Jordanian EFL Teachers' and Students' Practice of Speech Acts in the Classroom

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Abstract: *This study aimed at investigating Jordanian EFL teachers' and students' practice of five speech acts: Apology, compliment, greeting, request and thanking. The participants of the study were 30 female EFL teachers and their students; three teachers were chosen from each grade from the basic stage from the public schools of the Second Directorate of Education in Amman. The instrument of the study was a classroom observation checklist to investigate EFL teachers' and students' practice of these speech acts in the classroom. The findings of the study revealed that EFL teachers and students had no proper practice of any of the speech acts although the teachers practiced the speech acts of greeting, request, and thanking better than the speech acts of apology and compliment, and the students practiced the speech act of greeting better than the other speech acts.*

Keywords: *Apology, compliment, EFL, greeting, pragmatic competence, request, speech acts, thanking*

1. INTRODUCTION

English as foreign language (EFL) teachers do not have to focus only on teaching pronunciation, spelling, vocabulary and grammar, or what one can refer to as linguistic or grammatical competence. Rather they need to focus on the communicative competence which is the ultimate goal for learning a foreign language. Many specialists (e.g., Brown (1980), Brown (2001), Hadley (2001) and Lee and Van Patten (1995)) emphasize the relevance between communicative competence and language learning, arguing that learners may fail to communicate functionally even when they have an excellent grammatical and lexical command. Within the same context, Wolfson (1989) believes that the recognition of the usefulness of moving away from grammar exercises and working to guide students to learn to communicate in meaningful ways was a critical step for applied linguistics.

Inspired by a large number of researchers (e.g., Campbell and Wales (1970), Canale and Swain (1980), Hymes (1972) and Sauvignon (1972)), Canale (1983) describes four main components of the communicative competence: Linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. Linguistic competence refers to the use of vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling, word formation and sentence structure; sociolinguistic competence addresses the use of the language functions appropriately in varied contexts; discourse competence involves the cohesion of form and coherence of thought; and strategic competence involves the verbal and nonverbal communication strategies.

Restructuring the model of communicative competence, Bachman (1990) presents different classification of language competence. He considers that language competence consists of two main competences: Organizational competence and pragmatic competence. Organizational competence indicates grammatical competence (vocabulary, morphology, syntax and phonemic and graphemic elements) and textual competence (cohesion and rhetorical organization) while pragmatic competence indicates illocutionary competence (ideational functions, manipulative functions, heuristic functions and imaginative functions) and sociolinguistic competence (sensitivity to dialect or variety, sensitivity to register, sensitivity to naturalness and understanding of cultural referents and figures of speech).

The present study is concerned with one component of the communicative competence which is the pragmatic competence. Cohen (1996, 388) classifies pragmatic competence into two components: Sociocultural ability and sociolinguistic ability. The former is used to determine

which speech act is appropriate, taking into consideration the culture involved, the situation, the speakers' background variables, and relationships while the latter refers to "the speakers' control over the actual language forms used to realize the speech acts (e.g., 'sorry' vs. 'excuse me', 'really sorry' vs. 'very sorry')". Within this context, Widdowson (1978) notes that despite the fact that students may master the rules of linguistic usage; they are unable to use the language in context.

This study focuses merely on one aspect of pragmatic competence which is speech acts. Schmidt and Richards (1985,101) state that "speech–act theory has to do with the functions and uses of language; so in the broadest sense we might say that speech acts are all the acts we perform through speaking, all the things we do when we speak". So, according to the speech act theory, the speaker utters words and at the same time he/she accomplishes certain acts (e.g., he/she apologizes, compliments or thanks).

