

## **EFL Young Learners' Strategies in Dealing with Requests: Language and Pragmatic Transfer Analysis**

Torieq Abdul Muis<sup>1</sup>, Lies Amin Lestari<sup>2</sup>, Ahmad Munir<sup>3</sup>  
Universitas Negeri Surabaya<sup>1,2,3</sup>

[torieq.19013@mhs.unesa.ac.id](mailto:torieq.19013@mhs.unesa.ac.id)<sup>1</sup>, [lieslestari@unesa.ac.id](mailto:lieslestari@unesa.ac.id)<sup>2</sup>, [ahmadmunir@unesa.ac.id](mailto:ahmadmunir@unesa.ac.id)<sup>3</sup>

### **Abstrak**

Menjalin komunikasi antar guru-siswa atau siswa-siswa penting adanya dalam konteks kelas pembelajaran EFL (Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing). Pelajar EFL tingkat pemula sering kali berada dalam situasi yang menantang kemampuan berbahasa ketika dihadapkan dengan konsep bahasa baru yang mereka pelajari. Akibatnya, mereka tak jarang melakukan strategi yang terkadang gagal dipahami oleh guru. Makalah ini bertujuan untuk menyelidiki tindak tutur permintaan yang digunakan oleh pelajar EFL muda dalam mengkomunikasikan pemikiran mereka. Studi kualitatif ini berfokus pada bagaimana pelajar EFL menggunakan strategi meminta dalam ucapan L2 (Inggris) dan peran transfer pragmatis dan transfer bahasa dalam prosesnya. Data dikumpulkan dari 20 pelajar EFL dengan kemampuan bahasa rata-rata pemula melalui kegiatan lisan di kelas. Studi ini melihat proses transfer bahasa L1 (Indonesia) sebagai fenomena yang berkontribusi pada keberhasilan komunikasi kelas. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa transfer pragmatis dan bahasa memainkan peran penting dalam strategi mengungkapkan permohonan. Untuk menghadapi transfer pragmatis, pelajar muda cenderung menggunakan tindak tutur tidak langsung dengan strategi penyampaian permintaan berulang yang berpotensi memuat maksud atau pesan tersembunyi. Sedangkan transfer linguistik memprakarsai pelajar muda untuk menggunakan strategi intonasi meninggi dalam pernyataan afirmatif untuk membuat permintaan. Studi ini juga menyarankan bahwa pengajaran bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing atau kedua untuk pelajar muda juga harus memperhitungkan pengetahuan pragmatis selain kompetensi linguistiknya.

**Kata kunci: transfer bahasa, transfer pragmatis, tindak tutur; pelajar muda EFL**

### **Abstract**

Maintaining communications among teacher-students or student-student is crucial in EFL classroom settings. EFL learners of beginner levels often find themselves in challenging situations in dealing with new language concepts they learn. As a result, they frequently come up with strategies that teachers occasionally fail to comprehend. This paper aims at investigating the speech act of requests used by young EFL learners in communicating their thoughts. This qualitative study focuses on how EFL learners employ requesting strategies in L2 utterances and the roles of pragmatic and language transfer in the process. Data were collected from 20 EFL learners of lower language proficiency through classroom oral activities. This study sees L1 transfer as a phenomenon that contributes to a successful classroom communication. The findings demonstrate that language and pragmatic transfer play a pivotal role in the learners' requesting strategies. To deal with pragmatic transfers, young learners tend to use indirect speech acts by delivering repeated requests as the strategy that potentially encompass hidden intentions or messages. On the other hand,

linguistic transfers initiated the learners to utilize raising intonation strategy in affirmative statements for making requests. This study also suggests that teaching English as L2 to young learners should also take account of the pragmatic knowledge besides linguistic competence.

