

Politeness Behavior in Requests as a Function of Downgrading*

Jaesuk Suh

(Inha University)

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This paper examined Korean students' ability to express politeness in various face-threatening situations requiring the performance of the speech act of requests. As an important aspect of pragmatic competence, politeness in the paper was viewed as a function of downgrading which plays an important role in mitigating the imposition force of face-threatening acts, and considering saving others' face. In a study in which data were collected via discourse completion test (DCT), three language groups (EFL Korean learners, ESL Korean learners and English native speakers) were asked to read the description of each one of the six situations in DCT, perceive a need for politeness in each situation, and write down what they would be most likely to say in a given situation. The analysis of written data on both subjects' perception of a need for politeness and their requests across situations showed that three language groups did not differ from each other in their perception of politeness needs throughout situations. However, when it comes to the actual realization of politeness through the use of downgraders, great differences existed among the groups. The native speaker group used much more downgraders within requests by combining one downgrader with another from various types of downgraders than the two learner groups who relied mainly on a few types of downgraders, showed a limited repertoire of downgraders, and thus suffered from the lack of politeness in every one of the situations. Such a pragmatic deficiency was more pronounced in the EFL learner group than the ESL learner group. Based on the findings of the study, some teaching suggestions were offered to help students to become pragmatically competent L2 users as far as English linguistic politeness is concerned.

I. INTRODUCTION

Language philosophers such as Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) saw human's language use as verbal acts. According to their theory of speech acts, language is used to perform three major acts: (1) a locutionary act which is a simple statement of state of affairs, (2) an

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illocutionary act which is the use of an utterance to perform social functions, and (3) a perlocutionary act which is the result of performing an illocutionary act. The illocutionary act, which conveys social meanings in context, plays a more crucial role in communication than the locutionary act that expresses literal meanings of an utterance since the former not only is used far more often than the latter in everyday life, but also guides us in handling ongoing interaction successfully. Put another way, an appropriate indexation of social meanings to an utterance during interaction (i.e. how an utterance is said) is more important than a mere production of grammatically correct sentences (i.e. what is said) (Byon, 2004).

The central role of the social function of language in everyday communication is well represented in linguistic politeness. Politeness is socially motivated behavior to show a consideration on others, and to create an interpersonal bond uniting social members together, which helps to keep society smooth and harmonious. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), politeness comes into play when people are engaged in 'face-threatening acts (FTA)', and save each other's 'face' by reducing imposition or illocutionary effects caused by FTA. Learning to become polite in appropriate manners is one typical, important socialization task for children in any society though the task is gradual, challenging and even formidable in the sense that more often than not, adults are seen to preplan what to say and how to behave in order to be polite enough not to hurt other's feeling or emotion (Gumperz, 1996; Scollon & Scollon, 1995). In this respect, one can easily imagine how difficult and complicated it would be to learn about how to become polite in L2. One main reason for this lies in the very nature of pragmatic competence which refers to the ability to use language in socially, culturally appropriate ways. As many L2 researchers (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998; Canale, 1983; Cohen & Olshtain, 1994; Kasper & Rose, 2002; Thomas, 1983) pointed out, the pragmatically competent use of language presupposes a harmonious development between two different types of knowledge: knowledge about linguistic resources to encode a speaker's intended meaning of message, and knowledge about socio-cultural norms and principles governing and determining values placed on numerous contextual variables. The two types of knowledge are closely related to each other in that the mapping of a speaker's intended meaning onto language forms is greatly influenced by his or her socio-cultural assessment of various situational factors during interaction (e.g., a communicative goal to be achieved, information to be exchanged, and a relationship between interlocutors in terms of age, gender, familiarity, social power, educational background, and socio-economic background, among others). Thus in order for L2 learners to express politeness pragmatically appropriately, they need to both have sufficient linguistic resources encoding their intended meaning of politeness, and know about socio-cultural rules of politeness relevant to a given situation.

Languages differ from each other in a way that politeness is expressed. For instance, the Korean language has a sophisticated system of honorifics, euphemistic words, and

sentence-ending particles to mitigate the illocutionary effect of an utterance (Byon, 2004; Juck-Ryoon Hwang, 1990). The use of these linguistic devices in social interaction is determined by social, cultural constraints of the Korean language and culture which in turn play a key role in the formation of cognitive value orientations of Korean people who are usually described as formalistic, emotionalistic, indirect, collectivistic, and hierarchical (Byon, 2004; Ho-Min Sohn, 1986). Meanwhile, the English language like the Korean language depends on linguistic elements such as modals, directness level, and downgraders to express politeness, but they differ in a way that individual linguistic elements function syntactically within an utterance. English-speaking native speakers choose these elements on the basis of their cognitive value orientations which depict them as individualistic, rationalistic, practical, direct, and egalitarian (Ho-Min Sohn, 1986). Having said this, it can be easily assumed that the ability to become polite appropriately either in Korean or in English as a second or foreign language would be difficult to attain, and tricky to deal with, particularly in foreign language learning contexts. A failure of L2 learners to develop such ability may lead target language speakers to conclude that they are inappropriately uncooperative, rude or insulting “even when this is not at all the social message intended” (Celce-Murcia, 1991, p. 467).

Given that one important social function of language is to express politeness which is universal across cultures on the one hand, and that an appropriate expression of politeness requires both language- and culture-specific knowledge in a given society on the other, the present paper investigated the pragmatic competence of Korean students of English as they performed a face-threatening act eliciting politeness strategy-use in various situations. As stated before, in light of the fact that both linguistic and cultural differences exist between Korean and English in the expression of politeness, and that a combination of linguistic elements with social meanings of politeness in a particular situation requires the knowledge of what socio-cultural role it plays in that situation (Byon, 2004; Hinkel, 2001), a successful realization of English linguistic politeness would not be an easy task for Korean learners. Moreover, things would get even worse if they assume that L1 rules of politeness would be the same elsewhere, and apply them into L2 use.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. Politeness: A Hard-to-Define Concept with a Variety of Views

In spite of much research on politeness in sociolinguistics or pragmatics, ironically no consensus is available yet as to what politeness is all about (Watts, Ide & Ehlich, 1992). The main reason for this seems to lie in the multidimensional nature of politeness which leads

different researchers to see different aspects of it, and accordingly, eludes a clear definition (Meier, 1997). Another reason for the lack of a clear-cut definition of politeness is that politeness has often been used interchangeably with the terms such as 'indirectness' or 'deference', and such a mixing usage has resulted in confusion (Meier, 1995). Though indirectness has long been believed to have a strong relationship, or has been even identified with politeness, recent research evidence shows that the most indirectness does not necessarily indicate the highest level of politeness. Blum-Kulka (1987) reported that her subjects (native speakers of both English and Hebrew) perceived hints (nonconventional indirect requests) as the most indirect, but not the most polite while they measured query preparatory (conventional indirect requests) which is less indirect than hints as the most polite. Meanwhile, according to Juck-Ryoon Hwang (1990), as far as Korean sociolinguistics is concerned, deference and politeness are two separate social constructs since they are encoded by different linguistic, pragmatic means. While deference is marked through honorifics, politeness is realized by indirect speech, various hedges, longer utterances, or hyperrespectfulness.

