**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

*REQUEST STRATEGIES USED BY MALAYSIAN ESL LEARNERS OF FOUR PROFICIENCY LEVELS*

**TAW LY WEN**

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# LEVELS

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**MASTER OF ARTS
UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

**2014**

# REQUEST STRATEGIES USED BY MALAYSIAN ESL LEARNERS OF FOUR PROFICIENCY LEVELS

**By**

**TAW LY WEN**

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the Requirement for Master of Arts**

**September 2014**

# DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my loving family.

Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of University Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for Master of Arts

# REQUEST STRATEGIES USED BY MALAYSIAN ESL LEARNERS OF FOUR PROFICIENCY LEVELS

By

**TAW LY WEN**

**September2014**

**Chairman: Prof Chan Swee Heng, PhD**

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Pragmatic competence is defined as the ability to convey communicative actions in sociocultural contexts. Production of appropriate speech acts in a particular context is one of the important aspects of pragmatic competence. Making requests forms a large part of communicative events, and they thus play a significant role in communication. This study investigates the request strategies used by Malaysian ESL learners of four proficiency levels: elementary, lower intermediate, upper intermediate and advanced. The proficiency levels are obtained through benchmark standard as set by the Malaysian English University Test (MUET). The requests were discussed in terms of strategy types, and they are linked to their directness levels as well as internal and external modifications. The principal investigative tool was Oral Discourse Completion Task (ODCT), which is also called closed role play. It elicited the requests produced by 120 participants through six controlled situations which reflect common oral encounters. The Oral Discourse Completion Tasks were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed using the request coding scheme developed by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1989) in Cross-Cultural Study of Speech Act Realisation Patterns (CCSARP).The findings revealed that pragmatic development moves from direct to conventionally indirect strategies in accordance to the learners' proficiency levels. Specifically, the elementary and lower intermediate proficiency learners displayed overuse of direct request strategy while the more proficient learners applied more conventionally indirect strategies in their requests. In addition, it can be concluded that Malaysian ESL learners overused external modifications and underused internal modifications. It suggests that Malaysian ESL learners have not acquired sufficient linguistic forms to mitigate their request utterances. This study contributes to the knowledge of how requests are made by Malaysian ESL learners in the university setting and request making is co-related with pragmatic competence of ESL learners. Overall, they showed a pattern of pragmatic development which reflects language proficiency levels situated in request making.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai mementuhi keperluan untuk IjazahSarjana

## STRATEGI PERMINTAAN YANG DIGUNAKAN OLEH PELAJAR MALAYSIA YANG MEMBELAJARI BAHASA INGGERIS SEBAGAI BAHASA KEDUA DARI EMPAT TAHAP KEMAHIRAN

Oleh

**TAW LY WEN**

**September2014**

**Pengerusi: Prof Chan Swee Heng, PhD**

**Fakulti: Bahasa Moden dan Komunikasi**

Kompetensi pragmatik ditakrifkan sebagai keupayaan untuk menyampaikan tindakan komunikasi dalam konteks sosial budaya. Hasil tindak tutur yang sesuai dalam konteks tertentu merupakan salah satu aspek penting dalam kompetensi pragmatik. Membuat permintaan membentuk sebahagian besar daripada aktiviti komunikasi dan dengan demikian ia mempunyai peranan yang sangat penting dalam komunikasi. Kajian ini mengkaji strategi permintaan sebagai sebahagian daripada kompetensi pragmatik dalam bahasa Inggeris yang digunakan oleh pelajar Malaysia yang mempelajari bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua (*English as Second Language*, *ESL*). Penggunaan strategi permintaan oleh pelajar *ESL* dikaji dalam empat tahap kemahiran mereka: asas, pertengahan rendah, pertengahan atas dan lanjutan. Tahap kemahiran diperolehi melalui standard penanda aras yang ditetapkan oleh Ujian Bahasa Inggeris Universiti Malaysia (*MUET*). Permintaan dibincangkan dari segi jenis strategi, dan ia berkait dengan tahap terus terang mereka di samping modifikasi dalaman dan luaran. Instrumen utama kajian adalah Tugas Melengkapi Wacana Lisan (*Oral Discourse Completion Task*, *ODCT*), juga dikenali sebagai main peranan tertutup. Ia memperolehpermintaan yang dihasilkan oleh 120 peserta melalui enam situasi terkawal yang mewakili pertemuan lisan yang biasa. Tugas Melengkap Wacana Lisan dirakam secara audio, ditranskrip dan dianalisis menggunakan skema kod permintaan yang dibangunkan oleh Blum-Kulka dan Olshtain (1989) dalam Kajian Corak RealisasiTindak Tutur Lintas-Budaya (*Cross-Cultural Study of Speech Act Realisation Patterns*, *CCSARP*).Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa kemajuan pragmatik bergerak dari langsung ke strategi konvensional tidak langsung mengikut tahap kemahiran pelajar. Secara khususnya, pelajar dari tahap asas and pertengahan rendah menunjukkan kegunaan strategi permintaan terus yang berlebihan, manakala pelajar yang lebih mahir dilihat lebih menggunakan strategi konvensional tidak langsung dalam permintaan mereka. Di samping itu, dapat disimpulkan bahawa pelajar *ESL* Malaysia menggunakan modifikasi luaran secara berlebihan dalam permintaan dan dalam masa yang sama kurang menggunakan modifikasi dalaman. Hal ini juga membayangkan bahawa pelajar *ESL* Malaysia dilihat masih belum menguasai

