

Criterial features of pragmatic competence in a spoken corpus of Japanese learners of English: Distinguishing different levels of proficiency

Aika Miura

日本人英語学習者の話しことばコーパスにおける 語用論的能力の基準特性：異なる習得段階の弁別

三浦 愛香

要 旨

本論文では、「要求」のスピーチアクトのストラテジーに見られる言語特徴を観察し、日本人英語学習者の口頭による発話能力の一つである語用論的能力の予備調査したものである。インタビューテストである SST (The Standard Speaking Test) を書き起したデータから成る日本人英語学習者の The NICT JLE Corpus を使用し、先行研究の Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper (1989) などによる coding scheme に基づいて、サブコーパスである Role-play のタスクのうち Shopping 及び Train のトピックに取り組んだ受験者データの一部に「要求」のスピーチアクトによる直接性の度合いを示す語用論的機能タグを付与し、異なる習熟度を弁別する基準特性を示す言語特徴の抽出を試みた。結果、Direct なストラテジーが初級学者に最も頻繁に使用され、中級、上級と習熟度が上がるにつれて Conventionally Indirect 及び Indirect の頻度も上がっていくが、Direct なストラテジーの頻度は下がった。なお、Direct なストラテジーで使用される特徴的な言語特徴としては、初級学習者が elliptical phrases (文を省略した単語や句) の使用、初中級学習者は desires を示す動詞 (want や need) の使用が挙げられる。初中級学習者になると、imperatives (命令文) や elliptical phrases の発話と共に politeness marker の please を使用するようになり、要求の直接性の度合いを軽減する意識があることが示された。中級以上の学習者が示す direct なストラテジーでは wishes (wish や would like)、imperatives 及び desires が同じくらいの頻度で使用されていた。Conventionally indirect なストラテジーは、ability (can や could)、willingness (will, would や do you mind) 及び suggestory (why don't you, why not や how about) の3つのタイプに分類することができるが、最も使用頻度の高いものは ability であった。また、上級学習者に can より could の使用が多く見られ、この2つの助動詞の持つ丁寧度の違いを認識していると考えられる。なお、丁寧な依頼表現として英語教育で導入される傾向のある do you mind や would you mind は非常に使用頻度が低く、上級学習者にのみ使用されるにとどまった。なお、SST では、習得段階によって与えられるタスクの難易度が異なり、初級・中級レベルでは品物やチケットの「購入」及び上級レベルでは「返品・返金交渉」と問われるスキルが異なる。つまり、タスクによって発話者が聞き手のメンツを脅かす FTA (face-threatening act) の影響の度合いが異なる可能性が考えられる。そのため、頻度上昇の要因が習得段階を示す特徴であるのか、又はタスクの影響であるか特定することが難しいことが判明した。習得段階別の語用論的能力の基準特性を特定するには、習熟度に関係なく同じタスクの実施結果を補足する必要があることが示唆された。

Abstract

This paper aims to explore the *critical features* of pragmatic competence across different levels of second language proficiency among Japanese learners of English, using a corpus of speech data. Specifically, it considers requestive speech acts, as represented in the NICT (National Institute of Information and Communications Technology) JLE (Japanese Learner English) Corpus, which is composed of interview transcripts from the Standard Speaking Test (SST). The Head Acts of request strategies, as well as optional modification patterns such as downgraders, were identified and annotated in the extracted data; through the annotation, request strategies were classified as direct, conventionally indirect, or non-conventionally indirect. It was found that lower-level learners tended more often to employ direct strategies, with more infrequent use of external modification, compared to upper-intermediate and advanced learners. However, the nature of the task had an influence on the distribution of strategies, regardless of proficiency level.

Abstract

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1. Introduction

The present study aims to identify the *critical features* (that is, features that specify what learners know and can do in English at each level of proficiency, defined by Hawkins & Filipović [2012]) for the domain of pragmatics in a second language (L2) learning context. The notion of critical features originates in the English Profile, the intention of which is “to produce Reference Level Descriptions for English linked to the general principles and approaches of CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages)” (University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate [UCLES], 2011, p. 2). In the CEFR, *pragmatic competence* is considered part of *communicative language competence*, and is defined as the competence “concerned with the functional use of linguistic resources (production of language functions, speech acts), drawing on scenarios or scripts of interactional exchanges” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 13).

In order to see how learners at each level of proficiency display their pragmatic competence, the present study draws on the literature on *cross-linguistic* and *interlanguage pragmatics*, in particular literature developing a coding scheme for linguistic features realised in the requestive speech acts. In previous studies in this area, data collection methods have included *discourse completion tasks* (DCTs), where subjects are asked to complete written tasks consisting of incomplete discourse sequences for a speech act or dialogue in a given context along with brief situational descriptions (Achiba, 2003, p. 26). According to Kasper and Blum-Kulka (1993), role-play scenarios are a possible alternative to DCTs, as “they are useful tools for probing learners’ ability to instantiate sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge in interaction [...] in a highly automatized fashion” (p. 61). The present study investigates role-play sessions that involve transactions to obtain goods, negotiations for refunds, or item exchanges, taken from a learner corpus called the NICT (National Institute of Information and Communications Technology) JLE (Japanese Learner English) Corpus.

This preliminary study deals with small-scale data extracted from the role-play session in the NICT JLE Corpus in order to determine whether the investigation of requestive speech acts is useful for identifying the critical features of pragmatic competence. According to Adolphs (2008), “when pragmatic and functional theories of language and associated methods of analysis were first developed, the technology to capture and store large samples of spoken discourse in digital format was not yet available” (p. 1). The development and availability of spoken learner corpora allow us to re-examine the results of previous studies on interlanguage pragmatics, as well as yielding new insights into the development of tools and coding schemes for analysing the relationship between lexico-grammatical features and discourse functions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Review of Interlanguage Pragmatics: Requestive Speech Act

The field of interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) focuses on second language learners’ “comprehension and production of linguistic action, including discourse regulation” in the context of “general and especially cross-cultural pragmatics” (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993, p. 4). The major area of ILP research is *speech act performance*, especially in relation to *illocutionary* and *politeness* aspects (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993).

To clarify the present study’s rationale for investigating the pragmatic competence of Japanese learners of English, speech act theory and illocutionary acts should first be reviewed. Speech act theory originated in the field of linguistic philosophy, notably in Austin (1962) and Searle (1969; 1975). According to Austin (1962), there are three kinds of action

accomplished by each utterance: a *locutionary* act, an *illocutionary* act, and a *perlocutionary* act. A locutionary act is the physical act of producing an utterance and its surface meaning. An illocutionary act is the intended meaning of the utterance. A perlocutionary act is the effect achieved through the locution and illocution. The communicative intentions a speaker conveys through their utterances are the *speech acts*, such as requests, apologies, refusals, complaints, and expressions of thanks.

The notion of *directness* in relation to speech acts should also be discussed here, because analysing the level of directness in request strategies is the focus of the present study. In speech act theory, “the same act can be performed either directly or indirectly” (Achiba, 2003, p. 7). In *direct request strategies*, a speaker’s intentions are conveyed explicitly, in that “the propositional content (sentence meaning) of the utterance is consistent with the speaker’s intent” (p. 7). In contrast, *indirect strategies* are implicit, in that the propositional content of the utterances is not identical with the speaker’s meaning. For example, the locution of the statement “Can you pass me the salt?” is a simple question about the ability of the hearer to pass the salt. However, it can and usually does also have illocutionary force as a requestive speech act (asking the hearer to pass the speaker the salt). Whether the statement is interpreted as a request depends on the hearer’s derivation and interpretation of the speaker’s implied meaning on the basis of the surface meaning.

O’Keefe, Clancy, and Adolphs (2011) further note that “the illocutionary force of many utterances is not reflected in the sentence form since indirectness in speech acts occurs when the locution does not fully determine the illocutionary force of the same utterance” (p. 87). An extreme example of an indirect requestive speech act is illustrated in Blum-Kulka (1989, p. 40): “The kitchen seems to be in a bit of a mess.” This utterance occurred in a conversation between roommates, and the hearer was the last to use the kitchen. Although its literal meaning does not convey any request to the hearer, the illocutionary force of the speech act will successfully be interpreted by the hearer as part of inferring the speaker’s intention, by referring to contextual and *co-textual* knowledge and experiences. In this condition, the speaker does not flout any conversational principles, according to Searle (1975). Thus, the first sentence with “can you” is a *conventional indirect speech act*, while the second example is categorised as a *non-conventional indirect speech act* (Blum-Kulka, 1989).

