The Use of Directives in EAP Classrooms: A Corpus-Based Study

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Abstract

Directives, as a type of speech act (Searle, 1976, p. 11) refer to "attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something". Directives perform various functions such as asking, ordering, requesting, advising, and so on (Searle, 1976). These functions highlight the importance of appropriate use of directives by the teachers, since ineffective use of directives can bring about misunderstanding and hindrance in learning and might consequently affect students' academic performance (Waring and Hruska, 2012). To this end, the present study investigated directive use in English for academic purposes (EAP) classrooms. The study investigated the types of directives, identified their syntactic forms and recognized their corresponding pragmatic functions. Data were collected by recording and transcribing teachers' speech in an international English program (IEP) and contained 43,324 words. Results suggest that a wide variety of directive constructions are used in the IEP classrooms. The most frequent function of directives was commanding, which has the highest level of imposition. However, more than half of commanding tokens were softened by mitigating devices. Findings of this study can benefit EAPs and teacher training programs. Methodologically, this study draws upon discourse analysis.

Background

According to Searle's (1976) categories of speech acts, *directives* impose actions on the hearers, i.e. they get the hearer to do something. Directives perform various functions such as asking, ordering, requesting, advising, and so on (Searle, 1976), which may occur in numerous situations, such as classroom context. For instance, a teacher might use directives for *making requests,* to get the students to bring certain materials to class, or *giving advice* to give guidelines on how to do a task. As indispensable features of teacher talk in classrooms, directives can bring about misunderstanding and hindrance in learning for the students, if not produced effectively (Waring and Hruska, 2012). They have been the topic of interest in various studies with different foci, such as sociolinguistics (Falsgraf &Majors, 1995; He, 2000), pragmatics (Liu and Hong, 2009) and so on. In addition to their pedagogical value, what makes directives as the topic of interest in research is their face-threatening nature (Brown and Levinson, 1987). They are expected to accompany mitigation devices in certain situations in order to reduce the level of imposition and save face. Despite the fact that many previous studies have investigated directives from a pragmatic perspective, there are few corpus studies of directives in English for academic purposes (EAP) classrooms. Accordingly, this paper attempts to extend the body of research in this area by introducing the most common syntactic features of directives, and their corresponding pragmatic functions.

Research Questions

1) what are the common syntactic forms of directives in EAP classrooms?

2) What are the common pragmatic functions of directives in EAP classrooms?

Methods

Participants in this study were seven native English speaker teachers, teaching in level 5 (which is equivalent to scoring 57-69 on the TOEFL exam) at the program in intensive English (PIE) at Northern Arizona University (NAU). Participants who were teaching four different courses (listening, note-taking and speaking, reading and vocabulary, English for Specific Purposes-Business, and English for Specific Purposes-Engineering) each recorded 3-5 hours of their classes. The courses had been selected based on two reasons: meeting the same number of hours per week, and having more than one native-speaking teacher across sections. The reason for limiting the analysis to level 5 is two-fold: 1) level 5 at the PIE is planned to prepare learners for university and therefore, it is important to analyze the language (specifically directives) used by the teachers in these classrooms; 2. In order to assure variability among teachers, this study needed to have more than one teacher for each course and levels 5 was the only level that had this feature. Table 1 presents information about data collection by providing course names, class sections, and the recording duration in each class.

Table 1. Distribution of collected data from native-speaking teachers

Course name	Class level/section	Number of sessions (Recording duration)
Reading and vocabulary	5C	3 (4.5 h)
Reading and vocabulary	5B	2 (3h)
Listening and speaking	5B	3 (2h)
Listening and speaking	5C	3 (5h)
Listening and speaking	5A	3 (4.5h)
ESP (business)	5B or 5C	4 (6h)
ESP (engineering)	5B or 5C	4 (5.5h)

Data Analysis

The first step for the analysis of the interview data was to transcribe the recordings. Due to poor quality, recordings from 2 instructors could not be transcribed. The transcription convention by Edwards and Lambert (1993) was followed in this study (see Appendix A). The total number of words transcribed was 43,324 and average number of words for each instructor was 8,665, ranging from 7,520 to 9,258.

Following that, the transcribed texts were coded for directives using a bottom-up corpus-based approach. The directive identification process started with a general definition of directives by Searle (1976), i.e. "attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something" (p. 11). However, an operational definition of directives was provided by in-depth reading of 20 percent of the whole corpus by the researcher (see Appendix B). The operational definition developed (see Appendix B) contained some inclusion and exclusion criteria for identifying directives with examples.

After the initial identification of directives, all the instances were examined and coded for their clause type, construction types, and pragmatic function by the researcher. The rubrics for coding the construction types, and the pragmatic functions of directives are attached in Appendices C, and D respectively. As for the construction types, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) framework on request strategy types was taken into account and coding was administered using an adapted categorization of directives. The rubric for coding pragmatic functions of directives was adapted from Garcia (2004).

Finally, frequencies were counted for the number of directives with certain clause types, construction types, and different pragmatic functions. Then, the raw frequencies for each instructor were normed to 1,000 words.

