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Factors Influencing Teacher and Student Requests in the EFL Classroom: From a Sociocultural Perspective

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Abstract

Requesting has been seen as a complex sociolinguistic and sociocultural phenomenon. Although research has examined some factors (e.g. the social factors) that may affect L2 speakers requesting behaviors across different social situations, little research has sought to further explore whether these and other potential factors including situational factors may influence teachers' and students' requesting behaviors in the EFL classroom contexts. This study aims to explore whether contextual factors affect teacher and student request types. This study used classroom observation for data collection. Five intact classes of Freshman English at five different universities in Taiwan were observed. Over a 4 week period, two lesson units of teaching were observed, video-taped, and audio-taped for each class. A total of 39 periods, 50 minutes each, were observed. Teacher participants were Chinese-speaking female college EFL teachers. Results showed that both teacher and student requests were influenced by social factors including the social status and the imposition of tasks. The findings showed that teachers with more authority tended to use more direct requests, such as "You help me pass this." It is interesting to note that the teacher request "You help me pass this" referred to the lower degree of imposition. It was also found that teachers performed a request for completing a task by using an indirect request, "...can you just go through the whole paragraph for us?" Findings also showed that students with a lower social status tended to use more indirect requests, such as "Can I...?", and "Would you mind...?" The findings revealed that some contextual factors such as teaching goals, teaching activities, and class management affected teachers' requesting behaviors. This study has theoretically and pedagogically significance.

Keywords: Requesting behaviours, social factors, contextual factors, sociocultural perspective, sociopragmatic perspective

Introduction

Requesting behaviors are influenced by certain factors in different social contexts. Research has found that L2 speakers' requests may be influenced by social factors (e.g. social status) and contextual factors (e.g., request goals) (Blum-Kulka, et al., 1989; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2010). Such research has explored certain potential factors that may affect L2 speakers' different uses of request; however, the findings do not seem to be sufficient to explain college EFL teachers' and students' uses of request types in the classroom settings. It is necessary to accumulate more research evidence for exploring further some potential factors that may influence L2 teachers' and students' complex requesting behaviors in the EFL classroom contexts.

Objectives

The purpose of the study is to examine social and contextual factors influencing EFL college teachers' and students' requesting behaviors in the classrooms.

Research Questions

Research questions of the study are: 1) Are teacher and student requests influenced by social factors in the English classroom? 2) Are teacher and student requests influenced by contextual factors in the English classroom?

Theory

For theoretical framework, three pragmatic theories provide a basis of studying teachers' and students' requesting behaviors: speech act theory (SAT) (Searle, 1975; Levin, 1983; Ellis, 2008), the theory of politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1987), and the theory of context (Paltridge, 1996).

Methodology

This study used classroom observation for data collection. Five intact classes of Freshman English at five different universities in Taiwan were observed. Over a 4 week period, two lesson units of teaching were observed, video-taped, and audio-taped for each class. A total of 39 periods, 50 minutes each, were observed. Five Chinese-speaking female college EFL teachers were invited to participate in the study.

In this study, a framework of analysis was developed to analyze and explain college EFL teachers' and students' requesting behaviors in the English classrooms. The analysis consists of requests in terms of the levels of directness and potential factors that may influence teachers' and students' uses of request types. The categorization of requests at the directness level was based on previous taxonomies by Blum-Kulka, et al. (1989a), Trosborg (1995), and Lee (2011).

Literature Review

Factors Influencing Teachers' and Students' Requesting Behaviors

L2 speakers' requesting behaviors may be influenced by various factors: the social factors, the contextual factors, and the others. The social factors include "social distance" (D), social "power" (P), and rank of imposition (R) (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984; Fukushima, 2000; Economidou- Kogetsidis, 2010;). In research on how the social factors affect requesting behaviors, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) explain that the differences in the uses of requests may depend on the "social constraints embedded in the situation." They argue that "requests addressed to superiors might tend, in a given culture, to be phrased in less direct terms than requests addressed to social inferiors" (ibid., p. 197). To date, some studies (e.g., Blum-Kulka & House, 1989; Yang, 2009; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2010; Lee, 2011) aim at exploring to what extent the social factors affect requesting behaviors in different social situations. Economidou-Kogetsidis concludes that although the social "power," "familiarity," and the rank of imposition may affect L2 speakers' uses of request types in certain social situations, other factors need to be taken into consideration for explaining L2 speakers' different uses of request types in different social contexts.

