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Explicit Instruction of "Request and Refusal" Speech Acts in High School English from a Pragmatic Perspective: An Exploratory Study Based on Classroom Intervention

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Abstract. In view of the practical problem of "overemphasis on linguistic forms and neglect of contextual application" in high school English classrooms, this study constructs an integrated analytical framework of "context recognition—face assessment—strategy selection—linguistic realization—communicative effect" based on speech act theory and face politeness theory. Taking two types of high-frequency and face-threatening speech acts, namely requests and refusals, as the research carrier, an 8-week explicit pragmatic teaching is carried out. Two parallel classes of Grade 10 in a general senior high school in a city are selected as subjects. The experimental class receives teaching including rule explanation, corpus comparison, situational practice and metapragmatic feedback, while the control class receives conventional teaching focusing on vocabulary, grammar and sentence pattern drills. Evidence is collected through situational discourse completion tasks, classroom observation and learner attitude questionnaires. Descriptive analysis based on available materials shows that students in the experimental class can more fully employ conventional indirect strategies, external modifiers and compound refusal semantic formulas in situations with high power, high social distance or relatively high degree of imposition, and show stronger contextual sensitivity. The difference between the two classes is relatively limited in low-risk and stylized situations. The study indicates that the value of explicit instruction is not simply to increase polite sentence patterns, but to promote learners to establish the mapping among linguistic forms, communicative functions and social relations. Given that the existing data are insufficient to support strict causal inference, this paper positions the research as an exploratory classroom intervention and proposes a testable follow-up research scheme accordingly.

Keywords: second language pragmatic instruction, speech acts, requests and refusals, face politeness, explicit instruction

1. Introduction

The *Senior High School English Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition Revised in 2020)* [1] incorporates pragmatic knowledge into the language knowledge system, emphasizing that learners should appropriately comprehend and use language according to communicative purposes,

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occasions and the relationship between participants. Accordingly, the goal of high school English teaching should not be limited to grammatical correctness and lexical accuracy, but should also include the judgment of "who, in what situation, in what way, and why expresses in such a manner". In actual classrooms, functional items such as requests and refusals are often processed as several fixed sentence patterns. Although students can repeat expressions such as "Could you…?" or "I'm afraid…", they may not necessarily understand their politeness value, applicable relationships and possible communicative effects.

A request aims to prompt the hearer to perform an action, which usually restricts the hearer's freedom of action; a refusal negates the other party's proposal, invitation or request, which is likely to impair the other party's need for recognition and acceptance. Both have clear speech act structures and are highly dependent on social distance, relative power, degree of imposition and cultural norms, so they are suitable as the entry point for cultivating contextual awareness and strategic awareness at the senior high school stage.

The theoretical review of existing studies mostly stays at the listing of scholars' viewpoints, and teaching experiments also lack an operational chain from theoretical concepts to observation indicators. For this reason, this paper does not juxtapose speech act theory and politeness theory as two sets of background knowledge. Instead, the former is used to answer "what action the speaker performs and by what strategy it is realized", and the latter is used to answer "why mitigation is needed and how strategies are constrained by relational variables", so as to form an integrated framework applicable to teaching design and corpus analysis. The study focuses on two questions: (1) How does explicit pragmatic instruction affect learners' selection and modification of request and refusal strategies? (2) What differences does this effect present in situations with different social relations and degrees of face threat?

2. Theoretical basis and analytical framework

2.1. From "speaking as doing" to strategic realization of speech acts

Austin's [2] early distinction between constative utterances and performative utterances eventually developed into the three-part framework of locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act. A locutionary act involves uttering words that conform to linguistic rules and have referential meaning; an illocutionary act is the action performed by the speaker through utterances, such as asserting, requesting and promising; a perlocutionary act refers to the actual effect of utterances on the hearer's attitude or behavior. The teaching significance of this distinction lies in that the same sentence has both literal forms and undertakes communicative actions, and may produce relational consequences inconsistent with the speaker's expectation.

