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POLITENESS IN MAKING REQUESTS USING MODAL AUXILIARIES IN EFL SPEAKING CLASS

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Abstract

People communicate each other mostly by using spoken language. During the communication, they must avoid using modal auxiliaries especially in asking their interlocutors which then it influences the politeness of the utterances. This research, therefore, discusses the students' usage of modal auxiliaries in speaking class. Here, the modal auxiliaries are found during their performances in the classroom. It is integrated into the English Language and Literature classes in Sunan Gunung Djati Islamic State University in the year 2012. While carrying out the research, qualitative research method is employed. Data are mainly gathered through the observation by recording of students' performances and interview.

The research reveals that 'can' is the highest occurrence of modal auxiliaries used by the students. Moreover, 90% students in speaking class tend to produce positive politeness. 'Can' is in the highest occurrence since the students think it as the simplest modal and most heard in daily communication, while the positive politeness tends to appear since they consider that they need to have refined communication with the interlocutors. At the end, it is hoped that this research might encourage the English lecturers to be more aware of students' politeness during speaking English.

Keywords: Request, Modal Auxiliaries, Politeness

INTRODUCTION

Spoken language is mostly used since it can deliver speakers' ideas orally so that he can also know the response of the interlocutor is, which cannot be done through the written version. Moreover, people will also feel more satisfied if they can convey news, information, etc. to others orally and instantly so that a misunderstanding between them can be avoided. As supported by Brown and Yule (1983), speakers can observe their interlocutors and also modify what they are saying in order to make the conversation more accessible and acceptable. One of the ways is by using modal auxiliaries. These 'can, could, may, might, will, would, shall, should, must, and ought to' (Swan, 1995: 333). They are generally used to express a speaker's attitude or mood. For instance, modal auxiliaries can be used to express necessity, advisability, permission, or possibility; and in addition, they can convey the strength of these attitudes (Azar, 1989: 68).

Grammar in Sinclair (1996: 218) enhances the area of modal auxiliaries to Pragmatics and discusses their importance regard to politeness and tactfulness. They are mostly used in order to give certain impact and chosen based on several factors, such as the relationship between the speaker and the interlocutor, the formality and informality of the situation, and the importance of what they are saying. In this case, they are used as softeners in many discourse situations in English in order to make requests which are indirect, optional, and less forceful by avoiding blunt and direct demands and impositions. Therefore, the significance of politeness strategies in facilitating the acts leads to the study of modal auxiliaries.

Politeness means showing concern on the feelings of others. It is needed to create an effective communication and the cooperation is impossible unless speaker and interlocutor show concern for each other's sentiments and interests, especially about the use of interrogative utterances. The experts like Leech (1973), Brown and Levinson (1978), and Leech (1983) suggest some politeness strategies to ensure harmony during the communication. Thus, the use of modal auxiliaries in requests by the students during the speaking class is analyzed to know the degree of politeness.

Method
The data are collected from observation under the qualitative research. Observation is done by coming to the speaking class five times and the students' performances are recorded. After collecting the data, they are transcribed and selected based on the utterances using modal auxiliaries.

The analysis is started from the usage of modal auxiliaries which is counted on from the occurrences within utterances. Then the analysis continues on 1) principles from Lakoff (1973: 292-305) which consist of a) Do not force anybody, b) Give freedom, c) Make the interlocutor feels comfortable; 2) categories of politeness strategies from Levinson (1978: 94-129) which consist of bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, off record; and 3) Tact Maxim from Leech (1983: 105) which is applied to directive and utterance and convivial functions to tone down impoliteness by minimizing cost and maximizing benefit to others.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following diagram shows the use of modal auxiliaries and its occurrence of percentage.

As seen on the diagram, 'can' is the highest occurrence of all, it is 42.99 %. Then, 'will' is in the second rank and the occurrence is 20.56%. The third rank is the use of 'must' and the occurrence is 15.89%. The occurrence of 'may' in 10.28% is in the fourth rank. Next, 'should' is in the fifth rank and the occurrence is 5.61%. The next rank is placed by two modal auxiliaries, 'would' and 'could', both are in 1.87%. The last rank is the use of 'might', that is 0.93%. Here we can see that 'shall' are not used at all by the students during the speaking class.

