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# Pragmatic Instruction Effects on Students' EFL Production: A Qualitative Analysis

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**Abstract:** The present study aims to investigate whether the implementation of pragmatic instruction would change the students' pragmatic production of English requests. The pragmatic instruction was based on an approach proposed by Martínez Flor and Usó Juan (2006). Thirty-four undergraduate students participated in the study. A discourse completion task was used to collect the data that were administered before and after the treatment. During the treatment, the participants followed the six phases of the approach. After the treatment, students' pre-test was compared to that of the post-test. A qualitative analysis was used to scrutinise the request strategies. The result revealed that students' production of requests was improved. Internal modifications, lexical and phrasal modifications, were sometimes used. The participants often employed the external modification, grounders. Besides, the result also displayed first language transfer.

**Keywords:** pragmatic instruction; pragmatic production; requests; Indonesian; EFL.

## 1. Introduction

It has been an enormous challenge to foreign language teachers (FLT) to teach pragmatics in foreign or second language settings. As the ability to converse and decode meaning in social exchanges has become a vital component of second language (L2) proficiency (Taguchi, 2011, p. 289). Learners of English as a second or a foreign language may possibly produce language-related problems, as a result of which they differ from the standards and what is expected by first language (L1) speakers when they accomplish speech acts, produce particular kinds of discourse or take part in interactions (Kaur 2011). There are significant differences in language use and understanding particular speech acts between English language learners in circumstances of English as a foreign language (EFL) and those who learn English as their first language. On the other hand, EFL learners are expected to acquire the knowledge and develop required skills that make them have the capability to accomplish their social and communicative aims. Purwanti's (2016) study shows that Indonesian FL speakers of English were noticed to be direct at some point, and L1 norms seem to influence the way they use certain strategies. Therefore, it is important to teach pragmatics to foreign/second language learners (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005).

Scholars have shown that pragmatic competence can be taught to and learned by EFL and ESL learners (Martinez-Flor & Fukuya, 2005). Their investigations were directed to the implementation of pragmatic instruction to examine its effect on L2 pragmatic competence (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Rose, 2005; Martínez-Flor, & Soler, 2007). These pragmatic

instruction studies provide instructors with instructional activities and procedures that can be a model for the development of EFLs' pragmatic growth. In this case, pragmatic instruction has been recommended to be included in language teaching curricula. It is considered to positively increase L2 learners' pragmatic abilities, especially when they do not have direct contact with the L2 (Ishara & Cohen, 2010).

Within a foreign language setting, exposing the students to authentic pragmatic input and the opportunity for them to employ it is very inadequate. Therefore, integration of pragmatic competence is necessary (Martínez-Flor & Usó-Juan, 2006). Scholars have examined the teachability of L2 pragmatics in the context of instruction (Soler, 2012, p. 512). Schmidt's (1993, in Kim, 2017) noticing hypothesis concerning the learning of L2 pragmatics seems to influence scholars to investigate the teachability of L2 pragmatics including speech acts (Kim, 2017). Some scholars have proposed for pragmatic instruction or intervention (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). However, studies on pragmatic instructions, namely systematic empirical analyses of pragmatic instruction effects in the language classroom, are relatively infrequent (Glacer, 2016, p. 530).

To fill the gap between researches' findings regarding pragmatic intervention and the lack of pragmatic intervention in Indonesian EFL settings, the present study focuses on pragmatic instruction of English requests by implementing an approach proposed by Martínez-Flor & Usó-Juan (2006), namely The 6R Approach. The approach was implemented under the consideration that the approach would make the students exposed to authentic input, get the chance to practice and feedback from peers and the lecturer (Martínez-Flor & Usó-Juan, 2006). The overarching objective of this research was to investigate whether the implementation of The 6R Approach would change the students' use of request strategies. To this end, the research questions addressed were:

1. How did Indonesian EFL learners employ EFL request head acts before and after the treatment?
2. What internal modifications did Indonesian EFL learners prefer before and the treatment?
3. What external modifications did Indonesian EFL learners prefer before and the treatment?

