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Evaluation of four coursebooks in terms of three speech acts: Requests, refusals and complaints

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Abstract

This study set out to find out to what extent English language learners at TOBB University of Economics and Technology Preparatory School in Ankara, Turkey can perform strategies of three specific speech acts, i.e. requests, refusals and complaints and to check these speech acts in the coursebooks used. Data was collected from 90 students with a discourse completion task and their eleven coursebooks were also evaluated. The results of the DCT demonstrated that the learners were able to perform requests and refusals more or less while their complaints were not completely appropriate and that majority of the answers lacked variety in all three speech acts. The frequency of requests in the books was not problematic, the refusals and complaints were barely included in most of them. The coursebooks also had a paucity of various strategies.

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1. Introduction

The communicative aspect of the language can be said to be realized as ‘pragmatic competence’, which refers to “the ability to perform language functions in a context” (Taguchi, 2008, p. 34). Pragmatics has been both a controversial and a popular topic in language research since 1960s. However, its rising to prominence occurred with the emphasis put on the communicative aspect of language. Pragmatics is simply the study of meaning in interaction. It is usually seen in the pertinent literature that a learner’s being fully knowledgeable about the grammar of the target language does not guarantee that s/he is pragmatically competent, too (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998; Kasper & Rose, 1999). They can produce grammatically correct but pragmatically inappropriate utterances, which may lead to breakdowns in communication. This is called ‘pragmatic failure’ and may result from some factors. In EFL settings, one of the most dominant reasons is the learners’ transfer of speech act strategies from their native language (Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz., 1990; Ellis, 1994). Another reason is the problems with input. Learners have to be exposed to a great amount of input in the classroom surroundings. However, as the most common source of input, coursebooks seem to have problems with the presentation of pragmatics, i.e. speech acts (Kasper & Rose, 2001).

Speech acts are not a new topic for researchers. On the contrary, they have been very popular since their emergence in the late 1960s. The framework of communicative competence (Canale and Swain, 1980), which
helped the tides in language teaching turn in favor of communication as the ultimate goal, led to speech acts’ rising to prominence again because speech acts are the functions of a language. Teaching speech acts is still a favorite topic in the realm and it has begun to offer a wider range of research opportunities since the number of problematic elements in the dynamic process of teaching speech acts is increasing day by day, waiting to be clarified by researchers.

In EFL contexts, coursebooks are the main source of input along with the teacher. Nevertheless, as a result of the studies on the topic, coursebooks have been found not to include all the necessary input they have to, at least in terms of authenticity and coverage of important aspects of speech acts (Bouton, 1996; Salazar Campillo, 2007; Schmidt, 1994; Uso-Juan, 2007; Vellenga, 2004).

This study sets out to find the answers for the following questions:
1. Do Turkish learners of English at preparatory schools, who undergo an intense English program during at least 8 months, make use of semantic formulas in their request, refusal and complaint realizations?
2. Do the coursebooks that the learners have as input throughout their courses present request, refusal and complaint strategies?

2. Method

2.1. Subjects

The subjects of the study were 90 students of TOBB University of Economics and Technology Preparatory School in Ankara, Turkey. They were intermediate level students who had been receiving instruction for ten months at the time of data collection. The subjects attend classes that are 30 hours a week. 15 hours are allotted as ‘main course’ lessons, during which Top Notch and Summit series are used as the coursebook. Reading-Writing and Listening-Speaking are given 10 hours and 5 hours respectively and the coursebook used in those classes are Northstar Reading-Writing and Listening-Speaking series. According to the background questionnaire that was administered prior to the discourse completion task, the majority of the subjects had six to eleven years of experience in learning English. As for their experience in living in countries where English was spoken as a native language, there was only one subject with the experience; however, her length of stay was just one and a half months.

2.2. Data Collection Instruments

The data collection instrument in this study was a written discourse completion test (DCT), which is one of the most common instruments in collecting speech act data and have been used previously in many studies so far (Beebe et al., 1990; Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989; Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993).

There were 9 situations including 4 requests, 3 complaints 2 refusals in the DCT and they were the adaptations from the original DCTs of Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), Beebe et al.’s (1990), and Olshtain and Weinbach (1993). While choosing the items composing the task, the most important criterion was the situations’ relevance to a university student’s life, so that the subjects would not have difficulty in imagining the situations described in the scenarios (Bardovi-Harlig, 1998; Jernigan, 2007). The scenarios included interactions that were realized in places varying from the classroom to an apartment building. The interactants were various, too; the subjects were asked to visualize conversations with their lecturers, neighbors or friends. However, degree of familiarity and differences in social status were important elements, for they affect the directness and naturally the strategy used for the realization of the speech act to a great extent.

The situations were given in the subjects’ native language, Turkish because there was a possibility that they would have trouble in understanding the situation properly, which would cause them to opt out of doing what they were asked or would lead them to incorrect assumptions about the situations, causing them to give irrelevant answers (Cole & Anderson, 2001).

