

L2 Learners' Orientation toward Preference Organization

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Abstract

Recently, research in Interlanguage Pragmatics has employed conversation analysis as a tool to investigate speech acts. However, 'preference organization' has received little attention. This study examines L2 English learners' orientation toward preference organization and the influence of language proficiency on the same when producing requests. The data was collected from 40 participants divided equally into four groups: beginner, intermediate, advanced, and English native speakers (NS), using role-play scenarios in which participants played the roles of informants and conductors. The results show that pre-expansions, preliminaries to preliminaries (pre-pres), and other interactional devices were employed prior to the production of requests, an indication they carry social risk and are dispreferred. However, orientation to preference organization varied across groups - the more proficient the L2 learner, the more likely they were to reduce the effect of the dispreferred action. In addition, learners' requests shifted from direct to conventionally indirect as proficiency increased. Likewise, the use of accounts after requests increased with higher proficiency. It was, therefore, concluded that the more proficient the L2 learner, the more likely they are to orient to preference organization.

Key Words: Interlanguage pragmatics, conversation analysis, preference organization, requests, L2 learners.

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, the focus of research in Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP) has, to some extent, been on analyzing interactive data from the perspective of conversation analysis (CA) rather than analyzing data according to the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) coding scheme (Blum-Kulka et al. 273). CA examines how talk-in-interaction is co-constructed by both the speaker and recipient. This shift in the field of ILP yielded new issues that have not been investigated in previous ILP research, such as sequence organization in L2 requests (Al-Gahtani and Roever, "*Proficiency*" 42; Taleghani-Nikazm and Huth 185); the overall normality of second language interaction (Gardner & Wagner 246); multiple-response sequences in classroom talk (Ko 4.1); and multiple requests and questions in oral proficiency interviews (Kasper 323; Kasper and Ross, 2045).

Developmental pragmatics is central to ILP and the literature shows a small but growing body of research on the subject from a CA perspective. The current paper aims to investigate L2 learners' orientation toward preference organization, particularly how L2 learners of English with different proficiency levels co-construct request sequences.

1.1 Preference Organization

In general, preference organization refers to the study of how social activities (e.g. requests) are systematically co-constructed by both parties in talk-in-interaction. It highlights reciprocity of actions, e.g. head act of requests, and responses to these actions, e.g. acceptances or rejections (Schegloff, "*Sequence*" 2). In other words, it focuses on the speaker's projection of the social activity and the hearer's co-operation and interaction with the speaker to make the main first pair part of the base adjacency pair (e.g. head act of request) relevant. According to CA, preference organization plays a key role in talk-in-interaction and enables researchers to analyze how social activities such as requests, refusals, invitations, etc. are co-organized (Pomerantz and Heritage 211). There are numerous studies on the subject by researchers in the field of CA and ILP (e.g. Al-Gahtani and Roever, "*Insert- and post-expansion*" 189; Davidson 102; Pomerantz 57; Taleghani-Nikzam and Huth 185).

It is worth noting that the notions 'preference' and 'dispreference' have an impact upon preference organization. Some social activities are considered preferred (e.g. offers, invitations, etc.) and appear early in interaction, while others are considered dispreferred (e.g. requests, refusals, etc.) and appear later in interaction (Schegloff, "*Sequence*" 60; Taleghani-Nikzam 4). In addition, some responses to social activities are preferred over others. For example, in requests acceptance is preferred while rejection is dispreferred (Schegloff "*Sequence*" 67). Previous research on preference organization has also found that preferred responses tend to be brief, and are produced immediately after first pair parts, whereas dispreferred responses are generally

preceded by hesitation, mitigation, prefaces (such as “well”), etc. and are produced indirectly (Schegloff, “*Sequence*” 68). Participants in talk-in-interaction tended to use these interactional strategies in attempts to support ‘social solidarity’ (Goodwin and Heritage 297).

1.2 L2 Requests and Preference Organization

The literature demonstrates that requests are both ‘face-threatening acts’ (Brown and Levinson 65) and dispreferred activities (Schegloff, “*Sequence*” 83; Taleghani-Nikzam 2). As a result, speakers rely on their interactional resources to mitigate this. Generally, they employ strategies intended to delay requests and elicit offers. This is a commonality shared across languages and/or cultures (Schegloff, “*Sequence*” 58; Taleghani-Nikzam 18). However, there has been little evidence to suggest that L2 learners in second language acquisition (SLA) share such a regularity in L2 talk-in-interaction (Olsher 243). In light of this, it is important to examine L2 learners’ preferences and whether or not their biases are affected by their proficiency.

Few empirical studies have examined L2 requests in relation to preference structure in talk-in-interaction. However, Taleghani-Nikzam and Huth (185) examined preference organization in the production of requests by American learners of German in interactive role-play scenarios. The results show that learners dispreferred requests and used pre-emptive strategies to soften them such as accounts and explanations. This enabled learners to not only foreshadow the upcoming action, but also elicit an offer from their interlocutor. Indeed, the authors found that some learners succeeded in eliciting offers, thereby avoiding the face-threatening act altogether. However, as all the participants were advanced learners, the findings did not illustrate the impact of proficiency.

