**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

# A STUDY ON SPEECH ACT OF REQUESTS USED BY THE INDIAN ESL LEARNERS IN MULTICULTURAL CLASSES

**B.JAMUNA**

Research Scholar

Department of English & MEL, Banasthali University, Rajasthan

**ABSTRACT**

The present study investigated the notion of polite and impolite requests used by the Indian ESL learners. The participants were taken from two different categories, i.e., 60 Professional Course Students of B.Tech first year and 60 Post-graduate Management Course students of MBA. The respondents responded to a discourse completion task (DCT) realizing the speech act of request and the utterances were analyzed. First the request strategies/patterns were analyzed based on Blum-Kulka's CCSARP Project(1984). These patterns were regrouped by three language experts in terms of politeness on a five-point rating scale such as: (1) very impolite (2) impolite (3) partially polite (4) polite and (5) very polite. Politeness scores were studied to find significant differences (if any) existed among different groups of respondents classified based on the social variables such as age, gender and region (based on their mother tongue).

**Keywords:** politeness, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, request

## 1.INTRODUCTION

Speech acts are mostly culture specific. For a second or a foreign language learner speech acts are more complicated when they have to perform it in a foreign language. In country like India people hail from different languages and different (multi) cultures. Naturally, the impact of one's own language/culture will be found in their speech acts when they perform in English. For example, if a respondent comes from a different region with different language, if he/she is polite in one's language, definitely that will be reflected when one learns other language especially a foreign language, which is not his/her native tongue.

Research has been done on cross-cultural and cross-linguistic differences in the way the same speech act is performed. In native varieties of English, the preferred form to request is that of questions which are more polite than imperatives (Lakoff, 1990). In Indian languages, in contrast, it is acceptable to use imperatives as requests, especially if the fore is toned down by polite markers such as, *please* and **thank you.** In Indian languages, the **polite imperative** is considered as a **very polite form** because the verb usually carries an honorific ending. (Valentine, 1995)

Polite Imperatives:

- Please lend me a pen
- Kindly check your seat

- Go and get a glass of water please…

In this particular study we focus on the politeness level of the Indian speakers based on the request situations.

## 2.Cross cultural speech act research

Speech acts have traditionally been regarded as one of the major areas of pragmatic studies (Levinson, 1983) and importantly, the major dominant area of pragmatics in SLA research.  In this regard, Olshtain and Cohen (1991) noted,

> It seems that every language develops a set of patterned, routinized utterances
> that speakers use regularly to perform a variety of functions, such as apologies,
> requests, complaints, refusals, compliments and others.  By using a routinized
> utterance of this kind, the speaker carries out an act with respect to the hearer.

The issue of universality is one of the basic challenges for research in pragmatics.  Hence, cross-cultural research in pragmatics is essential to make the second language learners to acquire certain pragmatic rules of use for a given language to attain successful communication in the target language.

The contemporary studies into speech act focus on the following issues:

(1)     What cultural differences (if any) are there in the effect of context on the performance of speech acts?

(2)     What cultural differences (if any) are there in the impact of socio-pragmatic principles of people's performance of speech acts?

(3)     What language differences (if any) are there in the influence of pragma-lingustic conventions on the performance of speech act? (Spencer-Oatey & Zegarac, 2002, p.87)

The traditional speech-act researchers were criticized for reliance on "highly abstracted data" (McCarthy, 2001, p.11) whereas Blum-kulka,  House and Kasper (1989) conducted a comprehensive Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) and introduced Discourse Completion Tasks (DCT) for investigation of pragma-linguistic and socio-pragmatic expectation across cultures.  The project was based on a series of DCTs comprising scripted situations to elicit apologies and requests by respondents from different cultures, in terms of their use of pragma-linguistic formulas and socio-pragmatic behaviour.

A standard DCT comprises constructed situations and necessitates completion of utterances by the respondents.  However, in the event of individual speech acts, "What is polite in one culture may not be polite in another".  Importantly, "… as cultures are different, so are the manifestations of the pragmatic acts that make it possible for humans to live in a particular 'lingua-cultural' habitat." (Mey, 2007. pp.277-280).

