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The Use of Please in Requests Made by Japanese Learners of English

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate Japanese learners' requestive strategies in English focusing on the use of "please." The data was collected through a discourse completion test (DCT). The DCT consisted of two small, intermediate and large requests, which were directed to a friend of equal status and a teacher of higher status. The data were analyzed in terms of the following three points of view: 1) the frequency of the use of "please", 2) the requestive strategies, 3) the awareness of the politeness of the use of "please" to make a request. The results of this study showed that Japanese EFL learners preferred to use "please" in making requests. They frequently formed a sentence "please + imperative sentence" as a way to show politeness when making requests. In addition, it was revealed that they had some intention to show their polite feelings by using or not using "please," depending on the status of the interlocutor.

Keywords: request, politeness, please, discourse completion test

1．Introduction

Speech acts are an increasingly important area in applied linguistics. In our everyday life, we face conversations in diverse situations. People know instinctively how to deal with people of their culture in their native language. However, when speaking a

second language, it is difficult to control speech acts because people may not recognize the idiomatic expressions or norms of the second language culture or they may transfer their first language rules and conventions into their second language.

Politeness is an important part of effective communication for everyday life. The universal politeness theory of Brown and Levinson (1978) has remained the most influential starting point for politeness in intercultural communication. People try to use politeness strategies to avoid embarrassing the interlocutor or making him/her uncomfortable. Requests are important speech acts that require speakers to be aware of politeness. For second language learners, it is not easy to choose appropriate expressions to make requests in various situations.

This paper investigates how Japanese learners make requests in English. Specifically, we focus on how they use the word "please" to make requests.

2．Review of Literatures

2.1. Politeness

Goffman (1967, p.5) defines "face" as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact." Brown and Levinson (1978) suggest that some speech acts can threaten face, which is called face-threatening acts (FTA). The weight of FTA depends on the degree of imposition, social distance and power difference between hearer and speaker. That means the threat increases when there is a large degree of imposition or a large social distance and a large

power distance between speaker and hearer. Brown and Levinson distinguish two types of face as follows:

Negative face: the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction, i.e. freedom of action and freedom from imposition

Positive face: the positive consistent self-image or "personality" (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants

(Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), p.61)

Positive face is the desire to be liked/approved of. Negative face is desire to be unimposed on. According to Brown and Levinson (1978), positive politeness values positive face and negative politeness values negative face. Their 15 strategies of positive politeness are: 1) Notice, attend to hearer's interests, wants, needs and goods, 2) Exaggerate interest, approval etc., 3) Intensify interest to hearer, 4) Use in-group identity markers, 5) Seek agreement, 6) Avoid disagreement, 7) Presuppose/raise/assert common ground, 8) Joke, 9) Assert or presuppose speaker's knowledge of and concern for hearer's wants, 10) Offer, promise, 11) Be optimistic, 12) Include both speaker and hearer in the activity, 13) Give (or ask for) reasons, 14) Assume or assert reciprocity and 15) Give gifts to hearer. On the other hand, Brown and Levinson (1978) define the negative politeness as follows:

Strategy 1: Be conventionally indirect

Eg.) Could you possibly open the door?

Strategy 2: Question, hedge

Eg.) I suppose that she is sleeping.

Strategy 3: Be pessimistic

Eg.) You don't have time to help me, do you?

Strategy 4: Minimize the imposition

Eg.) I just want to ask you if I can have a bite of your sandwich.

Strategy 5: Give deference

Eg.) We look forward to meeting with you.

Strategy 6: Apologize

Eg.) I'm sorry to bother you, but can you open the door for me?

Strategy 7: Impersonalize speaker and hearer

Eg.) It seems to me that your chair is broken.

Strategy 8: State the Face Threatening Act as a general rule

Eg.) The entire train is non-smoking.

Strategy 9: Nominalize

Eg.) Your speech impressed us greatly.

Strategy 10: Go on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebting H

Eg.) "I'll owe you one."

Brown and Levinson claim that politeness is a universal feature of language usage. It is important as a way to smooth communication and minimize the interlocutor's embarrassment or discomfort. They point out that Japanese emphasize standoffish culture and live in a negative politeness culture.

For smooth communication, it is important to mitigate threats to

face. Since requests are inherently threatening to negative face, it is necessary to minimize the threat.

2.2. Problems of Intercultural Communication

In recent decades, there has been increasing interest in developing the communicative competence of non-native speakers of English. According to Canale and Swain (1980), further developed in Canale (1983), communicative competence consists of the following four components: 1) grammatical competence, 2) sociolinguistic competence, 3) discourse competence, and 4) strategic competence.