There have been a variety of approaches to the study of politeness in a daily interaction. Fraser (1990) in a review of various approaches to politeness presented four different ways of viewing politeness: the social-norm view, the conversational-maxim view, the face-saving view and the conversational-contract view. First, the social-norm view prescribes people's behavior or way of speaking in a particular situation on the basis of a certain set of social norms, for instance, manuals of etiquette. When a person acts under such norms, he or she can be seen as polite. Second, as its name displays, the conversational-maxim view is built on maxims in Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle and Leech's (1983) Politeness Principle, and claims that politeness serves as a basis for the rational use of language in conversation, and contributes to the establishment and maintenance of comity in society. Third, the face-saving view originates from Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory that searches for universals underlying human politeness behavior. According to this view, as everyone has 'face' (i.e., "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (p. 61)), and has a strong tendency to protect it from the outside world, individual persons in daily interactions in which face-threatening acts should be performed inevitably need to make cooperative efforts in maintaining and saving each other's face through politeness strategy-use. Fourth, the conversational-contract view put forward by Fraser (1990) sees politeness as dynamic and negotiable throughout interaction. Within this view, politeness is not fixed in advance, but rather determined only during ongoing interaction in which participants' rights and obligations are constantly negotiated to achieve a given communicative goal. Finally, like Fraser (1990), Meier (1997) considers politeness context-sensitive and situation-specific, and argues that appropriateness of politeness relies entirely on contexts where a lot of

situational factors are combined in various ways, and the way of perceiving and assessing them differs from culture to culture.

2. Previous Studies of L2 Learners' Politeness Behavior

Studies of politeness strategy-use by non-native speakers of English are classified roughly into two groups. One group of studies (e.g., Carrell & Konneker, 1981; Kitao, 1990; Walters, 1980) investigated non-native speakers' perception of politeness levels usually within the speech act of requests, and reported the overall similarities of non-native speakers to native speakers in their perception of politeness under various situations. One serious drawback of these studies is that what they showed is perception or judgment of what would be polite in a hypothetical context, not actual production of politeness in real-life situations. The other group of studies (e.g., Fukushima & Iwata, 1985; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; House, 1989; Niki & Tajika, 1994; Scarcella, 1980; Tanaka, 1988; Tanaka & Kawade, 1982) examined non-native speakers' use of politeness strategies in different situations in which various contextual factors were combined. One common finding is that non-native speakers, even those with high level of grammatical competence, were not able to use politeness strategies in a way similar to English native speakers. This finding that grammatical competence does not necessarily guarantee an appropriate use of language helped to stress the importance of developing pragmatic ability in L2 learning and use (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Hinkel, 2001).

The literature on politeness behavior of Korean learners of English has been underrepresented. Jin-ok Hong (1999) compared politeness strategies by Korean students of EFL with those of English native speakers in situations requiring the performance of requests. She found that learners used more varied levels of polite expressions in most situations than English native speakers. The author attributed these differences between two groups to L1 transfer effects because unlike the English language, the Korean language uses a well-developed system of honorifics to express politeness according to interlocutors of varying degrees of social variables. In a study in which college students were given instruction on the speech act of requests for six weeks, Jong-Im Han (1999) showed positive effects of instruction on politeness strategy-use of subjects since they were able to use a wider range of downgraders in their requests after instruction than they were before instruction. Meanwhile, Eun-Mi Yang (2001) examined EFL Korean students' ability to express politeness in e-mail requests. She compared students' use of downgraders to that of English native speakers, and found that most important, English native speakers used various types of downgraders far more frequently in all situations than the students who favored politeness marker ('please') most of the time.

3. Politeness as a Function of Downgrading

It was stated earlier that Korean and English differ greatly from each other in the production of linguistic politeness. As Fouser (1995) noted, the differences between the two languages at both linguistic and socio-cultural levels have been assumed to lead most Koreans to see their L1 rules of politeness unworkable in the English language and to feel anxious over being misinterpreted as impolite. Among various linguistic elements used to express English linguistic politeness, it is downgraders that Korean learners are not familiar with, and have much difficulty dealing with (Jong-Im Han, 1999; Eun-Mi Yang, 2001). Downgraders, according to House and Kasper (1981), are “markers which play down the impact X’s utterance is likely to have on Y” (p. 166). Thus downgraders serve a function of reducing the illocutionary force of communicative acts, particularly, face-threatening acts, and at the same time, sending to a hearer a signal of a speaker’s considering saving his or her face. In relation to the speech act of requests, downgraders are optional elements occurring within a core of request realization (i.e., head act) to soften the impositive force of a request through syntactic, phrasal or lexical choices (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989). For example, a comparison of a request ‘Can you lend me your book?’ with one such as ‘I was wondering if you could possibly let me borrow your book for a second’ clearly shows that the latter sounds more mitigated, more indirect, and hence, more polite than the former. This is because the second request contains various types of downgraders such as syntactic downgraders (past tense and durative aspect marker in ‘was wondering’ and ‘could’), phrasal downgrader (‘for a second’), and lexical downgrader (‘possibly’). The view of reduction of an illocutionary effect or imposition created by face-threatening acts as one major way of expressing politeness has been quite universal across cultures (House & Kasper, 1981). So downgraders can be considered to function as a politeness-marking indicator, and play a central role in conveying politeness in face-threatening situations. Depending on a speaker’s need for the investment of varying amounts of politeness in a given face-threatening situation, downgraders are used on their own or in combination with one another.

