

REQUEST STRATEGIES BY VIETNAMESE LEARNERS AND AUSTRALIAN SPEAKERS: SAME OR DIFFERENT?

Ha Cam Tam^(*)

1. Problem statement

Wolfson (1983, p. 61) asserts that each culture differs not only in the pragmalinguistic repertoire most often used to convey politeness, but also in the rules of speaking and the patterns of interaction. Therefore, language learners are required to be proficient in these community-specific rules in order to communicate appropriately and effectively with people in the target language. Since the acquisition of the community-specific rules in the target language is not a simple task, learners have been found to be different or deviating from native speaker norms in their realization of speech acts, which results in pragmatic failures, a common problem encountered by learners even at advanced level. According to Koike (1996), Gass and Selinker (1983), transfer of pragmatic knowledge from the first language in the use of a foreign language is highly common.

In reference to pragmatic transfer, Thomas (1983) identifies two levels of transfer, namely pragmalinguistic transfer and sociopragmatic transfer. In her position, pragmalinguistic transfer is defined as the inappropriate transfer of speech act strategies from one language to another, usually from the mother tongue to the target language, for

instance using a direct speech act where a native speaker would use an indirect speech act or "off-record" politeness strategy. House-Kasper (1987), Eisenstein-Bodman (1986) have also noted that pragmatic transfer is found in learners' use of conventions of means and form, affecting the illocutionary force and politeness value in interlanguage utterance.

Alternatively, sociopragmatic transfer relates very closely to issues of culture, which is fundamental in the study of language, since differences in ways of speaking reflect cultural values (Sociopragmatic transfer has been Wierzbicka, 1991, p. 69). found to operate in learners' perceptions of contextual factors, such as the interlocutor's relative social status (Beebe-Takahashi-Uliss-Weltz, 1990; Takahashi - Beebe, 1993), in the assessment of whether carrying out a particular linguistic action is socially appropriate, and in the politeness style adopted in a particular context (Blum-Kulka, 1982).

Pragmalinguistic and socio-pragmatic transfer is acknowledged as a problem in language learners by Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990, p.56) who report that second language learners often fail to acquire rules of appropriateness and

^(*) MA., Department of English-American Language and Culture, College of Foreign Languages - VNU.

identify pragmatic transfer as one of the reasons for this failure. Even when the structures of two languages are superficially similar, Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) argue that a grammatically and lexically similar message does not ensure that students understand it through transfer and analogy. In order to acquire a language learners must not only learn to decode at the utterance level, but also learn to read the context and its relationship to the utterance (Koike (1996). In addition, they must also learn the differences between the first and target language formulations of speech acts. This process implies knowledge of the target language speech acts at both the grammatical/lexical level as well as the pragmatic level of use and an ability to make pragmatic adjustments in situations of language contact. It is knowledge and use of rules of appropriateness and politeness that dictate the way the learner understands and formulates utterances, such as requests in their interlanguage (Koike (1989). Since, the same thing may be appropriate in one culture but inappropriate in another culture, this poses risks for those communicating across cultures since "competent adult members comment on the absence of politeness where it is expected; social appreciation is conveyed and withdrawn accordingly" (Kasper, 1990, p. 193).

Due to the current trend in communicative language teaching that emphasizes acquiring rules of speaking, empirically based research has been

carried out to meet the needs of material developers and language teachers. In spite of these researchers' emphasis, second language learners often fail to acquire rules of appropriateness. The following report will present some findings that reveal pragmatic transfer of Vietnamese learners of English in their realization of requests in the contexts studied.

2. Method

This research sets out to answer the following question:

How do Vietnamese learners of English differ from native speakers of English in their realization of requests in terms of the choice of strategies in the contexts studied?

In order to answer the research question, a DCT was designed to collect data. In the DCT, situations were set up with social factors P, D, R varied systematically. The DCT were distributed to subjects to provide request utterances. Request tokens were then analysed focussing on the choice of strategies.

Subjects of the study included three populations, Australian (called A), Vietnamese learners (called L), and Vietnamese speakers (called V), they were all students. In the Australian group there were 53 students, in the learners' group 52 students, and in the Vietnamese group 54 people. The Australian students and Vietnamese learners provided requests in English, while the Vietnamese people provided requests in Vietnamese.

3. Main results of the study

An examination of the three sets of data shows that there were several

differences between Learner's requests, Australian speaker's requests and Vietnamese speaker's requests, since they often opted for different strategy in the same setting. Overall, in terms of

strategy Learner's requests and Vietnamese speaker's requests looked more direct than those of Australian speaker's requests. Details of differences will be outlined below.