Even in speech act studies related to indigenized varieties of English, researchers find that cross-cultural and cross-linguistic differences exist in the way the same speech act is performed in different languages. K.Sridhar (1991) finds that requesting strategies in Indian English  are different from those in native varieties of English.  Indian English users from more traditional backgrounds are more likely to use direct speech such as polite imperatives and desideratives (e.g.,I want/need) for requests than Indian English users from more Westernized backgrounds who prefer relative indirectness.

Tinkham(1993) examined the use of directives by Indian authors in English literature.

Valentine(1994) provides further evidence that users of Indian English have developed their own distinct style of agreeing and disagreeing in Indian English based on speakers' awareness of face work and striving to satisfy the face wants of others.

Kachru, Yamuna(1991) proposes that to formulate a socially-realistic theoretical framework for speech acts in world Englishes, the many sociopragmatic approaches of speech act theory, contrastive analysis, sociolinguistics and ethnography of communication need to be considered jointly.

This particular paper focuses on polite and impolite requests used by the Indian ESL learners in a multicultural class context.  The present paper focused on the socio-linguistic development of Indian ESL learners (of a multicultural background) in request by scrutinizing the extent to which requests were analyzed (with the help of  three language experts) in terms of politeness on a five-point rating scale such as : (1) very impolite (2) impolite (3) partially polite (4) polite and (5) very polite based on Blum-Kulka's patterns.  By

investigating the politeness realizations can be of significance importance for the teachers to handle the second language learners to overcome these practical difficulties in intercultural communication.

## 3. Method of the Study

### 3.1    The Method

A Discourse Completion Task (DCT) – a modified version of the DCT questionnaire used in Kachru, Yamuna (1998) was used.  The questionnaire describes situations that students encounter in a normal social setting and seeks to elicit responses to such situations.

### 3.2    Tools used

The request strategies/patterns were analysed based on Blum-Kulka's  patterns.  These patterns were evaluated  and regrouped by  language experts in terms of politeness on a five-point rating scale such as :  (1) very impolite (2) impolite (3) partially polite (4) polite and (5) very polite.  The scores reveal on the whole the extent of politeness among the respondents.  The politeness  scores will have a theoretical minimum of 6 to a maximum of 30.

### 3.2.1    The Subjects

The subjects were taken from two different categories, i.e., 60 Bachelors degree Professional Course students of first year B.Tech and 60 Masters degree management course students of first year MBA.  The group consisted of both bilingual and multi-lingual in a multicultural class of Indian scenario.  Some of them were basically from different regions and settled down in Delhi for quite some time.   (Appendix B: Demographic details of the students)

### 3.2.2    The Purpose

The objective of the study was to determine whether there were any significant differences (if any) on politeness level existed among different groups of respondents based on the social variables such as age, gender and region (based on their mother tongue).

### 3.2.3    The Analysis

A statistical analysis of politeness score level was found out using the test of significance (t-test) and  Analysis of variance (ANOVA) to show the significant difference (if any) between the variables. For this purpose  SPSS software was used.

### 3.2.4    Designing the framework for analysis of speech act patterns : The coding

**Scheme** :

The politeness score for  request situations were studied and analysed.  A politeness score was found out by adding the ratings given for each of the six request situation.  The scores will reveal on the whole the extent of politeness among  the respondents.  The request strategies/patterns were analysed based on Blum-Kulka's patterns (1984). The patterns used by our respondents are  further classified into 5 point rating scale which are given below:

| 5 point rating scale | Speech act patterns (Based on data) |
|---|---|
| Very Impolite | -  No Request given |
| Impolite | -  Direct expression (want statements), Non-conventional indirect strong hints |
| Partially Polite | -  Indirect Expressions (Conventional indirect query  preparatory request strategy, suggestions – without polite marker 'please' |
| Polite | -  Indirect Expressions ( Conventional indirect query  preparatory request strategy , suggestions – with polite marker 'please' |
| Very Polite | - Direct imperative with polite markers |

These patterns were evaluated  and regrouped by  language experts in terms of politeness on a five-point rating scale such as :  (1) very impolite (2) impolite (3) partially polite (4) polite and (5) very polite.  The scores reveal on the whole the extent of politeness among the respondents.  The politeness scores will have a theoretical minimum of 6 to a maximum of 30.  The ratings given for each situation are as follows: Very Impolite – 1 ; Impolite  - 2 ; Partially Polite- 3  ; Polite  - 4; Very Polite - 5

**4.The Results and Findings**

Results of the independent't' tests showing the influence of the age of the respondents on the politeness score of the request situations are  presented and analyzed below in succession.