Drawing on Searle (1975), Blum-Kulka (1989) explains *conventionality*, stating that “certain forms habitually used to perform certain acts become the conventional ways for performing these acts” (p. 33). Thus, the sentence “Can you pass me the salt?” is immediately recognised as a request rather than a literal question about the hearer’s ability to pass the salt (O’Keefe, Clancy, & Adolphs, 2011, p. 87). According to Searle (1975), examples of *conventional indirect speech acts* are “Can/could you hand me the salt?”, “I would like you to go now,” “I want you to do this for me,” “I’d rather you didn’t do that,” “Would you mind not making so much noise?” and “Would you like some help?”, and so on. In sum, *conventional indirectness* is different from *non-conventional indirectness* in terms of the level of pragmatic ambiguity it contains (Blum-Kulka, 1989). Requests can be made using different levels of directness, and the study of speech acts provides a useful means of relating linguistic form to communicative intent (Achiba, 2003).

In the present paper, realisations of *modification patterns* in requestive speech acts are identified in the learner corpus and analysed. Work in the area of *politeness theory* helps clarify the concept of modifications. Brown and Levinson (1987) expanded Goffman’s (1967) metaphor of *face*, which they later defined as “the public self-image that every member of society wants to claim for himself” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 61). They developed a theory of politeness centred on *face-threatening acts* (FTAs), of which requests are one type (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989, p. 11). The notion of face includes two opposing components: *positive face* refers to our need to enhance our positive image, for instance the need

to be acknowledged by others and accepted as part of a group, while *negative face* refers to our need or desire to become independent and free from actions imposed on us by others (O’Keefe, Clancy, & Adolphs, 2011). *Politeness strategies* are used to satisfy these two face needs, according to Brown and Levinson (1987). An FTA is a communicative act performed by the speaker that may threaten the hearer’s face (whether negative, positive, or both). With respect to requestive speech acts, Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) explain that the “hearer can interpret requests as intrusive impingements on freedom of action, or even as a show in the exercise of power; speakers may hesitate to make the request for fear of exposing a need or risking the hearer’s loss of face” (pp. 11–12). The request is a pre-event where the speaker imposes on the hearer by requesting a future effort from the hearer, manipulating the use of *mitigation* in the request so as to compensate for the imposition on the hearer (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989).

2.2 Previous Studies on L2 Speech Acts and Coding Scheme for Requests

The present study uses a coding scheme designed by researchers involved in the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Patterns (CCSARP) project (Blum-Kulka, 1987; Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989). The goal of the project was to investigate cross-cultural and intralingual variation in requests and apologies across seven different languages and language varieties, including Australian English, American English, British English, Canadian French, Danish, German, and Hebrew. The researchers stated that “[t]he goal of the project is to look for intra-lingual, situational, [and] cross-linguistic variation in the use of these two speech acts” between native and non-native speakers (Blum-Kulka, 1987, p. 132).

The initial stage of coding identifies the core of the request sequence, represented as (b) the Head Act in Tables 1 and 2, as the minimal unit that realises the request. In isolating the Head Act, the following parts are also identified: (a) Alert and (c) Supportive Move (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989, pp. 275–276; Salgado, 2011, p. 247). The following tables show example sentences with definitions for each part.

Table 1

Alert and Head Act

(a) Alert	a term of address or attention getter	(b) Head Act	the minimal unit that realises the request; the core of the request sequence
<i>Excuse me,</i>		<i>could you give me a lift to town?</i>	

Table 2

Head Act and Supportive Move

(b) Head Act	(c) Supportive Move	a unit external to the request, which modifies its impact by either aggravating or mitigating its force
<i>Could you clean up this mess?</i>	<i>I’m having some friends over for dinner tonight.</i>	

The second stage of coding identifies whether the dominant perspective of the request is that of the *hearer*, the *speaker*, *both participants*, or *impersonal* (none of those) (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989). The previous example, “Could you give me a lift to town?” is *hearer dominant*, as the “request can be realized from the viewpoint of the hearer” (Salgado, 2011, p. 247).

Next, “the level of directness by which the request is realized” (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989, p. 278) is identified by classifying the Head Act into one of three types of request strategies. As mentioned in the section of “Review of Interlanguage Pragmatics”, the first type are direct request strategies, in which “a requester wants to make the illocutionary point of his/her utterance explicit”; this type can be illustrated by *imperatives* (“*Clean up the kitchen, please*”), *obligations* (“*You must/have to move your car*”), *performatives* (“*I ask/require you to move your car*”), *wishes* (“*I would like to borrow your notes for a little while*”), and *desires/needs* (“*I want/need to borrow your notes*”) (Salgado, 2011, p. 248). The second type are *conventionally indirect strategies*, proceeding via formulae referring to aspects such as *ability* (“*Could you lend me your notes?*”), *willingness* (“*Would you mind lending me that money?*”), and *suggestion* (“*How about \$40?*”). The third type are *indirect request strategies*, “where the speaker’s intentions are not clearly stated and the hearer has to infer the request” (Salgado, 2011, p. 249).

In the fourth stage, the linguistic features that modify the Head Act of the request are identified. These modifications are of two types: *internal modification* and *external modification*. Internal modification modifies the Head Act internally, and can be broken down into three subtypes: *syntactic downgraders*, *lexical and phrasal downgraders*, and *upgraders*. *Downgraders* are used to reduce the *impositive force* of the request by means of syntactic or lexical choices, while *upgraders* are used to increase the impact of the request (Salgado, 2011, pp. 249–250). Syntactic downgraders can be exemplified by features such as *interrogatives*, *negation*, *tense*, and *modals*; lexical downgraders are illustrated by *politeness markers* (“*please*”), *subjectivizers* (“*I wonder*”), *downtoners* (“*possibly*”), and *interpersonal markers* (“*I mean*”); and upgraders include items such as *adverbial intensifiers* (“*really*”) and *commitment indicators* (“*I’m sure*”) (Salgado, 2011, pp. 250–251). External modification is not essential to realising a request, but rather helps to reduce the impositive force of the request. This type of modification functions as a *supportive move*, and like internal modification, can be of several types, such as *grounders* (reasons and explanations), *preparators* (“*I’d like to ask you something*”), *threats*, *cost minimizers*, *disarmers*, *promises*, and *confirmations* (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989, pp. 287–288; Salgado, 2011, p. 251).

Using the coding scheme developed by the CCSARP project, Trosborg (1995), Kaneko (2004), and Salgado (2011) conducted research on the correlation of interlanguage pragmatic competence with lexico-grammatical skills of language learners at different proficiency levels. These scholars worked with learner data, including examples of speech acts such as requests and apologies, and compared them with native speakers’ data. Similar to the CCSARP project, Trosborg (1995) and Salgado (2011) used DCTs. According to Trosborg (1995), who investigated the communicative acts of requesting, complaining, and apologising, learners at higher proficiency levels use similar strategies to those used by native speakers, especially in terms of the use of syntactic modification, such as conditional sentences as a type of conventionally indirect strategies. Salgado (2011) compared Mexican learners of English at three different proficiency levels with native speakers in terms of requests and apologies. She concluded that even advanced learners were not pragmatically successful, although they had acquired higher grammatical skills, and that basic learners with lower grammatical skills tended to rely more on their L1 pragmatic strategies than intermediate and advanced learners.

Among subject groups consisting of Japanese learners at various proficiency levels, Takahashi and DuFon (1989)

examined role-play interactions, while Hill (1997) employed a DCT. The former study showed that as proficiency increased, learners' chosen strategies proceeded from less to more direct, and that the less direct strategies adopted by early learners could be attributed to L1 transfer. On the other hand, Hill's DCT research indicated that Japanese learners used more direct strategies and fewer conventionally indirect ones than native speakers did, but learners at higher levels of proficiency showed a similar tendency to the native speaker norm.

In contrast, Kaneko (2004), investigating extracts from the NICT JLE Corpus, examined the types of request strategies used by 76 subjects given a role-play task that required them to negotiate with a landlord, shop assistant, or railway station staff. The subjects were of mid-intermediate to advanced proficiency (Levels 5 to 9 on the Standard Speaking Test; see next section). It was found that the learners at Level 5 showed the lowest frequency of request strategies, and that most of the strategies adopted by Level 6 and 7 learners were direct ones. Moreover, the frequency and indirectness of the strategies used by learners at Levels 8 and 9 showed tendencies closest to those of native speakers.