Searle [3] classified illocutionary acts into assertives, directives, commissives, expressives and declarations based on illocutionary point, psychological state and language-world fit, and explained why speech acts are valid in terms of propositional content condition, preparatory condition, sincerity condition and essential condition. Requests belong to directives, but they can be realized directly by imperative sentences or indirectly by forms such as interrogative sentences. Searle's [4] theory of indirect speech acts reveals the separation between "literal act" and "primary communicative act". For example, "Can you open the window?" literally inquires about ability, but performs a request in conventional contexts. Therefore, the key to second language teaching is not to make students mechanically equate interrogative forms with politeness, but to understand the relationship among form, function and contextual reasoning.

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In cross-cultural speech act research, Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper [5] summarized request strategies into direct strategies, conventional indirect strategies and non-conventional indirect strategies, and distinguished head acts, internal modifications and external modifications. Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz [6] analyzed refusal sequences with semantic formulas, distinguishing direct refusals, indirect refusals, and additional components such as thanks, apologies, reasons, alternatives and future promises. The two sets of classifications provide codable strategy units for classroom observation.

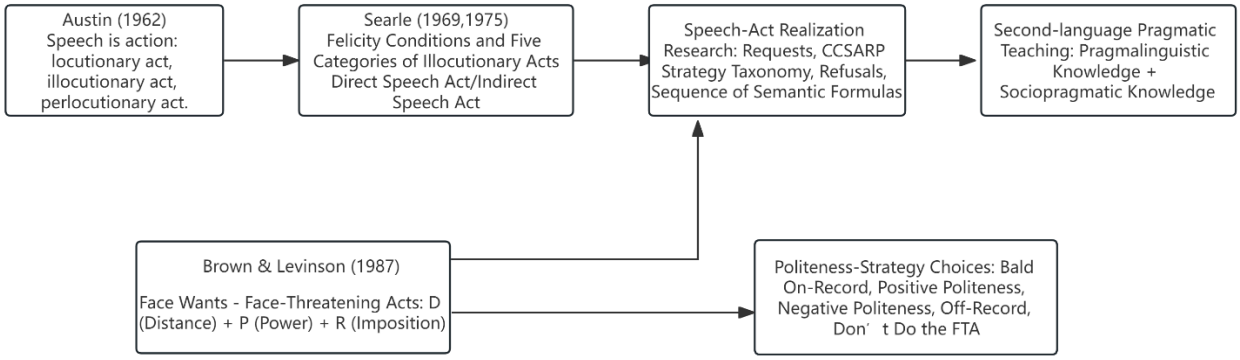


Figure 1. Evolution of speech act theory and politeness theory and their transformation into teaching

2.2. Face threat, politeness strategies and their explanatory boundaries

Brown and Levinson [7] divided face into positive face and negative face: the former refers to an individual's desire that their wishes, identity and value be recognized, while the latter refers to an individual's desire that their freedom of action not be imposed. Requests usually increase the hearer's action burden and mainly threaten the hearer's negative face; refusals negate the communicative action initiated by the other party, mainly threaten the other party's positive face, and may also expose the refuser to the image risk of being "uncooperative" or "rude". Speakers thus choose among performing without compensation, positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record performance and abandoning performance.

This theory summarizes the weight of face threat with the formula W=D+P+R: D stands for social distance, P stands for the hearer's power relative to the speaker, and R stands for the rank of imposition of the act in a specific culture. This formula is not a psychometric equation that can be directly added up, but a heuristic model illustrating that the three variables jointly increase the demand for strategy mitigation. More importantly, "indirect" is not inherently equal to "polite": whether an expression is appropriate also depends on local conventions, interaction order, relationship history and participants' evaluation of the situation. Leech's [8] distinction between the pragmalinguistic dimension and sociopragmatic dimension of politeness also reminds researchers to examine both linguistic resources and social norms, and avoid universalizing certain expressions in Western English.

Therefore, this paper regards face theory as an explanatory resource for strategy selection rather than a static hierarchy of sentence patterns. Classroom teaching should not only explain common conventions, but also enable students to recognize that politeness judgment is situational, cultural and interactive through comparison and negotiation.

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2.3. Integrated analytical framework and operational dimensions

Integrating the above theories, this paper proposes an analytical chain of "contextual input—face assessment—strategy selection—linguistic realization—communicative effect". Contextual variables trigger learners' judgment of face threat, which affects the selection of central strategies and mitigation devices, and finally manifests as pragmalinguistic competence and sociopragmatic competence [9], which is evaluated through appropriateness, effectiveness, relationship maintenance and strategic flexibility.

