Requests as Impositions: negative face among Saudi learners of English

Ikram Rouissi
University of Carthage, Tunisia

Abstract
The notion of communicative competence goes beyond the acquisition of linguistic competence to include pragmatic competence. Pragmatic competence is concerned with the use of language according to context and culture. A lack in the development of pragmatic competence may lead to communication breakdowns or cultural misunderstandings (Kasper and Blum-Kulka, 1993). Acquiring an appropriate level of pragmatic competence can be quite challenging because of the lack of clear prescriptive rules and the transfer of L1 socio-cultural norms (Chick, 1996; Cohen, 2007; Nakajima, 1997). Being primarily concerned with how non-native speakers acquire second language pragmatic knowledge (Kapser, 199), Interlanguage pragmatics has received a staple focus in second language acquisition research. Against this background, the present paper, drawing upon Brown and Levinson’s (1987) model of speech acts, investigates the realization of requests among Saudi EFL learners and the effect of degree of imposition enshrined therein in different eleven situations. Brown and Levinson maintain that Requests constitute an imposition on the hearer’s negative face because they represent an impingement on his freedom of action. They stress the role of three variables: distance, power, and ranking of imposition in speech act realization. The strategies posited in this framework for realizing formal requests (i.e., negative politeness strategies) represent the analytical categories adopted in this study. The study reveals that Saudi learners show a lot of care in not causing direct hits at their interlocutor’s negative face. It also reveals a number of pragma-linguistic failures and suggests that they might be better explained in terms of the learners’/speakers’ concern about their own negative face. The study is intended to draw teachers’ attention to the necessity of developing programs or courses which raise the learners’ awareness about the performance of requests in a cross-culturally sound way.

Keywords: Interlanguage pragmatics, Politeness, Negative Face, Requests, Variables, Distance, Power, Imposition, Speech Acts.
Introduction

For many years, the emphasis in second language teaching and learning theories has been primarily on the grammatical aspects of learners’ language. Meir (1997: 21) states: “As communicative competence has achieved ascendancy in the goals of foreign and second language pedagogy, attention to functional aspects of language identified as speech acts has also increased.” Thus second language acquisition research (SLAR) has become more and more concerned with investigating the pragmatic aspect of L2 learners’ language. This new emphasis in SLAR is embodied in the development of interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) studies. Kasper and Dahl (1991: 215) define ILP as the investigation of non-native speakers’ comprehension and production of speech acts, and the acquisition of L2-related speech act knowledge.” ILP studies concerned with the investigation of learners’ speech act realization have drawn on principles established by pragmatic theories as speech act theory and the role of politeness in language use (e.g. Leech, 1983 and Brown and Levinson, 1987).

The present paper falls under ILP research; it is concerned with investigating the effect of degree imposition on Saudi learners’ realization of requests in eleven different situations. The paper draws heavily on Brown and Levinson’s (1987)1 politeness model.

I. Brown and Levinson’s framework

B&L (1987) take the participant in discourse as a Model Person (MP) who is an adult member of a society and is endowed with two properties: rationality and face. Rationality is “the ability to weigh up different means to an end, and choose one that most satisfies the desired goal.” (B&L, 1987: 65). Speakers rely on rationality to choose from a set of possible linguistic means one that will satisfactorily achieve the desired goal. Face is the “Public self image that each member claims for himself.” (B&L, 1987: 61) It has two aspects: negative face and positive face. Negative face represents “the basic claims for territories, personal preserves, rights to non distraction i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition” while positive face represents “the positive and consistent self-image or ‘personality’ claimed by interactants.” (B&L, 1987: 61). Positive face2 underlies the interactants’ desire to be appreciated.

B&L maintain that requests are inherently threatening to the hearer’s negative face, because they represent an impingement on his freedom of action. The diversity of linguistic forms that requests can take is normally motivated by the speaker’s desire to protect the hearer’s negative face. Requests also depend on three sociological variables: distance, power, and ranking of imposition.

1. Distance

The variable sociological distance seems to be assessed in terms of “the frequency of interaction and the kind of material and non material goods including face exchanged between S and H.” (B&L, 1987: 77). Social distance between family members or close friends is perceived as low because of the high frequency of interaction that takes place

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1 - Henceforth B&L
2 - I do not account for positive face because it does not fall within the scope of this paper.
between them. However, social distance is perceived as high if the interlocutors are strangers or new acquaintances. High social distance increases the weight of the imposition whereas low social distance reduces it.

