

Evaluation of Pragmatic Information in an English Textbook: Focus on Requests

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Abstract—Learning to request in a foreign language is a key ability within pragmatics language teaching. This paper examines how requests are taught in English Unlimited Book 3 (Cambridge University Press), an EFL textbook series employed by King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia to teach advanced foundation year students English. The focus of analysis is the evaluation of the request linguistic strategies present in the textbook, frequency of the use of these strategies, and the contextual information provided on the use of these linguistic forms. The researcher collected all the linguistic forms which consisted of the request speech act and divided them into levels employing the CCSARP request coding manual. Findings demonstrated that simple and commonly employed request strategies are introduced. Looking closely at the exercises throughout the chapters, it was noticeable that the book exclusively employed the most direct form of requesting (the imperative) when giving learners instructions: e.g. listen, write, ask, answer, read, look, complete, choose, talk, think, etc. The book also made use of some other request strategies such as 'hedged performatives' and 'query preparatory'. However, it was also found that many strategies were not dealt with in the book, specifically strategies with combined functions (e.g. possibility, ability). On a sociopragmatic level, a strong focus was found to exist on standard situations in which relations between the requester and requestee are clear. In general, contextual information was communicated implicitly only. The textbook did not seem to differentiate between formal and informal request contexts (register) which might consequently impel students to overgeneralize. The paper closes with some recommendations for textbook and curriculum designers. Findings are also contrasted with previous results from similar body of research on EFL requests.

Keywords—EFL, Requests, Saudi, speech acts, textbook evaluation.

I. INTRODUCTION

TEXTBOOKS play a significant role in language learning. They are used as an important tool for academic studies as they provide EFL teachers with help and guidance in course and activity design. They assure a measure of structure, consistency, and logical progression in a classroom setting and meet learners' needs or expectations of having something concrete to work from and take home for further study [1]. While the quality of EFL textbooks has improved dramatically in recent years, the process of selecting an appropriate one has not become any easier for most English teachers and administrators. Evidently, the textbook selection process should be given thought and care on the basis of firm

principles derived from both research and practical experience. Based on the researcher's professional contact with EFL instructors and first-hand communication with EFL students, it was noticed that there had been certain concerns and sometimes complaints regarding the new English textbook currently in use, namely Cambridge English Unlimited 3 (CEU3). CEU3 the official textbook adopted by King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia to teach advanced Saudi EFL foundation year students. The new series has been in use since the beginning of the academic year in 2017. Many instructors have had concerns related to the appropriateness of the book's certain features to the Saudi EFL learners' (SEFLs) level and needs. Others had concerns related to the impact of the textbook on SEFLs' learning outcomes. The present work aims to investigate the representation of the request speech act in the textbook. Requests have been chosen as they are considered a crucial part of everyday communication. Moreover, failure to deliver requests appropriately can result in mishaps and severe cross-cultural miscommunications. Findings of this study may assist curriculum and material designers in adjusting representation of requests in English textbooks and subsequently help develop EFL learners' communicative/pragmatic knowledge in a systematic and progressive manner.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this paper, the focus of analysis is the evaluation of the request linguistic strategies present in the coursebook CEU3, used in EFL classrooms in a Saudi university. Parallel to the same line of investigation, this section will shed light on scholarly work which also attempted to evaluate EFL books used in various Saudi educational settings. The section will end with further Arabic studies which particularly evaluated requests speech acts and the textbook at hand, CEU3.

Reference [2] examined the contents of '*Flying High for Saudi Arabia series*' book, which is currently taught in all Saudi schools, with a focus on its ability to achieve the students' pedagogical goals. The investigation revealed a few shortcomings; mainly demonstrating lack of sufficient exercises in controlled and guided composition and lack of the demonstration of different techniques for handling aspects of composition teaching. The researcher also condemned that the book presented the pupils with non-native English sound systems and variations in the accents of non-native speakers of English. Alharbi believes that such young learners at this learning stage should be exposed to the native speakers' accent only.

Reference [3] reported the results of a content analysis of

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'Access' and the 'Interaction' 1 series; two books which are used in Saudi Arabian schools. A thorough analysis of the contents of the two books showed that the textbooks largely ignored local culture (L1) and included mainly foreign cultures and cultures of other nationalities. The results indicated that these textbooks completely failed to represent the cultural norms and values of the Arabic culture including that of Saudi Arabia. The researcher urged the concerned Saudi authorities to select and design textbooks which are suitable for effective pedagogy and compatible with L1 values and culture.

