

REQUEST STRATEGIES AND MODIFICATION DEVICES AS PERFORMED BY CZECH EFL LEARNERS: A FOCUS ON BORROWING OBJECTS

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Abstract

This study presents an analysis of informal written requests from the national school-leaving exam and simulated spoken requests collected via Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT) to describe pragmalinguistic features used by Czech EFL learners in requests for borrowing objects. In both types of data, the findings reveal strong preference for conventionally indirect strategies and external modification, but considerable underuse of softeners within head acts. The written requests show significant reiteration with a great deal of modification devices outside head acts and a higher proportion of face-threatening features, such as expectations and direct strategies realized by want statements and imperatives. The WDCT requests tend to employ more face-saving strategies but show less variability in request realization. Consequently, awareness raising activities, helping Czech EFL learners fully understand the face-threatening nature of requests, as well as explicit metapragmatic treatment, focusing on strategic use of requests constituents, are recommended.

Keywords

request strategies, politeness, head acts, internal modification, external modification, pragmatic competence

1 Introduction

In English, requests are regarded as the most impositive speech acts (Martínez-Flor 2003) that frequently occur in everyday interaction. To avoid being considered rude, they should be realized in a polite and contextually appropriate way. However, the concept of politeness differs across languages (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989), so acquiring pragmatic competence is an indispensable condition for L2 learners to become communicatively competent in the target language (Kasper 2001). Participation in L2 discourse practices is a useful way to gain the required socio-pragmatic and pragma-linguistic knowledge, but not all members of the target speech community behave in accordance with the shared principles

with respect to the degree of politeness. Moreover, the EFL context hardly offers sufficient exposure to target community practices (Alcón Soler et al. 2005), so learners are dependent on teachers to make the pragmatic feature salient and learnable by means of explicit metapragmatic treatment.

This is further supported by solid evidence suggesting that explicit pragmatic teaching can have a positive effect on L2 learners' pragmatic awareness and competence (e.g. Takahashi 2001, Alcón Soler et al. 2005, Economidou-Kogetsidis et al. 2018). However, most English language course books at lower proficiency levels tend to rely on implicit teaching and present speech acts using a large number of examples that are appropriate in particular communicative situations. Teachers' manuals hardly ever contain detailed explanation of principles underlying the use of individual speech acts. This can be attributed to the fact that course book writers producing a global product are unable to foresee how speech acts and politeness principles differ across the respective mother tongues of the learners who are likely to use the course book.

Hence, this paper responds to the lack of knowledge concerning pragmalinguistic variation between Czech and English languages and its findings can be instantly exploited in the process of devising teaching materials for pragmatic treatment of requests for borrowing objects. The originality of the current research lies in the use of two different samples collected via two elicitation methods which enabled us to provide a detailed and more reliable description of the written as well as simulated spoken requests and also to focus on the extremely under-researched area of pragmatics in secondary-school L2 production.

As a basis for subsequent metapragmatic treatment, it is essential to gain solid evidence concerning the extent to which Czech EFL learners use request constituents appropriately, and to identify the areas that require special attention in English language instruction.

Accordingly, the aims of the study were as follows:

- To determine which requesting strategies and mitigating devices Czech students of English at B1/B2 levels use when they need to borrow an object in an informal situation;
- To compare request constituents used in written and spoken requests;
- To identify the appropriate and inappropriate features in relation to native English speakers' expectations;
- To ascertain which particular requestive behaviour needs to be addressed in teaching.

2 The speech act of request

Requests belong to the category of directives (Searle 1975) because their function is to get the hearer to do something which is in the interest of the speaker and which the hearer would not normally do because it requires a certain effort (Brown & Levinson 1987). The hearer is thus under pressure either to grant or not to grant the favour and can be in danger of losing face because their self-esteem is threatened (Goffman 1971). For this reason, requests are regarded as face-threatening acts, i.e. acts in which the hearer's freedom of action is restricted by imposition and their right to non-distraction is violated (Brown & Levinson 1987).

Since the speaker does not want to lose face, i.e. public self-image, by being rejected and at the same time wants both to compensate for their impositive effect and to prevent the hearer from losing face, it is necessary to formulate the request in a socially and culturally appropriate way, i.e. by means of face-saving strategies or face-work. The face-work is most frequently realized within the core of the request, termed head act, which is the smallest unit of utterance that can realize the request independently. Based on contextual factors, such as the degree of imposition, the relative power of the hearer and the social distance between the speaker and the hearer, the speaker chooses the most appropriate request realization from three major strategies, differing by the extent to which the illocution is transparent from locution, which are: 1) direct requests, 2) conventionally indirect requests, and 3) non-conventionally indirect requests (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1984).

Direct forms of requests are employed when the speaker states without ambiguity what the hearer is required to do. They include imperatives (i.e. mood derivables), performatives, hedged performatives, expressions implying obligation, wishes, and declarative sentences containing the verbs *want* and *need* (i.e. want statements) (ibid.). Their main focus is clarity and efficiency, but they pay very little attention to face (Brown & Levinson 1987).

