# LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL FEATURES OF REQUESTS: SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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**Abstract**. This paper presents some linguistic and cultural features of English requests. It focuses on their structural properties of requests and communicative strategies in use, and on the analysis of the use of requests by native speakers of English and by Vietnamese EFL learners. The purpose of this article is to raise the EFL learners' linguistic awareness and pragmatic competence in their use of English. Accordingly, the author makes suggestions for EFL teaching and learning for communicative purposes.

## 1. Introduction

When native speakers of a particular language participate in conversational interactions, it is taken for granted that they will follow some sets of rules of communication that are socially accepted in their community. These sets of rules help speakers express themselves and hearers interpret in order to respond properly to the intended meanings encoded in the speakers' utterances. According to Geis (1995: 141) there is conventionalization of linguistic forms for certain functions and purposes in conversations. These conventions of language use have been discussed in Pragmatics such as presupposition, implicature, Grice's cooperative principle (1957) and the theory of speech acts of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969).

Requests are one type of the linguistic speech act, which according to Blum-Kulka *et al*. (1989: ix) is "rich in both linguistic repertories and the social meanings attaching to their use". Requests – acts in which the speaker asks for something - are used frequently in everyday interactions and constitutes an indispensable part of one's command of a language, especially in learning a target language.

In Vietnam, English has long been considered as an important subject in high schools and a major at the tertiary level. However, it is a challenge for Vietnamese EFL learners when they take part in interactions in the target language speaking environment. As far as requests are concerned, it is not surprising to hear many Vietnamese learners of English make similarly or identically structured requests in different contexts. Therefore, in order to be welcomed and socially accepted in the target language

community, Vietnamese learners should be provided with not only the grammatical structures of the target language but also the know-how to use that language effectively and properly.

This paper aims to present linguistic and cultural features of requests and the strategies in making requests in order to raise EFL speakers' awareness of different request strategies in social interactions, and ultimately make some suggestions for teaching and learning EFL.

## 2. Linguistic and cultural features of requests in English

### *2.1. Request as a speech act*

Searle (1969: 16) asserted that "the unit of linguistic communication is not, as it has generally been supposed, the symbol, words or sentence or even the token of the symbol, word or sentence, but rather the production or issuance of the symbol or word or sentence in the performance of the speech act". For example, in uttering "I promise to return the book on Friday", the speaker expresses a certain sense and simultaneously performs the act of doing something (in this case the act of promising). Therefore, a speech act is defined as an action that is performed via an utterance (Yule, 1996: 47).

According to Austin (cited in Levinson, 1983: 236), on any occasion the production of utterances will involve three acts. The **locutionary act** involves the uttering of words, the **illocutionary act** is some function the speaker is performing in relation to his/her utterance, **and perlocutionary act** is the effect that the illocutionary act is intended to have on the hearer.

In English, speech acts are specifically labeled as apology, complaint, compliment, invitation, promise or request. These terms are descriptively applicable to the speaker's communnicative intention encoded in the utterance, which is normally realized with the help of the circumstance around the utterance. This intention will also have a certain effect on the circumstance. Searle (1969) generalized five basic categories of speech acts as follows:

- **Declarations** are speech acts that change the state of the world via words (e.g. *I declare the2002 World Cup open*).

- **Representatives** are speech acts that carry the values (e.g. *She speaks four languages*).

- **Directives** are speech acts in which the speaker attempts to get the hearer to do something (e.g. *Can I borrow your pen for a while?*).

- **Commissives** are speech acts in which the speaker shows his or her commitment to a future action (e.g. *I promise to return the pen immediately*).

- **Expressives** are speech acts that express the feelings or attitudes of the speaker

(e.g. *How wonderful our holiday was*).

<div align="right">(Yule, 1996: 53-54)</div>

Request, which is defined as "an act of politely asking for something" (Hornby, 1995: 996), belongs to the category of Directives. By means of an utterance, the speaker expects the hearer to do something as he or she wants.

