African Perspectives of Research in Teaching and Learning Journal
Issue 3, Volume 8, 2024 Special Issue
ISSN Print: 2521-0262
ISSN Online: 2662-012X
ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Thinking in my home language and writing in a second language: towards decolonizing business writing

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Abstract

Navigating the practice of thinking and writing in two separate languages is a reality in South African Higher Education. This reality manifests when isiZulu first language (L1) university students studying through a medium of English (L2) write business correspondence tasks in English, the dominant language in the business world. These tasks necessitate good business writing skills, including the use of speech acts and politeness strategies. However, currently, business communication disregards the diversity of cross-cultural communication. Research indicates that second language students think in their L1 when engaged in L2 writing. This paper interrogates the students' use of negative politeness strategies in English request business letters and explores how African politeness strategies need not be regarded as negative transfer in intercultural business communication. Through random sampling, we quantitatively analysed English business letters written by first-year tertiary isiZulu L1/English L2 students (n=40). The findings reveal the use of negative politeness and impoliteness strategies in the request letters. This paper argues that the transference of politeness strategies from isiZulu to English need not be categorised as negative pragmatic transfer. However, their recognition promotes the decolonization of corporate communication in the South African context and embraces cultural and linguistic diversity in professional English interactions.

Keywords: African politeness, business writing, decolonization, negative politeness and impoliteness, pragmatic transfer, request speech acts

Introduction

This paper situates an argument on the use of politeness strategies in writing business letters of request from a decolonization perspective in South Africa. Thinking in a home language (L1) and writing in a second language (L2) is a prevalent phenomenon among students whose L1 is an African language and English is their L2, including isiZulu L1 students who are enrolled in Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in South Africa. This phenomenon is seen in a sample of written business letters in L2 by isiZulu L1 students enrolled in a first-year Communication Skills module at a University of Technology located in the province of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa. In South Africa, English is the dominant language of learning and teaching (LOLT) in the education sector, from primary to tertiary education (Dalvit, Murray & Terzoli, 2009; Probyn, 2019, p. 219).

African students, including isiZulu L1 students, are subjected to English as the LOLT from the fourth year of their primary education through tertiary education (Plüddemann, 2015, p. 190). However, learning through the medium of English, for most African students, as Probyn (2019, p. 219) argues, "poses a devastating barrier to learning". The advent of democracy in 1994 in South Africa and the subsequent constitution, passed in 1996, ushered in an era of multilingualism, promulgated in the constitution (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 Chapter 1 subsection 6). In addition to constitutionally mandated multilingualism, in 2015, South Africa experienced a wave of student protest actions that fanned the flames of transformation in the HEIs under the banner of

decolonizing knowledge and dismantling Eurocentric hegemony (Heleta, 2018, p. 47). The decolonization movement in the context of South Africa encompassed decolonizing the curriculum. According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013, p. 50), "The African university [decolonized university – our addition] must be founded on a critical Africa centred epistemology that is focused on a deep understanding of politics of knowledge generation involving reanalysing the claims of received sciences for the benefit of Africa and its people". In the context of this paper, Africa-centred epistemology embraces African ways of thinking, including the use of African languages in education as well as acknowledging African epistemes such as the African politeness strategies that are advocated for in this paper.

Research indicates that second language students think in their L1 when engaged in L2 writing. They tend to transfer politeness strategies from their home language to English, which according to the conventions of English, is considered as negative pragmatic transfer. In this light, this paper investigates how thinking in L1 impact a writing task in L2. The argument propagates the acknowledgement of African request speech acts as part of African politeness strategies alongside the Speech Act theory (Austin, 1962) and politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Such a propagation advances the decolonization of the curriculum movement that South African universities are proclaiming.

Previous studies on the use of speech acts and politeness strategies in business letters written by English L2 students, have adversely associated the use of L1 politeness strategies in L2 writing as poor writing skills indicating a lack of pragmatic competence in English. (Thomas, 1983; Lea & Street, 1998; Munro, 2003; Lillis & Scott, 2007; Nyangiwe & Tappe, 2021). As a result of the continued dominance of English in the corporate world, tertiary students, as future graduates, are expected to interact both locally and internationally with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. IsiZulu L1 students, and other students of African descent, are expected to acquire appropriate business writing skills in English. This expectation alienates African ways of knowing, including formalised use of African politeness strategies. We advocate that the acquisition of good business writing skills in English must be placed alongside the recognition and acknowledgement of these African politeness strategies. The objectives of the current paper are thus:

1. To interrogate English L2 tertiary students' use of politeness strategies in request business letters written in English.

2. To explore the instances of pragmatic transfer of politeness strategies between English and isiZulu in request business letters written in English.

3. To examine how navigating between English and isiZulu may contribute towards decolonizing business writing in the South African context.

To realise these objectives, this paper seeks to address the following questions:

1. In what manner do isiZulu L1/English L2 tertiary students use politeness strategies in request business letters written in English?

2. To what extent do instances of pragmatic transfer of politeness strategies between English and isiZulu manifest in request business letters written in English?

3. In what ways may navigating between English and isiZulu contribute to decolonizing business writing in the South African context?