In general, in these previous studies, advanced learners tended to perform like native speakers in that they more frequently used indirect strategies, while basic learners used these strategies less frequently (the only exception is the findings from Takahashi and DuFon [1989]). Achiba (2003) points out, however, that the claims of these studies vary in terms of "the *extent* to which low proficiency learners make use of direct strategies" (p. 12; italics added).

As mentioned above, DCTs have often been used as a typical method of data collection in research on speech acts (Adolphs, 2008), including studies on Japanese learners of English such as Cole and Anderson's (2001) longitudinal study on indirect conversational strategies and Takahashi's (1996) study on the transferability of L1 pragmatic competence into an L2. Similarly, Schauer (2009) investigated the developmental process of request strategies among learners studying abroad in an L2 context, using an original multimedia elicitation task. However, studies based mainly on DCTs or elicitation tasks have been criticised for not representing the features found in naturally occurring interactions (Chang, 2010). Ellis (1994) highlights the importance of "unplanned language use" in "naturalistic settings" (p. 82), and Granger (2002) argues that the kinds of studies are based on a limited number of subjects, making research results difficult to generalise. The small-scale studies on DCTs may fall in a category favouring "experimental and introspective data" that "tends to be dismissive of natural language use data" (Granger, 2002, p. 5). One useful resource to overcome this difficulty is computer learner corpora (CLCs), which include data from a larger number of speakers. CLCs produce more generalised conclusions from analyses of larger amounts of quantitative data that can generate more reliable frequency results, indicating what is most likely to occur in natural language use by L2 learners (Granger, 2002).

Adolphs (2008) conducted corpus-based research on pragmatic functions in spoken discourse, and admits that it is not clear "whether the growing development of international spoken corpora might be a useful resource for investigations in cross-cultural pragmatics" (p. 9). In addition, it is difficult to compare the validity of different methods used in pragmatic research, such as DCTs or similar elicitation formats (Adolphs, 2008, p. 9). Nevertheless, he also notes that "drawing on a corpus of spoken discourse for the analysis of pragmatic functions has relevance for language description [...] notably English language teaching and learning," as "a shift in focus towards a communicative approach in ELT has [...] created a particular need for context-sensitive descriptions of pragmatic functions, and a corpus-based analysis of such functions might provide useful evidence in this context" (p. 133). He attributes the relatively small number of corpus-based studies on speech functions to the fact that corpus-based studies are typically focused on lexical behaviours or concordance lines than on language functions or longer stretches of discourse.

3. The Background to the Study

3.1. The NICT JLE Corpus

The NICT JLE Corpus contains more than 1 million words of transcripts of approximately 1,200 Japanese EFL learners taking a speaking proficiency test called the Standard Speaking Test (SST) (Izumi, Uchimoto, & Isahara, 2004). The SST is a 15-minute oral interview developed according to the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) protocol of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). Table 3 shows the distribution of subjects, types, and tokens for each level of proficiency.

The SST has five stages: (1) answering warm-up questions (3–4 minutes), (2) describing a single picture (2–3 minutes), (3) engaging in a role-play scenario with the interviewer (1–4 minutes), (4) narrating picture sequences (2–3 minutes), and (5) answering questions which aims to wind down the subjects' tension (1–2 minutes). The subjects who took the test were assessed holistically and grouped into nine proficiency levels: Novice (Levels 1, 2, and 3), Intermediate Low (Levels 4 and 5), Intermediate Mid (Levels 6 and 7), Intermediate High (Level 8), and Advanced (Level 9).

Table 3

The Distribution of Subjects, Types, and Tokens for Each Level in the NICT JLE Corpus

SST Level	Proficiency	Subjects	Types	Tokens
Level 1	Novice Low	3	217	1,440
Level 2	Novice Mid	35	1,516	20,788
Level 3	Novice High	222	6,025	211,625
Level 4	Intermediate Low	482	10,120	606,951
Level 5	Intermediate Low Plus	236	8,290	365,330
Level 6	Intermediate Mid	130	6,867	219,646
Level 7	Intermediate Mid Plus	77	5,455	139,534
Level 8	Intermediate High	56	4,981	112,185
Level 9	Advanced	40	4,429	85,420

3.2 The SST Levels and the Reference Level Descriptions (RLDs) of the CEFR

The CEFR provides reference level descriptions for six proficiency levels: *Basic User* (levels A1 and A2), *Independent User* (B1 and B2), and *Proficient User* (C1 and C2). As mentioned before, the SST was developed using the ACTFL OPI; the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview by Computer (OPIC) is now available, and it is thus possible to convert CEFR levels to OPI and SST levels and vice versa, as shown by Tschirner and Bärenfänger (2012) and Martínez Baztán (2008). Tschirner and Bärenfänger attempted to assign CEFR ratings to OPIC and OPI ratings using the German language, following “the benchmarking protocol established by the Council of Europe to link the ACTFL OPI and OPIC to the CEFR”; assignment of ratings was done by six “experienced tester trainers and testers for [T]he European Language Certificates (TELC)” (p. 3). In contrast, Martínez Baztán (2008) was involved with Spanish language. According to Tschirner and Bärenfänger (2012), “there

are clear correspondences between CEFR and ACTFL ratings at the levels Novice High, Intermediate Low, Intermediate Mid, Intermediate High, Advanced Low, and Superior,” while Advanced Mid and Advanced High each align with two CEFR levels (p. 13). Tschirner and Bärenfänger affirm that their findings are relevant not only to German but also to the other languages included in the TELC suite of languages (English among them) because there is high inter-rater reliability across languages between TELC tester trainers.

The current study adopts the equivalences between CER and ACTFL standards proposed by Martínez Baztán (2008) and Tschirner and Bärenfänger (2012). Therefore, SST Level 9 corresponds with CEFR B2.1 to C2, Level 8 with B1.2, Levels 7 and 6 with B1.1, Levels 5 and 4 with A2, Level 3 with A1, and Levels 2 and 1 are below A1. The CEFR also provides an illustrative scale for “transactions to obtain goods and services” in the domain of “spoken interaction” with other scales such as “formal discussion and meetings” and “information exchange” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 89). According to this scale, B2, C1, and C2 learners “can cope linguistically to negotiate a solution to a dispute like an undeserved traffic ticket,” “can outline a case for compensation, using persuasive language to demand satisfaction and state clearly the limits to any concession he/she is prepared to make,” and “can explain a problem which has arisen and make it clear that the provider of the service/customer must make a concession.” B1 learners “can deal with most transactions likely to arise,” “can cope with less routine situations in shops, post offices, banks, for example, returning an unsatisfactory purchase,” “can make a complaint,” and “can deal with most situations likely to arise when making travel arrangements through an agent or when actually travelling.” A2 learners “can deal with common aspects of everyday living such as travel, lodgings, eating and shopping,” “can get all the information needed from a tourist office, as long as it is of a straightforward, nonspecialised nature,” “can ask for and provide everyday goods and services,” “can get simple information about travel, use public transport: buses, trains, and taxis, ask and give directions, and buy tickets,” “can ask about things and make simple transactions in shops, post offices or banks,” “can give and receive information about quantities, numbers, prices, etc.,” “can make simple purchases by stating what is wanted and asking the price,” and “can order a meal.” A1 learners “can ask people for things and give people things,” and “can handle numbers, quantities, cost, and time.” The evaluation of learners’ performances in the role-plays that were the focus of the present study should help illuminate the criterial features of their pragmatic competence.

However, the assignment of SST levels to CEFR ratings adopted here is not perfectly reliable. The SST was developed based on the OPI, but was adapted to Japanese learners of English in Japan (Izumi, Uchimoto, & Isahara, 2004); therefore, it is not absolutely clear that the assignment of OPI levels to CEFR ratings applies perfectly to the SST. Kaneko and Izumi (2012) addressed difficulties in the alignment of the SST and the CEFR-Based Framework for ELT in Japan (CEFR-J), which provides finer-grained ratings than the CEFR, especially for Pre-A1, A1, and A2 levels. For example, Kaneko and Izumi asked six SST evaluators to examine statements in the CEFR-J and assign SST levels to the CEFR-J, but found that the SST level 4 extended across A1 or A2 levels, while both SST Levels 6 and 7 matched best with the same rating, B1.1. Therefore, the alignment conducted by Tschirner and Bärenfänger (2012) may not be applicable to Japanese English learners, who mostly belong to A1 and A2 levels.

4. Research Questions

In order to explore the criterial features of pragmatic competence that distinguish different levels of proficiency in the NICT JLE Corpus, the present study focuses on the learner data for role-play tasks at Stage 3 of the SST. Specifically, the following research questions are addressed.