2.3. Data Analysis
There were two dimensions of data analysis in the study. First dimension was the analysis of the data gathered with the discourse completion task. The other one was the evaluation of the coursebooks in terms of their inclusion of semantic formulas that function as strategies of requests, refusals and complaints.

In the coding of the data gathered with the DCT, lists of semantic formulas provided by Blum-Kulka, et al. (1989), Beebe et al. (1990) and Trosborg (1994) were used as a road map. All these outlines of semantic formulas (strategies) adopted levels of directness as their criterion for classifying requests, refusals and complaints, which makes the coding of the study more systematic with one criterion in mind.

The other aspect of the data analysis of the study was coursebook evaluation. There were a total of eleven books to be evaluated and they were Top Notch, Summit, Northstar Reading and Writing and Northstar Listening and Speaking series, which included a range of levels from basic-low intermediate to high intermediate.

In order to make the evaluation process easier, checklists based on the coding schemes used in the discourse completion task analysis previously were prepared. Each book had three sheets of checklists, one for each speech act, i.e. requests, refusals and complaints. The evaluation was made unit by unit, for it would give the opportunity to look into each unit in minute detail and it would be much more practical than an evaluation of the book with a general look.

3. Results

3.1. Results of the Discourse Completion Test

The subjects can be said to be sensitive to contextual factors such as social distance and differences in social status. The high frequency in the use of indirect strategies demonstrates that they are aware of the fact that the use of indirect strategies lessens the face-threatening effect of the speech act of request. For instance, they know that it is not appropriate to use direct strategies such as mood derivable with people with a higher status. However, it is crystal clear from the numbers the data analysis revealed that there is a lack of diversity in the request strategies used by the subjects. There is a domination of preparatory strategy among the others, which shows that subjects are not accustomed to using non-conventionally indirect strategies as much. In conclusion, the subjects in this study can be said to be successful in making requests appropriately despite having some deficiencies that can be remedied.

In terms of refusals, at least for the first situation, it is easy to say there is a wide range of strategies the subjects made use of. Their main choices are heavily dominated by a couple of strategies, namely excuse/reason/explanation, criticism of the requester and statement of regret. The use of strategies other than those should be improved since refusals are much more risky than many other speech acts in terms of their face-threatening value and requires a great deal of finesse during their realization. Stating a reason or excuse may not be enough in many situations; the need for making up for the refusal in order to soften its effect may arise, which can be achieved with the use of other strategies such as setting condition for past acceptance. So, the speaker may not have to revolve around the same strategies and more significantly, carries out a communication task without losing face.

As for the use of complaint strategies, it is easy to claim that the subjects have a great deal to do in terms of complaining since in some situations it was nearly impossible to categorize the utterances. Although they can perform a complaint appropriately in some situations such as the noisy neighbor, it is indisputable that they still need more guidance in the realization of speech acts. That is, in this specific situation they dared using even explicit blaming of the person, which may increase its face-threatening value, let alone decrease it. Another point to ponder is the variety of the strategies the subjects used. In fact, there is a paucity of different strategies, limiting them to a few such as statement of ill consequences or annoyance.

3.2. Results of the Evaluation of Coursebooks

3.2.1. Top Notch Series

As a result of the close inspection of the books, it turned out that preparatory strategy is the most commonly used strategy in the Top Notch series with a repetition of 74 times. It is followed by mood derivable, which was seen
56 times in the books. Another important strategy in the books is want statement with 45 samples. Four other strategies, i.e. strong hint, suggestory formula, location derivable and hedged performative, were found; however, they were rare since they were mentioned only 5 times throughout the all three books. It should also be noted that requests were mentioned once or twice in the syllabus of each book and those units turned out to be the ones in which larger numbers of request strategies were found. Besides, requests are found both in dialogs and in sections such as useful language in speaking activities. To sum up, it is possible to say that Top Notch series are rich in terms of the number of request strategies they provide. However, it is not so easy to say that the same goes with their diversity. The distribution of the strategies demonstrates that three strategy types dominate the field, which may lead to various consequences. As for refusal strategies in Top Notch series, it is possible to assert that they can mostly be found in dialogs and listening audioscripts of the tasks. However, in some parts, they are also presented as useful language helping the learners carry out the speaking task. Refusals are not completely overlooked in Top Notch series, but their frequency is much less than requests’. Furthermore, just like the case with requests, the range of strategies presented in the books is not wide which means refusals are usually stuck with statement of an excuse or reason as a strategy. Additionally, in dialogs refusals are observed to be usually uttered in response to offers although there are many other options such as invitations or requests. Unlike requests and refusals, it was found that there was hardly any presentation of complaint strategies in Top Notch. Moreover, the complaints found in the books were indirect complaints, which Boxer (1993) defines as the ones in which the complainee is not responsible for the offense. Complaint samples in these three books were of no use for the learners’ improvement of direct complaints. There was only one example of a direct complaint in Top Notch series which expressed the thought with modified blame. The utterance “This isn’t fair!” was said by a competitor to the presenter whom he held responsible for his defeat in a TV show adding a value judgment to his statement. It is crystal clear that complaints were not presented as they should have been despite their being an important part of everyday communication via English. One thing is for sure; lack of complaints is an obvious shortcoming of Top Notch series.

