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# IMPERATIVES IN HOTEL SERVICE ENCOUNTERS: THE CASE OF JORDANIAN LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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**Abstract:**
This paper examines the language of requests among the hotel trainees in Jordan. It seeks to explore the ways in which the trainees employ requestive strategies at the service counter in managing interpersonal and cross-cultural communication. Specifically, it discusses the Jordanian trainees' use of imperative requests compared with native speakers hotel staff and relates any divergences to politeness and cultural factors. The data collected include conversations between the trainees and hotel guests. The findings demonstrate that trainees rely more on imperative constructions and they favour conventional imperatives more than any other types. The findings also reveal that the trainees deviate from the native speakers' performance in terms of volume and types of strategies used. Some of these deviations may be due to Arabic language influence, pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic transfer or to insufficient linguistic and pragmatic competences.

**Keywords:** imperatives, requestive strategies, pragmatic competence, hotel service encounter, cross-cultural communication

## 1. Introduction

Many studies have been conducted on service encounter in diverse settings. One of the first studies that attempted to study service encounter (SE) in public settings is Merritt's (1976) work in convenience stores. Service encounter (SE) can be defined as "*everyday*

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*interactions between the customer and the server whereby some commodity (information or goods) will be exchanged*" (Ventola, 2005, p. 19). Research on SE, as claimed by Barron and Schneider (2009), has mainly focused on three levels of analysis, namely, interactional, actional and stylistic levels. The interactional level studies focus on features of interaction such as openings and closings; the actional level focuses on different speech act realisations, and the stylistic looks at level of address forms used. Concerning the actional level, the majority of studies have focused on requests and mitigating devices used, and the impact of specific request formulae on politeness (e.g., Placencia, 2004). Research has revealed that SEs follow some general patterns, and include essential and non-obligatory elements (Solon, 2013). Kidwell (2000) observed that a regular organisation of SEs would include an opening, request for service, an optional element that she terms 'interrogative series', the provision, or not, of the service and a closing move. Because of the goal-oriented nature of the transaction, SEs normally exhibit similar patterns though "*there is room for individuality, idiosyncrasy and even for a small measure of creativity*" (Coupland & Yläne-McEwen, 2000, p. 203).

Face-to-face SE is generally characterised by conciseness, explicitness, prevalence of directives and the participant's clearly-defined roles, rights and duties (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2005). Besides, SE usually tends to "*constitute a one-time interaction between individuals who have never been in contact before and who will probably never be in contact again*" (Márquez-Reiter & Bou-Franch, 2017, p. 667). There are some exceptions to these one-time exchanges, as for instance, in hotel service encounters where guests may stay for some days and some kind of interpersonal relationships and rapport is established between the guest and the frontline staff.

SE researches primarily relied on natural data, collected either by audio-recording or using field-notes. In SEs, natural data should be used to capture "*a faithful representation of reality*" (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2005, p. 29). Nonetheless, some studies have used discourse-completion tests or role-plays (e.g., Félix-Brasdefer, 2010; Cruz, & López, 2017) to make comparison of a large number of participants. These studies observed pragmatic variation in different SEs.

In this paper, the focus is on requests strategies in a specific service encounter, that is, the hotel frontline to examine the degree of directness of requests. Studies focusing on the language used in hotel contexts are rather minimal (e.g., Blue & Harun, 2003; Yuen, 2009). Requests are important speech acts because they occur very frequently in everyday encounters. The inappropriate use of the requestive acts by non-native learners of language can make them look rude or impolite and every so often communication breakdown may occur (Trosborg, 1995). Native speakers may consider pragmatic errors to be more serious than syntactic or phonological errors (Koike, 1994). Blum-Kulka (1992) pointed out that requesting style is a good index of a cultural way of speaking. Learners have to acquire the sociopragmatic knowledge such as the effect of social factors on speech acts production in the target culture, and pragmalinguistic knowledge such as the politeness expressions in the second language (L2) to avoid being considered rude or impolite by native speakers.

Thus, this paper attempts to explore requests in English within the Jordanian context, in which English is a foreign language (EFL). The paper offers a contribution in the area of interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) among Jordanian L2 learners of English. More specifically, it focuses on the hotel trainees' requestive behaviours in English language and such behaviours are compared to the native speakers' of English (NSE) ways of managing requests. The intention is to see whether the Jordanian hotel staff members deviate or follow English native speakers' performance of requests in hotel service encounters.

## 2. Literature Review

Sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic variation of request realisations is a well-explored area in the literature, stemming from the seminal work by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989). In their Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP), Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) collected data on requests and apologies in eight languages for an intra-lingual, situational and cross-linguistic examination of similarities and differences in the realisation patterns of those speech acts. From this research, a vast body of studies followed it, especially on requests, due to their potentially negative effect on the hearer's negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