Conventionally indirect requests consist of formulaic expressions carrying implicit meaning which would hardly be deducible solely from the linguistic form without the particular context. These routinized expressions, query preparatory (QP) and suggestory formulae, which are "less direct, potentially less clear, generally longer, and with a more complex structure" (Yule 1996: 65), are valued not only for giving the hearer an option to refuse without losing face and/or distancing the request from reality, but also because they show that the speaker has made "a greater effort, in terms of concern for face (i.e. politeness), than is needed simply to get the basic message across efficiently" (ibid.). A

request becomes in effect indirect, “when it shifts to a question form and, most commonly, makes use of some modal form” (Eskin 2017: 54) as questions give the hearer the option to say no, or at least make it less obvious that the hearer is expected to comply. Politeness is considerably increased when questions about the hearer’s ability are employed because people can hardly be blamed for inability to carry out the speaker’s wish.

Non-conventionally indirect requests (i.e. strong or mild hints) avoid naming the desired action explicitly. As they refer only partially to one or more of its aspects, the hearer is expected to assume the illocution from the interaction of the locution with the context. In this case, the hearer has an option to pretend not to have noticed the request.

| Request structure | PRE-HEAD ACT | HEAD ACT | POST-HEAD ACT |
|-------------------------------|--|--|---|
| | peripheral constituents | core | peripheral constituents |
| Example (written requests) | <i>Hi David, Listen,</i> | <i>I would need your bicycle, please.</i> | <i>My car is broken and I am not able to get to school in any other way.</i> |
| Modification devices | EMDs: e.g. attention-getters preparators disarmers apology | IMDs: e.g. <i>if</i> -clauses softeners openers fillers intensifiers <i>please</i> | EMDs: e.g. cost minimisers grounders expanders expressing gratitude promises of reward concluding expressions |

Table 1: Request structure (adapted from Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1984: 200)

The requests are further “redressed, modified, or made less direct in order to soften their illocutionary force” (Eskin 2017: 52), which can be seen in Table 1. At the sentential level (i.e. within the head act itself or closely linked to it), they can be softened or intensified by internal modification devices (IMDs), such as syntactic and lexical modifiers and point of view orientation. At the discourse level, they tend to be mitigated by external (peripheral) modification devices (EMDs), also called adjuncts or supportive moves, which appear in the immediate linguistic context surrounding the head act. British English native speakers consider internal modification obligatory, but external modification is viewed as optional (Faerch & Kasper 1989), providing support and setting the request in context (Halupka-Rešetar 2014). Neither internal nor external modification devices have the potential to affect the level of directness, but both

mitigate the face-threatening impact of the request and perform face-saving functions, which are oriented either to a person's negative face, i.e. the right to independence of action, or to a person's positive face, i.e. the need to be accepted and liked by others.

Functioning as IMDs, syntactic downgraders (e.g. interrogative sentences, *if*-clauses, past tense, past-tense modals) modulate the illocutionary force of requests by downtoning the expectations as to their fulfilment. Their implicit softening effect is not inherent in the grammatical meaning of these structures (Faerch & Kasper 1989), so the learners may not be fully aware of their mitigating functions (Takahashi 2001).

Similarly invisible for L2 learners can be the mitigating functions of request perspective although their downtoning effect is considered comparable to the level of directness and modification by Ogiermann and Bella (2020). In relation to their linguistic realizations, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) distinguish four different types of request perspective based on the entity addressed in the head act: speaker-oriented (*Can I ...?*), hearer-oriented (*Can you ...?*), inclusive/speaker and hearer-oriented (*Can we ...?*), and impersonal (*Can one ...?*). Imperatives and questions containing *will* and *would* are always hearer-oriented while declarative sentences and questions with *may* are speaker-oriented. With regards to the impersonal perspective, this is most frequently realized by expressions containing the adjective *possible*, while interrogative sentences containing modal verbs *can* and *could* can take any of the four perspectives. When asking for an object, English native speakers strongly prefer speaker-oriented requests (Ogiermann & Bella 2020), which Leech (1983) considers "marginally more polite than hearer-oriented ones" (ibid.: 134). Contrary to this, L2 English data, such as obtained from Japanese (Niki & Tajika 1994) and Czech university students (Huschová 2020), show a strong preference for the hearer-oriented perspective.

Lexical means situated within head acts which are frequently used to modify and/or decrease the illocutionary force of requests include, for example, openers, fillers (e.g. appealers, cajolers, phatic enquiry), softeners (e.g. downtoners, hedges, understatements), intensifiers, and the politeness marker *please*, which is considered one of the most significant and transparent signals of politeness in English requests. One of its multiple functions is to mark the utterance as directive, especially in ambiguous cases when the utterance has the form of a question (Martínez-Flor 2009). *Please* also mitigates and softens the illocutionary force of the request, so that it sounds courteous and polite. As this politeness marker is emotionally loaded to a certain extent, it can be employed as a reinforcer, or to beg for cooperation. The politeness marker *please* can be used either extrasententially or within the head act. Previous research shows that

L2 learners tend to use *please* in the embedded position at higher proficiency levels and/or after a longer exposition to target language forms (Barron 2003). This position “approximating the native speaker norm” (Martínez-Flor 2009: 40) is considered a sign of developing pragmatic competence when used by L2 English speakers (ibid.). The overuse of this politeness marker by L2 learners is explained by Faerch and Kasper (1989) by the fact that the use of *please* requires less pragma-linguistic competence than the use of other modifiers.