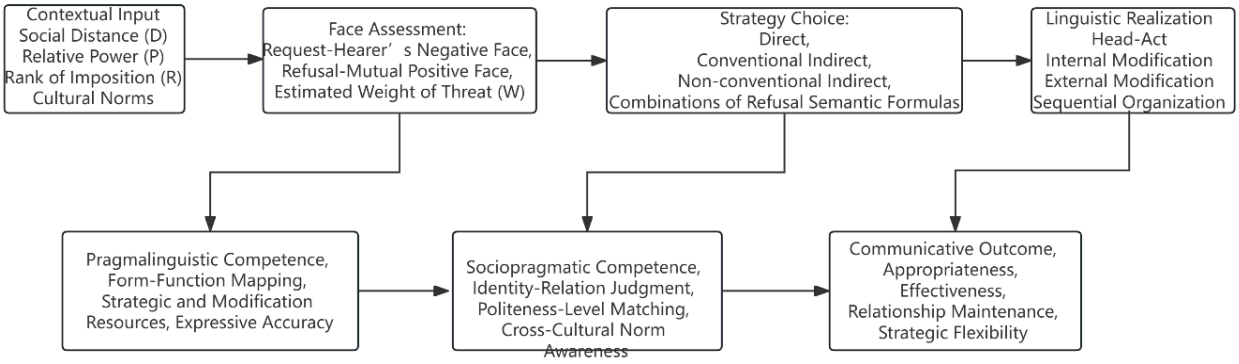


Figure 2. Integrated analytical framework of "context—face assessment—strategy realization—communicative effect"

Table 1. Theoretical constructs and their operational indicators

Theoretical Construct	Observable Indicators	Performance in Request Tasks	Performance in Refusal Tasks
Context Recognition	Judgment of D, P, R and communicative purpose	Distinguishing objects such as peers, strangers and teachers	Identifying preceding acts such as invitations, suggestions and requests
Strategy Selection	Directness and strategy types	Direct / conventional indirect / non-conventional indirect	Direct refusal / indirect refusal / avoidance or postponement
Linguistic Realization	Head acts and modification resources	please, conditional forms, reasons, address terms, preparatory expressions	Apologies, thanks, reasons, alternatives, future promises
Sociopragmatic Appropriateness	Matching between strategies and relational variables	Avoiding being overly direct or overly elaborate to people with high power	Balancing position expression, the other party's face and relationship maintenance
Strategic Flexibility	Multiple expressions and combinations of the same intention	Able to adjust strategies and modification intensity according to situations	Able to organize multi-component refusal sequences instead of applying single sentences

3. Research design

3.1. Research subjects and research orientation

Two parallel classes of Grade 10 in a general senior high school in a city are selected, with a total of 102 students. The experimental class has 50 students (24 males and 26 females), and the control

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class has 52 students (25 males and 27 females). They are taught by the same teacher, with consistent teaching materials, progress, class hours and homework volume. The intervention lasts for 8 weeks, 2 class hours per week, totaling 16 class hours. The available materials do not preserve individual pre-test and post-test original scores, inter-rater reliability and complete questionnaire data for review. Therefore, this paper positions the research as an exploratory classroom intervention, mainly presenting teaching mechanisms and descriptive differences, and does not use expressions beyond the scope of evidence such as "significantly improve" or "prove causal relationship".

3.2. Teaching intervention

The experimental class adopts five-stage explicit teaching of "attention—comparison—explanation—practice—feedback": first, identify requests and refusals from textbook dialogues, film clips or teacher-built corpora; second, compare expressions of the same intention in different identity relationships; third, explicitly explain strategy types, face needs and D/P/R variables; fourth, carry out production through role-play, situational rewriting and peer negotiation; finally, teachers provide metapragmatic feedback focusing on formal correctness, strategy matching and relational effects. The control class is still exposed to the same topics and basic expressions, but focuses on word meaning, syntactic structure and sentence pattern substitution exercises, without systematic explanation of strategy repertoire and social contextual variables.