Al-Gahtani and Roever (“*Proficiency*” 42) investigated the influence of learners’ proficiency on sequential organization of L2 requests in English using interactive role-play scenarios. The participants were divided into beginners, low-intermediate, high-intermediate, and advanced. The authors found that beginners’ and low-intermediate learners’ production of requests occurred early in the interaction. Pre-emptive work (i.e. pre-expansions and preliminaries to preliminaries (pre-pres), generally used to project requests and elicit offers) was rarely deployed. The authors attributed this to the learners’ limited linguistic repertoire which may have prevented them from using pre-emptive strategies rather than a dispreference of requests. By contrast, high-intermediate and advanced learners used pre-expansions and pre-pres before requests, an indication of their more highly developed interactional competencies. The study concluded that L2 proficiency affected learners’ preference organization.

Adopting a mixed cross-sectional and longitudinal design, Al-Gahtani and Roever (“*Insert- and post-expansion*” 189) also examined preference organization in L2 Arabic requests during an institutional service encounter. They examined how proficiency affected learners’ orientation toward preference organization over a five

month period. Four groups of learners (beginners, low-intermediate, high-intermediate and advanced) participated in role plays with an Arabic native-speaking administrator about rescheduling subject timeslots (at the beginning of data collection) and altering exam timeslots (five months later). The results indicated that learners produced more preliminary moves as their proficiency increased. For example, beginners and low-intermediate learners had increasingly oriented to requests as dispreferred actions, using more pre-expansions and pre-pres by the end of data collection. The authors concluded that L2 learners' orientation to preference organization developed with increased proficiency.

Although studies on preference organization are rather scarce, the few studies summarized above provided useful insights. Nonetheless, due to study design limitations, further research is needed. Building on previous research, the current study investigates the orientation of L2 learners of English toward preference organization and the influence of language proficiency.

1.3 This Study

The present study aims to answer two questions:

1. How do L2 learners of English orient to preference organization?
2. To what extent does language proficiency affect learners' orientation toward preference organization?

2. Data

The data were collected from 40 participants divided equally into four groups: beginner, intermediate, advanced, and English NS. The learners were male Saudi learners of English, residing in Australia. The beginners were studying English at three different language centres in Melbourne. These were complete beginners who had not yet finished an elementary level course. Their language exposure ranged from 0 to 3 months and their ages ranged from 19 to 23. The intermediates were also studying English at three different Melbourne language centres. However, they were placed in high intermediate or 'English for academic purposes' courses. They had previously studied English for 6 to 12 months. Their ages ranged from 19 to 26 years. The advanced learners had finished their English courses and were completing PhDs in different disciplines at three Melbourne universities. Their language exposure ranged from 3 to 5 years and their ages ranged from 29 to 35 years. The English native speakers were completing Bachelor degrees at the University of Melbourne. Their ages ranged from 18 to 27 years.

Participants were divided into pairs so that each group had five pairs. Each pair did two role-plays, including two request situations set in an Australian English environment. Role plays were designed to involve a high degree of imposition, low social distance, and low power difference. To ensure each participant had the opportunity to produce a request, participants took turns at being both the requester and the requestee.

In situation 1, the requester is a university student who is working on an assignment due at 9:00 am the next day. His computer crashes and he does not have another. However, he had saved a draft on a memory stick. He needs two to three more hours to finish his assignment. He does not know anyone else in the area except his friend (the requestee) who lives in the same building. The requestee is also a university student and he too is working on an assignment due at 8:00 am the next day. He needs two to three more hours to finish his assignment. He is exhausted and working hard so he can finish and go to bed. The requester asks to borrow his laptop until the morning.

In situation 2, the requester's close friend is arriving at the airport in an hour. The requester promised to pick him up as he does not speak English. However, his car wouldn't start and when he calls a taxi, he is told it will take at least half an hour to arrive. He does not know anyone else in the area with a car except his friend (the requestee) who lives in the same building. The requestee is getting ready to drive to university for a class starting in 45 minutes. He normally takes the tram, but it can be unreliable and he needs to be there on time because he is giving a presentation. The requester asks to borrow his car.

The data was analysed using a CA approach and transcribed by using CA conventions modified by Schegloff ("*Sequence*" 265). Specifically examined were the utterances preceding the request turns. Conversational moves that occurred rarely in the data, e.g. address terms were not examined.

3. Results

Overall, L2 learners relied on their interactional resources to minimize the effect of the dispreferred action, i.e. request. This was highlighted by their pre-request and request sequences. However, orientation to preference organization varied across groups. The more proficient the L2 learner, the more likely they were to reduce the effect of the dispreferred action. The below discussion examines a) how preference organization is reflected in the talk-in-interaction and b) how it differs across proficiency groups.

3.1 Pre-request Sequences

According to Schegloff ("*Sequence*" 26), pre-request sequences consist of pre-expansions and pre-pres. Pre-expansions are adjacency pairs that precede the request-response adjacency pair, e.g. accounts/explanations, which function as preliminaries to requests. Pre-pres are preliminaries to pre-expansions and are produced prior to pre-expansions, e.g. "Can you do me a favor?". This study found pre-expansions and pre-pres occurred before requests. However, other interactional devices related to preference organization were also employed. They included the dispreferred marker "oh", apologies and prefaces.

The marker “oh” is normally used in talk-in-interaction to delay a dispreferred *response* (Schegloff, “*Sequence*” 68). In the corpus, however, it was used to delay the dispreferred *action* (with a possible secondary function of forewarning the requestee it is coming) and was utilized at the *beginning* of the talk, after opening exchanges. Excerpt 1 illustrates the occurrence of “oh” at the beginning of a conversation.