RQ1: What kinds of language features in requestive speech acts function as criterial features to distinguish different levels of proficiency in the NICT JLE Corpus, referring to the reference level descriptions in the CEFR?

RQ2: How do the SST levels as represented in the NICT JLE Corpus correspond with the CEFR Levels in terms of pragmatic competence?

5. Research Methods

5.1 The Data from the NICT JLE Corpus

The NICT JLE Corpus is composed of interview scripts from the SST, including spoken data (utterances) from both the interviewees (below, the “subjects”) and the interviewers. There are five topics in the role-plays: “Invitation,” “Landlord,” “Shopping,” “Travel,” and “Train.” Each topic has two or three difficulty levels: beginner, intermediate, and advanced. The interviewer decides which version of a given topic should be used by estimating the interviewee’s proficiency during their initial interactions in the interview.

The present paper considers interviewee data from the Shopping and Train role-playing tasks as part of preliminary research into the identification and annotation of the linguistic features realised in requestive speech acts in a Japanese EFL context. Ten files or fewer (that is the greatest number of files) from each proficiency level were chosen for the analysis. In total, 161 out of 1,281 total subjects in the corpus were investigated. Tables 4 and 5 show the features of the files analysed as well as the distribution of tokens and turns by the subjects and interviewers, counted using the Perl programme. The proportion of total data for lower-intermediate proficiency levels (such as Level 4) that was analysed is relatively low, around 10%, because the majority of learner data in the NICT JLE Corpus represents these levels. It can be seen that the number of tokens per subject increases from level to level as proficiency develops, although there is not a big gap in the number of turns between proficiency levels.

In the role-play tasks, the interviewer plays the role of a shop assistant or railway station staff, while the interviewee plays the role of a customer or passenger who visits a shop or train station. In the Beginner and Intermediate versions, the interviewee is given a task where their final objective is to purchase a particular item by asking for information about price, quantity, and method of payment. In the Advanced versions, in contrast, the interviewee is given a situation where they have already bought a particular item or a train ticket and they need to visit the shop or train station to negotiate a refund or exchange of the purchased item with the interviewer.

Table 4

The Distribution of Data in the Shopping Task

Difficulty of Task	Beginner			Intermediate		Advanced			
SST Level	L1	L2	L3	L4	L5	L6	L7	L8	L9
Number of Analysed Files	1	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
Proportion of Files Analysed in “Shopping”	100%	83.3%	100%	10.6%	50%	33.3%	50%	76.9%	83.3%
Subjects’ Tokens	25	331	1002	1093	1439	1361	1758	1881	2337
Subjects’ Turns	8	130	141	158	188	111	143	160	172
Interviewers’ Tokens	101	913	841	1046	1054	872	1024	1162	1145
Interviewers’ Turns	8	135	145	160	190	112	147	165	176

Table 5

The Distribution of Data in the Train Task

Difficulty of Task	Beginner		Intermediate			Advanced			
SST Level	L1	L2	L3	L4	L5	L6	L7	L8	L9
Number of Analysed Files	2	8	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
Proportion of Files Analysed in “Train”	100%	100%	15.6%	7.1%	27.8%	71.4%	50%	76.9%	90.9%
Subjects’ Tokens	56	280	913	1056	1031	1673	1665	2156	1765
Subjects’ Turns	20	90	115	136	135	120	114	123	127
Interviewers’ Tokens	141	662	642	807	827	809	805	973	1020
Interviewers’ Turns	20	94	114	136	134	121	120	128	132

5.2 Analysis: Annotating the Requestive Speech Acts

Following Salgado's (2011) "Coding Instructions for Requests" (pp. 247–252), which originated in the CCSARP project (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989), the following tags were used to manually annotate the speech acts in the extracted corpus data for linguistic features. The frequency of each annotation was counted using a Perl program and the concordancer AntConc 3.2.4w. Tables 6 to 9 show the list of annotations and examples from the corpus.

According to Leech (2014), "[pragmatic competence] consists of [...] pragmalinguistic competence and sociopragmatic competence" (p. 15), which "are not to be studied in isolation from one another" (p. 15). The analyses in the present study deals only with pragmalinguistics, which "concerns such phenomena as the range of lexico-grammatical resources of the language, their meanings, the degree of pragmaticalization, their frequency, and how they are deployed as linguistic strategies" (p. 14). Whether learners' utterances "seem appropriate or normal in a given social setting (p. 14)" in terms of degree of politeness is not in the scope of the current study at this preliminary stage. Sociopragmatic politeness may potentially be affected by the social distance between speaker and addressee, as determined by "variation in age, gender, social class, and locality" (p. 14), and also by "a range of cultural factors" (p. 14). Not only the formal properties of requests but also the interconnection between pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic politeness should be investigated further in the future.

Table 6

The Structure of Head Acts

Identification	Tags	Meaning of Abbreviation
Head Act	<HA>	
Request Perspectives		RQ=request
Speaker-oriented dominance	<RQ dmc="s">	dmc=dominance; s=speaker
Hearer-oriented dominance	<RQ dmc="h">	h=hearer
Impersonal dominance	<RQ dmc="imp">	imp=impersonal
The Level of Directness		
Direct	<DR str="X">	DR=direct; str=structure
Conventionally Indirect	<CI str="X">	CI=conventionally indirect
Indirect	<ID>	ID=indirect

Table 7

Three Types of Request Strategy

Classification	Tags (Abbreviation)	Corpus Examples
Direct Request Strategy		
Imperatives	<DR str="imp"> (imp=imperative)	<i>Give me this.</i>
Obligations	<DR str="obligation">	<i>You should/must X.</i>
Elliptical Phrases	<DR str="inf"> (inf=infinite)	<i>Jacket.</i>
Desires	<DR str="desire">	<i>I want/need X.</i>
Wishes	<DR str="wishes">	<i>I wish/would like X.</i>
Declarative Statement	<DR str="state"> (state=statement)	<i>I will take this one.</i>

Conventionally Indirect Request Strategy		
Ability	<CI str="ability">	<i>Can I X?/Could you X?/I can X./You can X.</i>
Willingness	<CI str="willingness">	<i>Will you X?/Would you X?/Do you mind X?</i>
Suggestory	<CI str="suggestory">	<i>Why don't you X?/Why not X?/How about X?</i>

Table 8

Classification of Internal Modification

Classification	Tags (Abbreviation)	Corpus Examples
Lexical Patterns (LD = Lexical Downgrader; mkr = marker)		
Politeness marker	<LD mkr="polite">	<i>please/kindly</i>
Downtoner	<LD mkr="downtoner">	<i>maybe/rather/just/simply</i>
Upgrader	<LD mkr="upgrader">	<i>such/so/very/quite/really</i>
Interpersonal marker	<LD mkr="intper"> (intper = interpersonal)	<i>you know/well</i>
Subjectivizer	<LD mkr="subjectivizer">	<i>I think/I wonder/I am afraid/I would really appreciate it</i>
Hedge	<LD mkr="hedge">	<i>kind of/sort of/somehow</i>
Tag question	<LD mkr="tag">	<i>Isn't it?/did you?</i>
Consultive device	<LD mkr="consultive">	<i>Do you think....?</i>
Syntactic Patterns (SD = Syntactic Downgrader)		
Past tense	<SD mkr="tense">	<i>I wanted X./I was wondering if X./I thought I could X./I was thinking whether X.</i>
Progressive aspect	<SD mkr="aspect">	<i>I am looking for X./I was wondering if X./I was thinking whether X.</i>
Interrogative	<SD mkr="intrg"> (intrg = interrogative)	<i>Can you can you tell me?</i>
Negation	<SD mkr="negation">	<i>You don't have you don't have any faster than local one?</i>
Declarative	<SD mkr="dec"> (dec = declarative)	<i>I can get here?</i>
Modal	<SD mkr="modal">	<i>I wou I would be grateful if you can give me just the next train's ticket or something.</i>

Table 9

Classification of External Modification

Supportive Moves (SM=Supportive Move)		
Grounder	<SM function="grounder">	<i>Like because, you know, I can't do anything with this.</i>
Preparator	<SM function="preparator">	<i>If you don't mind/if possible/if you can</i>
Threat	<SM function="threat">	<i>So please trust me. If you don't accept my offer, you surely lose your customer, one customer.</i>
Cost minimizer	<SM function="costmini"> costmini = cost minimizer	<i>So could you please exchange the ticket to the next train? I don't need a reserved one.</i>
Disarmer	<SM mkr="disarmer">	<i>I like this one, but...</i>
Promise	<SM function="promise">	<i>This is just one time and I will I will not do it again. So please, please help me.</i>
Confirmation	<SM function="confirm">	<i>It's OK?/Is that possible?</i>

6. Results

This section presents a quantitative description of the linguistic features that indicate the requestive function in the speech acts investigated here. First, the level of directness is analysed in terms of three different types of request strategy: direct, conventionally indirect, and indirect. Second, the distribution of various patterns of syntactic and lexical downgraders that function as internal modifications of direct and conventionally indirect strategies is shown. Finally, the frequency and types of external modification are analysed.