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 The Participants**

The participants of this action research were thirty-four Indonesian undergraduates majoring in English Education. All were the fourth semester students at a public university in Pekanbaru - Indonesia.

### **2.2 The Treatment of the Study**

Before the treatment the students did the pre-test and got the post-test after the fourth meeting. The students received pragmatic instructions on request speech acts once a week, a hundred-minute class, for four weeks. The approach used was The 6R Approach (Martínez-Flor & Usó-Juan, 2006). Their pedagogical framework involves six steps, namely:

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**Step 1: Researching L1 requests**

At this stage, the lecturer explicated to the students that the focus was on the directive speech acts of requests and how the acceptability of the linguistic constructions chosen by the speakers is determined by sociopragmatic factors. After this explanation, the students were requested to *beinvestigators* and gather naturally occurring requests in Indonesian as their first language (L1). A worksheet for data-collection involving the three factors in sociopragmatics was provided for the students.

**Step 2: Reflecting on requests**

The students analysed and *reflected* on the requests examined by answering basic awareness-raising questions involving both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic issues. After this individual analysis, they are urged to make comparison of their data with their partners'.

**Step 3: Receiving explicit instruction on requests**

The lecturer conducted the explicit instruction on formulas of pragmalinguistics for constructing requests in English as their FL. They were requested to compare those found out in Indonesian and those in English.

**Step 4: Reasoning**

There were three tasks awareness-raising tasks at this step. First, the students were requested to read a language situation and four requests varying from indirect to direct level. The second, they read a language situation, rated the level of suitability of the requests and provided the reason of that particular rating. The third awareness-raising task, the students considered the importance of context by taking into account the three socio pragmatic factors when selecting an appropriate request.

**Step 5: Rehearsing**

The students watched a video of naturally occurring interactions and elicited request speech acts. The students completed a video worksheet to assist them in discerning the realization of requests. The students, then, were given a controlled production task.

**Step 6: Revising**

The lecturer provided feedback for the students.

**2.3 Data Collection**

A discourse completion task (DCT) was used to collect the students' production of requests in the pre-test before the treatment and post-test after the treatment. The DCT consisted of 2 scenarios of natural situations. The first scenario involves hierarchical politeness system (higher status) involving social power and distance relationship between the interlocutors. The second scenario is solidarity politeness relationship (equal status) where there is neither distance nor power between the interlocutors. The students were requested to provide responses, as they would express verbally in their daily interactions.

**2.4 Data Analysis**

The data were analysed using qualitative data analysis accompanied by some descriptive statistics, namely percentages. Requests' directness levels and modifications were scrutinised using analytical coding categories of Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989) that were employed in Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realisation Projects (CCSARP).

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1 The Results of the Study

Head act is a compulsory element of a request. It can be preceded or followed by elements, which are not obligatory in requests. The request strategies are scrutinised from the pragmalinguistic construction in the head acts. The directness levels of request head acts were classified following CCSARP (Blum-Kulka, et al., 1989) directness levels involving direct, conventionally indirect, and non-conventionally indirect strategies or hint. The results of the analysis of the present study show that the students employed direct and non-conventionally indirect requests in both scenarios.

##### 3.1.1 Request strategies

Students were requested to provide responses to the scenarios that show hierarchical and solidarity politeness relationship. The strategies used by the participants involve direct and conventionally indirect strategies as presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Degree of Directness of the Head Acts

Directness levels	Request strategies	Examples	Scenario 1		Scenario 2	
			Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
Direct	1. Imperatives	Give me more days, sir? Turn the volume down, please.	5,8%	0%	20,5 %	29%
	2. Want statement	I want to request additional time to collect my paper.	11,7%	0%	0%	0%
	3. Need statement	I really need your licence for me to get an extension on paper for your course.	5,8%	0%	0%	0%
	4. Expectation statement	I hope you will give me time to do it	2,9%	0%	2,9 %	0%
Conventionally indirect	Query preparatory (permission, willingness, ability)	I was wondering if it's possible for me to get an extension ... Can you lower the volume of the TV?	73.5%	100%	76,4 %	61,76 %
Non-conventionally indirect	Hint		0%	0%	0%	0%

Table 1 shows that the students favour conventionally indirect strategies. It is interesting that in hierarchical relationship scenario the students employed direct strategies before the treatment, but the direct strategies were not used in the post-test, and changed to conventionally indirect strategies. It seems that the students used the conventionally indirect expressions discussed in the treatment. So, there is no direct strategy in the post-test. On the other hand, in solidarity relationship scenario, the students employed direct strategy in the pre-test, and kept using the

strategy in the post-test. It seems that the type and the quality of the relationship controlled their choices of the request strategies.