### *2.2. Request and its linguistic properties*

Like many other speech acts, a request can be made direct or indirect. In most English language textbooks, requests are presented in the form of imperatives and polite imperatives (Hatch, 1992: 122). These are called Direct Requests. In social interactions, however, what is intended in the utterance is not always the same as what is meant by the expressed words. For example, if "I need to know the time for flight VN783" is said to the speaker's friend, it is likely to be a mere statement telling what s/he wants to know. But if it is addressed to a travel agent, it is more likely to be a request for information. Therefore, there are other ways to make a request than the Imperative (Hatch, 1992:122):

- Personal need/desire statements:

I need/want X

- Imperative:

Do X/ Don't do Y

- Embedded Imperative:

Could you do X (please)?

- Permission Directive:

May I do X? / Do you have X?

- Hint (sometimes with humor):

This has to be done over. What about X?

To realize the level of directness of the speech act of request, Yule (1996:54) presents a structural distinction between three sentence structures (declarative, interrogative, and imperative) and three general communicative functions (statement, question, command/request). Accordingly when there is a direct relationship between a structure and a function, the act is direct. As a result, Imperative is a direct request.

However, Brown & Levinson (1978:62) argue that request is a face-threatening speech act. Therefore, the speaker prefers an indirect way to make a request in order to keep a good public self image for the hearer. The ways of making requests other than the Imperatives are called Indirect Requests. These requests are those utterances the

syntactic forms of which do not match their illocutionary force. Rather, the interpretation of the utterances needs an inferential process.

One of the common indirect requests are in the form of a question (Yule, 1996: 55), typically that of the hearer's ability ("Can you?", "Could you?") or future possibility ("Will you?", "Would you?"). These are very commonly accepted not only in English but also in other languages. However, Blum-Kulka (1987) found that the understanding of request indirectness variably relies on either semantic content, conventional usage or the context of the utterance. For examples,

(1) May I have an extra day to finish the report?

(2) Could you tidy up the bathroom for me?

(3) OK kids, we are having a grown-up conversation.

Although the above three examples are alternative ways of indirectly expressing the illocutionary force, the force in (1) and (2) is more transparent than in (3). In both (1) and (2), the illocutionary force is clear and the speaker is more or less co-operative in conveying the intended request. Strategies of this type are called *conventionally indirect* requests. However, in (3) the intended meaning has to be inferred by the hearer. This strategy type is called *non-conventionally indirect* request (Brown & Levinson, 1978 and Blum-Kulka *et al.*, 1989).

The advantage of the indirect request is that it makes the speaker more polite in the eyes of the hearer, and it gives the hearer a freedom to choose his behavior. In the utterance *"Can you turn off the light?"* the hearer is free to interpret it either literally as a pure question as to whether the hearer has the ability to turn off the light or implicitly as a request asking the hearer to carry out the act of turning off the light.

Nevertheless, requests are never misinterpreted in practical language use. This is because a request comprises a sequence in which the five formulae suggested in Hatch (1992:122) play the role of a Head. Blum-Kulka et al. (1989: 17) identified three components of a request sequence, namely Alerters, Supportive moves and Head Acts. These components help to address the illocutionary force of the utterance. Alerters precede the request to attract the attention of the addressee. They are usually address terms, such as darling, Mary, Mr Smith, etc. Supportive moves can either precede or follow the request. They are usually statements accounting for request acts (e.g. I've lost my pen. Can I …) or questions checking if it is possible for of request acts to be made (e.g. Are you free tomorrow night? I'd like to …). **Head Acts** are the requests themselves.

