Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure From the Perspective of Politeness

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Abstract

The present paper attempts to outline the importance of familiarity of the politeness phenomenon amongst the fifth and seventh semester students of English Department, Misurata University and elaborate its influence on the socio-cultural attitudes and values in different contexts. It focuses on the teachability of pragmatic aspects of English in regard to the speech acts of requests and apologies from the perspective of politeness in the classroom in order to foster the students' awareness of the phenomenon of politeness and the appropriate strategies according to the context. It also intends to explore the types of strategies of requests and apologies which they use in their English productions and to discover whether there are any significant differences between students' requests and apologies strategies with respect to their academic levels. The participants are a total of (48) students from two different levels in the English Department. It was found out that students were not aware of the direct relation between language and the phenomenon of politeness. The results indicated that there were no significant differences between students' requests and apology strategies and their academic levels. The results also revealed the teachability of English pragmatic aspects of both requests and apologies which has led to raising the students' pragmatic ability in   producing polite requests and apologies.

Keywords: politeness, apologies, requests.

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ملخص البحث

تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى تحديد الإلمام بظاهرة التهذيب اللغوي في أوساط طلبة المستويين السادس والسابع في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، جامعة مصراتة، كما تهدف إلى توضيح تأثيرها على السلوكيات والقيم الإجتماعية والثقافية في سياقات مختلفة. وتركز الدراسة على قابلية تدريس الجوانب البراغماتية للغة الإنجليزية بالنسبة للأفعال الكلامية الخاصة بالطلب و الاعتذار من منظور التهذيب اللغوي داخل قاعة الدراسة بهدف تعزيز إدراك الطلبة لظاهرة التهذيب اللغوي والاستراتيجيات الملائمة حسب السياق. كذلك تهدف إلى تقصي نوع استراتيجيات الطلب والاعتذار التي يستخدمها الطلاب في إنتاجهم باللغة الإنجليزية، واكتشاف إذا ما كان هنالك أي فروقات كبيرة بين استراتيجيات الطلبة للطلب والاعتذار من جهة ومستواهم الأكاديمي من جهة أخرى. العدد الإجمالي للمشاركين في هذه الدراسة هو (48) طالبا من فصلين دراسيين مختلفين في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية. وقد تبين أن الطلبة لم يكونوا مدركين للعلاقة المباشرة بين اللغة وظاهرة التهذيب اللغوي. وأشارت النتائج إلى أنه لا يوجد أي فروقات كبيرة بين استراتيجيات الطلبة للطلب والاعتذار من جهة ومستواهم الأكاديمي من جهة أخرى. كما بينت النتائج قابلية تدريس الجوانب البراغماتية للغة الإنجليزية بالنسبة للأفعال الكلامية الخاصة بالطلب و الاعتذار، الأمر الذي أدى إلى إذكاء القدرة البراغماتية للطلاب في إنتاج عبارات طلب واعتذار مهذبة.

الكلمات المفتاحية : *التهذيب اللغوي، الطلب، الاعتذار.*

1. Introduction

1.1 Statement of the Problem

This study aims to identify the English Department students' pragmatic ability to produce and comprehend speech acts, especially requests and apologies. Students were noticed to be greatly influenced by their mother tongue and culture when it comes to speech acts in a way that they do not take the English culture into consideration. They tend to use expressions that are equivalent to their mother tongue and culture which can be inappropriate in the English context and could lead to pragmatic failure especially in terms of being subliminally impolite. As a particular language is associated with a particular culture, language itself cannot be fully understood without enough knowledge of the associated culture.   As Jenny Thomas argues that pragmatic failure refers to "the inability to understand what is meant by what is said" (Thomas,1983, p.22)

Therefore, this study attempts to recognize how and how often students use polite requests and apologies in English. It also attempts to teach the strategies of both polite requests and apologies explicitly in the classroom in order to foster the students' cultural awareness.

1.2 Hypotheses

Learning English in the Department of English, Misurata University is mostly based on the input which is available in the classrooms. In such an impoverished learning environment, which is considered to be the only place where students are given the chance to communicate in English, English pragmatic knowledge and sociocultural rules of the language are almost being ignored in the curriculum. Therefore the students are not likely to have much exposure to authentic input; consequently, they do not have the opportunity to learn about the English pragmatics.

