REQUESTS IN FILMS AND IN EFL TEXTBOOKS:
A COMPARISON[1]

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Research in the field of interlanguage pragmatics has shown that foreign language learners' grammatical and pragmatic competences do not always match, this can perhaps be due to a lack of appropriate pragmatic presentation in current EFL textbooks. Hence, there seems to be a necessity of bringing authentic discourse into the classroom. One of the possibilities could be using films as input to develop classroom tasks. In this paper we analyse and compare the type, strategy and frequency of requests in both textbooks and films, in order to realise whether they provide an adequate treatment of this pragmatic issue. Results show an insufficient, unreal, de-contextualised, and pragmatically inappropriate use of requesting strategies in the EFL textbooks analysed. We therefore propose using scenes from films as an authentic and motivating type of material which provides instances of real use of language and presents different requests in contextualised situations.

Key words: pragmatic competence, requests, films, EFL textbooks.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is twofold: (1) to compare the occurrence and realisation of requests in three widely used EFL textbooks and three American films; and (2) to explore the possibilities of using films as a useful tool for developing pragmatic competence in the classroom. First, however, we will review the literature dealing with pragmatic competence and speech act realisation.

Celce-Murcia et al. (1995: 9), for instance, refer to pragmatic competence as *actional competence,* and define it as "competence in conveying and understanding communicative intent by performing and interpreting speech acts and speech act sets". Being one of the main components of communicative competence, pragmatic or *actional* competence is now one of the main centres of attention for many researchers and methodologists. This concern is clear if we take into account that an inappropriate use of language can lead to pragmatic failure. Actually, research in the field of interlanguage pragmatics has shown that foreign language learners' grammatical and pragmatic competences often do not match, due, to some extent, to a lack of appropriate pragmatic presentation in current EFL textbooks. Foreign language students —unlike second language learners, who are in contact with the target language—, have only got the possibility, in most cases, to acquire the pragmatic-discourse aspects of the foreign language in an instructional context. Thus, the input learners are exposed to in the classroom by means of teacher talk and textbooks is a key factor in determining their communicative competence.

1.1. Pragmatic competence and EFL textbooks

Several researchers have argued that there is a lack of natural conversational models representing the real use of language, as well as an artificial presentation of speech act strategies in the textbooks students have to use during their learning process (Bardovi-Harlig et al., 1991; Boxer and Pickering, 1995; Meier, 1997; Salazar and Usó, 2001; Alcón and Safont,

2001; etc.). Among the studies dealing with speech acts, Boxer and Pickering (1995) focused on the realisation of complaints in seven ELT 'functional' texts. They determined that the examples containing complaints were based on the authors' intuitions, only presenting instances of direct complaints (instead of representing the actual speech behaviour in spontaneous interactions, in which indirect complaints seem to be much more frequent than direct complaints). They also reported a lack of underlying social strategies in the speech act presentation. Similarly, Meier (1997) criticised the presentation of speech acts in EFL materials along a directness/politeness scale, and concluded that textbooks exhibit an arbitrary selection which does not pay attention to contextual factors, and that this inappropriate presentation of speech acts may also cause learners' failure and problems of misunderstanding in the target language. This inappropriate treatment of speech acts was also the focus of attention in the study carried out by Salazar and Usó (2001), who examined requests in several tourism coursebooks, and found that the speech act under analysis was embedded in exercises focusing on syntactic structures leaving aside the communicative intent of requesting. Alcón and Safont (2001) compared the occurrence of requests, suggestions and advice in EFL materials and in an oral corpus containing spontaneous conversations, and came to similar conclusions regarding the artificial and inappropriate description of speech acts in the textbooks, since only the linguistic forms had been taken into account.

1.2. Pragmatic competence and the use of films in the classroom

Bearing in mind this artificiality in the presentation of pragmatic information in textbooks, there seems to be a necessity of bringing authentic discourse into the classroom, and one possible way may be through audiovisual media. Video input, in fact, has long been used as a language teaching resource; and a fairly large number of scholars (Arthur, 1999; Canning-Wilson, 2000; Grant and Starks, 2001; Rose, 2001; and Ryan, 1998, among others) have already praised the use of video sequences in the classroom. Ryan (1998), for instance, suggests the use of films in the classroom in order to develop learner motivation and activate their cognitive domains. Canning-Wilson

(2000), Henessey (1995), Hart (1992) and Wyburd (1995) also point out that the use of audiovisual materials provide a contextualised view of language and helps learners visualise words and meanings. Along these lines, Arthur (1999) reports that

> Video can give students realistic models to imitate for role-play; can increase awareness of other cultures by teaching appropriateness and suitability; can strengthen audio/visual linguistic perceptions simultaneously; can widen the classroom repertoire and range of activities; can help utilize the latest technology to facilitate language learning; can teach direct observation of the paralinguistic features found in association with the target language; can be used to help when training students in ESP related scenarios and language; can offer a visual reinforcement of the target language and can lower anxiety when practicing the skill of listening.

