

Pragmatic Competence in Requests of Thai Learners of Spanish

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ABSTRACT

This present study aims to analyse the pragmatic competence in requests of Thai learners of Spanish by comparing the pragmatic competence performed by Thai learners of Spanish and Spanish native speakers. A multiple-choice discourse completion test (MDCT) in Spanish in different situations was employed to collect data from two groups of participants. The first group consisted of 30 fourth-year Thai students of Khon Kaen University majoring in Spanish while the second group had 30 Spanish native speakers. Making a request is one of the speech acts frequently used in everyday life. Requests are face-threatening acts because a speaker wants to convince a hearer to do something that is beneficial to the speaker. Different request strategies are employed in different cultures. In some cultures, performing a request increases the level of indirectness to protect a speaker's face while in others, speakers need to reduce the level of indirectness to save the hearer's face or to show a close relationship between the speaker and hearer. Despite many differences between Thai and Spanish cultures, no study about pragmatic competence in requests focusing on Thai learners of Spanish has been conducted. It is necessary for Thai learners of Spanish to have pragmatic competence by learning the appropriate politeness strategies in Spanish to avoid communication failures or misunderstanding. The findings of this study suggest that in formal situations, requests performed by Thai learners of Spanish significantly differ from requests performed by native Spanish speakers. On the contrary, requests performed by two groups of participants are rather similar in informal situations. The results of this study can show cultural differences between the Thai and Spanish languages.

Keywords: Politeness strategies, requests, Thai learners of Spanish, pragmatic competence

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INTRODUCTION

To have intercultural communicative competence, L2 learners have to be aware of the variety of cultural aspects that affect communication and be able to use appropriate ways to maintain a good relationship with people in different cultures. One of the social principles used to please other people in communication is politeness. Politeness is a part of pragmatics that plays a significant role when people from different cultures have to interact. Thai learners of Spanish have difficulty communicating with native Spanish speakers and encounter misunderstandings in the Spanish conversation classroom because they tend to use, on many occasions, politeness strategies of Thai or their second language, in this case, English, more often than those of Spanish.

This present research was conducted to investigate the grammatical use of politeness strategies that Thai students of Spanish tend to use whether they have learnt to use appropriate or native-like politeness strategies or not.

Studies of Politeness

Politeness has been a widely studied subject for decades. A large number of theories of politeness have been proposed. In this section, we will review some of the theories of politeness.

Leech (1983) suggested that there is a set of maxims of politeness, which consists of tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement and sympathy. For Leech (1983),

being polite meant avoiding imposition, giving options and being friendly. Differing from Leech's (1983) concept of politeness, Brown and Levinson (1987) focused on the term of face, which means the public image a person wishes to display in society. People are concerned about their image when they interact with others; they expect to be respected and admired.

Brown and Levinson (1987) explained that when a speaker says something that can threaten another, it is called a face threatening act (FTA). On the other hand, when a speaker says something that tends to improve the image of another, it is called a face flattering act (FFA). When a FTA is performed, it is necessary to use politeness strategies to soften a threat or to reduce an imposition, which is described as negative politeness while positive politeness represents politeness which is used to satisfy the speaker's need of approval and the image of another.

Politeness in Spanish Culture

Politeness strategies vary from one culture to another in spite of their universal validity. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), there are two principle aspects of politeness: negative politeness, which explains the situations where the speaker avoids using an FTA (Face Threatening Act) and positive politeness, which consists of situations where the speaker uses an FFA (Face Flattering Act). Sifianou (1992) compared different aspects between English culture and Greek culture and concluded in his

work that in English culture, people tended to have negative politeness whereas Greek people generally employ positive politeness.

Similar to Greek culture, the characteristics of positive politeness appear in Spanish culture (Sifianou, 1992; Haverkate, 2004; Barros, 2008). Moreover, Bravo (2004), discussing two main concepts of politeness, autonomy and affiliation, proposed that the second concept was commonly found in Spanish culture since it is considered as confidence, proximity and familiarity, which not only satisfy one's own image, but also shows a positive image of both speaker and hearer (Hernández, 2004).