Our hypothesis can be briefly stated as "pragmatic aspects of English could and should be taught to students in EFL classrooms as the teachability of such aspects is beneficial to raise the students' cultural and pragmatic awareness".

1.3 Significance of the Study

This paper deals with universal communication which occurs between different parties with distinctive linguistic, social and cultural backgrounds, communicating with one another via the only shared knowledge, that is language. Therefore, it is related to socio-pragmatics, and (EFL) to fulfill the purpose of the paper which is highlighting some major problems such as misunderstandings, subliminal impoliteness, face threatening acts which are "utterances or actions which threaten a person's publicself-image." (Yule, 1996, p. 130), etc. in an attempt to decrease the common occurrence of such problems by providing some solutions to be recommended later. One of which is raising cultural awareness and pragmatic knowledge amongst students of English Department, Misurata University.

Moreover, it tries to focus on cross-cultural pragmatic failure from the perspective of politeness so that students and future researchers can be attracted to such topics that are usually overlooked .

Since there are some foreign teachers teaching in Department of English in which the study was conducted, they can be more aware of the inter-language and cross-cultural differences in interacting with Libyan students and teachers. Moreover, teachers may integrate pragmatic aspects and the phenomenon of politeness within the subjects they teach to students in order to raise the students' cultural awareness and pragmatic knowledge .

This study can be an eye opener to students whilst communicating with their foreign teachers and others as well in terms of being polite and avoiding cross-cultural pragmatic failure as well as for those who are planning to study abroad.

It is hoped that this study will create a state of harmony where teachers and students might be excused for some misunderstandings that they may encounter in the future which may lead to a friendlier relationship between both targeted parties.

None of the research papers on socio-pragmatics which we have read has discussed the cross-cultural pragmatic failure from the perspective of politeness in the classrooms of Department of English at our university. Since this study is the first of its kind in the mentioned department, it is hoped to provide students and future researchers with a general

idea of the topic as well as the relevant basic data which will raise the students' awareness of such important topics .

The curriculum can be modified in the department to adopt a cultural-linguistic approach in foreign language teaching as well as materials for the politeness phenomenon so that students will be given the chance to learn the pragmatic aspects of English in the classroom and how to be polite and accepted by the other interlocutor, or may propose cultural-linguistic programs and workshops of pragmatic competence to raise the students' pragmatic awareness regarding politeness.

1.4 Design

As this is a classroom-based research, the experimental design was used. Two experiments were conducted in this study; the first one is requests experiment which was intended to analyze requests and refusals strategies while the second one is apology experiment which was designed to analyze apology strategies.

2. Methodology

As this is a socio-pragmatics-based research, the researchers adopted the most common method of doing this kind of research which is a Discourse Completion Task (DCT hereafter) in both experiments. Moreover another method which is responses to a scenario (see Appendix C) was used as a posttest in the experiment of requests. In addition, presentations were later delivered to the students in the classroom in order to foster their awareness about polite requests and apologies, each speech act separately. Another method is feedback elicitation in which students were asked for their feedback about the lesson.

The present data of both experiments were elicited by means of a written (DCT). The DCT of requests (see Appendix A) consists of 4 items, two of which are for eliciting the students' linguistic and pragmatic abilities of making polite requests and refusals in different contexts. On the other hand, the DCT of apologies (see Appendix B) experiment was taken from Tunçel (1999), (as cited in İstifçi, 2009), and had been adopted by the researchers for the specific use in this study. The original version of the test consisted of 14 apology situations and they had been pilot tested before the actual study. The reliability of the test was 75%. (İstifçi, 2009). The DCT in this study consists of 7 items designed to elicit students' strategies of apologies in different situations which were organized according to the severity of offence and social status of the apologizer and apologizee.

Moreover, another method: role plays, which involves "acting" situations which are useful for establishing specific contexts (Macky & Gass, 2005), was planned to be used in this research but was ultimately changed from open role plays into constitute responses to a scenario (see Appendix C). In addition, a presentation was later delivered to the students in the classroom in order to foster their awareness about polite requests and apologies. Another method is feedback elicitation in which students were gently asked for their feedback about the lesson. Lastly, naturally occurring situations were used by means of observation.

