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Pragmatic competence in English at the VG1 level: To what extent are Norwegian EFL students able to adapt to contextual demands when making requests in English?

Abstract

The present article presents an investigation of Norwegian students of English as a foreign language (EFL) and their pragmatic competence in English. The importance of developing such a competence receives a strong focus in the English subject curriculum. However, very few studies have been conducted in the field of pragmatics in Norway, and even fewer Norwegian studies have focused on students' pragmatic competence in a second language. The purpose of this study was therefore to investigate whether Norwegian EFL students would be familiar with and show awareness of English politeness norms and pragmatic conventions when having to communicate in English. Would they be able to adapt their language, choice of strategy and level of formality to the contextual demands when making requests in a second language (L2)? Forty students answered a simplified version of a discourse completion test (DCT) consisting of four different situations in which the students had to make requests. The results, which were analysed by means of Brown and Levinson's theory of face threatening acts, indicated that most of the students were at one of the beginning stages of English pragmatic development. Their language use was characterized by first language (L1) transfer and overuse of familiar and informal expressions. When faced with more formal and demanding situations, they fell short and clearly lacked the knowledge and competence that would allow them to communicate successfully. It can be argued that these findings might indicate a lack of focus in Norwegian schools when it comes to developing students' pragmatic competence. If this is true, an important part of the subject curriculum is being neglected.

1.0 Introduction

In 2006, the Norwegian educational authorities adapted the Knowledge Promotion Reform (LK06), which was to serve as the national curriculum for the years 1–13 in Norwegian schools. Students were now, with the guidance and

help of their teachers, to strive to develop a certain level of competence in the various subjects, and each subject curriculum comprised elaborate descriptions of the expected level of competence as well as a series of competence aims. The English subject curriculum emphasizes, among other things, the importance of students developing knowledge of L2 (second or foreign language) politeness norms and pragmatic conventions.

Knowing how to be polite and taking social conventions into consideration in any number of linguistic situations are (...) important skills to master. This goes hand in hand with adapting the language to the recipient and the situation, including distinguishing between formal and informal, written and spoken registers. (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2010, main subject areas section, para. 5)

However, intending students to develop a certain competence is one thing. Whether students manage to reach the goals set by the educational authorities is a completely different story. For her master thesis, Johansen (2008) investigated how Norwegian advanced learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) chose to express gratitude in English. She found that

the participants [knew] how to express gratitude, but that they [did] not know when to use the different strategies they [knew] and that they [assumed] universality of the rules and principles that govern sociopragmatic behavior in Norway and thus [applied] these rules or principles to English. (Johansen, 2008, p. 126).

This study was conducted at university level, but the same results would most likely be found at lower levels of English acquisition as well. Either way, Johansen's findings are worrying. By successfully passing the VG1 course (first year of high school) in English, Norwegian students should, in theory, be highly skilled users of English. They should be able to communicate successfully in various types of contexts, manage to read and understand English textbooks and follow lectures in English at university level.

Inspired by Johansen's work, I chose to conduct a smaller but similar study during spring 2011. I investigated to what extent Norwegian learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) at the VG1 level were aware of and familiar with the politeness norms and pragmatic conventions of the English language. The analysis of the results revealed that "most of the students tended to rely on one single formulation, regardless of the context or whom they were addressing. Their registers were also strongly marked by informality" (Brubæk 2011).

Johansen's and my own findings indicate a lack of knowledge of the politeness norms and the pragmatic features of English among Norwegian students. Moreover, the findings indicate that the teaching of pragmatics in Norwegian schools is not done in a satisfactory manner, if done at all. These implications are potentially highly important and relevant in terms of developing a more thorough understanding of the quality of Norwegian EFL students' language competence and should thus be given more attention in research. For

this article, I have therefore chosen to conduct a study similar to the one conducted spring 2011. My research question is as follows:

To what extent are Norwegian EFL students at the VG1 level able to adapt their language, choice of strategy and level of formality to contextual demands when making requests in English?

In order to answer this question, I asked forty students at the VG1 level to answer a simplified version of a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) (Blum-Kulka, 1982, in Billmyer & Varghese, 2000, p. 517). A DCT is a written test of oral skills, and is a widely used data-collection method in the field of pragmatics. The DCT used for this study included four situations in which the students had to make requests in English. Each situation varied in terms of the required degree of formality and level of politeness. The analysis will focus on how well the students managed to solve the tasks in terms of politeness and pragmatic competence. The discussion will elaborate on and discuss the results in further detail. Finally, I want to stress that references made to *English* in the article are references to British English. Norwegian students are not obliged to study and/or apply British language norms when utilizing English in class or on exams. They might just as well choose to adapt to other standards of English, e.g. American English. There are likely to be differences among the various standards in terms of politeness norms and pragmatic conventions, but for this article I have chosen to focus on British English.