Research has also found that some contextual factors may also affect L2 speakers' requesting behaviors. Blum-Kulka, et al. (1985) and Blum-Kulka and House (1989), for example, note some contextual and situational factors that may influence L2 speakers' uses of requests, such as, the interlocutors' rights and obligations, the estimated likelihood for compliance, the urgency of request, the request goal, the setting, the formality and

informality of the situation (See Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2010, for more information and discussions).

Research on Requesting Behaviors in the Classrooms

Research has found that both teachers and students make requests in the classrooms (e. g., Doughty & Pica, 1986; Tsui, Marton, Mok, & Ng, 2004; Dalton-Puffer, 2005). Previous studies (e.g., Pica & Long, 1986; Ohta, 1994; Dalton-Puffer, 2005) reveal that teachers make two types of requests: the direct requests and the indirect requests. Students make requests in the English classrooms, too. Research has found that students make different types of requests, including the direct type and the indirect type, in the ESL/EFL classrooms (Dalton-Puffer, 2005; Ellis, 1992; Tseng, 1992).

Teacher and student requests are determined by certain factors. Teacher requests are determined by various factors: the social, cultural, contextual, psychological, and cognitive factors. A teacher request may be determined by such social factors as the social power (P), the social distance (D), and the rank of imposition (R) (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987). Regarding the social power, for example, teachers may make a direct request rather than an indirect request for the control of acts. Several studies (e.g. Falsgraf & Majors, 1995; Dalton-Puffer, 2005) have found that these social factors affect the teachers' requesting behaviors. According to Dalton-Puffer, classrooms are characterized by "participants who occupy stable roles that are clearly differentiated in terms of hierarchical status" (p. 1281). Dalton-Puffer further explains that the "asymmetric distribution of power" in the classroom contexts make teachers use more direct requests than indirect ones. With respect to the "imposition" factor, teachers' linguistic choices in requests may vary in their values and beliefs about whether students have an obligation to pursue the request (Fukushima, 1990).

In addition to these social factors, the situational and contextual factors are also likely to be influential on teachers' uses of various requests, including rights and obligations, estimated likelihood for compliance, urgency of request, topics, request goals, settings, and formality and informality of the situation (Dalton-Puffer, 2005; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2010). According to Dalton-Puffer, "classrooms are a prototypical one-vs.-many participant situation, combining a clear hierarchical differential between participants with an uneven distribution of speaking rights" (p. 1278). Thus, teacher requests in terms of directness level may be influenced by different contextual factors. Also, some potential factors may also affect teacher requests in the English classrooms, such as the contextual factors. Pica and Long (1986) note that the specific goals and methodology affect teachers' uses of the linguistic forms in requests. Chaudron (1988) notes that teachers' requesting behaviors may be also affected by certain classroom contextual factors such as classroom management (e.g. lecturing or grouping), code-switching (choice of language), lesson content, tasks, and goals.

Research has found that students make different types of requests, including the direct type and the indirect type, in the ESL/EFL classrooms (Dalton-Puffer, 2005; Ellis, 1992; Tseng, 1992). Ellis (1992) observes two ESL children's development of the use of requests in terms of the level of directness in the classrooms. His findings show that that his subjects tend to use the direct requests (e.g., "Give me my paper" (e.g., "Can I take book with me?"). Some factors affect students' requesting behaviors in the English classrooms. These include the students' proficiency level, the cognitive factor, student motivation, the social factors, the individual factors, and the psychological factors. L2 learners' uses of requests may be influenced by social, situational, cognitive, psychological and individual factors (Yu, 2004; Yang, 2009; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2010). Moreover, their characteristics such as motivation and L2 proficiency level can also

explain L2 students' uses in request (Lin, 2009, Yang, 2003, 2004). As for the psychological factors, Ellis (2008) explains that "the extent to which learners are able to encode illocutionary acts in socially appropriate ways may also depend on psychological factors" (p. 191). Students' requesting behaviors may also be affected by certain contextual factors in the classrooms, such as, teacher talk, the wait time after teacher questions, peer-peer or teacher-fronted interaction, code-switching (choice of language), lesson content, tasks, and goals.