In addressing these questions, this investigation is approached from a critical research paradigm perspective and applies a quantitative research methodology to get a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics involved in thinking in a first language while writing in a second language. This contributes to the development of more equitable use of South African official languages and to the acknowledgement of African epistemes in South Africa, as steps towards multilingualism and decolonizing the curriculum. We analysed 40 business letters written in English. Business communication, particularly written letters of request, foregrounds the use of Speech Acts and

politeness strategies. For English L2 students, the acquisition of speech acts per Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962) and the application of politeness strategies, as purported by Brown and Levinson (1987), are considered instances of pragmatic competence (Nugroho, Astuti & Atmojo, 2021, p. 47). Thus, as isiZulu L1/English L2 students navigate between isiZulu and English by thinking in L1 and writing in L2, issues of pragmatic competence and pragmatic transfer surface.

Pragmatic competence, pragmatic transfer, and pragmatic failure

Pragmatic competence is defined as a critical ability to communicate effectively thereby conveying the intended message, "with all its nuances in any socio-cultural context" (Fraser, 2010, p. 15). According to Rose and Kasper (2001, in Yarahmadi & Fathi, 2015, p. 499), this pragmatic competence encompasses "learners' ability to manipulate available linguistic sources and socio-cultural knowledge about the target language according to the given context". Therefore, an English L2 speaker may be considered competent in English when using the language in accordance to the expected socio-cultural norms and in conveying the meaning as intended. However, pragmatic transfer from L1 to L2 is prevalent. Pragmatic transfer is classified into positive and negative transfer. Positive transfer occurs when a learner uses an L2 pragmatic feature with native form, function, and distribution due to the influence of the L1 (Yu, 2011, p. 1128). Negative transfer takes place when an L2 pragmatic feature with non-native form, function, or distribution is used due to L1 influence (ibid.) Yarahmadi and Fathi (2015, p. 500) contend that this occurs when L2 learners apply the socially appropriate rules and formulas of their L1 in L2 situations. Thus, pragmatic competence and pragmatic transfer are based on socio-cultural prescripts of the language. Pragmatic transfer has two categories: pragmalinguistic transfer and sociopragmatic transfer. According to Dendenne (2014, p. 30), pragmalinguistic transfer focuses on how politeness in one language influences form-function mapping in another language, whereas sociopragmatic transfer is concerned with how social perceptions in L1 influence context evaluation in L2.

The instances of pragmatic transfer are often regarded as pragmatic failure (Loutfi, 2016, p. 16). To concur, Ogiermann and Bella (2020, p. 198) attest to how, in any context, a reliance on a request perspective of L1 that is not favoured in the L2, results in pragmatic failure. Therefore, when thinking in L1 and writing in L2, transferring politeness norms of L1 according to how these are socially perceived and mapping L2 articulation of speech acts, lead to pragmatic failure where there is a misalignment of the two languages (De Kadt, 1992). Since the English-oriented education sector in South Africa, at this point, is not cognisant of African politeness strategies, these instances of pragmatic transfer are often seen as pragmatic failure. While this paper interrogates the use of English politeness strategies in request business letters, we explore instances of pragmatic transfer and propose ways in which African politeness strategies may be acknowledged within the ambit of decolonization in a multilingual and multicultural South Africa.

Conceptual and Theoretical framework

This article is guided by a concept of decolonization and three theoretical frameworks: Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962), Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson 1987) and Framework of Impoliteness (Culpeper, 1996).

Decolonization as a concept

Decolonization is a broad term with multiple interpretations particularly in the context of higher education (Mheta, Lungu & Govender, 2018). Different steps of decolonization, including Africanisation and indigenisation of knowledge, have been documented by different universities in various parts of the continent, resulting in these multiple interpretations (Ajani & Gamede, 2021). Smith (1999) identifies the following elements of decolonization: deconstruction and reconstruction, self-determination and social justice, ethics, language, internationalisation of indigenous experiences, history, and critique. This paper is premised on Smith's (1999) element of self-determination and social justice within the South African higher education context. Self-determination and social justice

relate to the struggle of those who have been marginalised by the Western academy and who seek legitimacy for knowledge that is rooted in their histories, experiences, and ways of viewing reality. Additionally, it is guided by leading scholar Wa Thiong'o (1994, p. 94), who states:

> *Education is a means of knowledge about ourselves [...] After we have examined ourselves, we radiate outwards and discover peoples and worlds around us. With Africa at the centre of things, not existing as an appendix or a satellite of other countries and literatures, things must be seen from the African perspective […] All other things are to be considered in their relevance to our situation and their contribution towards understanding ourselves. In suggesting this we are not rejecting other streams, especially the western stream.*

Sayed, Motala and Hoffman (2017) affirm that decolonizing higher education is to rediscover and decolonize the existing bodies of knowledge that have become unchanging and unchangeable learning experiences and institutions. Therefore, in the context of this paper decolonization does not imply abandoning Western and northern customs, it entails placing African knowledge at the centre of diverse knowledge traditions (Mheta, Lungu & Govender, 2018, p. 4).