Excerpt 1.

1. ((knocking sound))
2. B: Yes?
3. Who’s there?
4. A: Yeah this ((name))
5. B: Hi ((name))
6. A: Hi ((name)) how are you?
7. B: Good good good how are you?
8. A: Oh:: (0.6) my friend I’m really in big trouble
9. B: Why what’s wrong?
10. A: I:: (0.5) was working my assignment a:nd er: (0.7)suddenly my laptop er shutdown
11. and [and] break- actually breakdown
12. B: [uh huh] uh huh
13. A: and ah h I don’t have any choi:ce, (1.0)

The conversation begins with opening and greeting exchanges (lines 1-7). Then, speaker A, the requester, immediately issues the dispreferred marker “oh” (line 8) in response to “how are you?”. The pause that followed suggests it functioned as a delay tactic.

Another interactional device that occurs before pre-expansions and pre-pres is apology. The study found that requesters apologized to requestees for bothering them, marking possible inconvenience to come. The requestee’s response shaped the requester’s next move with a ‘go ahead’ response usually leading to pre-expansions and pre-pres. The following excerpt exemplifies the occurrence of apologies before pre-expansions and pre-pres.

Excerpt 2.

1. B: Hi how are you ((name)) how are you?
2. A: I’m fine thank you
3. B: [Good]
4. A: [Sorry] to come late [[er:(0.6)=]] this time
5. B: [[No problem]] No problem
6. A: But I’m really in er: (0.4) indeed I ne I need your help

In this excerpt, the requester (A) issues an apology at the outset of the conversation (line 4). The requestee in turn produces a 'go ahead' response (line 5), enabling A to produce a pre-pre (line 6). This demonstrates that apologies may be used as a conversational device to foreshadow a dispreferred action. Sometimes the requester does not wait for a 'go-ahead' response, but rather 'rushes through' his talk to hold the floor (Schegloff, "*Discourse*" 76), as exemplified in the following example.

Excerpt 3.

- 1 A: hey Will (.) how are you going:?
- 2 B: yeah ↑good
- 3 A: sorry to bother you (.) I just need like yeah a lot of trouble
- 4 I dun↑no I (.) I got this assignment due tomorrow morning but
- 5 my laptop is (.) like (.) yeah crashed (.) it's the worst
- 6 thing I don't know what's happened to ↑it=

It was also found that requesters attempted to prepare requestees by producing prefaces. Examples of prefaces include "look" and "here's the thing". They are placed at the beginning of the talk before pre-expansions and pre-pres as exemplified in excerpt 4.

Excerpt 4.

- 1 . A: knock knock
- 2 B: Yeah? Who is it?
- 3 A: It's me ((name))
- 4 B: Yeah ((name)) hi
- 5 A: Hi man how are you?
- 6 B: Good yourself?
- 7 A: Not bad not bad
- 8 B: Yeah
- 9 A: Man here is the thing,
10. (0.5)
- 11 B: Yeah
- 12 A: My close friend is coming at- right now

After opening and greeting exchanges (lines 1-8), speaker A says "here is the thing" (line 9) preparing the requestee for the request. Speaker B in turn issues a 'go-ahead' response (line 11) which enables A to produce pre-expansions followed by his request. Sometimes, the preface is formatted as "look", as in the following excerpt. This is very common in Australian English.

Excerpt 5.

- 1 A : Oh look I'm: really so sorry to bug you at this time I know it's not a good

2. time but look what happened (1.0) Oh: (0.8) I'm expecting a friend (0.4) ah (0.5) to
3. came today er: (0.7) to Australia and I promised him to pick from the ar- airport and
4. he don't speak English ah: (0.5) at all,
5. B: Oka ((softly))
6. A: But you know ah: (0.3) my car didn't work I tried to: (0.6) I tried to work it- I
7. tried to switch it on but er: (0.4) it didn't (0.7) So I'm wondering if it's ok with you if I
8. can borrow your car fo:r probably one and a half hour?

Thus far we have discussed conversational devices that occur at the beginning of the talk before pre-expansions and pre-pres. These devices can be phrases or discourse markers produced as first pair parts that require second pair parts. They may either delay or project the dispreferred action. Discussion of pre-pres and pre-expansions follows below.

As mentioned, pre-pres are generic and serve as preliminaries to pre-expansions (Schegloff, "Sequence" 44). They attempt to shepherd requestees toward a preferred response (ideally without having to explicitly make a request) by prompting 'go-ahead' or 'hedged' responses. Alternatively, reflecting the spirit of co-construction, if requestees issue a 'blocking' response, requesters may abort the dispreferred action. In the data, requestees never produced a 'blocking' response and 'hedged' responses appeared infrequently. The following excerpt illustrates the occurrence of pre-pres in the corpus.

Excerpt 6.

1. ((knocking sound))
2. B: Ye:s?
3. A: Hi ((name)) how are you?
4. B: (Hi you hi: you)
5. A: It's was long time from s- er: last time I saw you man.
6. B: Yeah.
7. A: Yeah. I wanna ask you favour. Can you do it for me?
8. B: Er:: if y- I (0.3) can I do it.
9. A: Yea::h I- (0.8) I hope so. Ah my friend ah:: (0.3) I promise him to
10. pick up er: from the airport at five thirty. (0.6) And when I (0.3) try
11. my er:: car but er was (0.9) it doesn't () (0.4) it doesn't work.

