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A Study of Comparing Speech Act Data from Two Differing Data-gathering Instruments*

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To compare data on the speech act of requests from two different methods, a study was conducted in which both native and non-native speakers of English participated as subjects, and data were collected by means of actual e-mail writing and DCT (discourse completion test). The analysis of requests from the two different data-gathering methods showed that despite some similarities, considerable differences existed between e-mail and DCT requests in several important aspects of requests such as amount of talk, directness level, downgraders and supportive moves which play an important role in making a given request sound less imposing and more polite. Also it was shown that requests of non-native speakers differed considerably from requests of native speakers in terms of the four aspects of requests across type of data-gathering methods. Based on the findings, some suggestions were made for both further research and L2 classrooms.

[interlanguage pragmatics/speech acts/pragmatic competence]

I. INTRODUCTION

Many recent studies have addressed the importance of developing and promoting pragmatic competence in L2 learning. One common rationale of such studies is that grammatical proficiency alone does not guarantee appropriate use of language, and that language inappropriateness has a negative effect on social interactions by making learners sound strange, uncooperative, or even impolite in the eyes of communication partners (Bardovi-Harlig, 1992; Bardovi-Harlig & Dornyei, 1998; Thomas, 1983). As

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one way of looking into the acquisition of pragmatic competence by learners, numerous studies have tended to center on a comparison between native and non-native speakers of a target language in the use of speech acts, i.e., verbal acts of what people do with language for communication. Common findings of these studies indicate that both native and non-native speakers differed in form and content during the performance of a given speech act while they used differing speech acts in the same contexts (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Kasper, 1997; Kasper & Rose, 2002).

Unlike the consistent, convincing evidence for significant differences between native and non-native speakers in speech act performance, no consensus has been reached among researchers as to the preferred way of collecting data in research on cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics. Some researchers (e,g., Manes & Wolfson, 1981; Wolfson, 1989) showed a strong preference for natural speech collected through ethnographic approaches in which spontaneous, unrehearsed speech is observed and gathered in authentic communicative situations. Other researchers (e.g., Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz, 1990; Olshtain & Cohen, 1983) saw elicitation as an effective, appropriate means to collect data on speech behaviors. Since either ethnographic approaches or elicitation methods have their own strengths and weaknesses (For a comprehensive review of data collection methods in research on linguistic action patterns, see Houck & Gass, 1996 or Kasper & Dahl, 1991), it is not desirable to show a blind preference for one method over the other, or have a prejudice against a particular way of collecting data.

Some attempts have been made to compare data collection techniques in order to determine to what extent and in what ways data from a specific method are similar to or different from data from another type of method. Such attempts mostly involved comparing elicited data from questionnaires with equivalent data from other data-gathering methods since as one major type of elicitation instruments, questionnaires including discourse completion tasks have enjoyed much popularity in most current work on speech acts, particularly the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) (Ellis, 1995; Kasper & Dahl, 1991). For instance, Beebe and Cummings (1996) compared a speech act of refusals collected from a discourse completion test (henceforth DCT) with refusals occurring during telephone conversations. Both in a DCT and during telephone calls, twenty-two female teachers of ESL were asked if they could become a volunteer at a TESOL Convention. The results revealed that as compared to naturally occurring telephone conversation data, DCT data failed to reflect a variety of interactive features occurring in authentic speech event. One problem with this study is that a generalization of the findings of the study into non-native speakers would be limited since data were gathered only from native speakers. In a study of the speech act of rejections by both native and non-native speakers of English, Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1992) made a comparison of rejections from DCT with naturally

occurring rejections in academic advising sessions. They reported that though DCT data differed from natural data in a range of semantic formula, politeness strategy-use, and conversational features such as turn-taking and negotiation, DCT was useful in testing hypotheses generated from natural data where there were not enough examples of the act of rejections. Meanwhile, Rintell and Mitchell (1989) were interested in determining whether there existed differences between DCT data and role-play data in two speech acts, requests and apologies, by native and non-native speakers of English. They found that overall, DCT data did not differ from role-play data in both groups, but non-native speakers during role-play talked more than they did in DCT as compared to native speakers who did not show such a difference.