1. Can

The use of 'can' during the speaking class is 42.99% and it is the most used modal auxiliary. It is mostly in degree of positive politeness and in commissive act. It is done in order to establish a relationship and prevent the interlocutors to get offended. It can be seen from the following finding.

Can you describe a little bit on that?

Context of the Utterance:

Y: What style do you usually have in swimming?

X: I can swim with any style

Y: Oh really? Can you describe a little bit on that?

The conversation is held in question-answer session of speaking class with the teacher. Y requests X to describe the style of swimming. Since 'can' here is used by Y to ask X to describe the styles of swimming so that the principle here is giving freedom to choose. It is done in order not to limit X's explanation. As we can see, offers are made politely by using modal auxiliary 'can', in a request or interrogative form and by providing choice to the interlocutor. Y does not limit X's explanation.

Here Y is equal to X because they are classmate, so the use of 'can' is suitable in this context. The use of 'can' in request also increases the degree of politeness to be the positive and polished way to politely ask him to describe the styles of swimming. Y does not want to limit X's explanation.

addressee's positive face which indicates that he wants to "come closer" to the addressee. In positive politeness, solidarity is oriented and status differences minimized.

The act of this utterance is commissive. It is done to tone down impoliteness by minimizing the cost for X by not to describe all styles of swimming and maximizing the benefits for him to be freely in describing the examples. This indirectness increases the degree of option so there is no force for X to answer.

2. Will

The second rank of modal auxiliary usage is the use of 'will', it is 20.56%. Most of the students use 'will' in positive politeness and in directive acts. It is to keep the close distance between speakers and interlocutors, as we know that they talk to their classmates so there is no distance relationship. But in the following finding, there is an excessive degree on the use of 'will', which is used in negative politeness:

Sorry, will you flavour us with your opinion about home schooling?

Context of the Utterance:

C: I am tired of going to campus. I think it is a good idea for schooling at home.

D: Really?

C: Yes, I think so

D: Sorry, will you flavour us with your opinion about home schooling?

As we can see, the conversation is conducted by two students in the speaking class and they talk about home schooling. When C says that he wants to school at home, D asks her to give the opinion why she thinks like that. The modal auxiliary that is used by D is 'will' and the word 'flavour' is applied in order to make C feels comfortable and does will not get annoyed with his question. 'Will' is constructed in request, that is in an interrogative form which means D gives chance to C to speak more.

Generally speaking, C and D are classmate so they are equal. In that equality, D puts 'will' in the form of interrogative so that it becomes a polished way to politely ask C to give opinion about home schooling. 'Will' here is formed in a negative politeness which is characterized by formality and restraint to indicate social distance with the addressee. It is specific and focused, and also performs the function of minimizing the particular imposition. Hence due to the apprehension about the possibility of interlocutor's short answer in the previous question, D uses request question to know whether C is willing to follow his request at that time.

The Tact Maxim of this interrogative is a directive speech. 'Will' is used here to provide option to the interlocutor and in this way he hedges the rudeness that can be caused by a direct command. This indirectness deals with the declining choice which contributes to politeness.

3. Must

Modal auxiliary 'must' is in the third rank and it is in 15.89% occurrences. It is used by the students in the degree of positive politeness and in commissive act. They use it to maintain close relationship. There is a finding in which the student uses 'must' less appropriately since he uses it to speak to his lecturer. It is seen in the following finding.

Must I move to another group, please?

Context of the Utterance:

A student comes late to the class when the other students have already in groups. He just sits in one of the group without knowing the rules. When the lecturer asks him to what group he belongs to, he says: "I just join apple group by sudden. Must I move to another group, please?"

In those utterances, 'must' is not suitable to be used by student since he talks to his superior, the lecturer. He uses 'must' in a form of request or interrogative in order not to force the lecturer to make him stay in that group. By not forcing the lecturer to make a decision for him to stay in the wrong group, he respects his lecturer and gives a room of thinking to the lecturer.