The requester (A) issues a pre-pre (line 7) "I wanna ask you favour" instantly followed by another pre-pre "Can you do it for me?". In turn, the requestee, B, issues a 'hedged' response (line 8), indicating he will do what he can. Speaker A then produces multiple pre-expansions (lines 9-11) establishing a pre-condition to the projected request.

It should be noted, however, that not all pre-pres take a question-answer format (and the requestee's response is not always as important as it was in the previous

example). Rather, they can be formatted as a sentence or phrase, indicating the requester has a problem and needs the requestee's help, as in excerpt 7.

Excerpt 7.

1. B: Yes? Who's there?
2. A: Yeah this ((name))
3. B: Hi ((name))
4. A: Hi ((name)) how are you?
5. B: Good good good how are you?
6. A: Oh:: (0.6) my friend I'm really in big trouble
7. B: Why what's wrong?
8. A: I:: (0.5) was working my assignment a:nd er: (0.7)suddenly my laptop er
9. shutdown and [and] break- actually breakdown

After opening and greeting exchanges (lines 1-5) and a dispreferred marker "oh" (line 6), speaker A produces a pre-pre (line 6) "my friend I'm really in big trouble" forewarning of a possible request. Speaker B enquires about the source of the trouble (line 7), a 'go ahead' response, which in the spirit of co-construction prompts A to produce a pre-expansion.

The most common format of pre-expansions is accounts. The requester produces accounts before the request to provide the requestee descriptions and explanations of the dispreferred action. Besides foreshadowing requests, accounts may elicit offers from requestees. Accounts predominantly occur right before requests and can take several turns. The following excerpt illustrates the occurrence of accounts in the data.

Excerpt 8.

1. A: Knock knock the door? ((knocking sound))
2. B: Yes hello oh!
3. A: [Hi ((name)) how are you?]
4. B: [(How are you ((name))?) Fine thank you
5. A: Hi ((name)) please m- I need your help.
6. (0.8)
7. B: Yeah ok [w-]
8. A: My friend just arrived now at ah: (0.7) at the airport, he does speak English
9. he just arrived from: (0.5) Saudi Arabia,
10. B: Okay
11. A: Ah I need to pick him up from the airport so can you please er: (0.3) drive
12. me to to him please

Speaker A issues a pre-pre (line 5) and after receiving a 'go-ahead' response, launches multiple pre-expansions (lines 8-9). In turn, speaker B issues a 'go-ahead'

response (line 10), giving A a green light to proceed to the base first pair part. Instead, A launches another pre-expansion (line 11) before rushing through his talk to produce the base first pair part, a request, (lines 11-12). This demonstrates that pre-expansions (e.g. accounts) appear before requests to both foreshadow them and elicit a preferred response, i.e. granting of the request. In addition, the excerpt shows that the requester issues multiple pre-expansions which enhances the likelihood of receiving a preferred response.

Although, it should be noted, that not all speakers in the study employed multiple accounts when making requests. The following is an example of a speaker using only one account.

Excerpt 9.

1. ((indistinct voices))
2. A: Hi er:: (1.0) ((cough))
3. B: Hi welcome. Welcome ((name))
4. A: I: (0.7) I have er: (0.3) some problems with my (.)
5. laptop. (1.2) Can I borrow your (.) laptop for a moment

In this segment, speaker A produces a pre-expansion (lines 4-5) which indicates his laptop isn't working properly. When speaker B does not respond, a silence follows and A produces his request (line 5).

3.2 Request sequences

Request sequences consist of a base first pair part and second pair part, i.e. request and request response. The data showed the first pair part turn includes a request and often accounts or increments. It was also found that requests took various formats including statements of need/want, willingness, ability, if + ability, and "I was wondering". These request formats relate to preference organization. The more indirect or complicated the request, the more affiliative work the requester does. Ability and "I am/was wondering" requests are generally more appropriate than need/want statements and willingness requests. The following excerpts illustrate these request formats.

Excerpt 10.

- 1 A: HI Mr. ((first name))
- 2 B: hi ((first name))=
- 3 A: ar please: I need your CAR
- 4 (0.8)
- 5 B: er::: but I have class after 1 hour
- 6 (1.3)

Excerpt 11.

1. A: Hi ((name))
2. B: Hi
3. A: Ah excuse me er: my friend will: coming after one hour
4. from Saudi Arabia er: so: he needs (1.0) to my help(0.7) Er: in the airport
5. so I wanna: (.) borrow your cars if you don't mind?
6. (0.9)
7. B: Yeah it's ok but I have one problem e- ah- if you can er: drive me in er school

Excerpt 12.

1. A: ((knocking sound))
2. B: Yes?
3. A: () brother
4. B: () (name)
5. A: I know I know (0.7) eh: (0.5) it might be a: (0.4) a proper time to come in but
6. I (0.4) really in a very embarrassing situation and I need your help please
7. B: Er no prob what's up?
8. A: (0.5) my friend is coming at eh: (0.4) five thirty this evening (0.8) an': (0.6)
9. (0.5) tsk (0.6) I've (1.0) I've just wanted to:: (0.7) (0.5) to go by my car but my car
10. broken And I called er: (0.6) (0.2) a taxi (0.2) company: and the nearest taxi is (0.4)
11. gonna be here in fa- in half an hour .hh An I really (need) it urgently now so can
12. I borrow your (0.6) car please?
13. (0.7)
14. B: To pick your friend? pick up your friend?
15. A: Yep

Excerpt 13.

