

Interlanguage Pragmatics of Thai EFL Learners' Requests

วิจัยปฏิบัติการภาษาระหว่างกลางในการขอร้องของผู้เรียนชาวไทยที่เรียนภาษาอังกฤษ เป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ

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Abstract

This article examines the development of politeness among Thai learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), focusing on their ability to make requests in ways that are both culturally appropriate and socially sensitive. Central to this study are two key concepts: interlanguage—the transitional linguistic system used by non-native speakers—and pragmatics, which investigates the intended meanings behind language use. Specifically, the study explores how Thai learners' request-making behaviors are influenced by pragmalinguistics (language-specific strategies) and sociopragmatics (understanding social norms and expectations). While appropriate request-making is crucial across varied social contexts, the evolution of politeness in Thai EFL learners remains underexplored. Drawing on existing research in second language acquisition, the paper delves into the complexities of how learners navigate politeness when making requests. It highlights that achieving pragmatic competence involves more than mastering grammar—it requires the integration of social and cultural knowledge. This supports Bardovi-Harlig's (1999) assertion that although grammatical competence alone is insufficient for pragmatic appropriateness, it is a necessary foundation. By addressing this gap, the article sheds light on the intersection of language use and social interaction, providing insights that are valuable for both researchers and educators in the field of EFL.

Keywords: Appropriateness; Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP); Second Language Acquisition (SLA); Thai EFL Learners

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้ศึกษาพัฒนาการด้านความสุภาพของผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ (EFL) ชาวไทย โดยมุ่งเน้นความสามารถในการขอร้อง (requests) ในลักษณะที่เหมาะสมทั้งในเชิงวัฒนธรรมและความอ่อนไหวทางสังคม แก่นหลักของการศึกษานี้อยู่ที่สองแนวคิดสำคัญ ได้แก่ ภาษาเฉพาะระยะเปลี่ยนผ่าน (interlanguage) ซึ่งหมายถึง

ระบบภาษาที่อยู่ระหว่างทางของผู้พูดที่ไม่ใช่เจ้าของภาษา และวัจนปฏิบัติศาสตร์ (pragmatics) ซึ่งศึกษาความหมายเชิงประจักษ์ที่แฝงอยู่ในการใช้ภาษาโดยเฉพาะ การศึกษานี้จะลึกถึงพฤติกรรมการขอร้องของผู้เรียนชาวไทยที่ได้รับอิทธิพลจาก วัจนปฏิบัติศาสตร์เชิงภาษา (pragmalinguistics) ซึ่งเกี่ยวข้องกับกลยุทธ์การใช้ภาษาที่เจาะจงในแต่ละภาษา และ วัจนปฏิบัติศาสตร์เชิงสังคม (sociopragmatics) ที่เน้นความเข้าใจในบรรทัดฐานและความคาดหวังทางสังคม แม้การขอร้องอย่างเหมาะสมจะเป็นสิ่งสำคัญในบริบททางสังคมที่หลากหลาย แต่พัฒนาการด้านความสุภาพในผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษ EFL ชาวไทยยังได้รับการสำรวจน้อยมาก โดยอ้างอิงจากงานวิจัยที่มีอยู่ในด้านการเรียนรู้ภาษาที่สอง บทความนี้ได้วิเคราะห์ความซับซ้อนของกระบวนการที่ผู้เรียนต้องเผชิญในการสร้างความสุภาพในการขอร้อง บทความเน้นว่าการพัฒนาความสามารถด้านวัจนปฏิบัติศาสตร์ (pragmatic competence) มีความสำคัญมากกว่าแค่การเรียนรู้ไวยากรณ์ แต่ต้องรวมถึงการบูรณาการความรู้ทางสังคมและวัฒนธรรมด้วย ซึ่งสอดคล้องกับข้อเสนอของ Bardovi-Harlig (1999) ที่กล่าวว่า แม้ความสามารถด้านไวยากรณ์เพียงอย่างเดียวจะไม่เพียงพอต่อความเหมาะสมในเชิงวัจนปฏิบัติ แต่ถือเป็นรากฐานที่จำเป็น ด้วยการเติมเต็มช่องว่างดังกล่าว บทความนี้ได้ฉายภาพความเชื่อมโยงระหว่างการใช้ภาษากับปฏิสัมพันธ์ทางสังคม พร้อมมอบข้อมูลเชิงลึกที่มีคุณค่าสำหรับทั้งนักวิจัยและนักการศึกษาในวงการการเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ (EFL)