3 Cross-cultural differences between English and Czech requests

Brown and Levinson (1987) consider politeness strategies to be universal, but “empirical research has shown that the pragmatic force of syntactically and semantically equivalent utterances differs across languages” (Ogiermann 2009: 190).

In Czech, requests are not perceived to be as intrusive as in English and a potential refusal involves less face-loss, probably because the notion of a person’s negative face (Brown & Levinson 1987) has not been considered as crucial as in English. The politeness values in Czech are seen mainly in clarity and honesty even in formal written requests (Chejnová 2014). On the contrary, in English, “pragmatic clarity and directness are viewed as lack of concern for the hearer’s face” (Ogiermann 2009: 191).

Although the level of directness in Czech tends to be higher, imperatives are only appropriate among equals when the imposition is minimal (Chejnová 2014). Polite requests are commonly realized by QP, i.e. by interrogative sentences in present tense indicative of perfective verbs naturally referring to the future (i.e. *Půjčíš mi ...?/Will you lend me...?*), or in conditional clauses (i.e. *Půjčil bys mi ...?/Would you lend me ...?*), which are perceived as more polite. The speaker can choose from four different options ordered from the least to most polite: questions (see above), questions containing the equivalents of the modal verbs *can/could* (i.e. *Můžeš mi půjčit...?/Can you lend me ...?; Mohl bys mi půjčit ...?/Could you lend me ...?*), negative questions (i.e. *Nepůjčíš mi ...?/Won’t you lend me ...?; Nepůjčil bys mi ...?/Wouldn’t you lend me ...?*), and negative questions with the equivalents of the modal verbs *can/could* (i.e. *Nemůžeš mi půjčit ...?/Can’t you lend me ...?; Nemohl bys mi půjčit ...?/Couldn’t you lend me ...?*). Questions in negative form are seen as more tentative in Czech, and thus more polite, probably because they imply that the compliance is optional (Obenbergerová 1992). In English, however, interrogative sentences containing negation would be classified as rude (Ogiermann 2009) because they tend to be used to express “disappointment or annoyance” (Greenbaum & Quirk 1990: 233) when the previous positive expectations have not been realized. The range of

speaker-oriented interrogative sentences in Czech is limited to those containing the equivalents of the modal verbs *can* and *could*, but all four types of questions can be hearer-oriented.

Other dissimilar tendencies can be found when comparing modification devices. If QP is used, Czech would have a limited range of IMDs to soften the illocutionary force. They include only conditionals, modal verbs and negation, as the chief means of politeness in Czech (Hirschová 2013), and the equivalent of the politeness marker *please*; diminutives, which are largely restricted to the context of people in a close relationship; and minimizing the duration of the favour.

In Czech, imperatives tend to be accompanied by the equivalent of the politeness marker *please* and this modification device can appear with most request realizations. However, the function of *please* seems to differ from the English equivalent to a considerable extent. This formulaic expression (*prosím*) is the first person singular of the performative verb *to ask/beg* and when used within a request it emphasises how badly one needs the favour to be fulfilled, especially if it follows the head act. In this position, it can be further intensified by adverbs. When used prior to the requestive act, it draws the attention to the message that follows and emphasises it in this way. Consequently, it has no place in formal written requests, which use other means as attention-getters, and which are not expected to contain emotional expressions.

The strategy that is strongly associated with requests in Czech is thanking. These formulaic expressions, containing the exact equivalent of the verb *thank*, emphasise positive outcome. As such, they are perceived as face-flattering acts (Chejnová 2014), and thus nearly obligatory, especially in formal written requests. They are used regardless of the likelihood of the request being granted and are not perceived as an imposition on the requestee.

4 Previous research

Requests are considered to be the most researched area of interlanguage pragmatics, probably because their inappropriate realization is likely to lead to a breakdown in communication. Consequently, there is a growing need to find out which strategies and devices learners should acquire and employ in requests to enhance and maintain the mutual relationship.

Research into interlanguage request realizations in English seems to yield relatively consistent results. Longitudinal studies and studies analysing the discourse of L2 learners at different proficiency levels show a clear development from direct requests mitigated by the politeness marker *please* to predominant use of conventionally indirect requests as proficiency levels increase (Kasper

& Rose 2001). This reveals the considerable influence of L2 competence on general appropriateness (Taguchi 2006), the range of modification devices (Schauer 2004, Halupka-Rešetar 2014) and the use of indirect strategies (Ellis 1992, Kasper & Rose 2002, Achiba 2003, Jalilifar et al. 2011). Nevertheless, the pragmatic competence of informants appears to lag behind their linguistic competence (Halupka-Rešetar 2014, Huschová 2020).