2- Power

The power variable is assessed by the degree by which S can impose his own desires and goals on H. S’s superior position reduces the seriousness of the imposition and all S to use direct request forms, whereas S’s subordinate position increases the seriousness of the imposition and calls for the use of indirect and polite requests.

3- Ranking of imposition

As far as requests are concerned, Ranking of imposition (R), is assessed in terms of the extent to which the requested act interferes with H’s negative face, i.e. with his time and freedom of action. B&L (1987: 77) identify two different ways of ranking impositions on H’s negative face: “a ranking of impositions in proportion to the expenditure of (a) services (including the provision of time) and (b) of goods (including non material goods like information and other face payments).”

The above variables are used to this paper to investigate request strategies from a politeness perspective.

I.1. Strategies for realizing requests

Negative politeness strategies are central to this paper because they account for the notion of imposition on H’s negative face and its effects on planning and realizing formal requests. As B&L put it,

“Negative politeness is oriented mainly toward partially satisfying (redressing) H’s negative face, his basic want to maintain claims of territory and self-determination. Negative politeness thus, is essentially avoidance-based, and realizations of negative politeness strategies consist in assurances that the speaker recognizes and respects the addressee’s negative face and will not (or will not minimally) interfere with the addressee’s freedom of action. Hence negative politeness is characterized by self-effacement, formality and restraint with attention to very restricted aspects of H’s self-image, centering on his want to be unimpeded.” (1987: 70).

To realize negative politeness, S may opt for one of the following higher order strategies.

I.1. Higher order strategies

1- Be direct

Here S’s desire to be direct and straightforward clashes with his desire to pay attention to H’s negative face wants. The tension can be solved by conventionally indirect speech acts.

1a. Be conventionally direct

S does not pay attention to H’s negative wants. An appropriate example would be the orders a highly ranked officer gives to a soldier.

3 - R refers to “Ranking of imposition”
1b. Be conventionally indirect
The use of conventional speech acts softens the threat to negative face. Conventional indirectness is linguistically realized as follows, e.g. “I would like you to do x”, “Can you do x?”

2. Don’t presume/assume
To redress H’s negative face, S avoids assuming that H is willing or is ready to do the requested act.
2a. Question
All the interrogative forms used to encode conventional indirect requests (see 1b, above) perform the function of indicating that S assumes that H is not disposed or willing to the act requested of him.
2b. Hedge
This includes speech acts that contain tags, hedges like “perhaps”, “sort of” “roughly”, adverbial clauses “if clauses”, or other expressions like “to tell you the truth….”, “This may not be the right moment, but…”

3. Don’t coerce H
Here S gives H options not to respond positively to his act. He does not coerce H by minimizing the threat inherent in the request.
3a. Be pessimistic
Pessimism can be encoded in “indirect requests with assertions of felicity conditions which have a negated possibility Operator.” (B&L, 1987: 173), e.g. You couldn’t possibly lend me the money. Pessimism can also be encoded in the following subjunctive auxiliaries: could (you), would (you), or might (you). The use of the subjunctive allows S to indicate that “it is not assumed that the hypothetical world is close to this one (the real world), and this partially satisfies the injunction be pessimistic.” (B&L, 1987: 173).
3b. Minimize the imposition
Minimizing the threat or the imposition can be realized through euphemisms, i.e. the substitution of one word for another to be indirect, e.g. (borrow instead of take). It can also be encoded in such actives as ‘little’, ‘tiny’, or ‘just’.
3c. Give deference
This strategy can be realized in address terms such as ‘Sir’, ‘Madam’, which encode social distance (D) or high status (P). B&L stress that address terms “soften FTAS by indicating the absence of risk to the addressee.” (1987: 182).

4. Communicate S’s wants not to impinge of H
This strategy for redressing H’s negative face consists in conveying awareness of H’s negative face wants by indicating that S does not want to bother H. It can have the following realizations.
4a. Apologize
This can have the form of admitting the impingement, indicating reluctance, giving overwhelming reasons, and begging forgiveness.
4b. Dissociate S, H from the particular infringement
This can be realized by the avoidance of the pronouns “I” and “you”.

5. Redress other wants of H’s derivative from negative face
This strategy consists in compensating for the threat intrinsic in the face-threatening act (FTA) by paying attention to H’s desire to be respected or considered superior.

