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THE ANALYSIS OF REQUEST STATEMENTS BY EFL LEARNERS: A SOCIOPRAGMATIC POINT OF VIEW[1]

Rica İfadelerinin Yabancı Dil Olarak İngilizce Öğrenen Öğrenciler Tarafından İncelenmesi: Sosyo-Edimbilimsel Yaklaşım

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Abstract

Pragmatics is basically concerned with the social and contextual factors that affect communication. Research into the pragmatic competence of foreign language learners has shown that pragmatic competence levels of learners and native speakers are quite different. While acquiring the language, native speakers of a language acquire abstract knowledge of social and functional rules. However, communication is not easy for L2 learners. Because even though they develop a sound knowledge of language rules, they may have difficulty in dealing with people's intended meanings, assumptions, and purposes while communicating. The main aim of this study is to explore elementary and intermediate EFL learners' sociopragmatic awareness in requests and to examine whether proficiency level and gender cause any statistically significant difference. The data were gathered by a reverse discourse completion test (R-DCT) from 25 elementary and 36 intermediate level learners. R-DCT included eight statements and participants were asked to write situations in which these statements might have been uttered. Participants' responses were assessed in terms of three sociopragmatic variables: social power, social distance and imposition. The findings of the study revealed that while proficiency creates a statistically significant difference, gender does not cause a significant difference in learners' sociopragmatic awareness. Participants with intermediate level proficiency were more successful than participants with elementary level proficiency in designating the targeted sociopragmatic factors in conversational situations. Teachers should be aware that they need to spend considerable amount of time and energy to enhance pragmatic competence through which learners can create and maintain effective communication.

Keywords: *Speech acts, requests, sociopragmatic awareness.*

Özet

Edimbilim, temel olarak iletişimi etkileyen sosyal ve bağlamsal faktörlerle ilgilidir. Yabancı dil öğrenenlerin edimbilimsel yeterlilikleri üzerine yapılan araştırmalar, hedef dili yabancı dil olarak öğrenenlerle ana dili olarak konuşanların edimbilimsel yeterlilik seviyelerinin oldukça farklı olduğunu göstermiştir. Bireyler anadilini edinirken o dile ait sosyal ve işlevsel kuralların soyut bilgisini de edinir. Diğer yandan, yabancı dil öğrenenler için iletişim pek de kolay değildir. Her ne kadar, dilin kurallarıyla ilgili sağlam bir bilgiye sahip

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olsalar da, bu kişiler iletişim esnasında diğer kişilerin anlatmak istedikleri, varsayımları ve amaçlarını kavramakta zorlanabilirler. Bu çalışmanın temel amacı, İngilizce' yi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen başlangıç ve orta seviye öğrencilerin sosyo-edimbilimsel farkındalıklarını araştırmak ve cinsiyet ile dil yeterlilik seviyesinin istatistiksel olarak anlamlı bir farka sebep olup olmadığını ölçmektir. Veriler 25 başlangıç ve 36 orta seviye öğrenciden Ters Söylem Tamamlama Testi kullanılarak toplanmıştır. Ters Söylem Tamamlama Testi sekiz ifadeden oluşmaktadır. Katılımcılardan bu ifadelerin hangi durumlarda söylenmiş olabileceğini düşünüp yazmaları istenmiştir. Katılımcıların yanıtları, sosyal güç, sosyal mesafe ve yaptırım olmak üzere üç sosyo-edimbilimsel değişken açısından değerlendirilmiştir. Araştırma bulguları, dil yeterlilik seviyesinin öğrencilerin sosyo-edimbilimsel farkındalıklarında istatistiksel bir farka sebep olduğunu ancak cinsiyetin anlamlı bir etkisinin olmadığını göstermiştir. Konuşma sırasında geçen ifadelerde etkin olan sosyo-edimbilimsel faktörleri algılamada orta seviyedeki öğrenciler başlangıç seviyesindeki öğrencilere göre daha başarılı olmuştur. Öğretmenler, öğrencilerin edimbilimsel yeterliliklerinin geliştirilmesi için oldukça fazla zaman ve çaba harcamaları gerektiğinin farkına varmalıdır. Böylece öğrenciler etkili iletişim kurabilir ve bu iletişimi sürdürebilir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: *Söz eylemleri, rica ifadeleri, sosyo-edimbilimsel farkındalık.*

Introduction

In language acquisition, native speakers of a language acquire the knowledge of not only linguistic rules but also abstract knowledge of social and functional rules. However, communication is not easy for L2 learners because although they may have a sound knowledge of language rules, comprehending and producing appropriate speech acts have always been problematic for them (Kasper, 1981; Blum-Kulka, 1982; Thomas, 1983).

