

# The impact of task variation on request and refusal speech act production in Iranian EFL learners

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**Abstract-**Second language learners need to acquire not only linguistic rules but also sociolinguistic ones to communicate appropriately and effectively. This study investigated the effect of two social tasks on the production of requests and refusals. The sample involved 40 BA and MA Iranian students of English and they were evaluated for their ability to perform speech act of requests and refusals. Closed role plays were used to generate data. The closed role play included two situation types based on three social factors: power difference (P), social distance (D) and the degree of imposition (I). In one situation, the power relationship between interlocutors was equal, the distance was small and the degree of imposition was also small (PDI-low). In another situation, the listener had greater power, the distance was large and the degree of imposition was large too (PDI-high). Learners' oral production was analyzed for appropriateness and speech speed. In addition, learners' choice of linguistic strategies over two social situations was examined. Results revealed that second language learners produced PDI-high tasks slower in comparison to PDI-low ones. Results also revealed that second language proficiency influenced appropriateness and speech speed significantly. Moreover, each group chose different linguistic strategies indicating the effect of task variation on oral speech act production.

**Key words-** Requests; refusals; social distance; appropriateness; speech speed

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In order to communicate in a foreign language, language learners need pragmatic rules in addition to grammatical ones. The grammatical rules have to be used in certain appropriate contexts (Brown, 2001, p. 248). That is, language learners need to learn language appropriately, as well as accurately. Pragmatic is an important and influential aspect of language study. Linguists developed a theory in pragmatics called speech act theory and this theory is the most important part of pragmatics. According to speech act theory, speakers carry out illocutionary acts by utterances. An illocutionary act is a language function carried out by an utterance. That is, speakers convey their communicative intentions, such as requests, refusals, offers, complaints, apologies, thanking, advice and promises through utterances. Two speech acts that are used extensively by speakers and non-native speakers usually have difficulty in applying them are requests and refusals. The speech act of request is a direct or indirect order that signifies an effort on the part of the speaker to get the hearer to do something, generally for a speaker's goal. Also according to Zhang, Wang, Wu & Huo (2011), requests are face threatening acts and so a speaker, in order to reduce the threat and to minimize the potential face damage, will need to make use of strategies and modifications. On the other hand, refusals are those speech acts that people use in order to reject their interlocutors' demands. Speakers use either direct or indirect refusal strategies to evade accomplishing the

demanded tasks. Refusals like requests are face-threatening acts to the listener, because they contradict his or her expectations, and are often realized through indirect strategies. Thus, they require a high level of pragmatic competence (Chen, 1996). They are considered as face threatening among speech acts because the positive or negative face of the speaker or listener is risked when a refusal is carried out.

In describing tasks, previous researches predominantly had focal attention on cognitive and psycholinguistic domains of tasks. Previous research has analyzed learner production elicited through different tasks or the same task with different variables, and provided empirical evidence that features of L2 oral output such as accuracy, fluency, and complexity vary by task type (e.g. Bygate, 1999). What is missing in the existing literature is the inclusion of pragmatic conditions in defining task difficulty. This study aims to investigate the pragmatic side of speech act production, tending to study the effect of task variation on oral speech act production among EFL learners. Learner output is analyzed for appropriateness and production speed to examine the kind of impact such task variation might have on L2 oral output. Hence the present study investigates foreign language learners' speech production across variant situations. That is, the effect of different tasks on foreign language learners output is being investigated.

### 1.1. Research questions

Using social variables, this study is employing two kinds of tasks and speech acts which are going to be analyzed in terms of two criteria: appropriateness and oral proficiency. Accordingly two questions are raised in this connection.

1. Do the types of social situations have differential effects on the appropriateness of L2 speech act production?
2. Do the types of social situations have differential effects on the speech rate of L2 speech act production?