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4 - FTAS stands for face threatening acts.
5a. Go on record as incurring debt
S may express explicitly his indebtedness to H; e.g. “I’d be eternally grateful to you…”

II. Limitations of B&L’s model

B&L (1987) acknowledge certain limitations of their model. Abdesslem (2001: 121) states that the model is not geared towards studying discourse as an on-going process and that people’s “assessment of their proper face-value differ and their mood may affect their face evaluation.” Meier (1997: 22-23) has identified four problems in B&L’s model. First, it is not certain that formal features have an equivalent value across languages. Second, face wants can differ across cultures as well as the way to address these wants. Third, it is difficult to establish an objective measure to directness or to maintain that is universally least polite. Fourth, the model does not offer much guidance for researchers interested in cross-cultural studies.

The present study does not overlook the criticism leveled at B&L’s model. It uses the model as a tool to discuss Saudi students’ production of requests. It tries to see how requests affect what B&L call negative face. The variables of Distance, Power and Imposition are implemented to reveal their effect on the production of requests.

III. Data Analysis and results

III.1 Background

The data consists of a discourse completion test. This instrument imposes a tight control on the informants’ responses. It consists of a written questionnaire with several items. Each item represents a brief dialogue with an empty slot. The informants are asked to fill in a response, which they think is appropriate to the given context. The unit of analysis in the discourse completion test is the utterance or speech act/acts.

Ten (10) out of eleven (11) situations were taken, with little adjustment, from (Blum-Kulka, 1982). The number of participants is 20 level four (second year) male university students, majoring in English language and translation. The total number is 35, but 20 volunteered to take the test. The test was administered in the second week of May, 2003. The choice of this level is quite interesting because starting from level five students will be taking courses in linguistics and translation. There is a tacit assumption that students do not need any language courses such as speaking, listening, reading, writing, or grammar. Throughout their four terms, students were taught by non-native speakers of English and their exposure to the language is almost entirely limited to the classroom context.

The discourse completion test contains eleven situations. The situations are divided into three categories; each category highlights one of the three sociological variables, namely distance (D), power (P) and ranking of imposition (I). Within each category, each situation has a degree of imposition that differs from the others.
II.2. Data analysis and results

Data analysis and results are presented in three sections that are basically those of the discourse completion test. Each section describes the main strategies the participants adopted in realizing requests and the linguistic forms they used to encode them.

III.2.1. Distance

High social distance increases the weight of imposition whereas low social distance reduces it.

**Situation 1 - At the restaurant**

Dan: What would you like to eat?
Ruth: I don’t know. Is there a menu?
Dan (to the waiter): ………………………………………………………..

In this situation the social distance is high because the addressee is a stranger and the addressee is a customer who asks a waiter to bring the menu. The request is simple, predicated and expected. It hardly interferes with the addressee’s freedom of action: the imposition inherent in the request is minimal.

The participants opted for two major strategies to encode their requests: direct requests and conventionally indirect requests.

Four (4) out of twenty (20) students opted for direct mitigated strategies (e.g. Give us the menu, please). The choice of a direct strategy may indicate that the learners do not consider asking for a menu a serious imposition on the addressee’s negative face. Because of the effect of high social distance, students’ requests were mitigated by negative politeness markers, e.g. “please” “excuse me”.

Sixteen (16) participants opted for conventional indirect strategies. This involved the use of questions (2a, above), hedges i.e. interrogative form (2.b), and be pessimistic (3b, above) through the auxiliaries “could” and “would”. To minimize the imposition further, two participants avoided using the hearer-oriented perspective which contains or implies the pronoun “you”, (e.g. could we have the menu, please?). These indirect ways of making requests indicate that speakers are conscious of possibly offending their hearers. The use of “Would you…?” may not be very appropriate and may have rude connotations for native speakers (Ben Ayed, 1996). Two (2) informants used the auxiliary “do” and the copula “be” in “Do you have the menu?” and “Is there a menu?” Such requests are indirect, but their conventionality may not be always straightforward. The context of situation makes such acts requests and not questions.

**Situation 2: In the car**

Diane: We’re going to miss the train. Let’s ask someone how to get to the station.
Robert: I hate asking people in the street. Go on, you ask.
Diane: O.K. I will. ………………………………………………………..