6.1 Three Types of Request Strategies Showing the Level of Directness

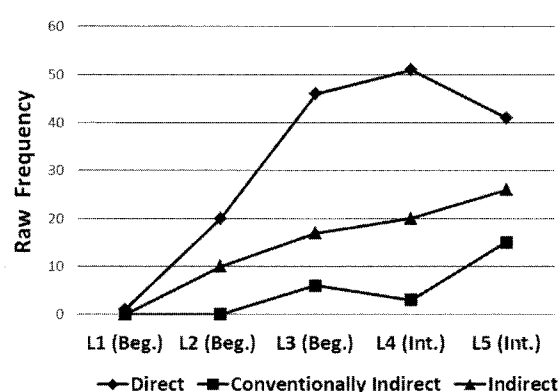


Figure 1. Strategies in lower group for "Shopping."

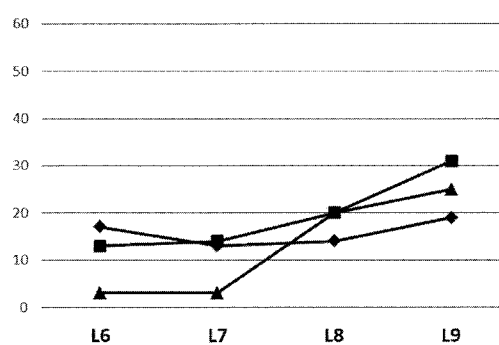


Figure 2. Strategies in higher group for "Shopping."

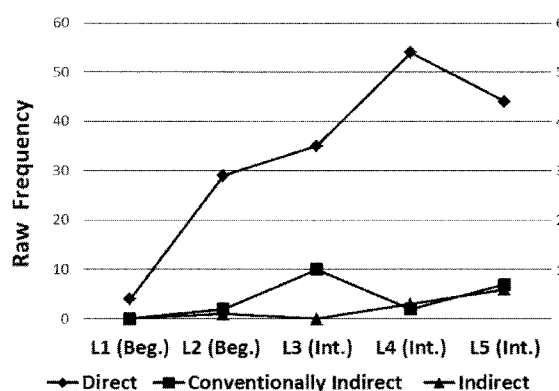


Figure 3. Strategies in lower group for "Train."

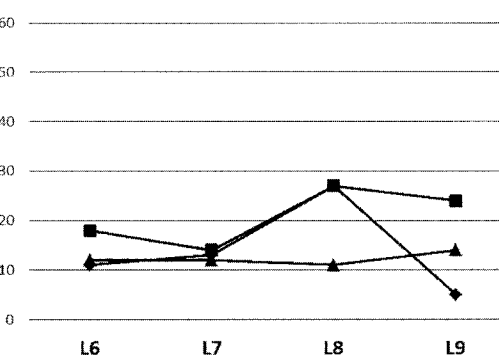


Figure 4. Strategies in higher group for "Train."

All the proficiency groups from Level 1 to Level 5, for both "Shopping" and "Train," show the highest proportion of requests using the direct strategy, as illustrated in Figures 1 and 3. The conventionally indirect strategy was only produced by learners at Levels 3, 4, and 5 for these topics, and at lower frequency than the indirect strategy for the Shopping task. Total frequency of strategy use increased with proficiency level because the learners tended to produce more utterances as their proficiency level went up, as shown in Tables 4 and 5. Nevertheless, the frequency of direct strategy use dropped from

Level 4 to Level 5 in the beginner and intermediate groups, for both tasks.

Figures 2 and 4 show the results for the three types of request strategies as observed in the advanced role-play task, which required the negotiation of a refund or exchange with a shop assistant or railway station staff. First, the distribution for Level 5, the highest of the lower levels, was compared with that for Level 6 on the advanced task. A small difference in proficiency between Level 5 and Level 6 was expected according to the SST scale; however, for the Shopping task the total occurrence of request strategies produced by the subjects at Level 6 was only 33 as compared to 82 at Level 5, as shown in Figures 1 and 2. In addition, Figures 3 and 4 show that those given the Train task and graded as Level 6 produced 41 occurrences, compared to those at Level 5, who produced 57 occurrences. This indicates that the subjects who worked with the beginner and intermediate versions adopted somewhat different interactional strategies from the subjects given the advanced version.

The most frequent patterns produced by the subjects at Levels 8 and 9 were conventionally indirect strategies, in both Shopping and Train tasks. Figure 2 shows that subjects at Levels 6 and 7 given the Shopping task produced direct strategies as frequently as conventionally indirect ones but that the frequency of indirect strategies was low compared to that of Levels 8 and 9. The frequency of indirect strategies produced by the subjects given the Train task was almost the same across all four levels from Level 6 to Level 9, as seen in Figure 4.

6.2 Patterns of Direct Request Strategies

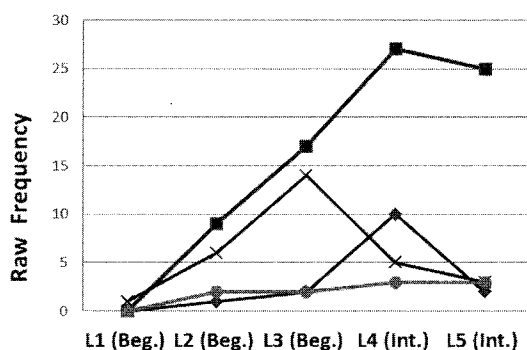


Figure 5. Direct, lower group, "Shopping."

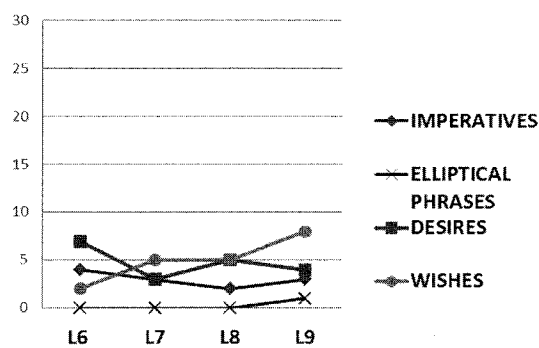


Figure 6. Direct, higher group, "Shopping."

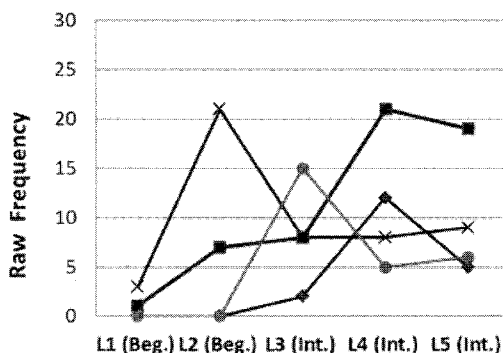


Figure 7. Direct, lower group, "Train."

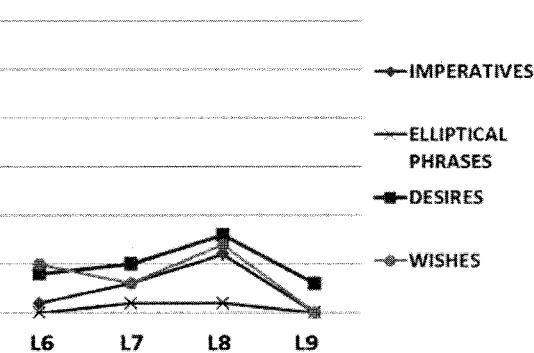


Figure 8. Direct, higher group, "Train."

The distribution of syntactic patterns for direct strategies, specifically imperatives, elliptical phrases, and wishes, is shown in Figures 5 to 8; obligations, performatives, and declarative statements, which were infrequent in the data, are omitted. Examples of these patterns are presented in Table 7.

It can be seen in Figures 5 and 7 that the strategy of desires was most frequently used by Levels 4 and 5 for both “Shopping” and “Train.” The frequency of this pattern in the higher group was lower than in the lower group, for both tasks. Elliptical phrases were frequently used by Levels 2 and 3 in both tasks, and their occurrence for Level 2 in the Train task was the highest among all the proficiency levels.