2.0 Theoretical Background

Pragmatic competence and *politeness* are two fairly vague terms, covering a variety of different concepts and are therefore not easily defined. According to the Common European Framework of Reference, a person's pragmatic competence and knowledge of politeness norms refer to two separate competences. The former refers to functional use of language, "[e.g.] (...) the production of speech acts (...), drawing on scenarios or scripts of interactional exchanges (...)" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 13). Knowledge of politeness norms, on the other hand, forms part of a person's sociolinguistic competence. "Through its sensitivity to social conventions (rules of politeness (...)) the sociolinguistic component strictly affects all language communication between representatives of different cultures (...)" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 13).

Yule (1996) emphasizes that pragmatics is the study of language in use and explains it by discussing a variety of complex concepts, such as *speaker meaning*, i.e. how a speaker communicate his or her intentions and how these are interpreted by the hearer, *contextual meaning*, i.e. how context influences what is said as well as where, how and when an utterance is produced, *inferences*, i.e. how more is being communicated than what is said, and *the*

expression of relative distance, i.e. how closeness, physical or social, affects a speaker's judgment of how elaborate an utterance needs to be (Yule, 1996, p. 3). By covering such a large number of sub-concepts in his definition, one can claim that Yule considers knowledge of a language's politeness norms to be part of a person's pragmatic competence. In order to demonstrate politeness, a speaker needs to be able to recognize the contextual demands of a situation, recognize the relative distance between him/herself and the hearer, etc.

Several other researchers have discussed pragmatics and its connection to politeness as well. Austin (1962) focuses on the concept of *speech acts*, e.g., acts of communication. He recognizes the fact that "people do more things with words than convey information (...)" (Bach n.d., p. 2). Speech acts are generally given specific labels, such as request, apology, etc. Austin emphasizes the role of speaker's intentions and hearer's inferences. A speaker will normally expect the hearer to recognize his/her communicative intentions, and these will often involve demonstrating politeness at some level (Yule, 1996, p. 47). Grice (1989) operates with a *principle of cooperation*, which consists of a series of sub-principles or *maxims*. It refers to the assumption of cooperation in conversation (Yule 1996). "In this (...) [it] has the function of regulating what we say so that it contributes to assumed (...) discursal goal[s]" (Leech, 1983, p. 82). A speaker thus risks being perceived as impolite if s/he violates this principle, e.g. by not providing the hearer with enough information for his/her utterance to be interpreted in the way intended. Leech (1983) introduces the *politeness principle*, which was clearly built on Grice's principle of cooperation. Leech's principle was proposed as a way of explaining the role of politeness in conversations and that its role is "to maintain the social equilibrium and the friendly relations which enables us to assume that our interlocutors are being cooperative in the first place" (Leech, 1983, p. 82). It also recognized the fact that there will be cultural differences when it comes to the maxims and what is considered polite.

Based on this selective review, I have chosen the following working definition of pragmatic competence, since it includes varying degrees of politeness in different cultures and contexts:

[Pragmatic] competence is the ability to comprehend and produce a communicative act (...) [and] includes one's knowledge about the social distance, social status between the speakers involved, the cultural knowledge such as politeness, and the linguistic knowledge explicit and implicit (Liu 2005, definition section, para. 1).

2.1 The LK06 and Politeness

Being able to express oneself appropriately, both in terms of recognizing a situation's contextual demands and one's own relationship to the interlocutor, is an important part of any language learner's competence. "Politeness conventions (...) vary from one culture to another and are a frequent source of inter-ethnic misunderstanding, especially when polite expressions are literally interpreted"

(Council of Europe 2001: 119). The English subject curriculum recognizes this fact and states that students “must be able to distinguish between (...) formal and informal styles (...) [as well as] to take cultural norms and conventions into consideration” (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2010, the objectives of the subject section, para. 2). In order to know what to say in what situations, language learners must develop the ability to interpret the demands of the situation and the context. In order to identify these demands, knowledge of the target culture as well as the appropriateness of the various registers in the target language is required. “Speakers may judge the social constraints (...) differently in one culture than another and if their judgments are carried over into their second language, this may cause misunderstandings” (Johansen, 2008, p. 46).

The subject curriculum also states that students should be able to “select and use appropriate writing and speaking strategies that are adapted to a purpose and situation (...) [and] (...) describe and evaluate the effects of different verbal forms of expression” (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2010, Competence aims after VG1-programs for general studies section). How we choose to express ourselves will always be interpreted and evaluated by our interlocutor(s). “Culturally colored interactional styles create culturally determined expectations and interpretative strategies, and can lead to breakdowns in intercultural and interethnic communication” (Gumperz, 1978, in Blum-Kulka *et al.*, 1989, p. 1). If the hearer misinterprets our intentions as speakers, or if we ignore cultural, social and/or politeness conventions when making an utterance, both participants in a conversation might end up feeling offended and hurt.