Moving on to specific discourse-pragmatic aspects that might affect learners' pragmatic competence, Rose (1997, 2001) has carried out several studies supporting the use of films, arguing that "in foreign language contexts, exposure to film is generally the closest that language learners will ever get to witnessing or participating in native speaker interaction" (Rose, 1997: 283). In the same way, Grant and Stark (2001: 49) claim that television conversations provide a wide variety of functional conversational English, imitate natural speech and follow cultural and linguistic behaviour of both the language and the participants.

2. The study

Based on the previous data and the relevant literature mentioned above, this study focuses on a specific aspect of pragmatic competence: conveying and understanding communicative intent by performing and interpreting the speech act of requesting; and formulates the following research questions:

1. Is there an appropriate presentation of requests in EFL textbooks?

2. Can fragments of films be an effective means of presenting and raising learners' awareness on this issue?

In order to answer these questions, we decided to use three proficiency-level textbooks and three American films. Among all the textbooks available, we chose *Proficiency GOLD* (Newbrook and Wilson, 2000), *Proficiency Masterclass* (Gude and Duckworth, 1997), and *The Nelson Proficiency Course* (Morris and Stanton, 1993), not only because of their wide use in some Spanish universities, but also because no study up to date has focused on ELT materials addressing an exam, such as the Cambridge Proficiency. The three films analysed, suitable for general audiences, were *As good as it gets* (1997), *While you were sleeping* (1995), and *War games* (1983).

The data obtained were analysed followed Trosborg's (1995: 205) typology concerning request realisation strategies and classified into five main types:

(1) Indirect requests (giving hints), such as using statements or giving excuses.

(2) Conventionally indirect requests based on the hearer, such as those based on the hearer's ability to perform the act (*Can/could you...?*), the hearer's willingness (*Would you...?*), asking for permission (*May/might I...?*); or using suggestory formulae (*How about...?, Let's ...*).

(3) Conventionally indirect requests based on the speaker's wishes, desires or needs (*I wish...; I would like...; I want you to...; I need to ...*).

(4) Direct requests, such as showing obligation (*You must...; You have to...*), using performative verbs (like *I ask you to...*), imperatives (as in *Do something, don't do it*), or elliptical phrases (for example, a woman asking her son to take out the garbage by saying *The garbage!*).

(5) Other types or strategies.

Textbooks were analysed completely, taking into account not only texts and tasks, but also the instructions given to do the exercises, i.e. all instances where a request is realised; first of all, because students are

exposed to all these linguistic forms when dealing with the contents of their textbook; and secondly, because there turned out to be almost no examples of requesting in the main reading texts and tasks[2].

3. Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the different realisations that appear in all three textbooks. Needless to say, one of the quantities is really shocking: 85,70% of the requests were performed using imperatives and, as can be observed, the three textbooks contribute to this extremely high percentage.

Type	*Strategy*	*Proficiency Gold*	*Proficiency Masterclass*	*The Nelson Proficiency*		
Indirect	Hints	0	0	3	3	0,08%
Conventionally	Ability	56	70	64	190	5,52%
indirect	Willingness	23	33	8	64	1,85%
(hearer-based)	Permission	1	1	5	7	0,20%
	Suggestory Formulae	0	1	3	4	0,11%
Conventionally	Wishes	0	3	15	18	0,52%
indirect	Desires	0	0	5	5	0,14%
(speaker-based)	Needs	0	3	1	4	0,11%
	Obligation	22	10	75	107	3,10%

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[2] In fact, and although instructions preceding exercises and reading texts can even be consider a 'genre' on its own (in which learners are usually requested to do something), this grouping turned to be quite revealing: for example, out of 1,404 occurrences of requests found in *Proficiency Gold (Longman, 2000),* a total of 1,398 requests were in the *Instruction sections*, whereas only 6 instances appeared in the tasks and texts (see *Results and Discussion* below).

