

THE USE OF MITIGATION STRATEGIES IN REQUEST-MAKING IN A CROSS-CULTURAL CLASSROOM CONTEXT: A CASE STUDY AT CAN THO UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT:

Requests constitute face-threatening acts whose successful realization depends on the interaction of linguistic form, semantic content, and pragmatic context. While prior research has examined mitigation strategies in request-making, evidence concerning gender-related differences remains inconclusive. This study investigates the use of mitigation strategies by Vietnamese university students in a cross-cultural classroom setting, with the aims of identifying the strategies employed, examining gender-based variations in their use, and exploring factors that constrain learners' effective deployment of such strategies. Adopting a mixed-methods design, the study collected data through role-play tasks and semi-structured interviews involving twenty third-year English-major students at a university in the Mekong Delta and a native American English teacher. Analysis of the role-play data indicates that students employed both internal and external mitigation strategies, with observable differences between female and male participants. Interview findings further suggest that learners' difficulties in producing appropriate mitigation primarily stem from negative pragmatic transfer from Vietnamese to English and limited pragmatic competence.

Keywords: mitigation strategies, request-making, cross-cultural communication, classroom discourse, case study.

1. Introduction

Culture plays a central role in shaping communicative norms, and cultural differences may lead to misunderstandings in cross-cultural interaction. Requests, as face-threatening speech acts, are particularly challenging for language learners and rely heavily on culturally conditioned mitigation strategies, with gender also influencing their use. While requests have been widely studied, limited attention has been paid to

mitigation devices, especially in the Mekong Delta context; therefore, this study examines Vietnamese university students' use of request-mitigation strategies and the difficulties they encounter in cross-cultural communication.

Research questions

1. What mitigation strategies do the English-major students use to make requests in the cross-cultural classroom context?
2. Are there differences between male and

female students' use of mitigation strategies in making requests?

3. What problems hinder the students' use of mitigation strategies in making requests in the cross-cultural context?

Research hypotheses

- Students' requests are mitigated through both internal and external modification, particularly via syntactic downgraders, lexical downgraders, and supportive moves.

- There are significant gender-based differences in students' use of mitigation strategies in making requests.

- Difficulties in students' use of mitigation strategies in cross-cultural request-making stem from cultural differences between American and Vietnamese participants, negative pragmatic transfer from Vietnamese to English, and limited pragmatic competence.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Requests

Requests have attracted extensive attention in pragmatics because they involve a complex interaction between linguistic form, speaker intention, and social meaning. Defined as illocutionary acts through which speakers attempt to elicit actions from hearers, requests are widely regarded as face-threatening due to their imposition on the hearer's autonomy and the risk of refusal. As a result, speakers commonly employ indirectness and mitigation, particularly in contexts influenced by social relations, power dynamics, and cultural norms. Research on request classification has been strongly influenced by Searle's distinction between direct and indirect requests and the expanded framework of Blum-Kulka et al., which further differentiates conventionally indirect and non-conventionally indirect requests. Previous studies consistently indicate a close relationship between indirectness and politeness, with indirect requests serving as a key strategy for reducing imposition and maintaining interpersonal harmony.

2.2. Strategies for mitigating requests

Requests are widely regarded as highly face-

threatening speech acts because they restrict the hearer's freedom of action and simultaneously expose the speaker to the risk of refusal (Brown & Levinson, 1987). To manage this dual threat, speakers often modify the degree of imposition by employing request-modification devices, which are commonly classified into internal and external modifiers (Faerch & Kasper, 1989). Internal modifiers, embedded within the request head act, include downgraders that mitigate illocutionary force through syntactic and lexical means, such as modal verbs, conditional structures, politeness markers, and hedging expressions (Sifianou, 1999; Brown & Levinson, 1987). External modifiers, by contrast, consist of optional supportive moves that precede or follow the head act, including preparators, disarmers, apologies, and promises, and function to further reduce perceived imposition and enhance politeness (Faerch & Kasper, 1989).

