

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The present study aims at revealing the relationship between Saudi English Foreign Language learners' (SEFL) English proficiency levels and strategies of making requests in the target language. Specifically, the study attempts to investigate the similarities\differences in pragmatic realization of making requests across high and low SEFL proficiency learners. In this respect, this chapter commences with the background of the study and statement of the problem (Section 1.2 and 1.3). After delving into the research objectives and questions (Section 1.4 and 1.5), the chapter further presents the significance of the study (Section 1.6). In sections 1.7 and 1.8 limitations and summary of the study are highlighted. Finally, the operational definition is addressed (Section 1.9).

1.2 Background of the Study

Verschueren (2012) regarded pragmatics, not as a primary component of the language, but instead as an overall social, cultural, and cognitive perspective on linguistic phenomena concerning their usage in behavior patterns. Crain and Lillo-Martin (1999) supposed that language is not regarded as abstract issues that exist in the world that we can define or feel. But rather, it is considered as something that exists inside our minds and brains.

The appropriateness of using language likely depends on assimilating and realizing the relationship between language and culture. This relationship comes under the umbrella of the pragmatic approach, which concerns the functional perspective of

the language. Lambert, et al. (1973, p.246) defined pragmatic as "an awareness of and sensitivity toward the values and traditions of the people whose language is being studied". Therefore, the learners might have solid background of the culture of the target language. However, if the learners do not exhibit any comprehension of the target language culture, they might encounter problems in learning the language. For example, Kramsch (2007) compared languages and cultures to determine and describe problems that second-language learners might confront. She concludes that learners transfer forms and meanings, and they render them from their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture.

Pragmatics focuses on form and meaning that is highly important for language learners. According to Kasper (1999) pragmatics means understanding and creating language act (linguistic action) in perspective. Most important, both terms perspective and act are included and two vital components of dialogue actions in linguistics. Crystal (1997), moreover, explains that pragmatics resembles reading of verbal communication from the standpoint of the language user, particularly of the varieties those users create; the limitations the users come across in consuming linguistic in societal dealings and the impacts on their usage of verbal communication possesses upon the other applicants in doing conversation. It should be mentioned that lack of pragmatic knowledge poses some problems for learners.

In this regard, Cohen (2004, p.3) indicated that "language learners can have all of the lexical items and the grammatical forms and still fail at conveying their message because they lack necessary pragmatic or functional information to communicate their intent." Cohen (2004) clarified speech acts as a constant interest for second and foreign language learners because they face difficulties continually in exploiting speech acts like apologizing, requests, complaints, thanking, and refusals. All of which indicates

that speech acts have different interpretations for non-native speakers i.e., they may not grasp explicitly the intended meaning of the speaker due to the cultural differences and pragmatic competence.

Saudi EFL learners, for example, show difficulties in using English appropriately for communication because the pragmatic competence of Saudi EFL learners (i.e., SEFL) has been reported as being challenge when they use English language with native speakers or in academic field. To support this claim, several studies (Shah, Hussain, & Nassef, 2013; AlSeghayer, 2005, 2011, 2014; Elyas & Al Grigri, 2014; Al-Zahrani, 2008) have claimed that Saudi EFL learners experience challenges using English for communication purposes. For instance, Rouissi (2014) showed that SEFL learners have different pragmatic failures, thus, the author suggests applying more communicative approaches as elements of EFL instruction for the purpose of overcoming such pragmatic failures.

Al-Qahtani (2020) concludes that Saudi teachers' awareness of the significance of integrating pragmatic competence teaching within EFL context is not yet satisfactory based on their performance when students employ utterances in the target language. The author suggests that the embedment of sufficient pragmatic features such as speech acts in teaching English within the daily classroom activities enhances the quality of EFL learners' performance in using English language properly and builds a successful communication. As the researcher has 12 years - experience in teaching SEFL, he notices that most students have weakness in using speech act and they sometimes fall back to their first language to transfer their messages when they use English language.