Two speech acts that are used extensively by speakers and non-native speakers usually have difficulty in applying them are requests and refusals. Requests, one of the focused speech acts in this study, have been one of the most-studied speech acts. Several studies have been conducted in the domain of speech act of request.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Tanaka (1988) studied the use of requests by Japanese ESL learners and compared them with requests formulated by Australian English native speakers. She elicited the data through role-plays. It was found that her participants used more direct request strategies than her control group. She suggested that high tendency of participants in using direct request strategies is due to the complexity and inherent difficulty of more indirect request strategies. Moreover, her data revealed that her learners used more specific explanations for their requests than her native speakers.

Hassall (2001) compared the requests produced by Australian adult learners of Indonesian with those produced by Indonesian native speakers through interactive oral role-plays. He found that Australian adult learners of Indonesian employed more supportive moves on their requests in comparison to Indonesian native speakers. He reported that verbosity and excessive supportive moves produced by adult learners of Indonesian was sometimes regarded as inappropriate, because too much information seemed redundant and unnecessary. Hassall stated that excessive and long supportive moves employed by these learners in oral role-plays might have been related to the elicitation method, since supportive moves mainly consisted of information that included in the role-play cue (Gorjian, Alipour & Saffarian, 2012)

Refusals are considered as face threatening among speech acts because the positive or negative face of the speaker or listener is risked when a refusal is carried out. Refusals are important because they are regularly used in everyday communication (Gorjian, Pazhakh & Naghizadeh, 2012). To communicate effectively learners should know how to refuse others requests.

Hussein (1995) studied speech acts by using naturalistic data and listed some of the strategies employed by Arab native speakers in refusals. He found that Arab speakers used indirect refusals with acquaintances of equal status and close friends of unequal status.

Nelson, Carson, Al-Batal, & El-Bakari, (2002) utilized a modified version of Discourse Completion Test (DCT) in

order to study the similarities and differences between Americans and Egyptians in making refusals. They analyzed data according to frequency types of strategies, the direct and indirect dimension of communication style, gender and status. In their research, they found that Arab speakers had a tendency to show more awareness of status differences in refusing a person in higher status than Americans did. They also found that refusals in Arabic language and culture were more "face-threatening" than those in American culture

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. Participants

Forty MA students were also supposed to have a good command of language. Participants were divided into two proficiency groups. 22 higher proficiency students and 18 lower proficiency students, based on Nelson language proficiency test (Fowler & Coe, 1976). Of course the overall number of participants was 55, after administering the Nelson language proficiency test 15 learners whom were assigned as mid group were removed from the study. 18 students represented high and 22 as low groups. All the students who participated in this study were informed of the general aim and procedures of the study, and no one participated in this research project against his or her will.

### 3.2. Materials and instruments

For the present study, a Nelson language proficiency test from (Fowler & Coe, 1976) was used for two purposes: first, to measure the overall language ability of participants and second in order to select the participants. The Nelson test was used in this study because it is a widely-used test for measuring general English language proficiency. The test comprised 50 multiple choice items including grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension and students are supposed to choose the correct answer among the alternatives. The required time allotment to complete the test was 50 minutes. The relevant data for the study have been collected through a means of data collection called closed role plays. A role play in which the participants respond to the description of situations to an interlocutor standardized initiation (Kasper, 2000).

The participants were presented with two kinds of task situations that involve speech acts of requests and refusals. The tasks were developed to elicit participants' ability to understand situational information and to produce speech acts of requests and refusals appropriately in closed role plays. Requests were chosen because they are face-threatening acts and could lead to unintended offence and communication breakdown if they are not performed appropriately. These task situations were taken from Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss- Weltz (1990), and Sasaki (1998).

### 3.3. Procedure

Closed role play situations were designed on the basis of the above-mentioned social categories. That is, social distance, power difference and the degree of imposition and accordingly four request situations and four refusal situations were designed. In effect, the present study was carried out in two sessions. In the first session, participants took an advanced Nelson language proficiency test (Fowler & Coe, 1976) based on which 40 students were selected. In the second session, closed role play situations were given by the experimenter that conversed with participants during role plays. Task situations were written down on index cards until students can read the situations and be mentally prepared. All interactions were recorded in handheld voice recorders and later their spoken responses were transcribed.