Cohen (2008, 2) states,

> *Speech acts are often , but not always, the patterned, routinized language that natives and pragmatically competent nonnative speakers and writers in a given speech community (with its dialect variations) use to perform functions such as thanking, complimenting, requesting, refusing, apologizing and complaining..... Speech act theory provides a reliable and valid basis for examining pragmatic patterns that are primarily focused on selected utterances from the discourse.*

So, within the context of the classrooms, EFL learners need to be taught the different forms and responses of speech acts in order to be able to communicate smoothly and properly with native speakers of English.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The practice of speech acts in the classrooms has not been widely studied and investigated. Rueda (2006) confirms that if the classroom setting is intended to build pragmatic competence, it has to fulfill three functions: (1) exposing learners to appropriate target language input, (2) raising learners' pragmatic awareness about the instructed aspect, and (3) preparing authentic opportunities to practice pragmatic knowledge. Bardovi-Harlig (2001) states that there are many pragmatic aspects of the target language that are not acquired without the intervention of instruction, or in the best case, they are learned more slowly, which makes instruction at least facilitative if not essential.

Billmyer (1990) compared nine female Japanese ESL learners tutored in compliments and compliment responses with nine learners who were untutored in this topic. The researcher found that learners who were tutored produced a greater number of appropriate and spontaneous compliments, used more positive adjectives, and deflected many more compliments while responding than the untutored group. It was concluded that formal classroom instruction regarding the social rules of language use enables learners to communicate more properly with native speakers.

Eslami-Rasekh, Eslami-Rasekh and Fatahi (2004) studied the effect of metapragmatic instruction on the speech act comprehension of advanced EFL students. The speech acts of requesting, apologizing, and complaining were included in the study. The subjects of the study were 66 Iranian undergraduate students in their last year of study in the field of teaching English as a foreign language; they were divided into an experimental group and a control group. Cooperative grouping and role-playing were used to promote the learning of the three speech acts. A multiple choice pragmatic comprehension test was developed in several stages and used both as a pre-test and post-test to measure the effect of instruction on the pragmatic comprehension of the students. Data analysis revealed that students' speech act comprehension improved significantly and that pragmatic competence is not impervious to instruction even in EFL settings.

Shrouf (2009) designed an instructional programme and studied its effect on Jordanian secondary stage students' learning of politeness strategies. Three speech acts were included: Compliments,

apologies and requests. The subjects of the study consisted of two groups: An experimental group and a control group. The two groups sat for a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) as a pre-test. The achievements of the two groups were very poor due to their insufficient knowledge of the politeness strategies. The experimental group was exposed to an instructional programme of politeness strategies for two months. Then the two groups sat for the same (DCT) as a post-test. The result was very encouraging as the achievement of the students in the experimental group improved significantly, compared to the control group. She emphasized the point that students should be trained in the use of politeness strategies.

Edwards and Csizer (2010) investigated the effect of a four-week program on students' performance of the speech acts of opening and closing conversations in the EFL classroom. They carried out an experiment involving 92 high school students; they were divided into 66 students in the experimental group and 26 in the control group. The two groups sat for pre-test and post-test. The researchers measured the presence of openings and closings and their appropriateness (e.g., choosing the formal and informal greeting forms in certain situations). It was found that students in the experimental group used more elaborate opening and closing elements which means that pragmatic competence can be developed through certain activities in the classroom.

In fact, more studies are needed in this context as the classroom in the foreign language context plays a critical role in teaching pragmatic competence as learners have no chance to communicate with native speakers.

Question of the study

This study aimed at answering the following question: To what extent are the speech acts of apology, compliment, greeting, request, and thanking practiced by the teachers and students in the Jordanian EFL classroom?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants of the study

The participants of the study were thirty female Jordanian EFL teachers and their (1116) students from the public schools of the Second Directorate of Education in Amman. The participants were chosen from the basic stage only from the first to the tenth grade, three teachers from each grade. The distribution of the students along the grades is shown in Table 1.

Table1. *The distribution of the students along the grades*

Grade	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Total
Number of students	76	105	135	126	97	105	122	115	121	114	1116

3.2. Instrument of the study

This study used a classroom observation checklist to probe the Jordanian EFL teachers' and students' practice of the speech acts in the classroom. The researcher used two separate forms: One for the teachers and one for the students (see Appendix A and Appendix B).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Regarding the speech act of apology, the results revealed that only one EFL teacher and only one student in the first grade practiced the form 'an expression of an apology' particularly the word 'sorry' once. The teacher said 'sorry' because her ruler fell down while she was pointing to the words; and the student said 'sorry' because she shouted in the class. One can say that the apology forms were not practiced in the Jordanian EFL classroom neither by the teachers nor by the students. Accordingly, they did not practice the apology responses at all inside the classroom.