**Table No. 1 :**  Results of 't' test showing the influence of the age of the respondents on the politeness score of all 6 request situations used in this study.

Table No.1: t-test for Equality of Means

| T | $d_f$ | Sig. |
|---|---|---|
| 1.443 | 118 | Ns |

1.    A Table of Means

|  |  | Request-Politeness Score | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  |  | Mean | S.D | No. |
| Age of the Respondent | 17 – 20 years | 21.55 | 3.35 | 60 |
|  | 21 – 30 years | 20.75 | 2.69 | 60 |
| Total |  | 21.15 | 3.05 | 120 |

As it can be seen from the table,  the mean politeness score for 17 – 20 years is 21.55 which is marginally higher than the mean scores of 21 – 30 years (20.75).  't' test was applied to find whether significant difference existed between the two age groups.  The test result shows that the t-value is 1.443 which was found to be not significant.  Thus the t-test result shows that no significant difference existed between the two age groups in the level of politeness.

**In sum, difference in Age did not affect the politeness level  of the request situations.**

**Table No. 2 :**  Results of 't' test showing the influence of the gender of the respondents on the politeness score of  all 6 request situations used in this study.

Table No.2: t-test for Equality of Means

| t | df | Sig. |
|---|---|---|
| 0.897 | 118 | Ns |

**2.  A Table of Means**

|  |  | Request-Politeness Score | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  |  | Mean | S.D | No. |
| Sex | Male | 20.90 | 3.38 | 60 |
|  | Female | 21.40 | 2.69 | 60 |
| total |  | 21.15 | 3.05 | 120 |

As it can be seen from the table,    the mean politeness score for female group is 21.40 which is marginally higher than the mean scores of male group (20.90).  't' test was applied to find whether significant difference existed between the two gender groups.  The test result shows that the t-value is 0.897 which was found to be

not significant.  Thus the t-test result shows that there is no significant difference existed between male and female respondents.

**In sum,  difference in gender did not affect the politeness level of the request situations.**

**Table No.3 :** Results of  t-test showing the influence of the region (based on mother tongue) of the respondents on the politeness score of  all 6 request situations used in this study.

Table No.3

|              |          | Request-Politeness Score | | |
|--------------|----------|-------|------|-----|
|              |          | Mean  | S.D  | No. |
| Mother Tongue | Hindi   | 21.16 | 3.04 | 68  |
|              | Punjabi  | 21.09 | 3.52 | 22  |
|              | Tamil    | 21.89 | 3.06 | 9   |
|              | Bengali  | 20.90 | 3.03 | 10  |
|              | Odiya    | 20.82 | 2.56 | 11  |
| total        |          | 21.15 | 3.05 | 120 |

| ANOVA for Request-Politeness Score | | | | | |
|----------------|----------------|-----|-------------|------|-----|
|                | Sum of Squares | df  | Mean Square | F    | Sig. |
| Between Groups | 6.836          | 4   | 1.709       | .179 | Ns  |
| Within Groups  | 1,100.464      | 115 | 9.569       |      |     |
| Total          | 1,107.300      | 119 |             |      |     |

Mean scores were found out for respondents of different mother tongue. The highest mean scores of politeness was found for Tamil as mother tongue. The mean score was  21.81. The lowest level  of politeness was found among respondents with Odiya as mother tongue and the mean score was 20.82. The next highest politeness was found among the respondents with Hindi as mother tongue. The mean score was 21.16.  The next highest  politeness after Hindi was Punjabi. The mean score was 21.09. The next highest politeness after Punjabi was Bengali. The mean score was 20.90.

ANOVA (Analysis of variance) was applied to find whether significant difference existed among respondent with different mother tongue.  The 'F' test value (0.179) revealed that no significant differences existed among different mother tongue groups.

