

## A Study on The Use of Downgraders in Request Realization: Contrasting Japanese Learners of English with Native Speakers of English

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**Abstract.** This study examines the respective influence of three factors on the realization of requests by Japanese EFL learners in high-imposition situations. These three factors were the Length of Stay in an English-Speaking Environment, the use of Syntactic Downgraders and the use of Lexical Downgraders. Request realizations in four different situations on a Discourse Completion Test were judged for appropriacy by a native speaker. These appropriacy scores were compared with each of the three independent variables above. It could be seen that all three factors had a significant effect on the appropriacy of requests. Qualitative analysis of the data, in which the requests of JEFLLs were compared with those of NSs, showed that JEFLLs used a limited range of syntactic downgraders and very few lexical downgraders at all, other than 'please', which was shown to be an ineffective downgrader as compared to other lexical downgraders. Conclusions could be drawn from this, concerning the positive effect of spending an extended period of time (more than three months) in an ESE, and also concerning the need for a greater variety of syntactic and, in particular, lexical downgraders to be included in teaching materials and explicit teacher input in the classroom.

### INTRODUCTION

According to Bachman (1990), 'pragmatic competence' sits alongside 'organizational competence' as one of the two chief constituents of communicative competence. 'Organizational competence' refers to our knowledge of form, whereas 'pragmatic competence' is concerned with use. Extensive grammatical and lexical knowledge of a language is useless as a communicative tool unless we know how and when to use that knowledge. Study into L2 pragmatics is generally termed interlanguage pragmatics or ILP (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996). Seminal works in this field include Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper (1989) and Kasper & Blum-Kulka (1993). More recently, attention has been focused on how pragmatic knowledge can be taught in the classroom, the kind of materials which can present it effectively, and how it can be accurately assessed (Rose & Kasper, 2001).

One of the main focuses of interest within the field of ILP has been Speech Acts, in particular requests and apologies. As they are both face-threatening by nature, and as their realization can vary considerably according to situation of use, they are

a rich area for insight into the development of pragmatic competence. Brown & Levinson (1987) showed the importance of the three factors of Power (P), Distance (D) and Ranking of Imposition (R) in the politeness of speech acts. Pragmatic competence requires the language user to be able to vary their language appropriately for these factors in a given situation in the given language. Negative sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic transfer from the L1 can result in pragmatic failure for the L2 learner.

This study focuses on the effective realization of requests in high Rank of Imposition situations by Japanese EFL learners (JEFLLs), as compared to Native Speakers of English (NSs). More specifically, it looks at the use of internal mitigation in requests, in the form of syntactic and lexical downgrading. Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper (1989) produced a comprehensive analysis of syntactic and lexical downgraders in their CCSARP Coding Manual. For reasons of space, readers are referred to that Manual for full details. Below are some of the more common examples of these downgraders: <sup>1)</sup>

### Syntactic Downgraders:

Could you lend me that book ?

- Past Tense Modal.

I was wondering if you could lend me that book.

- Past Tense and a Conditional.

### Lexical Downgraders:

Could you lend me that book, **please** ?

- Politeness Marker.

Could you be **a little** quieter ?

- Understater.

Could you **possibly** lend me that book ?

- Downtoner.

### EXAMPLES IN E-MAILS

Below are two real examples of the use of downgrading in requests. Both requests require a high level of imposition, and especially so in the second example. The first is written by a non-native speaker whereas the second is by a NS. They both include a mixture of syntactic and lexical downgrading.

#### Sample 1:

*Dear all,*

*Very sorry for using mass mail list for my own need.*

*But, does anybody have a book 'Discourse markers' edited by Andreas H. Jucker ? If anybody does, could I **just** borrow it **for an hour or so** as soon as possible ?*

*Thanks a lot.*

*Xxxxxxxxxxxxx*

This request (-P, +D, +R) by a Korean is fairly effectively realized through the use of a Conditional and two lexical downgraders. The weakpoint is the final phrase 'as soon as possible' which is Time Intensifier, and as such, a lexical upgrader.

#### Sample 2:

*Xxxx-sensei, would it be **possible** to have **a little more time** before I submit the paper. I could submit it to you by the end of this week – that is by Sunday evening November 3<sup>rd</sup>. Would that be ok ? I've been*

*too busy with teaching recently. But I have a few days now and I think I can get it finished by then. Is it ok to submit it by computer ? Could you let me know as soon as you read this. Thank you very much.*  
*Xxxxxxxxxxxx*

This second request (+P, +D, +R) by a NS in a panic about submitting a paper, includes three examples of syntactic downgrading and two cases of lexical downgrading, but also displays an inconsistency in the use of mitigation ('Is it okay', where 'Would it be okay' would be more consistent, and as in the previous example, the use of a lexical upgrader). This inconsistency can probably be interpreted as reflecting the writer's anxiety about the situation.