In light of the central, decisive role of downgraders in the expression of English linguistic politeness, the present paper regarded politeness as a primary function of downgrading optionally used within face-threatening acts such as requests, suggestions or orders. It was felt that treating politeness in this way could capture one typical, common pattern of politeness behavior of English native speakers who show their politeness to others through varying degrees of downgrading during everyday communication. Hence, one clear advantage of viewing politeness as a function of downgrading is a reflection of what English-speaking native speakers actually do for their expression of politeness in real-life interactions. In this light, it would be interesting to examine whether Korean

students are able to handle downgrading in a way similar to English native speakers in various face-threatening situations in order to become polite successfully. That is, the aim of this paper was to look into politeness strategy-use of Korean students of English as they employed downgraders in different situations requiring the performance of one face-threatening act, requests. To this end, the paper addressed the following research questions:

1. Are there differences among three language groups (i.e., Korean learners of EFL, Korean learners of ESL, and English native speakers) in the expression of politeness through downgraders across face-threatening situations?
2. How and on what basis do three language groups perceive a need for politeness in individual face-threatening situations?
3. What are similarities and differences among three language groups as they employ downgraders in individual face-threatening situations?

One main reason for the selection of the speech act of requests as a focus of the study is that requests not only are a basic conversational skill acquired from the early beginning of life (Taylor & Taylor, 1990), but also are a communicative act used quite often in everyday interaction (Fraser, 1978; Koike, 1989). Such an importance placed on requests stresses a clear, definite need for L2 learners to develop the pragmatic ability to perform requests in a way that is socio-culturally appropriate in target language society.

III. METHODS

1. Participants

Three different language groups participated in the study. Subjects in each group were all college students, which helped to strengthen the homogeneity of samples. The first group consisted of twenty Korean students of EFL (10 males and 10 females) enrolled at one university located in the southern part of Korea. Fifteen students majored in English language and literature, and about two thirds of the students were either sophomores or juniors. A self-rated English proficiency varied from intermediate-low to advanced. Most students except three had never been to English-speaking countries at the time of study. The second group was twenty Korean learners of ESL (8 males and 12 females). They were enrolled at one major university in the US as ESL students, undergraduates or

graduates. Among them, seven learners had been studying English at an ESL program of the university for an average of 10 months, and the other thirteen learners whose average length of residence in the US was 4.1 years pursued academic degrees in a variety of fields. The learners in this group ranged in English proficiency from intermediate-low to advanced. Lastly, the third group was twenty native speakers of English (9 males and 11 females). They were enrolled at the same university as the ESL learners as either undergraduates or graduates, and majored in various fields such as education, sociology, nursing, and business, among others.

2. Instruments and Procedure

To examine how subjects of the study deal with politeness in various face-threatening situations, data were collected by means of a discourse completion test (DCT) which is an open-ended questionnaire. Despite its drawbacks (Beebe & Cummings, 1996; Bonikowska, 1988; Cohen, 1996; Wolfson, 1989), the DCT was believed to be appropriate to Korean students most of whom are usually described as shy, reticent or anxious about making errors in face-to-face interactions. Since the DCT offers sufficient time for best responses, and thus helps informants avoid making errors as possible as they can (Rintell & Mitchell, 1989), it was assumed to contribute much to making Korean learners feel at ease and comfortable, and as a result, fully use their pragmatic knowledge during their engagement in a DCT task.

The DCT used in the study included six situations requiring the performance of the speech act of requests. The six situations were created on the basis of two contextual variables such as social distance and social status. Social distance representing familiarity had two values where -social distance indicated the presence of familiarity between interlocutors in a certain situation, and +social distance showed no such familiarity between interlocutors in a given situation. Social status representing social power had three values where +social status indicated a situation in which a speaker had more social power than a hearer while -social status referred to a situation in which a hearer had more social power than a speaker. 0social status indicated a situation in which interlocutors were equal in social power. A combination of two values of social distance with three values of social status resulted in six different situations. As for content of situations, efforts were made to create scenarios that subjects (college students) were familiar with since their unfamiliarity with the scenarios of situations might cause them to produce unnatural speech which in turn would have a negative effect on the overall findings of the study. Though a few scenarios were taken from Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989), and Mir-Fernandez (1994), they were given some revision to create more specific and more concrete situations. A description of the scenario of each situation is given below:

TABLE 1
Scenarios of Six Situations in Discourse Completion Test

Situation	Summary of each situation
1 (Notebook)	A student asks a classmate to lend a notebook.
2 (Music)	A student asks an unknown student to turn down music.
3 (Paper)	A student asks a known professor to give paper due extension .
4 (Article)	A student asks an unknown professor to lend an article.
5 (Computer)	A student asks a classmate to stop playing games in a computer lab.
6 (Noise)	A student asks an unknown student to be quiet in library.

When subjects were administered the DCT, they were instructed to answer two different questions. First, after reading the description of a given situation, subjects had to respond to a question of whether or not, they would express politeness in a specific situation, and provide their own reason for the investment of politeness in that situation. Second, subjects were asked to write down what they would be most likely to say within their request in a given situation.

3. Data Analysis

Since the focus of the study was on the production of politeness in requests, and since politeness was viewed as a function of downgrading in this study, the investigation of how politeness is expressed amounts to the examination of how downgrading is realized by subjects in three language groups. For the classification of downgraders, coding schemes developed by Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989), and House and Kasper (1981, 1987) were used for analysis, and definition and examples of category of downgraders are attached in Appendix B. Based on the coding of downgraders employed by three language groups in each one of the six situations of the DCT, a comparison was made among three groups in terms of type and frequency of downgraders according to individual situations to determine the similarities and differences in the actual realization of politeness through downgrading within requests. In addition, in an effort to find out how and why subjects in three groups perceived a need for politeness in a given situation, written data were content-analyzed. First, subjects' written responses in each one of the situations were read carefully with a focus on content to identify 'communication unit' which stands by itself, and has an independent meaning or information on a thought or behavior (Langer & Applebee, 1987, in Mangelsdorf, 1992). Second, communication units that represent similar concepts were grouped together through comparing one unit of communication with another to develop categories. Third, emerging categories of communication units were reviewed to check whether they overlapped, or were related to one another, and finally, each category of communication units was given an appropriate name.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. A Comparison of Three Language Groups Throughout Situations

In an effort to answer the research question 1 (i.e., Are there differences among three groups in the expression of politeness through downgrading across situations?), a comparison was made among three groups in their use of downgraders throughout situations. According to Table 2, it is obvious that an English native speaker group outnumbered two learner groups in the use of downgraders both in every individual situation and across six situations. The native speaker group used twice or even three times as many as downgraders in the first four situations as compared to two learner groups. This clearly indicates that the native speaker group consistently employed much more downgrading in their requests, and accordingly, was more polite than two learner groups throughout situations. The learner groups failed to express politeness by using downgraders in an appropriate manner, and suffered from the lack of politeness in every one of the situations. In particular, an EFL learner group seemed to be way behind the target language norm of politeness, and must have been experiencing much difficulty producing politeness through downgrading, which would lead them to appear strange or rude in the eyes of target language speakers.