South Africa's higher education curriculum is predominantly Eurocentric, reflecting continued Western supremacy even after apartheid (Ajani & Gamede, 2021). The need to decolonize the curriculum in higher education is long overdue considering that the country is 30 years into its democracy. Although South Africa is a multilingual country with twelve official languages, English, a language that was imposed by colonialism, is still a dominant LOLT. South Africa's higher education ~~academic~~ curriculum does not address the realities of the cultural and linguistic diversity of its students. This is despite government efforts and substantial measures that have been undertaken by both private and public institutions to promote the use of African languages. Moreover, the 2015 #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movements, and other student protests, which shook various tertiary institutions in South Africa, led to debates on the decolonization of higher education. These student actions were overt and called for urgent curriculum restructuring and multilingualism in South African higher education institutions (Kaschula & Wolf, 2020). In heeding these calls, tertiary institutions such as the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), Rhodes University, University of Limpopo, and the University of South Africa (UNISA), among others, have started to utilise African languages in various academic programmes (Madadzhe, 2019). Nonetheless, Indigenous languages continue to be on the periphery, rather than at the centre, of learning and teaching in South African higher education institutions. They are not used as instructional media but are visible in university language policy documents or taught as subjects (Makhanya & Zibane, 2020). Over and above the use of Indigenous languages as LOLT, there is a need to place African epistemology at the centre of the curriculum.

Decolonizing business writing

Le Grange (2016) asserts that decolonization is not an event but a process which is not easy to achieve. Decolonizing the entire higher education curriculum simultaneously would not be feasible, hence, we argue that decolonizing English business writing is a crucial step toward promoting inclusivity and respecting cultural diversity. Decolonizing English business writing entails encouraging cultural sensitivity through learning about and respecting the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds in South Africa.

Incorporating African politeness into English business writing is an important step in decolonizing communication and fostering

respect for the diverse cultural norms and values of the continent. It demonstrates a commitment to understanding and embracing the cultural diversity of the African continent while conducting professional interactions in English. In African culture, the term *ukuhlonipha,* 'respect' and politeness, is prevalent. African politeness often emphasises the community and respect for elders and utilises indirect ways of communication. The use of indirect communication is often favoured to avoid causing offence and to preserve face and harmony. African politeness often considers age, gender, and levels of positions or social hierarchy to determine how people are addressed (Nene, 2017, p. 6). African politeness strategies in written business communication, emphasise respect, courtesy, and maintaining harmonious relationships. ~~The use of indirect communication is often favoured to avoid causing offence and to preserve face and harmony.~~

In most African cultures, politeness is not only displayed through verbal communication, but also through other non-linguistic and non-verbal means, such as tone of voice, body movements, gestures, and eye contact, all of which also play a role in showing deference (De Kadt, 1995, p. 62; Ige & De Kadt, 2002, p. 149). In business writing, tone of voice is expressed in the politeness strategies used to show intention (illocution). For South African isiZulu students, the use of 'please' (*ngicela bandla*) is a common politeness strategy, which reflects a polite tone, to realise the speech act of request.

Speech Act Theory

Speech Act Theory, developed by Austin (1962) and expanded upon by Searle (1969), is a foundational concept in the field of pragmatics and the philosophy of language. It maintains that utterances can be used to both convey information and perform actions such as promising, requesting, and apologising, to mention a few (Austin, 1962, p. 12). Speech Act Theory emphasises that the meaning of a sentence goes beyond its literal content (locution) and includes the speaker's intentions (illocution) and the listener's interpretation (perlocution). Additionally, the theory acknowledges that context, social conventions, and shared understanding play crucial roles in determining the success of speech acts. As an act of communication, a speech act succeeds if the audience understands the speaker's intention or attitude being expressed. Austin (1962) subsequently proposed a three-dimensional model of the speech act.

Locutionary Act: This refers to the basic act or literal meaning of an utterance or a sentence. In other words, it is the surface-level form of what is said. In written business correspondence, the locutionary act would be the actual words used by the writer in communicating a message.

Illocutionary Act: The illocutionary act is the speaker's intended communicative act or the action the speaker intends to perform in making a statement. It is the speaker's intended meaning behind the words, as the intention is not explicitly expressed in the message. Speech acts can take various illocutionary forms, including assertions, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations (Austin, 1962). The focus of this paper is on the 'directives'.

Directives: Directives are speech acts that aim to induce the listener to do something. They include requests, commands, suggestions, and questions (Searle, 1975).

According to Alemi and Khanlarzadeh (2016), the speech act of request, the focus herein, is a directive in which the speaker wants to make the listener do something. Requests are regarded as face-threatening acts (FTAs) (Ivanovska, Kusevska & Daskalovska, 2016), which are realised both culturally and linguistically. Therefore, a speech act made in one culture using linguistic cues suitable for that context might be perceived as inappropriate in another.

Perlocutionary Act: The perlocutionary act refers to the effect that the speaker's words have on the listener in getting them to act or realise something. It is the impact or outcome of the speech act on the recipient. If

the perlocutionary act is carried out as it was intended by the interlocutor, the effect of the illocutionary act has been realised.