Table 1: The use of Strategy across situations by A, L and V

Strat	Sit.3(+P,+D) Licence			Sit.11(+P,-D) Document			Sit.24(=P,+D) Door			Sit.22(=P,-D) Car			Sit.14(-P,+D) Jack			Sit.20(-P,-D) Money		
	A	L	V	A	L	V	A	L	V	A	L	V	A	L	V	A	L	V
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Imp	5.7	32	33.3	7.5	33	72.2	0	15.4	20.4	0	5.8	5.5	0	5.8	1.8	0	9.6	9.26
Per	0	0	55.6	0	0	1.8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Abi	13	9.6	1.8	75.5	53.8	20.4	75.5	71	57.4	3.8	26.9	74.1	26	65.4	83.3	28	63.5	79.6
Wil	3.8	1.9	0	3.8	1.9	0	13	13.5	9.25	9.4	3.8	1.8	5.7	7.7	1.8	1.9	7.7	1.8
Psn	68	32	13	3.8	1.9	0	0	0	7.4	83	59.6	5.5	15	15.4	7.4	66	13.5	1.8
Fea	0	7.7	0	1.9	1.9	1.8	0	0	0	0	0	0	41.5	3.8	1.8	1.9	0	3.7

Table 1 outlines the results of three sets of data analysis with regards the use of strategy over the situations under the study and will be used as the basis for the subsequent discussion. As the title suggests, in this section I will focus on the differences between requests by learners and those of Australian speakers. The Vietnamese data will be used to trace the transference of Vietnamese pragmatics into English by the learners or explain for their pragmatic failures.

Firstly, as we saw in Table 1, the obvious feature characterizes Learner's requests and Australian requests is the use of *Imperative* in all situations by Learners with the highest frequency in +P setting. Consequently, we saw requests such as "Please lend me your jack" or "I want your jack. Can you help me?" or "Lend me your jack, please" which points

out that Learners have extended routines to situations where they are not appropriate (Richards and Sukwiat, 1983). In the native speakers' eyes, such an inappropriate formula would suggest that the speaker did not know how to act in accordance with the contextual relative power and obligations. As such, learner's request explicitly threatened the hearer's face, hence the perlocutionary act would be likely absent.

In order to identify the causes we should look at the Vietnamese data. Then we would not be surprised to find out why Learners used imperatives so frequently in English. The answer is because they used them very often in Vietnamese, especially for the situations of high power setting, so they automatically transferred them to the target language. This kind of pragmatic transference is termed by Brown and Levinson, (1978, p.216) as pragmalinguistic

failure in which a direct speech act was used where native speaker would use an indirect speech act.

Secondly, results show that learners' variation of the strategy across situations was limited with only Ability request found in high percentage in all most all situations except for Sit.3 (Licence). If we compared the strategy "*Anh/chi co the X...?*" most often used by Vietnamese, we would also find the same strategy occurring in high frequency in all most all situations in Learners' requests. Possibly this strategy is very common in Vietnamese language and can be used in combination with other devices to mitigate the requests so as to increase the degree of politeness. Furthermore, considering the equivalents of this structure in English, we will find several English equivalents, namely "*May I / Can I / Could I / Could you / Could you possibly / Would it be possible...*". When a narrow range of structures in the mother tongue has a wider range of possible "translations" in the target language, **pragmatic overgeneralization** is particularly likely to occur (Thomas, 1983, p.103).

Thirdly, let us look at Sit.14 (Jack) in which Learners and Australian subjects differed remarkably (see Table 4 and Graph 3). The Australian subjects were far more indirect than Learners. It is true that Learners failed to convey socially appropriate native speaker-like requests due to a lack of proficiency that has been mentioned in 5.3. However, if we look at how Learners interpreted the English request form of "*Can you/could you...*" in Vietnamese, we can say that Learners were trying to be indirect, or

very indirect according to Learners native language pragmatics. It is natural in Learners' culture to be very polite when asking for help from a stranger. Thus, it is possible to say that in this situation, both groups were inclined to be indirect, yet L failed to choose the strategy that Australian subjects did, which means that they failed to convey the wanted pragmatic force.

The same can be said about Sit.20 (Money) in that while they chose different strategies, they were both trying to be indirect, and less imposing. However, Learners failed to behave linguistically as the Australian speakers would because they misunderstood the pragmatic meaning of the two English structures "*Can I do...*" and "*Can you do...*" Also, this failure can be related to transfer from L1 to L2. Surprisingly, in the "finding the equivalents" questionnaire, 15 out of 50 Learners marked "*Can you find me the document right now*" to be similar to "*Co co the tim giup toi tap tai lieu ngay bay gio duoc khong?*" A misunderstanding of the pragmatic force of the English utterance. Two languages may have different routines for the same pragmatic force, Learners just opted for syntactically equivalent structure but totally different in pragmatic meaning.