The informant has to ask a stranger the direction. This represents a simple request for information, which hardly interferes with the addressee’s freedom of action, for the imposition inherent in the request is minimal. The social distance is high because the addressee is a stranger. Eleven (11) out of the twenty (20) participants did not understand what was required from them and failed to produce requests. They might have understood
“will” to indicate the future, but not the immediate future, i.e. now. Two (2) of the nine (9) requests were direct and made unmitigated explicit demands. Seven requests were conventionally indirect and had gambits. The gambits were apologise (beg forgiveness), give deference, and sentence initial ‘please’. It is worth mentioning at this point that although the gender of the addressee was not specified, informants used only a masculine form of address, (e.g. Excuse me sir, can you tell me how to get to the station?).

**Situation 3: In a shop**

Customer: How much is that dress?
Shop assistant: $50.
Customer: That’s expensive. ……………………………………………
Shop assistant: Sorry Sir, all the prices are fixed.

In this situation, the social distance is high and the imposition is relatively more serious than the other two situations because the request involves asking a shop assistant for a discount. All participants opted for indirect strategies. This may indicate their awareness of the relatively serious imposition inherent in the requested act.

To minimize the imposition eleven (11) informants were conventionally indirect and their responses came in the interrogative form and encoded the strategy question, hedge, and contained the subjunctive auxiliaries ‘could’ and ‘would’ which fall within the strategy: Be pessimistic. Eight (8) of the eleven participants used hearer-oriented perspective, i.e. the second person pronoun ‘you’ that refers explicitly to the addressee as the performer of the requested act, (e.g. ‘can you make a discount?’). Three (3) of the eleven participants used speaker-oriented forms, i.e. the first person pronoun ‘I’, that functioned as requests for permission (e.g. can I get it with $ 40?”). Nine (9) of the twenty participants opted for the use of non-conventional indirect forms. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984: 201) refer to these strategies as “the open-ended group that realizes the request by either partial reference to object or by reliance on contextual clues.” This consists of utterances as “this is an expensive one”, ‘I have bought a similar one with $ 30”. These requests can also function as adjuncts, which strengthen head acts, “Could you make a discount? This is an expensive dress.”

**Situation 4: At the student union**

Dan: Ron, I found a great apartment. I have to pay the landlady $50 deposit by tomorrow.
Ron: And you haven’t got it?
Dan: No, I’ll get my scholarship only next week.
…………………………………………………………………………
Ron: I’m awfully sorry. I am waiting for my dad to send me some money.

Although the distance is low in this situation, the imposition is high. The imposition on the addressee’s negative face is very serious because it represents an infringement on H’s material goods; money is not a ‘free’ good. However, the low distance between the participants can reduce the weight of imposition because asking one’s close friend for money is usually perceived as a having less imposition than asking a stranger for money. There were types of major strategies: be conventionally indirect, be non-conventionally indirect, and minimize the threat.

Thirteen (13) participants out of twenty (20) were conventionally indirect. They used interrogative forms such as ‘can you’ and ‘will you’ and encoded the strategy question
hedge. They also used the subjunctive auxiliaries ‘could’ and ‘would’, which involve the strategy of ‘be pessimistic’. In addition, learners used declarative request forms that express the speaker’s desire /need to borrow money, e.g. “I am thinking you could lend me the money”.

Six (6) out of twenty (20) informants were conventionally indirect, (e.g. “I’m out of money right now”; “I don’t have any money”. These utterances imply the act of requesting.

To soften the threat to negative face and minimize the imposition, twelve (12) learners used the euphemism for the verb ‘give’, i.e. ‘lend’ and ‘borrow’, and seven (7) used the quantity modifiers ‘some’ and ‘little amount’.

**Situation 5: In a student apartment**

John: Look at the mess in this kitchen, Larry.
Some friends are coming for dinner tonight and I’ll have to start cooking soon.

Larry: Ok, not to worry. I’ll have a go at it right away.

In this situation, the interactants are familiar equals. They are roommates and one of them asks the other to clear up the mess in the kitchen. The distance is low and the imposition inherent in the request is minimal.

Three (3) informants out twenty (20) failed to realize the requests and the rest opted for: be conventionally indirect, be non-conventionally indirect and be direct.