Cohen (1995) argued the necessity of sociolinguistic competence, as part of communicative competence. Cohen (1995, p.23) stated that "sociolinguistic ability refers to be respondents' skill at selecting appropriate linguistic forms to express the particular strategy used to realize the speech act (e.g., expression of regret in an apology, registration of a grievance in a complaint, specification of the objective of a request, or the refusal of an invitation)."

Non-native speakers tend to speak a target language according to their own socio-cultural norms. According to Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990) "pragmatic transfer" can be defined as transfer of first language (L1) sociocultural communicative competence in performing L2 speech acts or any other aspects of L2 conversation, where the speaker is trying to achieve a particular function of language. White (1993) noted that Japanese learners of English already know how to be polite within their own language and culture. However, they attempt to transfer their Japanese

conventions to English and that may run into unexpected problems. Therefore, it is necessary for Japanese learners of English to recognize that the sociolinguistic/pragmatic rules of Japanese differ from those of English. In selecting the appropriate communication strategy, it is important to acquire sociolinguistic competence of interlocutor's L1 and understand the socio-cultural norms of the interlocutor's home country.

2.3. Requests Made by Japanese Learners of English

The study of Fukushima and Iwata (1985) examined the use of polite expressions by Japanese and native English speakers when making three kinds of requests to their friend and teacher in English. Fukushima and Iwata asked 10 female Japanese participants and 6 female native English speakers to make some requests to their female teacher and their friend. This research did not define the age of the participants. The following are the content of the requests:

(1) Invite them to a formal party.
(2) Ask them to come on time.
(3) Ask them not to wear jeans.

All the utterances of participants were tape-recorded, transcribed and analyzed. The result showed that 6 Japanese participants used "Would you ...?" to a teacher when they invited her to a party. On the other hand, 3 Japanese participants used "Please ...." or "Why don't you ...?" to their friend. Fukushima and Iwata identified

expressions such as "Please ...." or "Why don't you ...." as more casual expressions compared to the expression "Would you ...?"

Moreover, more than 4 Japanese respondents used "Please ...." to ask their teacher to come on time and to not wear jeans. In their study, 8 Japanese participants used the expression "Don't wear jeans" to ask to their friend. In addition, none of the native English speakers used "please" or imperative sentences to make requests to their teacher and friend.

Fukushima and Iwata concluded that the Japanese participants tried to use more polite expressions to their teacher than to their friend but they were not able to use varied expressions compared with the native English speakers.

In 2000, Nakano, Miyasaka, and Yamazaki published a paper in which they analyzed Japanese EFL learners' speech functions using discourse completion tasks. First, they compared Japanese learners' expressions of requests with expressions obtained from native speakers of English, which was extracted from Aijimer (1996). Their results showed that the Japanese learners use limited types of strategies, i.e. "Can you ...?", "Will you ...?", "I want ...." and "May I ...?" while the native English speakers used the expression "I would like you to ...." frequently. However, the Japanese learners used the expression rarely. They also found that the Japanese learners frequently used the expression that combines an imperative and "please." Second, they compared the Japanese EFL learners' data and the data concerning Japanese EFL textbooks used in junior and senior high schools in Japan, based on a studies by Owada et al. (1999) and Ano et al. (1999). Owada et al.

analyzed 7 kinds of EFL textbooks developed for junior high school students in Japan. Ano et al. investigated 5 kinds of textbooks used in oral communication courses in Japanese high schools. Nakano, Miyasaka, and Yamazaki (2000) found that the word "please" was used frequently by Japanese learners in the DCT data and in the written conversations of the EFL textbooks. They concluded that Japanese EFL learners used "please" frequently to make requests in English because they learned how to use "please" in their high school and junior high school English textbooks.

Yamazaki (2002) examined the Japanese EFL learners' strategies for requests in both Japanese and English through Situational Assessment Questionnaire and the data of the DCT. Her study suggested that the Japanese learners' awareness of situational information had a weak relationship with the use of "please" in English. However, the data demonstrated that the Japanese learners took situational information into consideration in their responses in Japanese. In her study, Japanese EFL learners overused "please" in most situations. She discussed the possibilities that the expressions shown by Japanese learners were influenced by their EFL textbooks and L1 transfer.

Yamazaki also pointed out that Japanese learners were inclined to show their politeness only by attaching "please." As the result of the examination of co-occurrences of each requestive strategy and "please," the frequency of "imperative sentence + please" was extremely high in 6 out of 8 situations in the Japanese learners' data.