### *2.3. Request and its cultural features*

According to Blum-Kulka *et al*. (1989: 18), Head Acts in English requests can be performed employing nine strategies as follows

- **Mood Derivable**: utterances in which the grammatical mood of the verb signals illocutionary force, e.g. *Turn the music down.*

- **Performatives**: utterances in which the illocutionary force is explicitly named, e.g. *I'm asking you to take that book down for me.*

- **Hedged Performatives**: utterances in which the naming of the illocutionary force is modified by hedging expressions, e.g. *I would like to ask you to clean the bathroom for me.*

- **Obligation Statements**: utterances which state the obligation of the hearer to carry out the act, e.g. *You have to clean that mess.*

- **Want Statements**: utterances which state the speaker's desire that the hearer carries out the act, e.g. *I want to have a private talk with John.*

- **Suggestory Formulae**: utterances which contain a suggestion to do X, e.g. *Okay, kids. How about going out playing? I need to talk to John in private.*

- **Query Preparatory**: utterances containing reference to preparatory conditions (e.g. ability or willingness) as conventionalized in any specific language, e.g. *Could you show me how to get to the Museum?* ; *Would you mind explaining this structure to me?*

- **Strong Hints**: utterances containing partial reference to object or element needed for the implementation of the act, e.g. *You have left the bathroom a real mess.*

- **Mild Hints**: utterances that make no reference to the request properties (or any of its elements) but are interpretable as requests by context, e.g. *Someone has to do the cleaning after his use.* Utterances of this type may be supported by the prosody.

These are common strategies made by native speakers of English. However, the request as a speech act is associated with many socio-cultural factors of the circumstance, the speaker and the hearer, and thus it is derivable. In a cross-cultural pragmatic study carried out in Australia with 30 Australian native speakers of English and 30 Vietnamese students as non-native speakers, by asking them to fill in the Discourse Completion Task (DCT) questionnaire, Vo (2002) discovered two more strategies employed by native speakers:

- **Consultative Questions**: utterances in which the speaker seeks the hearer's cooperation, e.g. *Do you reckon you've got the time to clean the bathroom?*

- **Sarcastic Hints** are the semantic manipulations which serve as requests, implying the opposite of what the speaker means or intends, e.g. *Mary, I don't suppose people in China can hear your music.*

The nine suggested request strategies in Blum-Kulka (1989) and the two discovered in Vo (2002) are different in terms of levels of directness. Mood Derivable,

Performatives, Hedged Performatives, Want Statements and Obligation Statements belong to Direct Requests. Suggestory Formulae, Query Preparatory, and Consultative Questions are conventionally indirect. Strong Hints, Mild Hints and Sarcastic Hints are categorized as non-conventionally Indirect Requests. They are also employed differently by native and non-native speakers depending on the speaker's preference and cultural values.

In English, the matters of social distance and closeness are very important in making sense of what is said in a request. These matters are investigated in terms of politeness – a means the speaker employs to show the awareness of the hearer's public self image (Yule, 1996: 60). When the speaker in an interaction attempts to give the hearer a freedom of action, he is employing negative politeness. When the speaker shows the solidarity to the hearer, he is employing the positive politeness. In making requests, positive politeness "leads the requester to appeal to a common goal, and even friendship" (Yule, 1996: 64). Positive politeness in requests, therefore, is more associated with such direct strategies as Mood Derivable, Performatives, Hedged Performatives, Want Statements and Obligation Statements. These strategies need an established common ground between the speaker and the hearer; otherwise, the speaker will take a risk of a refusal response. In contrast, negative politeness shows the speaker's awareness of the hearer's "need to be independent or not to be imposed on" (Yule, 1996: 61). It is often carried out in the form of a question. Suggestory Formulae, Query Preparatory, and Consultative Questions are preferred by the speaker when he employs negative politeness strategies.

In Vietnamese politeness, however, the social status of the hearer and the speaker (e.g. age, gender, power, etc.) heavily relies on the choice of personal pronouns, thus "strategy types do not matter as much as the appropriate use of pronouns" (Nguyen, 1990). In English, by contrast, those social factors cannot be easily recognized through the use of *I* and *we* as first person pronouns and *you* as second person pronoun (Brown & Yule, 1983). Nguyen (1990) further remarked that direct requests are used more by those speakers who are older, or have more power over the other. People of younger age or with less power are expected to use indirect requests to show their respect to the senior. The differences in politeness cause them to use request strategies in different ways.