In accordance with Bravo (2004), Haverkate (2004) pointed out that solidarity is significant in Spanish culture, which can be found in these outstanding examples of speech acts. Firstly, *auto-repetition* of the speaker when he/she wants to accept an invitation: "Yes, yes, of course". Secondly, *the use of the imperative* to make a request is a commonly used strategy, particularly when the interlocutor relationship is close, although this seems to be impolite in some cultures. Lastly, *flattery* plays an important role in making the image of the hearer better in Spanish culture and, at the same time, it makes the speaker seem more considerate.

L2 Studies of Request

Making a request is one of the speech acts frequently used in everyday life. Requests are face-threatening acts because a speaker wants to convince a hearer to do something that is beneficial to the speaker. Different request strategies are employed

in different cultures. In some cultures, to perform a request, one has to increase the level of indirectness to protect a speaker's face while, in other cultures, they need to reduce the level of indirectness to save a hearer's face or to show a close relationship between speaker and hearer. Since there are many differences between the Thai and Spanish cultures, it is necessary for Thai learners of Spanish to learn the appropriate grammatical use of politeness strategies in Spanish to avoid communication failures or misunderstanding.

Several investigations about politeness strategies in requests by L2 learners were conducted. In this section, some of the relevant studies will be summarised.

Tanaka and Kawade (1982) compared politeness strategies used by native speakers of English and Japanese ESL learners, using a multiple-choice questionnaire discourse completion test (MDCT). The findings showed that the strategies used by Japanese learners did not differ significantly from those used by native speakers.

Another study was conducted by Suh (1999), investigating whether there was any difference between native speakers of English and Korean ESL learners. Similarly to Tanaka and Kawade's (1982) study, an MDCT was employed. It was revealed that Korean ESL learners differed in their use of politeness strategies compared to native speakers of English.

Chiravate (2011), investigating to what extent Thai EFL learners differ from native speakers of English in the use of politeness strategies and whether there was evidence

of L1 influence on the learners' use of politeness strategies, conducted a study of 60 Thai EFL learners and 30 native speakers of English. Employing an MDCT, it was found that Thai EFL learners were not able to use politeness strategies similarly to the native speakers of English. They tended to use fewer polite strategies, which showed that cultural differences between L1 and L2 were found to play a significant role in the use of politeness strategies.

As previously mentioned, a number of L2 studies of EFL and ESL learners were conducted; however, there has been no study focusing on the use of politeness strategies in requests made by Thai learners of Spanish. Therefore, it would be interesting to investigate whether Thai learners of Spanish would be able to perform a request in the same way as native Spanish speakers would.

Request Strategies in Thai

In the Thai language, the use of final particles (FP) has an important role in measuring politeness levels when making requests. Khahua (2003), whose study was about the speech act patterns of requests in Thai society, pointed out that request strategies in Thai are classified into two main syntactic structures. The first structure, which consists of a verb phrase (VP) and a final phrase (FP), is perceived as a direct request, as in the following examples:

- (a) *phu:t di: di: si?*
 speak good good FP
 "Speak nicely."
 (Khahua, 2003, p.49)

- (b) *pɔh diəw phruəmi pluk*
pɔk ti:ha khruəŋ na?
 Dad moment tomorrow wake
 me 5 and a half FP
 "Dad, tomorrow wake me up at
 5 o'clock."
 (Khahua, 2003, p.45)

- (c) *maa maa kep to? khaw ba:n*
haj phi: puu: nəj
 Come come get table enter
 house give sister me FP
 "Come on, move the table into
 the house for me"
 (Khahua, 2003, p.52)

According to Khahua, in a direct request or imperative, the final particles *si?*, *na?* and *nəj* are usually added to make an order sound softer or more polite. To be more specific, *nəj* which means "a little bit" shows the highest politeness level, compared to the other particles.

As in many cultures, a direct request, as shown in (a), (b) and (c), is made when the relationship between the requester and the requestee is close; for example, they may be friends or members of the same family. It is also used when the requester is older than the requestee or when the requester holds a higher social status.

The second syntactic structure of requests mentioned in Khahua's study was an indirect request, which is in interrogative form. This structure consists of a verb phrase (VP), a final particle (FP) and a question marker (QM), as in (d) and (e). In addition, Thai people usually add status particles (SP)

khrap (for men) and *kha* (for women) to increase the politeness level in the indirect request, while in the direct request they are not frequently found.