**Keywords: Language transfer; Pragmatic transfer; Speech acts; EFL young learners**

## I. BACKGROUND

In EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom settings, teacher-student communications are vital activities to support the language learning process. As language is meant to be used in communication, spoken face-to-face interaction plays important roles as it could encourage learners to be more productive in using the language. However, in many EFL settings, classroom communication is bound to misunderstandings due to various reasons that result in the failures at grasping the conveyed information from both ends; speakers and listeners. When old information (the first language acquired) and new information (the second language being learned) interact, the phenomenon of language transfer is likely to occur (Bou-Franch, 2012; Ellis, 2015; Gass & Selinker, 2008). This new information is likely to intervene with the existing knowledge that learners have and causes language errors such as subject deletion of a sentence (Adnyani & Kusumawardani, 2020) (e.g. Last holiday stayed at home.) which sounds more acceptable in learners' Indonesian colloquial language (L1) but not in the target language, English (L2).

The syntactical or linguistic errors that the students make is "the result of the negative transfer (interference) from the learner's L1" (Chen & Cheng, 2011; Ellis, 1992). Although the term transfer denotes a process of language acquisition, in determining whether it is positive or negative is based on the result in the L2 as the target language (Gass & Selinker, 2008).

In contrast to this, when learners are successfully facilitated and able to leverage the L1 and L2 similarities in the language acquisition process, the positive transfer is said to take place. It is clear that the role of the L1 in the SLA process does not solely pose interference but also provides assistance.

Thus, it can be assumed that learners will have a lower chance of experiencing positive transfer in the L2 acquisition process when they find linguistic differences between the two languages (L1 and L2). Furthermore, Ortega (2014) argued that it is not solely the differences in the languages that cause learning difficulties of L2. Conversely, learners will

face difficulties in L2 learning when they fail at comprehending the similarities between the L1 and the L2.

What is more, when learners are confronted with unfamiliar sociolinguistic rules and try to implement their L1 structures in producing speech acts in L2, and intercultural understanding will take place as a result of the pragmatic transfer (Chang, 2009). In other words, the pragmatic transfer occurs when one linguistic system (L1) is transferred to and causes interferences in L2 "with resembling linguistic forms and communicative practices" (Ifantidou, 2017). The pragmatic transfer can be classified into positive transfer and negative transfer (Kasper, 1992). When learners are able to implement the rules or concepts of L1 into L2, a positive transfer is likely to occur. On the contrary, the negative transfer will take place when learners' pragmatic knowledge in L1 does not facilitate them during L2 communication.

Such a phenomenon of transfer in using English as the second language (L2) that causes pragmatic failure is mostly due to the interference of learner's L1 that resembles the linguistic rules and communicative practices (Kasper, 1992).

However, Richard (1980) states, "transfer of features of first language conversational competence into English may have much more serious consequences than errors at the levels of syntax or pronunciation because conversational competence is closely related to the presentation of self, that is, communicating an image of oneself to others"

In this regard, research on pragmatic transfer has gained great attention from many linguistic studies (Babaie & Shahrokhi, 2015; Bu, 2012; Chang, 2009; Hamidi & Khodareza, 2014; Jiang, 2015; Morkus, 2018; Ren & Gao, 2012). A study conducted by Jiang (2015) investigated the pragmatic competence of Chinese high school students in dealing with refusal speech acts. The study is also conducted as the researcher's concern to the current trend in most schools in China that prioritize more on lexical and syntactic aspects of English rather than the pragmatic knowledge. The result showed that the students could reduce the pragmatic transfer in refusal speech acts as a result of positive pedagogical instructions that they might have learned. The study suggested that pragmatic competence is crucial and should gain more attention in ELT. Following the same tone, Babaie & Shahrokhi (2015) also emphasized in their study that pragmatic competence, as one of the most essential factors in acquiring communicative competence (Hymes, 1971), is necessary for the Iranian

learners of English to be a communicative competent speaker by minimizing the pragmatic transfer phenomenon.

In the Indonesian ELT context, Wijayanto (2016) analyzed the refusal strategies used by Javanese (a vernacular language in Indonesia) learners of English and native speakers of English. The result suggested that speakers' competence in grammar does not always indicate the target language pragmatic competence. All of these studies agreed that the higher the learners' proficiency level is, the less pragmatic transfer will likely to occur. In other words, students are able to make minimum pragmatic transfers when they have a better understanding of the L2.