As shown above, due to a shortage of studies on a comparison of data-collection techniques in the literature, the available empirical evidence is not conclusive enough to determine the best way to collect data in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics research. While Beebe and Cummings (1996), and Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1992) offer evidence for the differences between DCT data and natural data in the speech act of rejections, few studies have dealt with the speech act of requests for that purpose which is one of the most frequently used communicative acts in everyday life, and thus is of primary importance to L2 learners for everyday interaction. Moreover, little has been known about how differing types of data-gathering instruments might influence the way of making requests by informants of various status relations though Rintell and Mitchell (1989) can be one exception to this. From a sociolinguistic point of view, it is not difficult to see how important it is for learners to perform requests in socially and culturally appropriate ways under different situations where a number of contextual variables are combined in various ways. So it would be interesting to examine how native and non-native speakers of English would go about performing requests collected from different data-gathering techniques under various situations.

The present paper started along this line of inquiry, and its goal was to find out the similarities and differences between DCT data and natural data in the speech act of requests by native and non-native speakers of English in status-unequal relations. To be more specific, the paper compared requests in a DCT with actual e-mail requests from students to faculty or from instructors to faculty in university. As Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996) pointed out, the use of requests in institutional settings like company or university is a very tricky task among institutional members since institutional roles and status of members usually play a crucial role in determining the way of behaving and using language. Particularly in the case of requests from a lower-status person to a higher-status person who has institutional power to influence a lower-status person in a serious, decisive manner (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1990), a lower-status person threatens the face of a higher-status person who is asked to do something that he or she

might not otherwise do (Brown & Levinson, 1987). So it is in the best interest of a lower-status person to ensure that his or her request addresses the face needs of a higher-status person properly, and at the same time, gains compliance from a higher-status person successfully. With these features of requests in institutional settings in mind, the present study addressed the following questions:

1. What are similarities and differences between e-mail communication and DCT in the performance of requests within each language group (i.e., native and non-native speakers of English)?
2. How do non-native speakers differ from native speakers of English in the performance of requests in terms of each data-collection instrument?

II. METHOD

1. Participants

Subjects in the study consisted of two large groups: native and non-native speakers of English. Since the study compared two different sets of data (i.e., natural e-mail requests and requests from DCT), and each data set contained requests of two language groups (i.e., natives and non-natives of English), there were four differing subgroups of subjects in the study. As for the informants who provided e-mail requests, there were four subjects. Two of them were graduate students enrolled in one university in this country, and the other two were native English-speaking teachers working as instructors for conversation classes in the same university. More specifically, one graduate student was Chinese and came to Korea to learn more about applied linguistics. She had gained her BA degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language from a college located in northern part of China before coming to Korea. In fact, she had grown up, and completed her education from elementary school to college in an EFL setting where she had spent more than ten years learning English with no opportunity to stay in any English-speaking country. Despite little exposure to natural L2 input, she had a good command of English especially in reading and writing while she managed to get message across orally without much difficulty. Majoring in applied linguistics in a graduate school, she was under the guidance of a researcher with the hope that she would become an English teacher in home country after the completion of her MA degree. Another graduate student was from Philippine. She was in her 20s, and was enrolled in the same MA program as the Chinese graduate student. She started to learn English as she entered into elementary school, and majored in English language & literature in college, which indicates that she had studied English for about 14 years. Due to an early start in L2

learning and an exposure to L2 input in a naturalistic setting in which English is used as an official language in Philippine, she experienced little difficulty in interacting with others in English, and actually overwhelmed her interlocutors with near target-like proficiency.

Meanwhile, there were also two more subjects who contributed to the collection of naturally occurring e-mail requests. They were native English-speaking teachers who had been teaching conversation courses in the same university as the two graduate students. Both teachers were male, and were all in their 30s. One teacher was from the United States, and the other from Canada. Their e-mail requests sent to a researcher over the course of a one and a half year's time constituted L2 baseline data.