Otherwise, he constructs 'must' here which is actually 'may' is more appropriate. Moreover, request is used so it is still categorized as a positive politeness. It means that he tries to ask politely.

The student does not want to damage the addressee's positive face which indicates that he wants to "come closer" to the addressee. In positive politeness, solidarity is oriented and status differences are minimized. Once again, 'must' is not too appropriate to be used by a student to talk to his lecturer.

Then, the tact maxim of this utterance is commissive. It is done to tone down impoliteness by minimizing the cost for the lecturer and maximizing the benefits for him to be freely in answering the question. This indirectness increases the degree of option so there is no force for the lecturer to answer. Besides, it also relates to optionality to the lecturer to decline the choice contributed by politeness.

4. May

The fourth rank is placed by 'may'. This modal auxiliary gets 10.28%. In this modal auxiliary, most of the students make positive politeness degree and impositive acts. They want to get closer with the interlocutors and maximize the harmonious communication. It can be seen from the following finding:

May I get your attention?

Context of the Utterance:

One of the students comes in front of the class to get her turn to speak. "Hi friends, May I get your attention? In this occasion, I will tell you an unforgettable event of my life."

The situation takes place in the speaking class in which the lecturer asks the students to tell the unforgettable event in their life. Then a student comes forward and uses 'may' in her utterance which is in interrogative form. It is intended to fulfill the principle of politeness by making the interlocutors feel comfortable. In this case, the comfort refers to their willingness to listen to the student's speech without offended by being asked to listen.

Besides, 'may' which is in request is done in order to provide option to the other students as the interlocutors and makes the utterance a positive polite request. The use of 'may' in the interrogative eases the force of an impositive and it helps the interlocutor to establish rapport with the speaker. Moreover, she also does not want to damage the interlocutors' positive face which indicates that she wants to "come closer" to them, solidarity oriented, and status differences minimized.

The above utterance also functions as a directive which tends to give direction to other friends as interlocutors to pay attention to her command as speaker. So, 'may' here is also used skillfully to observe tact maxim to hedge an impositive in order to perform the social purpose of seeking cooperation from the hearers.

5. Should

This modal is in the fifth rank and the occurrence is 5.61%. Most of the students use it in positive politeness and in tactful manner. It can be seen from the following finding:

Should I give you more explanation?

Context of the Utterance:

I have mentioned some of them in the previous question. Should I give you more explanation?

The situation of the class is that a student speaks in front of the class and tries to explain to friends about home schooling. After answering the previous question, there is another question which seems almost the same as the previous one. Instead of imposing his own intentions on the interlocutor, the speaker wants to know from the interlocutor whether he is interested in receiving his help or not. Here, imposition of speaker's wishes on the addressee is always regarded as discourteous. An offer usually refers to interlocutor's desires and opinions. The offer implies that the speaker is not trying to impose his wishes on the interlocutor and wants to know what the interlocutor wants and thinks for himself.

The speaker puts 'should' in a request form so that it becomes a polished way to politely ask the interlocutor, in which 'could' is considered more appropriate to use. 'Should' here is formed in positive politeness which is characterized by closeness and intimacy with the interlocutor. It is specific and focused, and also performs the function of minimizing the particular imposition. Besides, the speaker uses request question to know whether the interlocutor is willing to follow his request at the time or not.

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The speaker avoids an impositive and makes a request by following the tact maxim. By using modal 'should' in an interrogative in a tactful manner, the speaker provides full freedom to the addressee to refuse or reject his offer if it is against his wishes or interests.

6. Would

The sixth rank is the use of 'would', which has the same rank as 'could', it is 1.87%. The degree is positive politeness and formed in direct impositive to save the interlocutors' faces. The following finding is the example.

Sorry for interrupting you, but would you go with him if he asks you to go dating?

Context of the Utterance:

S: I never go dating with him

T: Sorry for interrupting you, but would you go with him if he asks you to go dating?