### 3.4. Data analysis

In order to analyze the data accumulated from the participants, two kinds of methods were employed. First two features of speech act production that is, appropriateness and speech rate were measured. Appropriateness was defined as the ability to produce

speech acts at the proper level of politeness, directness and formality in the given situations and was measured through a six-point rating scale ranging from "no performance" (0) to "excellent" (5) (Table1). For example, speech acts received low ratings when participants had major grammatical and lexical errors, including illogical response or incoherent speech or they received higher ratings when no grammatical or discourse error was observed. Previous sources served as reference to develop the scale (North, 1995). Two different raters evaluated speech acts. The raters were asked to listen to each role-play interaction and determine the rating of appropriateness (0-5 scale) based on the rating descriptions. The sum of the ratings of the four PDI- high and the four PDI-low speech acts were used for analysis. Overall inter-rater reliability was 0.90 for the whole samples using Pearson's Correlation Coefficient. And the average score between the two raters was assigned as the final score.

Another measure to analyze the learners' speech act production was speech rate. Speech rate is one component of oral fluency that refers to the number of words spoken per minute (Lennon, 1990; Towel, 2002).

**Table 1.** Appropriateness rating scale for the pragmatic speaking task

	Ratings	Descriptions
5	Excellent	-Expressions are fully appropriate for the situation. (No or almost no grammatical and discourse errors)
4	Good	-Expressions are mostly appropriate. (Very few grammatical and discourse errors)
3	Fair	-Expressions are only somewhat appropriate. (Grammatical and discourse errors are noticeable, but they do not interfere with appropriateness)
2	Poor	-Due to the interference from grammatical and discourse errors, appropriateness is difficult to determine.
1	Very poor	-Expressions are very difficult or too little to understand. there is no evidence that the intended speech acts are performed
0		-No performance

The second method used to analyze the data was coding frameworks for requests and refusals in order to identify the type and frequency of request and refusal strategies made by learners. To determine why PDI- high speech acts were more difficult and took a longer time to produce than PDI-low ones, the present study examined linguistic strategies used by the participants and classified request and refusal expressions into different directness levels. For the analysis of request speech acts, the popular coding framework, 'Cross Cultural Realization Project (CCSARP)' adapted from Blum-Kulka et al. (1989, as cited in Francis, 1997) was used (Table 2).

The CCSARP has two major levels of request strategies: Direct and indirect strategies. Each level includes several types of request strategies. Direct requests include imperatives, performatives, implicit performatives, obligations and want statements. Indirect strategies

include conventional indirect and non-conventional indirect strategies. Conventional indirect requests include preparatory questions, suggestions, permissions, mitigated preparatory and mitigated wants. Non-conventional indirect requests include strong and mild hints. For refusal speech acts coding framework from Beebe et al. (1990) and Nelson et al. (2002) was employed (Table 3).

This model has two major levels of refusal strategies: direct and indirect strategies. Direct refusals include negative willingness. Indirect refusals include statement of regret, wish, excuse, and statement of alternative, promise of future acceptance, indefinite reply, postponement and repetition. Then the data were converted to SPSS version 16 for obtaining descriptive statistics such as means, standard deviations, frequencies and ANOVAs.

**Table 2.** Coding framework for requests based on Blum-Kulka et al. (1989, as cited in Francis, 1997) CCSARP

#### *1. Direct strategies*

1. Imperatives e.g., Please lend me a pen.
2. Performatives e.g., I'm asking you to lend me a pen.
3. Implicit performatives e.g., I want to ask you to lend me a pen.

4. Obligation Statements e.g., You should lend me a pen.
5. Want Statements e.g., I want you to lend me a pen.
- II. Indirect strategies*
- II.A. Conventional indirect*
6. Preparatory questions e.g., Could you lend me a pen?
7. Suggestions e.g., How about lending me a pen?
8. Permissions e.g., May I borrow a pen?
9. Mitigated Preparatory e.g., I'm wondering if you could lend me a pen.
10. Mitigated Wants e.g., I'd appreciate it if you could lend me a pen.
- II.B. Non-conventional indirect*
11. Strong hint e.g., My pen just quit. I need a pen.
12. Mild hint e.g., Can you guess what I want?