bentuk linguistik yang mencukupi untuk memperhaluskan ujaran permintaan mereka. Kajian ini menyumbang kepada dunia keilmuan tentang bagaimana permintaan dilakukan oleh pelajar *ESL* Malaysia di universiti, dan membuat permintaan adalah berkaitan dengan kompetensi pragmatik pelajar *ESL*. Secara keseluruhan, mereka menunjukkan pola perkembangan pragmatik yang mencerminkan tahap penguasaan bahasa dalam pembuatan permintaan.

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Finally, I wish to thank my family for their support and encouragement throughout my master's studies. I am particularly indebted to my parents for their invaluable support that inspired me to persevere through this arduous journey of my studies.

I certify that an Examination Committee met on 12 September 2014 to conduct the final examination of Taw Ly Wen on her Master of Arts thesis entitled "Request Strategies Used by Malaysian ESL Learners of Four Proficiency Levels" in accordance with the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Constitution of the Universiti Putra Malaysia [P.U. (A) 106] 15 March 1998. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the degree in Master of Arts.

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This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

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This is to confirm that:
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# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| CCSARP | Cross-Cultural Study of Speech Act Realisation Patterns |
| COPT | Cartoon Oral Production Task |
| DCT | Discourse Completion Task |
| EC | Elicited Conversation |
| ESL | English as Second Language |
| FTA | Face Threatening Act |
| ILP | Interlanguage Pragmatics |
| L2 | Second language |
| MET | Multimedia Elicitation Task |
| MUET | Malaysian University English Test |
| NRP | Naturalised Role Play |
| ODCT | Oral Discourse Completion Task |
| SLA | Second Language Acquisition |
| WDCT | Written Oral Discourse Completion Task |

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Overview

This chapter provides the introduction of the study. It sets out with the background of study, followed by statement of the problem and theoretical framework of the study. It then explores the objectives and the research questions of the study, significance of the study, and the limitations of the study. Finally, this chapter concludes with a summary of the chapter.

### 1.2 Background of the Study

"Language Lapse Cited in Colombia Air Crash"—headlined on April 17, 1996 in The New York Times, which reported that language lapse caused the airline crash that killed 160 people. It happened due to the misinterpretation of the request from an American crew by the Colombian air traffic controller (Hofmann, 2003; The New York Times, 1996). It is noted that the air traffic controller's "academic performance in English was above average with grades between 85 and 96 out of a perfect score of 100" (The New York Times, 1996). This case clearly shows that a good command of the language does not guarantee that a language learner is competent in the use of the language. This catastrophic consequence caused by the communication failure in the use of language, is also known as failure in pragmatics. Pragmatics generally examines the language use and its meaning in context from one's point of view (Crystal, 1985), and it will be discussed further in the section on the theoretical framework.

Request is one of the most frequently employed language uses in human interaction (Peng & Wei, 2011; Wang, 2011; Zingir, 2008). Making a request requires "considerable cultural and linguistic expertise on the part of the learner" and "a high level of appropriateness for their successful completion" (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984, p. 206). Thus when making a request, a speaker should make an effort to reduce the imposition of the act. Making a request differs cross-culturally and linguistically (Byon, 2004). Non-native speakers of a language might make an inappropriate request which might evoke an impolite impression on native speakers. A successful request requires pragmatic competence in performing speech acts. Pragmatic competence is defined as the ability to use the language effectively in communication which goes beyond mastery of grammar and pronunciation (Grossi, 2009; Li, 2011; Thomas, 1983).