The main focus of pragmatic study is on the meaning in contexts and how a speaker delivers their intentions to the hearer. When the speaker's utterances result in the actions of a hearer, this situation is called a speech act (Yule, 1996). He pointed out that when a speaker produces a verbal expression, it does not merely contain a stretch of words but also implies to carry out an action. The performance that entails the utterances can be divided into three categories of acts: a locutionary act, an illocutionary act, and a perlocutionary act. A locutionary act is a meaningful linguistic expression produced from an utterance that normally contains a literal meaning. An illocutionary act is an act that often contains a communicative purpose such as offering, apologizing, requesting, etc. A perlocutionary act is an act that deals with the effect of the speaker's intended utterances towards the hearer (Yule, 1996).

Among these three, the illocutionary act is considered to be the most important part of the speech act theory. Searle (1975) in (Yule, 1996) also classifies the illocutionary act into five categories: representatives (e.g. telling facts, making assertions, giving conclusions and descriptions), directives (e.g. giving orders, commands, requests, suggestions), commissives (e.g. making promises, giving threats, expressing refusals and saying pledges), expressives (e.g. expressing pleasure, preferences, happiness, sorrow), and declarations (e.g. conducting personal rituals such as marriage, or legal affairs like pronounce of a sentence, etc.). However, in most cases, the speaker makes a representative utterance but the illocutionary act of directive is their intention (e.g., It's hot outside). Such an utterance may have a literal function such as giving a statement on the fact that the sun shines so bright that the temperature rises.

However, the speaker may also have another unspoken intention to the hearer by making utterances to make a request such as: (1b) Would you turn the AC on? or a warning:

(1c) Don't wear a jacket or bring an umbrella with you. Thus, the term indirect speech act is outlined. It is indirect when the given illocutionary act (1) is containing other acts such as (1b) or (1c). Christison (2018) pointed out that the indirect speech act is frequently found in the discourse but is very challenging to understand for learners as it requires real-life exposure through experiences or interactions with people. Therefore, this present study will focus more on the speech act of requests.

Most of the previous studies discussed earlier put more interest in analyzing students' speech act of refusal in cross-cultural communication. That is when students of L1 interact with the native speakers of L2 of different cultural backgrounds. Emphasis on the participant was also given to the college level of students who presumably have more exposure in English. Thus, this present study attempts to investigate another important field in pragmatics such as the speech act of request used by Indonesian EFL young learners in the classroom. During classroom discussions, asking questions are always encouraged and highly expected by teachers for various purposes including knowing students' understanding of a certain topic of discussion, giving rooms for students' fluency to practice the language or simply for speaking assessments.

Unfortunately, students of a beginner level are likely to make greater effort in conducting a conversation and may lead to misunderstanding in communication due to their limited linguistic and pragmatic competence. Hence, during classroom conversations, young learners tend to use unique strategies in requesting information to find answers from their peers or teacher.

A further investigation of the relationship between pragmatic transfer and language transfer is required in this area. As mentioned by Ellis (2015) that communicative competence (i.e. the knowledge required to understand and produce messages in a language comprising both linguistic and pragmatic competences is crucial for second language (L2) learners. It could be implied that transfers in both language and pragmatic aspects are interrelated. Therefore, it is important to include the analysis of pragmatic transfer along with the language transfer so as to reveal the transfer phenomenon occurring at both linguistic and pragmatic levels. In responding to this issue, this present study aims to (1) identify young learners' strategies in requesting information and (2) investigate the relationship between linguistic and pragmatic transfer in classroom communication. This

study examines the spoken data of requesting strategies of young Indonesian EFL learners in classroom conversational settings.

## **II. RESEARCH METHOD**

This qualitative study aims at analyzing how EFL students employ their L1 knowledge during the L2 learning process. In-depth exploration on the evidence of L1 transfers during the classroom activities was taken into account which requires the qualitative research design to cater detailed descriptions of the phenomenon on pragmatic and linguistic transfers in the classrooms.

This study involved 20 EFL students of a language course in Surabaya. This English language course has been established for more than 50 years in the country. The learners' utterances were observed throughout the classroom activities and used as its source of data. Any utterances containing requesting speech acts are recorded, identified and collected as the primary data for this study. Focusing on the analysis of learners' requesting strategies, transfer of L1 pragmatic and linguistic knowledge play an important role in the process of L2 learning.