With regard to wishes, in the Shopping task their frequency tended to rise as proficiency increased. In contrast, the frequency of this pattern for the Train task dropped at Level 4, and tended to stabilise thereafter until Level 8. The frequent occurrence of wishes in Level 3 may be related to the drop in desires. Finally, remarkably, the use of wishes was not observed in Level 9 in “Train,” but reached its highest occurrence at this level in “Shopping.”

The use of politeness marker “please” as a lexical downgrader should be mentioned. Level 4 (in both tasks) showed the highest frequency of “please” amongst all levels, with 13 occurrences (10 with imperatives and 1 each with elliptical phrases, desires, and wishes) for “Shopping” and 16 occurrences (12 with imperatives and 4 with elliptical phrases) for “Train.” Although there were no occurrences for Level 1 in the Shopping task, or for any of Levels 1, 2, 6, and 9 in the Train task, 100% of imperatives that do occur were modified with “please” at each level of proficiency, except for Level 7 in “Shopping,” where two out of three were so modified. Elliptical phrases were common in the lower group, where between 10% and 50% of them were modified with the politeness marker “please.” In contrast, these learners rarely modified desires, wishes, and declarative statements with “please.” For example, at Level 4 in the Shopping task “please” was used with only 1 out of 27 utterances (3.7%): “I want to twenty-four inch I inches one, *please*.”

6.3 Patterns of Conventionally Indirect Strategies

Figures 9 to 12 show the frequency distribution of conventionally indirect request strategies. (Conventionally indirect strategy is abbreviated as “CI” in Figures.) The most typical patterns used were ability, willingness, and suggestory. The first two types were realised with the use of modal verbs such as “can,” “could,” “shall,” “may,” “would,” and “will,” as well as “would you mind” and “do you mind,” while illocutionary intent of the third type was realised with formulaic phrases such as “how about” and “why don’t you.” The distribution of ability patterns increased with proficiency level, and in particular with a rather drastic rise at Level 9 for “Shopping” and at Level 8 for “Train.” In contrast, all three of the patterns mentioned above were only observed from Level 3 onwards in the lower group, and the distributions fluctuated. The willingness and suggestory patterns were observed only infrequently even after Level 5 (less than five occurrences in all at the advanced level).

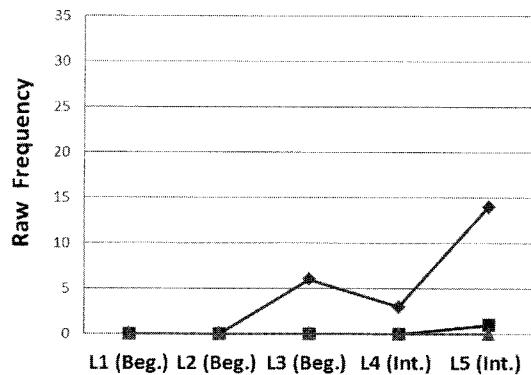


Figure 9. CI, lower group, "Shopping."

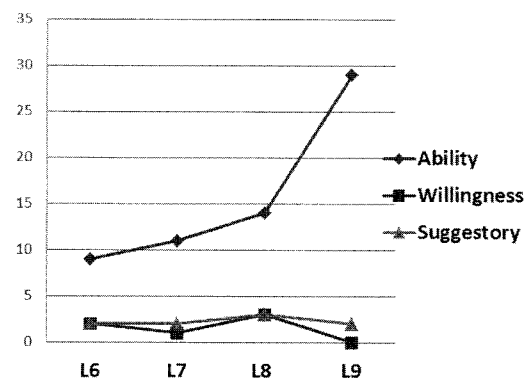


Figure 10. CI, higher group, "Shopping."

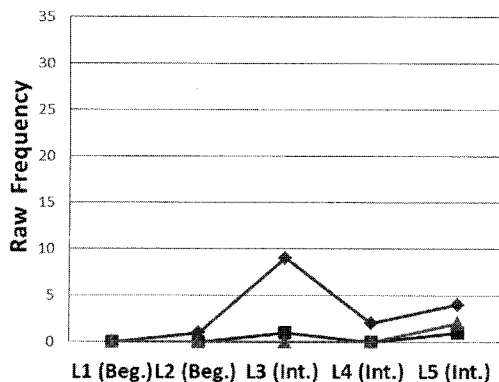


Figure 11. CI, lower group, "Train."

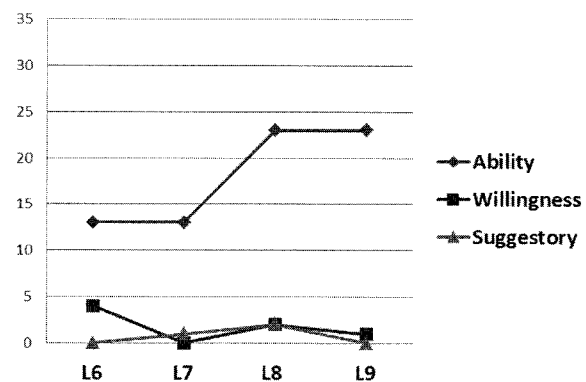


Figure 12. CI, higher group, "Train."

Ability was the most frequent type among these three, and the modal verbs used with it are described in Figures 13 to 16. In the lower group, for both "Shopping" and "Train," "can" was used more frequently than the other modal verbs; however, in the higher group, "could" was used as frequently as "can" overall, and gradually increased with proficiency level, with the exception of Level 7 for "Shopping." This drop might be related to the sudden increase in the use of "could." Interestingly, "can" was again produced more than "could" by Level 9, for both "Shopping" and "Train."

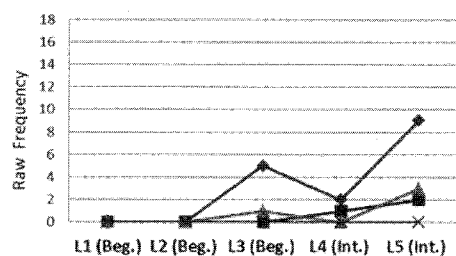


Figure 13. Modals, lower group, "Shopping."

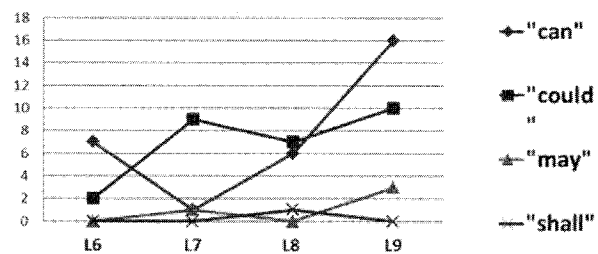


Figure 14. Modals, higher group, "Shopping."

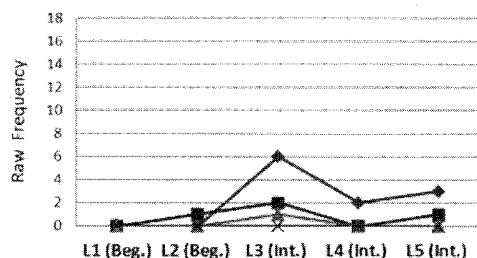


Figure 15. Modals, lower group, "Train."

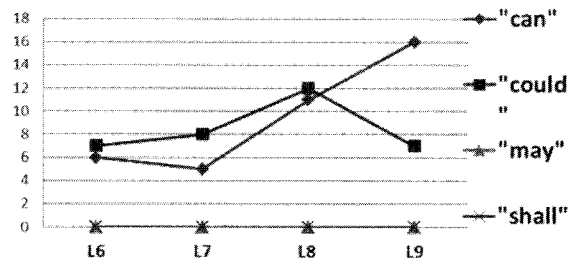


Figure 16. Modals, higher group, "Train."

The willingness and suggestory patterns were relatively infrequent compared to ability. It is difficult to ascertain the real prevalence of the use of these patterns on the basis of the data considered here, which came from 10 subjects or fewer per proficiency level. However, qualitative investigation indicated that their frequency may have been affected by individual lexical preference. For example, the results for Level 8 in the Shopping task showed four occurrences of willingness patterns produced by one particular subject. In trying to persuade the shop assistant to allow an exchange of an item previously bought, this subject produced several utterances like "But actually I don't like it so *will* you exchange it into, ur is it into money?" "Ahh. But ur if it was not on holidays, *will* you exchange it?" and "*Will* you take a look around and ask the manager?"

