Politeness Strategies in Request Among Ga Learners of English

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Abstract

This study examines the use of politeness strategies in request by young learners of English in Ghana as they communicate with their peers and also their teachers. It aims at unearthing the strategies children mostly use when they have to make a request. The assumption is that the children use both positive and negative politeness strategies to make requests among themselves and with their teachers. The participants were asked to role-play requests based on scenarios that focused on different power relations, social distance, and cost of imposition.

Key words: Power relations; Social distance; Cost of imposition; Role-play; Requests; Communicate

INTRODUCTION

In language learning it is very useful to ascertain how and why people from a different language background may appear to be impolite or rude when using a second language. Politeness is an important aspect of language use. The concept borders on using language to enhance harmony in relationships (Leech, 1983) or to maintain face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Requests are one of the speech acts in which politeness can be expressed. In making requests, the speaker and hearer are both conscious of the face of each other and in order to maintain the face and make their relationship harmonious they each employ strategies within the request and the response as well. This paper investigates the strategies that Ghanaian children learning English language use when making requests. The paper, studies the theories of politeness and the different types of face while looking at factors that may affect the choice of politeness strategies, during the act of request. The study looks at what politeness strategies are used by Ghanaian children in lower primary level of education in making requests in English. In language, it is very important to learn how to say what one wants to say so that the hearer does not get offended by what is said and how it is said at a particular time. It must be noted however that what may infuriate one hearer in a particular culture may not be that infuriating in another culture. Also depending on the age group, social status and distance relations between the speaker and the hearer an utterance may or may not infuriate the hearer.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Politeness Theory

Politeness may be explained to be a competent way of speaking a language in order not to offend the listener nor downplay the self esteem of the speaker. It is a very necessary factor in constructing and maintaining social relationships. It the feature of language use that exposes the nature of human sociality with most clarity (Brown, 2015). According to Brown (2015) being polite means taking considering other people's feeling and doing and saying things in a less straightforward way and therefore politeness involves being indirect and not saying exactly what one means. Lakoff (1973) sees politeness as a system of interpersonal relations which is meant to reduce potential conflict and confrontation possible in human interactions. The aim of this system is to facilitate interaction in human exchange. Lakoff

(1973) is of the view that three "rules of rapport" namely: "Don't impose", "Give options", "Be friendly" informs the choice of linguistic expression and these rules explain how speakers make indirect expressions and these rules bring about different communicative styles.

Politeness is also defined by Meyerhoff (2011) as "the actions taken by competent speakers in a community in order to attend to the possible social or interpersonal disturbance" (p.312). Njeri (2007) observed that in discussing matters involving topics on HIV in Gikuyu it is appropriate to be polite in language use and the appropriate use of politeness is very necessary in discussing such topics. In the view of Watts (1989, p.19) Politeness is viewed as "explicitly marked, conventionally interpretable subset of 'politic behavior' responsible for the smooth functioning of socio-communicative interaction and the consequent production of well-formed discourse within open social groups characterized by elaborated speech codes". This implies that in order for an utterance to be perceived as well-formed within a social group, it ought to contain identifiable words that mark politeness in the social group.

In the view of Leech (1983) a principle to "minimize the expression of impolite beliefs" is important in interactions. Thus the maxims of Tact, Generosity, Approbation, modesty, agreement and sympathy' ought to be employed in interactions and deviation from what is expected brings about implications.

These views on politeness presuppose that in all interpersonal interactions there are possible conflicts and confrontations which need to be alleviated. Therefore all participants in the interaction make efforts to minimize the inherent conflicts by being polite. In the view of Brown and Levinson face is fundamental to the theory of politeness and competent speakers of a language usually choose to be polite in order to maintain and guard their face against possible damage displaying their competency in the process (Meyerhoff, 2011). The speech act of politeness is likely to be performed differently across different cultures. For instance Americans and Japanese according to Beebe, Takahashie and Uliss-Weltz (1985) have been seen to differ in terms of order, frequency and intrinsic content of semantic formulas when making refusals.

According to (Ho, 1976) face refers to standards of behavior, personality, status, dignity, honor, and prestige. Once the face is threatened, one loses their dignity, status, honour and personality. In being polite, speakers of a language are knowingly or unknowingly maintaining two different types of face: the negative face and the positive face as suggested by Brown and Levinson. Negative face is explained as "the want of every competent adult member of a community that their actions be unimpeded by others, i.e., "don't tread on me" (Meyerhoff, 2011, p.88), while positive face is "the want of every competent adult member of a community that their wants be desirable to at least some others, i.e., "love me, love my dog".