**Table 3.** Coding framework for refusals based on Beebe et al. (1990) and Nelson et al. (2002)

- I. Direct strategies*
1. No/Negative willingness/ability e.g. I don't want to. I can't.
- II. Indirect strategies*
2. Statement of regret e.g. I'm sorry.
3. Wish e.g. I wish I could go.
4. Excuse e.g. I have a plan.
5. Statement of alternative e.g. I'd rather drink tea.
6. Promise of future acceptance e.g. I'll do it next time.
7. Indefinite reply/hedging e.g. Maybe we can work something out.
8. Postponement e.g. I'll think about it.
9. Repetition/question e.g. Friday night?

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Effects of situation type on appropriateness

The first research question sought to investigate whether the social situations (PDI-high and PDI-low) have

differential effects on the appropriateness of second language request and refusal speech act production and between the two different proficiency groups. Table (1) presents the descriptive statistics of appropriateness scores for the two proficiency groups.

**Table 4.** Effect of situation type on appropriateness scores

Group	N	situation type	K	Mean	SD
Higher	18	PDI-high	4	15.6	0.88
		PDI-low	4	16.75	0.738
Lower	22	PDI-high	4	10.86	1.017
		PDI-low	4	13.90	0.854

N= number of subjects

K=number of speech acts

The means show the sum of the speech act ratings.

The mean for the higher proficiency group was greater than the mean for the lower proficiency group. For the higher group, there was little difference between PDI-high and PDI-low situations. For PDI-high tasks, mean was 15.6 and standard deviation was 0.88 and for PDI-low situations, mean was 16.75 and standard deviation was 0.738. Considering the lower proficiency group, the mean for PDI-low situations was greater than the mean for PDI-high situations. For this group, the mean for PDI-low situations was 13.90 and standard deviation was 0.854 and also for PDI-high situations the mean was 10.86 and standard deviation was 1.017.

MANOVA test was performed on second language learners' appropriateness scores. Between subject factor was proficiency level and within subject factor was the situation typ. MANOVA test confirmed significant effects for situation type ( $F= 35.668$ ,  $P< .000$ ,) and proficiency group ( $F=78.055$ ,  $P<.000$ ,). It also revealed a

significant interaction between situation type and proficiency group ( $F= 2.898$ ,  $P< .091$ ,). Hence, it was found that PDI-high tasks were more difficult to be produced by the second language learners than those of PDI-low ones. In regards to proficiency groups, lower proficiency group was slower in the production of PDI-high tasks than higher proficiency group.

### 4.2. Effects of situation type on speech speed

The second research question asked whether the two social situations (PDI-high and PDI-low) have different effects on speech speed of L2 requests and refusals and between two different proficiency groups. Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of the effects of the two different situation types on speech speed.

**Table 5.** Effect of situation type on speech speed

Group	N	situation type	K	Mean	SD
Higher	18	PDI-high	4	36.54	14.676
		PDI-low	4	482.35	22.65
		PDI-high	4	31.07	12.249

Lower	22	PDI-low	4	65.34	18.879
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N= number of subjects

K=number of speech acts

The means show the average number of words produced per minute

As the table (5) shows the mean for the higher proficiency group was much greater than the mean for the lower proficiency group. Considering the higher group, the mean for PDI-low situations was greater ( $M=82.35$ ,  $SD=22.654$ ) than that of the PDI-high situations ( $M=36.54$ ,  $SD=14.676$ ). Regarding the lower proficiency group, as in the higher proficiency group the mean for the PDI-low situations was greater ( $M=65.34$ ,  $SD=18.879$ ) than that of the PDI-high situations ( $M=31.07$ ,  $SD=12.249$ ).