### 2.4. Request strategies used by native speakers and Vietnamese EFL learners

In her cross-cultural pragmatic study in Australia in 2002, Vo surveyed EFL students' employment of request strategies cross-culturally. The participants in the study included two information groups. 20 Australian English native speakers with little exposure to Vietnamese culture served to provide the baseline data for both cross-cultural comparison and contrast. They completed the questionnaire in English. 20

Vietnamese EFL students who were at the language institute to prepare for their undergraduate courses in Australia. They were asked to complete both English and Vietnamese versions of questionnaires.

The questionnaire used to collect data for the study was designed in the form of a discourse completion task, which elicited the speakers' responses to different situations in each of which a face-threatening act of request is desired. The data were then analyzed on the basis of nine request strategies, traits of request sequence and levels of directness suggested in Blum-Kulka et al. (1989).

Vo (2002) found that the strategies in making requests on the one hand varied culturally, but shared some features on the other hand. Native speakers have used a wider range of strategies (9 out of 11 strategies) than Vietnamese EFL learners (6 strategies). Both native speakers and Vietnamese EFL learners use Query Preparatory in many situations, making up of 65.8% and 72.5% respectively). The percentage of Mood Derivable use is similar with 36.8% for native speakers and 28% for Vietnamese students. This is because Mood Derivable and Query Preparatory strategies are also common in Vietnamese for direct and indirect requests respectively. In using Mood Derivable, the speaker is more confident that the request will be complied with than in the use of Query Preparatory. However, native speakers use Mood Derivable when the relationship between the speaker and the hearer is close, while Vietnamese EFL learners use it when the hearer is of the same age or younger than the speaker. As for Query Preparatory, native speakers tend to address this strategy to people of distant relationship regardless of age differences, and they make use of a variety of modal verbs (*can, could will, would, may,* and *might*). Meanwhile, Vietnamese EFL learners address Query Preparatory requests to different addressees with only one type of modal verb (*can/could*) despite how close the relationship between the speaker and the hearer is. For example, in a situation asking a stranger for direction to the Olympic Park in DCT, 63% Vietnamese students responded with the "Could/Can you …" requests. This can be attributed to the influence of Vietnamese culture on the target language use. In Vietnamese, *có thể* (which means "be able to" or "can" in English) is a modal verb available for making indirect requests in all situations. Hence, Vietnamese EFL learners tend to transfer *"có thể"* in Vietnamese into *"can"* in English as in the following utterances:

e.g.     *Excuse me, can you tell me how to get to the Olympic Park?*

        *Excuse me, can you show me the way to the Olympic Park?*

A problem of language transfer is that it easily results in misunderstanding and communication breakdown between the speaker and the hearer. This is very common in circumstances where there are differences in the system of values and beliefs of the two cultural groups (Chick, 1996:329). Consequently, Vietnamese EFL learners may

sometimes use a polite request strategy in their native language, but it is not considered appropriate in the target language. This leads to the misinterpretation of the message conveyed. The situation the author observed in an Australian library in 2002 was a vivid example. A Vietnamese student of Economics was trying to get a book off the shelf but she could not reach it. She said to a stranger Australian student "Excuse me! Please get that book down for me. I can't reach it." Though the Australian student took the book down for her, he was quite surprised, looking at the girl with a probe. The word *please* in English is translated into Vietnamese as *xin vui lòng* (a phrase conventionally used as a polite form in requests in Vietnamese). Hence, if a Vietnamese EFL learner makes a request to an elderly or a stranger by adding *please* to an Imperative implying a polite respectful attitude, it might be considered inappropriate and therefore misinterpreted by a native speaker.

The inappropriate use of request strategies is common in English classes where the author is teaching as in the following examples.