In this context, we need to consider the concept of *face*. “Face means the public self-image of a person (...) [and] it refers to that emotional and social sense of self that everyone has and expects everyone else to recognize” (Yule, 1996, p. 60). Acting polite therefore means knowing how to show awareness and respect for another person’s face.

2.2 Brown and Levinson’s Theory of Face Threatening Acts

Brown and Levinson (1987) distinguish between a person’s negative and positive face. “(...) negative face is the need to be independent and positive face is the need to be connected “(Yule, 1996, p. 62). Normally, interlocutors will work together in order to maintain and show respect for each other’s face wants. However, “certain kinds of acts intrinsically threaten face, namely those acts that by their nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or of the speaker” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 65), i.e. face threatening acts (FTA). Another central aspect of Brown and Levinson’s theory is the distinction between positive and negative politeness. The former “is oriented toward the positive face of H [the addressee], the positive self-image he claims for himself (...) [while the latter] is oriented mainly toward partially satisfying (...) H’s negative face, his basic want to maintain claims of territory and self-domination” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 70).

An interlocutor can choose to perform the FTA or not. If a speaker has to perform the FTA, s/he can use a variety of strategies in order to minimize the potential threat of the act (see figure 1).

Figure 1; Circumstances determining choice of strategy (Brown & Levinson 1987: 60)

By doing an FTA off record, e.g. by simply stating ‘I forgot my cell phone’ when wanting your friend to lend you his or her phone, “there is more than one unambiguously attributable intention so that the actor cannot be held to have committed himself to one particular intent” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 69). However, one also risks that the hearer misinterprets his conversational intentions. By going on record with an utterance “it is clear to participants what communicative intentions led the actor to do (the act) (...)” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 69). These FTAs can either be performed baldly without redress or with redressive action. The former “involves doing it in the most direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way possible (...)”. This type of FTA should preferably only be used when the need for efficiency or urgency is more important than the face wants of the participants (...)” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 69), e.g. when calling for help. An FTA with redressive action demonstrates an attempt “to counteract the potential face damage of the FTA by doing it (...) with such modifications or additions, that indicate clearly that no such face threat is intended or desired” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, pp. 69-70), e.g., ‘I’m sure you must be very busy, but...’ (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 188). This type of FTA will result in either negative or positive politeness.

In order to choose the most appropriate strategy, Brown and Levinson argue that we must consider the relationship between three independent variables: “Social Distance (D) between the speaker and hearer, (...) Relative Power (P) of the speaker with respect to the hearer, (...) and Absolute Ranking (R) of impositions in the culture (...)” (Fraser, 1990, p. 230). These variables can be used to calculate the seriousness, or the *weightiness*, of an FTA. A speaker will choose a strategy that reflects the seriousness of the FTA. However, it is important to be aware of the fact that these variables do not refer to actual distance and actual power. They simply refer to the interlocutors’ *assumptions*

of these variables (Brown & Levinson 1987). In the analysis of the students' responses, the focus will first and foremost be on their knowledge of D and P.

3.0 Method

Forty students at the VG1 level participated in the study. Participation was voluntary. All students are currently attending the high school where I work. This is therefore clearly a convenience sample. It is also a rather small sample, and one can therefore not generalize to the population as a whole. However, the students had gone to different junior high schools and the study was conducted only a few weeks after they started their first year of high school. Their level of competence would thus still mostly be a result of what they had acquired in junior high school. It was therefore assumed that, for the purpose of this paper, the sample population offered a satisfactory representation of EFL students at the VG1 level.

The students were given 60 minutes to answer the questionnaire. I introduced the test session by talking them through the questionnaire, explaining difficult words and allowing students to ask questions for clarification. I did not, however, give the test takers any information in terms of what I was looking for in their answers, as I did not want to lead their answers in any particular direction. Rather, I wanted them to react to and interpret the situations spontaneously and with only the knowledge and competence that they managed to apply there and then.

When collecting data for this article, I chose to utilize a simplified version of a DCT. A DCT is a well-known and frequently used method in research on pragmatics, as seen in, e.g., Eisenstein and Bodman (1986), Blum-Kulka *et al.* (1989) and Rose (1992). The test "[is] a written questionnaire containing short descriptions of a particular situation intended to reveal the pattern of a speech act being studied" (Nurani, 2009, p. 667). My questionnaire consisted of four descriptions of different situations in which students had to make requests. These situations all represented different levels of formality and thus required the students to apply various politeness strategies (see appendix).