While preference for conventionally indirect requests in both English native speakers' and Taiwanese, German and Danish L2 learners' requests was revealed in several comparative studies (House & Kasper 1987, Trosborg 1995, Chen 2001), it was also found out that Greek, Turkish, German and Japanese learners in comparison to native speakers tend to underuse IMDs (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2008, Otcu & Zeyrek 2008, Woodfield 2008), especially downtoners (Faerch & Kasper 1989, Trosborg 1995), while the politeness marker *please* appears to be overused by Irish learners of German and German and Danish learners of English (House & Kasper 1987, Faerch & Kasper 1989, Trosborg 1995, Barron 2003). A higher frequency of lexical and syntactic IMDs in English native speakers' e-mail requests was reported by Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996), Chen (2001), Biesenbach-Lucas (2007), Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011), and Pan (2012) whereas Spanish and Greek L2 learners of English used a higher proportion of direct strategies (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011, Alcón Soler 2013). In some studies analysing e-mail requests in academic communication (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007, Félix-Brasdefer 2012, Pan 2012), however, the use of strategies was revealed to be conditioned by the level of imposition.

Overuse of EMDs by Spanish, Hebrew, German and Danish L2 learners of English was reported by Kasper (1981), Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1986), House and Kasper (1987) and Alcón Soler (2013), and grounders were identified as the most frequent EMDs (House & Kasper 1987, Trosborg 1995). In L2 production, they tend to be longer, redundant and overexplicit (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1986, Hassall 2001), but it is speculated that their frequency could also to some extent be affected by elicitation procedures (Ali & Woodfield 2017).

Studies analysing requests by Czech EFL learners seem to show similar findings. Chejnová (2014) examined high imposition requesting e-mails addressed to the faculty members to discover that students used both direct and conventionally indirect strategies, a great deal of syntactic modification, and elaborate external modification. Huschová (2020), who used *Czech Students' Spoken Corpus*, compiled at the University of Pardubice, investigated modification devices in requests for information in pre-prepared roleplays performed by first-year university students majoring in English (i.e. at approximately B2 CEFR level), revealed a limited range of lexical IMDs and a preference for the syntactic

ones while the most common EMDs were grounders. When investigating the influence of social variables (i.e. the formality and informality of the situation) on the choice of requesting strategies, Lahodová Vališová (2020) compared two data collection techniques and discovered that Czech university students overwhelmingly use conventionally indirect strategies irrespective of the social variable.

Our research, motivated by an attempt to inform teaching and based on an integrated analytical framework, builds on these findings and extends them to an extremely under-researched area of secondary-school students' production. In an attempt to provide a detailed description of request strategies used by Czech EFL learners, it brings into light pragma-linguistic features from two different samples, including rarely analysed informal written requests.

5 Methodology

5.1 Context and participants

To find out which requesting strategies are used by Czech EFL learners when not focused on politeness and which strategies they consider socially and culturally appropriate in relation to their available pragmatic knowledge, the present study used two groups of participants and two different elicitation techniques (see Table 2).

The secondary-school sample was written under the stress of a high-stake exam and can be considered as clinically elicited data (Ellis & Barkhuizen 2005) because the students were prompted in Czech what to include in their informal e-mails. They were not specifically instructed to use polite utterances and politeness was not taken into account during the rating process. The students knew their primary focus was to convey the required message as accurately as possible in terms of appropriate vocabulary and grammar structures, but the exam requirements were void of any pragmatic criteria. Since e-mails are frequently used in interpersonal communication with requesting functions (Chen 2001), the task is likely to resemble a naturalistic setting. The data also hold some features of both a general and a focused language sample as the individual parts of the task may restrict the choice of language features so that the task can be successfully accomplished. However, the task lacked the capacity to enforce a specific target structure.

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| Participants | final-year secondary-school students | first-year university students |
|------------------------|--|--|
| Age | 19 + | 19 + |
| CEFR level | approximately B1 | approximately B1/B2 |
| Schools | different types of secondary schools in the Czech Republic | Faculty of Business and Economics at Mendel University in Brno |
| Elicitation | informal e-mails | WDCT |
| Aim | school-leaving exam | research on requests and apologies |
| Focus | communicative aim and accuracy | linguistic politeness |
| Motivation | to pass the exam successfully | no motivation to perform well |
| Form | written | spoken (simulated) |
| Number of texts | 195 requests for a bike | 130 requests for a mobile phone 81 requests for a book |
| Length | 60-70 words (required) | 20 words (on average) |
| Data collected | spring 2017 | 2018/2019 |
| Sample | random cluster sample | simple random sample |
| Source | <i>Centre of Educational Assessment</i> (CERMAT) | dissertation project: research on requests and apologies |

Table 2: Comparison of research samples

The university sample was written by students who could have contributed to the secondary-school sample the previous school year and they were explicitly told to create utterances which they consider to be appropriate in the particular social context from which the emphasis on politeness was obvious. The sample was elicited by the most widely adopted collection method, Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT), which is highly valued for easy administration and adaptability (Eskin 2017) and for the ability to reliably record the pragma-linguistic and socio-pragmatic norms which the respondents consider to be appropriate (Barron 2003, Ogiermann 2009).

5.2 Research design

The request strategies and their constituents were analysed using an integrated analytical framework combining the *CCSARP coding manual* (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989) and the *Typology of modifiers for the speech act of requesting* (Alcón Soler et al. 2005). The former provided a taxonomy of head acts and the latter contributed to the recognition of modification devices. These two complementary approaches make it possible to describe the learner language both from the pragma-linguistic and socio-pragmatic positions. However, several categories had to be prioritized over the others mainly due to the frequency of the studied features in the data.