Situation 1: a student asks a teacher for an extension

*Teacher, please give me an extra day to finish the assignment. I have a problem with my computer.* [1]

Situation 2: a group leader asks members in the group to meet for a rehearsal of the oral presentation

*Can you go to Nhung's to have a rehearsal at 2 pm tomorrow?* [2]

The requests sound strange to English native speakers, and sometimes they are considered as rude. In situation 1, it is the student's duty to hand in the paper on time, and thus he is expected to use negative politeness to ask for an extension in this case, giving the teacher the freedom to make a decision as to whether or not she should give him an extra day. In fact, [1] is a transfer of a polite respectful request in Vietnamese "Thưa cô, xin cô vui lòng cho em thêm một ngày nữa để hoàn tất bài tiểu luận. Máy tính của em bị hỏng."

Similarly, the group members are expected to meet for the preparation of the oral presentation in the second situation. In English speaking culture, direct requests can be used in this situation, and thus utterances of Imperative and Hedged Imperative types are commonly used as follows:

*Hey you guys, please meet at Nhung's for a rehearsal at 2pm tomorrow.*

*I'd like to ask you to meet at Nhung's for a rehearsal.*

Sometimes, a suggestion is made in place of a request:

*Let's meet at Nhung's for a rehearsal.*

In this situation, however, the speaker transfers a common Vietnamese request "các bạn có thể đến nhà Nhung để tập duyệt vào ngày mai lúc 2 giờ không?" to a structurally equivalent utterance. The speaker is not aware that his use of indirect request distances him from other members of the group not to mention the risk that he may suffer from a refusal.

Also in Vo's study (2002), Want Statements and Suggestory Formulae, Mild Hints and Sarcastic Hints are not used at all by Vietnamese EFL learners. As for other strategies, Obligation Statements, Strong Hints and Consultative Questions are used more by native speakers than by Vietnamese EFL learners in situations where the speaker is not sure whether or not the hearer is willing or able to perform the act. This is evidence of language transfer as there is no such way of making requests in Vietnamese, and thus Vietnamese EFL learners are not used to these request strategies.

Yule (1996: 57) explains that different structures can be used to accomplish the same basic function; however, they are different in the social relationship as well as the goals of the participants. The variation of request strategies also depends on what has previously happened. For example, in a situation where the hearer turns on the music too loudly without knowing that the speaker is trying to study, strategies such as Consultative Questions, or Query Preparatory may be adopted to make a request of turning it down.

e.g.    *Mary, can you turn down the music a bit? I'm trying to study.*

        *Mary, is it OK if you turn down the music?*

However, if the hearer repeatedly turns on loud music, Sarcastic Hints may be used as a request, and to some extent as a complaint.

e.g.    *Mary, you'd better see an audiologist. I reckon your ears have problems.*

        *Mary, I don't suppose people in China can hear your music.*

Not many Vietnamese EFL learners have the ability to realize the nuance of request strategies in English. Especially, non-linguistic and paralinguistic elements in the face-to-face interactions play a very important role in helping the speaker get the message across and the hearer interpret the message properly. Many researchers attribute the differences in making English request strategies by non-native speakers to the lack of pragmatic competence (Blum-Kulka, 1989; Nguyen, 1990). In this paper, the author shall argue that the differences in making requests by Vietnamese EFL learners, in addition to the lack of pragmatic competence, are also due to (1) the lack of exposure to the use of the target language in real contexts, and (2) the cultural transfer in speaking the target language.

*2.4.1. The lack of authentic language setting and materials*

Most Vietnamese EFL learners study in monolingual setting with friends and teachers who are native speakers of Vietnamese. English is practiced among EFL learners, who rarely speak English outside the classroom. They almost share the same difficulties in defining the nature of spoken English since they have few opportunities to use English in authentic situations. As a result, their use of the English language is isolated from its relationship to the target culture, which causes the occurrence of language transfer as discussed above.