On the other hand, elicited requests came from both native and non-native speakers of English. In the case of requests of native speakers, they were taken from a previous study, Suh (1998) in which thirty Americans were asked to perform requests by responding to DCT. These American informants were college students enrolled in one major university in the US at the time of study. They majored in a variety of fields such as education, law, business and economics, among others, and half of them were female. Concerning elicited requests of non-native speakers, they were collected from thirty students who were enrolled in one university located in southern part of Korea. Almost all the students were sophomores and juniors majoring in English language & literature, and about one third of them were male. Their self-rated English proficiency ranged from intermediate-low to advanced level, and like most Korean college students, most of them had some problems with oral communication skills in the target language.

2. Instrument and Procedures

E-mail requests to a researcher from both two native English-speaking teachers and two non-native graduate students were gathered over a one and half year-long period (from fall, 2005 to winter, 2006) for a total of 27 native and 36 non-native requests. Since the two graduate students were under the guidance of the researcher who served as an academic adviser at the very beginning of their study, they were expected to ask for help, guide or information for a variety of reasons including registration and thesis writing. Both students tended to make requests for such purposes through either sending e-mails or coming to the researcher's office in person. Among their e-mails sent to the researcher, 36 e-mail messages were identified as requests, and used for a later analysis. In addition, the two native English-speaking teachers also contributed to the collection of actual e-mail requests. They were coordinating teachers in a university English program in which they worked together with the researcher to direct and control over all English conversation courses for university students. So whenever there was a problem or issue

in the overall implementation of the program, the two teachers sent e-mails, or got together with the researcher for settlement. 27 e-mail requests from the two teachers were gathered over a one and half year-long period, and used for the present study.

In the meantime, to collect elicited requests, DCT was administered to both English native speakers and Korean learners of EFL. As mentioned before, requests of English native speakers were taken from Suh (1998) in which native speakers were given DCT containing twelve different situations, and asked to make requests in each one of the situations. Among all the requests made across the twelve situations, only requests made in two situations were considered for the present study whose goal was to focus on examining requests from lower-status persons to higher-status persons in institutional settings. That is, in the two situations in which role relationships between interlocutors are all hearer dominance in terms of social status, and there was some degree of familiarity between them, a lower-status student asked a higher-status professor to give an extension on paper, and to lend him/her a book (See Appendix for the two situations). Thirty requests were made in each situation, and a total of sixty requests were analyzed in the present study. For requests of Korean learners of EFL, the same two situations in DCT as those used to elicit native speakers' requests were also used. Given the two situations, Korean learners were instructed to write down what they would be most likely to say in individual situations. As in the native speaker group, sixty requests were made in the two situations, and analyzed in this study.

3. Data Analysis

In order to find out answers to research questions, both actual e-mail requests and DCT requests were analyzed in several ways. First, they were analyzed for amount of talk by counting all the words used to realize the request. Second, they were also analyzed for linguistic forms by identifying both syntactic frame representing directness levels and downgraders in the request (Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996). Finally, requests were analyzed according to content in such a way that supportive moves were identified and categorized. For the classification of directness level, downgraders and supportive moves, a coding scheme developed by Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989, pp. 273-289) was used.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. A Comparison between E-mail and DCT Requests by NS and NNS

1) Amount of Talk

Both native and non-native speakers showed much similarity between e-mail requests and DCT requests in the total amount of talk as measured by the mean number of words and sentences in each request. The subjects of the two groups tended to talk much more in the e-mail requests than they did in the DCT requests.

TABLE 1

Overall Talk for E-mail and DCT Requests in Each Group

	E-mail (NS)		DCT (NS)			E-mail (NNS)		DCT (NNS)	
	W	S	W	S		W	S	W	S
Mean	97	6.0	31	2.5	Mean	80	7.7	22	2.7

cf) W = Words S = Sentences

As seen in Table 1, the average number of words and sentences produced by native speakers per request in the e-mail communication is much higher than the average number produced per request in the DCT (97 vs. 31 for words and 6.0 vs. 2.5 for sentences). Non-native speakers followed the same pattern of producing overall talk as the native speakers, increasing from 22 words in the DCT requests to 80 words in the e-mail requests, and from 2.7 sentences in the DCT requests to 7.7 sentences in the e-mail requests.