ILP deals with how non-native speakers (NNSs) realize and produce speech acts in a target language (TL) or L2 and how their knowledge related to L2 speech acts is acquired (Kasper & Dahl, 1991). L2 learning includes more than the acquisition of phonological, lexical, and syntactic knowledge of the target language. Rather, it also necessitates learning the pragmatic rules of the target language to use it in a native-like manner (Hassall, 2003). Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1986) pointed out that a competent learner should acquire socio-cultural rules appropriately along with grammatical competence because communication failure may occur when second language (L2) learners do not have sufficient socio-cultural knowledge of the target language. To improve communicative competence, researchers recognised the significance of pragmatics aspects in second language learning and focused on interlanguage pragmatic (ILP) studies. Some ILP studies, which focused on examining the production and understanding of speech acts by L2 learners compared to that of native speakers, found that learners display the L2 pragmatic production and comprehension differs from that of the native speakers of a target language (TL) (Bardovi-Harlig, 2019; Kasper, 1997). Other studies which examined the learners' pragmatic competence found that learners diverge from the TL native speakers' pragmatic norms. They tend to produce speech acts that are considerably more direct or less direct or use different modifiers in terms of volume and types than native speakers (e.g., Hassall, 2003; Jalilifar, 2009; Taguchi, 2006, 2018; Beebe & Takahashi, 1989; Trosborg, 1995).

There has been a substantial empirical research which has examined L2 learners' production of speech acts. Among all the speech acts studied in ILP, requests tend to receive too much attention. This refers to their frequent use in daily communication and

their highly face-threatening nature. Studies on interlanguage requests mostly focused on the requestive behaviour of learners of English (e.g., Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2008, 2010; Trosborg, 1995; Woodfield, 2010, 2015; Woodfield & Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2010), or learners of other Western languages including German (Faerch & Kasper, 1989), Hebrew (Blum-Kulka, 1982), Spanish (Félix-Brasdefer, 2012) and Arab learners of English (e.g., Atawneh, 1990; Al-Ali & Alawneh, 2010; Tawalbeh & Al-Oqaily, 2012). IL requests research in Arabic has suggested that there are significant differences between Arab and English in the realizations of requests. It showed that Arab learners of English often deviate from the target language norms in their realizations of requests. Arab learners often perform speech acts with a different level of directness from native speakers (NSs). Some studies found that learners are more direct than NSs (e.g., Al-Ali & Alawneh, 2010), while others found learners are more indirect than NSs (e.g., Tawalbeh & Al-Oqaily, 2012).

Learner's pragmatic behaviour can be affected by transfer of first language (L1) pragmatic knowledge (cf. Kasper, 1992b). This transfer can be 'positive' or 'negative'. It is positive (or 'successful') transfer when a learner uses the L2 pragmatic feature with native form, function and distribution because of L1 influence. Conversely, it is negative (or 'unsuccessful') when a learner uses an L2 pragmatic feature with non-native form, function or distribution because of the influence of L1 (Kasper, 1992b). ILP studies that examined learners' transfer (e.g., Beebe and Takahashi, 1989; Faerch and Kasper, 1989; House and Kasper, 1987) observed that the bond between pragmatic transfer and linguistic proficiency is intricate. Takahashi (1996) asserted that learners' perceptions of transferability of L1 pragmatic features may not vary significantly in relation with language proficiency. Meanwhile, Kasper (1995) argued that the real transfer may not correlate with language proficiency in certain ways. Hassall (2003) asserted that low-level learners do not sometimes transfer pragmatic features of L1 to L2 because they may lack the linguistic competence to do so. Also, higher-level learners do not sometimes transfer pragmatic features of L1 to L2 because they fear that such transfer would be unsuccessful. House and Kasper (1987) referred to this phenomenon as the avoidance of pragmatic transfer.

In his cross-sectional study, Wen (2014) found that high-proficiency L2 Chinese learners produced more conventionally indirect strategies, fewer direct strategies, and used more internal and external modification devices than low-proficiency learners. Su and Ren (2017) observed that learners across different proficiency levels used the same range of pragmatic strategies as NSs, but they lack competence of using internal modification.

Requests have been widely analysed in the service encounter context because this context is rich in request acts. The focus has been on levels of directness and indirectness used in this goal-oriented context. Requests were found to be performed in a more direct way than in the past. In this sense, in today's world, it has been argued (Sifianou, 2013) that the sweeping power of globalization has brought about casualness, egalitarianism and comradeship in interactions which are influenced by variables such as the degree of

intimacy or the status of participants, and thus, some face-preserving strategies are needed. Due to the process of globalisation, language used in SEs has become more informal and friendly. For example, in an analysis of interactions in small shops in France, Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2006) found that elliptical requests are frequently used. Similarly, Placencia & Rueda (2011) found that Spanish subjects were more oriented towards closeness and convivial conversation in Spanish bars. The researchers observed that keeping personal relations is an essential part of a service encounter, although that most important element in the interaction is achieving the purpose of the transaction.

Placencia (2005) studied requests in Peninsular Spanish corner shops and found that Spanish preferred direct requests such as imperatives and elliptical forms more than indirect strategies. Shively (2013) proposed that differences in the degree of (in)directness of requests may refer to cultural variation. Shively (2011) investigated the American learners of Spanish in Toledo (Spain). The American learners' socialisation into the target language (Spanish) made them abandon more indirect requests realisations, which is typical in their L1, and started to use more imperatives in different commercial SEs.

