in everyday life situations so that the contents were designed for these students. That means learners be in EFL or in ESL context shall have sufficient knowledge and skills in these productive skills areas. Thus, it seems that the students have performed best in apology situation (90%) on average of good and excellent followed by requesting for help (85%); then, by permission, clarification, direction and preference respectively.

8. Conclusion and Recommendation

The above action research has been conducted on improving grade nine students' polite request speech. For this matter, lesson manual has been prepared on the selected request topics by consulting works of scholars and other reference books that supplement the contents. During the lesson techniques were used to see effects as well. These are information gap, role play, group discussion, pair work, debates, reporting, think-pair-share, round robin, pyramid, jigsaw, question and answer, oral drills, describing, interviewing, narrating, extemporaneous and impromptu speeches, dramas and games. These techniques are also conducive in productive skills teaching especially speaking.

It has been found that students have showed significant improvement on polite request speaking skills such as apologizing, seeking help, permission, clarification, direction and preference situations (See above tables). Therefore, teachers should provide opportunities for learners to take part in extended practice with using language in a meaningful way through various classroom strategies. A good language classroom is, as scholars enumerate, one that involves students actively in all situations given in academic contents and beyond. Furthermore, extensive research study shall be conducted in the country on this area as there is none before. This study didn't corroborate features and strategies in polite request, thus other researchers can investigate in such areas.

Author Contributions

Assefa Gebre Miko is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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