2.1 Participants and Setting

The present study examines the formulae of requests and apologies elicited from Libyan students of English Department, Faculty of Arts, Misurata University in Misurata City, Libya. The English data were collected from the students of the fifth and seventh semesters in the mentioned department. The respondents in this study were of both genders and they were a total of 48 student-respondents in this research, 19 in requests experiment and 21 in apology

2.2 Procedure

In both experiments which were conducted in different classes, the researchers had attended pragmatics lectures to get acquainted with the impression of the students in their first lecture of politeness. A week later, DCT's were distributed as a pretest and presentations about the mentioned topics were delivered. Then a posttest was given to the students in the same lecture.

In experiment (1) which explored the speech act of requests and refusals amongst the nineteen subjects, the first analysis illustrated their preferences for:

a) imperative vs. interrogative head act realization,
b) the modal verbs 'can/could',
c) request perspective (speaker-oriented/ hearer-oriented).

amongst students as to their levels.

For analysis of data concerning polite refusals, responses were analyzed according to the types of refusal expressions which could be used together with the reason of refusing.

In the analysis of the data in experiment (2) which explored the speech act of apology, responses were categorized according to Cohen and Olshtain's (1981) apology speech act set (see Appendix D) which was taken from Al-Zumor (2011). It is also based on the CCSARP (Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realisation Project) coding manual. (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989), (as cited in Al-Zumor, 2011).

3. Results and Discussion

Among the various interrogative constructions (will, would, can, could, etc.), ability questions with the modal verb 'can' constituted the most frequent request type in our data. Table 1 illustrates the preferences for ability questions between both targeted levels of students. Overall, 16 subjects formed their 'supposedly polite' requests using the modal verb 'can'. They were13 seventh semester students and 3 fifth semester students.

Table 1 *Preferences for the Modal Verbs (Can/Could) as to Level.*

Modal verb	seventh semester	fifth semester
Can I	4	_
Can you	9	3
Could I	1	1
Could you	6	5
Total	13	6

Although ability questions are regarded as one of the most polite request realizations (Ogiermann, 2009), 'can' is not the most appropriate modal verb to make polite requests. The frequent use of 'can' could possibly indicate the informal character of the situation. However, strangely enough, students' common use of 'can' is also frequent in formal situations as in (Situation 4, Appendix A), where students were asked how to ask their teacher to turn on the air conditioner in the classroom. This might be attributed to the students' lack of pragmatic knowledge in using the appropriate verb in the context as 'can' in this context might not be regarded as polite due to the high degree of formality of the situation and the social status of the hearer, who is the teacher. Therefore, it can be deduced that students do not always use the appropriate forms of making polite requests in different degrees of politeness according to the context. As Table 1 shows, interrogative constructions with a modal verb asking for ability can be formulated either in the 1st or in the 2nd person and, thus, they can represent the speaker's or the hearer's perspective. (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989), (as cited in Ogiermann, 2009). Leech (1983) states that a request can be softened "by omission of reference to the cost to h" (hearer) and suggests that "Could I borrow this electric drill?" is more polite than "Could you lend me this electric drill?" (Leech 1983), (as cited in Ogiermann, 2009).

In the second part of experiment (1), students' refusal responses were analyzed according to the refusal strategies being used as indicated in Table 2. The figures in Table 1 show that the use of "Positive Opinion", "Apology" and "Alternative" strategies before and after the lesson being taught to the students, is not quite distinctive. On the other hand, one remarkable result is illustrated in the usage of "Direct Refusal" strategy which was used by 7 students before the lesson and by only 1 student after the lesson. Moreover, "Thanking" strategy was never used before the lesson but was used twice after it which can indicate the usefulness of the lesson .

Table 2 *Types of Refusals in Pretest and Posttest .*

Refusal Strategy	Before the lesson	After the lesson
Type A: Positive Opinion	6	5
Type B: Thanking	–	2
Type C: Apology	9	10
Type D: Alternative	1	1
Type E: Direct Refusal	7	1
Total number of subjects	19	19

According to Table 1, these results support our hypothesis in that such strategies of speech acts could and should be taught in the classrooms and are beneficial to the students in that they provide them with the appropriate strategies that are used to make polite speech acts in English .

At the end of the class, the students were asked for their feedback whether they found the lesson useful or not. Amongst the 19 subjects in this experiment, only 1 student thought

that it was not useful as it had been already known by him/her. Nevertheless, all other 18 students agreed upon its usefulness.