Yates (2015) studied exchanges at two corner stores in Buenos Aires and found that vendors and customers mainly used elliptical requests and direct questions which suggest informality and closeness between them. The absence of greetings also indicates informal tone of the exchanges. In his study of a visitor information centre, Félix-Brasdefer (2015) found that direct requests in the form of questions were the favourite strategy by the participants. More recently, Ramírez-Cruz (2017) examined Anglo-American and Hispanic customers' requests at a taco stand in Pennsylvania. He found that the Anglo-Americans used more conventional requests whereas the Hispanic customers used more affirmative requests along with imperatives which made the encounter looks friendlier.

This paper discusses the study findings to facilitate cross-cultural understanding and communication between native speakers and L2 speakers of English. The outcome can assist both the English language teachers and the Jordanian students to speak intelligibly and effectively in the target language. It can also improve their intercultural competence with the others who are culturally different. The research question posed was: To what extent do the Jordanian (local) trainees use similar politeness strategies as the foreign hotel staff (native speakers of English)?

## 3. Material and Methods

### 3.1 Participants

Participants in this study were foreign hotel staff who are native speakers of English and Jordanian trainee who are students from a public university. The NSs staff sample consists of sex participants who work as floor supervisors in hotels in Jordan. The non-native sample comprises university students who study and receive training in five-star hotels in Jordan for one semester. Training is a requisite for graduation so they have to

spend one semester being trained in different hotel service counters. The study utilized purposive sampling based on particular criteria of respondents which include (i) having taken *English for specific purposes* (ESP) and *English in tourism* courses, (ii) being able to communicate with tourists in hotel service counters, and (iii) having had the experience of interacting with the foreign hotel guests. The criteria for that native speakers sample include (i) being hotel staff members, and (ii) being born and having grown up in an English speaking country, for instance, the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

**Table 1:** Participants' Profile 1 (Hotel Trainees)

| Participants | Nationality | Program | Year of study | Gender | Hotel experience |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **P1** | Jordanian | Hotel management | 4 | Male | 4 months |
| **P2** | Jordanian | Hotel management | 4 | Male | 4 months |
| **P3** | Jordanian | Hotel management | 4 | Male | 4 months |
| **P4** | Jordanian | Hotel management | 4 | Male | 4 months |
| **P5** | Jordanian | Hotel management | 4 | Male | 4 months |
| **P6** | Jordanian | Hotel management | 4 | Male | 4 months |
| **P7** | Jordanian | Hotel management | 3 | Male | 4 months |
| **P8** | Jordanian | Hotel management | 3 | Male | 4 months |
| **P9** | Jordanian | Hotel management | 3 | Male | 4 months |
| **P10** | Jordanian | Hotel management | 3 | Male | 4 months |
| **P11** | Jordanian | Hotel management | 3 | Male | 4 months |
| **P12** | Jordanian | Hotel management | 3 | Male | 4 months |

**Table 2:** Participants' Profile 2 (NSs staff)

| Participants | Nationality | Program | Gender | Hotel experience |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **P13** | American | Hotel management | Male | 9 years |
| **P14** | American | Hotel management | Male | 8 years |
| **P15** | American | Hotel management | Male | 10 years |
| **P16** | American | Hotel management | Male | 11 years |
| **P17** | British | Hotel management | Male | 9 years |
| **P18** | British | Hotel management | Male | 11 years |

### 3.2 Procedure and Instrumentation

The paper is based on the study of interactions among hotel staff and guests in a hotel in Jordan. The data consist of audio-recordings of hotel staff and guests exchanges, gathered in situ, in service counters in three five-star hotels. The service counters workers normally have their own desks to handle guests' requests and enquiries. To fully grasp the scene, the first author used a digital recorder that was placed on service counters in the area close to the staff and guests. The verbal exchanges in the natural setting of the study participants and the way they behaved as they spoke were observed. The interactions ranged in length from one minute to five minutes. The audio-recordings were done on different days and different times to ensure a varied representation of the sample of study.

Ninety encounters were recorded for each group (180 encounters for all groups). The focus was on one-on-one encounters between the workers (the NSs workers and Jordanian trainees) and foreign guests which contain requests. The observed employees responded to guests' inquiries and provided them with services including checking-in, checking-out, offering advice and information. Prior to the actual recording process, the participants gave their consent and showed their desire to participate in the study. They were then asked to fill out the written consent. They were also informed that their names would remain anonymous and the conversations would be treated as confidential and solely for research purposes.

### 3.3 Data analysis

The data were transcribed using the conventions introduced in conversation analysis (Jefferson, 1984). Although the analysis draws on CA concepts, it mainly relied on the pragmatic frameworks outlined in section 2. The frameworks of Ervin-Trip (1976), Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989) and Trosborg (1995) were adopted to define request strategies. A strategy is defined as the way the head act of the request is realized with respect to linguistic forms and means. Three major categories of request strategies were defined. Eight sub-strategies were defined, namely, imperatives (mood derivable), performative, obligation statement, want statement, suggestion, suggestive formulae, preparatory queries, and strong/mild hints. These categories help in identifying the level of politeness in each request act and what politeness strategy used to convey politeness.

## 4. Results and Discussion

The trainees used varied syntactic forms to make their requests. Some of these requests were to some extent forceful and impositive while some others were less forceful and less impositive. The trainees were motivated to use the different forms of requests based on the contextual factors or work circumstances. The data demonstrated that the NSs staff made 255 requests in the ninety encounters while the trainees made 220 requests in ninety encounters. They used different types of direct requests, conventional requests and unconventional indirect requests as presented here (Table 3).