These examples demonstrate that appropriate mitigation in requests is complex and consists of different factors. It is difficult to determine whether syntactic or lexical downgrading has the stronger mitigating effect. One of the targets of this research is to try to isolate the factors that contribute to effective mitigation in order to discover more about their respective pragmatic impact on utterances.

### REVIEW OF PREVIOUS STUDY

This present study followed a study (Fukazawa & Fordyce, 2002), in which 96 third-year undergraduate students at a national university, who are majoring or sub-majoring in English (27 males and 69 females), were asked to complete a written Discourse Completion Test (DCT) with descriptions of 4 high-imposition request (+R) situations. The four situations varied as follows:

Situation 1: Request to an unfamiliar classmate (-P, +D)

Situation 2: Request to an unfamiliar professor (+P, +D)

Situation 3: Request to a familiar professor (+P, -D)

Situation 4: Request to a familiar classmate (-P, -D)

The students' responses were analysed for the use of syntactic and lexical downgraders. These were tallied according to the CCSARP Coding Manual (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989).

A series of one-way ANOVA tests were carried out for each situation in order to investigate the relationship between the use of syntactic and lexical downgrading and:

- (a) the students' grammatical competence (based on CELT scores)
- (b) the length of time students had spent in an English-Speaking Environment (ESE)

The following significant results could be ascertained:

- (1) As regards the use of syntactic downgraders, there was a significantly higher use of syntactic downgraders in situations 1 and 2 by students with higher grammatical competence, and also by students who had spent a longer period of time (longer than 3 months) in an ESE.
- (2) As regards the use of lexical downgraders; in situation 2 there was a marginally significant higher use of lexical downgraders by students with higher grammatical competence, and a very significantly higher use of them by students who had spent a longer period of time in an ESE.

## PRESENT STUDY

Both this previous study and the present study were motivated by noticing that although JEFLLs appeared to intend to be polite when making requests, their linguistic realization of requests could often come across as somewhat impolite or even rude. They were often unaware of this effect.

The results of the above study demonstrated that both syntactic and lexical downgrading were used more by students who had spent a long time in an ESE. The question posed itself, to what extent each of these three factors led to improved realization of requests in high-imposition situations. As a result the following research questions were put forward for the present study.

## Research Questions:

- (1) Does length of residency in an ESE have an influence on Native Speaker (NS) judgment ?
- (2) Does the use of syntactic downgraders have an influence on NS judgment ?
- (3) Does the use of lexical downgraders have an influence on NS judgment ?

## Data Collection Instrument:

The frequency of use of syntactic and lexical downgraders, as well as the groupings of students with reference to their time spent in an ESE, were taken from the data in the previous study (see above).

Each of the request realizations for situations 1 to 4, by each of the participants in the study, were judged by a native speaker (one of the authors of this paper) according to the scale below:

- 2 Impolite
- 1 A little impolite
- 0 Appropriate request in that situation
- 1 A little too polite.
- 2 Much too polite.

It is important to stress here that these appropriacy judgments were made several months before this analysis was carried out, and the judgments were made on the basis of an 'overall impression' and without any microanalysis of the linguistic forms used in the request.

The data for the three dependent variables were grouped as follows:

- (a) Length of Residency in ESE:  
**Long** (3 months +); **Medium** (2 weeks – 3 months); **Short** (less than 2 weeks)
- (b) Use of Syntactic Downgraders:  
**High User** (2 or more downgraders in a request); **Low User** (0 or 1 downgrader)
- (c) Use of Lexical Downgraders:  
**High User** (1 or more downgraders in a

request); **Low User** (no downgraders)

The reason for the difference in requirement for a High User between Syntactic and Lexical downgraders (at least 2 uses for the former group and one for the latter) was simply that it became evident from the data that far more syntactic than lexical downgraders were used by the students. In order to divide the groups into reasonably balanced ones for statistical analysis, this division was necessary.

For each of the groups in each of the four situations, the Mean and Standard Deviation of the appropriacy judgments were calculated. These were then put into tabular and graph form (see Table 1 and Figure 1 below).