Pragmatics is defined as "the study of language from the point of view of users, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication" (Crystal, 1997, p. 301). With its highly complex nature, pragmatics is basically concerned with the social and contextual factors that affect communication. These factors include the physical setting, the relationship among speakers (power and distance issues), shared cultural assumptions and shared knowledge about the conversation topic in addition to the social rules.

Similarly, Yule (1996) describes pragmatic ability as the ability to deal with meaning as communicated by a speaker and interpreted by a listener and to interpret people's intended meanings, their assumptions, their purposes and goals and the kind of actions (for example, requests) that they are performing when they speak. Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) compared EFL and ESL learners and found that EFL learners consistently identified and ranked grammatical errors more seriously than pragmatic errors. On the other hand, ESL learners performed the opposite, they ranked pragmatic errors more seriously than grammatical errors.

Researchers studied a variety of speech acts such as: request, invitation, apology, refusal, greeting and complaint by learners with different proficiency and L1 background (Chai & Wang, 2013). Requests were one of those and defined as "a class of speech acts whose function is to instruct hearer to carry out an act for the benefit of speaker" (White, 1993, p.195). According to Brown and Levinson (1987) request strategies should be evaluated in accordance with the role-relations determined by three social variables:

- social distance (D) between the speaker and the hearer, i. e., the degree of familiarity between interlocutors,

- relative power (P) of the speaker with respect to the hearer, i. e., the degree to which H can impose his own plans and his own self-evaluation (face) at the expense of S's plans and self-evaluation,
- absolute rank of imposition in the particular culture (R) (p.74)

In the related literature, studies mainly focus on pragmalinguistic factors and try to understand how well learners use the linguistic resources for conveying communicative acts and interpersonal meanings. However, this study paid attention to social perceptions underlying participants' interpretation of communicative actions and investigated sociopragmatic awareness of elementary and intermediate level EFL learners in request situations.

The following research questions were addressed:

1) What is the level of elementary and intermediate level learners' sociopragmatic awareness in English evidenced in request situations?

2) Is there a significant difference between elementary and intermediate learners' sociopragmatic awareness levels?

3) Is there a significant difference between male and female learners' sociopragmatic awareness levels?

Method

In this study, there were 61 participants with the mean age of 19 chosen through convenience sampling procedure. Elementary level learners were 25 in number and consisting of 15 female and 10 male students. Intermediate group was 36 in total and consisting of 17 female and 19 male learners. All learners were studying English in English preparation department of a state university for their English-medium degree programs and were assigned to those levels as a result of institutional placement test.

Most of the studies in the related literature used discourse completion task/test (DCT) or discourse completion questionnaire (DCQ). The DCTs include different situations and ask the learners to provide utterances which could be appropriate for the given context. However, the data of this study were collected through a reverse discourse completion test (R-DCT) which was originally used by Kanık (2012). Unlike the discourse completion tests, in R-DCT participants are provided with the utterances and asked to define the setting, the speaker and the hearer and to write a situation and in which the given utterance would be appropriate. 4 more items were added to the original 4-item-test by the researchers. Therefore, the test included eight request statements in English that were created with a careful analysis of three sociopragmatic variables of relative power of speaker to hearer, distance between speaker and hearer and the absolute ranking of imposition. The statements in the test were examined in relation to sociopragmatic variables by three native-speakers of English who were instructors at the university where the study was conducted and revised according to the feedback received from them.

The responses to R-DCT were analysed with an assessment rubric. Examining the role relationships and the relevance of the situations with the utterances, the situations were scored as satisfactory or unsatisfactory. A satisfactory answer which matched with the pre-defined variables and was relevant to the utterance in terms of the speaker, the hearer and the settings received "1" point. If participants wrote inappropriate situations or defined the social roles incorrectly, they received "0" point. When participants did not

write any situation or information about the speaker, hearer and setting, these cases were coded as not applicable (N/A) and given "0" point. A participant who fully and correctly responded to the demands in all situations received 8 points in total. For reliability, another colleague of the researcher, who is an English language teacher and a graduate student in an ELT Department in a state university in Turkey, evaluated the data. At first, the results of the two raters matched 90%. The discrepancies were revised so that the results could match %100.