3.1 Using DCT as a Method of Data Collection

When conducting research on pragmatics "all data should (ideally) come from 'natural conditions'" (Blum-Kulka *et al.*, 1989, p. 13). However, collecting samples of natural, spontaneous speech is difficult and time-consuming, and we might best settle for "authentic" data and stereotypic aspects of speech behaviour" (Blum-Kulka *et al.*, 1989, p. 13). Since the DCT is a written test used to collect samples of spoken language, one loses some of the aspects of spoken interaction, such as turn-taking, hesitation and avoidance strategies. Moreover, Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1993) discovered that "(...) DCT is not

able to bring out the extended negotiation which commonly occurs in authentic discourses due to the absence of interaction between interlocutors.” When performing a speech act such as making a request, the speaker will normally produce the request during the course of a speech event, where “participants interact via language in some conventional way to arrive at some outcome” (Yule, 1996, p. 57). In a DCT this aspect of interaction will be lost. In the DCT used to collect data for this article, students were only asked to state how they would express specific requests in various situations, i.e. a single response, not to describe complete speech events, i.e. to describe the entire course of interaction. One can therefore claim that some important aspects of the students’ pragmatic competence are neglected in my research.

Moreover, the situations described in a DCT are hypothetical situations. Since there is no real communication, there are no real consequences for the speaker and the chosen strategy, and the test takers might risk using a strategy they would not normally apply (Nurani 2009). Besides, the students might not have any real experience with the situations in the DCT, and this might pose an additional challenge for some when responding to the test prompts. Thus, a DCT might not provide a researcher with reliable information about what speakers actually do in real-life interaction. However, a DCT can provide us with important information about what people most likely would say in various situations (Golato 2003).

Using written elicitation techniques enables us to obtain more stereotyped responses; that is ‘the prototype’ of the variants occurring in the individual’s actual speech (...). It is precisely this more stereotyped aspect of speech behavior that we need for cross-cultural comparability. (Blum-Kulka *et al.*, 1989, p. 13)

Beebe and Cummings (1996) found a strong congruence between responses given on a DCT and the ones found in natural communication, and they therefore claim that the DCT is a reliable method for collecting data for pragmatic research.

In order to collect language samples that are as natural as possible, it can be claimed that the prompts in the DCT need to be as relevant as possible, containing information about time of day, location, the relationship between the interlocutors, etc. (Johansen 2008). In a real-life situation, a speaker would have had access to this information, while in a DCT this information needs to be provided. In the test used for this article, the situations contained descriptions of location, the speaker-hearer relationship and the speaker’s communicative intentions. Some researchers claim that this amount of information is too small to enable the test to elicit any speech data that might resemble natural speech. In order for this to be possible, one would need to develop prompts that give the test takers additional information about the audience, “the gender and name of the interlocutor, (...) social distance, social dominance, the length of acquaintanceship, [and] the frequency of interaction(...)” (Billmyer & Varghese,

2000, p. 522). Without this information, the collection of natural samples will not be possible. However, Billmyer and Varghese (2000) compared non-native speakers (NNS) and native speakers (NS) of English and their responses to prompts with the same amount of information as in the one used for my version of the DCT and to prompts with a much larger amount of information, as described above. Their research showed that

the level of directness of request act strategies for NNSs does not appear to be sensitive to the type and amount of information in the situational prompt. A closer look at the distribution of (...) strategies by level of directness (...) shows hardly any variation between versions (Billmyer & Varghese, 2000, p. 528).

I therefore argue that the prompts used for my version of the DCT are appropriate for the purpose of this research. A copy of the test will be made available on request (*siljebrubak@hotmail.com*).

4.0 Results and Analysis

In the following, I analyse the students' answers by applying Brown and Levinson's theory of FTAs. As previously mentioned, the students had to consider four situations (see appendix) when answering the questionnaire. In all the situations, the speech acts are directed towards a person's negative face and thus demand a focus on negative politeness. The speaker needs to produce "a speech act that performs the function of minimizing the particular imposition that the FTA unavoidably effects" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 129).

However, when analyzing the data, I realized that situations 1-3 were somewhat similar in terms of appropriate strategies. The imposition was not great in any of them. In situation 1, students were to ask a stranger for directions, which is considered "free goods" and is included in "those things and services (...) which all members of the public may reasonably demand from one another" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 80). A high level of politeness was therefore not required. In situation 2 and 3 the social distance was not great, considering that the speaker and hearer were classmates and close friends. Producing a request is an imposition, but due to the small social distance, the level of politeness demanded by the situation was not great. In order to avoid extensive repetitions, I decided to only present the analysis of one of these situations in this article. Situation 3 was chosen by means of a process of random selection.