**Table 3:** Degree of requests directness

| Level of directness | | Trainees | NSs Staff |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Direct requests** | Conventional imperatives | 22/220(10%) | 15/255 (5.8%) |
| | Elliptical imperatives | 22/220 (10%) | 17/255 (6.6%) |
| | Embedded imperatives | 5/220 (3%) | 3/255 (1%) |
| | Performative | 11/220 (5%) | 6/255 (2%) |
| | Obligation statement | 6/220 (3%) | 3/255 (1%) |
| | Need/want statements | 26/220 (12%) | 18/255 (7%) |
| | Suggestion/let | 30/220 (14%) | 21/255 (8%) |
| | Total | 121/220 (55%) | 83/255 (33%) |
| **Conventional indirect requests** | Modal suggestion | 24/220 (11%) | 44/255 (17%) |
| | Query preparatory | 71/220 (32%) | 108/255(42%) |
| | Total | (43%) | (59%) |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Non-conventional indirect requests** | Hints | 4/ 220 (2%) | 20/255 (7.8%) |

**Source:** First Author Research data (2019).

### 4.1. Direct Requests

Direct requests are the types of requests that are expressed by the speakers explicitly. The speaker can say what he wants the hearer to do using imperative, performatives, statements of obligation, want/need statements, and statements of speaker's wishes and desires as shown in Table 3. The participants relied largely on direct strategies. The majority of the requests made by the trainees were constructed through using direct strategy (121 direct requests out of 220 requests (55%)), while the NSs staff used less of the direct strategy (107 direct requests out of 255 requests (33%)).

#### 4.1.1 Imperatives

#### 4.1.1.1 Conventional Imperatives

The imperative structure, which is also called mood derivable in Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) coding system, is the form which conventionally determines the illocutionary force of an utterance as a request. Conventional imperatives are examples of bald-on-record strategy (Brown and Levinson, 1987). They were overused by the trainees (10%) in comparison with the NSs (6%). These imperatives were used to achieve tasks that need to be clear. The utterances often included initial bare-stem verbs such as *'Bring your passport with you when you go to Petra'*, as well as some discourse markers including forms of address such as *'Sir, check your bill'*.

In the following encounter, a male guest asked about his reservation and the receptionist (trainee 2) used conventional imperatives to elicit personal information from him.

Excerpt 1

1 Trainee*: good morning si::r.*
2 *How can I help you?* Opening
3 Guest*: good morning sir.*
4 Trainee*: how are you?* Relational talk
5 Guest*: fine, thanks.*
6 Trainee*: how ca::n I help you.*
7 Guest*: I have a reservation for tonight.* Request for service.
8 Trainee*: oka::y. Under what name.* Provision of service.
9 Guest*: (he gave his name).*
10 Trainee*: your passport, please.*
11 Guest*: okay. Here it is.*
12 Trainee*: just sign er this form, please.*
13 *Don't write on this line.*
14 Guest*: Okay. thanks. Here it is*. Closing.
15 Trainee*: okay:: thanks. Welcome.*

The conversation (Excerpt 1) shows the structural and sequential similarities that reflect service encounters as described in the previous studies. It represents the frequent structural features in most of the service exchanges as identified below:

a. Opening

Request for service/information;

Provision or not of service/information;

Additional transactional or relational talk (optional).

b. Closing

These features were also reported by previous studies on the structural and sequential elements of service encounters (e.g., Hasan, 1985; Kidwell, 2000; Lamoureux, 1988; Solon, 2013; Ventola, 1987; 2005, Yuen, 2009). The 'additional transactional or relational talk' feature may not emerge in many encounters but when it appears, it could occur at any point in the sequence.

Evidently in excerpt 1, the service encounter was opened by the trainee with the formal greeting sequence *'good morning si::r'*. Then he used an utterance that offers a wide option which is, *'How can I help you?*'. Remarkably, the trainees varied their greeting behavior based on social distance and level of intimacy between them and their guests. The greeting terms used serve to enhance the hearer's affiliation face by indicating that trainees treated the guest as someone whom they know as part of the social group at the hotel which effectively personalized the interaction.

The trainees' use of enquiry about health *'how are you?'* (line 4) was to show closeness and enhance rapport between the trainee and the guests. He followed the behavioral expectations in Jordan where greeting and asking about someone's health are common in daily service encounters between acquainted and non-intimate interactants. However, in hotel service encounters where behavioral expectations do not call for this type of inquiry about health between non-intimates, the trainee's greetings managed to fulfil the intended function of enhancing rapport between the trainee and guest. In so doing, the trainee treated the guest as a person whom he knew and effectively personalized the interaction. Although the trainee had a transactional goal in this interaction, he did not ignore relational talk.

In most cases, the principal goal and personal measure of success in the service encounters was to offer a service. However, additional goals that employees focused on were having a comfortable and friendly interaction. Beyond the exchange of services, the trainees concerned how they treated guests. Their goal was to develop a relationship with the guests. They asked questions and engaged in talk that went beyond the obligatory transactional talk as a way to increase rapport. The trainees and guests might have engaged in talk that focused on service as the topic, but they went beyond the essential transactional talk to what McCarthy (2000) termed as "*transactional-plus-relational talk."* That is, there is an orientation to relational goals beside the transactional talk.