As far as the EFL materials are concerned, most EFL classes, especially at lower levels such as primary and secondary schools, use certain prescribed course books as the main source of materials. In addition, the teaching and learning procedure in most EFL classes in Vietnam is quite restricted. Each class section is confined to a unit of the course book, and the teacher has to cover all the drills and tasks provided in the book. In these tasks, some types of speech acts are introduced implicitly. Take speaking section (pages 103 – 104), Unit 9 in "Tieng Anh 11" – an English textbook for upper-secondary school students, grade 11 – as an example. According to the book map, the speaking section in this unit focuses on making requests. However, request strategies are not presented in this section. In stead, task 1 asks students to act out a sample dialogue between a customer and a post office clerk. Only one request strategy is implicitly presented in this speech event, *Could you help me to send this document to my office by fax?* (page 103). Task 2 requires students to make a conversation from the suggestions, and the conversation also takes place between the post office and a customer. Task 3 is similar to task 2, asking students to dialogues for two given situations: one is with a newspaper agent about newspaper delivery, and the other is another deal with the post office. Fairly speaking, these tasks are carefully designed and sequenced. The fact that all the tasks in this section deals with post office is acceptable because the vocabulary focus in this unit relates to the post office. However, the materials are not contextually sensible. For one thing, all the tasks in this section are transactional interactions in terms of conversational type. These interactions are rarely carried out by Vietnamese teenagers. Even when they involve in these interactions, they carry out in Vietnamese instead. For another, there is a need to present various request strategies explicitly. In this section, there is only one request form presented. It belongs to Query Preparatory. However, it would have sounded more like English if it had been *Could you please send this document to my office by fax?* The utterance *Could you help me to send this document to my office by fax?* in this situation is likely a transfer from a business request "Cô có thể giúp tôi gởi fax tài liệu này đến văn phòng của tôi không?" as in Vietnamese the verb "giúp" (help) can be used to make requests more polite rather than to mean "providing support" or "improve a situation" (Hornby, 1995: 321).

The lack of explicit presentation of speech acts in textbooks makes it difficult

for Vietnamese EFL learners to cope with real life situations. Their response then is either inappropriate or slow, which might alienate them in the English-speaking world.

### 2.4.2. The cultural transfer

There are also many other factors than the authentic language setting. The habit of rote learning and the heavy reliance on the teacher-imparted knowledge have negative influences on learners' active participation and their flexibility to cope with communication in real life situations.

Another salient aspect of Vietnamese culture is the perfectionism, which has great influences upon the learning EFL. Therefore, although learners are encouraged to make errors in learning, many of them appear to be loath to do this for fear of losing face. They only participate in the classroom activities when they know for sure of what and how they are going to speak, i.e. they must produce exact information and grammatically correct utterances. As a result, they always need time to think of what and how to say something before actually speaking. This habit hinders the learners' opportunities to develop their promptness and fluency in actual communication. Therefore, in using request strategies, many Vietnamese EFL learners use Query Preparatory and Mood Derivable strategies in most of the situations because, in addition to reasons of language transfer, these two strategies are presented as typical for structuring requests in many of the course books used in teaching EFL in Vietnam. Hence, using these strategies is a safe way to avoid errors (Vo, 2002).

## 3. Implications for EFL teaching and learning

Blum-Kulka (1997: 57) believes that native speakers sometimes do not accept non-native speakers' different way of speaking "as a marker of cultural identity" but might negatively view it as an unacceptable behavior. Wolfson (1983: 62) also remarked that "in interacting with foreigners, natives tend to be rather tolerant of errors in pronunciation or syntax. In contrast, violations of rules of speaking are often interpreted as bad manners". Therefore, the inappropriate use of request strategy, which may result in the face threat to the hearer, makes it difficult for many Vietnamese EFL learners to be accepted in interactions in the target language culture.

In the light of the presented analysis, the following suggestions are made to teaching and learning EFL to prepare learners for adequate pragmatic knowledge of the target language.