For the speech act of compliment, the results revealed that just five compliment examples were practiced by the Jordanian EFL teachers only. In the first grade, one of the students formed a question, so the teacher responded by saying, 'Your question is excellent', adopting the form 'NP is/looks (really) ADJ'. In the fifth grade, one of the students drew a trophy on the board, so the teacher responded by saying, 'Nice drawing!', adopting the form 'ADJ NP!' and in the seventh grade, three students suggested good ideas, so the teacher responded by saying, 'This is a good idea', adopting the form 'PRO is (really) a ADJ NP'. The EFL teachers and students did not practice any form of the compliment responses at all. The five compliment examples practiced by the teachers were only within the topic of 'ability/accomplishment'; the compliments were on 'forming a good question', 'drawing a trophy' and 'suggesting good ideas'.

For the speech act of greeting, the results revealed that the Jordanian EFL teachers practiced the greeting forms 49 times, adopting three forms which were 'How are you?' with the frequency of 25, 'Good X' with the frequency of 22 and 'Happy X' with the frequency of 2. And the students practiced the greeting forms 33 times; they used only two forms which were 'Good X' with the frequency of 22 and 'How are you?' with the frequency of 11. Regarding 'Good X', 'Good morning' and 'Good afternoon' were the only adopted forms and regarding 'Happy X', 'Happy Birthday' was the only adopted form. 'Hi' and 'Hello' are very simple forms of greeting but they were totally excluded from their practice.

Despite the fact that the greeting forms were practiced by the EFL teachers and students, only teachers initiated the greeting forms inside the classroom, and the students were the ones who responded these form. Only one student in the eighth grade initiated greeting by saying 'How are you?' to her teacher. Such a situation typically reflects the traditional role of teachers as initiators and students as responses.

It is worth mentioning in this regard that the greeting forms inside the EFL classroom were practiced as clichés that are memorized without recognizing their real functions. Also, students were accustomed to practice them chorally, and when the researcher tried to greet them individually, she had no response from any of the students. In fact, this does not go with the general and specific outcomes that expect that students in the first grade will take part in simple familiar exchanges and participate in simple short exchanges with a peer (e.g., greeting each other).

Regarding the speech act of request, the results revealed that the request forms were practiced by the Jordanian EFL teachers much more than the students. The teachers had very prominent focus on 'imperative' (e.g., 'stand up, sit down, open your book , look at me, listen, repeat, come here, write down, work together, stop talking, hurry up, read it, spell it, jump, skip, hop, raise your voice' and many others) for the purposes of classroom management and giving instructions. They also practiced 'request question', (e.g., 'Can you write the day and the date?' and 'Can you give me your own examples?'), 'need statement' (e.g., 'I want you to write four examples using have/has to' and 'I want two of you to act the dialogue') and 'permission directive' (e.g., 'Can we hear some of your plans?' and 'Can I listen to your sentences?').

On the other hand, the students had only eight examples of request forms, adopting the 'permission directive' (e.g., 'Can I ask you?'), 'need statement' (e.g., 'I want to ask you a question') and 'request question' (e.g., 'Can you give us two minutes please?').

For the request responses, teachers and students used few numbers of them; both of them practiced the compliance response (e.g.,

- ➢ Student: Can I ask you?
- ➢ Teacher: <u>Yes</u>. And
- ➢ Teacher: Can I have your book?
- ➢ Student: <u>Yes, you can</u>.)

While, only students practiced the non-compliance response (e.g.,

- ➢ Teacher: Can I have your hair?
- ➢ Student: <u>No, you can't</u>.