Considering these findings, it appears that Japanese use "please" frequently to make requests in English. Nonetheless, the number of participants in the study by Fukushima and Iwata (1985) was small. Furthermore, questions have been raised about the relationship between politeness and the rate of the use of "please". Previous studies did not focus on the similarities and the differences between the use of "please" and interlocutor's status, the use of "please" and the size of the request in much detail. It is necessary to examine them under the same conditions and possible situations as well.

Particularly in the study of Yamazaki (2002), the situations used in the questionnaire did not seem like they would be familiar situations for the participants. Therefore, we need to design a questionnaire with more familiar situations for the participants. The main purpose of this study is to develop an understanding of how, when and to whom Japanese people are using "please" to show politeness.

2.4 Research Questions

This study addresses the following questions:

1. In requesting, how do Japanese vary the use of "please" based on the size of request and the relative status of the interlocutor?
2. If Japanese use "please" to make request, how do they use it?
3. Do Japanese use "please" to make request more polite?

3．Methodology

3.1 Overview

This study investigated how Japanese speakers make requests in English. It focuses on the frequency of the use of "please" and participants' awareness of the use of "please" in making requests to show politeness.

3.2 Participants

The data were collected at a women's college in the Kansai area. The participants were 96 female native Japanese-speaking first year students. They were majoring in social systems. There were 14 participants who had been abroad. Of those 14 participants, 11 had been abroad for less than 1 month. The questionnaires were administered in Japanese in December, 2010.

3.3 Measures / Procedures

Each participant filled out a questionnaire that consists of 6 types of requests (see Appendix B). In the questionnaire, participants were requested to respond write what they think they would actually say in the situations described in the scenarios.

The situations involved small, intermediate and large requests (see Table 1). In all situations, participants were required to make requests to a friend of equal status and a teacher of higher status.

Table 1: Classification of Sizes and Situations of the Requests

Size of the Requests	Numbers	Situations
Small	#1	Ask to turn on an air conditioner
Small	#2	Ask to borrow an eraser
Intermediate	#3	Ask to find a replacement
Intermediate	#4	Ask to come to a party
Large	#5	Ask to borrow money
Large	#6	Ask to check rehearsal

On the questionnaire, the instructions and the explanation of each situation were written in Japanese but participants were told to make requests in English. The length of the questionnaire was limited to 6 situations to reduce the possibility that participants would get tired and not finish the questionnaire. At the beginning of each questionnaire, participants were asked about their experiences of living abroad.

3.4 Analysis

After collecting the questionnaire, the responses of the participants were categorized. We calculated the frequency of the use of "please". However, some of the participants failed to complete the questionnaire, which means they did not answer all the questions. Therefore, we did not include those parts in our data. For this reason, the number of participants who answered in each question is different.

Next, participants who did not answer in grammatically correct sentences were included in our data from the reason that we are focusing on their use of expressions. Finally, participants who used "please" with imperative sentence and those who used other

expressions were all analyzed by percentages. The higher level of polite expressions are expressions using the words such as "Could you … ?," "Would you … ?," "Can you … ?," "Will you … ?," and "Shall we … ?," rather than the word "please." These expressions are categorized into higher level of politeness based on the judgment of Fukushima and Iwata (1985). The data were also analyzed according to the difference in interlocutor.

4．Results and Discussion

4.1. In Response to Research Question 1

The frequencies of the use of "please" for each interlocutor in each situation are listed in Table 2. From these data, nearly 50.0% of the participants used "please" to make requests to their friends and nearly 40.0% of the participants used "please" to make requests to their teacher, except for the situation #4.

Table 2: Numbers of Participants Who Used "please" to Make Requests

Situations	Friend			Teacher		
	n		%	n		%
#1 (small)	46	(94)	49.0	32	(92)	34.8
#2 (small)	50	(96)	52.1	37	(94)	39.4
#3 (intermediate)	42	(93)	45.2	35	(91)	38.5
#4 (intermediate)	26	(95)	27.4	21	(90)	23.4
#5 (large)	48	(93)	51.7	39	(92)	42.4
#6 (large)	55	(92)	59.8	33	(90)	36.7
n/mean percentage	267	(563)	47.4	197	(549)	35.9

*The numbers in the parentheses indicate valid response

Therefore, participants used "please" more frequently to a friend

than to a teacher in most situations. However, the difference was only 11.5% between total number of the participants who used "please" to make request to their friend and teacher. Moreover, Table 2 shows that less than 23% of the participants use "please" to make request in the situation #4 (Ask to come to a party). In this situation, a lot of participants answered that they would use expressions such as "Shall we...?" rather than "please." In Table 2, we cannot say that most of the participants use "please" based on the size of the request but it is used most frequently both to a friend (#6) and to a teacher (#5) to make large requests.