Additionally, there are only to date, few studies focused on the factors that develop pragmatic competence of Saudi EFL learners, the studies that examined the factors that influence on performing a speech act among the Saudi learners are

inadequate (Al-Gahtani and Roevers, 2012). Therefore, this study investigates the influence of English language proficiency on Saudi EFL learner's pragmatic realization and making request strategies to pinpoint the pragmatic knowledge among SEFL and to compare the similarities and differences in using request strategies at different proficiency levels.

Request as a part of speech act can be described as declarative, imperative, and interrogative act. Speech act has been considered as the crucial aspect in pragmatic researchers in second language studies (Levinson, 1983). Speech acts are the core element of linguistic communication such as requesting, complaining, and thanking and others, which permit speakers to detect the power of language to do things rather than attributing reality (Green, 2010). Moreover, examining the speech act deals with the conveyed meaning, not to the falsity or truth the speech may presuppose. According to Austin (1962), the falsity or truth of utterance relies not solely on the meaning of the expressions, but on the performance of the act produced by a speaker in a specific circumstance. This study centers particularly on request act because it relates to foreign language directly. Speech act comprises binary aspects, head, and modifier. The main part of the request is the head act, for example "give me", which can stand alone without a modifier in performing the request. Furthermore, modifiers, in most situations, come before or after head acts, which are exploited to mitigate the degree of imposition in request act (Reiter, 2000).

1.3 Problem Statement

It is widely acknowledged that pragmatics is considered as the study of language from users' perspectives in terms of the choices they make and the effects of their employment of language on other people throughout the act of communication (Crystal,

1997). According to Syarifuddin (2017), pragmatic is a primary component of the language that seeks to use the language properly in the context. Accordingly, Syarifuddin (2017) suggests that developing learners' pragmatic competence in language classroom is crucial for language learners; although learners have linguistic knowledge, but they do not have sufficient pragmatic knowledge that hinder them to communicate effectively with native speakers of target language. Several studies (Loutfi, 2016a; Kasper, 1997, Latif, 2001) indicate that pragmatic competence is still lacking in second language learners even if their grammatical knowledge is considered proficient. All of which lead to awkwardness, embarrassment, rudeness, failure of the speaker's message to get through, all of which result in communication breakdown (Choraih et al., 2016).

It should be mentioned that there are some principles of making good language learners. According to Alhaysony, (2017) good language learners should be attributed to the following traits. First, learners should actively involve themselves in the language learning process by identifying and pursuing preferred learning environments. Second, they should enhance their knowledge of language as a system. Third, they should improve their understanding of language as a means of communication and interaction. Fourth, they should accept and adapt with the effective demands of L2. Fifth, they should enhance and revise the L2 system by inferencing and monitoring.

Previous studies on the Interlanguage pragmatic (ILP) field have indicated some factors influencing pragmatic competence development. One of these factors is language proficiency which has a great role in pragmatic competence (Bardovi-Harlig, et al 2015).; Schauer, 2006; Xiao, 2015). However, results of the previous studies demonstrated controversial outcomes. For instance, some findings stated that language proficiency has a significant role in pragmatic competence (e.g., Al-Gahtani, & Roever,

(2012); Qorina, 2012; Rastegar & Yasami, 2014). Other research revealed that language proficiency has an insignificant effect on pragmatic competence (e.g., Farnia, & Suleiman, 2016; Khorshidi, et al, 2016; Tabatabaei, & Farnia, 2015). However, the influence of language proficiency on pragmatic realization and using speech act for EFL/ESL has not been investigated widely and insufficient especially for Saudi EFL context. Hence, this study hopes to add insights into ILP studies by revealing the influence of language proficiency factor on pragmatic competence in making and realizing pragmatic competence in Saudi context as recommended by previous researchers (Huwari & Al-Shboul, 2015).

Harwood (2014) indicates that pragmatics should not be considered as an optional extra in a textbook syllabus. This is contrary to the common belief that pragmatic is merely concerned with rendering the literal meaning for eliciting the embedded meaning. The problem is that pragmatic does not gain adequate attention in teaching EFL in general (Taguchi, 2015). According to Leech (1983) pragmatics are divided into sociopragmatics and pragmalinguistics, the former suggests the knowledge in which the social role impact the use of language, while the latter refers to the utterance the speaker employs when speech act are used in real life situations. As these two terms are seminal aspects in the current study, the following paragraph sheds more insight on these definitions.