Finally, the results revealed that Jordanian EFL teachers practiced the thanking forms much more than the students. The teachers used two forms: 'Thank you' with frequency of 143 and 'thanks' with frequency of 10 (e.g., one of the students gave the teacher flash cards, the teacher said, 'Thanks a lot'). And the students used only one form which was 'Thank you' with frequency of 11. For the thanking responses, only one thanking response was practiced by a student in the eighth grade:

➢ Teacher: Thank you very much.

➢ Student: <u>You are welcome</u>.

So, one can say that the teachers and students did not practice the thanking responses inside the classroom. Besides, the results revealed that the teachers practiced the thanking forms basically within the 'function of appreciation benefit' (e.g.,

➢ Teacher: When was Prince Hussein born?

➢ Student: He was born 1994.

➢ Teacher: Excellent, thank you.)

Then the 'function of conversational opening, changing, stopping and closing' (e.g., in the seventh grade, a student was asking her classmates questions about the lesson, the teacher wanted to stop her; she said, 'Thank you') and finally the 'function of leave-taking and positive answer' (e.g., at the end of the class, one teacher said, 'Thank you very much , have a nice weekend'). On the other hand, students practiced the thanking forms only within the 'function of appreciation benefit' (e.g.,

➢ Teacher: How are you?

➢ Students: I'm fine, thank you.)

The researcher noticed that speech acts are the spirit of the EFL class; the more speech acts are practiced, the more live, energetic, and interesting the class is. Unfortunately, the English speech acts were not well practiced in the Jordanian EFL classroom; a lot of Arabic speech acts were adopted by the students and teachers; and the most striking Arabic speech act that was used by one of the teachers is 'Don't use Arabic language; use the English language'.

Thus, it is clear that the Jordanian EFL classroom does not provide the students with the chance to learn English speech acts. Teachers themselves are unable to use many forms and responses of the speech acts; accordingly, this is reflected on their students . This situation could be acceptable if one described a traditional English language class. Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford(1996) have characterized traditional teacher-student talk as an unequal status encounter, where the teacher's speech is not a good model for the speech of the learners. Being in the post –method era of language teaching, this situation is totally denied and unacceptable as the teacher must be a good model to teach the four components of a language.

Despite the fact that researchers (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig (2001), Billmyer (1990), Eslami-Rasekh, Eslami-Rasekh and Fatahi (2004), Shrouf (2009)and Edwards and Csizer (2010)) affirm the point that learners need explicit instruction in the second and foreign language pragmatics, Cohen (2008) raises some questions regarding this issue that have not been answered yet: What can actually be learned about speech acts in the classroom and how much time should be allotted to this effort? How many speech acts would be selected altogether? Would teachers focus on just one at a time ? How would it be determined whether to spend time on one speech act more than another? Is actual or idealized pragmatic behavior taught?

5. CONCLUSION

In brief, the Jordanian EFL teachers and students had no proper practice of any of the speech acts although the teachers practiced the speech acts of greeting, request, and thanking better than the speech acts of apology and compliment; and the students practiced the speech act of greeting, using simple forms, better than the other speech acts. Both teachers and students were unable to use the different responses of the speech acts. The researcher believes that teachers and students

need to practice more the speech acts under study in order to develop the pragmatic competence of the students and even probably, of the teachers themselves!

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Appendix A

Classroom Observation Checklist

Teacher's Form

Grade: **Teacher:**

Date: **Time:**

Observer:

Apology					
Apology forms	Frequency	Percentage	**Apology responses**	Frequency	Percentage
An expression of an apology			Reducing importance of offence		
An explanation or account			Denying need for an apology		
An acknowledgment of responsibility			Asserting restoration of balance		
An offer of repair					
A promise of non-recurrence					
Total			**Total**		

Compliment					
Compliment forms	Frequency	Percentage	**Compliment responses**	Frequency	Percentage
NP is/looks (really) ADJ			Accepting		
I (really) like/love NP			Agreeing		
PRO is (really) a ADJ NP			Deflecting		
You V a (really) ADJ NP			Rejecting		
You V (NP) (really) ADV			**Total**		
You have (a) ADJ NP!			**Compliment topics**	Frequency	Percentage
What (a) ADJ NP!			Appearance/possessions		
ADJ NP!			Ability/accomplishments		
Isn't NP ADJ!			Personality traits		
Total			**Total**		