TABLE 2
Frequency of Downgraders Used by Each Group across Situations (raw scores)

	Sit 1	Sit 2	Sit 3	Sit 4	Sit 5	Sit 6	Total
EFL	13	18	12	13	12	13	81
ESL	14	24	19	21	13	22	113
ENS	56	61	51	59	22	28	277

cf) EFL: Korean learners of EFL, ESL: Korean learners of ESL, ENS: English Native Speakers

A closer look at the use of downgraders by the native speaker group in Table 2 shows that there was a large decrease in the number of downgraders used in situations 5 and 6 as compared to the first four situations while no such decrease was found in two learner groups. This difference suggests that the learner groups might perceive two situations differently from the native speaker group, and as a result, invest differing degrees of politeness, or were unable to express politeness through downgrading in a way similar to the native speaker group in these situations. In light of the finding that the learner groups tended to underuse downgraders across situations in a rather consistent manner, it can be said that they must have had insufficient knowledge about downgrading as a major means to express linguistic politeness in English.

2. Similarities and Differences Among Three Groups in Individual Situations

The similarities and differences among three groups in the production of politeness through downgrading can be shown more clearly in terms of subjects' perception of a need for politeness and their use of downgraders in individual situations. Situation 1 in which a requester (student) asks a classmate to lend his or her notebook is characterized by equal social status and presence of familiarity.

TABLE 3
Subjects' Perception of a Need for Politeness in Each Situation (# of subjects)

	Sit 1		Sit 2		Sit 3		Sit 4		Sit 5		Sit 6	
	Yes	No										
EFL	20	0	15	5	20	0	20	0	15	5	7	13
ESL	20	0	18	2	20	0	20	0	19	1	16	4
ENS	20	0	18	2	20	0	19	1	19	1	15	5

As seen in Table 3, three groups reached a full agreement that politeness should be expressed in situation 1. Despite equal social status and presence of familiarity between interlocutors here, subjects in each group felt a clear, definite need for the investment of politeness in this situation. Table 4 below lists the main reasons of each group for the use of politeness in situation 1.

TABLE 4
Major Reasons of Each Group for Politeness Investment in Situation 1

	Categories of Communication Units	# of Communication Units
EFL	To be polite whenever asking a favor	11
	To get a compliance from a hearer	5
	To borrow a thing that is valuable to a hearer	3
ESL	To be polite whenever asking a favor	16
	To make a request more understandable to a hearer	2
ENS	To be polite whenever asking a favor	15
	To make a request to an unclose friend	3

From Table 4 it follows that most subjects in three groups thought that it was essential to demonstrate politeness whenever asking someone to do something as the following data show:

“Because you ask someone a favor, you should definitely become polite”(EFL # 2)

“Because I'm trying to borrow a notebook, there is no way that I can ask without politeness” (ESL # 7)

“I want something from them [classmates], so I will be nice” (ENS# 9)

Despite a consensus among three groups as to the investment of politeness in situation 1, there were great differences among them in the actual realization of politeness through downgrading.

TABLE 5
Type of Downgraders Used in Situation 1 (Notebook) (raw scores)

	Tense	Aspect	Subjectiv- iser	Condi- tional	Agent avoider	Politeness marker	Down- toner	Under- stater	To-tal
EFL	8					3		1	13
ESL	8			3		3			14
ENS	26	6	3	11	4	3	3		56

According to Table 5, the native speaker group employed a wider variety of differing types of downgraders within their requests than two learner groups in situation 1. Since the native speaker group outnumbered the learner groups in the total frequency of downgraders here, it was sure to enjoy combining one type of downgrader with another within one request strategy in contrast to the learner groups who depended mainly on only one downgrader. For instance, the native speakers used both syntactic downgraders (e.g., past tense with present time reference, durative aspect marker, conditional clause and agent avoider), and phrasal and lexical downgraders (e.g., subjectiviser and downtoner) at their disposal as seen in the example (Italicized parts are downgraders): “*Would it be at all possible* for me to borrow your notes?”; “*Is there any way I could* borrow your notes?”; and “*I was just wondering if you could* mind *if I could* copy your notes from last week.” Meanwhile, the learners used very few syntactic downgraders except for past tense with present time reference, and relied much on lexical downgrader like a politeness marker (‘please’) as shown in the example: “*Could* I borrow your note?”; “*Would* you *please* lend me your notes?”; and “*Please* show me your notes.” One thing to note here is that some learners of both EFL and ESL showed their preference for imperatives either followed or preceded by politeness marker in the situation. According to Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996), such a construction without an acknowledgement of cost to a hearer in the form of apologies or appreciation “does not serve as a strong enough mitigator to soften the force of the imperative” (p. 59), and is likely to make the learners sound awkward or even rude.

The two learner groups’ underuse of downgraders in the situation indicates no consistency between their perception of politeness needs and their actual production of politeness. That is, though learners in both groups felt a clear need for politeness in this situation, they were unable to show the perceived, intended politeness in an appropriate manner probably due to insufficient pragmatic knowledge of downgrading in requests.

Another possible reason lies in L1 transfer effects in the sense that under similar situations in Korean society where interlocutors are in equal social status, and know each other, they tend to use less-polite strategies and more-direct languages since Koreans usually place high values on social status rather than familiarity, and hence, in this case, equal social status between interlocutors would play a more crucial role in determining politeness than a contextual factor, familiarity (Byon, 2004).

Situation 2 is comparable with situation 1 in that interlocutors in situation 2 are in equal social status, but have no familiarity with each other since a requester (student) asks an unknown student to turn down music. Such a comparison between two situations leads to the prediction that a requester in situation 2 would be motivated to invest more politeness than he or she would in situation 1. This prediction was borne out by all three groups since there was a small increase in the number of downgraders from situation 1 to situation 2 (See Table 2). Also the three groups showed an overall agreement on their perception of a need for politeness in situation 2. The majority of subjects in each group believed that they should make a polite request in the situation (See Table 3).