- (d) *chuej tho: ha: khun pran*
:m haj nɔj da:j maj kha
 help call Khun Pranom
 give FP QM SP
 “Can you call Khun Pranom
 for me please?”
 (Khahua, 2003, p.74)

- (e) *chuej jip mine:re haj*
nɔj da:j maj kha
 help bring mineral water give
 FP QM SP
 “Can you hand me a bottle of
 mineral water, please?”
 (Khahua, 2003, p.75)

As shown in (d) and (e), the level of imposition is reduced by using the question marker *da:j maj* or “can you?”. Contrary to a direct request, an indirect request is usually used in more formal situations or when the requester and the requestee are strangers. However, it is possible to use an indirect request with friends or family members if politeness is required in that situation.

METHODOLOGY

Aims and Research Questions

Similarly to Tanaka and Kawade (1982) and Chiravate’s (2011) studies which focused on comparing the use of politeness strategies between English native speakers and EFL learners, the present study aims to analyse

Thai SFL (Spanish as a Foreign Language) learners’ pragmatic competence focusing on politeness strategies in making requests by responding to the following research questions:

1. To what extent do Thai learners of Spanish differ from native speakers of Spanish in the use of politeness strategies when they perform a request?
2. Is there pragmatic transfer of L1 when Thai learners make requests in Spanish?

Participants

Participants in this empirical study were divided into two groups; the first one consisted of 30 Thai fourth-year university students, studying Spanish Major or Spanish Philology at Khon Kaen University. Of the 30 participants, five were male. Most of them had just learned Spanish in the university. The second group consisted of 30 native Spanish speakers. All of them had already graduated from the university and now live in Spain. The age of the participants varied from 20 to 35 years.

Instruments and Procedures

This study was carried out through a multiple-choice questionnaire discourse completion test (MDCT), which consisted of six items that represented three social statuses: higher (+), equal (=) and lower (-). In addition, the familiarity between the requester and the requestee shown as more (+) or less (-) and the reference of requestees’ age, for instance, younger (-), same age (=) or older (+), were included since for Thai

people these two factors are significant for requesters to choose appropriate politeness strategies. The situation in each item had three main variables, as in the following:

- Item 1:
Social (-) Familiarity (-)
Age of requestee (-)
- Item 2:
Social (-) Familiarity (-)
Age of requestee (+)
- Item 3:
Social (+) Familiarity (-)
Age of requestee (+/-)¹
- Item 4:
Social (-) Familiarity (-)
Age of requestee (+/-)
- Item 5:
Social (=) Familiarity (+)
Age of requestee (+)
- Item 6:
Social (=) Familiarity (+)
Age of requestee (=)

Each item had seven politeness strategies modified from Tanaka and Kawade's (1982) and Suh's (1999) studies. All the participants were asked to choose only one politeness strategy that seemed the most appropriate for them in a given situation, as in the following examples.

¹ The symbol (+/-) for item 3 and 4 means that the age is not mentioned in the situation; the requestee could be younger or older than the requester as it is not a factor we want to focus on.

Politeness strategies in Spanish

- (a) Imperativo
(b) Forma interrogativa de Presente de Indicativo
(c) ¿Puedes ...?
(d) ¿Podrías ...?
(e) Si eres tan amable/ no te importa, ¿podrías...?
(f) Quiero ...
(g) Querría ...

Politeness strategies in English

- (a) Imperative
(b) Will you ...?
(c) Can you...?
(d) Could you...?
(e) If you would be so kind/ you don't mind, could you give...?
(f) I want...
(g) I would like...

In Spanish, the interrogative form of the present simple, as shown in (b), is used to make a request, for example, "Do you give me a cup of coffee?" When translated into English, this sentence is not normally used in the same context; therefore, it is translated into *Will you?*, which could be equivalent to the Spanish version. Additionally, the conditional form of the verb "want", which is equivalent to "would like" in English, is used as one of the politeness strategies in Spanish, as in (g).

All participants were asked to choose only one politeness strategy, which seemed the most appropriate for them in a given situation, as in the following example.

Item 1 (in Spanish).

Si quieres pedir una coca cola en un bar, quieres pedírsela al camarero que es menor que tú. ¿Cuál de estas opciones elegirías en esta situación?

- Ponme una coca cola.
- ¿Me pones una coca cola?
- ¿Me puedes poner una coca cola?
- ¿Me podrías poner una coca cola?