Eleven (11) participants out of seventeen (17) were conventionally indirect. There was the use of ability questions ‘can you do x’ and the subjunctive auxiliaries ‘could’ and ‘would’ which convey the strategy ‘be pessimistic about H’s response’ that reduces negative face damage. There was the adoption of hearer-oriented perspective (e.g. ‘would you clean it, please.’), speaker-oriented perspective (e.g. ‘what can I do?’), and speaker and hearer perspective (e.g. ‘can we clean it before we arrive?’). Eight (8) students used the first perspective, two (2) used the second perspective, and one (1) used the third perspective.

Five (5) out of the seventeen (17) informants were non-conventionally indirect and used two types of strategies; strong hints (e.g. ‘I need your help before they arrive’) and mild hints (e.g. ‘what am I going to do?’). One informant used ‘can you cut your hair’, which is rather inappropriate in English, but its literal equivalent in Arabic would be very appropriate.

**Situation 6: In the living room**

Peter: Mum, where’s the hair brush?
Mother: In the bathroom. Peter, your hair is down to your knees.

Peter: I don’t want a haircut.

In this situation, we have a mother tells her son to have his hair cut. Because of the close relationship between the two interactants and because of the minimal imposition, most participants opted for the use of direct and conventionally indirect requests. In fact, twelve (12) participants out of twenty (20) used obligation statements, (e.g. ‘you should cut your hair”). Five (5) other participants used ‘why not’ questions (‘why don’t you cut your hair?’). One informant used ‘can you cut your hair’, which is rather inappropriate in English, but its literal equivalent in Arabic would be very appropriate.
III.2.2. Power

Power relationship between interactants affects their language.

**Situation 7 at a teachers’ meeting**

Teacher: And when is the next meeting?
Principal: Next Wednesday. We will have to notify those who aren’t here.
Richard: O.K. I’ll do it.

In this situation, a school principal, who has a higher status than the other participants, requests information about the hearer’s willingness and readiness to inform the rest of the teachers about the next meeting date. Fifteen (15) out of twenty (20) participants failed to produce an appropriate request. Some did not seem to realize that the Principal addressed Richard in the third line of the dialogue. Three (3) participants opted for the use of the imperative form or mitigated requests (‘please notify the rest’) and two (2) were conventionally indirect (‘could you notify the others’). The responses are quite appropriate.

**Situation 8: In the professor’s office**

Student: I’m writing a paper in sociolinguistics. I need Hudson’s book.

Professor: But please remember to bring it back as soon as you finish.

A student has to ask a teacher to lend him his book. The imposition inherent in this situation is relatively high because the request impinges on the addressee’s negative face. To minimize the imposition involved in this act, eighteen (18) participants out of twenty (20) opted for the use of indirect strategies: give deference, euphemism, and sentence-final ‘please’. Two (2) participants were direct and used declarative statements (‘I want to take this book’), which seem rather inappropriate here.

In order not to sound coercive, the eighteen (18) students assumed that H is not likely to do the action. They used the question, hedge strategy (‘can you lend me the book?’) and be pessimistic strategy through (‘could’ and ‘would’). Eleven (11) out of the eighteen informants opted for the use of hearer-oriented perspective which includes reference to the requestee and the action to be performed, (e.g. ‘could you lend me the book, please’). Nine (9) students used speaker-oriented perspective (can I borrow your book?). Speaker-oriented forms are slightly less direct and more tactful than hearer-oriented forms. They encode the strategy impersonalise H because they distance the addressee from the request by avoiding reference to him as the performer of the action.

Eighteen (18) out of the twenty informants opted for the use of verbs that avoid permanence. They opted for the use of the verb ‘lend’ and ‘borrow’, which indicate temporariness. The two other informants used ‘take’ which implies a permanence that is inappropriate in contexts where the speaker intends to borrow something. Seven (7) students confused ‘borrow’ with ‘lend’, (‘would you borrow me your book, please’).

Four (4) students used the address terms ‘sir’, ‘professor’, which encode high social distance and high status. Seven (7) opted for the use of ‘please’ which is used as a mitigated expression in order to soften the speaker’s impingement on the hearer’s claim to freedom of action and freedom from imposition.
Situation 9: In the street

Police officer: Excuse me, is that your car there?
Man: Oh, oh yes.
Police officer: ……………………………………………………
Man: So sorry. I’ll move it at once.

A policeman asks a driver to move his car. This situation is believed to be governed by specific culture-bound social norms (Blum-Kulka, 1984: 45). The distribution of learners’ responses shows that learners are divided between making explicit, direct demand and making implicit, indirect requests or hints.

