

TEACHING SPEECH ACTS OF REQUESTS IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

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Abstract

The ability to perform speech acts appropriately is an essential component of communicative competence in a second language. Among various speech acts, requests play a crucial role in everyday communication because they allow speakers to ask for help, information, or services. However, many ESL learners struggle to formulate requests that are both grammatically correct and pragmatically appropriate. This article discusses methodological approaches to teaching request speech acts in the ESL classroom. The study reviews theoretical perspectives on pragmatics and speech act theory and proposes practical classroom strategies for developing learners' pragmatic competence. The paper highlights the importance of contextualized instruction, role-play activities, and awareness-raising tasks in improving students' ability to make polite and contextually suitable requests.

Key words: Speech Acts, Requests, Pragmatics, Communicative Competence, ESL Teaching, Politeness Strategies.

Introduction

In modern foreign language education, communicative competence is considered one of the primary goals of instruction. It is no longer sufficient for learners to master grammar and vocabulary alone; they must also learn how to use language appropriately in different social contexts. One important aspect of communicative competence is pragmatic competence, which refers to the ability to interpret and produce language in accordance with sociocultural norms. Speech acts constitute a central concept in pragmatics. According to speech act theory, language is not only used to convey information but also to perform actions. When people speak, they may request, apologize, promise, or thank others. Among these communicative actions, requests are particularly significant because they occur frequently in daily interactions. Despite their importance, requests are often difficult for second language learners. Students may produce grammatically correct sentences that sound impolite or inappropriate in certain situations. For example, direct forms such as "Give me your pen" may be acceptable in some contexts but can sound rude in others. Therefore, ESL instruction should focus not only on linguistic accuracy but also on pragmatic appropriateness.

This article explores effective methods for teaching request speech acts in the ESL classroom and discusses strategies that can help learners develop pragmatic awareness.

Literature review

The study of speech acts originates from the work of philosophers such as Austin and Searle. Austin introduced the concept that utterances perform actions, while Searle further classified speech acts into categories such as directives, commissives, expressives, declarations, and representatives. Requests belong to the category of directives because they attempt to get the listener to perform an action.

Later research in pragmatics emphasized the role of politeness and social context in speech acts. Brown and Levinson proposed the theory of politeness strategies, suggesting that speakers use various linguistic forms to maintain social harmony and respect the interlocutor's "face." In the case of requests, speakers often employ indirect forms or mitigating expressions to reduce imposition.

In second language acquisition research, scholars have highlighted that pragmatic competence does not automatically develop alongside grammatical competence. Learners may transfer pragmatic norms from their native language, which sometimes leads to misunderstandings in intercultural communication. Consequently, many researchers argue that pragmatic features such as requests should be taught explicitly in the language classroom.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative methodological approach based on classroom observation and analysis of teaching practices used in ESL instruction. The aim is to identify effective techniques for teaching request speech acts to intermediate-level learners.

The instructional framework proposed in this article includes three stages:

1. Awareness-raising activities
2. Controlled practice
3. Communicative practice

These stages allow learners to first understand pragmatic rules and then gradually apply them in real-life communication.

Teaching strategies for requests

Awareness-raising activities

The first stage focuses on developing learners' understanding of how requests function in English. Teachers may present authentic dialogues from everyday situations such as asking for help in a classroom, requesting information in a store, or asking a friend for a favor.

Students analyze these examples to identify differences between direct and indirect requests.

For instance:

Direct request:
"Open the window."

Polite request:
"Could you open the window, please?"

Through discussion, learners become aware of how politeness markers, modal verbs, and softening expressions influence the tone of a request.

Controlled practice

After students gain initial awareness, they practice forming requests using structured exercises. These activities may include sentence transformation tasks, gap-fill exercises, or matching situations with appropriate request forms.

For example, learners may be asked to rewrite direct commands into polite requests:

"Give me the book."
→ "Could you give me the book, please?"

Such activities help students internalize grammatical structures commonly used in requests, including modal verbs like could, would, and can.

Communicative practice



The final stage emphasizes meaningful interaction. Role-play activities are particularly effective for practicing request strategies. Students may simulate real-life situations such as:

asking a teacher for an extension

requesting directions from a stranger

asking a colleague for assistance

These tasks encourage learners to consider social distance, power relationships, and levels of formality when making requests.

Group discussions and peer feedback can further enhance students' pragmatic awareness.

Discussion

Teaching speech acts requires a balance between linguistic instruction and sociocultural understanding. If teachers focus solely on grammar, learners may produce correct sentences that still sound inappropriate. Conversely, teaching pragmatic norms without sufficient language support may leave students unable to express themselves effectively.

Therefore, integrating pragmatics into communicative language teaching is essential. Authentic materials, contextualized examples, and interactive tasks can significantly improve learners' ability to produce natural and polite requests.

Moreover, teachers should encourage learners to reflect on cross-cultural differences in communication styles. What is considered polite in one culture may be interpreted differently in another. By discussing such differences openly, students can develop greater intercultural competence.

Conclusion

The ability to perform request speech acts appropriately is an important aspect of pragmatic competence in second language learning. ESL learners often encounter difficulties in selecting suitable linguistic forms and politeness strategies when making requests.

This article has discussed methodological approaches to teaching requests in the ESL classroom, emphasizing awareness-raising activities, controlled practice, and communicative tasks. The findings suggest that explicit instruction combined with interactive learning activities can significantly improve learners' pragmatic competence.

Future research may explore how technology-based learning environments and digital communication platforms can further support the teaching of speech acts in foreign language education.

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