CHAPTER 3

It's 8 O'clock in the Morning— Are You Watching Television? Teaching Indirect Requests

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Requests in English are often made using a wide range of subtle linguistic resources. Even speakers in a higher position of authority addressing subordinates often rely on a finely tuned understanding of the scale of directness to indirectness, the supportive moves that precede or follow requests to mitigate the impact, and the linguistic modifiers used to soften the message. If learners are unaware of the function of this indirectness, they may respond only to the form of the utterance and miss the true intent. As a consequence, the potential for misunderstanding by both interlocutors of each other's politeness is high. In response to the need to raise learners' awareness of the role of indirectness and mitigation in English, this chapter provides practical tasks for recognizing levels of directness and the mitigating moves and softeners that are so essential for making appropriate requests in English.

CONTEXT

The following activities have been used primarily with intermediate English as a second language (ESL) learners in an intensive English program at a major university in the southwestern United States. However, we are confident that they could be successfully tailored to fit the needs of basic, as well as advanced, second language (L2) learners in both an ESL and an English as a foreign language (EFL) context.

According to Blum-Kulka, Danet, and Gherson (1985), a request is a preevent act that expresses a speaker's expectation about some prospective action, verbal

or nonverbal, on the part of the hearer. The goals of a request include action (e.g., "Can you open the window?"), goods (e.g., "Can you pass me the salt?"), information (e.g., "Do you know who our teacher is going to be this semester?"), and permission (e.g., "May I leave early?"), and the appropriateness of a particular goal is determined by the social norms of the society in which the speech act is made.

In order to categorize the wide range of request types, Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) developed a scale in the Cross Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP). The scale is composed of nine subcategories grouped into three broad categories of request strategies depending on the degree of directness. These strategies can be grouped as follows:

1. Direct requests
    - Imperative ("Stop bothering me.")
    - Explicit requesting verb ("I *am asking* you to change your mind.")
    - Hedged requesting verb ("I *must ask* you to move to another table.")
2. Conventionally indirect requests
    - Intention derivable ("You'll have to leave.")
    - Statement of wanting ("*I'd like to* get a ride home with you.")
    - Suggestion formula ("*How about* helping your sister?")
    - Preparatory—using *could you/would you* phrasing in questions: ("*Could you* lend me a couple of dollars?")
3. Nonconventionally indirect requests
    - Strong hint—one that mentions the problem: ("Your room is a mess." [Request to straighten room])
    - Mild hint—one that does not mention the problem or solution explicitly: ("It's already 11 o'clock." [Request for companion to leave])

(adapted from Blum Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989, pp. 278–280)

These categories are relatively standard. However, the terms "direct request" and "indirect request" can be misleading. Direct requests, as well as indirect intention-derivable and statement-of-wanting requests, can be perceived as orders or as rather pushy requests, depending on the content and context. Furthermore, intention-derivable and statement-of-wanting strategies are sometimes eliminated in discussions of requests (see Rinnert & Iwai, Chapter 4 of this volume).

The supportive moves used to mitigate (or aggravate) the force of a request can be either internal or external to the speech act itself. Internal modifications are part of the request itself and include softening words or phrases such as *please*,

just, and *only*. External modifications can occur before or after the request. Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989, pp. 287–288) describe six types of external modifications in the CCSARP:

1. Preparatory ("I'd like to ask you something.")
2. Getting a precommitment ("Could you do me a favor?")
3. Grounder ("*I wasn't feeling good yesterday.* Could I borrow your notes?")
4. Disarmer ("*I know you're tired*, but . . .")
5. Promise of reward ("Can you call the rest of the club members? *I'll do it next time.*")
6. Imposition minimizer ("Would you help me with this problem, but *only if you have the time.*")

Levels of directness and mitigation are employed in rather subtle ways by native English speakers, which makes these linguistic resources ideal candidates for instruction.

CURRICULUM, TASKS, MATERIALS

The following lesson focuses on developing an appreciation of the different levels of directness and the linguistic resources for expressing them, as well as raising awareness of some of the resources for mitigating requests. The activities illustrate the often subtle manner in which requests can be made.

The goals of this set of activities are to enable learners to distinguish between direct and indirect requests and to develop an initial awareness of softeners and their importance. (For a more detailed discussion of softeners, see Rinnert and Iwai, Chapter 4 of this volume.) This lesson includes activities involving (a) awareness of differences in directness levels, (b) analysis of a request from a movie, (c) practice recognizing different levels of directness, (d) collection of natural requests, (e) analysis of the collected requests, and (f) discussion of softeners and mitigation devices.

Activity 1: Developing Awareness of Directness Levels

The first step in developing learners' awareness of directness levels is activating their prior knowledge by asking them what they know about requesting in general and about requesting in English in particular. Questions such as "How is requesting in English similar to and different from requesting in your first language?" and "How does a higher status person ask a lower status person to do something?" can stimulate a discussion and prod students to think about request forms. Questions such as "How would you ask a younger brother to wash the dishes?" draw students' attention to their relationships with different people to

whom they regularly make direct requests. A common result of this elicitation of requests is that most students provide extremely polite forms involving modals (e.g., "Would you please wash the dishes, Hyun Su?") or extremely direct forms using the imperative (e.g., "Wash the dishes, Miguel!") with few examples in between.