Findings

Q1. Are teacher and student requests influenced by social factors in the English classroom?

The findings of the study revealed that teacher and student requests were affected by social factors. For example:

1. Teacher: Did you do the assignment? Yes? You come up here please. Just read your answer, OK? (Direct request)

Student: 我可以在這裡就好了嗎? 'Can I just read here?' (Indirect request)

Teacher: 好吧好吧。 'Ok, ok.'

Teacher:

...為什麼他 get more money 你就照它上面寫的啊。

... 'Why did he get more money? You can just follow the instructions.'

Student: 老師會不會介意我寫數字?

'Teacher would you mind if I write the numbers, Teacher?' (Indirect request) (Teacher A)

2. Teacher: 就是你沒有寫...你就給我在這裡寫...我就讓你在這裡寫...

'If you don't write..., you just write down in the classroom...I want to ask you to write here.' (Direct request) (Teacher A)

3. Teacher: 所以你就下禮拜交我還有時間幫你改。

'I will have time to help revise your writing if you turn it in by next week.'

Student: 老師等一下可以看嗎?

'Teacher can I take a look at it later, Teacher?' (Indirect request)

Teacher: 看甚麼? 'What to look at?'

Student: 看這個啊。 'Just look at this.' (Teacher B)

4. Teacher: (Student's nickname), 你幫我傳一下。 Thank you.

'You help me pass this. Thank you' (Teacher B)

5. Teacher: 每一組的人等一下要叫過來問問題喔。

'I want to call for people by group to answer questions later.'

Students: (making noises) (Teacher E)

In Examples 1 and 2, the teachers made direct requests by using the imperative type, "You come up here", and "You just write down in the classroom." It can be seen that a teacher with a higher social status tended to use more direct requests. In Examples 2 and 5, the teachers made direct requests by using the want statement type, "I want to ask you to write here", and "I want to call for people...." The findings showed that the teachers with more authority tended to use more direct requests in the classroom. In Example 4, the teacher made a direct request, "You help me pass this." The finding revealed that there was less social distance or more familiarity between teacher and student. It is interesting to

note that the teacher request “You help me pass this” referred to the lower degree of imposition. That is, helping pass papers is never a heavy task in the classroom. Further analysis found that teachers performed a request for completing a task by using an indirect request, “Ok now... can you just go through the whole paragraph for us?”. Due to the higher degree of imposition in this task, the teacher made an indirect request to ask the student to complete it. The qualitative analysis from the data showed that these teachers’ requests were influenced by different social factors.

This qualitative analysis also showed that student requests were also influenced by such social factors. In the above examples, the students with a lower social status tended to use more indirect requests, such as “Can I...?” (Examples 1 and 3), and “Would you mind...?” (Example 1). In Example 3, the student made a direct request, “Just look at this”, to respond to the teacher request. The student’s use of a direct request was influenced by the social factor imposition as revising students’ writings was considered as teachers’ obligation. The qualitative analysis from the data showed that in fact student requests were influenced by other different social factors.

Further analysis from the data also revealed that the social factor cannot solely explain students’ requesting behaviors in the classroom. Surprisingly, the findings of this study revealed that students did not use an appropriate request. Specifically, they probably did not consider being polite or face-saving important while they were making certain requests. For example:

6. Teacher: 你說我薪資很高是嗎? 怎麼可能!。

‘You said I got paid more, didn’t you? Impossible!’

Student: 薪水多少? ‘How much do you earn?’

Teacher: 甚麼多少? ‘What do you mean?’ (Teacher E)

7. Teacher: ...不會妳們這幾個都沒有寫吧? 有寫嘛 有, 好來。你也要在原位置來念嘛? 還是要來這邊?

‘Don’t you guys write the answers? You did. Yes. Ok. Will you read there or here?’