4.2. In Response to Research Question 2

In order to see in detail how participants used "please" to make a request, we counted expressions with "please" and the way they form a sentence by using it. Table 3 shows, out of the participants who used "please," how many used "Please + imperative sentence" to make requests in the questionnaire.

Table 3: Numbers of Participants Who Used "Please + imperative sentence" to Make Requests

Situations	Friend			Teacher		
	n		%	n		%
#1 (small)	42	(46)	91.4	25	(32)	78.2
#2 (small)	38	(50)	76.0	31	(37)	83.8
#3 (intermediate)	37	(42)	88.1	32	(35)	91.5
#4 (intermediate)	24	(26)	92.4	19	(21)	90.5
#5 (large)	45	(48)	93.8	35	(39)	89.8
#6 (large)	52	(55)	94.6	30	(33)	91.0

*The numbers in the parentheses indicate the number of participants who used "please" to make requests

Over 76.0% of the participants used "please + imperative sentence" to make small size of the requests and over 88.1% of the participants used "please + imperative sentence" to make intermediate and large sizes of the requests. Therefore, most of the participants used "please + imperative sentence" to make requests. These data show that participants did not use the word "please" depending on the size of the request.

Table 4 shows the frequency of participants who used "Please + other words" to make request in the questionnaire. According to Table 4, under 20.0% of the participants used "Please + other words" to make request in the questionnaire.

Table 4: Number of Participants Who Used "Please + other words" to Make Requests

Situations	Friend			Teacher		
	n		%	n		%
#1 (small)	4	(46)	8.7	4	(32)	12.5
#2 (small)	9	(50)	18.0	5	(37)	13.6
#3 (intermediate)	0	(42)	0	3	(35)	8.6
#4 (intermediate)	0	(26)	0	1	(21)	4.8
#5 (large)	2	(48)	4.2	2	(39)	5.2
#6 (large)	1	(55)	1.9	3	(33)	9.1

*The numbers in the parentheses indicate the number of participants who used "please" to make requests

In other words, the result again showed that there were few participants who did not use the type of sentences including "Please" in front of the imperative sentences. This table includes the numbers of participants who made requests in grammatically incorrect sentences such as "Please an air conditioner switch on." or "Please, would you lend eraser?"

In Table 3 and 4, "please" was mainly used with "imperative sentence" regardless of the size of the request and interlocutor's status. This agrees with the result of Nakano, Miyasaka, and Yamazaki (2002). In our data, participants used "please" at the beginning of a sentence not at the end in almost all kinds of requests (See Appendix A). Only a small number of participants used "please" at the end of their expressions. Some of them used "please" with just one word such as "Please money." which can be categorized into grammatically incorrect sentence. Therefore, the result of this study was related to the low English ability of the participants.

4.3. In Response to Research Question 3

Table 5 shows the frequency of the participants who used expressions including higher level of politeness such as "Could you ...?," "Would you ...?," "Can you ...?," "Will you ...?," and "Shall we ...?," rather than the word "please."

Table 5: Numbers of Participants Who Used Higher Level of Politeness to Make Requests

Situations	Friend			Teacher		
	n		%	n		%
#1 (small)	27	(48)	56.3	50	(60)	83.4
#2 (small)	29	(46)	63.1	51	(57)	89.5
#3 (intermediate)	22	(51)	43.2	35	(56)	62.5
#4 (intermediate)	27	(69)	39.2	45	(69)	63.3
#5 (large)	23	(45)	51.2	46	(53)	86.8
#6 (large)	18	(37)	48.7	54	(57)	94.8

*The numbers in the parentheses indicate the number of participants who did not use "please" to make the requests.

In response to research question 3, we compared #2 and #5: both are situations of borrowing something, to examine if "please" were used more frequently with larger requests compared to other sizes of the requests. However, there were no significant differences between those sizes of the requests. This result reveals that the Japanese learners seem to indicate a weak relationship between the size of request and their use of "please".

The results, as shown in Table 2 and Table 5, indicate that participants used a higher level of polite expressions such as "Would you ...?" and "Could you ...?" to a teacher more frequently than the word "please." In Table 2, they used "please" to a friend more frequently than to a teacher. Unlike the results of Fukushima and Iwata (1985), the overall response to our collected questionnaires had this tendency. In our data, the participants tried to adjust the level of politeness according to the interlocutor's status. They seemed to recognize the existence of appropriate expressions to use for people in higher status rather than to simply use the word "please."