Once students begin to contribute examples, teachers can list them on the board. Then learners can examine the list for similarities and differences and comment on any that are found. Students generally note likenesses and variation among the requests such as the use of imperatives, modals, conditionals, softeners (e.g., *please, just, a little*), and external modifications (i.e., preparatory statement, precommitment, grounder, disarmer, promise of reward, and imposition minimizer, examples of which are presented in the previous section).

Activity 2: Interpreting a Request

Once students are aware of the existence of differences in the ways of making requests in English, the teacher can show a short clip from a movie titled *Pleasantville* (Ross, 1998; Scene 15: "A Red Rose," from approximately 36:55–37:22). The teacher may want to distribute Worksheet 1 (see Appendix) and go over the background of the scene before showing the clip. (Teachers who do not have access to the movie can rely solely on the text included in Worksheet 1.)

After watching the clip and answering the questions, students can discuss their answers with the rest of the class. By the end of the discussion, students should realize that the mother was expressing an indirect request for her son to turn off the television and come eat breakfast. The mother in this scene initially seems surprised (perhaps astonished) and concerned to find her teenage son engaged in an activity (watching television) that he normally did not do.

Activity 3: Identifying Different Request Types

At this point students are ready to learn about the wide variation in English requests. They need to begin to recognize that even though many North Americans are considered very direct, requests can sometimes be quite subtle. Worksheet 2 (see Appendix) presents an opportunity for learners to practice categorizing different possible request forms. If students are more advanced or culturally sophisticated, they could label each of the requests on the worksheet according to one of the nine directness level subcategories previously presented. (*Note:* The requests have been placed in the CCSARP format order from the most direct to the most nonconventionally indirect, but it might be more effective to scramble them; see Appendix for the answer key.)

After students complete the form, students can discuss their answers as a class. Teachers can use this opportunity to reinforce the notion that requests can be framed very differently to convey different levels of directness.

Activity 4: Collecting Natural Data

Activity 4 is a homework activity using Worksheet 3 (see Appendix). Students are required to collect naturalistic requests, focusing on the characteristics of the speaker and addressee and the situation (including the degree of imposition) in which the request is made. Teachers may want to go over the terminology on the worksheet before assigning the homework.

In an EFL setting in which students have little or no access to English speakers, students can collect data in their first language (L1). This option can be quite effective, as the translation of the request into English can be especially helpful in cases where there are clear differences or clear similarities between L1 and L2 norms. Alternatively, learners could work with a partner to create examples of direct and indirect requests given various scenarios.

At this point, students may need to be reminded of the importance of recognizing explicit and implicit request forms and the pragmatic variables associated with them. In particular, it can help if the teacher highlights the importance of considering variables such as distance and dominance between the interlocutors, as well as the level of imposition, when assessing the appropriateness of a request.

The last two activities focus on raising learners' awareness of and ability to produce a range of mitigation and softening techniques employed in making requests and their understanding of how these differ according to the interlocutors, situation, setting, distance, dominance, and imposition.

Activity 5: Analyzing Natural Data

Activity 5 requires students to look for patterns between settings and request formulations using the data they collected for their homework. It may be helpful for them to review what was learned from the previous lesson exploring the differences between direct and indirect requests. In this activity, students' attention is drawn to the characteristics or the situations and the speakers of particular requests. They will then consider what kinds of mitigation and softening devices were used. Worksheet 4 (see Appendix) can also be completed on the board or on a transparency as a follow-up to small-group work.

After students have worked through several of their fellow students' worksheets, the teacher may have a group present some of their unordered requests and situations and have class members predict which request matches up with which setting characteristics. The teacher may want to direct learners to any differences in mitigation and softening between males and females and formal or informal situations. Learners could also be asked how they feel about the use and amount of mitigation in the collected requests as a point of comparison with their own cultures.

During this activity, it may be beneficial for the teacher to provide explicit instances that he or she feels are important for learners to become aware of and

acquire. As previously discussed in the Context section, some particularly common forms and formulas include:

1. Internal modifications
    - *please, just, um, cool, OK,* and *only*
    - *It would be . . . if you could . . .*
    - *for a moment/for a little while*
    - *I was wondering if . . .*
    - *Would it be possible/all right/OK/etc. . . .*
2. External modifications such as those discussed in the Context section

Activity 6: Practicing in Role-Plays

To provide opportunities to practice mitigation or softening in requests, teachers can make role-play cards with information about the characteristics of the interlocutors, setting, situation, and request (see Activity 6 in the Appendix for an example with a suggested answer).

Students can write down and submit their requests. Time permitting, one or two pairs could perform in front of the whole class followed by a brief discussion of the appropriateness of the request.

REFLECTIONS

The lessons presented illustrate the oftentimes subtle manner in which requests can be made, the scale of directness to indirectness, and the supportive moves that precede or follow requests in order to mitigate the impact. Additionally, the usefulness of authentic audiovisual input in the improvement of learners' pragmatic awareness and production of requests in both ESL and EFL contexts is clearly evident in these lesson plans.