In a few cases, service encounters did not include openings, but rather, begin directly with the request for service or information, that is the second structural element. Requests for information were frequently formatted by using the direct imperative, for instance, *'your passport, please!* (L10) *a*nd *'Just sign err this form, please'* (L12). Direct requests were preponderant in most of the service encounters. The trainee pre-posed the imperative with the minimiser *'just'* to modify his request and display that what he asked for requires little effort. He also finished the imperative with the marker *'please'* to show respect. This direct form of request was frequently used as discussed below due to efficiency and orientation to give clear directives as well to the simplicity of the structure.

The final structural element, the closing phase, was present in most of the service encounters. Closings were normally initiated by both the service provider and guests, but more frequently by service provider. Leave-taking sequences were generally used to mark an end to discussion and initiate closing (Pavlidou, 2002). They are referred to 'terminal phatic communion', which help in consolidating relationships and mitigate a potential rejection (Coupland et al., 1992, p. 212). Expressing gratitude was the most recurrent way to make a move towards closing the interaction. The trainee used the thanking expressions, *'thank you'* as a move to close the conversation. According to Aston (1995), in service encounter interactions, thanking expressions are not principally used as a sincere expression of gratitude, but rather are ritual expressions of gratitude that function most essentially as a move to close the conversation. Yet, it can be argued that it is also an act of politeness on the part of the speaker.

Another example of direct request is shown in excerpt 2 below:

Excerpt 2

1 Trainee*: good mo::rning sir:: how can I help you?*
2 Guest*: the way to:: the beach (.) is from here, right!*
3 Trainee*: yes:: yes right sir::, go straight plea::se.*
4 *Don't forget to:: leave your valuables err in the safety box.*
5 Guest*: thank you.*

In excerpt 2, the trainee opened the encounter with the formal greeting term *'good mo::rning sir::'* and asked how he could offer help. The trainee managed face through using a friendly tone of voice that was conveyed prosodically through vowel lengthening, wider ranges of pitch, and higher-than-normal pitch. It consisted of a wider range of pitch variation between the first and last syllable. A higher pitch was placed on the first syllable 'MORning' and a lower pitch on the second syllable. The trainee used increased energy in his speech to give an impression of friendliness with prosody (Gussenhoven, 2002). In using a friendly tone of voice, he enhanced both his own and the guests' identity face. He presented himself as a friendly person, and thus enhanced his own face by claiming for himself what he perceived as the positive social value of showing friendliness. In so doing, he also enhanced the face of the guest. By opening the interaction with a friendly greeting, the trainee made the service encounter a pleasant

interaction. He made the extra effort to treat the guest with respect and kindness, as he would a friend. This move enhanced the guest's face by demonstrating that the guest was worthy of being treated as a friend. Additionally, the friendly tone of voice *'yes:: yes right sir::'* served to enhance the trainees' own face and at the same time, attempted to present himself as a friendly person and improved the guest's face by indicating appreciation.

The trainee asked the guest with the bald imperative *'go straight, please'* (L3) *which was* mitigated with the politeness marker *'please'* that made the imperative less impositive and more polite. This structure was frequently used by trainees and it seems that this bald imperative request did not threaten the guest's face because of the nature of relationship between the guest and the trainee where the latter has more institutional knowledge. Then the trainee used negative imperative *'Don't forget to leave your valuables in the safety box*' (L4) to remind the guest of keeping his personal valuables in the safety box. Negative imperatives are highly face-threatening because they indicate prohibition and impede the hearer's freedom (Ruhi, 2006) and they stress inequality and thwart the hearer's autonomy; however, the trainee did not try to sugar-coat his requests which show his spontaneity and genuineness in offering help. In addition, using positive imperative in the preceded request followed with negative imperative is an attempt from the trainee to portray himself as a supporter rather than an authoritarian (Skewis, 2003) and expresses his concern about the guest's interest. The guest's agreement to accomplish what he is ordered to do and his expression of gratitude *'Thank you'* (L6), shows that he is pleased with the treatment he received.

Excerpt 3
1 Guest*: I'll go to Petra tomorrow*
2 Trainee*: take your err documents with you*
3 Guest*: I have them everywhere I go*
4 Trainee*: good (.)at eight*
5 Guest*: sure*
6 Trainee*: we leave at eight*
7 *Tell the err coordinator I want to go to:: Petra*

In excerpt 3, the guest was going to Petra, a very famous ancient city in Jordan and one of the World Seven Wonders, and the trainee used direct imperative *'take your documents with you'* (L2), to tell the guest to take his necessary documents upon entering the city without using any kind of modifiers. Given that the utterance begins with an action verb, this suggests the urgency and clarity to do the action. After that, the trainee explained about the trip arrangements. He informed the guest about the departure time of the tour but the recipient of the message was not mentioned explicitly, thus impersonalising the agent. In doing so, the potential threat of the imperative to the guest is mitigated. The trainee used the inclusive 'we' in *'we leave at eight'* (L6) which made the request sound like a joint endeavour rather than action that the guest will actually do on her own. A similar strategy is seen as the trainee attempted to give the instruction in the

first person 'I' as if he was the guest as shown in line 7 '*Tell the err coordinator I want to go to:: Petra'*. In that way, he was projecting the directive as a joint endeavour, rather than as something the guest will actually do on her own. Thus, the trainee made the procedures more interactive (Koester, 2010). Regardless of their institutional roles, discursively dominant service counter staff every so often seem to make an effort to 'personalise' the one-sided transfer of information, and consequently make the process of providing instructions and clarifying the procedures less 'unidirectional' and more interactive (Koester, 2010). By referring to his own role in the process, the trainee is seen to take the focus away from the actions to be performed by the guest. According to Shively (2008), the joint endeavour makes the conversation look more interpersonal and closer to a collaborative situation where the focus is on the joint action. Indeed, this adds a harmony and cooperation to the encounter.