Greeting

Time-free greetings	Initial greeting		Greeting response		**Time – bound greetings**	Initial greeting		Greeting response	
	F	%	F	%		F	%	F	%
How do you do?					**daily greetings**				
Hello. (How are you?)					Good morning				
Hi. (How are you?)					Good afternoon				
Glad to meet you!					Good evening				
(It's) Good to see you (again)!					Good day				
Long time no					Good night				

see you!									
					Total				
					Seasonal greetings				
					Happy New Year!				
					Happy Anniversary!				
					Happy Birthday!				
					Many Happy returns!				
					Merry Christmas				
Total					**Total**				

Request

Request forms	Frequency	Percentage	Request responses	Frequency	Percentage
Need statement			Compliance		
Imperatives			Non-compliance		
Embedded imperatives					
Permission directives					
Request questions					
Hints					
Total			**Total**		

Thanking

Thanking forms	Frequency	Percentage	Thanking responses	Frequency	Percentage
Thank you			Acceptance		
Thanks			Denial		
I appreciate X			Reciprocity		
I'm thankful for X			Comments (detailed description)		
I'm grateful for X			Non-verbal gestures		
Please accept my thanks for X			No response		
Total			**Total**		

Thanking functions	Frequency	Percentage			
Function of appreciation benefit					
Function of conversational opening, changing, stopping and closing					
Function of leave-taking and positive answer					
Function of emotional dissatisfaction or discomfort					
Total					

Appendix B

Classroom Observation Checklist

Students' Form

Grade: **Teacher:**

Date: **Time:**

Observer:

Apology					
Apology forms	Frequency	Percentage	**Apology responses**	Frequency	Percentage
An expression of an apology			Reducing importance of offence		
An explanation or account			Denying need for an apology		
An acknowledgment of responsibility			Asserting restoration of balance		
An offer of repair					
A promise of non-recurrence					
Total			**Total**		

Compliment					
Compliment forms	Frequency	Percentage	**Compliment responses**	Frequency	Percentage
NP is/looks (really) ADJ			Accepting		
I (really) like/love NP			Agreeing		
PRO is (really) a ADJ NP			Deflecting		
You V a (really) ADJ NP			Rejecting		
You V (NP) (really) ADV			**Total**		
You have (a) ADJ NP!			**Compliment topics**	Frequency	Percentage
What (a) ADJ NP!			Appearance/possessions		
ADJ NP!			Ability/accomplishments		
Isn't NP ADJ!			Personality traits		
Total			**Total**		

Greeting								
Time-free greetings	Initial greeting		Greeting response		**Time – bound greetings**	Initial greeting		Greeting response	
	F	%	F	%		F	%	F	%
How do you do?					**daily greetings**				
Hello. (How are you?)					Good morning				
Hi. (How are you?)					Good afternoon				
Glad to meet you!					Good evening				
(It's) Good to see you (again)!					Good day				
Long time no see you!					Good night				
					Total				
					Seasonal greetings				

				Happy New Year!			
				Happy Anniversary!			
				Happy Birthday!			
				Many Happy returns!			
				Merry Christmas			
Total				**Total**			

Request

Request forms	Frequency	Percentage	Request responses	Frequency	Percentage
Need statement			Compliance		
Imperatives			Non-compliance		
Embedded imperatives					
Permission directives					
Request questions					
Hints					
Total			**Total**		

Thanking

Thanking forms	Frequency	Percentage	Thanking responses	Frequency	Percentage
Thank you			Acceptance		
Thanks			Denial		
I appreciate X			Reciprocity		
I'm thankful for X			Comments (detailed description)		
I'm grateful for X			Non-verbal gestures		
Please accept my thanks for X			No response		
Total			**Total**		

Thanking functions	Frequency	Percentage			
Function of appreciation benefit					
Function of conversational opening, changing, stopping and closing					
Function of leave-taking and positive answer					
Function of emotional dissatisfaction or discomfort					
Total					