Results

Overall, there were 355 directives found in this data. Out of a total of 385 directives found in the texts, declaratives had the highest frequency (241 tokens, 63%), followed by imperatives (85 tokens, 22%), and interrogatives (59 tokens, 15%) respectively. However, an investigation of different construction types of directives shows that the most frequently-used directive construction was in the imperative form (base form of the verb), accounting for 28%, followed by a construction type in the declarative form, i.e. permission/suggestion/possibility modals, which was used 22% of the time. The next frequent construction types were want/need verbs (17%), obligation modals (12%), and performatives (7%). While it might seem that the most frequent directive had the highest level of imposition, an examination of the immediate context of directives reveals that more than half of the time imperative structures with the base form of the verb were accompanied by one or two mitigating devices. That is, they were not imposing on the hearer.

The pragmatic functions of directives were coded based on the teacher's intention and purpose. Following Garcia's (2004) categorization, the directives were classified into three different groups: commands, requests, and suggestions (see Appendix D). overall, 53 % of directives were coded as commands, followed by suggestions (25%), and requests (22%).

Relevance to the PIE and Second Language Learning

Results of this study has implications for EAP teachers, especially international teaching assistants (ITAs) at IEPs, such as the program in intensive English (PIE). Findings of this study may be used to train ITAs on the appropriate use of directives, as well as the variety of use of directives in classrooms.

The findings showed that a wide variety of construction types are used when using directives. While the most frequent construction types were of high level of imposition, analysis of the context showed that these construction types were mitigated about 60% of the time. In other words, although direct structures were used by the instructors, they were accompanied by grounders (to explain the reason for the request), politeness markers (e.g. please), or other types of mitigators to decrease the level of imposition. Imperative directives with the base form of the verb, which have the highest level of imposition, were the most frequent directive structure in the current data. These structures are short and direct. Therefore, the instructors who used them could be clearer and more understandable to the students, while they were also being polite by adding mitigating features. One reason for the high frequency of these construction types could be associated with the time constraints in the classroom. These types of structures can be used to expedite the lesson. This claim cannot be proved without further analysis of the texts.

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Appendix A

Transcribing Protocol

, Short pause or phrasal boundary

. Sentence boundary or final intonation

? Questions or rising intonation

.. Long pause (count to 3)

... Very long pause (count to 4 or longer)

() Unsure if word is correct

[] Insert comments inside brackets

{ Beginning of an utterance that overlaps with the previous utterance

Conventional spellings were used for all words except the following: OK, cuz, yup, nope,

mm, mhm, um, uh.   (Edwards & Lampert, 1993)

Appendix B

Rubric for Identifying Directives

Definition of a directive: A directive is an utterance produced by an instructor to get the students to perform an action, regardless of whether the action is performed immediately or later. The action could be either concrete (e.g. writing, reading, turning in) or mental (e.g. thinking, remembering, noticing).

Directive constructions may appear in **3 different clause types**:

1. **Declaratives** or subject-verb structures which usually express statements (e.g. "I'd like to know how many are taking each one")
2. **Imperatives**, including base form of the verb, usually without the subject (e.g. "narrow them")
3. **Interrogatives** (questions, or statements marked with a question mark in the transcripts)

➢ In some instances, directives can be **non-sentential** ("your papers please.")

Exclusion criteria

➢ Any **response to a student's question** is **not** counted as a directive (For example, in the following utterance, the instructor's response is not a directive).

    Student: so when does it mean that we are going to do the presentations?

    Instructor: <u>Wednesday, next week Wednesday</u>

➢ **Clarification requests** do **not** count as directives. For instance, "what?", "huh?", "could you please repeat that?" are **not** considered directives.

➢ **Questions that the instructor asks in order to elicit course-related content are not considered directives** (such as, **"**What do you think he means by the term expedient there?")

Appendix C

Rubric for Coding Construction Types of Directives

Clause type	Construction type
Declarative	1. Performatives (I ask you to V, directive verbs-e.g. suggest, recommend, required, expect) 2. Obligation modals (have to, must, should) 3. Intention and desire verbs (want/need) 4. permission/suggestion/possibility modals (can, will, could, may, etc) 5. Wish/hope/like (e.g. "I'd like to know how many are taking each one")
Imperative	1. Base form (e.g. "open your books") 2. You + base form ("you narrow them")
Interrogative	1. Feasibility/ability modal questions (e.g. "Would you pass that back to Habeeb.") 2. Non-modal questions (e.g. "are you passing out the testlets for me?") 3. Suggestory formulae (e.g. "(How about) if I allowed you to write it out by Wednesday?")

Appendix D

Rubric for Identifying Pragmatic Functions of Directives

Directives perform various pragmatic **functions** with different imposition levels such as ordering, directing, asking, requesting, advising, suggesting, and so on. See below for examples and definitions of each function.

Pragmatic Function	Name	Definition	Example
Command	Order, command, direct	Teacher orders or directs student(s) (not) to do something. What the teacher wants the students to do is procedural, obligatory and it is usually related to the course requirements	-You only have to answer one of the two book questions. -Talk to me about it sometime next week. -Basically write a short, two page, review of that…
Request	Request an action, ask for participation	Teacher requests an action that seems necessary, but not obligatory; The action is usually not related to students' obligation in class. For instance, they might be about student participation.	-Will you go through this please? -If there are extras here, please pass them across the aisle. -I want someone to stay here to guard stuff, too.
Suggestion	Suggest, advise, recommend, warn	Teacher asks the student(s) to do something that is not required, but it is recommended; The action might benefit the student(s) in the future; Teacher warns the student(s) not to do something that could have a negative impact.	-you could do an article from this you can do something on -Do you want to grab one for Laura? - But you better make sure they remove that, or you'll have to pay for a double.