In excerpt 4, a female guest asked the trainee how she could get downtown.

Excerpt 4

1 Female Guest*: I want to:: go downtown, please.*
2 Trainee*: okay madam. Go to:: that desk (.) over there.*
3 Female *Guest: that one.*
4 Trainee*: tell him that I want to err go downtown.*
5 Female Guest*: okay.*
6 Trainee*: they will help you.*
7 Female Guest*: okay... thanks.*
8 Trainee*: welcome sir.*

The trainee used conventional imperative '*Go to that desk'* (L2) and *'tell him that I want to go downtown*' (L4) asking the guest to go to the other desk. He used a very bald imperative twice. It seems this did not look imposing because the request was not for the benefit of the trainee but rather to the guest. The female guest showed her agreement by supporting the command with *'okay'*. After that the trainee redressed his bald imperative with a reason to soften the imposition of his request.

#### 4.1.1.2 Embedded Imperatives

The data analysis showed that embedded imperatives were overused by the trainees (10%) in comparison with the NSs (7%). In embedded imperatives, the agent of the action is clearly declared. The excerpt below occurred between a female guest who asked the trainee about some documents she left on the desk last night.

Excerpt 5

1 Female Guest*: I just want to ask about err some documents*
2 Trainee*: yes*
3 Female Guest*: I left them in the front desk (.) in the morning.*
4 Trainee*: with whom you:: left them*
5 Female Guest*: I think err with someone called (…) Ali.*
6 Trainee*: Okay. (..) Wait a moment!*

7 *Stay here, please!*
8 *Now err I will ring him.*
9 Trainee*: (the trainee rang Ali but he did not reply to the phone)*
10 *In the morning, you see [him.*
11 Female Guest*: [okay::*
12 Trainee*: We will tell him too.*
13 Female Guest*: Okay, thank you.*

The guest asked about some documents she left in the reception the day before. The trainee rang the receptionist (his name is Ali), who finished his shift the day before, but he did not reply so he asked the guest to come back and see the receptionist herself. The trainee used embedded imperative *'In the morning, you see him'* (L10) in which the agent of the action is stated clearly. This type of imperative is very direct but the institutional nature of the relationship between the undertraining staff and the guest makes it acceptable. You-imperative carries a high confrontational tone which might be misunderstood by the guest and consequently lead to complete rejection; therefore, the trainee followed his request with the collective plural pronoun 'we' in *'we tell him'* (L12) to conceal the level of authoritativeness in the you-imperative (Georgalidou, 2008).

**4.1.1.3 Elliptical Imperatives**

In elliptical imperatives, the agent and the verb are elided stating only the crucial information, and the direct or indirect object (e.g., *your passport please*). The omitted items are obtained from the immediate context. These types of requests have been classified as a direct or "quasi-imperative" request by Placencia (2005). The data analysis showed that elliptical imperatives were overused by the trainees (10%) in comparison with the NSs (7%). In the following encounter, a guest was asked to sign at the bill.

Excerpt 6
1 Guest*: is that everything.*
2 Trainee*: just your signature (.), please!*
3 Guest*: (held the pen to sign).*
4 Trainee*: here, sign here please.*

In excerpt 6, the trainee used an elliptical imperative *'just your signature'* with *'please'* (L2) to ask the guest to sign. The agent and the verb are dropped, and the request is impersonalized, thus it is less forceful than a normal blank imperative (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). The trainee used this strategy to debar himself from the responsibility of requesting. The minimiser *'just'* with the imperative conveys that what is being asked for is easy and of little violation on the freedom the guest (Koester, 2010).

Excerpt 7
1 Trainee*: I checked your bill.*
2 Guest*: I see.*
3 Trainee*: this is the bill err to:: pay.*

4 Guest*: thanks.*

The trainee in excerpt 7 made a request *'this is the bill to:: pay'* (L3) overtly when he asked the guest to pay the bill. The agent is elided, thus the force of the request for action is reduced as he avoided referring to the agent explicitly. This impersonal form of requesting reduces the force of imposition on the guest as the omitted agent can be easily recoverable from the context (McCarthy, 2000).

As the data revealed, ellipsis is prevalent in spoken discourse especially in the case in language-in-action talk, i.e. talk that conveys the performance of some activities, where there is a need for brevity and succinctness. Yuen (2009) stated that ellipsis tends to occur at the beginning of utterances rather than in the central or at the end. This is because given information is commonly incorporated at the beginning of utterances in which it is more easily recoverable from the context as can be seen in excerpts above.