One possible explanation for the differences in overall talk between the e-mail requests and the DCT requests has to do with the artifact of data-gathering instrument. That is, some inherent problems with DCT seemed to play a major role in causing a notable decrease in amount of talk during the performance of requests. It is obvious that genuine communication is hard to occur in a DCT task since interaction is unilateral and artificial. Such contrived, one-way communication is likely to create an interaction-unfriendly atmosphere in which informants feel less excited and less stimulated for communication, and make their contribution to communication as simple and minimal as possible by only producing what they are supposed to say. In addition, as Kasper and Rose (2002) pointed out, the fact that DCT provides informants with sufficient time to think about and prepare for their responses may allow them to try various expressions out in mind before production, and avoid using unnecessary, redundant expressions, which can reduce the total amount of talk to a great extent. In contrast, the subjects in

both groups were believed to see a strong, definite need for interaction with interlocutors in the actual e-mail communication, and make efforts to get meaning across in a clear, successful manner using whatever devices they had. This might result in lengthy requests containing expressions to make requests less imposing and more polite, which increases overall talk within a whole requestive utterance. Here are some examples of showing the differences between the e-mail and the DCT requests in overall talk:

From the DCT
Excuse me. I'm looking for a book for writing a term paper. But this book was checked out, so I wait for at least a month. And I know you have this book. Please can I lend the book? (NNS# 10)

Excuse me, I'm sorry that I can't turn a final term paper in on time. Will you give me an extension on the paper? (NNS #21)

Excuse me Professor ... I am in need of “book name” and the one at the library has been checked out. Could I borrow yours for a week ... just to finish my paper? (NS #5)

Professor Smith, I apologize for having to ask you this, but my paper isn't where I would like it to be and I was wondering if I might be able to turn it in late to you. (NS #17)

From the e-mail writing
Hello, Professor ...
How are you? I understand you are very busy these days. I'm so sorry to bother you like this. Anyway, I am still working on the refinements of my thesis. I sure can submit it sometime next week. Also I have my final exam next week in one of the subjects that I am taking this semester, so I wonder if it is OK that the schedule of the oral defense will be on June 16? Thank you very much for understanding. (NNS #1)

Hello, Professor,
How are you? I am sorry for contacting with you so late. For the questionnaire and the vocabulary size test which were researched in China by my friend cost much more time than I planned. Now I have finished most parts of my paper. So professor, please read it. And the presentation meeting will be held on this coming Thursday. I want to visit you one time before the presentation meeting. I am not sure if you are free on Monday or Tuesday. When can I visit you? Thank you! Have a nice day! (NNS #2)

Dr. ...
A few weeks ago, you and I talked about the idea of installing some inexpensive hardware in our classrooms, allowing us to use digitally recorded audio segments in our classes at a quite cheap price. But since we were busy, we had to postpone a ...'s demonstration of this. This summer, both ... and I are working in the program and we finish at 4pm each day. Would it possible to meet at 4pm on Thursday this week, so that ... could run a short demonstration? If Thursday isn't workable, please feel free to suggest another day that would be better for you. (NS #1)

Dr. ...
... and I would like to get together with you for a few minutes tomorrow afternoon to go over the schedule of deadlines leading up to the mid-term exam. Could you find out the date for the exam this year and the deadline for submitting exam papers to be printed? We need this information to make our own exam deadlines (which have to be given to the teachers at ...). Thanks. (NS #2)

2) Linguistic forms

The analysis of both e-mail requests and DCT requests for linguistic forms indicates that certain types of syntactic frame used to realize requests were frequently employed by the subjects in the two groups. Such types of syntactic frame include '(Please) imperative,' 'I want to/I'd like to,' and 'conventionalized form' (e.g., 'Can you,' 'May I,' or 'Will you'). These types of syntactic frame were further categorized according to directness which is "the degree to which the speaker's illocutionary intent is apparent from the locution" (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989, p. 278). For actual request realizations, the selection of a particular type of directness level is an essential, obligatory step toward making a request in a given situation. The first two types of syntactic frame mentioned above belong to the direct level while the last one is classified into the conventionally indirect level.