Student: 我不要, 在這邊就好 ‘No, I want to read here.’

Teacher: 不要喔 好, 那就發揮你唱歌的聲音. 你選第幾個? Which one? Three? 好 Good.

‘No? Ok. And try to do your best singing. Which one do you choose? Which one? Three? Ok, Good.’ (Teacher A)

In Example 7, the student made a direct request, “How much do you get paid?” which is an inappropriate request. In Example 7, the student answered by using a direct request, “I want to...,” in which the student did not probably consider the face-saving aspect in the interaction.

Q2. Are teacher and student requests influenced by contextual factors in the English classroom?

The findings of the study revealed that teacher and student requests were affected by contextual factors. Some contextual factors affecting teachers and students’ uses of request types at the directness level as well as performance of pragmatic functions in requests (e.g., teaching goals, teaching activities, and class management). For example:

1. Teacher: ...不會妳們這幾個都沒有寫吧? 有寫嘛 有, 好來。你也要在原位置來念嘛? 還是要來這邊?

'Don't you guys write the answers? You did. Yes. Ok. Will you read over there or here?

Student: 我不要, 在這邊就好 'No, I want to read here.'

Teacher: 不要喔 好, 那就發揮你唱歌的聲音. 你選第幾個? Which one? Three? 好 good.

'No? Ok. And try to do your best singing. Which one do you choose? Which one? Three? Ok, Good.' (Direct requests) (Teacher A)

2. Teacher: ... I want you to get a partner. I want you and your partner to talk about your best friend. ... Please introduce one of your best friend to your partner.
(Direct request) (Teacher B)

3. Teacher: 好, 右邊我給你幾個單字, 我把整個翻譯放在上面, 給你回家看。

'Ok, for the right part, I tell you some words and you can see the translation with them. You read them at home.' (Direct request) (Teacher B)

4. Teacher: 第三個, 天氣影響甚麼? Affect 是影響。

'Number 3, what does the weather affect? Affect means yingxian in Chinese.' (Direct request) (Teacher B)

5. Teacher: xxx, 你要不要試試看?... 第四段翻譯要不要試試看?

'..., do you want to take a try?.. Do you want to try to translate paragraph four?' (Indirect Request) (Teacher B)

6. Student: 老師我有那個嗎? 'Teacher, can I have that?' (Indirect request)

Teacher: 哪個? 'What do you mean?'

Student: 就是改過的, 還沒? 'The revised one, was it revised?' (Indirect request)

Teacher: 改過的? 'The revised one?'

Student: 就是我上次有給你嗎? 'Did I give it to you?' (Indirect request)

(Teacher B)

7. Teacher: How long is the old wall? How long is it? How long is it? (Direct request) (Direct request)

Student: fifth...

Teacher: Fifty feet long. Do you mean five? (Indirect request) (Teacher C)

8. Teacher: ..2 個人都要講話... and you are not allowed to read script, 請你不要

就兩個人對話就照著稿唸。 'You both have to speak out... and you are not allowed to read the script. Please don't read script with dialogues by two speakers.' (Direct request) (Teacher C)

9. Teacher: So, uh, can you tell us the meaning too? Tell us the meaning first.

Student: (answering) (Indirect request) (Teacher C)

10. Teacher: Hello, 後面的同學, 寫好自己的考卷的姓名學號, 然後收回來。

'Hello, classmates sitting behind, write your name and student number on the sheet and turn it back' (Direct request) (Teacher E)

11. Teacher: Ok, first check whether you have the answer sheet, and also the test paper. (Direct request) (Teacher E)

12. Teacher: 最近電腦有點怪怪的.. 等一下喔, 按哪裡?

'There's something wrong with the computer... Wait a second. Where is the button?'

Student: 中間那個綠色的 ‘Green, in the middle.’ (Direct request)

Teacher: 這個嗎? ‘This one?’