When people interact with each other, each of the participants in the interaction is aware of the positive and negative face wants of the other and therefore their choice of words are made with the face wants in mind and this shows how polite they choose to be. In making requests, the addresser is aware of the face threatening act towards the addressee and this affects how the request is made and the level of politeness attached to the request.

Meier (1995) characterized the negative strategies as expressions of formality, distancing, and restraint. Expressions of solidarity, informality, and familiarity are tied to positive strategies (p.346).

In a society where interaction between strangers pays more attention to the negative face wants, it would be rude to ignore the distance between the speaker and the addressee and talk as if we know him better than we do (Meyerhoff, 2011, p. 89). In other societies, the interaction between strangers is more friendly and casual. This means that people in these societies tend to pay more attention to positive face wants. It would be considered impolite to talk to an addressee in such a way that it draws attention to the distance between the interlocutors (Meyerhoff, 2011).

Thus the speech act of requests can be performed directly or indirectly or with strategies that are between the two extremes, and the choice of strategy according to Brown and Levinson (1987) are dependent on the speaker's assessment of his relative power over the respondent, their level of familiarity or distance relations between them, and the size of the request. In the view of Brown and Levinson, politeness depends on power, social distance and the cost of imposition. To be polite or impolite is determined by the levels of these three determinants involved in the speech act. Meyerhoff (2011), points out that one puts more effort into being polite and respectful to people whom one perceives to have more social power and higher in status. The social distance between the speakers will impact what type of politeness strategy they choose to use. Brown and Levinson proposed a universal theory of the face being the motivating factor for the use of polite language in different languages and cultures.

Meier (1995) views politeness as being universal in that everyone has mutual knowledge about face wants and how to pay attention to these wants in different speech acts. It is important however that a language learner learns the social rules in order to be able to develop communicative competence.

According to Watts (2003) polite behavior and polite language need to be taught in social contexts especially because second language learners may not have the background knowledge of the nature of the target

language culture, and the rules for speech-acts might differ from their own language and culture. Cultures may differ in the degree of directness tolerated in speech-acts. What is accepted in one culture might not be accepted in another culture (Blum-Kulka, 1980).

This type of intercultural contact mentioned in Meyerhoff (2011) can cause incompetent performance by participants if they confuse the politeness beliefs of their own culture with those of the target language.

1.2 The Speech Act of Request

By their nature, requests are acts that threaten the face of the hearer or addressee. A request is usually made to make the addressee perform an action whether verbally or nonverbally thereby imposing on the addressee and threatening their negative face. The speaker therefore employs some strategies in the request in order to minimize the effect of imposition on the addressee.

Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) defined request as an utterance or segment(s) that may include (a) address terms, (b) head act, (c) and adjunct(s) to head act (p.200). Request according to Trosborg (1995) is a speech act which is conveyed to make the respondent react in a way that will benefit the one who makes the request. Blum-Kulka et al. (1985, p.11) identifies four types of request namely: request for action, request for goods, request for information and request for permission.

Requests therefore threaten the negative face of the addressee. The requester's face is also threatened in that the respondent may refuse to do what the requester wants and so requests are face threatening acts. Therefore appropriate politeness strategies are employed to minimize the imposition to save the face of both the requester and the requestee. Different strategies may be employed in the realization of the request and different levels of directness play a part in how politely the request is made. The choice of strategy is determined by the weight of the request which is assessed by using the variables of relative power (P), relative social distance (D) and the degree of imposition in a particular culture (R).

The requests for permission according to Blum-Kalka et al. are lower imposition than the requests for action. The weight of the requests for goods depends on the "real or symbolic value of the goods requested" (p.118). In many languages, the request size can be deduced from the strategy employed in that "language that stresses in-group membership and social similarity" goes with small requests while "the language of formal politeness, namely: conventionalized indirect speech acts, hedges, apologies for intrusion are used for bigger requests. "Indirect expressions (implicatures)" are usually used in making requests which should not be made all (p.57).

Blum-Kulka and Olshtain specified three levels of directness that could be seen as universal (p.201): Explicit level, the most direct form of request, which includes imperatives; conventionally indirect level, which

includes contextualized predictions that include *could* and *would* in the request form; and Nonconventional indirect level in which the request will be made more as a hint.