As a general description of pragma-linguistic features employed by Czech EFL learners at B1/B2 levels in requests for borrowing objects was the main objective of the study, the collected data were subjected to comparison only to a limited extent.

5.3 Procedure

The description of pragma-linguistic competence of Czech EFL learners was based on the frequency analysis of request strategies and modification devices. First, requests were deconstructed into individual moves, i.e. semantic units containing identifiable ideas and/or functions, and each segment was coded according to the recognized communicative aim. In order to ensure consistency in coding, a sample of 20 requests from both cohorts was coded by both authors and any disagreements were resolved by unanimous decision. The remaining data were coded on the principles agreed on in the process of coding and decision-making.

When individual head acts and peripheral constituents were identified, these elements were further classified according to the function, employed request strategy, and linguistic features used. The proportion of request constituents in the written secondary-school data and WDCT first-year university data was compared and request moves likely to cause breakdowns, failures, and infelicities in communication were identified in relation to cross-cultural differences between Czech and English requests as presented in literature. Finally, several features which require special attention in teaching how to conduct a speech act of request were identified.

6 Findings and discussion

As the main objective of this study was to describe which requesting strategies are used and/or considered appropriate by Czech EFL learners when borrowing an object, 406 requests for borrowing three different objects were analysed: 195 written e-mails asking for a bike, 130 WDCT requests asking for a mobile phone, and 81 WDCT requests asking for a book.

6.1 Head acts

All 211 WDCT requests contain only one head act each, but 216 head acts were identified in 195 written requests because 21 of those exam texts (10.76%) include two different or identical utterances with the same pragmatic function as the core of the requests (e.g. *I'd like to borrow your bike. Can I borrow it please?*). Although this finding may be rather surprising, Halupka-Rešetár (2014) acknowledges the repetition of requests as internal modification, and Yang and

Kwan (2015) report that 28.85 per cent of business e-mails written by Chinese lower-intermediate and intermediate students had two head acts and 3.8 per cent of them even three.

As seen in Table 3, the majority of requests in our study are realized predominantly by conventionally indirect strategies exploiting the modal verbs *can* and *could*. Their proportion is even higher in WDCT requests, around 90 per cent, which can be a sign of greater awareness of face, but also indicates less variability in the chosen form. Written e-mails contain a slightly higher proportion of willingness modals (3.2%), and one request is realized by the permission modal *may*, but the proportion of direct strategies is considerably higher. Moreover, 14.7 per cent of written requests are realized by mood derivables and want statements, which do not allow the recipient to refuse without losing face. These highly impositive request realizations are rare in WDCT data, but they contain several requests realized by non-conventional indirect strategies, which also fail to carry politeness values (Chen 2001) because the hearer is required to draw a conclusion from incomplete information. By contrast, written data, which require more explicitness, were void of hints and showed stronger preference for repetitiveness.

| Head act strategies | Example | Written | WDCT | WDCT |
|---|---|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Object | | bike | mobile | book |
| Head acts | | n=216 | n=130 | n=81 |
| Direct strategies | | 27.2 | 2.4 | 8.6 |
| Mood derivables | <i>*Borrow me ...</i> | 0.9 | 0.8 | 1.2 |
| Hedged performatives | <i>I would like you to lend me ...</i> | 12.4 | 0.8 | 2.5 |
| Want statements | <i>I want to borrow ...</i> | 13.9 | 0.8 | 4.9 |
| Conventionally indirect strategies | | 72.8 | 96.1 | 90.0 |
| QP ability modals | <i>Could you lend me ...</i> | 67.2 | 91.5 | 86.4 |
| QP willingness modals | <i>Would/Will you lend me ...</i> | 3.3 | 2.3 | 1.2 |
| QP permission modals | <i>May I borrow ...</i> | 0.5 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| QP mind collocations | <i>Would you mind lending me</i> | 0.9 | 1.5 | 1.2 |
| QP possibility collocations | <i>Is it possible to borrow ...</i> | 0.9 | 0.8 | 1.2 |
| Non-conventionally indirect strategies | | 0.0 | 1.5 | 1.2 |
| Hint | <i>Man, do you really need that book? You have got it already for ages.</i> | 0.0 | 1.5 | 1.2 |

Table 3: Distribution of head act strategies (in %)

6.2 Internal modification

The research concentrated predominantly on functional aspects of request modification, but the syntactic realizations of requests, which are closely linked to the request perspective (Ogiermann & Bella 2020), have to be taken into account as well, especially in view of their capacity to distance the request from reality and show that the speaker's expectations are tempered. Table 4 shows that the majority of requests were realized by interrogative sentences in the form of direct questions followed first by declarative sentences and then by indirect questions. A considerable proportion of head acts, including a great deal of the above-mentioned request realizations, exploited less certain and more tentative modal verbs (i.e. *could*, *would*). Table 4 also presents the proportion of head-act realizations with speaker-oriented perspective (S) and hearer-oriented perspective (H), but our data also contain four instances of impersonal request perspective within QP possibility collocations. In line with learner data from different L1 backgrounds (Niki & Tajika 1994, Lin 2009, Ogiermann & Bella 2020), Czech EFL learners tend to foreground the hearer's role in syntactic realizations enabling learners to choose the perspective.