Direct	Performative verbs	2	0	2	4	0,11%
	Imperative	1,283	810	856	2,949	85,70%
	Negative imperative	7	5	42	54	1,56%
	Elliptical phrase	0	0	4	4	0,11%
Other types or strategies		10	0	18	28	0,81%
TOTAL		1,404	936	1,101	3,441	100%

Table 1. Requests in textbooks.

This requesting behaviour clearly limits students' exposure to the range of possible request strategies used in real-life and, thus, prevents them from developing their pragmatic competence as regards this particular speech act. We should, however, mention that (1) most of these occurrences belong to the instructions given to students to carry out the exercises, and that (2) these textbooks do not provide exemplification of natural dialogues or any communicative activities prompting this use. In fact, there is a really small amount of requests in the reading texts and in the activities: 6 occurrences in *Proficiency Gold*, 14 in *Proficiency Masterclass*, and 199 requests in *The Nelson Proficiency*.

Here is just a small sample of this abusive use of imperatives we have just mentioned:

(1) Read the following sentences and *match* them to the hints below. (*Proficiency Gold*, 172)

Please send us a copy of our directory. (*Masterclass,* 122)

Complete each sentence with one of the words or phrases given (*Nelson Proficiency,* 2)

Different strategies used to make requests appear only in isolated sentences without considering the context in which they might be realised. Example (2) shows some of these other uses:

(2) Can you help me tackle this problem? (*Proficiency Gold*, 67)

Would you mind not smoking in the library? (*Masterclass*, 149)

... you must shorten it. (*Nelson*, 14)

We should also state that there is no explicit explanation of the realisation of requests, except for a short grammatical section in *Proficiency Gold* (Newbrook and Wilson, 2000: 67) dealing with modal verbs:

(3) The modal verbs *may* and *might* used in requests are very polite and formal. With a certain intonation, they can sound sarcastic and unpleasant. Which of these sentences is polite and which sarcastic?

1. I wonder if I might ask you a big favour?

2. Perhaps I might suggest that you do this in your own time?

3. And what have **you** been doing, may I ask?

Astonishing as it may seem, none of the three textbooks provides any communicative exercises for the students to practise the use of these modal verbs expressing the speech act of requesting; what's more, neither texts nor exercises provide exemplification of real-world speech (except for a few phrases that are quoted in the reading texts or in the sentences learners have to complete).

As regards **requesting in films**, the first thing to comment upon is the presentation of contextualised speech acts in real-world conversations, showing the relationship between participants, setting, social status, and the like. Requests also appear mitigated by the use of modificational devices, such as *excuse me, please, just* or *really*. *Table 2* below illustrates the different strategies used when requesting in the three films:

Type	Strategy	As good as it gets	While you were sleeping	War games	Occurrences	Percentage
Indirect	Hints	3	17	14	34	6,65%
Conventionally indirect (hearer-based)	Ability	18	16	14	48	9,39%
	Willingness	2	8	21	31	6,06%
	Permission	6	3	2	11	2,15%
	Suggestory Formulae	5	3	3	11	2,15%
Conventionally indirect (speaker- based)	Wishes	0	3	0	3	0,58%
	Desires	6	7	18	31	6,06%
	Needs	2	6	4	12	2,34%
Direct	Obligation	4	8	6	18	3,52%
	Performative verbs	2	3	0	5	0,97%
	Imperative	76	33	104	213	41,68%
	Negative imperative	14	7	11	32	6,26%
	Elliptical phrase	0	0	10	10	1,95%
Other types or strategies		27	19	6	52	10,17%
TOTAL		165	133	213	511	100%

Table 2. Requests in films.

As can be observed, there is a wide variety of request strategies which range from indirect to direct realisations, although the most employed category belongs to the imperative type (41,68%), due to the situation or

setting in which they take place: In *War Games* imperatives do occur in a Government Base, under a possible Nuclear War; and it is precisely this problematic situation and the need to act quickly what prompts the use of direct, explicit and short utterances. In *As good as it gets*, most imperatives are addressed to a dog (e.g. *Come here, sweetheart!*). Similarly, in *While you were sleeping*, most of the imperatives used (e.g. *Tell her to come home on Christmas!*) are clear examples of positive imperatives requesting the listener to do something which may also have a 'good' benefit for him/her.