- e. Si eres tan amable, ¿me podrías poner una coca cola?
- f. Quiero una coca cola.
- g. Querría una coca cola.

Item 1 (translated into English).

You would like to have a coca cola in a cafeteria and you are placing your order with a waiter who is younger than you. Which of the following forms would you use in this situation?

- a. Give me a can of coca cola.
- b. Will you give me a can of coca cola?
- c. Can you give me a can of coca cola?
- d. Could you give me a can of coca cola?
- e. If you would be so kind, could you give me a can of coca cola?
- f. I want a can of coca cola.
- g. I would like a can of coca cola.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Here we present the results related to the research questions.

Research Question 1:

The first research question was: To what extent do Thai learners of Spanish differ from native speakers of Spanish in the use of politeness strategies when they perform a request?

The results showed that the SFL (Spanish as a Foreign Language) learners' use of politeness strategies in some situations

differed from the NS (native speaker) group, as shown in Table 1.

For item 1, it was found that *I would like...* was the most chosen strategy by the SFL group, at a rate of 30%, followed by *Can you...?* at 23.33% while the NS group preferred to use *Can you...?* at 36.67%, followed by *I want...* at 23.33%. For item 2, the SFL learners also preferred to use *I would like...* with the highest frequency (40%), followed by *Could you...?* at 36.67%. Differing from the SFL group, the most chosen strategy by the NS group was *I want...*, at the rate of 40%, followed by *Can you...?* at the rate of 20%.

For item 3, the most chosen strategy by the SFL and the NS groups was similar, which was the *Could you...?* at the rate of 43.33% and 46.67%, respectively, followed by *If you would..., could you...?* (23.33% and 20%, respectively). On the contrary, it was found that, for item 4, the two groups chose different strategies. In the SFL group, the *I want...* strategy was used with the highest frequency, followed by *I would like...* (33.33% and 23.33%, respectively) while, in the NS group, more politeness strategies were used, which were *Could you...?* and *If you would..., could you...?*, at the rate of 30% and 23.33%, respectively).

However, same preference of both the SFL and the NS groups was exhibited again for items 5 and 6. For item 5, the two groups chose the *imperative* strategy with the highest frequency (36.67% and 40%, respectively), followed by the *Will you...?* strategy (23.33% and 36.67%, respectively). Similar to item 5, for item

6, both SFL and NS groups used the *Can you...?* strategy most of the time (30% and 43.33%, respectively), followed by the *imperative* strategy, at the rate of 26.67% for both groups. The three most frequent politeness strategies chosen by the two groups are shown in Table 2.

Research question 2:

The second research question was: Is there pragmatic transfer of L1 when Thai learners make requests in Spanish?

According to the data, in the situations where the requester holds higher social status, as for item 1, 2 and 4, Thai students tended to use the strategies *I would like...* and *I want...*, which are considered to be direct requests, compared to other cultures in which these strategies are not commonly used. As the results of Chiravate (2011) showed, English native speakers did not use the *I want to...* strategy in most situations, particularly where the requester-requestee relationship is distant. However, these strategies are not included in Thai politeness

TABLE 1
Percentage of the Use of Politeness Strategies in Making a Request

Item	Politeness Strategies						
	<i>Imperative</i>	<i>Will you...?</i>	<i>Can you...?</i>	<i>Could you...?</i>	<i>If you would..., could you...?</i>	<i>I want...</i>	<i>I would like...</i>
No.1							
<i>SFL</i>	3.33%	10%	23.33%	13.33%	0%	20%	30%
<i>NS</i>	3.33%	16.67%	36.67%	16.67%	0%	23.33%	3.33%
No.2							
<i>SFL</i>	0%	3.3%	6.67%	36.67%	3.33%	10%	40%
<i>NS</i>	3.33%	3.33%	20%	13.33%	6.67%	40%	13.33%
No.3							
<i>SFL</i>	3.33%	0%	10%	43.33%	30%	3.33%	10%
<i>NS</i>	0%	3.33%	16.67%	46.67%	30%	0%	3.33%
No.4							
<i>SFL</i>	6.67%	0%	10%	20%	6.67%	33.33%	23.33%
<i>NS</i>	0%	3.33%	16.67%	30%	23.33%	10%	16.67%
No.5							
<i>SFL</i>	36.67%	23.33%	20%	13.33%	6.67%	0%	0%
<i>NS</i>	40%	36.67%	13.33%	3.33%	3.33%	0%	3.33%
No.6							
<i>SFL</i>	26.67%	20%	30%	10%	3.33%	10%	0%
<i>NS</i>	26.67%	6.67%	43.33%	20%	3.33%	0%	0%

strategies as mentioned in Khahua (2003). It is assumed that the students had learned to use them from Spanish classes since it is one of the most frequently used strategies in Spanish culture in situations where the requester perceives himself/herself in a higher position (Vidal Alba, 1994).