In many cases, direct translations were found in the data, for instance we found many Vietnamese phrasing their requests in situation 11 as "*Toi dang rat can tap tai lieu de di hop, co tim ngay tap tai lieu do cho toi*" or "*Co tim cho toi tap tai lieu, toi di hop ngay bay gio*", and many learners formulated their requests in English as "Hey, try to find out that

document as soon as possible”, “Please help me look for the document.”

Fourthly, even in cases where Learners' and Australian speakers' requests looked similar, they were in fact different. In an attempt to understand the underlying reasons for these similarities, I collected extra data from Learners who were Vietnamese studying at different universities in Melbourne. Nine request tokens including Ability, Permission and Imperative requests by Learners in my data were chosen. Twenty students including graduates and undergraduates aged between 19 and 30 were asked to translate those requests into Vietnamese (see the Translation Questionnaire, Appendix B). Following are the findings:

a) Nine informants translated “Can I see your driving licence?” into “Anh cho xem bang lai xe!” or “De nghi anh chi/chi cho xem bang lai xe!”. Eight informants translated “Can I borrow your car this Sunday” into “Em muon xe anh chu nhat nay nhe” or “Em muon xe anh chu nhat nay duoc khong?”.

b) Twelve informants translated “Can you lend me your car this Sunday?” into “Anh co the cho em muon xe vao chu nhat nay duoc khong?”.

c) Nine informants translated “Please lend me your jack!” into “Lam on cho toi muon cai kich” or “Xin vui long cho toi muon cai kich.”

d) One subject translated both “Can I see your driving licence?” and “Could you show me your driving license, please” into the same form as “De nghi anh/chi cho xem giay phep lai xe!” which is a direct form of a request in Vietnamese and which sounds authoritative.

These findings suggest that of the three forms available in the data, while (a), (b) and (c) are in order of decreasing indirectness in English, in Learners' data those forms, if placed in the same order of directness, are (b), (c) and (a). In fact, Learners' form in (a) is very direct. Especially in licence questions, Learners' utterances sound more like commands than requests in Vietnamese. Learners' form in (b) is more tentative, less imposing, and much more polite than that in (c) and (a). Learners' form in (c) is more tentative less assertive than (a) because of the use of “*xin vui long*”. Which means that Learners equated English *Permission* requests (*Can I...*) with the *Imperative* requests in Vietnamese, while English *Ability* requests (*Can you...*) were understood as equivalent to the most tentative and polite requests in Vietnamese. The English *Imperative* form with the inclusion of “please” was understood by Learners as requests in which the degree of indirectness is in between the most and the least indirect forms of requests in Vietnamese. Interestingly, the same way of interpreting English *Ability* requests in Learners is also found in some books and textbooks in Vietnam. In *Sach hoc tieng Anh lop 11* (English for year 11, 1994, p.51) “*Could you tell me the way to Regent's Park?*” was translated into “*Xin ong vui long chi cho toi duong toi cong vien Regent*”, a very polite form of request in Vietnamese which is not the pragmatically equivalent of English. This is a kind of pragmatic failure arisen from “teaching induced

errors” as Thomas (1983) puts it—the inappropriate transfer of speech strategies from one language to another, or the transferring from the mother tongue to the target language of utterances which are semantically/ syntactically equivalent, but which tend to convey a different pragmatic force.

Alternatively, the results show that Learners interpreted the form “*Can you/ Could you do X...*” in English as more tentative than the form “*Can I have/ do X...*” Which indicates that the two groups have different opinions about the pragmatic force of the three forms “*Can I*”, “*Can/ could you*” and “*Please do X*” because in Learners’ mother tongue Permission requests can be expressed linguistically by both forms, either “*Toi co the muon xe cua anh duoc khong?*” (*Can I borrow your car?*) or “*Anh co the vui long cho toi muon xe duoc khong?*” (*Can you please lend me you car?*) in which the former sounds more direct than the latter in Vietnamese. It, therefore, indicates that the similarity at the surface level is the reflection of direct transference of the seemingly equivalent forms from Vietnamese into English.