From the previous analysis, it should be evident that textbooks display an 'unrealistic', 'distorted' and 'exaggerated' amount of direct strategies (especially imperatives). Results offered in the previous tables are quite revealing by themselves, but if we put them together and compare the percentages obtained in all three Proficiency textbooks with those appearing in all three films, this claim seems to become more obvious: in *figure 1* we can clearly see the overuse of direct strategies in textbooks, accounting for nearly 100% of the occurrences observed. As we have previously stated, most of the strategies in this group belonged to the imperative type. The distribution of direct strategies in films, on the other hand, varies somewhat more. Besides, most of them are softened by the use of mitigators.
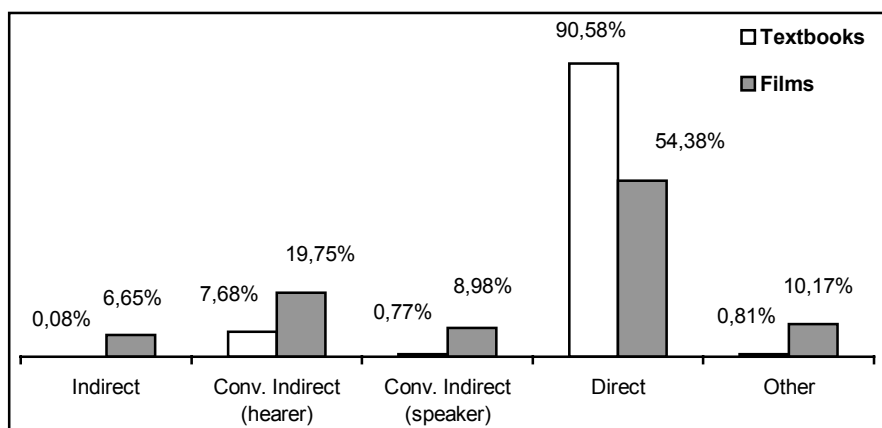

Figure 1. Requests in textbooks and films: a comparison.

4. Teaching implications: Films as input to develop tasks

Although the textbooks analysed here claim to comprise realistic tasks and authentic materials (in their introductions), they only exhibit isolated and de-contextualised examples of requests and drill exercises that do not focus on their realisation (at all). The teaching of speech acts, however, should adequately focus on naturally-occurring data, based on discourse-interactive phenomena; and not simply match a few isolated linguistic structures to certain communicative functions.

Bearing in mind (1) all the positive implications of using segments from a film to develop learners' pragmatic competence in the classroom, and (2) that, as Cohen (1996) states, "formal instruction can improve the ability to perform speech acts", we propose several pedagogical tasks to be carried out in the classroom, using scenes from films in order to draw learners' attention to the language forms that are used in English when performing the speech act of requesting. Actually, what interests us here, for this purpose, is that only a 10 or 15 minute fragment of a film can provide exemplification of most types or strategies used to perform speech acts in different contexts. Thus, taking into account that textbooks (i) do not provide real-life exemplification, and (ii) present isolated examples; and also that we should aim at (i') prompting genuine speech, and (ii') teaching pragmatics —with an explicit focus on the realisation of speech acts—, we propose a few tasks that provide the following features:

> (i) real-world use of language (authentic input),
>
> (ii) innovative teaching (stimulating pedagogical tools), and
>
> (iii) excellent input to work with (offering different possibilities to create and adapt tasks according to the course's aims, time available or students' level).

TASK 1	
Type	Deductive approach to the teaching of pragmatics.
Goal	To differentiate between request strategies, focusing on the participants' relationship, the context, and the linguistic formulae employed.
Material	*Video recordings*: Three scenes from a film in which requests are made by participants that have a close relationship and the degree of imposition is low (eg. a daughter asks her mother to pass the bread).
	Transcripts from recordings.
Time	45 minutes (approx.)
Procedure	1. The teacher explains the different ways of performing requests in English; and points out the importance of the context, the participants in the interaction, and the results derived from the speech act performed.
	2. Learners watch the three different situations from the film.
	3. Learners are asked about the relationship between participants and the request employed in each situation, taking into account the context, the topic, and previous explanations.
	4. Learners watch the video again. This time, they are provided with the transcript.
	5. Learners work in pairs or small groups and decide which strategy is used in each situation, and why.
	6. Group discussion about the requests used in these situations: whether the same formulae could be used in other situations (eg. a secretary-boss requesting situation).

TASK 2	
Type	Inductive approach to the teaching of pragmatics.
Goal	To recognise different levels of politeness in the realisation of requests.
Material	*Video recordings*: Extracts from films showing different contexts and relationship between participants –*home (two sisters), court (lawyer-judge), supermarket (customer-shop assistant),* etc.– but in which the same request (asking for help) is made.