Marmaridou, (2011) defines Pragmalinguistics as the intersection of pragmatics and linguistic forms. Accordingly, the ability of being pragmatically competent entails two aspects of pragmatics, understanding and producing sociopragmatic meanings with pragmalinguistic conventions. Thus, Roever (2009) points out that the lack of such results leads to pragmatic failure. Knowing that lack of pragmatic knowledge may lead to pragmatic transfer whereby second language learners tend to fall back to their first

language because of their inability to comprehend and produce the pragmatic competence of the second language (Bou-Franch, 2012; Saleem, et al. 2018).

The lack of pragmatic competence among language learners, is also supported by Qari's study (2017) in which students who are second language or foreign learners were commonly found to face a difficulty of mastering speech act in their communication. Qari (2019) pointed out that in the context of Saudi learners, they often make grammatical mistakes in performing speech acts in conversations such as apology and request, and they sometimes fall back on their first language to use speech act exploiting direct terminology, which may be easier in speaking due to the scarcity of practicing in the TL. Falling back to the first language inappropriately might be considered as a pragmatic failure that may further lead to misunderstandings in the spoken interactions, due to the different linguistic structures and cultural differences that existed between the two cultures. To understand pragmatic competence, communicative competence should be addressed first as the explanation in the following chapter.

There is a consensus between theoreticians from late 1960 in the applied linguistic field regarding defining communicative competence, which shows that language users should not only know the knowledge of the language itself, but how to employ and activate this knowledge into communicative events (Bagaric & Djigunovic, 2007). As one of the most utilized speech behaviors, learners' requests in their L2 should be investigated to understand their pragmatic development.

Requests have been shown to occur regularly in everyday communication, and how they are grasped influences the relationship between interlocutors. Thus, performing requests inappropriately can make the L2 learners look impolite in the target community, causing pragmatic failure. It is likewise broadly accepted that native

speakers consider pragmatic faults to be more serious than syntactic or phonological mistakes (Thomas, 1983; Wolfson, 1989).

Although most of ILP studies have investigated factors affecting pragmatic competence, the primary focus has been the effect of the learning environment (Schuar 2006, 2009; Sorour, 2015). In other words, it has been noted that there is lack of studies that examine how language proficiency can influence pragmatic competence (e.g., Taguchi, 2011; Xiao, 2015). Additionally, the findings of previous ILP studies are inconclusive. While some researchers (e.g., İstifçi, 2009; Al-Gahtani & Roever, 2011; Qorina, 2012; Rastegar & Yasami, 2014) have reported that language proficiency has a positive effect on pragmatic competence development, some other studies have not reported a significant effect of language proficiency (e.g., Sorour, 2015; Tabatabaei & Farnia, 2015; Khorshidi et al., 2016; Mohebbi & Salehi, 2016). Based on the findings reported by these studies, learners with high level of proficiency does not guarantee native-like pragmatic production and comprehension of speech acts. Accordingly, more studies are required to determine the relationship between language proficiency and pragmatic competence development.

To be pragmatically competent, Saudi EFL learners need to acquire a good competence of pragmalinguistic, and sociolinguistic aspects of English language. Accordingly, to get a complete picture of Saudi EFL learners' pragmatic competence, this study centered on both aspects, especially regarding the relationship between language proficiency and Saudi EFL learners' pragmatic production and realization of the speech act of request.

1.4 Research Objectives

The current study addresses the following three research objectives:

1. To identify request strategies employed by Saudi EFL learners at two different levels of English language proficiency use (linguistic variability). More specifically, it aims to investigate the level of directness, internal and external modifications among learners from different language proficiency.
2. To investigate the effect of English language proficiency of Saudi EFL learners at different levels of proficiency on pragmatic realization (situational variability) and production of the speech act of request.
3. To reveal the similarities and differences in the production and realization of request act by Saudi EFL learners at different levels of proficiency.

