

Politeness Strategies in Requests: A Comparative Study of Strategies Used by German Learners of English and British Native Speakers

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This study investigates differences in the perception and use of politeness strategies in English, comparing German learners of English (aged 15 to 18) and British native speakers. The data was gathered using a specifically constructed questionnaire which focused on requests and was based on Leech's Politeness Theory (Leech 2014). Participants were asked to phrase requests as well as rate given requests on a politeness scale ranging from "impolite" to "overly polite".

Two hypotheses were formulated on the basis of previous research (Pulaczewska 2014; Odlin 1989) and then tested against the data gathered:

1. German learners of English prefer more direct strategies in requests compared to British native speakers.
2. The longer the German participants in the study have had instruction in English, the more similar their answers will be to those of the native speakers.

The first hypothesis is not corroborated by the data. The German participants in the study rejected the direct imperative, which some of the native speakers judged as acceptable in some cases. The British native speakers, however, showed a stronger preference for very indirect strategies (such as *I was wondering if you could help me with this project.*) than the German students, who preferred conventionally indirect strategies (such as *Could you help me with this project?*) to both direct (e.g. 2nd person imperatives) and very indirect strategies.

The native speaker answers show a greater variation of the politeness level depending on the addressee, particularly with regard to the familiarity between speaker and addressee. While British participants used quite informal and direct requests with friends and parents on the one hand and high levels of indirectness with strangers on the other, the German participants tended to use a medium level of politeness towards all addressees, with only little variation. The study addresses different possible explanations for these results, taking into account linguistic as well as cultural and teaching-related issues.

The second hypothesis is supported by the data. The answers of the older group of German students were generally closer to those of the native speakers than were the answers of the younger group, indicating that a longer period of instruction correlates with more native-speaker-like intuitions and use of politeness strategies. However, some features are persistent throughout the German students' data. For example, while the British participants rated the two question variants with *can* and *could* roughly equally polite, both younger and older German participants perceived the questions with *could* as significantly more polite. Similarly, both German groups used *excuse me* more frequently in their freely formulated requests whereas the native speakers preferred apologies with *sorry*. A possible explanation explored in this study is the way politeness is portrayed in textbooks used in EFL teaching.

References

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