**In sum,  difference in region (based on language) did not affect the politeness level of the request situations.**

**Table No 4: Situational Differences**

**Table No.4 .Request situations**

|    |     | V. Impolite | Impolite | Partially Polite | Polite | V. Polite | total |
|----|-----|-------------|----------|------------------|--------|-----------|-------|
| R1 | No. | 12          | 28       | 26               | 29     | 25        | 120   |
|    | %   | 10.0        | 23.3     | 21.7             | 24.2   | 20.8      | 100.0 |
| R2 | No. | 2           | 13       | 47               | 55     | 3         | 120   |
|    | %   | 1.7         | 10.8     | 39.2             | 45.8   | 2.5       | 100.0 |
| R3 | No. | 5           | 13       | 12               | 24     | 66        | 120   |
|    | %   | 4.2         | 10.8     | 10.0             | 20.0   | 55.0      | 100.0 |
| R4 | No. | 5           | 28       | 30               | 40     | 17        | 120   |
|    | %   | 4.2         | 23.3     | 25.0             | 33.3   | 14.2      | 100.0 |
| R5 | No. | 5           | 9        | 22               | 49     | 35        | 120   |
|    | %   | 4.2         | 7.5      | 18.3             | 40.8   | 29.2      | 100.0 |
| R6 | No. | 2           | 3        | 77               | 31     | 7         | 120   |
|    | %   | 1.7         | 2.5      | 64.2             | 25.8   | 5.8       | 100.0 |

Scale Definitions:

*Situations used to elicit requests

R1 –Requesting to unknown person (male): R2 – Requesting to unknown person (male);

R3 – Requesting to known family member (brother); R4 – Requesting to

Unknown person (male); R5 – Requesting to unknown person (non-specific gender);

R6 – Requesting to unknown person (non-specific gender)

Findings in Table No. 4 show that the majority of the speakers were polite, i.e., they made use of Conventional indirect requests.  In situation 3, the hearer is a close relative, hence 20% of conventional indirect requests was used by the speakers. Whereas in other situations, the hearers are strangers or people with whom no relationship is established.  In all these situations, the respondents used the conventional indirect requests (termed as polite in 5 point rating scale) i.e., in R1-24.2% ; R2 -45.8% ; R4- 33.3% ; R5 – 40.8%; and in R6 – 25.8% as per the findings.

When examining the 5 point rating scale for politeness in all situations, variation is observed based on the situational severity level, i.e., different patterns of speech acts were used in different situations. From Table No.4, we could see there is evidence that majority of the speakers used polite expressions.  Based on the 5 point rating scale,  we came to know that the respondents used indirect expressions more compared to direct expressions.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The entire sample shows that the sociological variables did not influence the politeness level of the respondents.  The Gender, Age and the region (based on the mother tongue) did not differ significantly with regard to the politeness level when they make requests. From Table No.4, we conclude that Indians prefer using indirect expressions with polite markers and polite imperatives to show their politeness when requesting.   Unlike the native speakers, Indian English speakers have their own way of expressing politeness since the Indian system is more hearer-based. The respondents, irrespective of the regions they belong to, still they did not differ in politeness when they make requests in English. This shows that Indian cultures are more culturally- based in which they are guided by an underlying principle of politeness.

**REFERENCES**

Austin. J.  *How to Do Things With Words*. London: Oxford University Press.1962. Print.

Blum-Kulka,S.,&Olshtain, E.  Requests and apologies : A cross-cultural study of speech act realization

Patterns (CCSARP). *Applied Linguistics*  , (1984);  5(3),  pp 196-213. Print.

Blum-Kulka,S.,House,J.,&Kasper,G.(Eds.)   *Cross-cultural pragmatics: Requests and apologies*.     Norwood, NJ:Ablex. 1989. Print.

Cohen, A.D.&Olshtain, E.  Teaching Speech act  behavior to nonnative speakers. In M.CelceMurcia (Ed.), An Introduction to teaching English as a second or foreign language. 2nd ed. (1991) Cambridge, MA:Newbury House/Harper&Row,154165. Print.

Kachru, Y. 1991. "*Speech Acts in World Englishes: Toward a Framework for Research.*" *World Englishes*,    10,3. (1991);   pp 299-306. Print.