Looking at the number of occurrences of conventionally indirect requests both in pre- and post-test, it seems that there is no impact of the treatment given on the use of conventionally indirect strategy. However, the quality of the request increased as can be seen in the following extracts that are excerpted from the pre-test and post-test for comparison. Extracts 1 – 2 are the strategies excerpted from pre-test and post-test of hierarchical politeness relationship scenario.

**Extract 1**

Student 20: Would you mind give an extension, sir? (Pre-test)

: I was wondering if you could extend more time for me to finish it, sir?

(Post-test)

**Extract 2**

Student 3: Sir, can you give me extension for the paper? (Pre-test)

: Could you give me more time, sir? (Post-test)

Extracts 1 – 2 show that even though the students employed the same strategy, conventionally indirect strategy, they modify the head acts internally to mitigate the force of the requests. Students changed their request expressions; they employed strategies introduced in the implementation of the treatment. For example, it can be seen in Extract 2 that the student used the modal *can* in the pre-test, but he employed past tense modal *could* which is a syntactic downgrader. Extract 1 shows that the student used past tense in pre-test, but he employed combination of aspect and conditional. These changes showed that there was improvement of their pragmalinguistic choices in their requests.

**3.1.2 Modifications used to the request strategy**

The students used modifications to mitigate the requests. There were three internal modifications used by the students involving politeness marker ‘please’, consultative devices ‘would/do you mind...’, and understaters ‘a bit’. The occurrences of internal modifications are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** The Occurrences of Internal Modifications

Modifiers used	Scenario 1		Scenario 2	
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
1. Politeness marker	2.9%	0%	32.3%	29.4%
2. Consultative devices (do you mind...)	8.8%	23.5%	5.8%	0%
3. Understaters	11.7%	2.9%	11.7%	0%
4. Using address term	100%	97%	73.5%	79.4%

Table 2 shows that politeness marker ‘please’ is used more in solidarity politeness relationship (scenario 2). There is no change in the occurrences of politeness marker ‘please’ both in pre- and post-test. In hierarchical politeness relationship, consultative devices are used more in post-test. In addition, the address terms were mostly employed in post-test in hierarchical politeness relationship scenario. The address terms used include ‘sir’, ‘Prof’, and title followed by name. In solidarity politeness relationship, first name is commonly used. The students did not use any Indonesian kinship address terms.

To mitigate the requests the students did not only employed internal modifications, but also external modifications involving preparator, getting a pre- commitment, grounder, showing apologies, and showing thanks. The occurrences of these external modifications are displayed in Table 3.

**Table 3.** The Occurrences of External Modifications

External Modifiers	Scenario 1		Scenario 2	
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
1. Preparator	0%	5.8%	0%	0%
2. Getting a pre-commitment	8.8%	2.9%	2.9%	0%
3. Grounder	67.6%	91%	58.8%	70%
4. Showing apologies	38.2%	38%	11.7%	14.7%
5. Showing thanks	5.8%	5.8%	2.9%	2.9%

As Table 3 above shows, the students in both scenarios mostly used grounders in which the students gave a reason, an explanation, or a justification for the requests. The occurrences especially increased in hierarchical politeness relationship scenario. Students also showed apologies to mitigate the requests more in higher status relationship than those in equal status.

### 3.2 Discussion

The finding shows that students not only used more conventionally indirect strategy, but also they made improvement in the quality of head acts, conventionally indirect strategy, used. The finding that the students preferred conventionally indirect strategy is relevant to Hassall’s (1999) study in that Indonesians or Indonesian learners of English preferred using conventionally indirect strategies. The finding of this study did not correspond to Purwanti’s (2016) study. In her study, the Indonesian participants preferred using direct strategies in hierarchical politeness relationship. The difference may be due to the source of data used as Purwanti used naturally occurring data. Different types of data may elicit different results.