The three levels of directness could be divided into nine request categories, which form an indirectness scale starting with the explicit type of requests and ending with the most indirect requests (pp.20-202). There are the most direct which is the explicit level, which is marked by grammatical mood of the verb in the utterance i.e. imparatives or by performatives that request an action; the conventionally indirect level such as "hedged performatives", "obligation statement", "want statement", "suggestory formulae"; and there is the nonconventional indirect level such as "query preparatory", "strong hints" and "mild hints". The "mild hint" is the least direct strategy.

Indirectness in requests according to Brown and Levinson lowers the face threat that may occur. Thus, requests might not be made by using the literal meaning but more as an utterance and hints. The use of formal titles when addressing the listener to emphasize the social distance will seem more polite in an indirect manner according to Dittrich et al. (2011).

The use of politeness and indirectness however differs from one culture to another. According to Dittrich et al. "individualistic cultures in which the concern of the people is self, family, and freedom, use more formal titles when making face threatening requests" (p.3809). Dittrich et al. are of the view that communal-oriented cultures focus more on the society or their group and thus use formal titles less than the individualistic cultures do. In their view, communal-oriented cultures have a stronger feeling of equality between people and a stronger concern of belonging to a group. Whereas in individualistic cultures the focus is more on achievement and power.

2. RESEARCH QUESTION

The research questions that guided this research are: What politeness strategies do children in the English as a second language classroom use when they make requests to their friends and teachers. Are there any differences in strategies employed in polite requests among friends and polite requests made to teachers? Are there differences in the choice of strategies between the English language and the local language of participants? Are the aims of the requests associated with the choice of strategies?

3. METHODOLOGY

In this study, 20 primary three pupils of a school in Teshie were investigated as they made requests among themselves and to their teachers. The participants were between eight years and eleven years old and they all speak Ga at home and in school. The participants were

observed during their class hours as they do their normal classroom activities. The researcher sought permission from the class teacher to observe the class within a period of two weeks. Pupils' utterances were recorded and then a role play was set on the last two days of observation for the pupils to make requests. In the first scenario, the pupils were asked to find out from their friends what time the singing period in school would be over; they asked their friends and then their class teacher the same question. Another scenario was set up for the pupils to ask their friends for a pencil and also to borrow their note book to copy notes they missed out on. They also were directed to ask their friends for some money.

The participants were again asked to borrow their teacher's textbook to go and study at home. Participants also obtained permission from their teachers to go out and urinate. Another scenario was to request their friends and teacher to clean up after them. The different scenarios were intended to vary the weight of the request and also the relative distance between the participants. Requests were first made in Fante and then later on made in English language as well. Participants' requests were recorded and transcribed after which the requests were analyzed according to the weight of requests and the relative distance between participants in relation to the politeness strategies employed.

4. FINDINGS

To friends in English	Imperative	Performative	Hedged performative	Obligation statement	Want statement	Suggestory formular	Query preparatory	Strong hints	Mild hints
Time					2		18		
Note book	5						12	3	
money			1		5			10	4
textbook									
Help	12				3		5		
permission		18			2				
Clean up	14					2		4	
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I

To teacher in English	Imperative	Performative	Hedged performative	Obligation statement	Want statement	suggestory formular	Query preparatory	Strong hints	Mild hints
Time			2				15	3	
Note book									
Money			2				8	10	
Textbook					13		4	2	
Help							12	8	
Permission							8	12	
Clean up							16	4	
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I

To friends in Ga	Imperative	Performative	Hedged performative	Obligation statement	Want statement	suggestory formular	Query preparatory	Strong hints	Mild hints
Time							20		
Note book	10						10		
Money	15						5		
Textbook									
Help	20								
Permission									
Clean up	20								
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I

To teacher in Ga	Imperative	Performative	Hedged performative	Obligation statement	Want statement	suggestory formular	Query preparatory	Strong hints	Mild hints
Time							20		
Note book									
Money					15		5		
Textbook			5		15				
Help							8	12	
Permission								20	
Clean up									20
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I

4.1 Requests in Ga to Friends

The participants of the study showed different strategies in the different levels of request they made in Ga to their friends and teacher. The results show different strategies employed for friends and teachers revealing distance that exist between the two social groups.

The findings show that the children show a tendency of using query strategy in asking for information such as time. All 20 participants in asking the time from friends did so directly by calling the friend's name and asking, "mɛɛbe abaakpa worship?" (When will worship time be over?)