TABLE 2

Choice of Syntactic Frame for E-mail and DCT Requests (%)

	E-mail (NS)	DCT (NS)		E-mail (NNS)	DCT (NNS)
DL	28	17	DL	37	40
CIL	72	83	CIL	63	60

cf) DL= Direct Level, CIL = Conventionally Indirect Level

Table 2 shows that there was a small difference between the e-mail requests and the DCT requests in the choice of directness within each group. The native speakers made more frequent use of conventionally indirect level in realizing requests in the DCT task than they did in the e-mail writing (83% vs. 72%) while the opposite was true to the choice of direct level (28% vs. 17%). However, the non-native speakers did not show a notable change in their choice of directness level according to type of data-collection method. This finding can be understood in two opposite ways. If a small difference found in the native speaker group can be ignored, it is assumed that as far as the choice of directness level in realizing requests is concerned, the influence of data-gathering instrument on the performance of requests is rather small. However, if the difference in the native speaker group is accepted as real, it implies that the native speakers were more sensitive to the choice of directness level in the performance of requests according to type of data-gathering instrument than the non-native speakers. In this case, little change in the non-native speaker group might be due to insufficient pragmatic knowledge of how to use directness level in requests under differing situations. Accordingly, learners' pragmatic ability weakened or even overrode the possible influence of data-gathering methods on speech act performance.

Meanwhile, one main reason for the high occurrence of conventionally indirect level in the native speakers' DCT requests may lie in the very nature of the DCT. They might feel that under imaginative, artificial situations without interlocutors in the DCT, it would be unnecessary to write down everything that they would actually say in face-to-face communication by engaging in a rather long, refined interaction in order to achieve a communicative goal. So they might decide to employ a relatively more polite and safer style of language, which led them to make frequent use of conventionally indirect level in choosing syntactic frame for their requests.

The analysis of the requests for linguistic forms also led to an in-depth look at downgraders. Occurring inside a head act of a request realization, downgraders are “markers which play down the impact X's utterance is likely to have on Y” (House & Kasper, 1981, p. 166), and function as a mitigating device to reduce the level of imposition created by ‘face-threatening acts’ (FTAs) like requests (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989). Hence, an appropriate, skillful use of downgraders plays an important role in making a given request sound indirect and polite to a considerable extent.

TABLE 3

Mean Number of Downgraders Per Request in Each Group

	E-Mail (NS)	DCT (NS)		E-Mail(NNS)	DCT (NNS)
Mean	1.5	0.8	Mean	0.6	0.3

In Table 3, the two groups of subjects showed an agreement on the use of downgraders across types of data-gathering method. They tended to employ downgraders more frequently in the e-mail writing than in the DCT task. For both groups, the mean number of downgraders used in the e-mail requests is almost twice as many times as the number used in the DCT requests, which means that in general, the two groups made efforts to sound more indirect and more polite during the e-mail communication than during the DCT task. One plausible explanation for such a difference can be found in the use of different data-gathering methods. The e-mail writing here created real communicative situations in which the primary focus was always on exchanging information, and in the case of making requests, a writer asked interlocutors to do something which was costly to them. This typical characteristic of real communication was sure to lead the subjects of the two groups to be active in using downgraders to make their requests less imposing and more polite, and to get compliance from intrlocutors. On the other hand, in the DCT it would not be easy to notice the same degree of urgency or necessity of communicative interaction as in real, authentic communication, and this might have caused the subjects in the study to pay less attention to the expression of politeness, and become negligent in using downgraders for their DCT requests.

3) Content

The analysis of the requests for content was done with a focus on an external modification of them. An externally well-modified request usually sounds less imposing, more face-saving and more polite than request with little external modification. As its name displays, the external modification occurs outside of a head act of a request without any changes in directness and propositional meaning of the act, and takes the form of supportive moves (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). Major categories of supportive moves frequently employed in the study include grounder, acknowledgement of imposition, preparatory, apology, appreciation, and willingness, among others.