คำสำคัญ: ความเหมาะสม; วัจนปฏิบัติศาสตร์ระหว่างภาษา; การได้ภาษาที่สอง; ผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ (EFL) ชาวไทย



Introduction

A subfield of Second Language Acquisition—(SLA) called Interlanguage Pragmatics —(ILP) studies how second language (L2) learners acquire, apply, and grow in their ability to carry out sociocultural tasks. For L2 learners to carry out common social tasks in the target language, they require linguistic structures and abilities. However, learners must understand which forms are suitable in certain situations because our speech patterns are influenced by context, including who we are speaking to and how we are speaking. Thus, pragmatic competence consists of two layers: language knowledge and sociocultural knowledge of social norms, habits, and conventions. The main areas of investigation in ILP research are the process of acquiring these knowledge bases, individual differences among learners, and process-influencing factors (Taguchi, 2017).

Effective communication in a second language (L2) requires both grammatical knowledge and an understanding of pragmatics. For non-native speakers (NNSs), mastering social norms that shape language use is crucial but challenging. Native speakers (NSs) often produce contextually appropriate phrases that may lead to miscommunication if interpreted literally by NNSs. Thus, understanding the social dynamics of language use is essential to prevent misunderstandings.

Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP) plays a vital role in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), focusing on how non-native speakers (NNSs) comprehend, perform, and develop pragmatic knowledge in a target language. Koike (1989) defines pragmatic competence as the knowledge and application of appropriateness and politeness rules in speech acts. Pragmatic competence, a subset of

communicative competence, includes grammatical competence (forming correct sentences) and sociopragmatic competence (adhering to social norms) (Thomas, 1983). Taguchi (2012) highlights ILP's emphasis on how L2 learners understand, produce, and refine sociocultural functions in various contexts.

Bachman (1990) emphasized that L2 instruction should focus not only on grammatical accuracy but also on developing learners' pragmatic competence—the ability to use language effectively in context. Pragmatic competence involves two components: illocutionary competence (knowledge and appropriate use of communicative strategies) and sociolinguistic competence (contextually appropriate language use). Research highlights its critical role in communicative ability, exploring L2 learners' pragmatic functions (Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Canale & Swain, 1980). Thomas (1983) noted that pragmatic competence involves performing speech acts appropriately, requiring both linguistic skills and understanding societal communication conventions.

The development of pragmatic competence, particularly through speech acts, is a central focus within ILP studies. Speech acts, which perform specific social functions such as requesting, apologizing, or complimenting, are key elements of pragmatics (Ishihara & Cohen, 2012; Levinson, 1983). Austin's (1962) speech act theory identifies three types of acts: locutionary (the act of saying something), illocutionary (the intended function of the utterance), and perlocutionary (the effect on the hearer). Among these, illocutionary acts are considered the core function of language, as they reflect the speaker's purpose.

One speech act extensively studied in pragmatics is requesting, due to its inherently

face-threatening nature (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Requests impose the speaker's needs on the hearer, making the balance between directness and politeness crucial. Comparative studies between native and non-native speakers have highlighted how cultural values shape request strategies, which, if misunderstood, can lead to pragmatic failures and strained relationships. This article provides valuable insights into the interactional nuances of L2 learners and their request performances.

Interlanguage pragmatics.

SLA study includes ILP as one of its subfields. Interlanguage phonology, interlanguage morphology, and interlanguage semantics are subfields of interlanguage studies, of which ILP is one (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993). One method used in interlanguage studies (Selinker, 1972) is ILP, which compares learners' IL production and comprehension with L1 and L2 data (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993). ILP is regarded as one of the approaches to examine pragmatic failure. Then, it provides the research instruments to determine how learners' pragmatic performance varies from their L2 and how learners' L1 influences their L2, which raises a significant issue in ILP research: how learners' L1 influence interacts with the L2 norm through interlanguage (Bou-Franch, 2012; Chantharasombat & Pongpairroj, 2018).

Kasper (1992) defined Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP) as the study of how non-native speakers (NNSs) understand, perform, and acquire pragmatic knowledge in a target language. ILP research often examines the impact of L2 proficiency on its development.