In experiment (2) which explored the speech act of apologies, responses were categorized according to Cohen and Olshtain's (1981) apology speech act set which was taken from Al-Zumor (2011). IFIDs (Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices) is the most central strategy for apology in many languages. (Al-Zumor, 2011). The first formula in apology as a speech act set is "an expression of apology". (Olshtain & Cohen, 1983), (as cited in Al-Zumor, 2011). It consists of some sub-formulas as:

• An expression of regret, e.g., "I'm sorry."

• An offer of apology, e.g., "I apologize."

Table 3 shows that IFIDs are used by most subjects in situation (1), which is a highly formal situation, with variation in the type of strategy. In the data collected from the twenty one university students, the mostly used sub-formula is "an expression of regret" amongst other sub-formulas. Interestingly, this indicates the students' choice to offer quite a routine-like response and that they preferred this sub-formula as an apologetic response .

As table 3 indicates, the second mostly used sub-formula amongst both targeted levels is "an offer of apology" which figures in 5 responses. However the strategy "excuse me" does not occur in the data as a result of the severity of offense in this situation that "excuse me" was probably considered by the students as so weak for the purpose of apology.

Table 3 *Distribution of IFID's in Situation (1) as to* level.

Level	Sorry	Excuse	Apologize	Forgive	No Apology	Total
seventh semester	6	_	1	1	1	8
fifth semester	7	_	4	1	2	13

Strangely enough, the strategy "excuse me" appears only once in one situation where the participants promised to return a textbook to their classmate within a day or two, after photocopying a chapter but they held onto it for almost two weeks and their classmate was really upset about it as this classmate needed it to prepare for a class. The participant used "excuse me" despite the severity of offence committed by the participant in the situation. However, the social distance (degree of formality between the interlocutors) and the social dominance (the relative degree of the social power of the interlocutors over each other) are not regarded as important in this case as both interlocutors are classmates, which may reveal that that student considered social distance and dominance as more important than the severity of offence in this very situation .

Interestingly, as table 3 shows, "No Apology" was used three times by both targeted levels students in situation (1), one of which is "an explanation of account" while another response is "pretending to be offended", both without an apology being expressed!

Furthermore, as table 3 reveals, only 3 subjects out of the 21 subjects did not apologize in situation (1), which can indicate the other students' predisposition to apologize. It was also found out that there is no direct relationship between the academic level and pragmatic knowledge of the students.

At the end of the lesson, the experimenter asked for the students' feedback whether they find the lesson useful or not. All the 29 students who had attended the class agreed upon its usefulness .

Before the lessons were given to the students, they were asked if they had ever thought that they would study "politeness" in the classroom. Overall, students thought it was weird to study politeness, and far from what they actually studied in their major   .

They thought that it is not directly related to language. It can be deduced that students were not aware of the important role that the politeness phenomenon plays in defining the use of speech acts and, thus it affects communication. However, when they were asked how to express politeness, their answers included word choice, facial expressions and body language in general.

Naturally occurring situations were also used as data in this study but were not referred to in detail in this paper because of its brevity.

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

When we are communicating with people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, it is best to act with regard to their cultural values, so as to avoid misunderstandings caused by cultural or linguistic differences. Otherwise, relations are broken, feelings are hurt, offense is taken, wrong mental images and offensive stereotypes are drawn or sometimes things just seem to be a bit odd. One way of creating familiarity to others' cultural assumptions within the scope of university is teaching such aspects in the classrooms with an authentic input to which students are being exposed.

We recommend to add the the phenomenon of politeness to the curriculum to be directly taught in different subjects and levels so as to foster the students' cultural awareness and pragmatic knowledge . Thus, students may have the opportunity to observe and practice what they have learned in any situation they encounter with regard to the phenomenon of politeness as well as cross-cultural pragmatic failure which is hoped to lead to the appropriate use and understanding of the English speech acts politely. Furthermore, students will realize that politeness is directly related to language as through language we can express politeness.

Future researchers may study in detail the correlation of politeness and gender, as gender was not studied in this research, politeness and social status, and politeness from the teacher to the students. Other studies may focus on other specific speech acts with regard to politeness.

It can be pointed out that the choice of polite speech acts indicates the unrelatedness between level and pragmatic knowledge of the students. Furthermore, it can be deduced that pragmatic aspects can be taught to intermediate and upper-intermediate levels students in

order to give them the chance to have a sound command of the language from a pragmatic perspective.