There would be more frequent interactions between people from different countries with the increased globalisation of economy. As English language is an international language, pragmatic competence in English language is undoubtedly vital all over the world (Li, 2011). Learning a language goes

beyond the understanding of just the rules of grammar; learners must be able to use the language appropriately based on the context. Amaya (2008) claims that many learners face difficulties in establishing a conversation with native speakers despite having a good command of grammar rules in second language. This brings in the notion of pragmatics which elaborates on the use of language in terms of different speech acts, such as requesting, refusing, apologising, thanking, inviting, and complaining. It is important to note that a certain speech act might work in one's first language, but it might not in one's second or foreign language.

Today, there is greater and more frequent communication in English language in Malaysia. A JobStreet.com study revealed that 91% of employers stated that English is the language of business communication with only 6% of them using the Chinese language and 2% using the Malay language (JobStreet, 2009). This is not surprising also because the English Language has been formally accorded the status of a second language in Malaysia when the National Language Policy was implemented in 1970 (Darus, 2009). Although Malay Language is the national language in Malaysia, English Language has continued to play an important role in many perspectives of use in Malaysia (Darus, 2009; Foo & Richards, 2004). Thus, pragmatic competence in English should be given emphasis among Malaysians as it constitutes a fundamental ability in effective communication especially in the field of business in the increased globalised Malaysia today.

In view of progressive developments in a globalised economy, there is a need for institutions especially universities in Malaysia, to cope with the changes to society and economies (Lie, Pang& Mansur, 2008). It has been found that lack of English language proficiency reduces the marketability of new graduates in the Malaysian job market (Nair, 2012).Hence, it is crucial to give emphasis pragmatics in language use for second language learners to develop their pragmatic awareness which prepares them for the job market. In particular making a request is a vital and very frequently performed function in our daily life compared to other speech acts in pragmatics (Fraser, 1990). Given the context, this study investigates request strategies used by Malaysian ESL undergraduates in a Malaysian public university. It provides insights into Malaysian ESL learners' pragmatic skills in English language in the speech act of requesting. The next section addresses the statement of the problem in this study which reinforces the rationale of the study.

## 1.3     Statement of the Problem

In a variety of speech acts, request remains the most frequently researched speech act in interlanguage pragmatic studies (Fraser, 1990; Hendriks, 2008). Making a request can be a challenging endeavour for second language learners of different cultural backgrounds, for they need to assess the context and select the appropriate linguistic forms to express their request (Barron, 2003).It requires

"considerable cultural and linguistic expertise on the part of the learner" as well as "a high level of appropriateness for their successful completion" (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984, p. 206). Due to the second language learners' cultural background and first language influence, selecting appropriate linguistic forms to express their request can pose difficulties for learners (Omar, 2006; Woodfield, 2008).

There have been numerous studies on interlanguage pragmatics on speech act of request from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds such as British English and American English, Dutch, Spanish, German, Romanian, Finnish, Arabic, Turkish, Farsi, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian and Thai. In Malaysia, there are only a few studies of request strategies done on Malaysians, such as those by Khaliba and Tayeh (2014), Youssef (2012) as well as Sattar and Lah (2011), Maros and Rahim (2011), Marzuki, Damio, & Ting (2009) to date. Maros and Rahim (2011) examined Malaysian Malays' request strategies in their first language, Malay language. This study does not involve English as a second language aspect. Another two studies by Sattar and Lah (2011)and Youssef (2012) deal with cross-cultural studies which attempt to address the comparisons of request strategies in English used by Malaysian Malay postgraduates to Iraqi postgraduates (Sattar & Lah, 2011) and to Libyan postgraduates (Youssef, 2012). Khaliba and Tayeh (2014) focus on directness levels in requests produced by Malay university participants without considering their proficiency levels. Kasper and Rose (1999) noted that there have been numerous studies on interlanguage pragmatics on speech act of request, but most of them have focused mainly on second language use rather than on the development of language learning. The study by Marzuki, Damio, & Ting (2009) was the only study hitherto that focuses on the development of ESL learners' request strategies in Malaysia. This small-scale of study examined difference only between five proficient and five less proficient Malay learners of English from a secondary school in making requests. These studies aforementioned undoubtedly contribute to the expansion of interlanguage pragmatic research in request. However, there is no study has been found to date that focuses on the development of Malaysian ESL adult learners' request strategies in Malaysia with a bigger scale of sampling.To fulfil this gap, this cross-sectional study focuses on the developmental stages of language learning by investigating the request strategies employed by Malaysian ESL adult learners according to different proficiency levels.