In borrowing a notebook from friends, 10 participants preferred direct and explicit strategies by mentioning the name of friend and requesting thus: "Abam ofainɛ ha ni ŋkɛ owolo nɛɛ aya shia ni ɲyakɔpe notes lɛ" (Abam, please allow that I take your book home to go and copy the notes.) while the other 10 made the request indirectly by asking, "Asabea ofainɛ obaanyɛ okɛ owolo lɛ aha mi kɛya shia ni maya kɔpe notes lɛ?" (Asabea please can you give me your book to take home to copy the notes?)

When asking for money from their friends, majority of the children (15) expressed the request directly using the strategy of 'mood derivable' while five of the children used the strategy of Query preparatory. Thus the children show the tendency of using direct or explicit strategies in requesting money from their friends. They mostly called the friend's first name and then use the imperative though they mitigate the effect by adding "ofainɛ" (please).

When asking their friends to tidy up, all 20 participants used the explicit strategy without any form of mitigation. They started the request by calling out the friend's name and then using the 'imperative' to ask them to clean up the mess they caused.

When requesting for their friend's helping hand to carry a heavy object, all the participants used the imperative. They called out the friends' name and instructed them to extend a helping hand using the imperative mood.

These findings show that the Ga children investigated were more direct and less polite when making requests among themselves using the Ga language though they use words like "ofainɛ" which means "please" to reduce the effect of the request. They mostly used the direct strategies in their requests indicating the closeness they feel when among them. The children display less distant relationship among themselves. They tend to be less formal and pay attention to the positive face of their listeners.

4.2 Requests in English to Friends

When the children made the same requests in English, there were changes in the strategies used in making the requests. In asking for the time, two of them used the "want statement" while 18 of them used the "Query Preparatory" by calling a friend's name and asking "do you know the time that worship will be over?" None of the children used "please" in finding out this information as some of them did when making the request in Ga.

When asking for a friend's notebook, five children used the direct approach (For example: Akwele, give me your notebook to go and copy the notes) while 12 of them used the Query Preparatory strategy (for example: Kofi can I borrow your note book?) and three of them used strong hints (example: "Nana where is your notebook I need to copy the notes") in making the request. Therefore the children on the average were less direct and thus more polite in borrowing their friend's book using the English language. The children tend to be more direct with very close friends.

When asking for money, the tendency is for the children to use indirect strategies. 10 participants used "strong hints", four used "mild hints", five used "want statement" and one participant used "hedged performative" in making the request. None of them used the "imperative" form in requesting for money maintaining the negative face of their friends in their request.

Twelve participants used the imperative when asking for help. Then mention the first name of friend and then asked for help for instance "Maamle, hold the other end of the bench for me, I need to take it outside". Three of them used want statements like, ("Ayele, I want you to hold the

other end of the chair so we take it outside") while five of them made the request using query preparatory (Ashami, can you hold the other end of the bench for me to take it outside?)

When requesting friends to clean up their mess, 14 of the participants used direct strategies while six of them used indirect strategies. The majority of the participants used the "imperative" form which is the most direct or explicit strategy. In doing so, they infringe on the negative face of the respondents. This might be attributed to the fact that participants expressed anger for their friends not doing what they should do without being prompted.

4.3 Requests in Ga to Teachers

The findings show that the children show a tendency of using Query Preparatory strategy in asking for information such as time. All 20 participants in asking the time from the teacher did so by using "Query Preparatory" strategy ("Madam, ofainɛ ole beni abaa gbe worship lɛ naa?")

In borrowing a textbook from the teacher, the 15 participants preferred "want statement" (for example: "Madam, ofainɛ miitao ni ŋkɛ owolo lɛ aya shia ni ɲyaŋma notes lɛ" Madam, please I want to take your book home to write my notes) while five of them used "hedged Performatives". (For example: "titʃa ofainɛ manyɛ ŋkɛ owolo lɛ aya shia ni ɲyaŋma notes lɛ?")

When asking for money from their teacher, majority of the children (p.15) expressed the request indirectly using the strategy of "want statement" while five of the children used the strategy of "Query preparatory". Thus the children show the tendency of using indirect strategies in requesting money from their teacher.

All 20 participants used the "mild hint" strategy which is the most indirect strategy to suggest to the teacher that she spilled water on the writing desk and it needed to be cleaned up. All of the participants pointed out to the teacher that he had spilled some water on the writing desk without actually asking her to clean up.

When asking for permission to go out, all the participants used "strong hints" to express their need to go out of the classroom. They mostly told the teacher what they are going to do outside the classroom without explicitly asking the teacher for permission to go out, (for example: "Madam, ofainɛ ɲya ʃamɔ" Madam, please I am going to urinate.)