2.3. Gender-linked differences in making requests

Gender differences in language use are well documented, with women generally employing more politeness-related forms and mitigation devices and men favoring more direct interactional styles (Lakoff, 1975; Holmes, 1995; Tannen, 1990). Consequently, women tend to use greater indirectness when performing face-threatening acts such as requests (Holmes, 1992). In cross-cultural contexts, the use of mitigation strategies is further complicated by cultural differences and negative pragmatic transfer, which may result in pragmatic failure despite grammatical accuracy (Brislin, 1993; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Kasper, 1997). As pragmatic errors are less tolerated than grammatical ones, pragmatic competence is crucial for successful cross-cultural communication (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996).

2.5. Studies related to mitigation strategy use in making requests

Previous studies in cross-cultural pragmatics have examined request-making and mitigation strategies among native speakers and L2 learners, including gender-related variation (Edwards &

Watson, 1999; Braun, 2001). However, findings on gender effects remain inconsistent, and classroom-based teacher–student request situations and learners’ difficulties have received limited attention. These gaps highlight the need to investigate Vietnamese learners’ use of mitigation strategies, gender differences, and challenges in cross-cultural classroom interactions.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research design

The present study adopted a descriptive research design to examine the use of mitigation strategies in cross-cultural request-making and to identify factors hindering their use. Data were collected through role-play tasks and semi-structured interviews.

3.2. Participants and scope of the study

The study involved twenty Vietnamese university students and one native American English teacher. The student participants were randomly selected from a cohort of sixty third-year students enrolled in the English Studies Program at Can Tho University. All students had an upper-intermediate level of English proficiency and had received prior instruction in request-mitigation strategies through listening–speaking courses. Participants were aged between 20 and 22 years, with equal numbers of male and female students, allowing for balanced gender-based comparisons. The teacher participant was a native American English teacher with two years of teaching experience in Vietnam and had been teaching listening–speaking courses at the Vietnam USA Society English Training Center in Can Tho for six months at the time of the study.

3.3. Data collection instruments

Two primary instruments were employed for data collection:

3.3.1. Role-play

To investigate mitigation strategies in cross-cultural request-making, a role-play task was employed as the primary data collection instrument. The role-play scenario, which required students to request an extension for a late assignment from a native American teacher, was

reviewed by the study supervisor and three English Department lecturers at Can Tho University to ensure content validity.

3.3.2. Interview

Semi-structured follow-up interviews were conducted to gain deeper insight into the findings and to facilitate more informed interpretation. The interview protocol comprised three core questions developed by the researcher in consultation with the supervisor and focused on the difficulties students encountered when employing mitigation strategies in cross-cultural request-making. Follow-up questions were used to further explore participants’ strategy use and their awareness of cultural influences. Ten students were selected for the interviews based on the typicality of their role-play performance, including those who used the highest and lowest numbers of mitigation strategies, to capture a range of perspectives.

3.4. Research procedure

3.4.1. Administering the role-play

Data were initially collected through role-play tasks. Twenty individual student–teacher conversations were conducted separately to ensure the independence and objectivity of each participant’s responses. Prior to the role-play, students were informed of the task’s purpose and instructed to read their role cards carefully, with opportunities to seek clarification from the researcher if needed. Each participant was given approximately five minutes to prepare before interacting with the native American teacher. All role-play interactions were audio-recorded, and observational notes were taken by the researcher to supplement the recorded data.

3.4.2. Administering the interview

Following the role-play task, face-to-face interviews were conducted with ten Vietnamese student participants, each lasting approximately ten minutes. To ensure confidentiality, all participants were assigned pseudonyms. Interview schedules were adjusted across participants to enhance the objectivity of responses, and all interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to facilitate participants’

confidence and depth of expression. The interview data were subsequently translated into English for qualitative analysis.

4. Research findings

4.1. The mitigation strategy used by the student participants

The results of mitigation strategy use in twenty role-plays in which the student participants performed requests for the extension to their take-home assignment were presented in Table 1.

It can be noted from Figure 1 that there was a distinction between two groups of student participants in their use of requests. Specifically, male students used more direct requests than female participants. On the contrary, the proportion of indirect requests performed by female participants was greater than that of male students.