- 1 A: hallo?
- 2 B: OH hey ↑ Steve
- 3 A: hey you=
- 4 B: =umm so I just ↑ have (.)I have a really BIG paper due at
- 5 e ↑ le:ven=
- 6 A: =me too
- 7 B: and: oh my goodness (.) my lap ↓top just died=
- 8 A: =yeah=[NO
- 9 B: =and [I was wondering if I could possibly borrow your
- 10 laptop I have my draft on the memory stick and that's all I ↓ha:ve=
- 11 A: =YEAH (.) well how much do you have left to DO:?

In excerpt 10, speaker A issues his request (line 3) as need ("please: I need your car") while speaker A in excerpt 11 formatted his request as want ("I want ...") (line 5).

On the other hand, speaker A in excerpt 12 issues his request as ability (“can I ...”) (lines 11-12), while speaker A in excerpt 13 produces his request as “I was wondering” (lines 9-10).

It was also found that requests were followed by accounts, giving reasons for the request or providing background to the request. This occurred before the requestee issued the base second pair part. The following excerpt demonstrates the production of accounts within request turns.

Excerpt 14.

1. A: my laptop is er:(0.5) broke. (0.9) Er:[:] (1.3)
2. B: [Uh huh]
3. A: Because the::(0.7) battery dead. (0.7)
4. B: [Oh: (0.5)]
5. A: [(If) I] don't have a charger. (0.6) Can you help me please
6. give me your laptop I didn't want er: (0.4) I do () my homework.

Here, speaker A produces several pre-expansions (lines 1, 3, and 5). He then issues his request (lines 5-6), “Can you help me please give me your laptop”. Rather than yielding the floor to speaker B to issue the base second pair part, he rushes through his talk to produce an account (line 6), saying he needs the laptop to do his homework. Given A had already issued pre-expansions before the request, the account that followed was not an alternative to a pre-expansion, but rather an additional device used to enhance the likelihood of receiving a preferred response. Excerpt 15 is another example of the occurrence of accounts within request turns.

Excerpt 15.

1. ((indistinct voices))
2. A: Hi er:: (1.0) ((cough))
3. B: Hi welcome. Welcome ((name))
4. A: I: (0.7) I have er: (0.3) some problems with my (.)
5. laptop. (1.2) Can I borrow your (.) laptop for a moment
6. because I:: (0.6) have (0.3) er:: (0.9) necessary
7. homework (0.4) I have to:: (0.6) s er slove this
8. homework. ((“solve”?))

In this segment, speaker A issues a pre-expansion (lines 4-5), saying he has some problems with his laptop. He then produces his request (line 5) “Can I borrow your laptop for a moment” and immediately issues accounts (lines 6-8). His accounts were preceded by the connector “because” which is used to show that the following talk is an explanation of the preceding talk. Speaker A explains why he needs to borrow speaker B’s laptop by emphasizing that he has a very important assignment due and he wants to get it done. This suggests that these accounts serve to seek compliance with the request.

3.3 Preference Organization and L2 Proficiency

It was found that L2 learners' orientation to preference organization was affected by L2 proficiency. Unsurprisingly, beginner learners tended to issue requests at the start of the conversation. They never produced the dispreferred marker "oh", apologies, or prefaces and in only a few instances produced accounts prior to requests. Excerpts 16 and 17 below exemplify this.

Excerpt 16.

- 1 ((knocking))
- 2 B: hi
- 3 A: hi ((first name)) how are you?
- 4 B: how are you ((first name))?
- 5 A: I can BORROW your laptop today?
- 6 B: oh :::

In this segment, after minimal opening and greeting exchanges (lines 2-4), speaker A issues his request (line 5) "I can borrow your laptop today?". He does not employ any conversational move to forestall the projected request or elicit an offer from speaker B. In addition, he does not issue a pre-pre or pre-expansion. Excerpt 17 likewise shows a beginner making his request early without pre-emptive work.

Excerpt 17.

- 1 A: >good evening< ((very softly))
- 2 B: >good< ((softly)) evening
- 3 A: er::(0.9) I please this CAR (0.6) m- er I want to (0.6) to: (the)airport
- 4 (3.3)
- 5 B: NO er no you can't (0.7) I have a: presen↑tation er:: fif(teen) fifty

Again, after a minimal greeting exchange (lines 1-2), speaker A immediately produces his request (line 3), saying he wants to take speaker B's car to the airport. His limited linguistic resources likely prevent him from producing interactional strategies that foreshadow the projected dispreferred action.

Beginners' requests were frequently produced directly. Three requests were formatted as "I need...", two were formatted as "I want...", four were formatted as "Can you / I can..?", and one was formatted as "I must...". Moreover, accounts or explanations were rarely used after the production of requests. Excerpts 10 and 17 illustrate the production of direct requests amongst beginner learners.

Intermediate learners' orientation to preference organization shows some development, particularly in terms of pre-pres and pre-expansions. Like beginners, they did not employ the dispreferred marker "oh" or prefaces prior to requests. An apology was observed only once. The following excerpt exemplifies the absence of

these interactional moves in intermediate conversations.

Excerpt 18.