The following analysis will therefore focus on situations 3 and 4, which differed greatly in terms of social distance, relative power, level of imposition and the degree of politeness required. The former was quite informal and most likely familiar to the students, while the latter was formally demanding and might pose a challenge to the respondents. By choosing to cut two situations from the analysis, I might have lost potentially interesting statistical data. On the

other hand, it might have allowed me to gain a more profound understanding of the students' competence as reflected in the two remaining situations.

4.1 Situation 3: Borrowing Money from a Friend

This situation involves two friends, two equals, and the social distance between the speaker and the addressee is not great. However, “the basic assumption, from the perspective of politeness, is that face is typically at risk when the self needs to accomplish something involving other” (Yule, 1996, p. 67). Given the fact that the speaker is asking the hearer if she can lend him/her money, we can say that by performing this speech act, the speaker is imposing on the hearer. Even though speaker and hearer are socially close and the threat of performing the request can be said to be low, the speaker could be said to be in a power-inferior relationship to the hearer and a certain degree of politeness is still required.

“The British use a (...) variety of strategies avoiding bald on-record even when the threat is perceived to be low (...). [Users] of BE use more conventional (...) indirectness (...)” (Stewart, 2005, p. 117). *Conventional indirectness* can be described as a compromise between communicating one's intentions indirectly and going on record. It focuses on negative politeness and refers to “the use of phrases and sentences that have contextually unambiguous meanings which are different from their literal meanings” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 132). Furthermore, the British use a variety of external modifiers in order to fulfill one's communicative intentions e.g. through the use of questions and the past tense, i.e. ‘could you/would you’-formulations (Stewart 2005). In order to avoid coming across as rude, it is also quite normal to produce what is referred to as a pre-request, such as “excuse me” (Yule 1996).

Based on this, the students should ideally demonstrate awareness of the hearer's face wants by doing an FTA with redressive action focusing on negative politeness and being conventionally indirect by using various modifiers - with or without a pre-request.

Table 1: *Formulations and strategies used when asking to borrow money from a friend*

Formulations	Percentage	Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Could I please borrow some money (from you)? - Could you please lend me some money? 	32%	On record with redressive action → focuses on negative politeness → conventionally indirect with question and use of past tense → without pre-request
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Can I please borrow some money? - Can you please lend me some money? 	63%	On record with redressive action → focuses on negative politeness → conventionally indirect with question → without pre-request
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I have to borrow money from you! - Let me borrow money from you. 	5%	Baldly, on record, without redressive action
Total (n = 40):	100%	

95% of the students applied strategies identical to the strategy described in the previous paragraph, while 32 % chose to use ‘could I/could you’ formulations. None of these used a pre-request. By using such a request, one would probably be perceived as being slightly more polite and showing more concern in terms of protecting the hearer’s negative face than when applying a strategy *without* a pre-request. However, the majority’s choice of strategy still satisfies the contextual demands in terms of the required level of politeness.

Based on the results, it seems as if a large majority of the students are aware that conventional indirectness is an important feature of the English language. However, one cannot claim, based on these results alone, that the students really are familiar with all the areas of use for this specific strategy. Besides,

[the] safest politeness strategy for a Norwegian performing an act of requesting (...) is to abandon the indicative (i.e. “can you” formulations”). (...) The past tense (i.e. ‘could you’ formulations) (...) can be a sign that the state of affairs described is hypothetical rather than factual, as in English. (Fretheim, 2005, pp. 157-158)

This could mean that the students’ seemingly convincing knowledge of appropriate politeness strategies in English is in fact an example of what is known as *L1 transfer*. In terms of pragmatic competence, L1 transfer refers to the phenomenon of transferring and applying one’s L1 pragmatic knowledge in L2 situations (Ellis 1997). Are the students successfully applying their knowledge of their mother tongue in an L2 situation, without possessing any real knowledge of L2 politeness strategies and conventions? Assuming that one can safely apply L1 pragmatic patterns in L2 situations, might suggest that students believe that there exist certain universal norms that one can rely on when realizing speech acts in an L2. Another possible explanation of the seemingly well-developed competence among the students in terms of showing awareness of politeness norms in English could, in other words, be due to reliance on a false assumption that politeness is expressed by following the patterns of a set of universal norms.

