

Saudi EFL Learners Choice of Language in their Emails to Instructors

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ABSTRACT: This paper investigates the linguistic preferences of Saudi female university students in relation to their choice of language (L1 or L2) in the emails they send to their instructors. The sample included a total of 47 emails that were sent by the students of the College of Languages and Translation IMSIU to their instructors. Students in CLT are required to use the English language in the emails they send to their instructors, and the use of the Arabic language is not acceptable. However, the analysis shows that they used Arabic in 19 emails (almost 41%). Our assumption is that students tend to use Arabic when they are planning to communicate particular speech acts. The analysis revealed that the speech acts that were communicated most frequently in these emails were: greeting, complimenting, apologizing, requesting (information), requesting (favour), and complaining. The results show that greeting and apologizing are the most frequently used speech acts in both languages. The least performed speech act in both languages was that of complaining. However, the most frequently used two speech acts had a higher percentage in the Arabic (L1) sample, with 89.5% of the total number of Arabic emails including these two types. To understand the students' perspective, a self-reflection questionnaire was distributed and collected, in which students were asked to pick their preferred language of email communication in relation to each of the six speech acts. The results of the questionnaire revealed that Arabic was the majority's choice in performing the speech acts of complaining and apologizing. This study and similar ones can shed the light on areas of weakness in EFL students' pragmatic performance, hence giving more attention to ways of improving them.

KEYWORDS: pragmatic performance, speech acts production, EFL, language choice

Introduction

"Speech act theory emerged as a theory within the philosophy of language to explain the ways language can be used" (Drid 2018, 13). It is supposed to allow us to understand how native speakers of a language use their language to perform various acts. When L2 learners refrain from using L2 even when they are supposed to, it indicates that they lack the ability to use it. When the learner refrains from using it only on certain occasions, or when performing certain speech acts, we deduce that s/he does not lack knowledge of using the language as a whole, but of performing those specific acts in that language. When the language referred to is a foreign one, we believe that devoting parts of the teaching curriculum to explaining and practicing ways of expression of different speech acts might improve students' L2 pragmatic skills.

Many previous studies have investigated the production of speech acts by non-native speakers of a language and compared it with that of native speakers to arrive at a better judgment of L2 proficiency levels of non-native speakers and its effect and/or relation to production of speech acts (Holtgraves 2018; Maeshiba, Yoshinaga, Kasper, and Ross 1996; Murphy and Neu 1996; Siebold 2012). However, only a few, to the researcher's knowledge, have studied cases where EFL learners refrained from using English because they do not believe they can be as expressive using English as they are using their first language. Here, I believe the present study proves significant in highlighting how pragmatic incompetency in EFL can hinder communication, and suggesting ways to deal with such a problem.

Literature review

Framework

Although the term itself was formally adopted to the pragmatic field a few years later by Searle (1969), speech act theory was initially developed in 1962 by Austin when he observed that sometimes "it seems that to utter the sentence [.....] is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it" (Austin 1962, 6). He made the distinction between constative and performative expressions, where the former term is used to "denote(s) statements or utterances that describe or depict facts or states of affairs and so may be true or false" Hafifah (2020). On the other hand, Performatives are utterances that are produced to perform an action and therefore they resist falsifiability. Moreover, Austin (1962) classified performatives into five types according to their illocutionary force; verdictives, exercitives, commissives, behabitives, and expositives. A three-level categorization of simultaneous acts upon producing an utterance was suggested; the locutionary act, the illocutionary act and the perlocutionary act. The locutionary act refers to the mere saying of an utterance, the illocutionary act denotes the doing or performing of an utterance, and the perlocutionary act relates to the consequential effect of the utterance on its hearer.

There have been several post-Austinian attempts to categorize speech acts. The one proposed by Searle (1976) might be the most reputable one so far. According to Searle, speech acts are categorized into the following five types;

- Representatives, which commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition such as reporting.
- Directives, which are considered as attempts by the speaker to get the addressee to do something as in requesting.
- Commissives, which commit the speaker to a future action as in promising.
- Expressives, which express a psychological state such as the case of apologizing.
- Declarations: which effect immediate changes in the institutional state of affairs such as the case of firing from employment.