The above examples (excerpts 1-9) demonstrated that the trainees relied much on imperatives to make requests, indicate requirements and give instructions. The most typical examples recorded as seen in excerpts 1-7 are the ones when the trainees give the guests directions or instructions. Imperatives are supposed to be used by more authoritative person to less powerful addressee but in the context under study, to achieve clarity and effectiveness in task-oriented interactions, both the staff and the guests share a mutual understanding of accomplishing the tasks of asking and giving information. Their common awareness and understanding of the situation may outweigh the need for politeness.

## 5. Discussion

All of the encounters examined in the present study included topics related to the hotel interactions. Although the hotel workers enjoy the institutional power to ask for information or actions, giving requests is still a face threatening act (Brown and Levinson, 1987) because they attempt to get the guests do something that they would not otherwise do. Due to the nature of institutional communication, the principles of negative politeness are customarily expected to be observed through minimizing imposition, using mitigation and there was an inclination to use conventional indirectness. Nonetheless, the results showed that the NNS trainees relied heavily on direct strategies, rather than conventional indirectness, either when they elicit information, give directions or ask for actions preferring to use direct requests such as conventional imperatives, elliptical imperatives, and embedded imperatives. However, using such direct strategies expansively can cause pragmatic infelicities as they may give the guests, who come from different cultures and possibly have different linguistic requestive behaviour, no choice in complying with the requests. Among other forms, using imperative specifically can be realized as inappropriate strategy in institutional settings because the guests, as Bloch (1995) argued, also entertain power as they are those who pay for receiving a service and the whole business depends on them.

The trainees used imperatives very frequently which may due to their feeling of 'professional dominance'. They are empowered with the institutional authority to perform their duties such as arranging check-in, check-out and answering enquiries. They normally seek to accomplish their transactions promptly and effectively. They have the privilege to ask questions which grants them control over the interaction.

The data analysis demonstrated that among the different direct request types, the trainees favoured to use imperatives to make requests. Imperatives were used to express the acts explicitly. In task-oriented interactions, the participants used imperatives to achieve clarity and efficiency. According to Brown and Levinson, when direct strategy is used, the brevity and clarity of the message is prioritized over politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987). The participants share a mutual understanding in the interest of completing the tasks of asking and giving information. The need for clarity and urgency might override the need for politeness. This is reflected in excerpts1 *'Your passport, please!*'; excerpt 2 *'go straight please Don't forget to:: leave your valuables err in the safety box'*; excerpt 3 *'take your documents with you'* and excerpt 4 *'Go to:: that desk (.) over there, tell him that I want to err go downtown'*. The trainees were giving instructions or showing guests about the hotel facilities, thus they cared with the clarity and promptness of the information to be conveyed to the guests. They avoided vague and fuzzy structures to meet the communicative goal to be achieved. Thus, when delivering clear messages is the principal goal of the interaction, politeness strategies become of less concern. Mir (1993) stated that Mediterranean cultures do not look at requests with imperatives as authoritarian, but rather as verbal means of indicating in-group membership and low social distance. Mediterranean cultures, such as the Arab culture, place a greater value on group involvement and in-group solidarity resulting in the use of direct forms such as imperatives and elliptical imperatives extensively (Mir, 1993; Wierzbicka, 1985). On the other hand, imperative requests in the Anglo-Saxon cultural value, which place excessive importance on the freedom of action of the individual, are dispreferred forms in requests.

The trainees used elliptical imperatives such as in excerpt 8 *'In the morning, you see him'*; excerpt 9 *'just your signature'*; excerpt 10 *'this is the bill err to:: pay'* to avoid overly imposition on the guests. This type of request structure was used when the guests were given directives concerning requirements. The trainees impersonalized the agent or deleted some parts of the directives to reduce the potential impact of the face-threat and redressed the negative face of the guests.

The trainees' overuse of imperatives may go back to the fact that the guests themselves requested for services such as reservation and other relevant activities; thus, the trainees' requests seem not to be perceived as FTAs. Moreover, there is a need for eliciting information promptly to fulfil the task of making reservations for the guests.

As illustrated in table 1, direct requests were the most frequent strategy used by the trainees which is around 55%, whereas the NSs group used it around 33% of their requesting strategies. It is possible that the trainees have not fully developed their pragmatic competence. They still lack of sufficient pragmalinguistic resources and lack

of sociopragmatic awareness in L2. This indicates that there is a correlation between trainees' level of language proficiency and types of requesting used (Al-Gahtani and Roever, 2015).

The trainees' use of direct type of requesting more than NSs staff seems also to refer to transferability where Arabs were found to prefer direct requests to express solidarity and positive politeness (Atawneh, 1991). The trainees' pragmatic knowledge influences their comprehension and production of requests in the L2 (Kasper, 1995; Takahashi, 1996). That is, since they significantly overused direct strategies more than NSs staff, they negatively transferred their pragmalinguistic forms of directness levels in requests. Another explanation might be that the trainees employed a common and easy form of requesting which has been practised in their native language.

There are significant differences between the trainees' overuse of imperative strategy and NSs staff's inclinations to use a variety of requesting strategies. Woodfield and Economidou-Kogetsidis (2010) contended that learners are most likely not sufficiently competent to use a variety of strategies and accordingly rely on imperative strategy. This confirms Harlow's (1990) suggestion that the greater use of direct types of requests by the learners is probably due to the linguistic deficiency or lack of attention to the rules of politeness. The trainees have not yet acquired ample linguistic ability to use other types of request as the higher groups. This suggests that there is a strong preference for using imperative because this sub-strategy does not demand high linguistic proficiency.