TABLE 4

Mean Number of Supportive Moves Per Request in Each Group

	E-Mail (NS)	DCT (NS)		E-Mail(NNS)	DCT (NNS)
Mean	1.8	1.6	Mean	3.8	1.5

According to Table 4, both the native and the non-native speakers were similar to each other in that they showed an increase in the use of supportive moves in the e-mail

communication. The native speaker group employed more supportive moves in the e-mail requests than in the DCT requests, and the same was true to the non-native speaker group. This difference can be explained easily by data-gathering method itself. It may be the case that given general characteristics of naturally occurring speech, the subjects of both groups who made the e-mail requests must have been under more pressure to have a successful communication by decreasing imposition and seeming polite in an immediate, appropriate manner than those subjects who were asked to make the DCT requests in artificially designed situations. As one way of reducing such a pressure, and at the same time, attaining a communicative goal successfully, the e-mail writers (i.e., both the native and the non-native speakers) must have shown a strong preference for a strategy which led them to produce what they wanted to say through making frequent use of various categories of supportive moves before and after a head act of a whole requestive utterance. Consequently, it can be said safely that the DCT did not reflect the subjects' requestive behavior on the use of supportive moves in the way in which the e-mail writing showed.

One interesting thing here is that the non-native speaker group showed a greater proportionate change in the use of supportive moves from 1.5 in the DCT to 3.8 in the e-mail writing than the native speaker group did from 1.6 in the DCT to 1.8 in the e-mail writing. The difference can be understood in two ways. The first explanation involves the task influence. However, given available research evidence that overall, L2 learners have a tendency to make more frequent use of supportive moves than target language speakers under both DCT situations and authentic situations (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; Edmondson & House, 1991; Rintell & Mitchell, 1989; Yang, 2001, 2005), the underuse of supportive moves by the non-native speakers in the DCT requests can not be explained by the task influence satisfactorily. Rather, it is better understood by the gap in L2 competence between the non-native speakers who made the e-mail requests and those who made the DCT requests. As mentioned earlier, the two non-native speakers providing the e-mail requests were international graduate students who were fluent enough to make themselves understood in English for both academic and everyday communication whereas most of the non-native speakers producing the DCT requests were undergraduate Korean students who had much difficulty using the L2 for communication. So insufficient L2 proficiency of the Korean students seemed to interfere with the realization of requests, leading them to underuse supportive moves in the DCT.

2. A Comparison between NS and NNS by Data-gathering Methods

Apart from the task influence on the performance of requests within groups, such influence can be also noted by comparing the requests by the native and the non-native speakers in terms of each data-gathering method.

TABLE 5

Mean Number of Four Major Aspects of Requests by NS & NNS in Each Instrument

	NS(E)	NNS (E)	NS (DCT)	NNS (DCT)
AT	W: 97	W: 80	W: 31	W: 22
	S: 6.0	S: 7.7	S: 2.5	S: 2.7
DL	DR: 28%	DR: 37%	DR: 17%	DR: 40%
	CIR: 72%	CIR: 63%	CIR: 83%	CIR: 60%
DW	1.5	0.6	0.8	0.3
SM	1.8	3.8	1.6	1.5

cf) E: E-Mail AT: Amount of Talk DL: Directness Level
DR: Direct Level CIR: Conventionally Indirect Level
DW: Downgraders SM: Supportive Moves

In the e-mail communication, as seen in Table 5, regarding the choice of directness level, the native speakers realized their requests at conventionally indirect level more often than the non-native speakers did (72% vs. 63%) while the non-natives performed their requests at direct level more frequently than the native speakers did (37% vs. 28%). Similarly, as for the use of downgraders, the native speakers had a much higher mean number of downgraders than the non-natives (1.5 vs. 0.6). Since directness and downgrading have been shown to assume a crucial role in expressing politeness of English requests (Blum-Kulka, 1989; House & Kasper, 1981), the underuse of such devices indicates that overall, the non-native speakers invested less politeness, and could be perceived as less polite than the native speakers in the e-mail interaction. Here are some examples of showing such differences between the two groups:

So professor, please look it in advance, and then please give me some guidance and advice. (NNS #1)
I will let you know the total number of subjects the soonest the possible. (NNS #2)
Could you please let me know what the daily schedule will be? (NS #1)
Is there some way we can ensure it gets unlocked a little earlier? (NS #2)