For lexical downgraders, two separate sets of data were calculated (see Tables 3 & 4). Firstly, the word ‘please’ was included in the calculations, whilst in the second count it was excluded. The reason for this was the hypothesis that the word ‘please’ has limited pragmatic effect, whereas other lexical downgraders have a stronger effect.

**SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

**(1) Length of Stay in an ESE:**

Table 1 demonstrates that spending more than 3 months in an ESE significantly improves the appropriacy of request realizations. On the other hand, there is little difference between the results for the **Medium** and **Short** groups.

Table 1 Effects of Length of Residency in ESE on Native Speaker Judgment

Group	Situation 1 Mean (SD)	Situation 2 Mean (SD)	Situation 3 Mean (SD)	Situation 4 Mean (SD)
<i>Length of Residency (N)</i>				
Long (28)	-0.86 (.756)	-0.54 (.637)	-0.79 (.499)	.00 (.720)
Medium (29)	-1.34 (.721)	-1.21 (.774)	-1.24 (.689)	-.03 (.566)
Short (31)	-1.42 (.720)	-1.42 (.672)	-1.23 (.617)	-.23 (.805)

Situation 1 (Unfamiliar classmate) Situation 2 (Unfamiliar professor) Situation 3 (Familiar professor)  
 Situation 4 (Classmate, Friend)

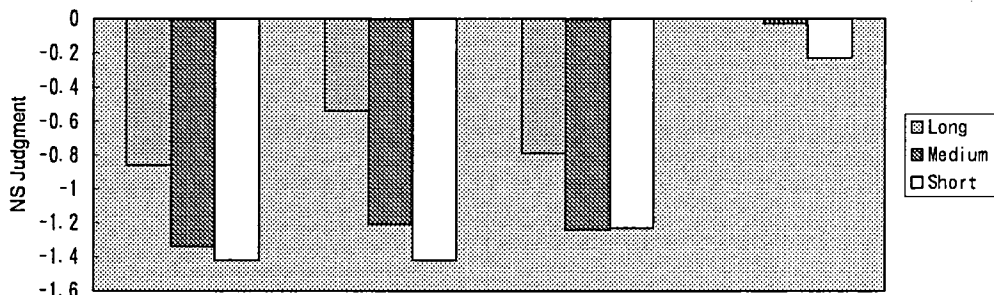


Figure 1: NS Judgment according to Length of Residency

Table 2 Effects of Syntactic Downgraders on Native Speaker Judgment

Group	Situation 1 Mean (SD)	Situation 2 Mean (SD)	Situation 3 Mean (SD)	Situation 4 Mean (SD)
<i>Syntactic Downgraders</i>				
High-user(2+)	-0.68 (.59)	-0.82 (.72)	-0.74 (.44)	.74 (.73)
Low-user(0-1)	-1.87 (.34)	-1.69 (.60)	-1.67 (.48)	-.32 (.55)

Situation 1 (Unfamiliar classmate) Situation 2 (Unfamiliar professor) Situation 3 (Familiar professor)  
 Situation 4 (Classmate, Friend)

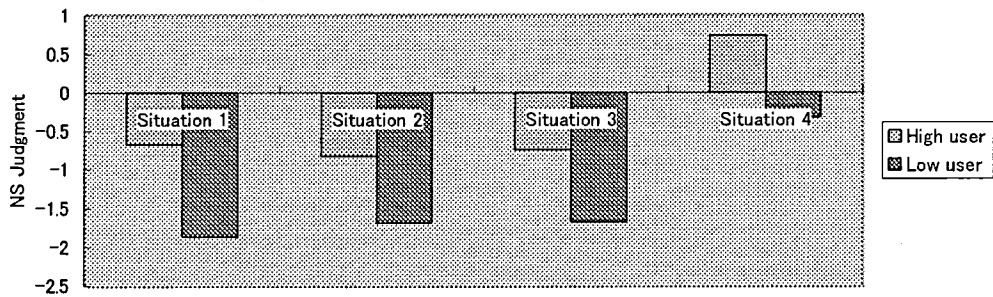


Figure 2: NS Judgment according to Frequency of Syntactic Downgraders

Table 3 Effects of Lexical Downgraders on Native Speaker Judgment

Group	Situation 1 Mean (SD)	Situation 2 Mean (SD)	Situation 3 Mean (SD)	Situation 4 Mean (SD)
<i>Lexical Downgraders</i>				
High-user (1+)	-1.26 (.84)	-.80 (.78)	-1.43 (.51)	-.11 (0.72)
Low-user (0)	-1.23 (.62)	-1.19 (.78)	-1.07 (.66)	-.12 (.74)