Seven (7) out of twenty (20) respondents opted for the use of imperatives and obligation statements (e.g. ‘you have to move your car.’). Eight (8) were conventionally indirect (e.g. ‘could you’, ‘would you’, ‘can you’, ‘will you’). The rest of the learners, five (5), opted for the use of strong hints (e.g. ‘you are stopping the traffic’ or ‘this is not a car park’).

III.2.3. Ranking of impositions

The ranking of imposition (R) relates the situational and cultural assessment of the degree of imposition inherent in a particular act. In requests R is assessed in terms of the extent to which the requested act interferes with the speaker’s negative face, i.e. his time and freedom of action.

Situation 10: At the office
Stephen: Dan, I don’t know what to do.
Dan: Do what?
Stephen: I have to write a short report for our new boss, but my computer is out of order.
………………………………………………………………
Dan: Yes, sure.

In this situation, S and H are ‘similar’ in social terms, the relative power of S and H is small and the imposition is not great. The imposition is small because there is a request of a ‘free good’. Thus, this request is predictable and reasonable since both Stephen and Dan are employees in the same company and they can share the company’s goods to get things done.

Eighteen (18) out of twenty (20) participants opted for the use of conventional indirect requests (‘can I use your computer?’) or (‘would you *borrow me your computer?’). Sixteen (16) out of the eighteen (18) used the speaker-oriented perspective and two (2) used the hearer-oriented perspective.

One (1) learner out of the twenty (20) participants opted for the use of a declarative unmitigated request (‘I want to your computer’) and another one (1) used a ‘why don’t’ question, which may be closer to a suggestion.

Situation 11: At the office
Stephen: Dan, I have to get my car repaired. I need $500 to pay the mechanic.
Dan: Don’t tell me you’re short of cash again?
Stephen: ………………………………………………………………………………………………
Dan: Ok. But, please make sure you pay me back as soon you get your salary.

In this situation, power and distance are similar to the previous situation. The imposition (R) is great and learners may choose many strategies to minimize the imposition (apologize, indicate reluctance, give overwhelming reasons, beg forgiveness, use expressions like ‘just’, ‘little’, or ‘tiny’).

Ten (10) learners out of twenty (20) failed to realize requests and answered either with ‘I am afraid yes’ or ‘unfortunately, yes.’ Their failure is due to both linguistic and sociolinguistic competence limitation. Six (6) learners opted for the use of conventional indirect requests (‘could you help...?’ or ‘can you lend…?’) and used gambits that express apology (‘I am afraid’). Four informants (4) out of twenty (20) opted for the use of non-conventional indirect requests, which consist of hints ‘I’m sorry, but I need help’ or ‘I am at trouble’. Minimizing the imposition in this situation is mainly achieved through the use of indirect forms, the use of expressions like ‘I’m afraid’, ‘I’m sorry + the use of substitutes (euphemisms) for the verb ‘give’.

IV- Discussion

Scrutiny of the learners’ responses reveals that students are widely concerned with politeness and seem to care for the hearer’s negative face. In situation six (6), however, the informants who took the role of the mother who asks her son to have his haircut chose to be direct. This is quite in order, and it may be a universal phenomenon, parents pay little attention to their children’s negative face.

The tendency to be indirect may be due to two major factors: The first factor consists of the transfer of social norms from the learners’ first language and culture. Blum-Kulka (1982: 31) suggests that indirectness is a social phenomenon and the "ethos" of one society influences the application of the principles of indirectness. In their native language Saudi learners tend to use mitigated expressions and indirect strategies to minimize the imposition and soften the threat inherent in requests. Although the Arabic expressions are not transferred, the indirectness is observed, and in most cases, in appropriate and grammatical English.

The second factor that may explain learners’ tendency for indirectness involves the effect of the target language norms. Learners have learnt, through education, socio-cultural knowledge, and knowledge of the world, that indirectness and mitigated expressions are frequently used by native speakers of English, especially when realizing requests.