Despite the growing interest in ILP, research on politeness strategies among Thai EFL learners remains scarce. Chiravate (2011) inves

tigated the differences between Thai EFL learners and ENS regarding politeness strategies. She also investigated evidence of L1 influence on learners' politeness strategies. She found that Thai EFL learners used fewer politeness strategies than NSs. She also found that the level of proficiency and rules from the L1 culture played important roles in the use of politeness strategies. In Thai culture, for instance, the imperative is regarded as a direct request and is therefore used with intimate friends. Clearly, this showed L1 influence on the learners' use of politeness strategies.

Chantharasombat and Pongpairroj (2018) investigated negative answers to English Yes/No questions among Thai L1 speakers. Using a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) with 14 participants of varying English proficiency, they found that lower-proficiency learners exhibited greater negative pragmatic transfer, relying more on Thai pragmatic norms in their L2 English responses.

Communicative and pragmatic competence

Hymes (1971) introduced Communicative Competence (CC) as an alternative to Chomsky's linguistic competence, emphasizing language acquisition as a social interaction rather than an individual mental process. CC encompasses not only grammatical knowledge but also sociocultural rules, enabling appropriate language use within a speech community. Hymes' dynamic and interpersonal approach highlights the importance of sociolinguistic norms and context in effective communication.

Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP), a branch of SLA, explores how non-native speakers (NNSs) comprehend, perform, acquire, and develop L2 pragmatic knowledge. As part of communicative competence, pragmatic competence includes pragmalinguistic competence (using grammar

to form correct sentences) and sociopragmatic competence (adhering to social language rules) (Thomas, 1983).

With the emergence of communicative competence models (Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Canale & Swain, 1980), L2 learning now emphasizes functional and sociolinguistic control over grammatical forms. Pragmatic competence, a key element of communicative competence, has become a central focus in L2 research.

Bachman (1990) emphasized pragmatic competence as the ability to produce and understand context-appropriate communication. It comprises illocutionary competence (knowledge and appropriate use of communicative strategies) and sociolinguistic competence (contextually appropriate language use).

Earlier research focused on analyzing L2 pragmatic performance based on the directness of speech act production without considering broader communicative abilities. During the 1980s–1990s, studies collected cross-linguistic data on speech act directness (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989), highlighting variations in speech act performance. For instance, requesting a math explanation with “Please explain this math problem for me” might be overly direct and inappropriate. Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs), written questionnaires, were used to gather speech act data from native and non-native speakers, which researchers then compared using a coding system.

Latif, H. (2024) explored how Moroccan university students of English employ modification strategies to either soften or intensify their requests, contrasting their approaches with those of American native English speakers. The study utilized a written discourse completion task to collect data, with Faerch and Kasper's (1989)

typology of request modification categories serving as the foundation for quantitative analysis. The findings revealed significant differences in both internal and external modifications. Moroccan students tended to use more lexical and phrasal downgraders in their requests, whereas American speakers relied more on mitigating supportive moves. However, no statistically significant differences were observed in the use of aggravating supportive moves, upgraders, syntactic downgraders, or alerters. The study concluded with insights into the importance and applicability of modification categories in teaching and learning requests in a foreign language context.

The Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) developed a widely used coding system for analyzing speech acts, focusing on requests and apologies in eight languages. Requests were classified into three main categories: direct, conventional indirect, and non-conventional indirect. Direct requests use explicit grammatical or lexical cues (e.g., “Please show me your passport”), while conventional indirect requests rely on fixed conventions (e.g., “Could you pick me up at the airport?”). Non-conventional indirect requests make partial references to the act (e.g., “Do you have the time?”).

In 2024, Otgontuya Dashtseren, ODonTuya Luvsanbaldan, and Otgontuul Togtokh conducted a study titled “A Comparative Study of Request in Mongolian and English.” This research emphasized the need to elevate the standards of interlanguage and cross-cultural pragmatics studies in Mongolia. Utilizing the directness categories established by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), the study compared request realization strategies used by native English speakers (n=87) and Mongolian speakers (n=86). Data was collected using a

Discourse Completion Test (DCT) that prompted participants to complete scenarios involving requests across eight distinct social situations. The findings revealed that, regardless of the addressee’s social status, Mongolian speakers predominantly used direct strategies, while English speakers favored conventional indirect expressions.