Speech acts can be performed either explicitly or implicitly. Hence, Yule (2016, p. 118) further classifies speech acts according to their structure into direct and indirect speech acts.

Direct and indirect speech acts

Direct speech acts are words that the speaker uses to convey an exact and literal meaning, hence only one illocutionary force can be inferred (Searle, 1975, p. 30). The speaker's intention is explicitly and directly conveyed through their utterance. In business writing the illocutionary force is unambiguous, and there is no need for inference. Hence, direct requests sound less polite and abrupt than indirect requests.

Indirect speech acts occur when the speaker's utterance and meaning are not the same. The illocutionary force is not explicitly stated but is implied. The speaker conveys their intention indirectly, often relying on context, social conventions, or pragmatic implicatures for the listener to infer the intended meaning. In the case of business letters, a reader would infer meaning behind the illocutionary force of the message by considering the context in which the words are used, and by having pragmatic knowledge of how an indirect speech act is used. Hence, due to their implicitness, indirect requests are regarded as diplomatic, polite, and tactful compared to direct requests. A person who makes a request indirectly may be perceived as displaying more respect and courtesy than one who makes a direct request. Indirect speech acts are commonly used when a person of a lower social status addresses a person of a higher social status to avoid imposing on a person (Madoyan, 2014, p. 20).

Madoyan (2014, p. 19) explores two other forms of indirectness, namely whimperatives and hedged performatives. Whimperatives are indirect requests that take the form "Could you...?" and "Will you...?", for example, "Could you send me the catalogue?". Hedged performatives, on the other hand, take the form of explicit performatives with a modal verb in the main clause, for example, "I would request you to send me the catalogue" [sic]. Furthermore, Madoyan (2014, p. 20) points out embedded performatives as another form of indirectness, which is difficult to interpret. "Embedded performatives contain the proposition to which they refer indirectly, but that proposition may be embedded arbitrarily deep within the literal expression" (ibid~~, 2014, p. 20~~). An illustration of this performative is, "I would like to request you to …" [sic]. This utterance indirectly performs the act of requesting. The three forms of indirectness have been used in analysing data for this study and have been further illustrated in Table 1.

Three factors guide the speaker in choosing whether to use direct or indirect speech acts (Madoyan, 2014, p. 20):

- the social distance between the speaker and the listener,
- the power the listener has over the speaker,
- the degree of imposition of the face-threatening act in a specific culture.

Since the Speech Act Theory focuses on spoken interaction, this paper has extended it to written business communication, as writers aim to achieve a specific intention which readers must decode for successful communication.

The Politeness Theory, developed by Brown and Levinson (1987), and the Impoliteness framework, developed by Culpeper (1996), are two influential approaches in the field of pragmatics that examine how people use language to convey politeness or impoliteness in communication.

Politeness Theory

Politeness Theory aims to explain how people use language to maintain 'face' which is the public self-image that every person wants to claim and maintain during social interactions (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 61). This theory has influenced the study of language and communication, particularly in cross-cultural and sociolinguistic contexts. It is based on the idea that people within all cultures have face needs. These fall into two categories:

Positive Face: This refers to the desire for approval, appreciation, and social connection. Positive face is about being liked and maintaining a positive self-image.

Negative Face: This relates to the desire for autonomy, independence, and the absence of imposition. Negative face is about having the freedom to do as one pleases without interference.

Making a request, which is a face-threatening speech act, may damage the addressee's positive or negative face, resulting in potential conflict or discomfort. Politeness Theory presents various strategies that individuals employ to mitigate face-threatening acts (FTAs). These strategies include:

Bald on-record: Making a direct, unambiguous, concise, and unmitigated statement or request. This politeness strategy is performed in specific circumstances where the danger to the addressee's face is very small. The speech acts used in this strategy are directive in nature. However, in business communication, these speech acts are considered too direct and instructive, and thus impolite.

Off-record indirect strategies: Hinting at a request or avoiding direct confrontation by suggesting or implying rather than stating the FTA directly.

Positive politeness: Using strategies that emphasise social bonds and redress the addressee's positive face wants to soften the impact of the FTA. This involves strategies that aim to make the addressee feel valued and respected through the use of expressions of friendliness and solidarity, or compliments.

Negative politeness: Using strategies that acknowledge the other person's autonomy and minimise imposition on the addressee to satisfy negative face wants. Negative politeness strategies may include respect, formality and restraint, apologies for interfering or transgressing, linguistic and non-linguistic deference, use of hedges, the use of softening mechanisms, polite requests, or indirectness, and maintaining social distance. The request speech acts in this category are considered polite in business communication.

Impoliteness Framework (Culpeper, 1996)

The Impoliteness framework, developed by Jonathan Culpeper, is based on the theory of politeness by Brown and Levinson (1987) and focuses on the opposite end of the politeness spectrum. Instead of analysing how people maintain face and politeness, this framework examines how impoliteness is conveyed and understood in communication. Impoliteness refers to language and behaviours that threaten face, challenge social norms, and create conflict or discomfort.