1. A: ((knocking sound))
2. B: Yeah
3. A: Hi ((name))
4. B: Hi
5. A: How are you?
6. B: Good
7. A: I want er one thing for you.
8. (1.2)
9. B: What do you want?
10. A: Ah: can you give me your car?

This excerpt shows speaker A issuing a pre-pre (line 7) after opening and greeting exchanges (lines 1-6). Following speaker B's response (line 9), he produces his request (line 10) "Can you give me your car?". He does not use the dispreferred marker "oh", apologies, or prefaces. The issuing of a pre-pre (line 7) establishes a pre-condition to his request, a conversational move absent in the beginner group. This may indicate intermediate learners' discursive development. Nonetheless, the occurrence of pre-pres in the intermediate group was infrequent. Their interactional competency remained incomplete. They appeared to lack the knowledge that pre-pres are moves that precede pre-expansions. Typically, a 'go ahead' or 'hedged' response to a pre-pre leads to a pre-expansion which leads to a request. Speaker A broke from this preference organization regularity, issuing his request (line 10) directly after B's hedged response to his pre-pre.

However, intermediate learners were capable of producing pre-expansions. In fact, pre-expansion was commonly employed in this group. Most of their conversations were accompanied by accounts and explanations of the request, as illustrated in the following excerpt.

Excerpt 19.

1. A: Hi ((name)) how are you?
2. B: Good thank you and you?
3. A: (0.6) A e not bad. (0.7) I have some problem with my computer.
4. B: Yes?
5. A: (0.6) And ah:: (0.6) if you can help me can I borrow your computer?

In this segment, Speaker A issues a pre-expansion (line 3), saying he has problems with his computer. After speaker B produces a 'go ahead' response (line 4), A issues his request (line 5), asking if he can borrow B's computer. This demonstrates intermediate

learners' ability to foreshadow the projected request by producing pre-expansions. Intermediate learners were also capable of producing multiple accounts which enhance the likelihood of receiving a preferred response. Nonetheless, this occurred in only a few instances.

Intermediate learners used different request formats from those of beginners. While 'want statements' occurred in one instance, the remaining requests were formatted as "Can you/I..?" or "If I can ...", which are considered more indirect and polite than "I need..." or "I want...", common in the beginner group. The following is an example of an ability request by an intermediate learner.

Excerpt 20.

1. A: Hi hi ((name))
2. B: Hi ((name))
3. A: My er:: (0.6) my computer is eh damage (0.5) er: (0.6)
4. I have a problem because er: (0.5) (0.3) tomorrow I have a
5. I want I must finish er: (0.6) (0.9) er my homework (0.7)
6. but er: (0.5) I cannot can you lend me er: (0.4) (0.7) er:
7. (0.6) your er: (0.5)(.) computer?

In this excerpt, speaker A issues multiple pre-expansions (lines 3-6). He then produces his request (lines 6-7). His request takes the format of "Can you..?", commonly employed by this group.

Intermediate learners used accounts within request turns, but the technique was not favoured when compared to others. As discussed, accounts within request turns seek compliance from the requestee rather than foreshadow requests (like pre-expansions). Excerpt 21 shows an intermediate learner's use of accounts. Speaker A issues his request (line 5) "Can I borrow your laptop for a moment?" before rushing through his talk to produce accounts (lines 6-8) to justify the request.

Excerpt 21.

1. ((indistinct voices))
2. A: Hi er:: (1.0) ((cough))
3. B: Hi welcome. Welcome ((name))
4. A: I: (0.7) I have er: (0.3) some problems with my (.)
5. laptop. (1.2) Can I borrow your (.) laptop for a moment
6. because I:: (0.6) have (0.3) er:: (0.9) necessary
7. homework (0.4) I have to:: (0.6) s er solve this
8. homework. (("solve"?))

In contrast to beginners and intermediates, advanced learners showed significant development, using more mitigating strategies. They produced the dispreferred marker

“oh”, apologies, and prefaces. This may reflect more highly developed conversational competency. The following excerpt demonstrates one learner’s use of the dispreferred marker “oh”, apologies, and prefaces.

Excerpt 22.

1. A: Hi ((name))
2. B: Yeah hi ((name)) how are you?
3. A: Goo:d good how are you doing?
4. B: good good how can I help you?
5. A: Oh look I’m: really so sorry to beg you at this time I know it’s not a good
6. time but look what happened (1.0) Oh: (0.8) I’m expecting a friend (0.4) ah (0.5)
7. to came today er: (0.7) to Australia and I promised him to pick from the ar- airport
8. and he don’t speak English ah: (0.5) at all,
9. B: Okay ((softly))
- 10.A: But you know ah: (0.3) my car didn’t work I tried to: (0.6) I tried to work it-A-
11. I tried to switch it on but er: (0.4) it didn’t (0.7) So I’m wondering if it’s ok with you
12. if I can borrow your car fo:r probably one and a half hour?

Speaker A produces the dispreferred marker “oh” (line 5) before a preface “look” and an apology. These three consecutive interactional moves are delay tactics that strongly indicate speaker A is going to issue a dispreferred action.

Pre-pres and pre-expansions were most frequently employed by advanced learners who used them to establish a pre-condition to the projected request. When requestees gave ‘go ahead’ responses, advanced learners forestalled the projected request with pre-expansions. The following excerpt exemplifies this.

Excerpt 23.