Table 2. Five-stage design of explicit pragmatic teaching

Stage	Core Activities in Experimental Class	Theoretical Orientation	Expected Learning Outcomes
Attention	Circling head acts, address terms and mitigation devices	Illocutionary acts and linguistic realization	Discovering that forms carry different communicative functions
Comparison	Comparing situations of peer/teacher, acquaintance/stranger	D, P, R and face threat	Identifying situational conditions for strategy selection
Explanation	Explaining request strategies, refusal semantic formulas and politeness strategies	Speech act + politeness theory	Establishing articulable metapragmatic knowledge
Practice	Role-play, situational transformation, strategy rewriting	Form-function-context mapping	Developing strategy combination and transfer ability
Feedback	Self-assessment, peer assessment, teacher's inquiry into communicative effects	Sociopragmatic appropriateness	Correcting the judgment that "grammatical correctness equals appropriateness"

3.3. Tasks, scoring and evidence sources

Eight situational discourse completion tasks are set in the study, including four requests and four refusals, covering relationship combinations such as peers, strangers, teachers or head teachers. Analysis should not only count whether a certain polite sentence pattern appears, but code head strategies, modification devices, context matching and overall appropriateness respectively. To improve the reviewability of follow-up research, two trained raters can independently code 20%—30% of the corpus and report Cohen's κ or intraclass correlation coefficient; quantitative research should also report pre-test and post-test means, standard deviations, effect sizes and between-group differences after controlling for pre-test.

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Table 3. Evidence sources, explanatory boundaries and improvement directions

Evidence Source	Main Purpose	Conclusions Supported by This Study	Follow-up Supplements
Situational discourse completion tasks	Observing strategies and modification resources	Describing typical choices in different situations	Individual original responses, scoring reliability, pre-test and post-test statistics
Classroom observation	Verifying teaching implementation and learning process	Explaining mechanisms of explicit attention, comparison and feedback	Structured observation forms and intervention fidelity indicators
Attitude questionnaire	Understanding acceptance and difficulty perception	Providing auxiliary evidence of learning experience	Scale sources, reliability and validity, complete distribution and interview triangulation

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Requests: from sentence pattern invocation to contextualized strategy combination

In low-risk peer situations such as "borrowing a pen from a deskmate", most students in both classes can use conventional indirect requests such as "Can/Could I borrow…?", with limited differences. This indicates that high-frequency and stylized expressions may have been acquired through textbooks and daily classroom input, and the gain of explicit teaching does not necessarily appear equally in all situations. A small number of direct imperative sentences cannot be judged as impolite solely by their form, but need to be judged in combination with peer relationship, tone and specific interaction background.

In situations with high power or relatively high imposition, such as "asking the English teacher to revise a composition" and "asking the head teacher to explain a question", the responses of the experimental class present a more complete request sequence: address terms, interruption markers or preparatory expressions are used before the head act, the head act mostly adopts conventional indirect forms, and reasons or thanks are added afterwards. The change is not just "more euphemistic", but the ability to incorporate P and R into expression planning. Although the control class can also invoke "Could you please…?", it mostly stays at the level of single sentence patterns, with relatively limited modification resources and sequence organization.

When facing peers of similar status but unfamiliar relationship, the experimental class more often uses contact preparation expressions such as "Excuse me" and brief reasons. This indicates that social distance mainly affects interaction initiation and relationship positioning, and does not necessarily prompt speakers to increase the degree of indirectness infinitely. In teaching, we should avoid reducing D, P, R to "the larger the value, the longer the sentence", but help students understand that different variables may act on different positions: power and imposition degree more affect central strategies and mitigation intensity, while social distance also affects address terms, contact modes and explanation sufficiency.

4.2. Refusals: from single reason utterances to multi-component semantic formulas

When refusing a friend's invitation, the common combination in both classes is "apology + reason", such as "I'd love to, but…" "Sorry, I have to…". Some responses in the experimental class further use positive evaluation, future acceptance or alternative plans. Such components do not change the

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refusal position, but can confirm the value of the other party's invitation and maintain subsequent relations, reflecting care for positive face.

Refusing a teacher's arrangement to participate in a speech contest is a task with relatively high face threat. The experimental class is more inclined to first express thanks or affirm the opportunity, then explain the reason for not being able to accept, and use expressions such as "I'm afraid…" to reduce assertiveness; the control class more often only states reasons. The key here is not to hide the refusal deeper and deeper, but to organize a mitigation sequence on the premise of ensuring a clear position. If the expression is too ambiguous, it may also impair communicative effectiveness. Therefore, appropriateness evaluation should include politeness, clarity and task completion at the same time.

