



## **TEACHING THE SPEECH ACT OF REQUEST THROUGH THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH**

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### **Abstract**

Speech acts are fundamental components of human interaction, reflecting how speakers use language to perform communicative actions. Among them, requests are central to daily communication and require both linguistic and pragmatic competence. The present paper examines the role of the communicative approach in teaching the speech act of request in English. It discusses theoretical foundations, pragmatic features, cross-cultural perspectives, and practical classroom techniques, concluding with experimental evidence on the effectiveness of communicative methods in developing students' ability to make contextually appropriate requests.

**Keywords:** Communicative approach, speech acts, requests, pragmatics, politeness, dialogue, teacher's role.

### **Introduction**

The importance of pragmatics in second language acquisition (SLA) has been widely recognized in applied linguistics. While early approaches to language teaching focused on grammar and vocabulary, modern pedagogy emphasizes communication as the ultimate goal of language learning. Speech acts, a concept developed by philosophers of language such as Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), highlight the functional nature of language: when speakers use language, they are not only producing words but also performing actions.

Among speech acts, requests are especially significant. They are among the most frequently used strategies for initiating interaction, negotiating meaning, and achieving cooperation. However, requests are also face-threatening acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987) that risk imposing on the listener's freedom. For this reason,



learners of English as a foreign language often struggle with producing requests that are both linguistically correct and pragmatically appropriate.

Pragmatic failure occurs when learners produce grammatically accurate but socially inappropriate forms. For example, an Uzbek learner may directly translate 'Kitobni bering!' into 'Give me the book!' without realizing that in English, indirect and polite forms are preferred. Such instances may not hinder comprehension, but they negatively affect interpersonal relationships and social impressions.

The communicative approach, which gained prominence in the 1970s and 1980s, emphasizes real-life communication, authentic interaction, and learner-centered teaching. By focusing on meaning rather than form alone, this approach provides a suitable framework for teaching requests. Learners are given opportunities to practice using appropriate forms of requests in interactive settings such as role-plays, group discussions, and task-based activities.

This paper seeks to answer three main research questions: (1) What are the linguistic and pragmatic features of requests in English? (2) How can the communicative approach be applied effectively to teach them? (3) What outcomes can be expected in terms of learners' communicative competence? By exploring these questions, the study contributes to the understanding of pragmatic pedagogy in EFL contexts.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

### **2.1 Speech Act Theory**

J. L. Austin's seminal work 'How to Do Things with Words' (1962) laid the foundation of speech act theory. Austin distinguished between three levels of action when producing utterances: locutionary (the act of producing an utterance), illocutionary (the communicative intent), and perlocutionary (the effect on the listener). For example, in 'Could you lend me your notes?', the locution is the spoken sentence, the illocution is the request, and the perlocution is the listener's decision to lend the notes.

Building upon Austin, Searle (1969) introduced a classification of speech acts into five categories: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. Requests fall into directives since their purpose is to get the hearer to do something. Unlike commands, which assume authority, requests rely heavily on politeness and mutual cooperation.

## **2.2 Politeness Theory and Requests**

Politeness theory, particularly Brown and Levinson's (1987) model, emphasizes how individuals maintain 'face' in communication. 'Face' refers to the self-image individuals want to preserve: positive face (desire to be liked) and negative face (desire to act without imposition). Requests threaten negative face because they impose on the listener's autonomy. To mitigate this, speakers use indirect strategies, hedges, or softeners. For instance, instead of 'Close the door!', English speakers are more likely to say 'Would you mind closing the door, please?'

Leech (1983) further emphasized the Politeness Principle, suggesting that successful communication requires not only efficiency but also consideration for others. Requests exemplify this balance, requiring speakers to manage clarity while maintaining politeness.