## 1.4    Theoretical Framework

The fundamental focus of the current study is on request which is directly linked to the use of language that shapes the theory of pragmatics. Pragmatics has its origins in the philosophy of language based on speech act theory which was originally developed by Austin (1962), and then further developed by Searle (1969). Speech act, as the name suggests, is the action performed via spoken utterances. Speech act theory is based on Austin's (1962) belief that speakers use the language to do things. Speech act is the minimal unit of human communication that carries out the functions of language to perform different

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types of acts such as requesting, apologising, inviting, refusing, complimenting, responding to compliments, thanking, giving directions, and complaining. Searle (1969) refined Austin's taxonomy to avoid inter-category overlap and identified five categories of speech act: representatives, directives, commissives, expressive, and declarations. The Speech act of request, which is the central focus of this study falls under the category of directives which is defined as an attempt by the speaker to get the hearer to do something (Searle, 1969). Requests can be made directly or indirectly in imperative, interrogative, or declarative mood as the same illocutionary act can be described in terms of grammatical moods, either directly or indirectly (Blum-Kulka & House, 1989; 1975; Searle, 1969).

The current study examines request production by Malaysian ESL learners. Therefore, the notion of interlanguage pragmatics comes into the picture when it involves second language (L2) learners' use of language in this context. Interlanguage pragmatics is illustrated as the 'hybrid' of two disciplines, which are Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and pragmatics (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993). SLA is a branch of applied linguistics that focuses on how the second language is acquired (Ellis, 1997); whilst pragmatics examines the language use and its meaning in context from one's point of view (Crystal, 1985). In SLA, pragmatics "acts as a constraint on linguistic form and their acquisition, and it represents a type of communicative knowledge and object of L2 learning in its own right" (Kasper & Rose, 1999, p. 81). Therefore, production and comprehension of language are the two crucial aspects in interlanguage pragmatics (Kasper & Rose, 2002). In interlanguage pragmatics studies, researchers seek to investigate second language comprehension and production as well as development of linguistic action (Kasper, 1998), as in the examining of the patterns of pragmatic development. This study specially focuses on the proficiency levels of the ESL learners to examine the developmental patterns of request production in second language across the learners of different proficiency levels.

## 1.5 Objectives and Research Questions of the study

Due to the paucity of interlanguage pragmatic studies on request speech act that resolves around the development of pragmatic competence in Malaysia context, this study aims to explore the developmental patterns in the pragmatic production of request speech acts by Malaysian second language adult learners of English language.

The general objective of this study is to investigate the request strategies used by Malaysian ESL undergraduates of elementary, lower intermediate, upper intermediate and advanced proficiency levels in a public university. The specific objectives of the study are as follows:
i)     To determine the correlation between learners' level of language proficiency and three directness levels of requesting.

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ii)     To examine how the learners' types of request strategies varied according to their proficiency levels

iii)    To identify how the use of internal modifications in request speech acts vary according to the learners' proficiency levels.

iv)     To identify how the use of external modifications in requests speech act vary according to the learners' proficiency levels.

Second language learners' performance of pragmatic competence in request speech act is at the core of this research, which is to explain the nature of developmental patterns as illustrated by the groups of adult learners with different proficiency levels. To achieve this goal, the study addressed these four research questions:

i)      Is there any correlation between learners' level of language proficiency and three directness levels of requesting?

ii)     How do the learners' types of request strategies vary according to their proficiency levels?

iii)    How does the use of internal modifications in request speech act vary according to the learners' proficiency levels?

iv)     How does the use of external modifications in request speech act vary according to the learners' proficiency levels?