The data were analysed through descriptive statistics to find out frequencies of satisfactory and unsatisfactory responses for each situation. Independent-sample t-tests were carried out in order to see if there were significant differences between two proficiency levels of learners and between male and female learners' sociopragmatic awareness.

Results

The first research question of the study is: *What is the level of elementary and intermediate level learners' sociopragmatic awareness in English evidenced in request situations?* This research question was answered through descriptive statistics. As shown in Table 1, elementary learners' mean score is 4.44 (SD=1.80); the intermediate learners' mean score is 6.13 (SD=1.12).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Participants' Scores for Statements in R-DCT

Proficiency level		St.1	St.2	St.3	St.4	St. 5	St. 6	St.7	St. 8	Total
Elementary N=25	**Mean**	.64	.80	.32	.60	.64	.52	.44	.48	4.44
	SD	.48	.40	.47	.50	.48	.50	.50	.50	1.80
Intermediate N=36	**Mean**	.77	1.0	.63	.83	.83	.55	.72	.77	6.13
	SD	.42	.00	.48	.37	.37	.50	.45	.42	1.12

St = statement

As can be seen in Table 2 and 3, when the mean scores for each situation were analysed elementary learners had the highest score in situation 2 (80%), and the lowest score in situation 3 (36%). Similarly, intermediate learners had the highest score in situation 2 (100%), they all defined the role relationships appropriately for this situation and they had the lowest score in situation 3 and 6 (63% and 55% respectively).

Table 2. Frequency and Percentage of Satisfactory Answers (Elementary Learners)

Elementary Learners	Power (f) %	Distance (f) %	Imposition (f) %	Satisfactory Answers
Statement 1	(22) 88%	(17) 68%	(22) 88%	(17) 68%
Statement 2	(24) 96%	(22) 88%	(24) 96%	**(20) 80%**
Statement 3	(9) 36%	(9) 36%	(9) 36%	**(9) 36%**
Statement 4	(17) 68%	(21) 84%	(23) 92%	(16) 64%

Statement 5	(17) 68%	(18) 72%	(18) 72%	(17) 68%
Statement 6	(21) 84%	(12) 48%	(12) 48%	(12) 48%
Statement 7	(17) 68%	(12) 48%	(12) 48%	(26) 72%
Statement 8	(11) 44%	(18) 72%	(11) 44%	(11) 44%

Table 3. Frequency and Percentage of Satisfactory Answers (Intermediate Learners)

Intermediate Learners	Power (f) %	Distance (f) %	Imposition (f) %	Satisfactory Answers
Statement 1	(29) 80%	(29) 80%	(30) 83%	(28) 77%
Statement 2	(36) 100%	(36) 100%	(36) 100%	(36) 100%
Statement 3	(24) 66%	(27) 75%	(36) 72%	**(23) 63%**
Statement 4	(30) 83%	(36) 100%	(36) 100%	(30) 83%
Statement 5	(30) 83%	(33) 91%	(33) 91%	(30) 83%
Statement 6	(34) 94%	(20) 55%	(21) 58%	**(20) 55%**
Statement 7	(30) 83%	(26) 72%	(26) 72%	(26) 72%
Statement 8	(28) 77%	(33) 91%	(28) 77%	(28) 77%

Statement 3 had the lowest score for power variable in both elementary and intermediate learners' responses. When the responses were analysed, there were various scenarios most of which were unsatisfactory (See Table 4 and 5). Both groups could not recognize the low degree of the speaker, although the speaker used very formal and polite language *(Sir/Madam, I deeply apologize…).*

Table 4. Role Relationships for Statement 3- Elementary Learners

Sir / Madam, I deeply apologize. The technical team needs to work here immediately. Could we move you to another table?

Setting	Speaker	Hearer	f (%)	S/U	Power	Distance	Imposition
Restaurant	Waiter	Customer	9 (36%)	S	-	+	+
Office	Colleague	Colleague	4 (16%)	U	=	-	-
Office	Engineer	Employee	2 (8%)	U	=	-	-
Hospital	Worker	Secretary	1 (4%)	U	=	-	-
N/A			9 (36 %)	U			

Notes: S= Satisfactory; U= Unsatisfactory; (+)= high; (=)=neutral; (-)= low; N/A= Not available

An unsatisfactory response from elementary learners for statement 3 is as follows: "*This situation happens at a hospital. The worker wants the secretary to change her table*" (Participant #21, Elementary, Female). The role relationship in this example does not match with the targeted factors in the assessment rubric. Both the secretary and the worker are employees in the hospital and have equal power degrees as the speaker and the hearer. Also, at a workplace asking an employee to move to another table for some technical repair does not have a high rank of imposition. Therefore, the participant did not get any point for her scenario.