Kachru, Yamuna.   Culture and Speech acts: Evidence from Indian and Singaporean English. *Studies in the Linguistics Sciences.*  (1998) *;* 28(1). pp.  78-98. Print.

Lakoff, Robin.  *Talking Power*. Basic Books. 1990. Print.

Levinson, Stephen C.  *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1983. Print.

McCarthy, M.  *Issues in Applied Linguistics.* Cambridge:Cambridge University Press 2001. Print..

Mey, J.L.  Pragmatics: An introduction (2nd ed.) Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. 2007. Print.

Searle, J.  Speech Acts-An Essay in the Philosophy of language. London: Cambridge University Press.1969. Print

Sridhar,Kamal, K.  "*Speech Acts in an Indigenized Variety: Sociocultural Values And Language*

*Variation*" in  Jenny Cheshire ed*. English Around the World*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univeristy Press,  (1991) ;  pp.  308-318. Print.

Tinkham, Thomas.  " SocioculturalVariation in Indian English Speech Acts". World Englishes,  12,2. (1993);  pp .239-247.Print.

Valentine, Tamara.    "*Agreeing and Disagreeing in Indian English Discourse:Implications for Languages teaching*" in Makhan L. Tickoo ed. *Language and Culture in Multilingual Societies*. Anthology Series, 36.Singapore:SEAMEO Regional Language Centre (1994);   pp. 227-250. Print.

Valentine, Tamara m.    Politeness Models in Indian English*. Revista de Lenguas para Fines Especificos*   3, (1996); pp.  279-300. Print.

## Appendix A
### Discourse Completion Test

Please read the following description of situations and write what you would  say in each situation.

1.     In a movie theatre, you  are occupying a particular  seat  for some time,  in between you leave for getting some drinks. When you return, you see someone else  is occupying that seat.  What would you say to that person?

You  :-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------- --------------------------------------------------------------

2.     When you and your friend get into a bus, you don't find  vacant  seats together.  You see a young chap sitting all alone in a two-seater.   So you decided to request him for change of seat. How will you approach him?

You  :-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------- -------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

3.     You are studying at home in your room.   Your younger brother who comes there, opens the window and the cold breeze blows right on your face and  it bothers you.  You want him to close it.  What would you say?

You  :-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------- -------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

4.     You bought a new shirt from a big shop for your brother, but he doesn't like its colour.  The very next day you go to the shop for exchanging the shirt. What would you say  to the manager ?

You  :-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------- -------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

5.     You are studying   in your room and get disturbed  by the  loud music played outside   by your neighbour.  You don't  know  him, but you decided  to ask him/her to turn down the music.   How will you tackle the situation?

You  :-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------- -------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

6.     For registration of a house, you need to fill a couple of forms.  But unfortunately you don't have a pen.  You have to borrow a pen from someone to complete it.  How will you ask for it?

You  :-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------- -------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

**APPENDIX B**

**DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF THE PARTICIPANTS**

1. Name :

2. Age : 17 – 20Yrs(UG) :_____ 21 –30Yrs (PG): _____ ($\sqrt{}$ The Correct option)

3. Gender : Male _____ Female_____ ($\sqrt{}$ The Correct option)

4. Native Place :

5. Place you stay at present :

6. Duration of stay :

7. Mother Tongue (MT) :_____

8. Present Course:_____

9. Medium of Instruction :
   (a) School        :
          Upto X$^{th}$ :
          XI$^{th}$& XII$^{th}$ :

10. The pattern of Schooling ($\sqrt{}$ The Correct option)
    (a) Board: State Board_____ CBSE_____ICSE
    (b) Govt.School_____Private_____Govt. aided_____

11. Father's Educational Qualification ($\sqrt{}$ The Correct option/s);
      Nil_____; Below 10_____; Class 10 _____; 10+2_____;Graduation_____
      Post graduation _____; PG and above_____

12. Mother's Educational Qualification ($\sqrt{}$ The Correct option/s);
      Nil_____; Below 10_____; Class 10 _____; 10+2_____;Graduation_____
      Post graduation _____; PG and above_____

13. Father's Occupation : _____

14. Mother's Occupation : _____

15. Other Languages known: _____