Previous studies

Taguchi (2006) conducted a study to examine the correlation between English proficiency of Japanese college students and their production of English requests. The instrument used to elicit the participants' responses was an oral role play task. The resulting data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively; the former by rating performance on a six-point scale for overall appropriateness, and the latter by identifying the directness levels of the linguistic expressions used to produce requests. Contrary to Tabatabaei's (2019) findings below, this one revealed a significant influence of L2 proficiency on the overall appropriateness of the produced speech act. In addition, it suggests that appropriateness of pragmatic performance depends on many factors including sufficient linguistic and pragmatic knowledge which needs to be accompanied by overall strategic capacities to implement this knowledge in communicative interaction.

Beckwith and Dewaele (2012) studied the effect of living in L2 culture in the production of apologies by American students living in Japan. The data was collected from four groups; two control groups, one of native speakers of English and the other of native speakers of Japanese. The first experimental group included American learners/ users of Japanese who have studied Japanese in the UK only and have never resided in Japan, while the second experimental group was comprised of participants who have spent eight months or more studying or working in Japan. The data collection instrument was a discourse completion task which was written in both English and Japanese. The results showed that both control groups used explanations as part of their apologetic act despite the cross-cultural differences. Moreover, they revealed that living in the target language community can trigger pragmatic development, although it was observed that this development was of a non-linear nature.

Felix-Brasdefer and Hasler-Barker (2012) examined American learners' of Spanish as a foreign language production of compliments and compliments responses in Spanish FL classroom. The data was collected via a DCT comprising 18 hypothetical situations that was distributed to the participants, and they were asked to complete each situation with their genuine response. The results revealed that FL learners of Spanish rely on their insufficient knowledge of the syntax and semantics of Spanish in their production of compliments and compliments responses. Therefore, they did not employ appropriate pragmalinguistic resources in the data they provided. The researchers suggest that "teaching pragmatics in the FL classroom will make learners aware of cross-cultural differences" (p.263) which will help them achieve native-like speech production.

Zayed (2014) investigated the production of certain speech acts by Jordanian EFL teachers and students in public schools. To carry out this task, the researcher used a classroom observation checklist to probe the participants' practice of speech acts. The results revealed that neither teachers nor students practiced the use of speech acts appropriately. However, certain speech acts were performed better than others by both groups. The researcher concluded that EFL teachers and students need to constantly practice the use of speech acts in English in order to achieve acceptable levels of pragmatic competence.

Holtgraves (2018) examined whether ESL learners automatically recognize speech acts once they comprehend an utterance. The participants composed two different groups; one including native speakers of English who were university students both males and females, the other consisting of male and female university students whose English is their second language and speak different first languages. Participants of both groups were residing in the United States at the time of the study. The stimulus materials for this experiment consisted of a set of scenarios, each scenario described a situation between two people and was followed by a remark. This remark was the target utterance that either performed a specific speech act or not. The participants, then, had to decide whether it constituted a speech act or not via a lexical decision task. Results revealed that for L2 participants, speech act activation was not as automatic as it was for L1 participants. They also suggested that there was a positive correlation between the duration of speaking English as a second language and the degree of speech act activation.

Tabatabaei (2019) investigated the effect of language proficiency on the production of the speech act of refusal by Iranian EFL students. The participants were Iranian postgraduate students in India enrolled in various majors. They were divided into two groups based on their level of English proficiency. The instrument of the study was a discourse completion task including 12 situations which needed to be completed with refusal expressions. Upon completion, two British native teachers scored respondents' performances on the DCT according to Hudson, Detmer, and Browns analytical rating criteria which is based on four aspects of appropriacy; the ability to use correct speech act, correct expressions, amount of information, and level of politeness. Results revealed that even high proficient learners did not approximate English native speakers' norms in strategy choice. The researcher blames the grammar-translation method that has been used to teach EFL in Iran. He believes that in order to achieve high proficiency levels in a foreign language, more focus must be put to the teaching of pragmatic functions. Moreover, the cross-cultural differences between languages in the realization of the refusal speech act should be highlighted to avoid performing negative transfer and pragmatic failure while communicating in English.

Methodology

Participants

Participants in both instruments were female university students enrolled in the English department of the College of Languages and Translation at Imam Mohamed ibn Saud Islamic University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The data was collected from the emails of 26 students and the (questionnaire) responses of 16 students.