In terms of modification devices, the figure shows that female students mitigated their

Table 1 The overall mitigation strategy use by the student participants

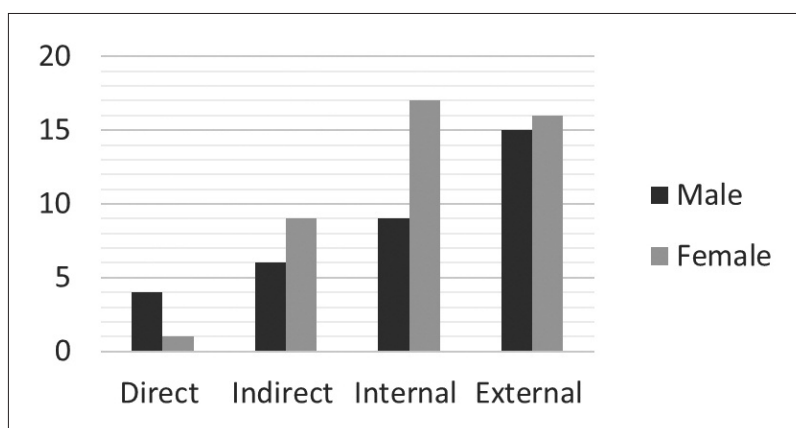
Requests	Total	Type	Number	Percentage
	20	Direct	5	25%
		Indirect	15	75%
Modification devices	57	Internal	26	45.6%
		External	31	54.4%

As shown in Table 1, of total 20 requests performed in the role-plays, indirect requests took up 75%. It is also noted that the student participants' requests were modified both internally (45.6%) and externally (54.4%).

4.2. Differences between male and female student participants' use of mitigation strategies in making requests

The results of mitigation strategies utilized by male and female student participants were recorded and plotted in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The overall mitigation strategy use by male and female student participants



requests more frequently than the male counterparts. It can be also observed that there was a significant distinction in the total number of internal and external devices employed by the two groups of student participants. In other words, while male students demonstrated a higher use of external than internal modification, their female counterparts almost used as many internal devices as external ones.

4.3. Problems hindering the student participants' use of strategies for mitigating requests in the cross-cultural context

Interview findings revealed clear differences between the two groups. Participants who frequently employed mitigation strategies reported higher satisfaction, attributing their success to the acceptance of their requests by the native American teacher. In contrast, four of five low-mitigation participants expressed dissatisfaction, citing difficulties in producing successful requests. Key challenges included

differences in politeness conventions between Vietnamese and English and limited pragmatic competence. Although most participants were aware of cultural differences between Vietnamese and American communicative norms, these differences were not perceived to significantly hinder communication.

4.3.1. The student participants' negative pragmatic transfer from Vietnamese to English

The results from the interview data revealed that 70% of the participants' mitigation strategy use was influenced by their mother tongue. Specifically, three participants reported that they had a habit of translating literally what they intended to say from Vietnamese to English. Four other participants shared the same concern when stating that they always brainstormed ideas, chose words, and arranged arguments in Vietnamese first.

4.3.2. The student participants' lack of pragmatic competence

In terms of factors influential to the participants' conversations, there were differences in the two groups' responses. Four out of five students who used the least mitigation strategies confirmed that they took vocabulary, grammar, and structures into consideration. However, the students who belonged to the group with the highest use of mitigation strategies reported that context and culture were two factors they concerned most.

The interview results revealed one major finding that did not support the researcher's hypothesis. Although it was expected that difficulties in mitigation strategy use would stem from cultural differences between American and Vietnamese norms, these differences were not found to impede the participants' communication.

5. Discussions and conclusions

5.1. Discussions

5.1.1. The mitigation strategy used by the student participants

Analysis of the role-play data indicates that student participants employed external modification devices more frequently than internal ones. This finding contrasts with Edwards and

Watson (1999), who reported a preference for internal modification among native English speakers. It also diverges from Braun's (2001) results, which showed that German learners of English used internal and external modifiers with similar frequency.

5.1.2. Differences between male and female student participants' use of mitigation strategies in making requests

The major finding drawn out from male and female student participants' role-plays indicated that female students performed more indirect requests than their male counterparts. This result is in line with that of Marshall and Powell's (2003) study conducted on the Spanish and British undergraduates. These findings support Holmes' (1992) conclusion about men's and women's interactional style, in which women's speech is characterized as more polite and indirect than men's.