4.2 Situation 4: Asking for a Pay Raise

This situation differs from the one in 4.1 in that it asks the students to formulate a request on behalf of Mary - not themselves. This presents the students with a great challenge in terms of interpreting and relating to the situation and has the potential of separating students with profound pragmatic knowledge and skills from those with only superficial knowledge. Besides, of all situations in the questionnaire, this situation is the most marked in terms of politeness. The speaker is in a power-inferior relationship with the addressee, given the fact that the hearer is the speaker’s boss. The speaker is asking for a pay raise, which is a fairly risky request. The degree of imposition is therefore high. According to Brown and Levinson, it would be appropriate to demonstrate negative politeness

through giving deference in this type of situation. The speaker will thus demonstrate that s/he recognizes the addressee's face wants and that s/he is aware of the addressee's right not to be imposed on. Moreover, the speaker "communicates that any infringement of H's territory is recognized as such and is not undertaken lightly" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 187). One should therefore expect the speaker's speech act to be marked by a high level of politeness and to demonstrate respect and awareness of the addressee's negative face through giving deference.

Table 2; *formulations and strategies used when asking one's boss for a pay raise.*

Formulations	Percentage	Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Could I get a pay raise? - Could you give me a pay raise? 	42,5%	On record with redressive action → focuses on negative politeness → conventionally indirect with question and use of past tense → without pre-request
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Can I (please) have/get a pay raise? 	35%	On record with redressive action → focuses on negative politeness → conventionally indirect with question → without pre-request
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I would like a pay raise. - It would only be fair of you to give me a raise. - I think it's time for a pay raise. - I deserve a pay raise. - I want more money. - I think I should have a raise. 	22,5%	Baldly, on record, without redressive action
Total (n = 40):	100%	

None of the students applied the strategy described in the previous paragraph. 77,5 %, chose a strategy similar to the one described in 4.1 and 42,5% used 'could I'-formulations. This could be an example of how students overuse and rely on well-known fixed expressions. An NS would interpret the situation and modify his/her language and choice of politeness strategy accordingly. L2 learners, on the other hand, often cling to "the same range of request strategies irrespective of whether they [are] talking to the teacher or other students" (Ellis, 1997, p. 10). It has also been said that extensive use of ability strategies [(could I/you)] is a major characteristic of the pragmatic competence of beginner EFL learners (Hill, 1997, in Kasper & Rose, 2002). These results might therefore indicate both that the students have only managed to learn one way in which to make requests in English and that they are still at the one of the lowest stages of pragmatic development in English.

Conversely, 22,5 % of the students chose strategies that were "closely linked to the act of going baldly on record and verbally attacking the addressee" (Brubæk, 2011, p. 12), e.g., *In the last time I have been working my ass off. Personally, I think that I deserve a pay raise after all the work I've done.* It is

interesting to see how insecure many of the students seem to be in this situation. In 4.1, the majority of the students demonstrated awareness of the hearer's face by applying the strategy that was considered the most polite and socially appropriate. In this case, however, the majority of the students ignored the risks of producing the FTA and the damage it does to the addressee's face. They cross over to the side of explicit rudeness. This might indicate that more formally demanding situations are unfamiliar to the students and they find them difficult to interpret and handle. The students seem to lack the formal registers needed to solve the task in a socially acceptable manner. They appear unable to vary their use of requests and modify their choice of strategies and language according to the demands of the situation.

On the other hand, one must not rule out the possible effect of the students having to produce the request on behalf of Mary, not themselves. The apparent lack of knowledge and ability to communicate appropriately in this situation might simply be a result of difficulties with relating to 1) Mary and her situation or 2) the situation in general. Some students might not possess relevant experience with this type of formal situation or have work experience in general, and this lack of experience might have caused additional problems when producing a response to this situation.

5.0 Discussion

Only a few studies have been conducted in the field of pragmatics in Norway, e.g. Røkaas (2000), Gray (2005) and Johansen (2008). As far as I can see, the latter study is the only Norwegian study that has been conducted using DCT as a method of data collection. Johansen (2008) investigated how Norwegian advanced EFL learners chose to express gratitude in English. It discovered that the participants knew the basic patterns and strategies for expressing gratitude in the L2, but they lacked knowledge of how and when to produce these patterns and use these strategies appropriately. Moreover, the participants assumed some form of universality in terms of pragmatic principles and often relied on their pragmatic competence in their L1 when communicating in the L2.

The goal of this article was to investigate to what extent Norwegian EFL students are able to adapt their language, choice of strategies and level of formality to contextual demands when realizing requests in English. The analysis did not provide any clear-cut answers, but it did seem to indicate several things. Moreover, some of the findings were quite similar to those of Johansenn (2008). On the one hand, the analysis suggests that the students seem to be aware of concepts such as social distance and power relationships between the speakers involved in informal situations. However, are these results really proof of a profound knowledge of politeness norms, or is it merely a case of L1 pragmatic transfer? On the other hand, the results of the analysis of situation 4

seem to indicate that there is a lack of knowledge among Norwegian students when it comes to handling formal situations that require a higher level of politeness and more sophisticated strategies for protecting the addressee's face. Does this mean that the students only know how to handle informal interaction between equals and that they will be unsuccessful when trying to interact in more formally demanding situations?