TABLE 6
Major Reasons of Each Group for Politeness Investment in Situation 2

	Categories of Communication Units	# of Communication Units
EFL	To make a request to an unknown person	10
	To maintain a good relationship with a requestee	3
	To respect a requestee's freedom to listen to music	2
ESL	To make a request to an unknown person	5
	To prevent a requestee from feeling offensive	4
	To get a compliance from a requestee	3
	To respect a requestee's freedom to listen to music	3
ENS	To maintain a good relationship with a requestee	2
	To prevent a requestee from feeling offensive	5
	To get a compliance from a requestee	5
	To be polite whenever asking a favor	3
	To make a request to an unknown person	3

Table 6 lists the main reasons of each group for politeness needs in situation 2. One notable difference between the native speaker group and the learner groups is that many learners of both EFL and ESL saw unfamiliarity between interlocutors in the situation as a decisive factor influencing the investment of politeness while the native speakers focused on considering saving a requestee's emotion or feeling, or gaining a compliance.

When it comes to the actual production of politeness through downgrading, there were big differences among three groups. As shown in Table 7, the native speaker group used downgraders much more often along with a wide range of downgraders in their requests than the learner groups. Accordingly, the learner groups demonstrated much less politeness

than the native speaker group in situation 2. Their unsuccessful realization of politeness would lead them to sound less persuasive, and result in little compliance from a requestee.

TABLE 7
Type of Downgraders Used in Situation 2 (Music) (raw scores)

	Tense	Aspect	Subjectiviser	Conditional	Politeness marker	Down-toner	Under-stater	Total
EFL	8				8		2	18
ESL	10			2	9		3	24
ENS	27	7	1	7	13	3	3	61

It is interesting to note that situation 2 triggered the highest occurrence of downgraders in the native speaker group. That is, despite equal social status between interlocutors here, the native speaker group used the largest amount of downgrading. The highest occurrence of downgraders in this situation which indicates the highest level of politeness seems to show the native speakers' special concern with being polite to an interlocutor of equal social status. According to Wolfson (1988), socially equal-status members in American society tend to see their relationship as dynamic and unfixed, so they usually make a lengthy conversation through engaging in more negotiation and using more politeness strategies during interaction.

Situation 3 differs from the previous situations in that a speaker (student) makes a request to a hearer of higher social status (professor). This hearer-dominant situation is likely to stimulate a speaker to invest the considerable amount of politeness in his or her request in spite of the presence of familiarity between interlocutors. As seen in Table 3, all the subjects in three groups perceived a clear, definite need for politeness in the situation. The three groups of subjects, however, differed from each other in their reasons for the investment of politeness. While about half of the learners of both EFL and ESL gave one voice that they should be polite because of their failure to keep a paper due date, many native speakers felt that either making a request in itself or getting someone to do something that is costly to him or her (in this case, asking him or her to bend an academic rule) required politeness. Here are some examples:

“It’s your fault to hand in the paper past the due date, and you want to ask a favor. So you must be polite” (EFL #17)

“I should have turned in the paper on time. It’s my fault that I can’t turn it in on time, so I should be polite” (ESL #11)

“A favor is being asked, and requests for aid or understanding require the most politeness” (ENS #1)

TABLE 8
Major Reasons of Each Group for Politeness Investment in Situation 3

	Categories of Communication Units	# of Communication Units
EFL	To make a request to professor	10
	To make a request due to my fault	8
	To make a request due to my fault	11
ESL	To be polite whenever asking a favor	3
	To make a request to professor	3
	To be polite whenever asking a favor	7
	To make a request which breaks an academic rule	4
ENS	To make a request to professor who is socially and academically superior to me	3
	To get a compliance from a hearer	2
	To make a request due to my fault	2

The agreement of three groups on the perception of a need for politeness in situation 3 was overshadowed by clear differences among them in the use of downgraders. In Table 9, the distribution of types of downgraders in the native speaker group is much wider than that in the learner groups, which means that the native speakers not only used more downgraders, but realized downgrading from a wider range of downgraders than the learners. Such a skillful command of downgrading by the native speakers is very likely to lead them to appear cooperative and polite enough to get a compliance from professor in the situation.

TABLE 9
Type of Downgraders Used in Situation 3 (Paper) (raw scores)

	Tense	Aspect	Subjectiviser	Conditional	Agent avoider	Politeness marker	Down-toner	Under-stater	To-tal
EFL	5					7			12
ESL	10		1	2	1	4		1	19
ENS	23	6	1	7	5	2	4	3	51

The high level of politeness demonstrated by the native speakers here was achieved mainly through a combination of syntactic, phrasal and lexical downgraders as seen in the example: “I was wondering if I could possibly have an extension on the due date”; “I wanted to see if I could maybe turn it in a little later”; and “I was just wondering if there was any way possible that I could turn in my paper a couple of days later.” The optimal, balanced combination of various types of downgraders constitutes one important aspect of pragmatic competence which enables language users to collocate downgraders within one request strategy. In contrast, the learners, particularly EFL learners, used a narrow range of downgraders, and seemed to have a limited repertoire of downgraders. They showed a strong preference for one type of syntactic downgrader, past tense with present time reference and a few types of phrasal and lexical downgraders such as politeness marker and understater, or even used no downgraders at all as the following examples show: “Give me an extension on the paper,

please”; “Can I turn in the paper *a little* later?”; and “I want to get an extension on the paper.”

Situation 4 is similar to situation 3 in that a hearer (professor) has higher social status than a speaker (student), but is different from it in that there is no familiarity between interlocutors. So it can be easily predicted that the higher level of politeness would be necessary in situation 4 than in situation 3 since the absence of familiarity between interlocutors in situation 4 would motivate a speaker to invest more politeness than the presence of familiarity between interlocutors in situation 3 though the hearer dominance in both situations still requires the considerably high degree of politeness. According to Table 2, this prediction was partially supported. There was a small, clear increase in the number of downgraders from situation 3 to situation 4 in both the native speaker group and the ESL learner group. It is hard to say that such an increase occurred in the EFL learner group which employed the rather invariable number of downgraders across situations. Meanwhile, the three groups showed an overall agreement on their perception of a need for politeness in situation 4 (See Table 3). Except for one native speaker, all the subjects agreed that their requests would demand politeness for this situation. Table 10 offers several reasons for the investment of politeness in the situation. In general, the majority of subjects in three groups saw making a request to an unfamiliar person and making a request for a favor as two major reasons for politeness needs for the situation.

TABLE 10
Major Reasons of Each Group for Politeness Investment in Situation 4

	Categories of Communication Units	# of Communication Units
EFL	To make a request to an unfamiliar person	11
	To be polite whenever asking a favor	7
	To make a request to professor of higher status	2
ESL	To be polite whenever asking a favor	12
	To make a request to an unfamiliar person	4
	To make a request to professor of higher status	3
ENS	To be polite whenever asking a favor	11
	To make a request to an unfamiliar person	4
	To make a good impression	3

In spite of the overall agreement of three groups on their reasons for investing politeness in situation 4, three groups differed greatly from each other in the use of downgraders within their requests.