The students did not use non-conventionally indirect strategy or hint in this study. It seems that they took avoidance action to not use it. It could be triggered by their misunderstanding and confusion of how to express requests in non-conventionally indirect strategy, as there is no clear formulaic form for this strategy. The rare use of non-conventional indirect strategy in the interactions could signify a deficiency in pragmatic competence in the target language (Purwanti, 2016).

Politeness marker ‘please’ and address terms were the internal modifiers used in this study. ‘Please’ is an explicit politeness indicator in English and the most frequent mitigation used. It is interesting that the number of politeness marker is closely related to the number of direct requests in imperative used in equal status. The students seem to use politeness marker ‘please’ to mitigate the direct imperative requests. The use of address terms in higher status is dominant. All the students used address terms showing status deference in pre-test and only one student did not use it in post-test. They used non-reciprocal address terms to show asymmetrical relationship. These considerable use of address terms showed that they followed the Indonesian addressing pattern in addressing their lecturers unless they would be considered to have improper manner. It is common in social status deference relationship to express the deference using honorific address terms in Indonesia. The use of honorific address terms in student – lecturer interactions is different from the finding in Merrison et al.’s (2012, p. 1094) study.

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Their finding displayed that Australian students regarded their academics as social partners who are equal regardless of the difference in social status. This difference is due to cultural difference between Indonesian and Australian. Besides, the subjects of this study could not just avoid transferring their L1 culture in using L2 as it is the value in their cultural norms.

This study displays that the students employed external modifications and preferred grounders to modify their requests. Even though students frequently used grounders both in pre-test and post-test, they used more in the post-test. It seems that they had no difficulty in expressing grounders. The use of grounders as the most frequent supporting moves in this study is in line to the findings in the studies of Economidou-Kagetsidis (2012) and Hassall's (2012, p. 216). Hassall's findings showed that both Australian L2 speakers of Indonesian and L1 speakers of Indonesian commonly employed grounders in his study. Similarly, the finding of this study also corresponds to that of Purwanti's (2016) study in that she found that Indonesian L2 speakers of English frequently used grounders.

The results of this study also showed that there was improvement in pragmalinguistic quality of the head acts used in the pre- and post-test. This means that pragmatic instruction, especially the approach used, could increase the students' or L2 learners' pragmatic ability in using requests. This finding is in line with Rose's (2005) study that pragmatic instruction is possible and effective to increase L2 learners' pragmatic ability. Likewise, pragmatic instruction effects on L2 learners' pragmatic ability in this study corresponds to the findings in the studies of Kim's (2017), and Martínez-Flor and Soler's (2007). This study also supports Aufa (2011) who claims the effectiveness of explicit pragmatic instruction in facilitating EFL learners to develop their pragmatic competence. Likewise, Ishara and Cohen (2010) argues that pragmatic instruction can increase the ability of L2 learners' pragmatics especially when L2 learners don't have a straight connection with the target language.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The focal aim of this study is to investigate whether the implementation of The 6R Approach would change the students' use of request strategies. In hierarchical politeness relationship scenario students pragmalinguistics ability changed from using direct strategies (26,5%) in pre-test to conventionally indirect strategies (100%). It is interesting that in solidarity politeness relationship scenario, the students kept using the direct strategies. It appears that their choices of the request strategies were determined by the type and quality of the relationship. For internal modifications, the students used consultative devices more in post-test in hierarchical politeness relationship scenario. They also used considerable number of address terms following the Indonesian addressing pattern in addressing their lecturers. They transfer their L1 culture in using L2 requests, as it is the value in their cultural norms. For the external modifications, grounders were the preferred modification to mitigate the requests.

This study shows that pragmatic instruction is possible and it is considered necessary to provide L2 learners with pragmatic instruction. This study corroborates other studies that pragmatic instruction is applicable to increase students' pragmatic competence especially in the use of requests. It holds an important role in developing students' performance in requesting politely.

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