1. A: Knock knock the door?((knocking sound))
2. B: Yes hello oh!
3. A: [Hi ((name)) how are you?]
4. B: [(How are you ((name))?) Fine thank you
5. A: Hi ((name)) please m- I need your help.
6. (0.8)
7. B: Yeah ok [w-]
8. A: My friend just arrived now at ah: (0.7) at the airport, he does speak English
9. he just arrived from: (0.5) Saudi Arabia,
- 10.B: Okay
- 11.A: Ah I need to pick him up from the airport so can you please er: (0.3) drive
12. me to to him please because u- my car is broken and I have to wait the: (0.4) taxi for
13. half an hour that’s ma: (0.3) make me late for him

Speaker A issues a pre-pre (line 5) "Please I need your help", to establish a pre-condition to the request. Speaker B, in turn, produces a 'go ahead' response (line 7), providing A with a green light to proceed to the dispreferred action. Yet, A does not immediately produce the base first pair part, but instead issues multiple pre-expansions (lines 8-9). B produces a further 'go ahead' response (line 10) prompting A to issue yet another pre-expansion (line 11). Without yielding the floor to B, he issues the base first pair part (lines 11-12), asking if B can drive him to the airport to pick up his friend. This excerpt exemplifies how advanced learners used pre-pres and pre-expansions, in particular multiple pre-expansions which they favoured to increase the likelihood of receiving preferred responses. It should be noted that intermediate learners also used multiple pre-expansions, though infrequently.

It was also found that accounts were commonly employed after the production of requests. In the above excerpt, A produces his request (lines 11-12), "so can you please drive me to him please?" and immediately rushes through his talk to produce two accounts (lines 12-13) saying his car had broken down and he would be late if he took a taxi. These accounts were placed to increase the likelihood of receiving a preferred response, boosting the importance of the request. This technique reflects advanced learners' increasing interactional mastery.

Like intermediate learners, advanced learners preferred to format their requests as "Can you/I...?". However, the second most utilized request format was "I am/was wondering...". Considered more indirect and polite than "Can you/I", this is suggestive of developing pragmatic competence. Excerpt 24 illustrates the occurrence of "I am/was wondering" requests in the advanced group.

Excerpt 24.

1. A: Hi ((name))
2. B: Yeah hi ((name)) how are you?
3. A: Goo:d good how are you doing?
4. B: good good how can I help you?
5. A: Oh look I'm: really so sorry to beg you at this time I know it's not a good
6. time but look what happened (1.0) Oh: (0.8) I'm expecting a friend (0.4) ah (0.5)
7. to came today er: (0.7) to Australia and I promised him to pick from the ar- airport
8. and he don't speak English ah: (0.5) at all,
9. B: Okay ((softly))
10. A: But you know ah: (0.3) my car didn't work I tried to: (0.6) I tried to work it-A-
11. I tried to switch it on but er: (0.4) it didn't (0.7) So I'm wondering if it's ok with you
12. if I can borrow your car fo:r probably one and a half hour?

In this excerpt, speaker A issues several pre-expansions which serve to foreshadow the projected request and elicit an offer from speaker B. As B does not make an offer, A produces his request (lines 11-12), "so I'm wondering if it's ok with you if I can borrow

your car for probably one and half an hour". This request is quite complicated and reflects A's pragmatic competence. As discussed above, 'wondering' requests were very common in the advanced group compared with beginner and intermediate groups. Such requests require high-level pragmatic and linguistic competence which beginner and intermediate learners perhaps lacked.

Like advanced learners, English NS used the dispreferred marker "oh" and apologies. Still, prefaces did not appear in this group. Instead, English NSs relied heavily on pre-pres and pre-expansions. The following are examples of English NSs using pre-pres and pre-expansions. In the first excerpt, speaker A produces a pre-pre (line 4), "Um ok huge favour to ask..." to establish a pre-condition to the request. In the second excerpt, A issues multiple pre-expansions (lines 4-5) and, after a micro-pause, issues yet further pre-expansions (lines 5-6).

Excerpt 25.

- 1 A: ((knocking))hal↑lo: HI=
- 2 B: = Caitlin hey howzit goin [(.) how'd that paper go=
- 3 A: [↑hey =it went well=
- 4 B: = OKAY good me too ya (.) UM ok HUGE favour to ask heh my
- 5 friend's coming into the airport at five thirty

Excerpt 26.

- 1 A: hey A↑lex howzit ↑going=
- 2 B: °fine°
- 3 (0.8)
- 4 A: erm basically my friend's coming to Mel↑bourne (.) and
- 5 they're at the airport in an ↑hour (0.5) and my car has broken
- 6 down: and there's no taxi for half an HOur (.)just wondering
- 7 if there's any chance of borrowing your ↑car (.) so I could go
- 8 to the ↑airport=

English NSs employed ability and "I am/was wondering" requests (the only group apart from advanced to do so) with the former more frequent than the latter. They also employed 'increments', as demonstrated in the following example. After producing his 'wondering' request (lines 8-10) ("so I was just wondering if I could possibly borrow your laptop"), speaker A adds an 'increment', saying he needs the laptop for few hours. He then adds another 'increment' (line 11), saying he needs the laptop to do his term paper.

Excerpt 27.

- 1 A: hey Will (.) how are you going:?