Reference [4] elicited instructors' opinions' on EFL textbooks, '*Interactions Series*', which have been used in Saudi universities. The sample of the study consisted of 27 EFL male instructors at King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The questionnaire which was used consisted of 13 domains: practical considerations, layout and design, aims and objectives, activities, skills, language type, subject and content, assessment, the teacher's book, appropriateness, flexibility, the availability of English teaching/learning resources, and overall opinion. The findings of the study revealed that the respondents perceived the book series as appropriate for teaching English to Saudi EFL university students.

Reference [5] examined two English for specific purposes (ESP) textbooks, '*Business Objectives*' and '*Business Studies*', to evaluate the external and internal aspects of the books. The books are taught to students at King Faisal University, Al-Ahsa, Saudi Arabia. The course is for business major students who wish to apply for jobs at The Saudi Telecommunication Company (STC), which requires a strong command of English. The study concluded that concerning language, authenticity, and appropriateness, '*Business Studies*' was preferable; but on the whole, the researcher recommended implementing both textbooks to fulfil the objectives of the course, as a single textbook that can accommodate the needs of all learners does not exist.

Reference [6] analysed the cognitive levels of the wh-questions following the reading texts in the Students' Book '*Flying High for Saudi Arabia One*', an EFL textbook used in Grades 10–12 in all government schools in Saudi Arabia. The main findings revealed that the wh-questions following the reading texts were not properly formed in that the authors of the textbook overemphasized the lower thinking skills (remembering and understanding) and neglected higher thinking skills (applying and analysing). The skills 'evaluation and creation' had no existence in the examined questions.

Moving on to Arabic studies which investigated the speech act 'request' in EFL textbooks, we found only two Arabic studies which explored requests, none of which came from Saudi Arabia. The first is [7] and the second is [8]. Reference [7] explored the presentation of requests and pragmatic information in '*My Book of English*' textbook, while [8] examined request expressions employed in written manuals used in teaching Tunisian EFL university students.

Reference [7] concluded that in the textbook investigated, requests were not used enough, in that they were not presented

as frequently as they would have been in authentic conversation. In addition, the metapragmatic cues offered before requests were scarce. The book mainly offered requests linguistic devices rather than explaining how they are used in context in relation to sociopragmatic considerations, such as politeness, interlocutors' status, formality of the situation, the setting, the imposition on the hearer, etc.

Reference [8]'s results provided some evidence of the inappropriate pragmatic presentation in the EFL manuals Tunisian EFL learners are exposed to, particularly in relevance to requests, which were characterized by their tendency to be direct. The researcher stressed that the excessive use of direct request strategies in the manuals may lead the learners to be unaware of the effect of the social factors on realizing requests in L2. It may also unconsciously urge them to use direct request strategies even in formal situations.

In terms of relevant literature on CEU evaluation, [9] explored gender representation in the same book used as a point of analysis in this study (CEU), albeit another level, namely, elementary. The study investigated gender frequencies in conversations in three dimensions: gender relations, subject positions, and contents. The study further revealed that the material seems to under-represent females. Most of the conversations in the coursebook were between male-male interlocutors. Moreover, the overall number of male-female or female-female conversations was comparatively very low. In addition, [10] investigated EFL instructors' perceptions of the same course book at hand (CEU) taught at Taif University, Taif, Saudi Arabia. The researcher attempted to reveal the strengths and shortcomings of the textbook from the instructors' perspectives and their suggestions to overcome these drawbacks. The results showed that the instructors in general had a positive attitude towards the textbook in terms of certain criteria such as the usefulness of the material and balance of taught skills. However, they had concerns and further suggestions in regards to the topics chosen for discussion in the book, the font size, space and length, as well as the textbooks' grammar activities which need more clarification and explanation.

None of these studies examined the exact issues this current paper is addressing. Therefore, this paper aims to bring in new knowledge to the field which is hoped to assist curriculum designers and EFL teachers specifically teaching in Saudi Arabia.

A. Research Questions

What are the CCSARP request strategies that have been used in the CEU3 textbook?

What are the shortcomings of the textbook in representing request speech acts in general?

III. METHODOLOGY

In this paper, the researcher collected all the request linguistic realizations present in the CEU3 English textbook and divided them into levels employing the CCSARP request coding scheme. One of the most widely used speech act coding systems is the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization

Project (CCSARP) [11]. The CCSARP analysed requests and apologies in eight different languages by using the same coding scheme. The CCSARP project looked at many request forms in different languages and accordingly placed them based on their level of directness. The most direct and explicit form is the imperative (e.g. *look, go, don't*). Explicit performatives (*I request you not to park your car here*) and hedged performatives (*I would like you to stop talking now*) are also considered direct. The second level is conventionally indirect in which requests are realised by references to preconditions necessary for their performance: ability (*can you shut the window? could you shut the window?*), willingness (*would you help me with my homework?*), and possibility (*Is it possible that you lend me some money?*). The third and last level is non-conventionally indirect which mostly refers to hints, strong and mild (e.g. *it's hot in here- indirectly requesting someone to open the window*).