| Syntactic realization | Written bike | | | WDCT mobile | | | WDCT book | | |
|-----------------------------|--------------|------|------|-------------|------|------|-----------|-----|------|
| | Total | S | H | Total | S | H | Total | S | H |
| Direct q. | 56.5 | 17.6 | 38.9 | 88.5 | 29.2 | 59.2 | 85.1 | 9.9 | 75.3 |
| Indirect q. (if-clauses) | 16.2 | 3.2 | 13.0 | 2.3 | 0.0 | 2.3 | 3.7 | 1.2 | 2.5 |
| Indirect q. | 1.3 | 0.5 | 0.9 | 5.4 | 1.5 | 3.8 | 3.7 | 0.0 | 3.7 |
| Declarative sentences | 26.4 | 23.1 | 3.2 | 2.3 | 2.3 | 0.0 | 6.2 | 5.0 | 1.2 |
| Imperative | 0.9 | 0.0 | 0.9 | 0.8 | 0.0 | 0.8 | 1.2 | 0.0 | 1.2 |
| Past tense | 0.9 | 0.0 | 0.9 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 1.2 | 1.2 | 0.0 |
| <i>could/would</i> | 25.9 | 4.2 | 21.8 | 42.3 | 7.7 | 34.6 | 30.9 | 1.2 | 29.6 |

Table 4: Proportion of syntactic downgraders and speaker and hearer perspective (in %)

Interrogative sentences are strongly affected by *borrow* vs *lend* confusion, which, on average, has been observed in 21 per cent of all head acts (e.g. **Could you borrow me your bike, please?*). Table 5 clearly shows that the verb *borrow*, which is slightly more frequent in written requests, is more likely to be used incorrectly in both types of data. Possible reasons for these errors might include issues with deixis, an inability to distinguish the request perspective, and/or the meaning of the verbs. Moreover, these verbs are substituted by other verbs, such

as *give, use, take, elevate, advance, rent, hire* (e.g. **Do you can advance your wheel?*). In the written requests, all of them (n=7) are used inappropriately, but in WDCT requests (n=29), their use is acceptable.

| Frequently confused verbs | Written bike 201=100% | | WDCT mobile 130 = 100% | | WDCT book 81 = 100% | |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------|---------------------------|-----------|------------------------|-----------|
| | correct | incorrect | correct | incorrect | correct | incorrect |
| <i>lend</i> | 32.1 | 7.5 | 55.4 | 4.6 | 54.3 | 4.9 |
| <i>borrow</i> | 34.8 | 21.4 | 18.5 | 10.8 | 7.4 | 14.8 |
| Total | 66.9 | 28.9 | 73.9 | 15.4 | 61.7 | 19.7 |

Table 5: Proportion of correctly and incorrectly used verbs (in %)

Similarly to Faerch and Kasper (1989) and Trosborg (1995), our study reveals that Czech EFL learners tend to underuse IMDs, especially softeners (see Table 6). Both downtoners, which relativize full commitment to the content of the request and allow the hearer to refuse, and hedges, which make the specification of the request more tentative, were completely absent in all head acts. However, all three types of requests contained a limited number of understatements (n=15), i.e. *a little, only, just, for a day*, underrepresenting the scope of the request (e.g. *Could I borrow it just for a few minutes?*). Softeners as well as other features generally considered to be IMDs tend to appear with much higher frequencies within EMDs, especially in written requests which use a hedge (e.g. **I am writing you because I am in sort of trouble.*); understatements (n=51) in preparators (e.g. **I have a little request on you.*); and cost minimisers (e.g. *I want it only for one week.*). WDCT requests rarely employ IMDs outside head acts.

| IMDs | Bike | | Mobile (WDCT) | | Book (WDCT) | |
|---------------|----------|------|---------------|------|-------------|------|
| | Head Act | EMDs | Head Act | EMDs | Head Act | EMDs |
| Softener | 2.3 | 23.6 | 9.3 | 0.8 | 6.2 | 0.0 |
| Intensifier | 0.0 | 40.7 | 2.3 | 29.2 | 2.5 | 25.9 |
| <i>please</i> | 39.4 | 13.8 | 55.3 | 1.5 | 46.9 | 1.2 |
| Opener | 30.3 | 0.0 | 5.4 | 0.0 | 5.0 | 0.0 |
| Filler | 32.3 | 0.0 | 0.8 | 0.0 | 2.5 | 0.0 |

Table 6: Proportion of internal modification devices (in %)

Intensifiers have a potential to increase the impact of the requests, but their absence within head acts in our study may be a positive sign because their inappropriate use can make the request sound impolite due to the emphasis on

necessity and urgency. In both data sources they were used far more frequently outside head acts as mitigating devices emphasizing the scope of imposition in preparators, the extent of the requestor's problem in grounders, and the extent of gratitude. Nevertheless, the intensification of some praising and flattering expressions in disarmers (e.g. *I know that you have a really good bike.*) can be considered a risky strategy. The same is true for time intensifiers in concluding expressions (10.8%), which apply a considerable pressure on the hearer (e.g. **Send me very fast your answer.*).