TABLE 11
Type of Downgraders Used in Situation 4 (Article) (raw scores)

	Tense	Aspect	Subjec- tivist	Condi- tional	Agent avoider	Politeness marker	Down- toner	Under- stater	To-tal
EFL	9			1		2		1	13
ESL	12			5		2		2	21
ENS	25	8	1	11	2	3	6	3	59

A cursory look at Table 11 indicates that as compared to the native speaker group, two learner groups showed both the underuse of downgraders and the narrow range of downgraders in the situation. As a result, they demonstrated much less politeness, and became less polite than the native speaker group. Moreover, some EFL learners favored constructions such as interrogatives beginning with ‘Do you ...?’ or ‘Can you ...?’ and ‘want statement’ with no politeness indicators at all as can be seen in the examples: “Do you lend me the article?”; “Can you lend me that article?”; and “I want to borrow book which you have because the book is not in library.” The occurrence of such constructions without downgraders implies that the learners failed to express their intended politeness since all learners of both EFL and ESL agreed on the investment of politeness in the situation.

Situations 5 and 6 can be differentiated from the first four situations in that they are speaker-dominant situations where a speaker has more social power than a hearer. So both situations are the same in terms of social status, but differ in that there is a familiarity between interlocutors in situations 5 while no familiarity exists in situation 6. Thus a speaker in situation 5 would be likely to demonstrate less politeness than he or she would in situation 6. This prediction was supported by the native speaker group and the ESL learner group. Put another way, a small increase in the number of downgraders from situation 5 to situation 6 can be noted in both groups (See Table 2). In the case of the EFL learner group, for the same reason mentioned earlier, a very little difference in the number of downgraders (from 12 times in situation 5 to 13 times in situation 6) can not be considered a meaningful change. Concerning the perception of a need for politeness in situation 5, nineteen out of twenty subjects in both the native speaker group and the ESL learner group thought that politeness should be expressed in the situation while only fifteen EFL learners did so.

TABLE 12
Major Reasons of Each Group for Politeness Investment in Situation 5

	Categories of Communication Units	# of Communication Units
EFL	To prevent disruption or discomfort	7
	To be polite whenever asking a favor	6
	To get a compliance	2
ESL	To be polite whenever asking a favor	7
	To get a compliance	6
	To show respect	4
ENS	To show respect	7
	To get a compliance	6
	To prevent disruption or discomfort	3
	To be polite whenever asking a favor	2

In Table 12, some differences can be found among three groups in their reasons for the investment of politeness in situation 5. The majority of native speakers ranked showing

respect to and getting a compliance from a hearer as two main reasons for their use of politeness in the situation while most learners of both EFL and ESL saw the act of asking a favor in itself, the prevention of disruption and discomfort, and the gaining of compliance as important reasons for investing politeness. Here are some examples from the data:

“Though a classmate may be wrong, it’s still his right to use computer. If you are impolite, you can hurt his feeling or emotion.” (EFL #7)

“Even though computer games are not permitted in the lab, polite attitude with etiquette is essential when you make a request for something.” (ESL # 11)

“Politeness in any circumstance shows respect, and respect and obedience are more likely to be returned than being rude.” (ENS # 10)

TABLE 13
Type of Downgraders Used in Situation 5 (Computer) (raw scores)

	Tense	Condi- tional	Politeness marker	Downtoner	Under- stater	Subjecti- viser	Total
EFL	4		7	1			12
ESL	6		5		1	1	13
ENS	12	1	7	2			22

Though the native speaker group tended to employ fewer downgraders in situation 5 than it did in the first four situations, it still outnumbered the two learner groups in the total frequency of downgraders. This indicates that the learners in both groups were short of the appropriate amount of politeness needed in the situation. One main reason for the low occurrence of downgraders in the native speaker group seems to lie in its avoidance of combining one type of downgrader with another in a request. As mentioned before, since differing degrees of politeness can be obtained according to the number of downgraders embedded into a given request strategy (House & Kasper, 1981), it is clear that the native speakers were not motivated to invest politeness in situation 5 to the same extent to which they demonstrated it in the first four situations, and as a result, reduced the total amount of downgrading mainly by avoiding using more than one downgrader in requests. Then one question can be raised about what led the native speakers to invest less politeness in situation 5 (and in situation 6) than in the first four situations. A closer look at scenarios of both situations offers one plausible explanation. Under these situations in which a computer assistant asks another student to stop playing games in a computer lab (situation 5), and a library monitor asks noisy students to be quiet in a non-discussion area of library (situation 6), a requester is highly likely to feel that he or she has a clear, definite right or power to make a request, and thus to place a requestee under an obligation to comply with his or her request (Blum-Kulka & House, 1989). In such situations, there is no strong,

urgent need for the investment of the high degree of politeness on the part of a requester. Unfortunately, the dramatic change in the total amount of politeness between the first four situations and the last two situations found in the native speaker group did not occur in the two learner groups.

Finally, in situation 6, both the native speakers and the ESL learners used more downgraders, and thus invested more politeness than they did in situation 5 where a familiarity exists between interlocutors. The EFL learners were unable to follow such a pattern of investing politeness through the use of downgraders. They also differed from the native speakers and the ESL learners in the perception of a need for politeness in the situation. Only seven out of twenty EFL learners felt that they would express politeness here while sixteen ESL learners and fifteen native speakers thought that their requests would demand politeness. Table 14 shows major reasons of three groups for investing politeness in situation 6.

TABLE 14
Major Reasons of Each Group for Politeness Investment in Situation 6

	Categories of Communication Units	# of Communication Units
EFL	To prevent a requestee from feeling offensive or uncomfortable	3
	To be polite whenever asking a favor	3
	To get a compliance	7
ESL	To prevent a requestee from feeling offensive or uncomfortable	6
	To make a request to an unfamiliar person	2
	To show respect	2
	To prevent a requestee from feeling offensive or uncomfortable	5
ENS	To make a request to an unfamiliar person	3
	To get a compliance	3
	To show respect	2
	To be polite whenever asking a favor	2

One common reason of three groups for a need of politeness here is that they considered politeness as playing a crucial role in avoiding making a requestee feel offensive or uncomfortable as some subjects from each group told:

“Though I should warn them to be quiet, I need to do so in a way that does not hurt their emotion” (EFL #16)

“Just because they are inconsiderate, it does not mean you need to be rude to them to make them upset or embarrassed by other students” (ESL #5)

“Not as much politeness in other situations, but I would still be polite enough to get my point across without making someone upset” (ENS #15)

Two main reasons were identified for the EFL learners who were against the investment of politeness in the situation. Ten of the thirteen learners saw that no politeness was necessary in their requests because a requestee violated the rule of library that one is supposed to be quiet in a non-discussion area while three learners claimed that they had an authority to make a request without having to be wary about politeness.