In asking the teacher for a helping hand to lift the writing desk 12 participants used "strong hints" (Madam, ofainɛ iɲɛɛ mawo okplɔ lɛ) and eight of them used "Query Preparatory" (Madam ofainɛ obaaɲɛ omɔ okplɔ lɛ mli ohami ni mawo? Madam, please could you help me to lift this desk?) All 20 participants used indirect strategies in making the request.

These findings show that the Ga children investigated used indirect strategies when making requests to teachers using the Ga language.

4.4 Requests in English to Teachers

The findings show that most of the participants show a tendency of using "Query Preparatory" in asking for information such as time in English. 15 participants used "Query Preparatory" strategy in asking the time from the teacher (for example, Madam, please do you know when the time for worship will be over?) Three participants used "strong hints" (Sir, I need to run an errand for my class teacher after the worship period) and two of them used "Hedged Performative" (for example: Madam, could you tell me what time the worship period would be over please?) in making the request.

In borrowing a textbook from the teacher, the 13 participants preferred "want statement" (for example: "Madam, please I want to take your book home to write my notes") while four of them used "Query Preparatory" (for example: Sir, please can you lend me your text book to make the notes at home?) Two participants used 'strong hints' in making the request, (for example: Sir, please I need to use your text book at home this evening)

When asking for money from their teacher, majority of the children (10) expressed the request indirectly using the strategy of "strong hints" while eight of them used the strategy of "Query preparatory" and two of them used "Hedged Performative". Thus the children show the tendency of using indirect strategies in requesting money from their teacher.

In asking the teacher to clean up, sixteen participants used the "strong hint" strategy while four of them used "mild hints" in making the request indirectly and suggesting to the teacher that she spilled water on the writing desk and it needed to be cleaned up. All of the participants pointed out to the teacher that she had spilled some water on the writing desk without actually asking her to clean up.

When asking for permission to go out, sixteen of the participants used "strong hints" while four of them used "mild hints" to express their need to go out of the classroom. They mostly told the teacher what they were going to do outside the classroom without explicitly asking the teacher for permission to go out, (for example: Madam, please I need to urinate.)

In asking the teacher for a helping hand to lift the writing desk 12 participants used "strong hints" (Madam, please I cannot lift up the desk) and eight of them used "Query Preparatory" (Madam, please could you help me to lift this desk?) All 20 participants used indirect strategies in making the request.

These findings show that the Ghanaian learners of English used indirect strategies when making requests to teachers using the English language.

When making requests to their teacher, it turns out that different strategies from what was used for friends were adopted by the children to illustrate the distance between the teacher and the children. The tendency is for

the participants to use less direct strategies in making their requests to teachers and this reveals the distance that exist between the two social groups.

In asking for a helping hand, twelve of the participants used the "Query Preparatory" (Sir, please can you help me to lift the bucket of water) while eight used "Strong Hint" (Sir, please I cannot lift the bucket).

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The study has revealed that children employ different politeness strategies in making requests to friends and teachers. In making requests to their friends the children tend to use strategies which suggest that they are close to their peers. They tend to use more explicit strategies such as the imperative in making the requests both in Ga and in English among themselves. They seem to maintain the want of peers to feel part of the same group showing solidarity in that they use direct strategies rather than indirect strategies which may suggest the distance between them. As explained by Meyerhoff (2011), the social distance between the speakers determines the type of strategy used. Children by their nature tend to be friendly and more informal with children within their age range even when they meet for the first time. Thus the use of direct strategies in making the requests enforces the positive face of the listeners.

It is observed though from the data that more participants used the indirect strategies in some requests made in the English language where most of them made the same requests with explicit strategies in the Ga language. This also means that there were fewer occurrences of the use of the imperative mood in making requests in English than there were with Ga. One dimension to this finding is that the participants in making requests in their local language feel easier and more close to each other than when they have to use the English language in making the requests. It may also imply that the children are taught to use the indirect strategies among themselves during English language lessons and that reflects in their interactions.

Requests made in Ga to their teachers took a different turn because they tend to use more of the indirect strategies than the explicit strategies. There were mostly strong or mild hints and then want statements in their requests. These corresponded also to the strategies used when requests were made to teachers in English language.

We can conclude therefore that children have the tendency to be more direct in their requests to their peers but use indirect strategies more when making requests to their teachers whether they use the Ga or English language. Thus among the children we observe collective group while we also observe individualism when considering children and adults during request (Meyerhoff, 2011).

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