Contextual factors such as power, social distance, and the degree of imposition influence the level of directness in speech acts (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Thomas, 1995). Formal situations with high imposition and power differences require greater indirectness to preserve the interlocutor’s face, while informal settings with equal relationships and lower imposition allow for more direct expressions.

Request strategies Thai EFL learners employ in the production of English requests

This article examines the interlanguage pragmatics of request-making among Thai EFL learners, focusing on their use of request strategies at various proficiency levels. It explores differences in the strategies employed, the impact of interlocutors’ social status (superior, equal, or subordinate) and social distance (familiarity level), and the relationship between appropriateness ratings and linguistic expressions in evaluating the quality of speech act production across proficiency levels. Specifically, the article investigates how lower-intermediate (LTE), intermediate (ITE), and advanced Thai EFL learners (ATE) make English requests to American native speakers in different contexts. The findings reveal that intermediate learners tend to use more direct request strategies across all situations compared to the other groups.

For the comparison between the advanced Thai EFL learners and the inter

mediate Thai EFL learners, this gives support for Felix-Brasdefer's claim that learners "have only a limited competence in situational variation in the initial stages of FL development" (Brasdefer, 2007). It can be seen that the tendency towards the use of directness seemed to decrease when proficiency increased. This is consistent with previous research (Felix-Brasdefer, 2007; Hassall, 2003; Hill, 1997; Rose, 2000) in the aspect that the frequency of use of conventional indirect strategies increases with proficiency, while the direct strategies appear to be more typical in the performance of the lower proficiency group than the higher one. Then, it is possible that with higher proficiency, learners can acquire the linguistic forms that allow them to be conventionally indirect. On the contrary, for the comparison between the lower intermediate Thai EFL learners and the intermediate Thai EFL learners, the latter group of learners still employed more direct requests. However, this does not support Felix-Brasdefer's claim and is not consistent with the previously mentioned research. It is possibly that this phenomenon happened because in the Thai educational context, learners in high school levels have to be taught and practiced more linguistic forms than the undergraduate learners so as to use their knowledge of their linguistic competence for the university entrance examination. As a result, they can acquire more linguistic forms that allow them to be conventionally indirect than the graduate learners whose educational context focused on their certain field of study and interest.

Another fact that appears to be consistent with some previous studies (Hassall, 2003; Trosborg, 1995) suggests the comparison of the frequent use of non-conventional indirect strategies by the lower intermediate Thai EFL

learners. It was displayed that the tendency to use this kind of indirect strategy also decreased with proficiency. That is to say, the intermediate Thai EFL learners and the advanced Thai EFL learners employed these non-conventional indirect strategies to form their requests less than the lower intermediate Thai EFL learners. Consequently, this supports Trosborg's strong belief that these non-conventional indirect strategies are not considered to serve indirectness, but instead they are probably used to balance learners' insufficiency of suitable pragmatic means (Hassall, 2003; Trosborg, 1995).

Although, according to the observation, there was a decrease in the frequency of use of direct strategies by the lower intermediate Thai EFL learners, a noticed preference for imperatives was demonstrated in the performance of the lower intermediate learners in the situation that a teacher asks a student to turn off his cell phone. However, these learners were found not to use want statements that were displayed slightly in the intermediate Thai EFL learners and the advanced Thai EFL learners' data. Some of the lower intermediate Thai EFL learners still performed their request directly in the that situation, selecting the imperative.

A possible explanation for the appearance and more frequent use of imperative in some lower intermediate Thai EFL learners' performance could be consistent with the simple structure of the imperative in Thai, which is considered as the easiest linguistic form for learners of all proficiency levels. In addition, the imperative is one of the main types of sentences to be taught since lower level of proficiency. Therefore, it is possible that this learner group is more familiar with this linguistic form because syllabi and teaching textbooks are likely to contain lessons

about imperative; even teachers tend to use it in the lower intermediate Thai EFL learners' classroom. So, it is possible that for the lower intermediate Thai EFL learners, the imperative is an easily and simpler acquired form whose use is encouraged by the informal nature, especially in informal situations. However, the fact that sometimes Imperative is avoided by these same learners or the other groups of learners in certain situations is possibly because of sociopragmatic awareness on their part.