Situation 1 (Unfamiliar classmate) Situation 2 (Unfamiliar professor) Situation 3 (Familiar professor)  
 Situation 4 (Classmate, Friend)

Table 4 Effects of Lexical Downgraders on Native Speaker Judgment (without please)

Group	Situation 1 Mean (SD)	Situation 2 Mean (SD)	Situation 3 Mean (SD)	Situation 4 Mean (SD)
<i>Lexical Downgraders</i>				
High-user (1+)	-.50 (.63)	-.33 (.49)	*	.75 (.96)
Low-user (0)	-1.40 (.70)	-1.19 (.77)	-1.15 (.65)	-.15 (.69)

Situation 1 (Unfamiliar classmate) Situation 2 (Unfamiliar professor) Situation 3 (Familiar professor) Situation 4 (Classmate, Friend)  
 \*For Situation 3, no students used lexical downgraders other than 'please'.

**(2) Use of Syntactic Downgraders:**

For situations 1, 2 and 3 there is a clear difference between the appropriacy of the requests of **High-Users** as compared to **Low-Users** (see Table 2). There is also a very consistent difference in means across these three situations, varying from a difference of 0.97 for Situation 3 to 1.19 for Situation 1. For Situation 4 we can see that **Low Users** of syntactic downgraders are more pragmatically appropriate, as the informality of this situation does not require much mitigation in the request. It should be clarified here that the groups of **High-Users** and **Low-users** are calculated separately for each situation, so an effective student would be a **High-User** for situations 1 to 3 and a **Low-User** for Situation 4.

**(3) Use of Lexical Downgraders (including 'please'):**

There was little difference in the mean scores across the four Situations for lexical downgraders when 'please' was included in the data (see Table 3).

**(4) Use of Lexical Downgraders (excluding 'please'):**

In Situations 1 and 2 there is a clear difference in the appropriacy of the requests by those students who used 1 or more lexical downgraders other than 'please'. In both cases the mean score is nearly 1 point higher for the **High-User** group (see Table 4). It needs to be pointed out here that the number of **High-User** was very low in each case, and in the case of Situation 3 there were no cases of lexical downgrading so a **High-User** score could not be

calculated. However, the mean for **Low-Users** (in this case all of the participants) was very similar to those for Situations 1 and 2. Just as for Syntactic Downgraders, in Situation 4, the **Low-Users** were more pragmatically appropriate.

It can be seen from this final set of data that the hypothesis about the lower effect of ‘please’ as compared to other lexical downgraders appears to be true.

### QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

The quantitative analysis above shows clear difference in the effects of each of the three independent variables on the appropriacy of requests by JEFLLs. By looking at the requests on the DCTs it is possible to look at the patterns of requests which reflected the different levels of appropriacy judgments.

In the table below are examples of typical

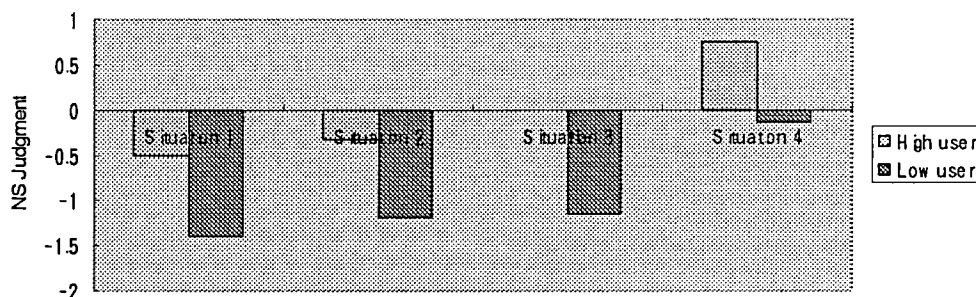


Figure 3: NS Judgment according to Frequency of Lexical Downgraders

Table 5 Typical characteristics of NS / NNS requests<sup>2</sup>

	Native Speakers	Japanese EFL Learners
Situation 1 [unfamiliar classmate]	<i>Hey, I'm in the next room trying to study for a test and I could hear your radio and cell phone quite clearly. The walls here are pretty thin, [so would it be possible to keep the volume down a little? I would really appreciate it.] Thanks. [a]</i>	(0) <i>Excuse me. [Would you mind if I ask you to turn down the radio and not to make a noise of cellular phone?] I'm studying in the next room. [b]</i> (-1) <i>Excuse me. [Could you turn down the volume?] I can't concentrate to study.</i>
Situation 2 [unfamiliar professor]	<i>Excuse me, Professor Brown. I am afraid my schedule is a little busy this afternoon. [Is there anyway we might meet tomorrow morning?] [c]</i>	(-1) <i>I suppose you are busy but I can't meet you at that time. [Could you change the time of my interview, please?] [d]</i>
Situation 3 [familiar professor]	<i>Is there anyway you could let me use this book? I shouldn't need it too long. It would really help me out with my paper. [c]</i>	(-2) <i>It is the book that I'm looking for long time. [So please lend me this book.] I want to use it. [e]</i>