On the contrary, where the requester holds lower social status, evidence of L1 was found. The students used *Could you...?*, which can be equivalent to an indirect request in Thai (VP + FP + QM + SP), a politeness strategy used when the requester and the requestee have a distant relationship.

In informal situations, where the requester-requestee relationship is close and both hold the same social status, as was the case for item 5 and 6, the *imperative* and *Can you...?* were frequently used. These two strategies are equivalent to politeness strategies used by Thai people, as previously discussed in Khahua's (2003) study.

In addition, in Spanish culture, these two strategies are also commonly used due to the characteristic of politeness in Spanish (Haverkate, 2004). In this case, the similarity between L1 and L2 results in a positive pragmatic transfer in the field of request making.

TABLE 2
The Three Most Frequently Used Politeness Strategies

Item	Order of Politeness Strategies Used by Thai Learners of Spanish		
	1	2	3
No.1			
SFL	I would like... (30%)	Can you...? (23.4%)	I want... (20%)
NS	Can you...? (36.67%)	I want... (23.33%)	Will you...? (16.67%)
No.2			
SFL	I would like... (40%)	Could you...? (36.67%)	I want... (10%)
NS	I want... (40%)	Can you...? (20%)	Could you...? (13.33%)
No.3			
SFL	Could you...? (43.33%)	If you would..., could you...? (23.33%)	I would like... and Can you...? (10%)
NS	Could you...? (46.67%)	If you would..., could you...? (30.33%)	Can you...? (16.67%)
No.4			
SFL	I want... (33.33%)	I would like... (23.33%)	Could you...? (20%)
NS	Could you...? (30%)	If you would..., could you...? (23.33%)	I would like... and Can you...? (16.67%)
No.5			
SFL	Imperative (36.67%)	Will you...? (23.33%)	Can you...? (20%)
NS	Imperative (40%)	Will you...? (36.7%)	Can you...? (13.3%)
No.6			
SFL	Can you...?(30%)	Imperative (26.67%)	Will you...?(20%)
NS	Can you...?(43.33%)	Imperative (26.67%)	Could you...?(20%)

CONCLUSION

From my study, the SFL learners' use of the politeness strategy was not always similar to the native speakers. In the situations where both requester and requestee have a close relationship and equal social status and where the requestee has higher social status than the requester, the SFL learners used politeness strategies that were similar to the NS group. However, in the situations where the requestee has lower social status, it can be concluded that SFL learners may not have sufficient pragmatic competence because the use of politeness strategies of the two groups were different. The SFL group tended to use more politeness strategies than the SFL group.

Moreover, the result of item 2 reveals that the age of requestee is an important factor for SFL learners to choose appropriate politeness strategies. In this item, the requestee has lower social status than the requester but the requestee is older than the requester. Most of SFL learners used the *Could you...?* or the *I would like...* strategies while less polite strategies were chosen by the NS group. On the contrary, for item 4, which has the same conditions as item 2 except that age of the requestee is not mentioned, the SFL group tended to use a less polite strategy, which is the *I want...* strategy.

According to pragmatic transfer of L1, it can be seen that there was no evidence of L1 influence on Thai Spanish learners' use of politeness strategies in the situations where the requestee has lower social status, as where the *I would like...* and *I want...*

strategies were used for item 1, 2 and 4. On the other hand, pragmatic transfer of L1 appeared when both requester and requestee have a close relationship since the participants used the strategies *imperative* and *Can you...?*, which can be considered politeness strategies used by Thai people to make a request.

The results of this study suggest that the teaching of pragmatics should be more focused in the classroom to avoid communication breakdown when learners use the language in their real life. Moreover, cross-cultural contexts should not be ignored in the language classroom.

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