The differences in the use of the request strategies among Thai EFL Learners

According to the data collection and the data analysis of the writers, it can be explained that lower intermediate, intermediate, and advanced proficient learners differed in their speech act production and what features of production (i.e., appropriateness ratings or the choice of linguistic expressions) differentiated among the three groups. Although the three groups of proficiency were found to use conventional indirect strategies in the most situations, some differences among them were demonstrated in regard to the choice of conventional indirect sub-strategies. Specifically, all groups of Thai EFL learners frequently expressed their requests by utilizing the preparatory questions with present or past indicatives such as "Can you... or could you...?" as well as "Would you mind...?" formulas. This indicated that the speech act production of these three proficiency levels of learners is considered appropriate since preparatory questions, in native speakers' view, demonstrated politeness. However, the past indicative is one of the conventionalized, most frequent means of request of these three groups among Thai EFL learners. This is probably due to the fact that they

were taught in their English classes that the past indicative expresses more politeness than the present indicative. Therefore, its use complies with the politeness usually shown by Thai EFL learners in interaction among equal or different status interlocutors.

With regard to another nonconventional indirect request such as suggestions, on the contrary, both Trosborg (1995); Kallia (2005) argue that this type of requestive strategy is considered less threatening because when the speaker expresses a request by using a suggestory formula, the speaker tentatively makes his/her request and decreases his/her own interest as a recipient of the action (Trosborg, 1995).

Notwithstanding, this particular strategy, suggestions, was slightly demonstrated in the three groups of Thai EFL learners' data. This probably indicates that Thai EFL learners, even at the advanced levels, have not acquired the pragmatic forms and the sociopragmatic functions of this strategy. There are two possible interconnected explanations according to this finding: the first explanation is the fact that suggestions are general of familiarity situations and normally in oral production. As a result, when the situation appeared to be more formal, Thai EFL learners avoided using this type of requestive strategy because it was likely that they did not understand the sociopragmatic functions of this strategy. The second explanation is that although very common in oral production of requests, the form and functions of this particular strategy are not frequently highlighted in textbooks for teaching Thai learners as a foreign language. As a result, Thai EFL learners seem not to have adequate chances to acquire it and use it properly if textbooks are regarded as the major source of input for foreign language learners.

The last difference is about micro-strategies concerning very small proportionate use of Permissions strategy among the three groups. It can be seen in the result section that there was no permission strategy in the lower intermediate Thai EFL learners, but there was only one use of this strategy in the intermediate Thai EFL learner group and two in the advanced group. This can easily be interpreted as meaning that if one considers power differences that influence a particular situation, the use of permission strategies may have emerged. The fact that this strategy is hardly found in Thai EFL learners' data can reveal difficulties in its acquisition and proper use by learners. This difficulty may be related to the speaker's perception that this strategy is usually expressed in Thai as asking for permission, not making a request. This correlates with native speakers' view that the permission perspective seems to be one of the most infrequently used in everyday situations (Bella, 2012). Hence, it can possibly be seen that there is a limitation for Thai EFL learners to notice and use this strategy appropriately because of the lack of sufficient input and teaching materials concerning sociopragmatic distinctions like request perspective in their EFL classes.

Summary

In summary, this article supports Bardo vi-Harlig's (1999) claim that even though a high level of grammatical competence alone cannot guarantee high levels of pragmatic production,

it is possibly a necessary factor for pragmatic appropriateness. As illustrated in this article, the effectiveness of speech act production that is considered by high appropriateness ratings was not only measured by the directness level of the linguistic expressions employed in the production of the speech act of request. As a result, in order to understand the nature of pragmatic competence, a more complete picture of the interaction among learners' overall linguistic competence and pragmatic competence needs to be explored.

As requests are one of the face-threatening acts, it is very important to make learners aware of how to use English appropriately in requests and how to mitigate their speech when requesting. We are employed at a private university, where the primary focus of English instruction is career-oriented. We believe that no more or less this article can be applied in designing lessons that can provoke workplace interaction, with the aim to teach learners to mitigate their speech to be less harsh in many different face-threatening contexts. This will support Kasper's (1997) study that arranging appropriate learning opportunities can further the development of pragmatic competence. In addition, speaking and dealing with request situations need to be emphasized during language assessment so learners will be aware of the issue in their language use.



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