Student: 再右邊一點點 ‘Turn to your right more.’ (Direct request)

(Teacher E)

The above data showed that these teachers tended to use more direct requests while managing class (Examples 2 and 7), lecturing (Examples 4 and 5), checking answers (Example 11), and assigning homework (Examples 3, 6, and 8). In Example two (e.g. “I want you to...”) and Example seven (“Write your name and student number...”), the teachers gave instructions by using the direct requests. In Examples four and five, the teachers were lecturing by using the direct requests, “What does the weather affect?” and “How long is the old wall?” Teachers used direct requests to check answers, “Which one?” (Example 1) and “first check...” (Example 8), and to assign homework. In Examples three and five, the teachers made direct requests, “I want you read them at home”, and “You are not allowed to read the script” for assigning homework, “You read them at home” (Example 3), and “You are not allowed to read the script” (Example 5). It can be seen that these teachers tended to make indirect requests in doing exercises and practices. They used indirect types such as “Do you want to try to translate paragraph four?” (Example 5) and “Can you tell us the meaning, too?” (Example 9). Although teacher requests were influenced by such contextual factors, other factors were influential too, such as teacher characteristics. For example, Teacher B tended to use more direct requests in different contexts in the classroom.

These findings also showed that student requests at the directness level were influenced by other contextual factors in the classrooms, such as topics, settings, and events. They used direct requests in helping teachers solve the computer problems (Example 12), in which the student made a request in an informal situation. They used indirect request types while they were talking to their teacher about their schoolwork (Example 6). In Example one, the student responded to her teacher’s request by using a direct request “No, I want to read here.” Such request was influenced by a specific event, in which the student was asked to read in front of the class.

The pragmatic functions of requests performed by college EFL teachers and students were also influenced by certain contextual factors in the classrooms. For example:

13. Student: That’s all.

Teacher: That’s all? 你們講得怎麼都兩三個,你們不會講為什麼有好朋友 why? 因為命運嗎?

‘That’s all? Why are you talking about this only? You cannot explain why you have good friends. Why? Because of fate?’

Student: Because we are classmates.

Teacher: Classmates? 可是你大一他大二,為什麼會是 classmates?

‘Classmate? Why are you classmates? You’re a freshman and he is a sophomore.’ (Request for clarification) (Teacher B)

14. Teacher: 對, blogger, 台灣有甚麼有名的部落客, 你們認識的? 女王算嗎?

‘Right, blogger. Do you know any famous blogger in Taiwan? Is *The Queen* famous?’

Student: 彎彎。 ‘Wan-wan’

Teacher: 彎彎是誰? 還有甚麼? ‘Who is Wan-wan? What else?’

- Student: (Murmuring)
 Teacher: 誰?...他是部落客是不是?
 ‘Who? Is he a blogger?’ (Request for clarification) (Teacher B)
15. Teacher: How long is the old wall? How long is it? How long is it?
 Student: fifth...
 Teacher: Fifty feet long. Do you mean five? (Request for clarification)
 (Teacher C)
16. Teacher: ...Belgium, do you know? Belgium? In Europe, a small country.
 Student: 瑞典。 ‘Sweden.’
 Teacher: 瑞典? ‘Sweden?’ (Request for clarification)
 Student: 瑞士。 ‘Swiss’
 Teacher: 瑞士? ‘Swiss?’ (Request for clarification)
17. Teacher: 甚麼是 middle age? 可以猜猜嗎? ‘What is middle age? Can you take a guess?’ (Request for information; request for encouragement)
 (Teacher B)
 Teacher: xxx, 你要不要試試看?...第四段翻譯要不要試試看?
 ‘..., do you want to take a try?...Do you want to try to translate paragraph four?’ (Request for encouragement) (Teacher B)
18. Teacher: All right, any other? Can we have one more person to say something?
 Student: (One student is raising his hand) (Request for encouragement)
 (Teacher C)
19. Teacher: 你寫數字總要唸一下, 想一下, twenty-fifth...
 ‘While writing down the number, read it please, and think about it.’
 (Request for speculation) (Teacher B)
20. Teacher: How do we say this word? Freight? Do we pronounce the gh? Do we pronounce the gh? (Request for speculation) (Teacher C)

In these examples, the teachers made requests for clarification, such as “Why are you talking about this only?”, “Because of fate?”, “Why are you classmates?”, “Is *The Queen* famous?” and “Who is Wan-wan?”. It can be seen that they tended to make more requests for clarification while talking about the topic of daily-life experiences in the classrooms. The findings also showed that they made requests for clarification in lecturing, for example, “Do you mean five?” (Example 15), and “Sweden?” (Example 16).