Level of directness	Strategy	Semantic formulas
Direct	1 Mood-derivable	You shut up.
	2 Performative	I am telling you to shut up.
	3 Hedged performative	I would like to ask you to shut up.
	4 Locution-derivable	I want you to shut up.
Conventionally indirect	5 Suggestory formula	Let's play a game.
	6 Query-preparatory	Can you draw a horse for me?
Non-conventionally indirect	7 Strong hint	This game is boring.
	8 Mild hint	We've been playing this game for over an hour.

Fig. 1 Taxonomy of request strategies according to the CCSARP

IV. FINDINGS

A. Request Strategies Present in CEU3

Looking at the exercises throughout the chapters, it was noticeable that the book almost exclusively employed the most direct form of requesting 'the mood derivable' used in the form of the imperative when giving learners instructions: (e.g. *look, listen, write, ask, answer, tick, read, look, complete, make, choose, talk, think, speak, learn, send, take, try, change, turn, cover, wait, work, start, make sure, don't forget, go, stop, etc.*).

The book also made use of some other request strategies in various exercises as in the following examples:

- 1- Direct request imperative: (*Just make it thirty-five dollars, page 35, Don't wear your shoes inside, page 46*)
- 2- Direct request syntactically mitigated by 'if' (*If you hold on a minute, page 100*)
- 3- Hedged performative (*We'd like to ask you some questions about international sales, page 26, I'd like to go to the airport please, page 35*)
- 4- Locution derivable: (*I need some coins for the ticket machine, page 56*)
- 5- Conventionally indirect query preparatory: employing the ability function with 'can' (*Can you pass the remote? Page 7, Can you give us a bit more information about your background? page 26*); employing the ability function with 'could' (*Could I ask you a favour? Could I ask you to do something for me? Could I ask you to wait here? Page 101, Could you text me the plans? Page 116*); employing the function 'willing' (*Would you like me to record it? Page 7*); employing the function 'permission'

(*Would you mind if I had another biscuit? Would you mind sending me a form? Page 101*)

- 6- Conventionally indirect Suggestory formula: (*How about dinner next week? Page 16, Why don't we make a cake? Page 30, Maybe you can bring a box of chocolate? page 46, So should we go? Page 56*).
- 7- Conventionally indirect syntactically mitigated by 'if' (*Is it alright if I drop by tomorrow? page 16*).

In terms of request modification, unsurprisingly, the most salient supportive move used in the book was the politeness marker 'please.' Regarding internal syntactic downgraders, according to the CCSARP model, there are four ways to mitigate the speech act of request by purely syntactic means: interrogative, negation, past tense, and embedded 'if' clause. All four means were used in the book (*Perhaps you'd like to buy something? Interrogative, page 56*); (*Why don't we make a cake? Negation, page 30*); (*What was your name again? Past tense, page 24*); and (*I wonder if you could change this ten for me, embedded 'if' clause, page 56*).

Moving on to internal lexical modification, again, most modifiers found in the CCSARP data were presented in the textbook as follows: (*Do you think you could tell me a bit more? Consultative device, page 56*); (*Could I just leave a message? Understater, page 79*); and (*Can I use it for a moment? Downtoner/downgrader, page 88*). It is worthy to note that no intensifiers, upgraders, or expletives were used in the book.

In terms of external supportive moves, pre-request checking availability was most frequently used; examples include (*Are you doing anything tomorrow? Do you fancy having lunch? page 86*); (*Are you free? Do you want to go for a quick coffee? Page 88*).

As a matter of fact, there was an entire exercise dedicated to teaching students ways to check the hearer's availability before making the request as demonstrated in Fig. 2.

Additionally, addressing the hearer by their first names was frequently used throughout the exercises; however, no sweeteners such as 'darling' or 'honey' were ever employed in the textbook. In addition, there was a few times when disarmers were used as external moves (e.g. *Sorry to bother you, Rose. Have you got a moment? Page 88*). Other times, 'grounders' were used to explain the reason behind making the act (*I'm not well*), requesting to cancel an appointment.

It is worth noting that although conventionally indirect strategies were often used in exercises containing request situations (*Can I take you out for dinner? 'ability', page 119*); yet no conventionally indirect strategies which merged multiple functions in one request form such as: (*would it be possible if you could lend me a pen? 'willing + possibility + ability'*) were used in the entire book. This type of combined q-prep functions was used in request data collected from British English native speakers [12]. In that study, there were 15 q-prep combined functions which were elicited from native speakers' data, and most of them were not presented in the textbook currently being evaluated. Furthermore, in terms of linguistic realisation of request strategies, the devices (*Can I...? Could I...? 'ability', and*

Would I...? 'willing') were used more than (*Do you have...? 'possession', Is it possible...? 'possibility'*) which were used less. Also, there were some common request devices in English which were never employed in the book, such as the requestive device realising the function 'permission' (*May I...?*). In fact, 'may' was only taught to students as a linguistic device used to indicate future possibility (*the supermarket may be crowded on Saturday*, page 137). It was not further discussed as part of a request form employing the q-prep function 'permission' (*May I borrow your pen?*).