In addition, the use of the verb "mind" was found at Levels 7 and 6 for "Shopping," only as in "Do you *mind* changing this swe sweater more smaller one?" and "So would you *mind* changing another er shirts instead?" Regarding suggestory patterns, there were only nine occurrences for "Shopping" and six occurrences for "Train." The phrase "why not" was produced by five subjects during the Shopping task and two during the Train task, while "how about" was used by four subjects in each task.

6.4 Types of External Modification

The distribution of external modification is shown in Figures 17 to 21. (External modification is abbreviated as "EM" in Figures.) Grounder patterns, which convey a reason to modify a Head Act, were the most common type in both groups and for both tasks. Their frequency increased with proficiency level in the higher group for the Shopping task, while their frequency for the Train task fluctuated between 15 and 25. In contrast, the frequencies of other patterns such as cost minimizer, confirmation, preparator and threat were infrequent. External modification was only observed at Level 3 in the lower group, although the average frequency was approximately 12 for "Shopping" and 4 for "Train." The patterns of confirmation (abbreviated as "comfirm", which confirms the understanding of the hearer), cost minimizer (abbreviated as "costmini"), preparator, and threat were rarely used in the lower or the higher group (less than five each).

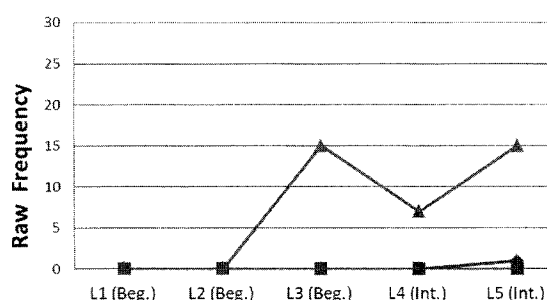


Figure 17. EM, lower group, "Shopping."

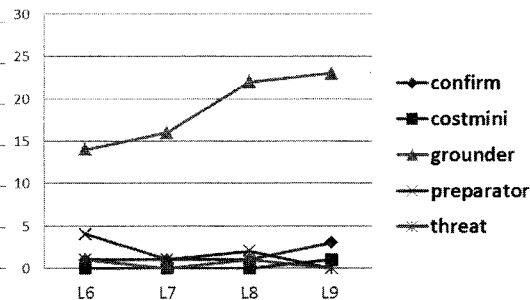


Figure 18. EM, higher group, "Shopping."

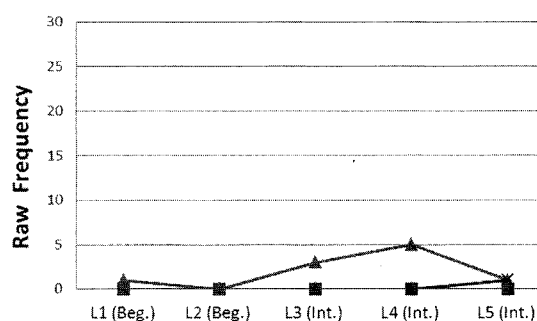


Figure 19. EM, lower group, "Train."

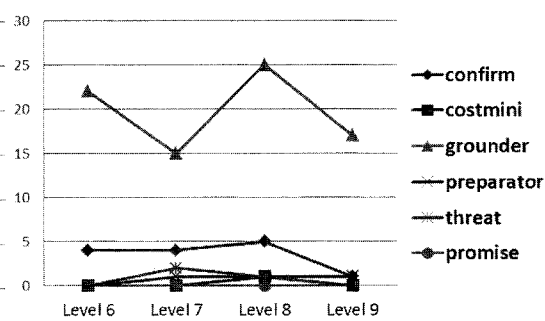


Figure 20. EM, higher group, "Train."

7. Discussion

Regarding the types of request strategies and their level of directness, it was found that direct strategies were more preferred by lower learners than by higher learners. However, as learners' proficiency developed, the use of conventionally indirect and indirect strategies gradually increased, probably replacing direct strategies, which decreased at the same time. In the beginner and intermediate versions of the task, these lower learners were given a general transaction task and were only required to express their desire to purchase an item. Therefore, lower learners tended to be more direct because the need to redress face-threatening effects when making a request was low, although it may also be true that they had not yet acquired or been able to produce request strategies showing modification. However, the advanced group, who were required to negotiate a refund or exchange of the item, tended (especially in Levels 8 and 9) to choose conventionally indirect and indirect patterns in order to persuade the interviewer to give them the refund or exchange. In situations where more concessions were required, the degree of imposition the request placed on the hearer may have been higher than in the other versions.

The main feature that distinguishes learners at Levels 2 and 3 (i.e. novices) from those at Levels 4 and 5 (low intermediate) is the choice between elliptical phrases and desires among their direct strategies. First, elliptical phrases were rarely used in higher groups, but in beginner and intermediate groups. Beginners used elliptical phrases more and desires less, but this tendency reversed in intermediate learners. In higher groups of both tasks, the ratio of wishes, imperatives, and desires were almost the same (except for Level 9 in "Train").

In terms of syntactic and lexical patterns in the indirect strategies, ability patterns were the most typical among the three

types. Comparing the use of “can” and “could” in requests, “could” was generally treated as a more polite form. It is likely that the high frequency of “could” in the higher group (except in Level 6 for “Shopping”) indicated that higher learners might have already realised the difference in the degree of politeness between these forms and they tended to be more aware of face-threatening acts in their requests.

The willingness and suggestory functions can also be contrasted with ability, in a way that might explain why the former two patterns were relatively infrequent in both tasks. Willingness and suggestory patterns are speaker-oriented, a less polite perspective than the hearer-oriented one, according to the literature on requests, including Trosborg (1995) and Salgado (2011). Thus, compared to willingness, the choice of suggestory patterns indicates that the speaker is likely to be more demanding as a customer by making a suggestion in the form of a requestive speech act. Finally, the forms “do you mind” and “would you mind,” which are “used as polite requests” (Leech, 2014, p. 166), were found to be very rare in the present data and produced only by the most advanced learners.

Regarding the politeness marker “please,” 50% or less of elliptical phrases produced by all target learners was modified by it, in comparison with almost 100% in the case of imperatives. Table 10 shows the distribution of “please” as a lexical downgrader in direct and conventionally indirect strategies for both Shopping and Train tasks, across the nine proficiency levels. The numbers in brackets show the proportion of the total number of lexical downgraders accounted for by “please.” Example utterances are given in Tables 11 and 12.

Table 10

The Distribution of “Please” in Direct and Conventionally Indirect Strategies

SST Level	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Direct Strategies (%)	1 (100)	9 (100)	200 (95.2)	29 (96.7)	20 (95.2)	7 (70.0)	6 (85.7)	8 (44.4)	5 (26.3)
Conventionally Indirect Strategies (%)	0	0	1 (100)	0	0	3 (44.4)	0	12 (46.2)	7 (36.8)

Table 11

Examples of the Use of “Please” in Direct Strategies

SST Level	Examples
1	I want ticket, <i>please</i> .
2	One adult ticket, <i>please</i> .
3	I, I, <i>please</i> take it.
4	I want to twenty-four inch inches one, <i>please</i> .
5	<i>Please</i> mhm give me one ticket.
6	I'd like to I I ask you to re urr exchange the ticket to other urr trains. So, <i>please</i> .
7	<i>Please</i> . I need to go as soon as possible.
8	And <i>please</i> let me know if it is possible after you er talking with your manager.
9	So if you would <i>please</i> let me return it for.

Table 12*Examples of the Use of “Please” in Conventionally Indirect Strategies*

SST Level	Examples
3	I I can get brown one, <i>please</i> .
6	Would you <i>please</i> explain why it is not impo erm possible for you?
7	So could if I bought er more than this, could you accept this refund or could you could you accept this er clothes once again, <i>please</i> ?
8	I hope you can apecs accept the situation and change the the train ticket, <i>please</i> .
9	If you er get touch with him, could you <i>please</i> c ah let me know.

According to Table 10, from Levels 1 to 7 more than 70% of the lexical downgraders produced in direct strategies consisted of the politeness marker “please.” However, this percentage dropped in Levels 8 and 9 as they increased their production of other lexical modifiers. Table 11 shows example utterances from Levels 1 to 5 in which “please” modifies direct strategies using the verb “want,” that is, of desires and the form of imperatives. Examples of Levels 6 and 7 show that the Head Acts of the request (such as “I’d like to I I ask you to re urr exchange the ticket to other urr trains.” and “I need to go as soon as possible.”) were externally modified by a *request markers* “please”: for example, “So, please” and “Please.” Thus, “please let me ...” is an formulaic imperative pattern produced at Levels 8 and 9 that should be distinguished from the patterns of “please” with directive verbs characteristic at lower levels, such as this utterance of Level 5: “*Please* mhm give me one ticket.” Tables 10 and 12 show that “please” was infrequently used in conventionally indirect strategies from Levels 1 to 7, but that the raw frequencies and proportions of “please” in Levels 8 and 9 were slightly higher in conventionally indirect strategies than in direct ones.