These findings also showed that teachers tended to perform requests for information while starting a new lesson and lecturing (Examples 1, 4, 7, and 17). In Examples 17, 18 and 19, teachers made requests for encouragement while they were lecturing or doing practices in the textbook with the students. They also made requests for speculation and ability in lecturing (Examples 20, 21, and 22). They performed a request for want in giving instruction (e.g. “Ok, now, turn to next page”), checking answers to questions in reading, listening, and assignment (e.g. “I would like to ask six persons to answer the six questions”, “Introduce your best friend”), conducting a task (e.g. “I want you and your partner to talk about your best friend”, “Could you please assign your partner?”), managing a class (e.g. “Why didn’t you fill in your English this time?”, “Would you please deliver in a slower way?”), and assigning homework (“Please practice

the questions at home”). These results showed that these teachers made requests for want in different contexts in the classrooms.

Discussion

Social factors influencing teacher and student requests in the EFL classroom

The results also reveal that the teacher request types are affected by such social factors as social power (social status and authority), social distance (familiarity), and imposition. It is highly possible that college EFL teachers tend to make direct requests by using imperatives and want statements (e.g., “I want to ask you to...”) because they think they are in a higher social status or they have more authority in the classrooms. The results seem to confirm with Dalton-Puffer’s (2005) and Economidou-Kogetsidis’ (2010), stating that “asymmetric distribution of power” in the classroom contexts. Also, the familiarity between teachers and students may also affect teachers’ uses of request types. For example, they tend to use the direct request sub-types (e.g., “You help me...”) due to their close relationship. It is possible that if there is more distance between teachers and students, teachers tend to use the indirect request types, such as “Could you please...?” Theoretically, Brown and Levinson’s ‘face-saving model’ (1978, 1987) can explain this. In Brown and Levinson’s model, there are two aspects of face. One of them is ‘positive face’, which represents an individual’s desire to be accepted and liked by others. In the data of the study, the degree of imposition is influential, too. The teachers may use a direct or indirect type depending on how heavy the task is. For example, it is easy for students to pass papers in the classrooms; therefore, teachers tend to use the direct request sub-types, such as “You help me pass this.” In Searle’s (1975) classification of speech acts, the direct and indirect requests of speech act are used to express a speaker’s desire and wish.

The results seem to reveal that student requests are influenced by social factors, too. It is highly possible that students think they are in a lower social status in the classrooms, so they use more indirect requests, such as “Can I...?” and “Would you mind...?” Students may use a direct request type when they think they have closer relationship with their teachers.

Contextual factors influencing teacher and student requests in the EFL classroom

The results also indicate that certain contextual factors affect teachers’ and students’ uses of request types in the English classrooms. The results seem to confirm with Chaudron (1988), Yu (2004), and Yang (2009), claiming that certain classroom contextual and situational factors may influence teachers’ and students’ requesting behaviors, such as classroom management (e.g. lecturing or grouping), code-switching (choice of language), lesson content, tasks, and goals. The results reveal that the teachers tend to use direct requests in managing classroom order and giving instructions. Not surprisingly, they make direct requests as they have to draw students’ attention to the class and they have obligation to do so. The results are compatible to the theory of context in pragmatics. As Paltridge (1996) notes, language is variously understood and interpreted by the people involved in the interaction in different contexts. Teachers and students are also considered as social beings.

Based upon the above findings, the present study also makes the following suggestions for further research. To make the results of the study more generalizable, there is a need to take the subject and the gender factor into consideration.

Conclusion

The findings of the study showed that the teacher and student request types were affected by such social factors as social power (social status and authority), social distance

(familiarity), and the rank of imposition. The findings showed that some contextual factors (e.g., goals, topics, classroom management) affected teachers' uses of the request types at the directness level. The findings also showed that student requests at the directness level were also influenced by contextual factors in the classroom as topics, settings, goals, and events.

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