Table 5. Role Relationships for Statement 3-Intermediate Learners

Sir / Madam, I deeply apologize. The technical team needs to work here immediately. Could we move you to another table?							
Setting	**Speaker**	**Hearer**	**f (%)**	**S/U**	**Power**	**Distance**	**Imposition**
Restaurant	Waiter	Customer	21 (58%)	S	-	+	+
Airport	Security Guard	Passenger	1 (2.8%)	S	-	+	+
Internet Cafe	Employee	Customer	1 (2.8%)	S	-	+	+
Hospital	Doctor	Patient	2 (5.5%)	U	=	+	+
Office	Worker	Worker	2 (5.5%)	U	=	-	-
Company	Boss	Worker	1 (2.8%)	U	+	-	-
Library	Tech. Team	Student	1 (2.8%)	U	=	+	-
Cafe	A man	A woman	1 (2.8%)	U	=	+	+
		N/A	6 (17%)	U			

Notes: S=Satisfactory; U=Unsatisfactory; (+)= high; (=)=neutral; (-)=low; N/A= Not available

An unsatisfactory response from intermediate learners for statement 3 is as follows: "*There is a technical problem in the office. A technical team member needs to work on the table where an office worker is using*" (Participant #27, Intermediate, Female). This response has the same problems as the previous sample in the elementary group data. As both the speaker and the hearer are workers in the same office or company, their power relationship is neutral; their distance is low as they probably know each other. This is not a high imposition request in an office context. For these reasons, this sample does not match with the targeted sociopragmatic factors in the assessment rubric.

Table 6 and Table 7 summarize how elementary and intermediate learners designated role relations in statement 6 which seemed another most problematic statement for both levels.

One unsatisfactory sample from elementary learners for statement 6 is as follows: "*A child is watching movie but he can't hear well and he wants to speak quieter from his friends*" (Participant #12, Elementary, Female). In this response, the problem is the distance between the speaker and the hearer as they are friends the distance is low unlike the targeted distance which is high. The structure in the statement 6 is highly formal and polite which is not commonly used in social situations between friends.

Table 6. Role Relationships for Statement 6-Elementary Learners

Setting	Speaker	Hearer	f	(%)	S/U	Power	Distance	Imposition
I can't hear the movie. Could you speak a little quieter?								
Cinema	Viewer Family	Other Viewer(s) Family	12	(48%)	S	=	+	+
Home	Member	Member	5	(20%)	U	=	-	-
Cinema	Friend	Friend	2	(8%)	U	=	-	-
Home	Friend	Friend	2	(8%)	U	=	-	-
School	Teacher	Student	1	(4%)	U	+	-	-
		N/A	3	(12%)	U			

Notes: S= Satisfactory; U= Unsatisfactory; (+)= high; (=)=neutral; (-)= low; N/A= Not available

Table 7. Role Relationships for Statement 6-Intermediate Learners

Setting	Speaker	Hearer	f	(%)	S/U	Power	Distance	Imposition
I can't hear the movie. Could you speak a little quieter?								
Cinema	Viewer	Other Viewer(s)	19	(52.7%)	S	=	+	+
On the bus	Passenger Family	Another Passenger Family	1	(2.8%)	S	=	+	+
Home	Member	Member	9	(25%)	U	=	-	-
Home	Friend	Friend	5	(13.9%)	U	=	-	-
Classroom	Student	Teacher	1	(2.8%)	U	-	-	+
		N/A	1	(2.8%)	U			

Notes: S= Satisfactory; U= Unsatisfactory; (+)= high; (=)=neutral; (-)= low; N/A= Not available

The second research question of the present study is: *Is there a significant difference between elementary and intermediate learners' sociopragmatic awareness?* As can be seen in Table 8, intermediate level learners' sociopragmatic awareness was significantly higher than elementary level learners (t= - 4.52; p<.05).

Table 8. Independent Samples T-Test Results of Participants' Scores by Proficiency Variable

	Group	N	M	Sd	t	p
Proficiency Level	Elementary	25	4.44	1.80	-4.52	.007
	Intermediate	36	6.13	1.12		

(p<.05)

The third question in this study is: *Is there a significant difference between male and female learners' sociopragmatic awareness levels?* The result showed that there was not a significant difference between male and female participants' sociopragmatic awareness (t=1.488; p**>**.05).