While Brown and Levinson's (1987) model on politeness is certainly one of the best-known and most utilised theories on politeness, it has been criticised by some scholars as having a Western, or Eurocentric bias (Gu, 1990; Ide, 1993; Mao, 1994; Matsumoto, 1988; Wierzbicka, 1991, 2003, cited in Leech, 2005). It cannot therefore claim to present a universal theory applicable to all languages and cultures (ibid). According to Mao (1994 cited in Leech, 2005, p. 2), Brown and Levinson's notion of face is quite different from the Chinese concepts of *miànzi* and *liân (losing face* and *saving face).* In the same vein, Gu (1990) explains that their concept of politeness does not match the Chinese concept of *limào (courtesy or politeness).* Equally, according to Ide (1993), the Japanese concept of *wakimae* or discernment, neglected by Brown and Levinson, is needed in explaining Japanese socially constrained politeness or *teineisa*. De Kadt (1998, p. 179) concurs and contends that the collectivist nature of the African culture, Zulu in particular, is contrary to the 'individualistic' nature of the West. The applicability of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory to Zulu culture is, therefore, not appropriate. Hence, this paper contends that cross-cultural business communication cannot only recognise Western cultural politeness, especially in a multilingual country like South Africa. African politeness should be acknowledged as part of the decolonization agenda.

Culpeper (1996, p. 355) defines five impoliteness super-strategies, which are opposites of Brown and Levinson's politeness super-strategies, as follows:

Bald on record impoliteness: The FTA is performed in a direct, unambiguous, and concise way in circumstances where face is not relevant or minimised. For example, "Make sure all your orders are delivered on time" is regarded as a direct instruction.

Positive impoliteness: The use of strategies designed to damage the addressee's positive face wants.

Negative impoliteness: The use of strategies designed to damage the addressee's negative face wants.

Sarcasm or mock politeness: The FTA is performed with the use of politeness strategies that are insincere, and thus remain surface realisations.

Withhold politeness: The absence of politeness where it would be expected. For example, failing to thank somebody for a gift may be taken as deliberate impoliteness. (Culpeper 1996, p. 356-358)

The data analysis for this study focused on negative politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987), those being, whimperatives, hedged performatives, embedded performatives, and linguistic deference and negative impoliteness strategies (Culpeper 1996), and specifically focussed on bald on record and explicit performatives, as shown in Table 1 below.

These politeness and impoliteness strategies were chosen due to their applicability to written business communication. Further, they have also been used in other studies analysing written business letters (Wijayanto, Laila, Prasetyarini & Susiati, 2013; Goudarzi, Ghonsooly & Taghipour, 2015; Khatib & Lotfi, 2015; Nikoobin & Shahrokhi, 2017)

Table 1: Politeness and impoliteness strategies used for data analysis

Politeness Strategies Brown and Levinson's (1987)	**Impoliteness Strategies** Culpeper's (1996)
Negative politeness	**Negative impoliteness**
Indirect speech acts **1. Whimperatives** - indirect requests Example: Could you… Won't you please… **2. Hedged performatives** - use of a modal verb to hedge a performative verb (softening mechanisms) Example: "I would request you rectify the situation". **3. Embedded performatives** indirectly perform the acts of requesting. Example: "I would like to request that …". "May I request that…" **4. Linguistic deference** (respect) Politeness marker to reveal deference or request for cooperation. Example: "I would appreciate…" "I was wondering …"	**Direct speech acts (imperative)** **5. Bald on record** command/order/instruction – rude, harsh tone Example: I need…/I want… **6. An explicit performative** Performing the FTA in a direct, clear, unambiguous, and concise way in contexts where face is relevant and maximised. Example: I request...

Literature review

Research evidence shows that second language learners often face challenges when using speech acts as they tend to transfer the rules and expressions of their native language to the second language. As a result of using different language ~~use~~ rules, this in turn, may lead to the conveyance of an unintended pragmatic force in the target language (Umar & Majeed, 2006; Sithebe, 2011). Iranian and Persian-speaking English Foreign Language (EFL) students who participated in a study on the pragmatic production of complaints frequently demonstrated pragmatic transfer in their complaint performances (Yarammadi & Fathi 2015). Pragmatic transfer was also evident in the results of a study that examined the pragmatic transfer in English request realisations made by EFL undergraduate students, with proficient English skills, enrolled in an English Study Program at a state university in Indonesia. This was demonstrated by their use of "Sorry" or "I'm sorry", instead of "Excuse me", as a politeness strategy when making requests. These phrases are frequently used in English to convey regret, sadness, or apology, and were employed inappropriately in the context of requests. Such language use can lead to misunderstanding between the interlocutors and may be regarded as negative pragmatic transfer. Negative pragmatic transfer is regarded as the primary factor causing pragmatic failure.