Another notable difference between the two groups can be found in the use of supportive moves. The non-native speakers made much more frequent use of supportive moves in their e-mail requests than the native speakers did (3.8 vs. 1.8). A close look at the non-native speakers' requests shows that they had a tendency to employ a wider variety of supportive moves than the natives. Concerning amount of talk, it is clear that the native speakers made lengthier requests than the non-native speakers in the e-mail requests, using a higher mean number of words per request than the non-natives (97 words vs. 80 words). But it is surprising that the non-native speakers used a higher mean number of sentences per requests than the native speakers (7.7 sentences vs. 6.0 sentences). The reason for this lies simply in the fact that the non-native speakers tended to create a higher number of short sentences within a requestive utterance than the native speakers did. The following are some examples:

Hi, Professor,
How have you been? I am sorry for writing a letter to you so late. I couldn't visit you at the end of this semester because of a terrible cold. These days it is vacation time. I am not sure that you be on campus. When you are free, I want to visit you. Professor, it is OK? (NNS #1)

Hello Professor,
Thank you for allowing me to see you this Tuesday. Thank you for giving me your time. I really appreciate it. Can I come between 2:00 - 2:30? I would be very glad to hear your feedback on my draft. (NNS #2)

Meanwhile, in the DCT, overall, both the native and the non-native speakers showed the same pattern of choosing directness level and using downgraders as they did in the e-mail communication. That is, the native speakers were more active in both making their requests at conventionally indirect level and using downgraders than the non-native speakers (83% vs. 60% for directness level and 0.8 vs. 0.3 for downgraders), which means that the native speaker group sounded more indirect and more polite than the non-native speaker group. The following are some examples of showing this difference:

Could you give me an extension? (NNS #20)
Do you lend me that book? (NNS #9)
Would there be any way I could get an extension? (NS #15)
I was just wondering if you would mind if I borrowed that book we need to use for the paper. (NS #27)

Also as in the e-mail requests, the native speakers' tendency to talk more than the non-native speakers can be also found in the DCT requests (31 words vs. 22 words). Despite a great decrease in the mean number of words and sentences used per request from the e-mail communication to the DCT task, the native speakers still made relatively lengthy requests. Finally, the two groups did not differ greatly from each other in the use of supportive moves (1.6 for NS vs. 1.5 for NNS), which was not the case in the e-mail communication.

To summarize, from the results of the study so far, it follows that first, both the native and the non-native speakers talked much more in the natural e-mail communication than in the artificial situations of the DCT. Such a difference was accounted for by the data elicitation method itself, i.e., some inherent problems with the DCT. Further, despite such a task influence, the native speakers produced more words, and made longer requests in general than the non-native speakers regardless of type of data-gathering instrument. Second, as for the choice of directness level, the two groups showed some differences. The native speaker group realized requests at conventionally indirect level in the DCT task more often than they did in the e-mail writing while the non-native speaker group did not show such speech behavior. This finding was accounted for by either the possible influence of data-gathering method or insufficient learner knowledge of L2 pragmatics. Across the two differing data-gathering methods, overall, the native speaker group chose conventionally indirect level more often than the non-native speaker group, which indicates the native speakers' consistency in choosing directness level, and their constant consideration on appropriateness of speech act performance for the expression of linguistic politeness.

Third, the two groups also showed an overall agreement on the use of downgraders irrespective of type of data-gathering method. They made more frequent use of downgraders in the e-mail requests than the DCT requests. But when it comes to a comparison between them in the total number of downgraders, the non-native speaker group underused them, and was perceived as less polite than the native speaker group in both types of data-gathering methods. Finally, both groups of subjects were shown to be more active in using supportive moves during the e-mail communication than during the DCT task.

IV. CONCLUSION

The study reported here had an aim to examine the possible influence of different data-gathering instruments on the performance of requests. In a study in which two different groups of NS and NNS of English participated as subjects, and made the

requests in various situations of status-unequal relations, the requests by one group of NS and NNS in the actual e-mail communication were compared with the requests by another group of NS and NNS in the DCT in terms of amount of talk, directness level, downgrading and external modification (i.e., supportive moves). The results of the study showed that clear differences existed between the e-mail requests and the DCT requests within each language group. First of all, both the native and the non-native speakers tended to talk much more in the natural e-mail writing than in the DCT task, and made the e-mail requests a lot lengthier than the DCT requests. They also made more frequent use of downgraders and supportive moves in the e-mail communication than in the DCT task. In spite of some disagreements on the choice of directness level, the differences between the e-mail writing and the DCT in the performance of requests across the groups were clear and large enough to claim that in general, the DCT differed considerably from the natural e-mail communication in providing data on the speech act of requests in several major ways. So it can be said that the DCT did not represent what occurred in the natural e-mail communication satisfactorily, and researchers using elicitation procedure like DCTs need to be careful about the collection and interpretation of data which are highly likely to be influenced by type of data-gathering instrument utilized (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1993).