Concerning the trainees' frequent use of imperatives, this may refer to the authority they possess. They have the duty to ask questions and the guests have the obligation to show cooperation to delicately achieve their purpose of the transaction. These instances of imperative use show that the hotel employees' possession of higher power and authority makes them entitled to issue imperative requests. In addition, the need for clarity and efficiency in such task-oriented interactions makes imperatives less imposing than in other ordinary social non-institutional settings (Yuen, 2009). A further explanation comes from the principle of regularity of Terkourafi (2005) which proposes that a structure in a setting displays its appropriacy by the community or by the participants in the given context. People do not tend to use the marked forms that can be over-polite or impolite. Thus, according to Terkourafi's (2005) principle of regularity, the employees are not perceived as authoritative or rude because individuals often use imperatives in this setting and the community, guests here, are accustomed to receive imperatives in this context to achieve their purpose of the visit in a delicate and swift way. Furthermore, the trainees' use of imperatives indicates their sincerity to offer help and present them as objective professional service givers. Their position as service counter staff qualifies them as a powerful authority to give blunt requests without being regarded by the guests as impolite. Larina (2015) argued that the use of imperatives displays spontaneity, frankness and genuineness to achieve beneficial tasks rather than caring with logomachy. According to Dwyer & Forsyth (1997 and Yuen (2009), the hotel service counters employees are entitled with more institutional power and expertise

power so they perceive themselves reasonably authoritative in delivering their requests in the imperative.

Elliptical imperatives were also used more by the trainees because they may not demand high linguistic proficiency. Ellis (1992) pointed out that beginning learners tend to use elliptical imperatives because they may lack the linguistic ability to elaborate their desired message. They simply state the desired object (e.g. ''credit card'').

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to share the different types of imperative direct requests employed by the staff and guests at the front desk in a Jordanian hotel. The findings from this study revealed that speakers' linguistic choices is influenced by socio-cultural backgrounds and that different cultural groups may have differing perceptions of social reality and thus they may have different preferences towards using politeness strategies. In the hotel service encounter examined, Jordanian trainees were found to employ a higher degree of directness to make their requests as compared to NSs staff. This suggests that in intercultural communication, using higher levels of directness such as bare imperatives might sound blunt and rude for NSs which may lead to unpremeditated pragmatic violations and misinterpretations. IL behaviour deviated from the target norms could violate the social rules of appropriateness of the target community and, thus, may lead to pragmatic failure.

It was argued in this paper that the trainees' preference for high level of directness is motivated by clarity and efficiency. This finding is congruent with the attitude of directness, spontaneity, naturalness and positive politeness orientation found to characterise the Jordanian Arabic language and culture (Al-Ali & Alawneh, 2010) and the Mediterranean cultures (Mir, 1993). Thus, this overuse of directness by trainees is probably due to pragmatic transfer from L1. This also refers to the need for the trainees to convey their messages in the most obvious and straight way possible. This suggests that there is a need for the trainees to verbalize their requests explicitly and briefly in the hotel context examined and thus, using directness is not only driven by spontaneity but also by the need for urgency, efficiency, and pragmatic clarity.

This paper contributes to the field of interlanguage pragmatics by highlighting the sociopragmatic features of Jordanian hotel trainees (EFL learners in the performance of the request speech act. It sheds some light on practical implications concerning intercultural communication and EFL pedagogy. Pedagogically, developing pragmatic competence in a foreign language may be hard to reach because the learners lack chances of full interaction with NSs (Kasper & Schmidt 1996). Learners need to be trained or groomed using specific teaching material, and explicit instructions to learn and perform speech acts competently.

Some learners' deviations in IL requests may refer to intercultural differences or the effect of the teaching instructions. Thus, the EFL textbooks should provide learners with authentic data improving both the pragmalinguistic and the sociopragmatic

competence. The textbooks should also be supported with empirical data and metapragmatic information relating to politeness, cultural, and social norms of the target language. More importantly, learners should be provided with activities designed to learn and practice requests.

Cohen (2018) emphasised on strategic-based instruction which develops learners' sense of dealing with speech acts via learning and performing speech acts. Learners should rely on themselves to learn speech acts by looking for knowledge relating to semantic formulae and linguistic structure used in L1 and target language by means of written tools, making cross-cultural comparisons or reading publications about speech acts. Also, they should practice the acquired knowledge by, for instance, taking part in unreal interactions and role plays with peers or NSs (Taguchi and Roever, 2017; Vidal and Shively, 2019). Additionally, learners can look at the metapragmatic aspects of requests and check the appropriateness of the production and comprehension of requests in terms of the level of directness, semantic formula, and linguistic forms used (Bardovi-Harlig, 2017; Cohen, 2018).

The present cross-sectional study is just a leap forward in the research of ILP of Jordanian EFL learners. Future studies can contrast the findings of the current study with findings drawn from other data collection tools, such as the discourse completion test (DCT) and role-plays. The findings could also be validated by investigating a larger sample of subjects from different backgrounds.

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