The results of a study on a corpus of business letters written in English by Kazakhstani business professionals (English L2 speakers) to fellow English L1 business professionals revealed frequent instances of pragmatic failure and communication breakdowns due to the manner in which politeness strategies and communication intentions were implemented (Aimoldina, Zharkynbekova & Akynova, 2016). The results of research on the relationship between language proficiency and negative pragmatic transfer from a first language by American learners of Arabic as a Foreign Language (AFL) in Egyptian Arabic showed evidence of negative pragmatic transfer in their use of direct and indirect politeness strategies when performing refusals (Morkus, 2021). A study, comprised of native English speakers and Moroccan second- and third-year university learners of English, on the issue of pragmatic transfer, showed evidence of pragmatic transfer from L1 into the Interlanguage of Moroccan university students regarding their use of direct and indirect strategies when performing requests in English (Loutfi, 2016).

These studies indicate a misalignment of politeness practices between English and different linguistic communities of the world. In this paper, a similar form of misalignment is noted between English and isiZulu. This misalignment emphasises the lack of universality of Speech Act Theory, Politeness Theory, and the Framework of Impoliteness. Therefore, the continuous use of these politeness theories as a yardstick of pragmatic competence in English alienates African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and African ways of knowing. This alienation jeopardises the decolonial agenda that the South African higher education sector is purporting.

Methodology

We approached this research from a critical research paradigm and applied a quantitative research methodology. The critical research paradigm aligns with the objectives of this paper as we aspire towards ~~decolonializing~~ decolonizing business writing in English in the South African context. The critical research paradigm, according to Kivunja and Kuyini (2017, p. 35), "seeks to change the politics so as to confront social oppression and improve the social justice". For this research paradigm, reality is shaped by, amongst other things, political factors which reify reality into structures that are taken to be immutable (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110). This assertion by Guba and Lincoln is relatable to how, in this investigation, the Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962), the Politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), and the Framework of impoliteness (Culpeper, 1996) are applied for English L2 students. These theories are not universal as they do not take into cognisance the multicultural histories and the linguistic backgrounds of the L2 students. Thus, the acknowledgement of African politeness strategies in business writing conducted in English would improve social justice and decolonize business writing within the South African context.

The research was conducted using a quantitative research methodology. We applied an inferential approach in the analysis of 40 randomly sampled business letters. The inferential approach studies a sample of the population, determines the characteristics of the sample, and makes inferences about the population under investigation (Kothari, 2004, p. 5). Thus, in the sample business letters, we isolated instances of politeness strategies in the request speech acts used, we calculated the frequency of each type of politeness strategy, and we made inferences on the use of the speech acts, taking into consideration the linguistic background of the research participants. The analysis is based on the politeness and impoliteness strategies as presented in Table 1.

The sample of 40 business letters was drawn from a population of 100 first-year students enrolled in a first-year English Communication Skills module. The students identified as isiZulu L1/English L2 speakers who come from disadvantaged and predominantly semi-urban and rural areas of KwaZulu-Natal, a province in South Africa. The students are registered at a University of Technology (UoT) located in one of the townships in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal. This UoT offers practical and professional programmes in the engineering fields and the business fields; programmes that require proficiency in business communication in English.

In the business letter task, the respondents, acting as sales consultants in a company, were asked to write a letter to a sales manager requesting marketing materials that were needed for an upcoming advertising campaign. For anonymity, they were asked to only write the last four digits of their student numbers prefixed with M for male or F for female, for example, M5278. The analysis was based on the negative politeness and impoliteness strategies as presented in Table 1.

Discussion of the Findings

The analysis of the 40 business letters yielded 70 units of request speech acts used. The data analysed indicated that the respondents largely used both direct and indirect politeness strategies in articulating the request speech act in English. However, the use of indirect politeness strategies was more evident. Figure 1 below presents the summary of each category of politeness strategies used in the data.

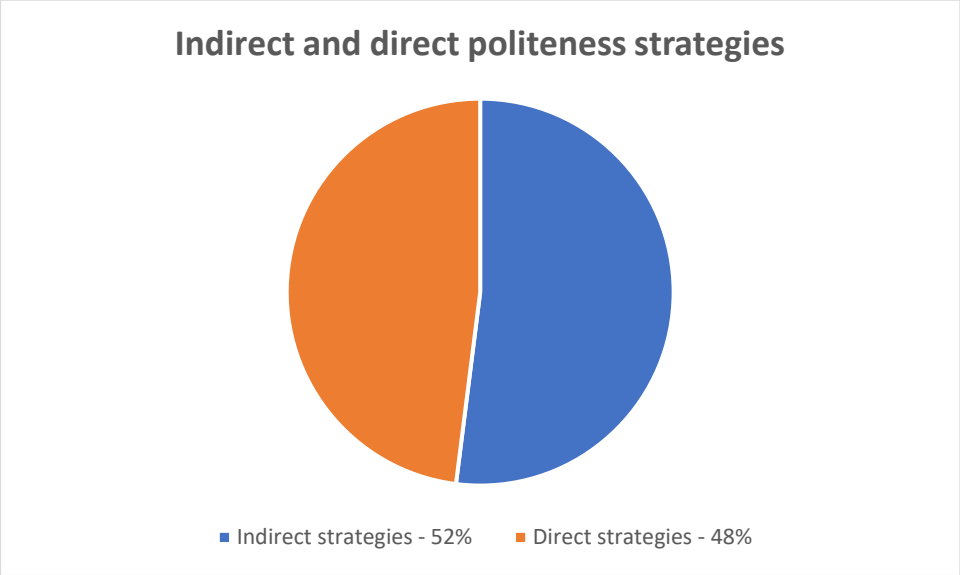

Figure 1: Indirect and direct politeness strategies

As shown in Figure 1 above respondents used indirect politeness strategies 52% of the time. These indirect strategies are categorised as negative politeness strategies, according to Brown and Levinson (1987). Indirectness is a strategy that the addresser may use to minimise imposition on the negative face wants of the addressee (Brown & Levinson,