- [a] This NS request includes two lexical downgraders in one Head Act. Amongst the 96 Japanese EFL learners (JEFLLs), there were no requests for any of the situations which included more than one lexical downgrader.
- [b] Effective requests by JEFLLs in Situations 1, 2 and 3 tended to have one of these structures: **Would you mind, if or Could you possibly**
- [c] Some of the native speakers used the structures in [b] but the most common choice for '+Power' (Situations 2 & 3) situations was this '**Is there anyway + Pronoun + Past Modal**' structure. None of the 96 JEFLLs used this structure in any of the situations.
- [d] This was a typical '-1' structure for situations 2 and 3. The student used one syntactic downgrader and the word 'please'. If the student had dropped 'please' and replaced it with 'possibly', it would have carried a more appropriate level of mitigation.
- [e] A large number of students, and generally those with little experience in an ELE, used the Imperative + 'please' structure for requests. They appear to be unaware of the forceful effect this would have on the listener, causing it to be inappropriate in High Imposition situations.

responses from the Japanese students on the DCT, and for comparison, on the left hand side, responses taken from DCTs filled out by Native Speakers are included. Examples are included for each of the first three situations, in which the request realizations were generally found to be lacking in politeness. Below the table are some qualitative comments on these examples.

## PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

### (1) Teaching Materials

A study of Japanese High School textbooks (Fukazawa, 2002) shows that there is a lack of variety of syntactical downgraders presented in these materials, and that no lexical downgraders other than 'please' are presented. In situations where requests are presented, there is little variation for Power, Distance and Ranking of Imposition. The textbooks appear to be too neutral as regards pragmatic content. These are issues which appear to need addressing in the light of the results above.

McCarthy (2001) states that 'much lexical output consists of multi-word units; language occurs in ready-made chunks.'. Acquisition of language includes the ability to retrieve and use such chunks, which include units such as 'Would it be **possible** to', 'I was wondering if'. This appears to be another issue that needs to be looked at with regard to the presentation of appropriate pragmatic input to JEFLLs.

### (2) Input Enhancement / Metapragmatic Awareness

From the textbook analysis above, it is clear that students are not presented with a varied enough input for effective acquisition of pragmatic knowledge. It is also the role of the teacher to ensure that learners are presented with explicit information and are given the opportunity to develop their metapragmatic awareness (cf, Takahashi, 2001). Students need to become aware of the possibility of negative transfer from the L1 (cf, Takahashi, 1996). In Situation 3 in this study, JEFLLs

used less mitigation than for Situation 2, whereas NSs showed no significant differentiation in their use of mitigation. This could be explained by negative transfer, in that in Japan it is more normal for students to be on more informal terms (at least linguistically) with professors they know well than with those they do not know so well.

## CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF RESEARCH

It is clear from this research that lexical downgraders play a significant role in the realization of appropriate request forms, a fact that may not have been taken into account sufficiently by some material writers and curriculum developers. The advantages, from the point-of-view of development of pragmatic knowledge, of spending time studying in an ELE are also demonstrated here.

To further develop this research, and to probe further into the exact nature of the respective effects of syntactic and lexical downgrading, the following steps will be carried out:

- (1) The size of samples for both JEFLLs and NSs will be increased.
- (2) Other NSs will be asked to rate the requests for appropriacy, thereby improving their reliability level.
- (3) Two-way ANOVA tests will be carried out in order to measure the relative effects of syntactical and lexical downgrading on the appropriacy of requests.

## NOTES

- 1) In this paper, in examples, syntactic downgraders are underlined and lexical downgraders are in bold type.
- 2) Key to Table 5:  
The words between the square brackets constitute the Head Act of the request.  
The numbers in brackets [(-1)etc.] refer to the appropriacy judgment for this request.

Examples of syntactic downgraders are underlined.

Examples of lexical downgraders are in bold type.

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