1.5 Research Questions

Investigation of this study attempts to address the following questions:

1. What strategies do Saudi EFL learners at different levels of English language proficiency employ in making request act? Linguistic variability pertaining to
 - a. Level of directness / indirectness between HAs and LAs
 - b. conventionally indirect, and non-conventionally indirect request strategies
 - c. external and internal modifications between HAs and Las
2. What is the relationship between language proficiency and pragmatic realization of making requests by Saudi EFL learners? (Situational variability).
3. What are the similarities and differences in the production and realization of request act by HAs and LAs?

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study deduces its significance from four aspects as follows. First, many studies on pragmatics in the Arab context normally focus on the differences between native and nonnative speakers of English in producing speech act even the tools/analysis used are different from those in the current research. That means the current study focuses on two dimension linguistic and social variables. In doing so, this study focuses on the pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics aspects in using request act among HA and LA. Thus, learners at different levels of English language proficiency were chosen so that the findings can enhance understating of the influence of language proficiency on Saudi EFL learners' pragmatic realization and production of the speech act of request.

Second, teachers, instructors, and trainers may find this study useful as findings gained from this study may provide a better understanding of the most preferred strategy employed by SEFL at different language proficiency in particular situations. Moreover, the speech act of request is considered as an obstacle that EFL\ESL encounter in their communication (Al-Nasser, 2015), hence results gained from the investigation may enhance students to use a wide range of request strategy and strengthen their competence in using pragmatics taking into consideration the social variable. Hence, there is a need to focus on pragmatic competence of Saudi EFL in making requests at different language proficiency.

Third, this study hopes to add new insights to the literature for scholars and researchers because there are few studies on Saudis' request as part of speech act specifically the influence of language proficiency in making request (Hussein & Albakri, 2019; Al-Ageel, 2016; Al-Gahtani & Alkahtani, 2012; Alsulayyi, 2017; Qari, 2019; Tawalbeh & Oqaily, 2012). Al-Ageel, (2016) stated that scholars face difficulties

due to the shortage of literature when they investigate the use of speech acts by Arabic speakers as EFL learners.

Investigating the request act used by Saudis may strengthen the literature of the linguistic features and cultural norms, In the case of L2 learning, this can cause serious repercussions as Saudi learners' employ higher directness in contexts where using directness is treated as socially inappropriate in the target language. So, the results may be useful for learners to strengthen their pragmatic competence in using request as one type of speech act. To the best of researcher knowledge, this study will be one of the necessary studies which scrutinize the speech acts of request and the impact of language proficiency in making requests among high and low SEFL proficiency Saudi learners.

Fourth, the current DCT appears to have many administrative benefits, such as enabling the researcher to gather a large corpus of data on difficult to observe speech events in a variety of situations within a relatively short period of time. To be more focused, in this research it is important to gather sufficient data from different situations and DCT is considered as one of the most efficient tools to collect such data.

Accordingly, the current DCT serves to obtain information about what utterances are employed by Saudi at different language levels in different situations to implement a particular speech act and it encompasses social variables in each situation that helps the researcher to study the speaker's ability to recognize the contextual variables. Therefore, DCT seems to be an effective data collection method when the purpose of the study is data production. Hudson and Brown, (2001) defined DCT as a pragmatics instrument that entails the students to read a written description of a situation that contains social variables.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

The current study has some limitations, as follows:

1. The study is conducted to investigate the pragmatic competence for Saudi EFL on Preparatory Year Program (PYP) at Prince Sattam bin Abed Aziz University (PSAU), so the findings will not be generalized to all students as PSAU or any PYP's students at any university in Saudi Arabia.
2. The current study centers on request as a type of speech act and the impact of language proficiency on performing the request so other acts will not be measured.
3. The sampling in the current study is limited to a heterogeneous population. Therefore, the study's sampling is limited to population involving education programs, specifically first-year students at a specific public university that does not in any way imply connection with the public at large or students at secondary or primary stages.