5.1 Pragmatic Competence in L1 and L2

The subject curriculum explicitly states that developing the students' pragmatic competence should be a major goal in English teaching in Norway. However, my findings indicate that students have acquired productive knowledge of only one or two strategies for making polite requests in English. This is worrying considering the fact that a lack of pragmatic knowledge might lead to a communication breakdown that will hinder fruitful participation in the L2 culture. "No 'error' of grammar can make a speaker seem so incompetent, so inappropriate, so foreign as the kind of trouble a learner gets into when he or she (...) disregards a language's rule of use" (Rintell & Mitchell 1989 in Blum-Kulka et al., 1989, p. 248).

In 4.1, the analysis of the results suggested that the students were somewhat reliant on their L1 when attempting to communicate in the L2. When asking a friend to lend them money, many students appear to have transferred pragmatic patterns of their L1 and applied these in an L2 situation. In this particular situation, the strategy of transferring and applying L1 knowledge in an L2 situation proved successful, but this will not likely always be the case. Other studies have reached similar conclusions. Takahashi (1996) found that Japanese EFL students, no matter the level of general language proficiency, "relied on their first language request conventions or strategies in second language request realization" (Takahashi, 1996, in Kasper & Rose, 2002, p. 156). Whether this was the case for the students who participated in this study must be validated in further research.

5.2 Contextual Demands

The choice of strategy in 4.1 might also indicate that many of the students rely on a false assumption of the existence of universal politeness norms and pragmatic conventions. Kasper and Rose (2002) suggest that some knowledge of politeness and pragmatics is universal. "Universal pragmatic competence minimally comprises implicit knowledge and ability to use (...) [e.g.] specific communicative acts such as (...) requests (...) [and] politeness as a mutually face-saving strategy (...)" (Kasper & Rose, 2002, p. 164-165). An adult learner of an L2 can thus build on a large amount of prior knowledge when trying to develop his or her L2 competence. However, many language learners are unaware of the fact that there can be significant cultural differences when it comes to the realization of central speech acts (Eisenstein & Bodman, 1986).

Some knowledge is culture specific, and even adult learners have to acquire at least some new pragmatic and politeness conventions.

In 4.2, students were asked to produce a speech act in which they addressed their boss requesting a pay raise. The majority of the students seemed quite insecure in terms of handling the contextual demands of the situation. Most of them relied on the same strategies as they did in 4.1. This might indicate that the students are not familiar with these types of formally demanding situations. However, familiarity with the situation and its contextual demands is not necessarily enough to enable an NNS to express himself according to NS norms (Eisenstein & Bodman, 1986). Other factors, such as “the complexity of language (...) (and) the language functions demanded by the situation (...) (and) the degree of cultural disorientation (...)” (Eisenstein & Bodman, 1986, p. 174), play a major role. Therefore, one might be justified in claiming that, in addition to being unfamiliar with the situation, the students also lack knowledge of appropriate strategies that they can apply in more formally demanding situations.

5.3 Implications for Teaching

The results of both Johansen’s study (2008) and of the present analysis might indicate that the development of students’ pragmatic competence in Norwegian EFL classrooms is being neglected:

[In] order to fulfill the goals expressed in the LK06, the teaching of English as a foreign language in Norway needs to pay more attention to pragmatics features and the students’ comprehension, development and acquisition of different registers in English, both formal and informal. (Brubæk, 2011, p. 13)

Even though these claims need to be validated in further research, they can to some extent be supported by international research. It is, for example, possible to draw parallels between the findings in Johansen’s thesis and in the present article and the results of studies conducted internationally, e.g. Eisenstein and Bodman (1986) Bardovi-Harlig and Hatford (1993) and Blum-Kulka & *al.* (1989). These studies revealed some major differences between NS of English and NNS in terms of choice of strategy and formulation when realizing various types of speech acts.

Eisenstein & Bodman (1986) investigated expressions of gratitude. They found that even advanced EFL learners “had considerable difficulty adequately expressing gratitude in the target language. (...) Learners were often unable to approximate native idioms and routines” (Eisenstein & Bodman, 1986, p. 176). Eisenstein & Bodman (1986) claimed that there is a need for a stronger focus on important language functions in school. A high proficiency in English in general does not necessarily equal well-developed pragmatic skills. In their study of gratitude expressions, they actually found the complete opposite. Moreover, they emphasize the fact that most students trying to acquire an L2 in a classroom

context, as is the case for most Norwegian EFL learners, will need help from a teacher to be able to identify implicit values and beliefs in the L2 and to recognize culture specific pragmatic differences. Bardovi-Harlig (1996) claim “Learners either don’t receive the relevant input or don’t receive it from sources they consider relevant, or they may not notice the relevant input due to either lack of pragmatic awareness or possibly even grammatical competence” (1996, p. 23).