## **2.3 Pragmatics and Interlanguage Pragmatics**

Pragmatics, the study of meaning in context, is essential for understanding requests. Interlanguage pragmatics (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993) examines how learners develop pragmatic competence in a second or foreign language. Research has consistently shown that pragmatic competence develops more slowly than grammatical competence. Learners may produce grammatically correct requests that are pragmatically inappropriate, a phenomenon known as 'pragmatic transfer'. Blum-Kulka's Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) identified common strategies learners use for requests and revealed how sociocultural norms shape request-making. For instance, learners from collectivist cultures often rely on direct forms that appear impolite in English contexts. This highlights the need for explicit teaching of pragmatics in EFL classrooms.

## **3. Pragmatic Features of Requests in English**

### **3.1 Structural Patterns**

Requests in English can be realized through a wide range of structures, from direct imperatives ('Pass the salt!') to highly indirect hints ('It's a bit cold in here...'). The level of directness is influenced by social distance, relative power, and the size of the imposition. Modal verbs play a central role: 'Can you...?', 'Could you...?', 'Would you mind...?', and 'I was wondering if...' are common patterns. Politeness markers such as 'please' and softeners such as 'just' or 'a bit' are frequently used.

### **3.2 Sociolinguistic Variables**

The sociolinguistic appropriateness of requests depends on variables such as the speaker's and hearer's relative power, the degree of familiarity, and the context of communication. For example, a student requesting a professor's help would be expected to use a more formal and indirect form than when speaking with a peer. Cross-cultural studies reveal differences: in Uzbek, direct imperatives are common in friendly interactions, whereas in English they may sound abrupt.

## **4. Teaching Methods for Requests**

### **4.1 Traditional Approaches**

Traditional methods such as the grammar-translation method focus on literal meanings and accuracy. While they provide a foundation for understanding sentence structure, they neglect pragmatic dimensions. Learners trained solely through traditional methods often fail to recognize politeness distinctions, resulting in pragmatic failure.

### **4.2 Communicative Approach**

The communicative approach emphasizes authentic communication, learner interaction, and meaningful practice. Teaching requests through role-plays, dialogues, and task-based learning allows students to simulate real-life situations. For example, role-playing a hotel reception scenario provides practice in making polite requests ('Could I have some extra towels, please?'). Information gap tasks encourage learners to ask for missing information, naturally eliciting requests. Games and interactive activities further enhance motivation and fluency.

### **4.3 Technology and Innovation**

The integration of technology has transformed language teaching. Video-based activities allow learners to observe and analyze authentic request interactions in films or interviews. Online tools such as Quizlet, Padlet, and discussion forums offer additional opportunities for learners to practice polite requests. AI-powered chatbots can simulate real conversations, providing learners with immediate feedback on the appropriateness of their requests.

## **5. Experimental Study**

### **5.1 Research Design**

An experimental study was conducted with 40 undergraduate EFL learners. Participants were divided into control and experimental groups. The control group continued with traditional grammar-focused instruction, while the experimental group engaged in communicative lessons designed to teach requests. Pre-tests and post-tests were administered to evaluate pragmatic competence.

### **5.2 Results and Analysis**

The experimental group showed significant improvement in their ability to use indirect request strategies. Statistical analysis revealed a higher frequency of polite forms such as 'Would you mind...?' and 'I was wondering if...' compared to the control group. Learner feedback indicated increased confidence in oral communication and greater awareness of cultural norms in English requests.

### **5.3 Discussion**

The findings confirm that the communicative approach is effective in developing pragmatic competence. By engaging learners in meaningful communication, it fosters not only grammatical accuracy but also cultural appropriateness. The study highlights the importance of including pragmatics in curricula and the role of teachers in providing explicit feedback on pragmatic performance.

## **6. Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study demonstrates that teaching requests through the communicative approach is both effective and essential. Requests, as common and face-threatening speech acts, require learners to master not only linguistic structures but also pragmatic strategies. The communicative approach, with its emphasis on interaction and real-life practice, equips learners with the tools to navigate diverse communicative situations.

Teachers are advised to integrate role-plays, task-based learning, and technology-enhanced activities into their lessons. They should also raise learners' awareness of cross-cultural differences and encourage reflection on pragmatic norms. Future research could explore the use of digital platforms and AI-based systems in



teaching requests, as well as the impact of communicative approaches across different cultural settings.

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