5. References

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Appendices

Appendix A

A: Before the the lesson: (the lesson was a presentation about politeness):

Dear student,we apologize for taking your precious time. Would you please have a look at these questions and try to answer them؟

1. What expressions for making polite requests do you know؟

…………………………………………………………………………………………..
…………………………………………………………………………………………
…………………………………………………………………………………………
…………………………………………………………………………………………..

2. What expressions for making polite refusals of requests do you know ؟

E.g.   I'm   sorry   but   I   really   have   to   study   for   my   exam.
…………………………………………………………………………………………
…………………………………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………………………….

3. Write your own polite request to ask another student in your class to lend you their book.

…………………………………………………………………………………………

4. Write your own polite request to ask your teacher in your class to turn on the air conditioner.

…………………………………………………………………………………………

Gender .……………   :

Semester..…………… :

Do you find the lesson useful؟

……………………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………………

Any comments؟

……………………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………………
……………………………………………………………………………

Thank you very much for your time and patience.

Appendix B

Dear student, we deeply apologize for taking your precious time. Would you please have a look at these questions and give them a try?

Please note that your identity will be kept anonymous and that this activity has NO effect on your performance or grades.

Thank you in advance.

1. You completely forget a crucial meeting at the office with your boss. An hour later you call him/her to apologize. The problem is that this is the second time you've forgotten such a meeting. Your boss gets on the line and asks :

Boss: "What happened to you? Next time you'll be fired"!

You :

………….…………………………………………………………………………………………

………………………….…………………………………………………………………………

2. You forget a get-together with a friend. You call him/her to apologize. This is really the second time you've forgotten such a meeting. Your friend asks over the telephone:

Friend: "What is wrong"‽

You   :

………….…………………………………………………………………………………………

………………………….…………………………………………………………………………

3. Backing out of a parking place, you run into the side of another car. It was clearly your fault. You scratched the side door slightly. The driver gets out and comes over to you angrily.

Driver: "Can't you look where you're going? See what you've done"!

You:

………….…………………………………………………………………………………………

………………………….…………………………………………………………………………

4. You promised to return a textbook to your classmate within a day or two, after photocopying a chapter. You held onto it for almost two weeks.

Classmate: I'm really upset about the book because I needed it to prepare for last week's class.

You   :

………………………………………………………………………………………………………

……………………….……………………………………………………………………………

5. Spending an evening at a friend's apartment, you accidentally break a small vase belonging to her/him.

You   :

………….…………………………………………….………………………………………………

……………………………………………………

6. Rushing to get to class on time, you run round the corner and bump into one of your fellow students who were waiting there, almost knocking him/her down.

You   :

………….…………………………………………………………………………………………

……………………….……………………………………………………………………………

7. You have forgotten to return the book you borrowed from your teacher. On the staff corridor you come across your teacher.

You   :

………….…………………………………………………………………………………………

……………………….……………………………………………………………………………

Gender …………….   :

Semester..……………   :

Age..…………… :

Appendix C

*This activity is taken from Plan ELT worksheet and has been modified .

Appendix D

The model followed in experiment (2) is presented below:

1. Illocutionary force indicating devices (IFIDs)

    –An expression of regret, e.g. I'm sorry.

    –A request for forgiveness and accepting the apology،

    e.g., Please forgive me/please accept my apology.

2. Explanation or account: any external mitigating circumstances،

    ''objective'' reasons for the violation, e.g،.

    i. Explicit: the Traffic was terrible.

    ii. Implicit: traffic is always so heavy in the morning.

3. Taking on responsibility

    a. Explicit self-blame, e.g., It is my fault/my mistake.

    b. Lack of intent, e.g., I didn't mean it.

    c. Expression of self-deficiency.

    d. I was confused/I didn't see you/forgot.

    e. Expression of embarrassment, e.g., I feel awful about it.

    f. Self-dispraise, e.g., I'm such a dimwit!

    g. Justify hearer, e.g., You're right to be angry.

    h. Refusal to acknowledge guilt.

    –Denial of responsibility, e.g., It wasn't my fault.

    –Blame the hearer, e.g., it's your own fault.

    –Pretend to be offended, e.g. I'm the one to be offended.

4. Concern for the hearer, e.g., I hope I didn't upset you/Are you all right؟

5. Offer of repair, e.g. I'll pay for the damage.

6. Promise of Forbearance, e.g., It won't happen again.