Indirect strategies either conventional (e.g. questions, hedges) or non-conventional (e.g. hints, association clues) are the strategies frequently adopted to minimize the imposition and to recognize the hearer’s negative face wants. To minimize the degree of imposition and to redress H’s negative face, Saudi learners tend to use speaker–oriented forms, (e.g. can I use your computer?) and speaker-oriented forms (e.g. can we/I clean it?). Both of these forms include the strategy impersonalise H. Learners distance the addressee from the request by avoiding reference to him as the performer of the requested act. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984: 203) stress that “Given the fact that in requests it is the hearer who is under
threat, any avoidance in naming the addressee as the principal performer of the act serves to soften the impact of the imposition.” The effect of the high degree of imposition involved in situations 4 and 11, (in both situations the imposition is high because it involves asking the addressee for money), was reflected in the use of indirect strategies, the use of gambits that express apology (e.g. I’m sorry), the use of under-staters (e.g. little, some only), and the use of euphemism to convey temporariness and avoid permanence.

Some learners seemed to be unaware of the grammatical constraints on the verb to borrow and formulated requests such as “would you *borrow me your book?” instead of “would you lend me your book”. Swan (1980) remarks that confusing ‘lend’ and ‘borrow’ is a typical error among second language learners of English. The confusion among Saudi learners and Arab learners in general may be explained in terms of first language interference where the semantic difference between lend and borrow is not marked lexically in two different verbs, but morphologically: /asallaf/ (I lend) and /atsalaf/ (I borrow).

To admit the impingement on the addressee (see situation 11), learners used “I am sorry,” “I am afraid”, and ellipted, as it were, the head act, or accompanied those gambits with the head act of requesting. When used on their own, gambits cannot stand for requests in English, but in Arabic they can and they reveal a great care in not dealing a strong blow to H’s negative face. They are more of the going off-record type. When preceding or following the head act of requesting, gambits may not sound very appropriate in English. According to Edmondson and House (1981), the formula ‘sorry’ is used to apologize for harm caused to H and it is used as a common response whereby the speaker seeks to make amends for his offence. In both Modern Standard Arabic and Saudi Arabic, ‘sorry’ /a:sif/ may introduce an apology or a request.

Despite the fact that students were widely concerned with politeness and seem to care for the hearer’s negative face, they did not produce linguistically elaborate strategies that reflect high imposition due to high D, P, or I. The following strategies are either missing or have an extremely low frequency: a- indicate reluctance and embarrassment to make requests (e.g. I’m terribly sorry to ask you); b- admit the impingement (e.g. I’d like to ask you a big favour); c- give overwhelming reasons (e.g. I can think of nobody who could help me); d- go on record as incurring debt (e.g. I’d be eternally grateful to you if you); e- the use of hedges like ‘you know’, ‘perhaps’.

It is often assumed that lack of elaborate strategies is due to poor linguistic means. I think it is perhaps more related to the fact that learners see themselves as performers (as in the theatre) and not real users of the language. I believe that the strategies that are missing or that have a low frequency reveal the learners’ reluctance to admit vulnerability or to express emotions that harm their own negative face. In other words, Saudi learners are concerned about their interlocutor’s negative face, but are much more concerned about their own negative face in role-play situations, let alone real situations.

The violations of social appropriateness norms while realizing requests in the target language (e.g. “Will you lend me the money?” “Are you going to give me the money”; “Isn’t there a discount?” “Can you cut your hair?”) are due to lack of linguistic means, but they may be also due to a concern about S’s negative face. In Hebrew, a Semitic language like Arabic, Blum-Kulka (1982: 34) suggested that a standard way of making indirect requests is by questioning whether there is a possibility in the future for the act to be
performed. I think in Arabic and particularly in Saudi Arabic this questioning strategy dissimulates a negative face-vulnerability on the part of the speaker. It is reflected in English.

Conclusion

This article attempted to investigate the effect of the degree of imposition on Saudi learners’ realization of requests in English in eleven situations. It also attempted to investigate whether learners are sensitive to their addressee’s negative face wants. The study relied on Brown and Levinson’s (1987) model, while being aware of the criticism leveled against it. It revealed that Saudi learners show a lot of care in not causing direct hits at their interlocutor’s negative face. It has revealed a number of pragmalinguistic failures and suggested that they might be better explained in terms of the learners’/speakers’ concern about their own negative face. Those who advocate the communicative approach and who claim that in order to overcome pragmalinguistic failures, learners should be exposed to authentic conversations which provide real examples of language use where distance, power and ranking of imposition are highlighted, seem to have a recipe that does not take into consideration how face is valued in the source language and culture⁵.  

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⁵ - These findings remain tentative.
References