3.2.2. Summit Series

The results of the evaluation of Summit series can be said to be similar to the ones of Top Notch since mood derivables and preparatory strategy were the ones to dominate other strategies. So, the range of request strategies is not very broad, which is another point similar to the results of Top Notch series’ evaluation. Similarly, refusals were found to be not so common in the books. There were eleven utterances that can be defined as refusals, which can be said to set good examples for the use of the speech act. However, their number is really inadequate when their important role in everyday communication is taken into consideration. The frequency of refusals in the books is parallel with their variety and not surprisingly, the highest frequency belongs to giving an excuse, reason or explanation, which is limited when one happens to think of all the other strategies. Except for only one utterance that can be interpreted as a complaint, no other samples were found in the Summit series. These series also suffers from a paucity of complaints, which is not definitely one of the strengths of Summit 1 and Summit 2.

3.2.3. Northstar Reading and Writing Series

Like the evaluation of the other books in the study, each and every part of the books was examined in search of request, refusal and complaint strategies and as a result, only requests could be found in the books. It may have resulted from the fact that the books focuses on reading and writing, two skills that do not include an oral performance, through which speech acts come to life. The frequencies of request strategies in Northstar Reading and Writing series are not disappointing; however, just like the other books in the study, there was a problem with the diversity of request strategies presented. Typically, two strategies were far more common than the others in the books, which caused the books to be regarded as inadequate from this point of view.

3.2.4. Northstar Listening and Speaking Series

In Northstar Listening and Speaking books, there are three most frequent strategies, namely preparatory strategy, mood derivables and want statements. However, there are some units where requests are emphasized,
which affects the frequency of some request strategies. In terms of refusals, the evaluation of Northstar Listening and Speaking series demonstrated that there were exactly fifteen refusals in all three books and it should be noted that the basic-low intermediate coursebook zoomed in on refusal of suggestions in a unit. A certain number of direct refusals could also be found in the series, which is similar to the numbers found in Summit series. Indirect refusals are also existent in Northstar Listening and Speaking coursebooks. Providing an excuse, reason or explanation is the most common choice as usual while statement of an alternative is also favored in these series. No complaints could be found in these series, which has been typical almost for all the books that were looked into in this study.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

First aspect of the study was whether Turkish learners of English at a preparatory school of a university make use of request, refusal and complaint strategies in their speech act performances. As for request strategies, the subjects turned out to be aware in terms of contextual factors such as social distance and differences in social status along with the fact that indirectness of a request plays a key role in getting things done especially in situations where degree of familiarity is low and social statuses are not equal. The second group of strategies belonged to refusals, a rather complicated speech act to perform. The subjects tried to use indirect strategies in their refusal realizations in various combinations which can be interpreted as an effort to tread gently on unfamiliar ground since a refusal has the potential to create a communication disaster. The last set of strategies was the ones listed for the speech act of complaint, which was a much more dangerous territory for the subjects. They seem to be careful about indirectness in their complaint performances; however, their sensitivity towards this key element seems to be less when compared to their previous performances of requests and refusals. It should also be borne in mind that “missing” answers or answers that do not correspond to the targeted speech act were found mostly in complaint situations. These results lead to two assumptions; either the subjects did not care about the effect of their being more direct on the outcomes of the communication task or they did not simply know how to put a complaint indirectly. A common feature of all three speech act realizations of the subjects was the variety of the strategies used. Whether the situation requires a request, a refusal or a complaint, all the answers reflect that the subjects are stuck with certain patterns, which means they use a limited range of strategies to make themselves clear while expressing a request, refusal or complaint.

The second aspect was on the presentation of the aforementioned speech acts in the subjects’ coursebooks. The detailed examination of the eleven coursebooks revealed that they are not adequate in general terms. It is possible to state that all the coursebooks presented requests adequately in terms of their frequency. However, to say the same for the other ones, i.e. refusals and complaints is not possible. Frequency of refusals in the coursebooks is much less than requests and complaints are nearly non-existent. The evaluation demonstrated a common feature with the results of the discourse completion task. Like in the subjects’ answers in DCTs, some of the strategies included in the coursebooks were dominant in frequency among the other ones. For instance, in the subjects’ request strategies preparatory strategy was found in great numbers and the same result was seen as a result of the evaluation of the coursebooks, where the preparatory strategy was indeed very common. To sum up, coursebooks evaluated in this study do not provide their learners with different strategies that requests, refusals or complaint require.

References