5.4 Pragmatics and Intercultural Communicative Competence

Michael Byram (1997) received a great deal of attention for his attempt to create a framework for the assessment of students’ *Intercultural Communicative Competence* (ICC). By drawing parallels between that and pragmatic competence, one might explain why Norwegian teachers seem to either neglect the teaching of or lack the competence required to teach an important part of any language learner’s competence. On the one hand, it is possible to argue that pragmatic competence is part of ICC. The *savoir of knowledge* includes knowledge of the target culture and of what is considered appropriate. *Savoir comprendre* refers to a person’s ability to interpret and comprehend aspects of the target culture. Moreover, *savoir s’engager* relates to the ability to evaluate a culture-specific aspect and successfully interact with individuals from the target culture based on the information gained from this evaluation (Byram 1997). On the other hand, ICC is much broader than pragmatic competence, and I have therefore chosen to refer to these as separate competences in order to create a comprehensive comparison.

Both ICC and pragmatic competence include attitudes, cultural knowledge and interpretation skills, and these can be neither taught nor assessed only by relying on traditional methods. In terms of these competences, what is not observable in student performance is just as important as what is observable. The fact that “there is an agreement in the educational (...) profession that (...) performance measurement calls for examinees to demonstrate their capabilities (...) by creating some product (...) and that there is heavy reliance on observation (...)” (Byram, 1997, p. 89) therefore causes a problem for the assessment of these two competences.

Moreover, Byram (1997) argues that in recent years there seems to be an increasing demand for holding educational institutions accountable for the quality of the education that they are providing.

[T]here is a tendency to seek modes of assessment which break knowledge and abilities into closely defined and observable sub-sets. These can then be related to the teaching process, by asking whether what has been taught has in fact been learned by students. (...) (Byram, 1997, p. 96)

Since ICC does not live up to these ‘standards’, it tends to be neglected in the classroom. Its vagueness creates severe difficulties, especially when it comes to

testing the level of competence the students have developed during a semester or a school year. The results of the analysis indicate that the same inability to break knowledge and ability into closely defined and observable sub-sets can be said for pragmatic competence as well - at least for the more complex aspects of this competence. There are those aspects that students seem perfectly capable of handling. The frequent use of 'can/could you' expressions in the students' responses, for example, might indicate that the students find these familiar and easy to handle. According to Ellis (1997), the use of formulas and fixed expressions is a major characteristic of learner language. Moreover, the (over)use of these expressions suggests that they are easy to handle for teachers as well, in that they are easy to teach and easy to test. However, other aspects of pragmatic competence are difficult, maybe even impossible, to break down and define. The analysis in 4.0 indicates that highly context-dependent, idiosyncratic expressions are difficult for students to apply, e.g. those expressions that are used in formally situations and involve pre-requests as well as conventional indirectness. These expressions are also likely to be significantly more challenging to demonstrate and teach in class. Besides, pragmatic competence is seemingly not definable in a way that all experts will agree on. How can we then expect teachers to be able to teach and test it and students to be able to acquire it?

6.0 Conclusion

In this article, I wanted to investigate the extent to which Norwegian EFL students are able to adapt their language, choice of strategies and level of formality to contextual demands when making requests in English. The analysis in 4.0-4.2 and the discussion in 5.0 both revealed that students seem to possess adequate knowledge of how to interact and produce speech acts in informal situations, even though this ability might also be the result of L1 transfer or reliance on a false assumption that a set of universal politeness norms and pragmatic conventions exist. In more formal situations, however, students fall short and are unable to produce speech acts according to L2 rules and conventions. Most students appear to be insecure and choose to rely on their knowledge of informal interaction, even though this is hardly appropriate in more formally demanding situations. These results might also indicate a lack of attention in Norwegian schools developing EFL students' pragmatic competence in English.

It is clear that the development of Norwegian students' pragmatic competence is an aspect of language learning that needs to receive more attention in Norway. More extensive study is needed in order to give more precise answers to the questions and implications discussed in this article. It would be an interesting challenge to conduct a similar study on a larger scale. Would the results be similar, or would there, for instance, be significant differences

between different groups of students? Moreover, it will be important to investigate whether the development of students' pragmatic competence really is being neglected in Norwegian schools and, if so, map out the reasons why. Do textbooks and other sources of input used in the English classroom offer teaching and learning material of a sufficient quality? Is developing native-like pragmatic competence in a classroom context even a realistic goal? And what about students in the various teacher education programmes? Do they receive instruction on how to teach pragmatics and, if so, to what extent? Considering the goals of the current curriculum, these are important questions to ask and investigate further.

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