## **III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The present study analyzed utterances of requiring information or questions by Indonesian young learners of English to figure out whether a negative pragmatic transfer occurs in their request speech acts.

Indirect requests seem to be one of the potential types of speech act that is likely to be the subject to pragmatic transfer. When an indirect request is made, misunderstanding often occurs between the utterances and the actual expected results. This is due to the request utterance is not grammatically formulated clearly. As a result, both the speaker and hearer have to rely more on the context or situations of the surroundings to get the message delivered.

(1) Kaka (K) and Andy (A), and Teacher (T).

(a) A: What flavor is this?

(b) K: It's "Lays"

(c) A: What flavor?

(d) K: it's potato (chips).

*Andy stared at the teacher in confusion.*

(e) T: What flavor is this? (pointing at the salmon picture on the package)

(f) A: It's salmon.

(g) K: Yeah, it's salmon.

(h) A: mmm...I like salmon.

(i) K: (continues eating)

(j) A: Can I see (it)? (approached Kaka to check the inside of the potato chip bag)

(k) K: Do you want (some)?

(l) A: Yes, thank you! (smiling at Kaka)

This conversation took place during the 10-minute break time between the lessons. Despite being the newest member of the group, Andy is a confident student who has a good level of English proficiency among his peers. Andy and Kaka are often found to sit next to each other during class and seems to be a closer friend to each other compared to the others.

As soon as Kaka took a large package of chips out of his bag, Andy seemed to be interested in it too. Not only because he did not have his snack for break time, but he also knew that Kaka always shares his snacks with everyone in the class.

It can be assumed that Kaka really did not know what the word "flavor" meant. This might be his first time hearing it due to his limited knowledge. However, Andy's question is not genuinely for requiring information regarding the flavor of the chips. It can be shown from the line (1f) that he knew if it was salmon flavor from the illustration on the package that the teacher pointed out. Obviously, there is an ulterior motive behind Andy's declarative utterances. His true intention was then revealed at (1h) when he made a statement of affirmative regarding his opinion of salmon.

This finding demonstrated that a pragmatic transfer from Indonesia (L1) requesting strategy to English (L2) occurred at a discourse level. It is very common for local Indonesian speakers to make positive declarative statements such as (1h) about a topic being discussed when they need to have or ask something from someone. The reason why Andy employed L1 requesting strategy is that he has to appear nice to Kaka. As mentioned by Ellis (2015)

that in a situation where a speaker is required to be careful with their expressions, they tend to make a pragmatic transfer from their L1 to the L2. Moreover, in Indonesian contexts, the hearer would normally understand that the speaker has an untold intention (indirect request) when someone is trying to compromise even though the statements do not indicate a question linguistically.

This evidence also indicated that such a negative pragmatic transfer does not occur due to the speaker's lower level of proficiency in using L2. Instead, it is the situation that sets up the context playing a vital role in successful communication.

(2) Feli (F), Doni (D), and the Teacher.

- (a) T: Can you please turn to page 65 on your book. Do you have the book with you?
- (b) F: How many page Mr? (talking without looking at the teacher, and was busy flicking through pages.)
- (c) D: What?! What's that!? Is that even a word? (react immediately as he heard Fero said the phrase)
- (d) F: Hehe...(giggles) I mean what page Mr? (ignoring Dillon, but to the teacher)
- (e) T: That's fine. What page is it Dillon?
- (f) D: It's 65.

This is another occurrence of an indirect speech act of request. When Doni made such a question in (2c), his main intention was clearly not to genuinely ask what Feli's utterance means in (2b). In the classroom, Feli is commonly known as a more reserved student who rarely gets herself engaged in a discussion. Whereas Doni, not only he has higher language skills in the group, he also often appears cheeky during the class. No wonder that he would make such a comment *Is that even a word?* (2c) with sarcastic intention to remind Feli of her grammatical mistake that she unintentionally committed.

The phenomenon of language transfer at grammatical level in (2b) is evident when Feli tried to confirm the teacher's instruction. Using *how many page* (2b) instead of *what page* (d) is a common type of negative conceptual language transfer among learners since the main idea of teacher's utterance (2a) is on the number (65) that often denotes quantity.