Instrument

The ethnographic approach to data collection proved to be very effective when studying speech act production (Cohen 1996). Nevertheless, it is always advised to combine it with elicited data methods (ibid). Therefore, in this study the researcher's main tool is ethnographic analysis of students' emails to their instructor, supported by the results obtained from a questionnaire answered by students. The questionnaire included six items, all identical except in the type of speech act. It required the students to choose their preferred language (L1 or L2) in the emails they send to their instructors in relation to six speech acts. The speech acts specified in the questionnaire were the most frequently used ones in the analysed emails, namely; complaint, greeting, request (for information), request (for a favour), compliment, and apology.

Procedure

Spontaneous, non-elicited, emails of students to their instructors were collected during the second academic semester of 2018. Students were explicitly informed that English is the language they are expected to use in their correspondence with their instructor. After collecting and analysing the emails, six speech acts were named as the most frequently used ones. Hence, a questionnaire was designed and sent to the students asking them to explicitly identify the language of their preference when emailing their instructors. The questionnaire gave them the choice of language (Arabic or English) in relation to each speech act separately.

Results analysis and discussion

Upon analysing the emails, the researcher noticed that only three (from the 26 students whose emails were analysed) have conformed, in all of their emails, to the rule pertaining English being the only language allowed in student-instructor correspondences. Another three have only sent one email -each- in English, and eight have sent one email -each- in Arabic. The remaining twelve have sent multiple emails, and all of them have used English in some of their emails and Arabic in others. A total of 47 emails, 19 written in L1 (Arabic), and 28 in L2 (English) were used to collect data for this study. When ordering the six speech acts according to frequency of occurrence, as we can see in table 1 below, it was observed that the most frequently used speech act in both English and Arabic emails was the speech act of greeting. Apologies were performed the same number of times as greetings in the Arabic emails and slightly less in the English ones. In the third place was the speech act of complimenting, in both languages. The fourth most frequently performed speech act in Arabic emails was requesting a favour, while in English it was requesting information. The reverse order applies for the fifth place. And the least frequently used speech act in both languages was that of complaint, although the difference in the percentage of use was significant (see table 1).

Table 1. Speech act production in Arabic and English emails

Type of speech act	Number of occurrences in L1 emails	Percentage of number of occurrences to number of emails	Number of occurrences in L2 emails	Percentage of number of occurrences to number of emails
Greeting	17	89.5%	22	78.5%
Compliment	15	79%	18	64%
Apology	17	89.5%	20	71.5%
Request for favour	13	68.5%	4	14%
Request for information	12	63%	16	57%
Complaint	4	21%	1	3.5%

We can see from table 1 that there are some differences in the students' linguistic behaviour in their production of speech acts. For instance, we can see that they have a greater tendency to start their emails with a greeting when using L1 (89.5% in L1 emails as opposed to 78.5% in L2 emails). The same can be said about the speech acts of apology and compliment. Although they occupy the same order slot in relation to occurrence, second and third respectively, the percentage of occurrence is much higher in the Arabic data. Requesting information comes in the fourth place in the English data and in the fifth place in the Arabic one, with marginal difference in the percentage of use. The least performed speech act was that of complaint. However, its percentage in the Arabic emails was much higher than in the English ones.

When requesting a favour, the participants seemed to be much more comfortable using L1, which explains the language choice of Arabic instead of English for those who have sent emails in both languages. Requests for favours occurred in 68.5% of the Arabic emails, and only in 14% of the English ones. Actually, when studying the emails of this group closely, we can see that in most cases the main purpose of the L1 email was the request for favour, especially if the request is a prolonged one. For example, in one case, a student sent an email in English asking to change the time of her midterm (request for a favour). She performed the act and mentioned her excuse very briefly in one sentence. 25 minutes later she sent another email in Arabic requesting the same favour, but this time she elaborated in her email mentioning a number of reasons behind her requests in over three lines. Such a case, and similar ones, lead us to the conclusion that students feel more comfortable requesting a favour in their native language. This might be caused by a feeling of solidarity and common grounds between the requester and the requestee when using L1, leading the requester to believe that the requestee would understand the reasons behind the request and grant it to her.