Regarding the actual production of politeness through downgraders, there were clear differences among three groups. As seen in Table 15, the learner groups underused downgraders by employing a narrow range of downgraders and relying much on one-word downgraders like a politeness marker, and as a result, showed the insufficient amount of politeness in the last situation.

TABLE 15
Type of Downgraders Used in Situation 6 (Noise) (raw scores)

	Tense	Aspect	Condi- tional	Agent avoider	Politeness marker	Down-toner	Under- stater	Total
EFL	3				10			13
ESL	9		1		10		2	22
ENS	11	1	2	1	9	2	2	28

The pragmatic deficiency in the use of downgraders here was more pronounced in the EFL learner group than the ESL learner group. In particular, some EFL learners tended to use imperatives without politeness marker such as “Be quiet or get out”, “Be quiet”, and “If you want to discuss, move to discussion area”, which never showed up in the native speaker group. Such speech behavior can be explained in two ways. First, a transfer of L1 socio-cultural norms appeared to be operative. Korean society has been viewed as vertical and authoritative, so a person of higher social status or authority is expected to use crude language with little politeness to a person of lower social status or less authority. Some of the EFL learners might have activated this kind of L1 socio-cultural knowledge during their performance. According to Brown and Levinson (1987) who saw the use of imperative forms in face-threatening contexts as “doing an act baldly without redress” (p. 69), imperatives with no politeness strategies are considered as one legitimate way of making a request in context “where S(peaker) is vastly superior in power to H(earer)” (p. 69). Second, a ‘transfer of training’ (Selinker, 1972) may be responsible for the learners’ inappropriate use of imperatives. That is, the mere use of imperatives without politeness indicators can be attributed to teaching materials or teachers that do not offer appropriate ways of performing requests in face-threatening situations. There is some evidence which is supportive of this account. Jang-Mi Baek (2002) looked into types of requests appearing in dialogues of high school English textbooks in this country, and reported that certain types of requests such as direct requests (‘mood derivable’) and conventionally indirect

requests ('query preparatory') were overrepresented in textbooks. Biased textbooks can be problematic in that they provide students with defective pragmatic information, which may cause them to have prejudiced stereotypes toward English linguistic politeness and English-speaking native speakers, and to assume that the English language really does not care about politeness as much as the Korean language. Further they may think incorrectly that it is unnecessary to have trouble becoming polite because English has only a limited set of request strategies along with a few other devices expressing politeness. Accordingly, an unintentional, inconsiderate use of direct requests without politeness indicators in face-threatening situations can give target language speakers the wrong image of the learners as being rude, aggressive or authoritative.

V. CONCLUSION

The aim of the study was to investigate one important aspect of pragmatic competence, politeness, as it was expressed by Korean students of English in various face-threatening situations requiring the performance of requests. To this end, politeness was viewed as a function of downgrading, and three language groups were compared with one another in terms of their perception of a need for politeness and their use of downgraders under different situations. As the results of the study indicated, the native speaker group outnumbered the two learner groups in the use of downgraders by employing a wide range of downgraders and combining one downgrader with another within a given request strategy, and thus invested more politeness than the learner groups throughout situations (Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996). Such politeness behavior of the native speaker group can be accounted for by one major socio-cultural principle of interaction in American society that Americans seriously care about others' privacy, or freedom to act freely, and express their concern through demonstrating the sufficient amount of politeness whenever engaging in face-threatening acts during interaction. On the other hand, the learners of both ESL and EFL underused downgraders consistently, and showed a limited repertoire of downgraders by relying on a few one- or two-word downgraders. Consequently, they suffered from the lack of politeness, and failed to produce their intended politeness though they were similar to the native speakers in the perception of a need for politeness in individual situations. The deviations from the target language norm were more pronounced in the EFL learner group than the ESL learner group.

The ESL learner group showed some similarities to the native speaker group in the use of downgraders under some situations, which indicates that the ESL learners seemed to know how to sound polite in English when they should be polite, and that they were gradually moving toward the L2 socio-cultural norms of politeness even though they were

still far behind the target language norm in general. In the case of the EFL learners, things got even worse. They showed more serious limitations in the range of downgraders than the ESL learners, and relied heavily on a politeness marker 'please' in most situations. Indeed, it is the EFL learner group who invested the lowest degree of politeness among three groups in every one of the situations. It appears that the EFL learners had no idea of what downgrading is in relation to the performance of face-threatening acts, and of how to use downgraders in context. From the overall findings of the study it follows that the Korean learners of English were short of L2 pragmatic knowledge of downgrading needed to successfully handle English linguistic politeness in face-threatening situations (Eun-Mi Yang, 2001). Such a deficiency is a major source of pragmatic failure resulting in an unsuccessful, inappropriate realization of politeness in real-life situations.

This study has some limitations. First, though many L2 researchers (e.g., Beebe & Cummings, 1996; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1992; Houck & Gass, 1996) argued for the use of DCT as a data-gathering method in studies of speech acts, it is true that the data collected in this way are not likely to fully represent what informants would say in actual interactions. So in order to gain a better understanding of learners' politeness behavior, it is necessary to collect data from other methods like open role-plays which allows informants to interact in an open-ended context, and to compare them with the data from the present study. Second, since politeness was viewed as a function of downgrading in the study, other factors influencing the expression of politeness in the performance of requests were ignored. In future research which should take a multidimensional view of the notion of politeness, it is desirable to consider both verbal and nonverbal aspects of politeness such as directness levels of request, perspective, supportive moves, tone, intonation and posture, among others (Tanaka, 1988). In doing so, a whole picture of learners' pragmatic competence in English linguistic politeness can be obtained. Third, as one important contextual variable affecting politeness, degree of imposition was not considered in the study. As Brown and Levinson (1987) point out, degree of imposition along with familiarity and social power plays a crucial role in determining the level of politeness in a particular situation. Thus in future research, efforts should be made to elicit information on degree of imposition created in a specific situation requiring the performance of requests, which would lead to a better understanding of learners' politeness strategy-use. Finally, since most situations in the study are likely to take place only in a college setting, they do not represent a variety of settings which usually occur in many other sectors of everyday life.