1987). It is thus regarded as a polite strategy. The indirect strategy is acceptable in business writing in English as it helps to achieve the intention of the writer and assists the reader in perceiving the intention. Moreover, this strategy helps in building and preserving good relations between the writer and the reader.

Figure 1 also shows that 48% of students' requests used direct politeness strategies. Direct politeness strategies are categorised as negative impoliteness strategies (Culpepper, 1996). The use of negative impoliteness may damage the addressee's face wants and is regarded as an impolite strategy. In the context of business writing, this may lead to pragmatic failure in English resulting from the misinterpretation of the illocutionary force and inappropriate perlocutionary force of the request speech act. This can harm the relationship between the writer and the reader.

In summary, the use of both indirect and direct politeness strategies in English request letters indicates that while the students, to some extent, have acquired pragmatic knowledge, they still face challenges in this regard.

Figure 2 below illustrates the distribution of the request strategies that fall into the categories of negative politeness strategies and negative impoliteness strategies as used in the data. The negative politeness strategies used are whimperatives, hedged performatives, embedded performatives, and linguistic deference. The negative impoliteness strategies used are explicit performatives and bald on record.

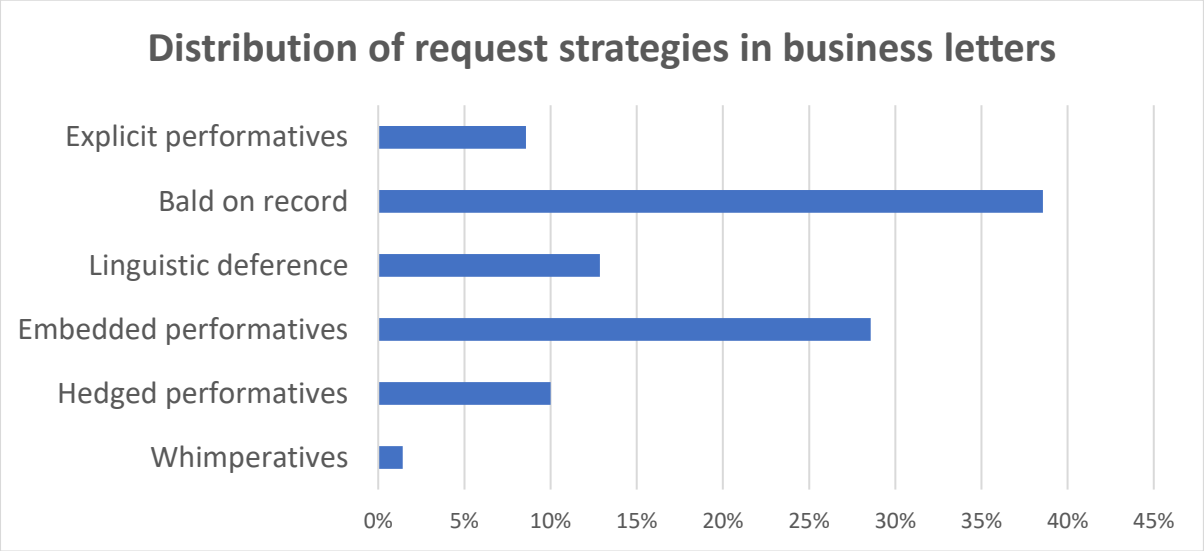

Figure 2: Distribution of request strategies in business letters

The data analysis revealed that the respondents' English request letters had more bald on record (39%), which is a direct and negative impolite request strategy, compared to other politeness strategies. Bald on record is the use of a direct, clear, unambiguous, and unmitigated request speech act (Culpepper, 1996). This was noted in the respondents' use of phrases such as:

"We want banners" (*sifuna ama-banner*)

"We are going to need material" (*sizodinga i-material*).

"You must include bronchues [sic], flyers, post cards and business cards …". (*kumele ufake ama-brochure*…).

In the context of business writing in English, the use of phrases such as "We want", "We are going to need", "You must include", and "I need" are blunt and direct requests that demand actions from the reader and thus, sound rude, harsh, and instructive. This can lead to failure in achieving both the illocutionary and

perlocutionary effects of the speech act in question and breakdown relationships. Instead, the use of a modal verb such as "would" could have been a more polite and appropriate politeness marker to ensure the reader received the request positively.

In addition, another impolite strategy used in the English request letters was explicit performatives (9%). The use of explicit performative indicates an instance of direct pragmatic transfer of language use from isiZulu to English. This was seen in some of the respondents' use of phrases such as:

"I request some materials" (*Ngicela i-material*).