Fifthly, there is an indication that Learners misinterpreted the form “*Please do X*” in English, since they translated this form into a fairly polite form of request in Vietnamese, which is not what is actually meant in English. A likely explanation is that Learners interpreted the English form according to Learners native language

pragmalinguistics. In Vietnamese a request with the inclusion of “*lam on*” (please) is a very mitigating one, in fact this form is so strongly mitigating that it is rarely used among intimates, because it implies deference on the part of the speaker. Whereas in English the use of “please” in the form of *Ability* requests is not considered mitigating enough, hence not appropriately polite. Here again, the two languages may have the same routine but different pragmatic forces.

Surprisingly, some Learners even used permission request for Sit.3 while the majority of subjects used Imperative. This also resulted from a pragmatic transfer from Learners use of request forms rather than a true understanding of the more mitigating nature of a Permission request in English. Since this strategy was understood as equivalent to the imperative in English by several subjects which already mentioned earlier. This finding lends support to Kasper (1989) as she discovered that “a formally comparable request structure, such as English “*can I borrow your notes*”, German “*kann ich deine Auszeichnungen leihen*” and Danish “*kan jeg lane dine noter*” is not necessarily functionally equivalent in the three languages and cultures, i.e. its socio-pragmatic value might vary cross culturally.”

Finally, let us look at Sit. 22 (Car) in which both Learners and Australian speakers had *Permission* requests as their most preferred strategy. This apparent similarity is in fact misleading in that while the Australian speakers opted for Permission requests so that the Addressee had more control of the

situation, meaning more mitigating, more polite, Learners formulated their requests using the same strategy for different reasons, more direct showing more intimate. Thus indirectness of Learners in this case is superficially a success. Again, this is a case of pragmalinguistic transfer and socio-pragmatic transfer. Because while L used the indirect form, they intended to be direct, thus they failed to convey the intended meaning (Thomas, 1983). They do not have problems in producing the speech act, but they probably have problems in interpreting the act in real conversation.

All things considered, with respect to the degree of indirectness and mitigation attached to Ability, Permission and Imperative forms of requests, the two groups A and L were in fact quite different.

4. Conclusion

As we saw above, the two groups were different in several ways.

a) Learners were more direct than Australian speakers in most of the cases. They therefore appear more imposing and less polite than they should have been to native speakers' eyes.

b) Compared to Australian speakers, learners were limited in the variation of strategies in the realization of requests.

c) There were clear indications of pragmatic transfer from Vietnamese to English which results in the directness of their requests.

d) Learner's incorrect understanding of the pragmatic meaning of the permission request and ability request in English was due to the negative transference of L1 pragmatics.

e) It is true that some Vietnamese patterns were identical with English but their pragmatic forces were different, and Vietnamese learners should be fully aware of this if they wish to improve their pragmatic competence.

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CHIẾN LƯỢC YÊU CẦU CỦA NGƯỜI VIỆT HỌC TIẾNG ANH VÀ ÚC: GIỐNG HAY KHÁC NHAU?

Th.S Hà Cẩm Tâm

Khoa Ngôn ngữ & Văn hoá Anh-Mỹ

Đại học Ngoại ngữ, Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội

Trong những năm gần đây, nhiều nghiên cứu đã khẳng định rằng việc học một ngoại ngữ đòi hỏi người học phải nắm được những quy luật sử dụng các công thức giao tiếp trong tình huống. Nghiên cứu này nhằm phát hiện những lệch chuẩn của người Việt Nam học tiếng Anh so với người Úc bản ngữ trong việc lựa chọn các chiến lược ngôn ngữ cho lời yêu cầu của những tình huống đã được xác định trước. Nghiên cứu được thực hiện bằng phương pháp định lượng, sử dụng phiếu câu hỏi cho ba nhóm cấp tín viên: (1) nhóm người Úc, (2) người Việt học tiếng Anh và (3) nhóm người Việt. Hai nhóm người Úc và người Việt học tiếng Anh cung cấp lời yêu cầu bằng tiếng Anh, còn người Việt cung cấp lời yêu cầu bằng tiếng Việt. Mục đích của nghiên cứu là để phát hiện những chuyển di dụng học ngôn ngữ từ tiếng mẹ đẻ (tiếng Việt) sang ngôn ngữ đích (tiếng Anh). Kết quả cho thấy lời yêu cầu của người Việt Nam học tiếng Anh có nhiều dấu hiệu chuyển di dụng học từ tiếng mẹ đẻ sang ngôn ngữ đích do đó đã lệch chuẩn khá nhiều so với người bản ngữ. Điều này khẳng định rằng cần cung cấp thêm thông tin ngữ dụng cho người học để học biết phải làm gì và làm như thế nào cho phù hợp khi giao tiếp bằng tiếng Anh.