Also, Table 2 shows that around half of the participants used "please" to make requests. That means, "please" was one of the familiar polite expressions to the participants. This also indicates that Japanese learners have a small repertoire of request expression in English. Consequently, they tend to show their politeness only by attaching "please."

In our study, participants used "please" to a friend who is of equal status. For example, they request "Please lend me some money" instead of "Lend me some money." It can be seen that

they are aware of politeness to a friend when they make a request. In addition, this can be attributable to L1 transfer because the Japanese word "onegai" can be translated as "please."

5．Conclusions

The present study was designed to investigate Japanese learners' requestive strategies in English focusing on the use of "please."

This study produced results which corroborate the findings of a number of the previous studies in this field. Across all the situations in the questionnaire, around half of the participants used "please" both to a teacher and to a friend. Most of them favored to use "Please + imperative sentences" as a request strategy. In terms of the size of the request, there were no great differences in the use of "please".

To see how participants used "please" to show their politeness, we compared the use of "please" in very similar situations with a different size of the request. The result has shown that "please" was not used much more frequently in making larger requests compared to the other sizes of the requests. Moreover, there was no great difference between the number of participants using "please" to a teacher and a friend.

The important finding was that there did not appear to be a tendency among the participants to use "please" differently when making requests to a teacher than to a friend, regardless of the size of the request. This result suggests that participants were aware of appropriate polite expressions other than using the word "please."

Finally, there were several limitations of this study. First, there was a methodological weakness in this study. We examined the written discourse completion test, but the request made by all the participants might have been different compared to those in their actual conversation. Therefore, it would be useful to gather data in more naturalistic way and compare the result of DCT.

Second, participants of our study were limited to those who are majoring in social systems in their college. The result might have been changed if they were majoring in English in their college.

Third, the current study did not find the differences between requests made in English and in Japanese. We presented our perception that there was a possibility of L1 transfer in the use of "please." To support our position, we need to compare requests in English and in Japanese.

Fourth, may be useful to do further research taking a qualitative approach. It would be illuminating to interview Japanese learners of English to see on what basis they use, or do not use "please" to make requests in particular situations. In addition, it would be useful to investigate what they learned about the use of "please" in junior high and high school English textbooks.

We hope that this study will help Japanese learners of English to become competent communicators in English by acquiring appropriate expressions for making requests.

Notes

referees for their invaluable comments on the earlier draft of this paper. It goes without saying, all errors that remain are our own.

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Appendicies

Appendix A: Participants Using "sentence + please" to Make Request in the Questionnaire

Situations	friend			teacher		
	n		%	n		%
#1 (small)	0	(46)	0	3	(32)	9.4
#2 (small)	3	(50)	6	1	(37)	2.8
#3 (intermediate)	5	(42)	12	0	(35)	0
#4 (intermediate)	2	(26)	7.7	1	(21)	4.8
#5 (large)	1	(48)	2.1	2	(39)	5.2
#6 (large)	2	(55)	3.7	0	(33)	0

*The numbers in the parentheses indicate the number of responses which included "please".

Appendix B: Questionnaire used for This Research Project

１．日付＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

２．学科＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿　　　３．年齢＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

４．性別　　　　　　　　　　男　　・　　女

５．海外での生活経験　　　あり　　・　　なし

６．海外での生活経験があると答えた方のみご記入ください。

生活していた国＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿　　　　期間＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

150   The Use of Please in Requests Made by Japanese Learners of English

A　以下の状況をよく読んで実際の会話を思い浮かべて、最も適切な表現を１つ
　　ずつ英語で記入してください。

（１）授業中、部屋のなかが暑いのでエアコンの電源を入れてほしい場合。

友達に対して＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

先生に対して＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

（２）授業中、メモを取っているときに書き間違えてしまい、消しゴムを貸して
　　　ほしい場合。

友達に対して＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

先生に対して＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

（３）学外でのセミナーの受付を２人で行なう約束をしていたが、当日になり、
　　　体調不良で欠席せざるを得なくなったため、代役を探してほしい場合。

友達に対して＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

先生に対して＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

（４）会費１万円のクリスマスパーティーを学外のレストランで開催するため、
　　　参加してほしい場合。

友達に対して＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

先生に対して＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

（５）財布を忘れたので学校から帰宅するための電車代を貸してほしい場合

友達に対して＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

先生に対して＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

（6）学校にて、昼休みの時間のうち、30分を活用して授業で行なう発表の練習
　　　を行なうため、チェックをしてほしい。

友達に対して＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

先生に対して＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

　　　　　　　　　ご協力ありがとうございました。