However, this does not mean the total uselessness of DCTs in research on interlanguage pragmatics. As the findings of the study indicated, it is also true that the DCT did show a basic pattern of the native speakers' speech act behavior in a way similar to the natural e-mail communication. Indeed, as many scholars (e.g., Beebe & Cummings, 1996; Beebe & Takahashi, 1989b; Cohen, 1996) pointed out, DCTs are a useful means to help to gain information on basic, stereotypical speech behavior of both native and non-native speakers of a target language with regard to a given speech act. For this reason, it is suggested that in situations where there is a clear, definite need for obtaining information on speech acts within a relative short period of time, or letting learners know about stereotypical forms to realize a particular speech act in EFL learning contexts, DCTs can become an appropriate candidate to meet such needs. Meanwhile, in EFL learning situations where few opportunities are available for face-to-face interactions with target language speakers, and there is a strong need for an exposure to natural, spontaneous speech, it is desirable to make the best of e-mail communication though it suffers the lack of interactive features of face-to-face conversations such as tone, prosodic, hedging and depth of emotion, among others (Beebe & Cummings, 1996).

The study has some limitations. First, since there was no data from natural face-to-face conversations comparable to the data from the e-mail writing, it is unclear how well the e-mail data in the study adequately represent natural data. So the fact that the data

from the DCT were compared with the data from the e-mail writing serving as baseline data may be problematic, and have a negative effect on the overall findings of the study. Second, the number of native and non-native speakers who contributed to the collection of the e-mail requests was small, which leads to the limitation in the generalizability of the findings of the study. Third, gender of the subjects who produced the e-mail requests was not controlled appropriately. Two native speakers were all male while two non-native speakers were female. The second and third problems seem understandable when one considers disadvantages of ethnographic approaches to the collection of sociolinguistic data, as Beebe and Takahashi (1989a) held that "natural data give us lots of examples that are not at all comparable in terms of speakers, hearers and social situations" (p. 120). Finally, there existed a rather large L2 proficiency difference between the two groups of non-native speakers. Such a proficiency difference seemed to contribute to a considerable extent to the enlargement of the differences between the e-mail requests and the DCT requests, simply not allowing the non-native speakers of lower proficiency to produce whatever they wanted to say in request realizations during the DCT task.

One main reason for the widespread, popular use of DCTs seems to lie in their benefits appealing strongly to researchers who want to collect a large amount of data, and at the same time, manipulate variables under study in an easy, effective and rapid way. However, given a constant debate on the quality of data from DCTs, such a one-sided, blind preference toward DCTs would cause undesirable effects on L2 pedagogy in that information based on sociolinguistic data gathered in an invalid, unreliable manner can lead learners to encounter misunderstanding or experience communication breakdown. As the results of the study suggested, actual e-mail writing can become an appropriate alternative to natural face-to-face communication in light of a rapid growing interest and development of information technology. Thus according to situations which individual researchers and teachers are faced with, it is advisable to make the right choice of data-gathering instrument to help our students to get ready for everyday interactions where a variety of social, cultural and situational variable are combined in various ways, and an immediate and constant assessment of the variables is needed for an effective, successful communication to take place.

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APPENDIX

Two Situations in DCT Used to Elicit Requests of NS and NNS

Situation 1)
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?

Situation 2)
You are looking for a book that you need to read for writing a term paper. Today you have just found that this book was checked out and recalled by another student, which means that you will have to wait for at least a month. You have about a week to write the paper. You know that your professor has this book. Because you have taken a course from this professor, you know him/her. You want to ask the professor to lend the book to you. You go to his/her office and knock on the door. What would you say?

Examples in: English
Applicable Languages: English
Applicable Levels: Secondary

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