The utterance is a directive used as a polite question as the speaker demands cooperation from the interlocutor to benefit himself. In this situation the interlocutor wants to know whether S as the speaker wants to go dating with a man that is talked about by him. In this case, T as interlocutor uses 'would' in order to make S comfortable with his question.

'Would' as a tentative modal is used to ask a polite question to the speaker as a softener to hide the offence that may be caused by an impositive so that he could respect the choice of the speaker whether he wants to answer the question or not. And at the previous question he uses 'sorry for interrupting....' which means he uses formal question and puts himself not too close to the speaker so the speaker will not get offended. Therefore, this request is categorized as the negative politeness.

'Would' in this request form is the imperative one. It is used tactfully in an interrogative sentence to avoid a direct impositive. It is used here to provide option to the interlocutor and in this way he hedges the rudeness that can be caused by a direct command. This indirectness deals with the declining choice which contributes to politeness.

7. Could

The other sixth rank is 'could', which also has the same occurrences as 'would'. They are used in positive politeness degree also.

Could I have a chance to deliver my ideas?

Context of the Utterance

Lecturer : Do you understand what I mean?

Student : Could I have a chance to deliver my ideas?

In this situation, a lecturer explains about something to her students. After that, she asks them whether they understand or not. Then there is one student who asks permission to speak up his ideas. It is clearly seen that the student uses 'could' in request to give the lecturer an option whether she allows him to speak up or not.

Considering that this conversation is between lecturer and student, so the student talks to his superior and it is appropriate to use 'could' here. 'Could' here functions as positive politeness which shows that the students wants to save the lecturer's face and wants to get close to her. Here, social difference is not considered.

He uses an indirect illocution and in this way lessens the force of an impositive. Instead of directly giving opinion, the student uses it as a request to hedge the lecturer's question and by providing option to the lecturer and increases the degree of politeness. The contextual knowledge provides us that the speaker uses tact maxim to establish intimacy with the lecturer so that he will be able to achieve the intended goal. It is a directive speech act and 'could' as a modal auxiliary is used in the interrogative to hedge an impositive and to turn it tactfully into a requestive.

8. Might

The last rank is placed by 'might'. It is very rare to use by the students, that is 0.93%. One of the examples of 'might' is:

'Might I ask you something'.

Context of the Utterance:

After finishing telling a story, a student (called as A) is asked by the other student (called as B) 'Might I ask you something? Where did that experience happen and do you want that experience to happen again?'

The utterance shows that B requests for permission to A. B uses 'might' to avoid imposition and to lessen the offence that may be caused by it. In such equal position as partners there is no place for the imposition of the wants of any of the partners. Due to their equal position at the time of asking right after A finishes the story, B cannot go straightforward to the question but uses a declarative or an imperative utterance. Hence, to avoid the misunderstanding of A, B uses 'might' as a tentative form of 'may', to politely request A to answer his questions. Thus 'might' is used in an interrogative utterance to provide option and choice to the interlocutor. Here B uses 'might' in an interrogative utterance in order to provide option to A and makes the utterance a positive polite request. It performs a directive speech act but the option provided to the hearer hedges the inherent impositiveness. 'Might' is used in request in a tactful manner to tone down the effect of an impositive by hedging the impositive command and to make it request as the surface level.

CONCLUSION

Modals auxiliaries are used in making request to signal optionality, tentativeness and indirectness. Options provided to the interlocutors save impositives and commissives from being impolite. In making an offer, the students never impose their likes and dislikes on the interlocutors even though they give full freedom to decline the offer if they please to. In some social situations, they use modals to request to observe tact maxim to signal politeness and to seek a favourable response from the interlocutors. 'Could', 'might', and 'would' when used as tentatives in interrogatives are more polite than 'can', 'may', and 'will' as the force of a command that is softened if a request made in a polite manner. As we see that these modals are signals of indirectness, tentativeness and optionality, they save directives and commissives from their face threatening quality and through the use of tentatives turns impositions into a polite request.

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