## 1.6     Significance of the Study

This study examines the request strategies used by Malaysian adult ESL learners of different proficiency levels. The study is significant for two reasons. Firstly, the significance is discussed generally from the perspective of the theoretical background of pragmatics. The focus of the study, which is the speech act of requesting, falls under the field of pragmatics. Communication breakdowns might occur among the speakers who have different first language backgrounds (Urano, 2000). This communication breakdown is known as pragmatic failure, which is defined as the inability to understand "what is meant by what is said" (Thomas, 1983, p.91). Thomas (1983) also claims that pragmatic failure may lead to others' negative judgment of learners of having abrasive manner. Therefore, pragmatic failure may result in misunderstandings, anger, frustration, and embarrassment (Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz, 1990 ).

The focus of the study is on the speech act of requesting. Speech act of request is very frequently used in daily communication compared to other speech acts (Fraser, 1990). Making a request is also considered as a Face Threatening Act (FTA), as a speaker is imposing her or his will on the hearer (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Thus, requests have the potential to be intrusive and demanding. Using inappropriate linguistic forms in requests in a particular language may make the speaker appear to be brusque in social interactions (Lin, 2007). In other words, less proficient ESL learners who fail to request using appropriate linguistic forms may appear rude and impolite. Learning requests such as the standard indirect speech act "Can you…" exist in most languages

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(Morgan, 1978:274, cited in Blum-Kulka, 1982). However, learning the effective use of strategies in speech acts of a particular language for appropriate context is also fundamental to learning a second language (Blum-Kulka, 1982).For instance, using the modal verb of 'can' imposes the dual functions of asking the ability of the hearer and requesting from the hearer. Schmidt and Richards (1980) found that Czech speakers may not identify the English modals of "can" as a request. It is rather impolite to question the hearer's ability to perform the act, which the speaker intends. Thus, it might cause misunderstanding that the hearer might take it as his or her ability of being asked to do an act. In addition, there is a need for the requester to minimise the imposition involved in the request (Blum-Kulka, 1989). Investigating second language learners' contextual use of linguistic forms provides insights into language learners' pragmatic skills in their L2.

Secondly, pragmatics of the target language has also been insufficiently given attention in L2 learning (Dash, 2004). There is need for L2 learners to become more competent in pragmatics. However, pragmatic teaching is claimed to be on new ground as it is not well-established in foreign or second language curricula and could be deemed as a neglected area in the language classroom (Barron, 2003). As Kasper and Schmidt (1996) point out, that language instruction should be informed by research on pragmatic development. An enlightenment of the pragmatic development patterns helps ESL teachers establish realistic expectations of students' pragmatic progress. It also enables them to administer appropriate pedagogical interventions to improve students' pragmatic competence (Beebe & Waring, 2005). Thus, the outcome of this current investigation could serve as guidance for language teachers in teaching pragmatics in classrooms and ESL curriculum and textbook designers in incorporating pragmatics in ESL curricula and ESL textbooks. It is then hoped that Malaysian ESL learners would be well-equipped with competent English pragmatic knowledge by using considerably refined conventionalised linguistic forms when making requests.

## 1.7    Limitations of the Study

This study has two main limitations that should be addressed. First, this study examined only a particular group of ESL Malaysian undergraduates in a public university in Malaysia. It would be more comprehensive to have a larger sample in future research by examining the ESL undergraduates from a few public universities in Malaysia. The next limitation concerns the use of Malaysia University English Test (MUET) as the benchmark of the participants' proficiency level. MUET comprises four components: reading, speaking, writing, and listening. The weighting for speaking is only 15% out of the total marks of 100%. The weightings focus more on the reading and writing skills — 40 % and 30% respectively. Nevertheless, the participants' MUET results are the general indicators of their English proficiency levels. There is a high chance that there is a correlation that these aforementioned general indicators of the

participants' English proficiency levels can be related to pragmatic ability. Thus, in this research, the participants' English proficiency levels are based on the premise of their MUET results.

## 1.8    Summary of the Chapter

To summarise, this chapter has provided the background of the study to explain how pragmatics in English language is important and can contribute to the success or failure in communication that would have repercussions in developing a globalised and liberalised nation such as that of  Malaysia, where English is a dominant language of business communication. This study particularly investigates speech act of requesting as it records high regularity in language use in our daily lives. To address the issue in the study, some justifications have been mooted.

This chapter has also applied the initial outlays of the theoretical framework to scaffold the study. It is followed by the objectives and research questions of the study and definition of terms. Finally, the significance of the study and limitations of the study have provided further salience to the study.

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