The results of the study address some pedagogical implications for EFL classrooms. Since insufficient L2 pragmatic knowledge of downgrading was one primary source of deviation from the target language norm, first of all, students should be explicitly taught how to express politeness when performing face-threatening acts. They need to be given instruction on the important role played by downgrading in performing such acts, and on

appropriate ways of realizing downgrading in context. At the same time, to ensure a students' full understanding of politeness through downgrading, it is necessary to provide them with plentiful opportunities to practice what is learned in various face-threatening situations. There is also a need for enhancing students' cultural awareness by making them familiarized with L2 socio-cultural norms of politeness (e.g., Americans' cognitive value orientations). It goes without saying that both teacher's enthusiasm for well-planned instruction on English linguistic politeness and students' active participation in it will help them to know what to do with language in face-threatening contexts, and to become polite in a pragmatically appropriate way.

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APPENDIX A

Questionnaire (Discourse Completion Test)

Please read the description of each situation, and imagine yourself in a given situation. Then answer the questions.

Situation 1)

You are taking a course. Last week you missed a few classes since you had a bad cold. A mid-term exam is scheduled to be held next week. You know that one of the classmates attends classes regularly and takes good notes. You want to borrow his/her notebook. You approach him/her. What would you say?

1. In this situation, do you think 'politeness' should be expressed in your request? If your answer is either 'Yes' or 'No', please briefly write down why you think so.

2. Write down how you would make a request in this situation.

Situation 2)

You live in a dormitory. It's about 12 o'clock midnight. You are preparing for a mid-term examination tomorrow. However, you can't concentrate on studying because you have been hearing loud music coming from a nearby room for more than an hour. You don't know the student who lives there. You want him/her to turn down the music. You go to his/her room. What would you say?

1. In this situation, do you think 'politeness' should be expressed in your request? If your answer is either 'Yes' or 'No', please briefly write down why you think so.

2. Write down how you would make a request in this situation.

Situation 3)

Tomorrow is the due date of a final term paper for one of the courses you take this semester. However, you are not able to turn it in on time. You want to talk to the professor, whom you have known for a couple of years, and ask him/her to give you an extension on the paper. You go to his/her office and knock on the door. What would you say?

1. In this situation, do you think 'politeness' should be expressed in your request? If your answer is either 'Yes' or 'No', please briefly write down why you think so.

2. Write down how you would make a request in this situation.

Situation 4)

You need to read an important article to write a final term paper. Today you have just found that a library does not have the scholarly journal which includes this article. You have heard that a new professor in your department has this article. Since you haven't had a chance to meet and talk with this professor before, you do not know him/her. You want to ask him/her to lend the article to you.

You go to his/her office, and knock on the door. What would you say?

1. In this situation, do you think 'politeness' should be expressed in your request? If your answer is either 'Yes' or 'No', please briefly write down why you think so.

2. Write down how you would make a request in this situation.

Situation 5)

As a part-time job, you are working as a computer assistant in a computer lab. It is the end of the semester, and there are many students waiting for their turn to use computers. While consulting one student's problems, you see your classmate playing games excitedly. Academic use always precedes non-academic use in a computer lab. You approach him/her. What would you say?

1. In this situation, do you think 'politeness' should be expressed in your request? If your answer is either 'Yes' or 'No', please briefly write down why you think so.

2. Write down how you would make a request in this situation.

Situation 6)

As a part-time job, you are working as a library monitor. While checking on each floor in the library, you see a group of students that you don't know talking loudly in a non-discussion area. It seems clear that this loud noise disturbs other students studying. You want those students to be quiet or move to a discussion area. You approach them. What would you say?

1. In this situation, do you think 'politeness' should be expressed in your request? If your answer is either 'Yes' or 'No', please briefly write down why you think so.

2. Write down how you would make a request in this situation.

APPENDIX B

Coding scheme for the classification of downgraders (Adapted from Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper (1989) and House & Kasper (1981, 1987))

I. Syntactic downgraders

1. Tense: Past tense forms as downgrading only if they are used with present time reference, i.e., if they can be replaced by present tense forms without changing the semantic meaning of the utterance
(Example: "I *wanted* to see if I could turn it in a little late", "Would it be alright if I *could* borrow the article from you?")
2. Aspect: Durative aspect marker as downgrading only if it can be replaced by a simple form
(Example: "I *was wondering* if the music could be turned down", "I *was hoping* to get an extension for the paper")
3. Interrogative: Syntactic structure used as interrogation for downgrading
(Example: "*Do you think* I could borrow your notes?")
4. Conditional clause: Syntactic device used to tone down the illocutionary effect of an utterance
(Example: "I was wondering *if* I could borrow your notes and maybe copy them")
5. Agent avoider: Syntactic devices by means of which it is possible for the speaker not to mention either him/herself or the hearer as agents, hence, avoiding direct attack
(Example: "*Would it be at all possible* for me to borrow your notes?", "*Is there any way* I could have an extension because I will not be done in time")

II. Lexical and Phrasal downgraders

1. Politeness marker: An optional element added to a request to involve a hearer directly in a request, bidding for cooperative behavior
(Example: "Could you *please* let someone who is doing academic work use this computer?")
2. Downtoner: Sentential modifiers (e.g., 'just', 'possibly', 'maybe', 'rather', 'simply', and 'perhaps', etc) used to reduce the illocutionary effect of an utterance on a hearer
(Example: "Could you *possibly* turn your music down?", "I was *just* wondering if you could *maybe* turn your music down a little bit because I have a huge test tomorrow")
3. Understater: Adverbial modifiers (e.g., 'a little bit', 'for a second', 'not very much', and 'just a trifle', etc) by which a speaker under-represents the state of affairs denoted in the proposition
(Example: "I was wondering if you guys could turn down the music *a little bit*")
4. Subjectiviser: Elements (e.g., 'I think', 'I believe', 'I suppose', 'I am afraid', and 'in my opinion', etc) in which the speaker explicitly expresses his or her subjective opinion vis-a-vis the state of

affairs referred to in the proposition, thus lowering the assertive force of an utterance
(Example: “*I think* you should give other students your computer”, “*I am afraid* you’re going to have to move”)

Applicable levels: secondary and college

Key words: pragmatic competence, English linguistic politeness, downgrading

JaeSuk Suh
Dept. of English Education
Inha University
253 Younghyun-dong
Incheon 402-751, Korea
Tel: (032) 860-7853
Fax: (032) 865-3857
E-mail: jssuh@inha.ac.kr

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