- 2 B: yeah ↑good
 3 A: sorry to bother you (.) I just need like yeah a lot of
 4 trouble I dun↑no I (.) I got this assignment due tomorrow
 5 morning but my laptop is (.) like (.) yeah crashed (.) it's
 6 the worst thing I don't know what's happened to ↑it=
 7 B: =[OH] that's no good
 8 A: [aw] yeah the worst (.) so I was just wondering if I could
 9 possibly (.) if you have (.) I (.) d- I could I borrow your
 10 lap↑top (.) for just like (.) I just totally need it for a
 11 few hours tonight and then I got this thing to do at 9am=

4. Discussion

The speech act of request is considered a dispreferred action (Schegloff, "Sequence" 83; Taleghani-Nikzam 2) or face-threatening (Brown and Levinson 65). Thus, it is expected that requesters employ conversational devices or supportive moves to delay, establish a pre-condition to, or foreshadow them, enhancing the likelihood of receiving a preferred response. The present study found that this regularity is affected by L2 proficiency.

The results showed that learners with limited linguistic resources, such as beginners, are more likely to produce requests at the beginning of the talk without employing any mitigating interactional moves. A similar finding was reported in Al-Gahtani and Roever's ("Proficiency" 42; "Insert- and post-expansion" 189) studies, which found, for example, that beginners rarely produced pre-pres and pre-expansions prior to requests.

Intermediate learners, by contrast, tended to issue pre-pres and pre-expansions, yet, unlike advanced learners, rarely issued apologies. Advanced learners produced all interactional devices: the dispreferred marker "oh", apologies, prefaces, pre-pres, and pre-expansions, reflecting their higher proficiency. Like English NSs, they produced multiple pre-expansions. These findings are supported by Taleghani-Nikzam and Huth's (185) study in which advanced learners appeared to consider requests as dispreferred actions issuing accounts and explanations to forestall them. Therefore, it can strongly be argued that L2 learners' orientation to preference organization is affected by L2 proficiency.

Preference organization concerns not only pre-request sequences, but also request sequences. How the request is formatted and whether the request is followed by accounts or increments are related to preference organization. This study found requests took different formats which were affected by learners' proficiency. On the one hand, beginner learners relied heavily on direct requests, i.e. want/need statements and, to a lesser extent, ability requests. On the other hand, intermediate learners relied almost exclusively on ability requests, an indication of their pragmatic development. Advanced learners minimized the use of ability requests but used 'wondering' requests

unlike lower proficiency groups. As discussed, 'wondering' requests are considered more indirect and polite than ability requests.

L2 learners' tendency to use more indirect and complicated requests with the increase in their proficiency has been reported in previous research (Hill 97; Felix-Brasdefer 53). For instance, Felix-Brasdefer (53) examined requests made by learners of Spanish and found that direct requests occurred more frequently amongst low-level learners; whereas, indirect requests occurred more frequently amongst high-level learners. However, previous research has examined the use of requests by L2 learners in isolation from preference organization which is at the heart of the current study. The findings of the present study indicate a correlation between request formats and L2 learners' orientation to preference organization with both affected by L2 proficiency.

The current study also found that learners' orientation to requests does not end with their production. Even after the production of requests, learners issued accounts or increments. Given they were used in conjunction with pre-pres and pre-expansions, this technique served to further bolster pre-emptive work and increase the likelihood of receiving a preferred response, i.e. granting the request. Ergo, the occurrence of accounts within request turns is not only a pre-emptive work as was the case in other studies (e.g. Gardner 264; Roever and Al-Gahtani 424).

The occurrence of accounts within request turns has been reported in previous research (e.g. Roever and Al-Gahtani 405; Gardner 246; Pomerantz 57). For example, Roever and Al-Gahtani (405) investigated multiple requests in Arabic as a second language. They reported that accounts occurred within request turns and they were issued only by high-level learners. Therefore, they argued that accounts within request turns "serve to make the speaker's case and support their argument...accounts in requests are "biased" and designed to sway the hearer" (Roever and Al-Gahtani 424). The findings of the current study support this argument. Learners, particularly advanced, tended to issue pre-pres, pre-expansions and indirect requests but also rushed through the transition space to produce additional accounts. The appearance of accounts when placed as such is to enhance the likelihood of receiving a preferred response from the hearer.

This study also highlights the placement of the dispreferred marker "oh". Previous research has demonstrated that "oh" is usually issued in talk-in-interaction to delay a dispreferred *response* (e.g. Drew 129; Heritage 103; Levinson 284; Pomerantz 57) while its occurrence prior to a dispreferred *action* has not been reported. The findings of the present study indicate that "oh" can also be produced *before* requests and even pre-expansions, and serves to delay the dispreferred action.

Finally, the CA approach used in this study has enabled investigation of the effect of L2 proficiency on preference organization which the traditional approach, i.e. speech act, cannot capture – lending support to Al-Gahtani and Roever's ("*Proficiency*" 42) argument. In addition, L2 learners playing both the informant and conductor's roles eliminated the influence of a third role-play conductor, as was the case in Al-Gahtani

and Roever's ("Proficiency" 42; "Insert- and post-expansion" 189) earlier studies.

5. Conclusion

This paper examined a) L2 English learners' orientation toward preference organization and b) the influence of language proficiency on the same (using interactive role-play scenarios). The overall findings indicate that orientation to preference organization varied across groups and the more proficient the L2 learner, the more likely they are to reduce the effect of the dispreferred action.

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