Students of young learners will likely associate numbers (quantity) and how many (phrases for asking quantity) in making interrogative sentences.

The pragmatic transfer also seems to occur in the utterances of (2b)-(2d). Doni's reaction in the utterance (2c) is based on Feli's previous question. The series of interrogative sentences (2c) indicated that he was joking or making fun of the mistake of her friend's utterance (2b). His intention is obviously not to require explanation despite the sentences grammatically contain requesting structures.

(3) Aila (F), Jojo (J), and the teacher (T).

- (a) T: (gave a series of instructions on how to do an activity during a group work)
- (b) A: I want to go.
- (c) T: Ok, but later, yeah? It's Jojo's (turn)
- (d) T: Jo, can you please (letting Jojo give a try)
- (e) J: Yes...
- (f) A: Mr.....I want to go. (pointing her finger up)
- (g) T: Can you wait for your turn please, Aila?
- (h) A: I want to go....(pauses for a few seconds)... to the bathroom...
- (i) T: Oh yes, please. I'm sorry. You can go, I thought you wanted to (get a go and try.

The conversation above took place when the teacher was giving instructions for the students before a group activity started. The class activity was supposed to be done in turn but the teacher thought that Aila (3b) interrupted him while asking Jojo (3c) to have his turn first.

Receiving an undesirable response, Aila made another interrogative sentence (3f) by stressing the word *Mr* to get the addressee's attention. Such an utterance and the teacher's follow-up request in (3f) clearly show that both the indirect illocutionary act and a transfer phenomenon occurred. The teacher failed at understanding the student's request of asking permission in (3h) since the structures of requests in asking permission such as *May I...?* or a phrase like *excuse me* were absent in the utterances (3b) and (3f). In most cases, statements such as (3b) and (3f) are used to express orders or commands that belong to directive speech acts (Yule, 1996).

However, the teacher's responses in (3c) and (3g) demonstrate his inability in grasping the context due to the pragmatic and language transfer by the student. As mentioned by Christison (2018), the interactions of both speakers and hearers significantly contribute to the ability to a successful interpretation of indirect speech acts. After a while, the teacher then realized and made corresponding perlocutionary act (3i) as the student expected.

One of the contributing factors in the pragmatic transfer phenomenon is the low proficiency of the learners in L2 (Bu, 2012). The evidence showed in (3b), (3f), (3f) implied that the learner's inability to make a proper requesting statement in L2. Moreover, requesting strategy is often carried out by making declarative utterances without changing them into interrogative functions in the learner's L1 structure.

Raising intonation is a typical way the speaker uses to make sure the hearer catches the main idea of the message they attempt to deliver. The raising intonation in an affirmative statement, as in interrogative sentence, was the strategy employed by the student denoting that the language transfer occurs in this process (3h).

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

It is a common phenomenon in English Teaching and Learning (ELT) that EFL students make incomprehensible requests or statements in general during language productions. One of the biggest reasons is due to the L1 pragmatic transfer within the L2 learning process. A pragmatic transfer can be both positive and negative depending on how well the speakers make use of their first language. Overall, the EFL students' strategies in requesting information are bound to the pragmatic transfer of indirect speech acts and linguistic transfer of their L1. Pragmatically, young learners tend to use indirect speech acts by delivering repeated requests strategy which potentially encompass hidden intentions or messages. On the other hand, linguistic transfer let the learners to utilize raising intonation strategy in affirmative statements to deal with requests.

These factors are triggered by different conditions such as the learner's perceptions of their L1, similarities of L1 and L2 forms, and learners' lower proficiency. Another important finding to note is that pragmatic competence, in addition to the linguistic one, is vital in supporting a successful communication.

Understanding the implications of pragmatic and language transfer plays an important role in learning second language. However, many stakeholders are yet to be aware of such a phenomenon in language education. Therefore, teaching a second language should not be stressed on the learner's linguistic skills but also on their pragmatic knowledge in both local and international levels.

For educators, it is essential to understand student's individual linguistic and pragmatic competence as they would support successful classroom interactions, especially during communicative activities.

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