"We request banners" (*Sicela ama-banner*).

"I ask for more marketing materials so that the campaign will be … (*Ngicela amanye ama-*)

"I remind you about one of the biggest upcoming advertising campaigns" (*ngikukhumbuza nge-*)

"Please also provide T-shirts, mugs, calendars …" (*Ngicela bandla usinike futhi nama - T-shirt*…)

The use of "I request", "We request", "I ask for", "I remind you", and "please also provide", are direct speech acts which sound rude, especially in the context of business communication in English. The use of "I ask" translated as '*ngicela*' or '*ngiyacela*' is an indication of direct transference of the rules of language use from isiZulu to English. The writer, as an L2 speaker of English, thinks that they are being polite because they lack pragmatic competence in English. In this situation, such a lack of pragmatic competence can potentially result in pragmatic failure and may cause the reader to misconstrue the message. Likewise, the use of "please" to tone down a performative verb (provide) is evidence of transferring the rules of language use from isiZulu to English. In isiZulu, using '*ngicela bandla*', which means 'please', to fulfil the same illocutionary intention would have been perceived as polite. This strategy softens the request, shows respect, and thus, would be deemed appropriate. Yet in English, this is perceived as a direct request and thus regarded as impolite. English L2 learners may transfer socio-pragmatic skills from their L1 to L2. Due to different rules of language use, this in turn, may lead to the conveyance of a pragmatic force in the target language which was not intended (Umar & Majeed, 2006; Sithebe, 2011, p. 12; Dilek, 2020, p. 1265).

In these instances, we witness both pragmalinguistic and sociolinguistic transfer occurrences. While these are perceived as pragmatic failure instances in English, such articulation is accepted in African politeness norms. We strongly claim that failure to acknowledge these instances of extreme politeness from the African perspective perpetuates Eurocentric hegemony in business writing. Hence, we argue for the decolonization of business writing in the South African context.

In the category of indirect politeness strategies, the respondents largely used embedded performatives (29%). This is evident in the use of phrases such as:

"I would like to request for the marketing materials" (*ngizothanda ukucela i-markerting material*)

"We would like to have marketing materials" (*ngizothanda ukuthola i*-marketing material).

"I would wish to request the television as well …" (*bengifisa ukucela nomabonakude*)

The use of phrases such as, 'would like' and 'would wish', is a softening mechanism to save the negative face wants of the addressee. The use of embedded performatives indirectly performs the act of requesting and is thus regarded as very polite in both English and isiZulu. Additionally, the respondents used linguistic deference (13%). This is shown in phrases such as:

"I would appreciate if…" (*ngingathokoza uma*…)

"It will be greatly appreciated…" (*kuzongithokozisa kakhulu*…)

"I hope this letter will find you in a good mood" (*Ngiyethemba lencwadi izokuthola usesimweni esihle*.).

Linguistic deference is evident in the respondents' use of politeness markers that show respect, such as 'would appreciate', 'highly appreciated' and 'I hope'. This is an attempt to show that they do not want to impose on the addressee. This strategy is considered polite in both English and isiZulu. Moreover, the respondents used hedged performatives (10%). For example:

"I would request you to buy…" (*ngizokucela ukuthi uthenge*…)

"I would need …" (*ngizodinga*…)

In these cases, the use of a modal verb 'would' to hedge the performative verbs 'request' and 'need' is another softening mechanism that minimises the imposition of the negative face wants of the addressee. The absence of a modal verb in these cases may make the requests sound like a command and be interpreted as rude. Hedging is considered polite both in English and isiZulu.

The last indirect politeness strategy used was the whimperative (1%), as illustrated in the following expressions:

"Please could you help me" (*ngicela bandla ungisiza*…)

"Can you organize for me…" (*ungakwazi ukungitholela*…)

The use of an indirect request which sounds like a question is a polite way of articulating a request in English.

Conclusion

IsiZulu L1 students in our investigation have acquired politeness strategies in English. This is evident in their use of indirect negative politeness strategies. However, they also use direct negative impoliteness strategies. This use indicates a challenge with politeness strategies in English (bald on record) and a direct transference of language use from isiZulu to English (explicit performatives). Politeness is expressed differently in different languages and cultures, and it is therefore not surprising that English L2 learners have challenges in expressing politeness when writing business correspondence in English.

Based on the findings of our investigation, we recommend that the teaching of business writing should include developing pragmalinguistic competence in English. In addition, Higher education curricula should include intercultural communication skills that acknowledge different levels of politeness in different languages. Hence, the incorporation of African politeness in the South African context is imperative. This acknowledgement advances the decolonization of business communication in the South African context and embraces the cultural and linguistic diversity in professional interactions in English.

Ethical statement

The study observed all the necessary ethical/human subjects requirements surrounding quantitative research as stated and approved by the Human and Social Sciences Ethical Committee in the university where the study was registered.

Disclosure of interest

- There are no financial or proprietary conflicts of interest from both authors in publishing this article.
- Both authors have contributed equally in preparing this article for publication.
- Both authors have approved the article for publication.
- The article reports on original research, and has not been submitted elsewhere for publication.

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