The politeness marker *please* is the most frequently used internal modifier in our data and its overall frequency is similar in all three types of requests. In the written requests, however, *please* tends to be positioned relatively frequently (13.8%) outside head acts, predominantly in concluding expressions where it tends to assume the initial position bearing the connotation of urgency (e.g. *Please answer me ASAP.*). This politeness marker is also used to modify disarmers, expanders, gratitude, and preparators with softening and mitigating effects. Its frequency within the head acts in the written requests is the lowest (39.4%) and most of its instances are found in QP realized by ability modals. The final position prevails in requests using the modal verb *can* (e.g. *Can I borrow your bike please?*), but when the more tentative modal verb *could* is used, the central position (e.g. *Could you please lend it to me?*), regarded as a sign of developing pragmatic competence by Martínez-Flor (2009), prevails. Considerably shorter WDCT requests contain the politeness marker *please* mostly within head acts in the final position. The high-imposition requests for borrowing a mobile show its highest proportion (55.3%).

WDCT data and written requests differ considerably in the frequency of openers and fillers (see Table 6), both of which may carry an element of hesitation. Openers, conventionalised expressions seeking the addressee's co-operation, are rare in WDCT data, but the conventions of the written discourse, the lack of eye contact, and the immediate context may be responsible for a relatively high frequency of the formulaic sequences introducing requests (e.g. *I'm writing because..., I would like to ask you..., I want to ask you ...*). Although there is no need to fill in the gaps occurring during interaction, more than 30 per cent of the written requests contain fillers, which are highly formulaic and semantically void expressions with socio-pragmatic functions, mainly in the form of phatic inquiry and adjacent formulaic structures. Fillers in WDCT data appear only marginally at the end of head acts and they take the form of appealers eliciting the hearer's approval (e.g. *Is it OK? Will you? Is it possible?*).

6.3 External modification

EMDs, which are considered optional by English native speakers (Faerch & Kasper 1989), were discovered in high frequencies in the analysed requests, but the communication channel and assignment affected their proportion to a great extent. Attention-getters, conventionalized preparators and concluding expressions are mandatory parts of e-mails, and the secondary-school students were guided to use grounders (i.e. explanation of the reason for borrowing a bike) and expanders (i.e. further suggestions concerning collecting the bike). As such, the written data show a considerably higher proportion of requests in which these EMDs were used (see Table 7). Moreover, in some of them, two different EMDs of the same type (i.e. grounders, expanders, cost minimisers) were found in two different positions (e.g. *I need it only for that one day. ... *I will not broke it.*). Another sign of repetitiveness can be found in asking for additional approval at the end of many requests (e.g. *Do you agree?*, **I can?*, **ok for you?*). In the written requests, preparators are largely declarative sentences signalling a forthcoming request, but pre-requests are used only exceptionally. Disarmers often show awareness of the imposition and compliment the hearer and the bike, but in seven cases, they were used in a risky way to confront the hearer with the speaker's previous knowledge preventing the refusal (e.g. *I need a bike and I know that you have one.*).

| External modification types | Bike | Mobile | Book |
|--|-------|--------|------|
| Attention-getter | 100.0 | 55.4 | 86.4 |
| Preparator | 40.5 | 9.2 | 18.5 |
| Grounder | 100.0 | 88.5 | 75.3 |
| Disarmer | 11.8 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Expander | 94.9 | 1.5 | 1.2 |
| Cost minimiser | 39.1 | 8.5 | 6.2 |
| Promise of reward | 3.6 | 8.5 | 0.0 |
| Gratitude (<i>I would be very grateful.</i>) | 11.3 | 0.8 | 3.7 |
| Thanking expressions (<i>Thank you.</i>) | 36.4 | 6.9 | 7.4 |
| Apology | 2.1 | 11.5 | 4.9 |
| Concluding expressions | 84.6 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| Expectations | 10.3 | 0.0 | 0.0 |

Table 7: Proportion of external modification devices (in %)

The phrases outside head acts contain a range of softening and mitigating features as well as modal verbs, *if*-clauses and, exceptionally, past-tense forms.

The use of these devices might be perceived positively by English native speakers because they enable the requestors to distance themselves from the request and treat it as unreal. Nevertheless, secondary-school students also employed impositive and risky EMDs. In more than ten per cent of requests, they used expectations, strongly impositive claims (e.g. **I hope that you comply me.*) and often relied on thanking expressions (e.g. *Thank you in advance.*), which can be viewed either as closing devices unable to mitigate the request (Chen 2001) or as strong presuppositions of the positive outcome, and thus rather impositive (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011, Chejnová 2014). As such, using appreciators in combination with conditionals closely following the head act would be more appropriate (e.g. **If you could please lend me your bicycle on one day I would be so grateful.*).