These results indicate, first, that the target learners were able to produce the modifier “please” correctly at lower levels of proficiency such as Levels 1 and 2. As their proficiency increased, these learners realised that making a request with an imperative form and elliptical phrase was too direct and tried to reduce the imposition entailed by their request by adding “please.” According to the utterances at Levels 1, 3 and 4, seen in Table 11, desires (“want”) and declarative statements were modified by “please,” a type of production which should be treated as unnatural (as in “I *want* ticket, *please*.”). That is, as their proficiency increased, the learners tended to use “please” in direct and indirect strategies of various forms.

8. Conclusion and Implications for Future Studies

The aim of the study was not to compare the learner data with that of native English speakers or with the learners’ use of their L1 as baseline data, as in the prior literature. Rather, the goal was to identify criterial features that can distinguish each level of proficiency. However, as Tables 4 and 5 show, the numbers of subjects available at Level 1, for both tasks, were too small, making them non-comparable to those at other proficiency levels. Thus, dealing with the small scale (10 subjects per level for each task), a statistical analysis was not conducted to determine whether the results were significant. As a result, it is too early to conclude whether criterial features disting uis hing each SST level or the corresponding CEFR levels can be identified from the results of this study. Despite these shortcomings, the findings do indicate that some linguistic features can distinguish the lower group (SST Levels 1 to 5, or CEFR A2, A1, and Pre-A1 learners) from the higher group (Levels 6 to 9,

or B1 and B2 learners) as follows. In response to RQ1, we can conclude that the characteristic criterial features of requestive speech acts as identified in the NICT JLE Corpus extracts are the use of elliptical phrases and desires in direct strategies, as well as the use of the politeness marker “please,” which modifies all occurrences of imperatives and which even lower learners were able to produce. In addition, the higher group is distinct from the lower group in terms of its tendency to choose conventionally indirect strategies with “could” preferred to “can,” as well as its production of grounders in external modification, as supportive moves. Finally, the increase in conventionally indirect strategies with increasing proficiency levels corresponds with the results of previous studies such as Hill (1997) and Kaneko (2004).

With regard to RQ2, it is difficult at this preliminary stage to conclude whether the proficiency levels of the NICT JLE Corpus correspond accurately with the CEFR levels in terms of pragmatic competence. First, the NICT JLE Corpus includes learner data taken from different types of tasks, due to the structure of the interview test from which this corpus originates. The choice of degree of directness of request strategy may have been influenced by the nature of the tasks. It is usually expected that neighbouring levels like Levels 5 and 6 will show similar choice distributions between the three types of request strategies if they follow a developmental transition. However, the drastic decrease in occurrences at Level 6 cannot be explained by developmental patterns. To avoid FTAs in requestive speech acts, speakers generally try to downgrade or upgrade the imposition of the request on hearers, using various patterns of modification. The power relation between the subject (in this case, the customer) and the interviewer (the shop assistant or railway station staff) may also change depending on whether the customer is willing to make a purchase or whether the shop assistant has to compromise because of an unreasonable request by the customer. Therefore, the methodology of classifying request strategies according to their modification patterns is not the best one to identify criterial features in the NICT JLE Corpus.

Instead, more language contexts and functions should be included in the analysis of role-play tasks, rather than treating requests simply as one type of discourse functions. It is necessary to identify and annotate language functions not only where requests occur but also for other speech acts, such as apologies, complaints, refusals, and thanks, with reference to the CEFR illustrative scales as shown in the section of “The SST Levels and the Reference Level Descriptions (RLDs) of the CEFR.” With this kind of approach to criterial features, it is possible to clarify each situation where these speech acts arise, regardless of the type of task given to the subjects. Language learners manipulate their *communication strategies* and *negotiation of meaning* in order to compensate for their lack of command of the language. Their interlanguage speech act performance may not be realised in linguistic features like those already identified in theoretical or cross-cultural pragmatics and speech act theory, which are basically based on the use and performance of native speakers. In addition to the use of simple forms for direct request strategies, such as the use of politeness marker “please” with elliptical forms or imperatives, presented here, more language patterns produced by learners with lower proficiency can and should be identified, as they may be more indicative of L1 transfer or influence.

As one possible future framework for this kind of analysis, the author’s ongoing study (Miura, 2014) can be considered. Miura developed three annotation schemes in order to provide an overview of developmental transition in interlanguage pragmatics, by annotating the Shopping task role-play data from 200 learners in the NICT JLE Corpus, plus 11 native speakers. In addition to the annotation scheme for requestive speech acts discussed in the present study, two other annotation schemes were invented to address two matters: (i) *repairing interactions* and (ii) *shopping transactions*. The repairing scheme was developed based on Kasper and Ross (2007) and the Council of Europe (2001). Each segment of the utterance was annotated as one of four types: *rephrasing one’s own utterances*, *repeating one’s own utterances*, *echoing others’*

utterances, or *confirming others' utterances* due to lack of understanding. Discourse markers such as “I mean,” “sorry,” “well,” and the use of Japanese were tagged as supporting elements. Miura's shopping transaction scheme identified two major categories: *dealing with transaction* and *communication for transaction*. The scheme uses a total of 73 annotations for language functions, including “expressing the intention to purchase an item,” “asking for an alternative item,” and “negotiating for discount.” In addition, each segment is categorised in terms of the naturalness of the utterance, referring to contexts including the interlocutors' questions. A natural unit was considered to be instantiated if the utterance was produced relevantly in a given context with no grammatical errors (including tense, inflection). Unnatural utterances were categorised as either *coherent*, *incoherent*, or having an *unnatural topic comment structure* such as “I want the shoes colour is umm black.” Incoherent segments were further categorised by whether the utterance was *intelligible* or *unintelligible*. An incoherent but intelligible segment indicates that while the learner answered the interlocutor's question incoherently, the formal properties of the utterance had no errors, whereas an incoherent and unintelligible segment was erroneous in terms of both its form and its function.

Miura (2014) also attempted to incorporate the determination of the degree of politeness in her scheme of requestive speech acts. The annotated features were categorised into three degrees of politeness—low (i.e., less polite), mid (i.e., moderately polite) and high (i.e., highly polite)—drawing on the ordering of pragmalinguistic politeness categories proposed by Leech (2014). For example, direct strategies such as imperatives, elliptical phrases, desires expressed for instance by “I want/need,” and conventionally indirect strategies featuring speaker-oriented dominance such as “you could” were categorised as bearing a low degree of politeness. Mid-polite requests included conventionally indirect strategies featuring ability patterns “can/could you” and “may I,” willingness pattern “will/would you,” desire-patterned direct strategy “I would like,” and the use of politeness marker “please.” High politeness included conventionally indirect strategies such as willingness pattern “do/would you mind” and the use of lexical downgraders including subjectivizer “I am wondering if.” The quantitative results show that the proportion of requests with low politeness was the highest in the CEFR A1–correspondent (SST Level 3) and A2–correspondent (Levels 4 and 5) groups, but that mid-politeness was the highest in B1 (Levels 6, 7 and 8) and native-speaker groups. High politeness was rarely observed in the learner data or in that of native speakers. In addition, however, in the process of annotation with reference to contextual information, some utterances of a few advanced learners and native speakers using linguistic items of high politeness were found to be impolite, that is, more offensive with these highly polite linguistic items than comparable utterances using direct strategies produced by the lower level learners. This was because they conveyed sarcasm to the interlocutor, placing a high imposition on the hearer and leading to an impression of impoliteness. However, the occurrence of this type of impolite sociopragmatic performance was not considered at all in the results of the quantitative pragmalinguistic analyses presented here.

As mentioned in the Analysis section above, learners' production of pragmatic features in requests does not by itself account for their overall pragmatic competence (Leech, 2014). In future study, it will be necessary to appoint annotators who are culturally and socially able to determine the degree of politeness and appropriateness exhibited in terms of the contexts employed. A framework for the improvement of intra-annotator as well as inter-annotator reliability should be established, as a single annotator's assessment of whether an utterance is appropriately polite in terms of context is not objective enough. In short, in order to validly and reliably identify criterial features of pragmatic competence from a source such as the NICT JLE Corpus, not only pragmalinguistic features but also sociopragmatic performance should be measured.

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