### 3.1. Language Setting

The supportive role of the language setting for EFL learning is undeniable. However, most Vietnamese EFL learners do not have opportunity to speak English outside the classroom to authenticate their learning. It is suggested that integrative tasks, i.e. tasks that combine different language skills, should be designed for classroom

practice (Willis, 1996). This is to develop learners' ability in both receptive and productive skills because one skill "cannot be performed without others" (Harmer, 1994: 52) in real communication. Teachers should also organize more cooperative activities to create language environment for learners' practice. For example, in the case of requests in the speaking section, unit 9, English book for grade 11 as mentioned above, there should be more practice involving the interpersonal interactions so that students can act out in classes such as borrowing a classmate a pen, asking the teacher to explain something again, and so on. In addition, teachers can give students homework asking them to write a letter of request as a follow-up activity of the speaking section. In this way, teachers raise students' awareness of the use of request in both speaking and writing modes.

Alternative activities may include inviting native speakers of English to talk to students and holding English speaking clubs or contests. By doing this, learners may have more motivation and confidence to build up the sense of natural language and to develop their language competence.

### 3.2. Materials

Choosing teaching materials is of great importance. The materials on the one hand must be appropriate to the level of the majority of learners in a class; on the other hand they need to be communicative in nature. These requirements are hardly met by the use of only one course book. Therefore, teachers should design more authentic tasks, in addition to the drills and tasks provided in the course book, to help students to develop flexibility in various situations. These tasks should focus on communicative activities which involve using language for a purpose, create a desire to communicate and encourage learners to be creative and open-minded to contribute and exchange their ideas. It is recommended that teachers use teaching materials designed by English native-speaker educators for English as a Second Language (ESL) or as a Foreign Language (EFL) programs. There are a wide range of ESL/EFL books available. However, easy-to-use English book series is "Blackwell, A. & Naber, T. (2003) *English Know How*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press." First, the book is organized into sections similar to those in "Tieng Anh" textbooks series used in Vietnam. For this reason, it is easy for teachers to find supplementary tasks for the sections they need. Second, the topics are familiar to Vietnamese EFL learners. In addition, different types of speech acts are presented in the section of Language in Action with model expressions and sometimes with usages.

Although it is impossible to expose learners to a wide range of situations and to prepare them for different cultural assumptions which potentially cause communication breakdown, authentic tasks are still helpful to the extent that they encourage learners to differentiate cultural salient, avoid possible misunderstanding in real life interactions,

and minimize the influence of the first language and culture on the target language use.

Since a failure in communication deals with either pragmalinguistic failure or sociopragmatic failure, teaching and learning EFL should start from these two aspects of human communication. Teachers need to facilitate students with issues related to pragmatics. In case of request strategies, teachers should introduce to learners different strategies types. This is because, in speech act theory, more than one utterance could address the performance of a single act. Therefore, learners should be provided with other strategies than those frequently presented in the course books (Mood Derivable and Query Preparatory). To this end, a repertoire should be built up in the syllabus from simple to complex, from direct to indirect or from the most similar to the least similar request strategies in English to those in Vietnamese. In this way learners are encouraged to verify the use of request strategies and to make sense of appropriate employment of requests in the target language, which helps to reduce the mass production of similar or identical requests for various situations.

In order to limit the repetition of a single structure for many different requests, it is advisable that students be aware of the rules and conventions, and evaluate the situations based on the cultural norms of the target language rather than those of their mother tongue.

## 4. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to present a background in English requests with the focus on their linguistic and cultural properties. Evidence from empirical studies in the field of interlanguage and cross-cultural pragmatics is taken to provide an insight into the use of request strategies by native speakers of English and Vietnamese EFL learners. Problems in using requests in English by Vietnamese EFL learners are identified and explained in terms of pragmatic competence, authentic language setting and materials and cultural transfer. Accordingly, suggestions are made for EFL teaching and learning in Vietnam in order to raise learners' awareness of pragmatic competence in their use of requests in particular and of the target language in general.

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