MANOVA test was performed on second language learners' average speech speed. Between subject factor was proficiency level and within subject factor was the situation typ. The statistical analyses indicated significant main effects for situation type ( $F=396.985$ ,  $P< .000$ ,) and proficiency group ( $F=34.932$ ,  $P< .000$ ,  $\eta^2 = .181$ ). In addition, there was a significant interaction between situation type and proficiency group ( $F=8.234$ ,  $P< .005$ ,). Thus, both proficiency groups were slow in the production of PDI-high tasks and the lower proficiency group was much slower in the production of PDI-high speech acts than the higher proficiency group.

This study also sought to identify the type and frequency of request strategies in order to indicate why PDI-high speech acts were more difficult and took a longer time to produce than PDI-low ones. To do this, for request speech act analysis Cross Cultural Realization Project (CCSARP) adapted from Blum-Kulka et al. (1989, as cited in Francis, 1997) was used. In addition, for analysis of refusals coding framework from Beebe et al. (1990) and Nelson et al. (2002) was used.

The study also revealed that both proficiency groups had difficulty in the production of PDI-high requests and refusals. It was found that social variables of tasks make certain situations more demanding to produce than others. This demanding could be due to the great politeness required in the production of PDI-high situations. Both appropriateness scores and speech rate were influenced by social factors, namely power difference, the social distance between them and the degree of imposition. The difficulty in the production of PDI-high speech acts could be due to the difficulty in the production of appropriate expressions or probably learners did not have the linguistic resources appropriate to the PDI-high situations. Hence, production difficulty may be resulted from learners' low proficiency or lack of linguistic resources to produce PDI-high situations. In contrast to PDI-high situations learners produced PDI-low speech acts faster and more quickly. This quickness and easiness in the production of PDI-low speech acts could be due to the less face-threatening nature of these kinds of situations and also lesser degree of politeness required in the production of these tasks.

In conclusion, this study found that two social task situations (PDI-high and PDI-low) have differential effects on the oral output of second language learners. Some tasks were less face-threatening and have been produced more quickly and easily and some tasks were

more face-threatening and took a longer time to be produced.

## 4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

An overall view of the requests and refusals data made available by the two groups showed that pragmatic tasks influenced both appropriateness and speech speed. The study revealed that different pragmatic tasks (PDI-high and PDI-low acts) have different effects on speech act production. Participants performed some tasks more quickly and easily than others because those tasks were required fewer linguistic and psychological resources on the part of the learners. The second reason could be the nature of less face-threatening of some tasks. On the other hand, participants had difficulty in the production of tasks that were more face-threatening and took longer time to be produced.

This study has shown that task variation is a determining factor in pragmatic teaching and so in designing tasks sociolinguistic variables (power difference, social distance and the degree of imposition) have to be considered.

This study also has revealed that PDI-low speech acts should be introduced before PDI-high ones because second language learners produce them faster and easier in comparison to PDI-high speech acts (Zhang, Wu, Wei & Wang, 2011).

This study may have some important pedagogical implications. The present study explored the impact of pragmatic tasks on speech act production. The findings have revealed that task variation is a determining factor in pragmatic teaching and so in designing tasks sociolinguistic variables (power difference, social distance and the degree of imposition) have to be focused on. Thus, social variables are indispensable aspects of pragmatic teaching and could be useful criteria in designing tasks (Gorjian, Pazhakh & Parang, 2012).

This ambiguity and inexplicitness seemed to have resulted in the lower appropriateness scores of PDI-high speech( Zhang & Wu, 2011 a, 2011b) acts in comparison to those of PDI-low ones (Zhang, Wang, Wu & Huo, 2011). Hence, when analyzing appropriateness of second language learners' speech acts, the degree of clarity should be emphasized. The conduct of the research in the second language classroom setting is always open to error and practical challenges. The most practical challenge that present study encountered was the collection of oral data for the closed role plays. The oral data was collected through recording the participants' role plays with experimenter by handheld voice recorders. This process is highly time-consuming. The findings of this study can be valuable resources for potential future studies of speech acts.

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