In particular, these activities can be readily adapted to the needs of basic, as well as advanced, learners of all ages and in both ESL and EFL contexts. Irrespective of the characteristics of the group, the selection of media or examples should reflect an appreciation for their proficiency level, interest, maturity, and environment. For younger learners, for example, the selection of animation or comic books would be a popular choice. For learners in an EFL context, where the availability of authentic materials may be somewhat circumscribed, the translation of native language media could offer excellent opportunities for cross-cultural exploration of requests in the native and target languages.

Of course, one of the challenges of the language used in media is that it may not represent authentic language use. However, with the popularity of reality television shows (e.g., *Survivor*) more genuine sources of language are increasingly available. Furthermore, the level of difficulty of the language used in these programs should match the students' level of language proficiency.

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APPENDIX

Worksheet 1: Video Exercise

You are about to see a short video clip taken from a North American movie about two teenagers, a brother and sister, who are pulled into a 1950s television show. The video clip contains an interaction between a mother and her son. It begins with a teenage boy watching television as his mother enters the room. As soon becomes evident, it is 8:00 a.m. and time for breakfast before heading off to school. The following interaction takes place:

Mother: It's 8 o'clock in the morning. Are you watching television?

Boy: (Gestures toward the television with an exasperated look on his face as if to say, "Of course I am. Isn't it obvious?")

Answer the following questions:

1. How do you interpret the mother's comment and question?
2. How do you feel the mother's comment affects possible interpretations of her question?
3. Did you recognize the mother's question as an indirect request or did you think it was simply a yes or no question?
4. Would this happen in your home? If not, how would your mother have asked you to turn off the television and come to breakfast before heading off to school?

Worksheet 2: Identifying Request Directness Levels

Individually or in small groups, identify the following requests as either direct, indirect, or neither:

1. Turn off the television now! It's time for breakfast.
2. I'm asking you to turn off the television, son.
3. I would like to ask you to turn off the television now and come to breakfast.
4. You have to turn off that television, son.
5. I really wish you'd turn off that television.
6. How about turning off the television now?
7. Son, your breakfast is getting cold. Why don't you come into the kitchen and eat?
8. I don't want you to be late for school, son. Could you turn off the television now?
9. I don't know why I even bother to make breakfast for you.
10. I know that can't be the television I hear.
11. You know how I feel about watching television in the morning.
12. I'm sorry I forgot to make breakfast today.
13. Oh! What's on television?
14. That's my favorite program, son.

Worksheet 2: Answer Key

1. direct; imperative
2. direct; explicit requesting verb
3. direct; hedged requesting verb
4. conventional indirect; intention derivable
5. conventional indirect; statement of wanting
6. conventional indirect; suggestion formula
7. conventional indirect; suggestion formula with external modification
8. conventional indirect; *could you* phrasing in question with external modification
9. nonconventional indirect; strong hint
10. nonconventional indirect; mild hint
11. nonconventional indirect; mild hint
12. neither
13. neither
14. neither

Worksheet 3: Homework—Collecting Requests

Directions:

1. Collect five examples of requests in English. You can listen for requests in your favorite television programs, movies, music, or even in conversations around you. You can also find examples in print media, such as magazines, newspapers, websites, comic books, or books.
2. Identify the characteristics of the request situation. Include the following information:
    - Speaker and addressee—gender, age, and any other relevant information
    - Speaker's social distance—close friend, acquaintance, stranger, etc.
    - Speaker's dominance—superior, equal, subordinate, etc.
    - Degree of imposition involved in the request—high, medium, low
    - Situation—what the speaker and addressee are involved in doing
    - Setting—where the speaker and addressee are
3. Analyze whether the request is direct or indirect.

Note: **You may want to use the following form to organize your data:**

Request #: _____

Speaker: _____

Addressee: _____

Speaker's social distance: _____ Speaker's dominance: _____

Imposition: _____ Situation: _____

Setting: _____ Directness level: _____

Worksheet 4: Matching Requests With Situations

Part I: On the sheet below, write down the request and the setting of three of the examples you collected for homework in random order. For example, you might write your first request in slot #1 and the situational characteristics of the first request in slot #3.

	Request	**Situation Characteristics**
1.	_____	_____
		_____
		_____
2.	_____	_____
		_____
		_____
		_____
3.	_____	_____
		_____
		_____
		_____

Part II: With a partner or in a small group, look at each other's requests and try to match up each request with its setting.

1. Explain your rationale for each pair including the following:
    - Describe the specific nature of the request.
    - Make a guess about the characteristics of the interlocutors (in terms of gender, age, occupation) and their relationship.
2. Identify any mitigation and softening techniques and speculate as to why they were used.

Activity 6: Example Role-Play Card

Request:	Ask your teacher to let you turn in your homework a day late.
Speakers:	Teacher and student
Setting:	Classroom after class has finished

Activity 6: Suggested Answer

Student: Excuse me, Dr. McLeod. I've had a family emergency, so I was wondering if it would be OK if I turned in my homework tomorrow.