WDCT data employ considerably fewer thanking expressions, and they appear predominantly in positions where they are more likely to be viewed as closing devices. In simulated spoken requests, there is no need to be overexplicit, so expectations and disarmers were not found. In line with the previous research, grounders, which help the addressee understand the reasons behind the request (Martínez-Flor 2009), remain the most frequently used EMDs despite not being required by the assignment. Requests for borrowing a mobile phone show a higher proportion of cost minimisers (e.g. *I will make only one urgent phone call.*) and promises of reward (e.g. *I could pay you the cost.*), which may indicate that the first-year university students can use some EMDs with respect to the level of imposition. Apologies (e.g. *Sorry but I need the book./Sorry to bother you but ...*) were also very common in simulated spoken requests and appeared in 11.5 per cent of requests for borrowing a mobile phone.

7 Conclusion and pedagogical implications

In this study, an integrated analytical framework and two different elicitation techniques were used to identify the request strategies and modification devices employed by Czech EFL learners in informal requests for borrowing objects. The findings reveal that on the basis of their previous life experiences with English language instruction and their mother tongue Czech learners prefer strategies and modification devices which they consider to be polite. However, they fail to use the language strategically in order to match English native speakers' expectations, probably due to limited awareness of the face-threatening nature of requests.

The majority of requests in our study show some similarity to request realization in Czech and also show some consideration for the hearer's face because they are realized predominantly by conventionally indirect strategies

(i.e. QP) in the form of direct questions but also partially by indirect questions, both of which mainly exploit the modal verbs *can* and *could*. These realizations are also most frequently mitigated by the only relatively common IMD, *please*, which tends to assume the final position when the more frequent modal verb *can* is used. Despite being regarded as optional by English native speakers, EMDs are frequently used. Moreover, they contain syntactic and lexical means with softening and mitigating functions, which native speakers tend to use more strategically within head acts (Faerch & Kasper 1989).

The frequency and range of request constituents was strongly affected by the data-collection method. WDCT data show a lower proportion of direct strategies than the written requests, and a few of them are realized by hints requiring the requestee to estimate the illocution on the basis of interaction between the partial reference and the context. WDCT requests employ the politeness marker *please* and rare softeners considerably more frequently within head acts, and there is no tendency to use modification devices in abundance within EMDs. First-year university students that produced WDCT data also show the ability to modify their requests in accordance with the degree of imposition because requests for borrowing a mobile phone, which appear to be more impositive than requests for borrowing a book, are mostly realized by conventionally indirect strategies and show a higher proportion of softeners, openers, cost minimisers, promises of reward, and apologies.

The written requests show slightly greater variability in head act realisations and a considerably stronger tendency for reiteration. This is demonstrated by doubling head acts and EMDs, and by asking for additional approval towards the end of the e-mails. Mitigating devices generally considered to be IMDs, including the politeness marker *please*, tend to be relatively frequent outside head acts. The higher frequency of openers and fillers, attention-getters, preparators and concluding expressions is affected by the communication channel, but the higher proportion of *borrow* vs *lend* confusion in head acts which enable the learners to choose the request perspective might be attributed to lower language proficiency in the secondary-school sample.

The lack of socio-pragmatic and pragma-linguistic knowledge is reflected in three groups of infelicities: features that need to be implemented (i.e. obligatory internal modification), features that have to be avoided (i.e. mood derivables, want statements, expectations), and features that constitute risky strategies (i.e. thanking, initial position of *please*). Bearing in mind the lack of exposure to negative evidence in EFL setting, learners should be supported to achieve not only deeper understanding of the face-threatening nature of requests for both the speaker and the hearer but also to recognize general principles regarding how

to minimize the imposition. To give the hearer the feeling of optionality, Czech EFL learners should be advised to employ only conventionally indirect strategies in request realizations. Not only query preparatory, but also suggestive formulae and a wider range of modal verbs would deserve to be used. More attention should be paid to head acts and their internal modification primarily by means of softeners. However, more research is needed to find out at which proficiency levels softeners and hedges are teachable because learners need sufficient syntactic knowledge to be able to position them properly. Czech EFL learners also need to be warned against using mood derivables, want statements and hints as request strategies and expectations as EMDs in order to avoid impositive realizations. A detailed explanation why *please* used in the initial position and why thanking might apply pressure on the hearer can lead to a better awareness concerning their use.

Further research is needed to focus on pedagogical interventions and to investigate what type of explicit instruction is effective; how to develop pragmatic and speech-act-specific motivation (Tajeddin & Zand-Moghadam 2012); how to exploit learner subjectivity (Siegel 1996); how to eliminate language ego barriers (Guiora 1994); and what is the best way to approach the discovered infelicities in an EFL context characterised by limited pragmatic input, insufficient number of contact hours and few opportunities for intercultural communication.

The results of our research, however, can hardly be generalized to all types of requesting behaviour of Czech EFL learners because in our study, only requests for borrowing objects were analysed and only two elicitation methods were used. Further limitations of our research may include a relatively small sample and a lack of precise information concerning the participants' length of English language instruction, stay in the target culture, age, and language proficiency.

The results of our research confirm most of the previous findings concerning interlanguage request realizations, such as underuse and a limited range of the lexical IMDs and overuse of EMDs. Moreover, the analysis of written requests in the secondary-school sample brings some original contributions, including the discovery of modification devices softening already overused EMDs, and a considerable tendency for reiteration.

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