Moreover, it was observed that the rank of imposition was an effective factor in the participants' choice of language. For instance, in one case, a student sent an English email asking her instructor to send her her midterm mark via email. Of course, this is considered a favour since it is customary that students can see their mark and check their paper either in class or in the instructor's office during office hours, not in the convenience of their homes in an email. However, since this is a low-rank request, that does not require excessive effort from the requestee, the requester used the English language, and she was brief and direct. In a following email, asking for bonus (extra) marks, the same participant opted to use Arabic, and she elaborated in her request for eight lines, including other speech acts (apology and complaint) in the performance of the main one (request for favour).

Urgency, as well, seemed to be a factor affecting students' choice of language. For instance, a student who seemed to be comfortable using English proficiently in a few emails, switched to Arabic in a following email, although she was only requesting information. The reason, however, is that the information she requested pertained the final exam which is an important topic with critical timing. In addition, according to her, receiving this piece of information was a necessity. Finally, a common trait among most Arabic emails is that they are lengthy, elaborated, and informal.

In their responses to the questionnaire (table 2), the participants expressed their preference to use L1 (Arabic) when performing the speech acts of complaint and apology, while they preferred using English -to varying degrees when performing greeting, requesting for information, complimenting, and requesting a favour. Their responses go in line with the results obtained from the analysis of the emails in relation to the speech act of complaint which was performed four times in 21% of the Arabic emails, while only performed once in English. The number of occurrence of apologies in Arabic emails was also higher in percentage. In almost 90% of the Arabic emails, the speech act of apology was performed. The corresponding percentage in the English emails was around 71%.

Table 2. Students' choice of language in production of speech acts in emails to their instructors

Type of speech act	Number of students who preferred L1	Percentage	Number of students who preferred L2	Percentage
Greeting	2	12.5%	14	87.5%
Compliment	4	25%	12	75%
Apology	9	56.25%	7	43.75%
Request for favour	5	31.25%	11	68.75%
Request for information	2	12.5%	14	87.5%
Complaint	13	81.25%	3	18.75%

Data in table 2 reveals that only in two cases participants admitted that they prefer using L1 over L2, apology and complaint. In the case of greeting and request for information, the majority of participants claimed that they prefer using L2. The same was the case with requesting a favour and complimenting but with a lower percentage. The results of this tool come in accordance with the results of the first one in relation to apologies and complaints, which were expressed much less in the English emails than in the Arabic one. The most obvious discrepancy in the data obtained from the two tools lies in the results for 'request for favour' which was only performed in 14% of the English emails, yet almost 69% of the respondents claimed that they prefer to perform it in English.

Although this data represents students' beliefs about their language preference, not their actual linguistic performance, it can be illuminating in recognizing areas of weakness as perceived by the students themselves. Thus, according to table 2, students believe that they can express apologies and complaints better in Arabic than in English. Bearing in mind that this study was not designed to evaluate the level of proficiency of students in English or in speech act production in L2, knowing EFL learners' beliefs regarding which speech acts they see as problematic allows us to better understand and assess the whole situation.

Recommendations and conclusion

The present study investigated EFL learners' choice of language (L1 vs L2) when performing certain speech acts in the emails they sent to their instructors. Knowing that the use of L2 (English) is mandatory, and excluding lack of proficiency as a cause since most of the participants sent multiple emails in both languages, we deduce that the reason behind resorting to L1 when the use of L2 is a requirement is the lack of proficiency in performing certain speech acts in L2. Moreover, there were other observed factors which seemed to affect the choice of language, such as urgency, elaboration and informality. Accompanied by the results of the self-reflection questionnaire, we come to the conclusion that EFL learners actually believe that their L2 proficiency in certain speech acts is insufficient.

Hence comes the role of pedagogical planning. As Murphy and Neu (1996) have suggested EFL learners must be taught the distinctive features that differentiate one speech act from another, e.g., complaint and criticism. Lack of such knowledge may cause misunderstanding or even the production of an impolite expression. Since it is hard to explicitly define specific syntactic structures (Grundy 2008) and/or semantic formulas (Beebe and Cummings 1996) for the performance of each speech act based on the data gathered from natural spontaneous speech, and

since the exposure to natural speech in L2 proved effective in improving pragmatic development (Beckwith and Dewaele 2012), we believe that EFL learners should be exposed to natural speech of L2 in the classroom, in the form of audio or video clips. They should also be encouraged to watch or listen to shows in English outside the classroom to acquaint themselves with the foreign language culture and mindset of its speakers (Leaver, Ehrman, and Shekhtman 2005).

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