	Handout in which this request (asking for help) is expressed in different forms: *I need some help here; Help me, will you?; Help!; How about helping me?; Could you help me?; Oh, please; You have to help me*; etc.
Time	30 minutes (approx.)
Procedure	1. Students organise all the utterances in the handout according to their politeness values (on their own).
	2. They compare and discuss their results (in pairs or small groups), trying to explain and rationalise (1) the difference in the use of all those forms, (2) their level of politeness, and (3) the situation in which they are (not) appropriate.
	3. They watch the video.
	4. They decide whether there is any evidence in the films that can illustrate their justification of politeness values in requesting behaviour.

TASK 3	
Type	Consciousness-raising.
Goal	To raise learners' awareness of the different possibilities available to express the same request, bearing in mind that the selection will depend on the participants' relationship, context, etc.
Material	*Video recordings*: five short scenes from a film in which requests are made. The scenes show different situations which vary from a degree of close familiarity (son-father; friend-friend; sister-brother,...) to polite situations (secretary-boss; student-teacher; etc...).
	Handout with the requests shown in the film, and three other linguistic realisations of each.
Time	30 minutes (approx.)
Procedure	1. Students are given a handout with four different options (ranging from indirect to direct) for each of the scenes they are going to watch, and have to mark the most appropriate request for each situation.
	2. Teacher shows the five scenes (played with no sound).
	3. Teacher asks learners to provide a justification of their selection taking into account participants' relationship, context, etc.

	4. Learners watch the video again (now with sound).
	5. Learners get in groups and discuss the options they provided for each situation, comparing them to the ones used in the film.

TASK 4	
Type	Role-play.
Goal	To be able to use different requesting strategies in different contexts, in order to be appropriate in a particular situation.
Material	*Video recordings*: Five short scenes from films (1 minute each), showing different situations in which several requests are made (e.g. *Listen! If I don't get today's notes, I'll fail this module. [...] Did you take any notes today? Can I have a look at them?*)
	Handout in which 5 different situations (extracted from films) are presented (as requests learners need to make): Case 1-*Your car has broken down and you need a lift to university, your teacher is one of your neighbours.* Case 2-*You missed class yesterday and need the notes,* etc.
Time	25 minutes (approx.)
Procedure	1. Pair work: students role-play the five different situations presented in their handout.
	2. Volunteers perform *Case 1* in front of the class.
	3. Right after *Case 1* is role-played, teacher plays that scene from the film.
	4. Learners give their opinion on the appropriacy of the requests made by peers and the original request made in the film.
	5. The same procedure for *Cases* 2 to 5.

5. Conclusion

This paper has compared the results of the presentation of the speech act of requesting in three widely used EFL textbooks and three American films. It

has also tried to demonstrate the wide range of possibilities of using films to raise learners' pragmatic awareness and to elicit pragmatic production.

Most of the requests in the textbooks were found in the instructions students were given to carry out the different exercises. In the exercises and the reading texts, only a few instances were encountered in isolated sentences and in rewriting or transformation exercises, since no examples of natural conversations were found in any of the books examined. The percentages obtained in the results also seem to indicate that requests in textbooks are mostly performed by means of direct strategies (especially using imperatives). This overreliance on imperatives as a main request strategy, as well as its de-contextualised presentation, clearly reduce learners' exposure to requests in real-life conversations and limit learners' pragmatic development. In contrast, requests in the films analysed appear highly contextualised and show a wider variety of linguistic formulae. On the whole, the use of input from films as authentic and motivating classroom material provides a natural use of language and can be regarded as an ideal source to raise learners' awareness of important pragmatic variables, such as setting, speaker's intentions, participants' relationship and social background, politeness, etc.

To sum up, results provide some evidence of the inappropriate pragmatic presentation in these exam-oriented textbooks FL learners are exposed to, particularly in the realisation of the speech act of requesting and the difference between direct, indirect and conventionally indirect request strategies. The use of films in the classroom, on the other hand, offers learners a great potential value to develop their pragmatic competence, since it provides instances of real language use in a variety of contexts.

However, the present study is limited in the small number of films and textbooks analysed, and the findings cannot be extrapolated to other pragmatic aspects, since we have only focused on requests. Consequently, future studies may need to investigate these issues involving a larger number of materials and other pragmatic-discourse aspects that might affect learners' pragmatic competence.

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