In the situation of refusing strangers to fill in street questionnaires, most students in both classes use brief "Sorry, I'm in a hurry" or "I'm afraid I don't have time", with little difference. Unfamiliar relationship reduces the demand for continuous relationship maintenance, and being in a hurry strengthens the efficiency goal, so concise refusal may be more appropriate than elaborate foreshadowing here. This result further illustrates that the number of strategies cannot be used as a single indicator of pragmatic competence; whether strategies match communicative goals is more important.

4.3. Mechanism of explicit teaching and theoretical responses

Descriptive materials show that the potential advantages of explicit teaching mainly appear in complex situations that require the integration of multiple social variables, rather than the average improvement of all tasks. Its mechanism can be summarized into three points: first, metapragmatic terms make implicit politeness judgment noticeable and discussable knowledge; second, minimal situational comparison helps students attribute expression differences to D, P, R and communicative purposes; third, role-play and feedback prompt students to shift from "choosing a correct sentence pattern" to "organizing a discourse that can complete the action and maintain the relationship".

This finding also revises the mechanical application of politeness theory. The teaching of requests and refusals cannot establish a fixed line of "direct—impolite, indirect—polite", but should examine strategy conventionality, modification position, interaction goals and cultural expectations. What explicit teaching aims to develop is the ability to make reasoned choices among a variety of available expressions, rather than copying a single native speaker norm.

Table 4. Descriptive differences in different situations and their explanations

Situation Type	Common Performance of Both Classes	Relative Advantages of Experimental Class	Teaching Explanation
Low-risk peer requests	Mostly using conventional indirect strategies	Slight advantage, slightly richer modifications	Stylized expressions have been relatively fully input
High power / relatively high imposition requests	Generally avoiding imperative sentences	More preparatory expressions, reasons, thanks and compound sequences	Explicit explanation promotes the mapping between P, R and linguistic resources
Refusals of acquaintance invitations	Mostly using apology + reason	More often adding evaluation, alternatives or future promises	Enhanced awareness of positive face maintenance

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Table 4. (continued)

Refusals of proposals from people with high power	Mostly using indirect refusals	More complete sequence of thanks—evaluation—reason	Balancing clear position and relationship maintenance
Refusals in low-continuity relationships with strangers	Mostly brief reason-based refusals	Limited difference	Efficiency goals make concise expressions situationally reasonable

5. Conclusions and implications

This study defines action types and strategy realization with speech act theory, explains the social motivation of strategy selection with face politeness theory, and integrates the two into a teaching and analytical framework of context—assessment—strategy—realization—effect. Exploratory classroom evidence shows that the main value of explicit teaching lies in improving learners' sensitivity to social relations and communicative risks, enabling them to coordinate head acts and internal/external modifications in requests, and organize multi-component semantic formulas in refusals. The differences are more obvious in complex and high-risk situations, and relatively limited in low-risk and highly stylized situations. For high school English teaching, first, language points in textbooks should be reorganized in units of communicative functions, and request and refusal expressions scattered in different units should be incorporated into the strategy repertoire. Second, minimal situational comparison should be used: for the same intention, only change the object identity, closeness of relationship or task burden, to guide students to explain expression changes. Third, evaluation criteria should be expanded from grammatical accuracy to strategy matching, discourse organization, task completion and relationship effect. Fourth, cross-cultural differences should be treated as comparable and negotiable normative resources, avoiding simple copying of so-called "English politeness formulas".

The evidence boundary of this paper also needs to be clarified. Due to the lack of complete individual pre-test and post-test data, inter-rater reliability, questionnaire reliability and validity, and classroom observation scales, the existing results can only support descriptive and mechanistic judgments, and cannot claim that the teaching effect reaches statistical significance or has wide generalizability accordingly. Follow-up research should adopt a pre-test—post-test—delayed test design, report effect sizes and scoring reliability, and combine retrospective interviews or interaction corpora to investigate learners' selection and response in addition to production. Only by combining production, judgment and interaction effects can the development of second language pragmatic competence be more fully explained.

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