In contrast to previous studies carried out by García (1993) and Catarina and Vizcaya (1994), the present study found that a higher amount of mitigation strategies were employed by female participants. Specifically, female students used internal modifiers such as modal verbs, conditional structures, and politeness markers more frequently than males. This evidence supports that men and women make differential use of linguistic features (Lakoff, 1975; Hartman, 1976; McMillan, 1977; Poole, 1979; Mulac & Lundell, 1994; Holmes, 1995). These differences result in gender differences in linguistic style of requests.

5.1.3. Problems hindering the student participants' use of mitigation strategies in making requests in the cross-cultural context

Interview data indicated that cultural differences did not pose significant difficulties for the student participants, contrary to Ting-Toomey's (1997) view of cultural barriers. This may be attributed to the participants' prior university coursework on American culture, which enhanced their awareness of differences between Vietnamese and American communicative norms. Instead, students' difficulties were primarily linked

to negative pragmatic transfer from Vietnamese to English, as reflected in their tendency to frame requests as problems to be solved. Their frequent reliance on please may also reflect transfer from the Vietnamese expression *làm ơn*. Moreover, interview responses suggested that students who employed fewer mitigation strategies exhibited lower pragmatic competence, which may account for the lower acceptance of their requests. This finding aligns with Bardovi-Harlig (1996) and Nelson (1997) regarding the consequences of limited pragmatic competence.

5.2. Conclusions

This study investigated Vietnamese EFL students' use of mitigation strategies in request-making, the relationship between mitigation use and gender, and factors hindering effective mitigation. Overall, the findings indicate that

students were largely unsuccessful in mitigating the imposition of their requests, as they tended to frame request situations as problem-solving events and employed relatively few preparatory moves. Of the fifteen modifier types identified, eight were underused, suggesting a restricted repertoire of both internal and external modifiers despite students' presumed familiarity with these forms. Gender-based differences were also observed, with female participants producing more indirect and polite requests and employing mitigation strategies more frequently than their male counterparts. Finally, participants' difficulties did not primarily stem from cross-cultural interaction with a native American speaker but were instead largely attributable to negative pragmatic transfer from Vietnamese to English and limited pragmatic competence ■

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VIỆC SỬ DỤNG CHIẾN LƯỢC GIẢM NHẸ TÍNH CẦU KHIẾN TRONG GIAO TIẾP HỌC ĐƯỜNG LIÊN VĂN HÓA: NGHIÊN CỨU TRƯỜNG HỢP TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC CẦN THƠ

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TÓM TẮT:

Hành động cầu khiến là một hành động ngôn ngữ mang tính đe dọa thể diện của cả người nghe lẫn người nói, do đó việc sử dụng các chiến lược giảm nhẹ tính cầu khiến giữ vai trò quan trọng trong giao tiếp. Nhiều nghiên cứu trước đây đã xem xét việc sử dụng các chiến lược này cũng như ảnh hưởng của giới tính người sử dụng ngôn ngữ đến hành vi cầu khiến, song kết quả còn chưa thống nhất. Nghiên cứu này nhằm khảo sát các chiến lược giảm nhẹ trong hành động cầu khiến của sinh viên Việt Nam khi sử dụng tiếng Anh, mối quan hệ giữa việc sử dụng các chiến lược này và giới tính người tham gia, đồng thời xác định những khó khăn trong bối cảnh giao tiếp liên văn hóa. Nghiên cứu được thực hiện theo phương pháp hỗn hợp, sử dụng nhiệm vụ đóng vai và phỏng vấn để thu thập dữ liệu. Đối tượng tham gia gồm 20 sinh viên năm ba chuyên ngành tiếng Anh tại một trường đại học ở Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long và một giáo viên tiếng Anh bản ngữ người Mỹ. Kết quả cho thấy sinh viên sử dụng cả chiến lược giảm nhẹ nội tại và ngoại tại khi thực hiện hành động cầu khiến, đồng thời tồn tại sự khác biệt theo giới tính. Những khó khăn chủ yếu bắt nguồn từ hiện tượng chuyển di ngữ dụng tiêu cực và hạn chế trong năng lực ngữ dụng của người học.

Từ khóa: chiến lược giảm nhẹ trong giao tiếp, hành động cầu khiến, giao tiếp liên văn hóa, diễn ngôn trong lớp học, nghiên cứu trường hợp.