Conclusion

The results were promising on the part of both elementary and intermediate level learners. The elementary learners could define the role relationships in the statements to a certain extent successfully although they had grammatical mistakes in their responses. This showed that as young adult EFL learners, they were, to a certain extent, aware of the social factors such as power, distance and imposition.

Intermediate participants had much better results than elementary participants as they designated roles suitably in most situations. The reason could be that the elementary level learners lack sociopragmatic and linguistic resources which would allow them to analyse situations. It appeared that learners with an increased proficiency level were more liable to sociopragmatic transfer since they had more linguistic resources for transfer. The results of the present study were in line with the findings of Otçu and Zeyrek (2008) who examined Turkish learners of English. They found out that proficiency level was crucial in the acquisition of request strategies in EFL context and concluded that as proficiency level increases, learners tended to be more creative and expressive.

Since English was a foreign language (not a second language) for the participants, they had limited exposure to real life situations and it might take considerable time for Turkish learners to analyse social variables as it was evidenced in the present study in s*tatement 3,* both groups could not recognize the low degree of the speaker *(power).* Similarly, Hergüner (2009) studied pragmatic awareness of Turkish ELT teacher trainees in refusals and Akıncı and Akkurt (2007) studied the pragmatic awareness of Turkish EFL learners in complaints, they identified difficulties and the need to raise the pragmatic awareness of Turkish EFL learners.

Regarding practical implications for the practitioners, to make students be able to perform different speech acts in English in different situations, c*ontextualized activities* should be designed to get students engaged in (Pham, 2012). Among those, r*oleplay, simulation,* and *drama* activities not only provide students with practice in social roles and speech events, but also opportunities to be engaged in the wide range of pragmatic and sociolinguistic abilities (Crookall & Oxford, 1990; Olshtain & Cohen, 1991).

Language users cannot reach competency in expressiveness without pragmatic adequacy. The syllabus must cover *sociopragmatics features* which constitute a pragmatic perspective (Akıncı & Akkurt, 2007). Teachers can assign students 'observation tasks' inside or outside of the classroom so that they could focus on sociopragmatic or pragmalinguistic features (Kasper, 1997). Students can observe particular pragmatic features in various sources of oral or written 'data' including native speaker 'classroom guests', 'videos of authentic interaction', 'feature films' and other fictional and nonfictional written and audio-visual materials (Bardovi-Harlig et. al.,1991; Rose, 1997).

This small-scale study revealed results only for sociopragmatic awareness. Therefore, the results do not mean that the learners can use appropriate language in request situations. It is most likely that these learners will be less successful when they are required to produce the language. For future studies, it is strongly suggested that the learners' sociopragmatic awareness should be compared with their pragmalinguistic ability evidenced in production tasks.

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APPENDIX 1 - Statements of R-DCT

Statement 1: I know that you came from another city but to clarify my decision about you I need to see you again next week.

Statement 2: There is an inspection tomorrow. Could you work overtime today for cleaning?

Statement 3: Sir / Madam, I deeply apologize. The technical team needs to work here immediately. Could we move you to another table?

Statement 4: I know that today is the last day for project submission, but I could not finish it. Could you excuse me two more days?

Statement 5: Excuse me, Madam! Mobiles are not allowed on board. Could you please turn it off?

Statement 6: I can't hear the movie. Could you speak a little quieter?

Statement 7: The battery of my mobile phone is dead. Can I use your phone? I can pay for it.

Statement 8: I want to meet a friend for lunch. Is it possible for me to leave a little earlier today?

APPENDIX 2 - Assessment Rubric (adapted from Kanık, 2012)

Assessment Rubric							
Student Number:_____			Total score: _____				
	Targeted sociopragmatic factors			Sociopragmatic factors in student-created situations			
	P	*D*	*I*	*P*	*D*	*I*	*Relevance*	*Score:*
Statement 1	+	+	+				Yes / No	
Statement 2	+	-	+				Yes / No	
Statement 3	-	+	+				Yes / No	
Statement 4	-	-	+				Yes / No	
Statement 5	=	+	+				Yes / No	
Statement 6	=	+	+				Yes / No	
Statement 7	=	+	+				Yes / No	
Statement 8	-	-	+				Yes / No	