4 a Read the beginnings of six conversations.
In pairs, decide what speakers A and B could say next.

- 1 A **Do you like** Chinese food?
B Yes, I do.
A Well, would you like to ...?
- 2 A **What are you doing** tomorrow?
B Nothing, really.
A ...
- 3 A **Are you interested in** movies?
B ...
A ...
- 4 A **Have you got** your mobile here?
B ...
A ...
- 5 A **Are you going to** the party tonight?
B ...
A ...
- 6 A **Do you have any plans for** the weekend?
B ...
A ...

b Practise your conversations.

Fig. 2 Request practice exercise, CEU3 textbook, page 88

Moving on to non-conventionally indirect request strategies (aka, hints), these were used very rarely and sporadically throughout the book. When the request was made non-conventionally and indirectly, it was always made in the form of strong hints. In strong hint requests, utterances often contain partial reference to elements of the act, directly pragmatically implying a 'request', e.g.:

- A. I need to print something but it [the printer] is not working.
B. Again? OK. Let's have a look. (Page 88)

V. DISCUSSION

The analysis of the data shows that although different types of request strategies were employed in the textbook, generally, the most direct level of strategies (mood derivable) and the most direct sub-level of variations (imperative) were mostly used to give the SEFLs various instructions. Almost every page had at least one instruction being given to the SEFLs in the form of a direct request (the imperative). Moreover, apart from student instructions, even in practice exercises where conversations take place, it was noticeable that almost all the

requests were made directly as shown in Fig. 3. This result is in alignment with [13] and [14] who both found that EFL textbooks tend to overuse the direct strategies when presenting the speech act of request. They noted that the percentage of the use of direct request strategies can sometimes be more than 80%. One of the problems of overusing direct requests in EFL textbooks is that students eventually learn to request exclusively in a direct manner, as in most cases, students acquire the pragmatic aspects of their L2 in an instructional context [14]. The textbook is thus a key factor in developing students' communicative competences. Therefore, the pragmatic input that the students receive from the classroom instruction via their teachers or the textbook should be abundant and sufficient in developing their pragmatic and communicative abilities such that there is minimal to no cultural and linguistic misunderstandings when conversing and interacting with native speakers. It is therefore a crucial recommendation that the use of imperative directives as a linguistic tool to give recommendations/advice/instructions to the SEFLs needs the teacher's clarification to the students that bare imperatives are rarely employed by native speakers in face-to-face interactions, and especially between strangers or in formal situations. This socio-cultural information is what the textbook needs to provide. In fact, it was noticed that there is a dearth in the metapragmatic cues found in the book. Most request speech acts in the textbook were unaccompanied by adequate cues pertaining to appropriateness, politeness, register, and other extralinguistic and contextual information.

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JASMINA I'm going to move on now to talk about the European results.

TONY Sorry, can I ask something else about Japan? How many people did we recruit last month?

JASMINA Erm, **just give me a second. Let me check ...** erm, yes, here we are. Eighteen people overall.

TONY Oh right. Er, thanks.

JASMINA So, er, as you can see, the European results have been very good indeed.

TONY What about last month's results?

JASMINA I'm afraid the figures for last month aren't on the graph. **Let me just have a look here.** Erm, **bear with me a moment.** ... Yes, I have the figures here, but unfortunately, you can't see them. OK, erm, **let me think ...** I'll tell you what I'll do, **if you hold on a minute ...** I'll read the figures to you and then you can ask me about them.

TONY Thanks, erm, that would be very helpful.

Fig. 3 Request practice exercise, CEU3 textbook, page 108

VI. CONCLUSION

When the textbook offers fairly limited pragmatic knowledge, the teacher has a paramount role to play when instructing EFL learners. Teachers themselves should be aware of the crucial importance of developing pragmatic competence in EFL classrooms. In this regard, the findings of the present paper bear implications for textbook writers and teachers alike. For teachers, they can guide their students to benefit from the pragmatic information available in their textbooks as well as make use of raising awareness work in

the classrooms. For EFL curriculum and textbook designers, the presentation of pragmatic information should be abundant enough so that EFL learners develop their L2 competences linguistically and pragmatically. It should not be ignored that if learners are only exposed to limited pragmatic choices, they are most likely going to rely back on their mother language when interacting in English.

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