1.8 Summary

The influence of language proficiency is a variable in the current study. Stern (1992) classified language proficiency into two branches, the first classification refers to the degree of proficiency of EFL\ESL learners in employing a second or a foreign language and the extent to which the speakers continue to nearly perfect their native-like proficiency. The second classification, in addition, refers to the components of language proficiency.

Stern (1992, p. 73) defined language proficiency as “the mastery of such skills as listening, speaking, reading and writing”. Additionally, the learning of language for communication requires achieving mastery in linguistic strategies, sociocultural and

interactional norms and discourse of the target language (Stern, 1992). On the other hand, language proficiency is built in two contexts: context-reduced and context-embedded. First, context-reducing happens when the speaker has insufficient knowledge of the language, which imposes the speaker to elaborate utterances and use explicit forms to prevent any possible misunderstanding. Context-embedded is the implicit competence of the language that the speaker used in the communication (Cummins, 1983).

To sum up, proficiency, as it is defined in English dictionaries, is an indication of the speaker's skill and capability in using language. It is noteworthy to highlight that this term can also be connected to measurement and test in second and foreign language teaching. For example, IELTS and TOEFL are international tests which are used to measure the proficiency for people who desire to study English or travel to a place where English is the medium of communication. Accordingly, adapting this view, Language proficiency, tapped via standardized testing, is an important tool to distinguish mastery from non-mastery candidates. Thus, to this end, this current study adopted a test, Touchstone Placement Test (TPT), to determine language proficiency. The participants in the study were classified into 2 groups namely high achievers and low achievers as the influence of language proficiency is a variable in the current study.

1.9 Operational Definitions

1. Pragmatic competence: It deals with a person's strength in using language appropriately to accomplish specific goals, comprehend language in context, and use communicative action (Bachman, 1990). Specifically, it explains pragmatic competence as the interpretation of the meaning of any utterance in a specific

context, which presupposes the speaker's knowledge about social distance and status among hearer and speaker and politeness strategies (Yul, 2014).

2. Pragmalinguistic competence (linguistic variability): This term is described as the speaker's adequacy to employ particular strategies and forms (such as levels of directness) to achieve a specific speech act such as request (Kasper and Roever 2005).
3. Pragmatic transfer: It relates to the effects exercised by speakers' pragmatic awareness of cultures and languages other than the second language in their learning, performing, and recognizing pragmatic knowledge of the target language (Kasper, 1992).
4. Sociopragmatics competence (situational variability): It refers to the correlation between the appropriate utterance concerning social power and distance, rights, obligation, and the level of the force engaged in the specific act. Leech (1983) stated that sociopragmatic is (the study of) the strategies in which pragmatic performance reflect *specific* and *general* conditions on language use. (1983, p.10).
5. Interlanguage pragmatics: An area of inquiry that investigates the non-native speaker's capability to perform actions, understand, grasp and communicate in the target language and examines how second or foreign language students improve and develop their efficiency to produce action and comprehend in the target language.
6. Request: is a branch of directive illocution which permits for the possibility of refusal. (Safont, 2008) defined request acts as "are performed by the speaker to engage the hearer in some future course of actions that coincide with a speaker's goal" (p.168). Moreover, it is described as asking, but in more polite utterance for the same function.

7. Indirect request strategies: It is an indirect request act known as “one illocutionary act is performed indirectly by way of performing another”, or in other words, the illocutionary force of the act is not derivable from the surface structure such as conventionally and non-conventionally indirect (Searle 1975, p.60).
8. Direct request strategies: Searle (1975, p. 60) defined direct request as an evident relationship between form and function, as when an imperative is used to make a request such as (mood derivable and hedge performative).
9. In an indirect speech act, Level of directness: Blum-Kulka et al. (1989, p.17) defined as “that part of the sequence which might serve to realise the act independently of other elements”.
10. External modifications: This type of modification, therefore, takes place in the form of supportive moves, such as justifications and explanations of various kinds, occurring either before or after the head act (Kasper 1988).
11. Internal modifications: “elements within the request utterance proper (linked to the head act), the presence of which is not essential for the utterance to be potentially understood as a request” (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989, p.60).