

## Acquisition of the Multicultural Competence by the University of Burundi English Majors: The Case of the Speech Acts of Requests and Apology.

Ildephonse Horicubonye,  
University of Burundi  
Department of English Language and Literature  
BP: 1550 Bujumbura-Burundi

### Abstract

*Multicultural competence that enables communication between people from different backgrounds is a very important requirement for an effective communication today. Burundi Government has initiated education system reform aiming at enabling University graduates to respond to the demands of intercultural understanding required for the globalized society. In this perspective, the University of Burundi offers English courses to all the students, especially English majors.*

*Given that students take English courses after six years of exposure to this language, it is legitimate to wonder about whether or not they can achieve effective communication with people from different cultures. This paper seeks to analyse how English majors from the University of Burundi express the speech acts of apology and requests and attempts to answer the following question:*

- (1) *Are the Burundian English majors able to interpret appropriately utterances containing speech acts of requests and apology?*

*This question was answered by administering a questionnaire to a sample of students, who were also involved in role plays. The questionnaire was elaborated in the form of a discourse completion test (DCT) on the speech acts under study –request and apology. The role plays were also prepared on the same speech acts. Responses on apology were categorized following the semantic formulas (Cohen and Olsain, 1983), their syntactic structures, and the semantic structure (Wierzbicka, 1991). Requests were analyzed following their semantic formulas ((Blum-Kulka, House &Kasper,1989, p.123) and their semantic structures (Wierzbicka, 1991). They were afterwards analyzed following Searle's (1969) speech act theory and Goffman's (1957) and Levinson's (1987) notion of face.*

*Results indicate that Burundian English majors have learned the semantic formulas used to express the speech acts under study. However, they fail to use them appropriately in different situations. Furthermore, it was noted that they do not know that the order in which the semantic formulas are arranged in utterances convey different illocutionary forces. From these results, it can be posited that this inappropriate acquisition of English cultural elements by Burundian English majors can result in miscommunication with non-Kirundi speakers of English.*

**Key Words:** Multicultural, competence, acquisition, apology, requests.

### 1. Introduction

Multicultural competence that enables communication between people from different backgrounds is a very important requirement for an effective communication today. The knowledge of many languages is crucial to communicate in multicultural contexts. It is in this perspective that we have four languages on the programme of the Burundian education system: Kirundi- the mother tongue and official language, French – a second language and official language, and English – a foreign language that is used in some formal situations like in meetings with member states of the East African Community, and other international fora, and Kiswahili – a lingua-franca that is mainly used in business especially in the East African countries.

Although these languages are taught, their teaching in foreign language contexts is essentially limited to the transmission of linguistic knowledge, which alone cannot enable the learners to acquire that language for communicative purposes. To communicate effectively in a language, the mastery of its pragmatic knowledge is of paramount importance because the pragmatics of that language is linked to the social perceptions that are the basis of the interpretation and the production of any communicative action by the participants (Kasper, 2001).

For the case of the acquisition of English in Burundi, a language learned after Kirundi and French, the appropriation of new concepts becomes difficult because they enter in competition with the already acquired concepts in the first two languages.

This article seeks therefore to analyse whether the acquisition of English speech acts of requests and apology by Burundian English majors enabled them to communicate effectively with non Kirundi speakers of English. In pursuing this objective, we shed some light on these speech acts both in Kirundi and in English, and how the multicultural aspect is acquired in English as a foreign language.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

### **2.1 The Teaching of English in Burundi**

The teaching of English in Burundi secondary schools has been concerned mainly with providing linguistic knowledge, which alone, cannot enable learners to communicate in a multicultural context. It is in this perspective that many different language teaching methods have been tried but what seemed to remain constant was the content to be taught (Wilkins, 1979). That is the reason all the different methods were collapsed in the three approaches according to how the syllabus was elaborated. It is clear then, if we look at the textbooks that were used in the teaching of English in Burundi, that it is the grammatical syllabus that was predominant. In this syllabus, the learning units have grammatical labels: the article, possessive adjectives, the tense, etc... These linguistic elements were taught, drilled and used out of context which made its use in communication rather inappropriate.

The only approach to language teaching that was likely to bring learners to communicate was the communicative competence approach, but it was very demanding for teachers because it requires well qualified teachers, appropriate teaching materials and small classes that are easy to handle. No one of these conditions was met. It is therefore clear that the teaching of English did not aim at the communicative competence, but at the mastery of the grammatical structures that only develop the grammatical competence as Widdowson (1974pp. 1-22) observes that students in developing countries, who have received several years of formal English teaching frequently remain deficient in the ability to actually use the language and to understand its use in normal communication.

### **2.2 Acquisition of Multicultural Competence**

Cultural competence is the ability to understand, communicate with and effectively interact with people across cultures (Make it Our Business, retrieved on July 31, 2020). As it is defined, its acquisition in additional language learning contexts is a complex and difficult process since learners of additional languages have normally been exposed to other languages and their respective cultural norms. But, it has been observed that L2 learners need to develop their pragmatic competence in order to use language appropriately according to the socio-cultural norms of the L2 community (Shima, 2005). Similarly, Kecskes (2014: 61) argues that pragmatic competence of nonnative interactants plays a significant role in second/foreign language use and intercultural communication. But it is assumed that multilinguals have already have an L1- governed pragmatics in place, which will be adjusted to accommodate the sociocultural requirements of the new language (Kecskes, op.cit).

Unfortunately, pragmatic competence or cultural competence is rarely achieved in the classroom contexts where learners are exposed to three types of input, namely those of the teacher, the materials, and other learners (Shima, op.cit). These types of input cannot enable learners to be culturally competent because they cannot gain knowledge of different cultural practices and world view from the input they get from the classroom context. In this perspective, as Widdowson (op.cit) noted above learners in foreign language contexts frequently remain deficient in the ability to actually use the language and to understand its use in normal communication. So, lack of ability to use language according to contextual factors or absence of the cultural and pragmatic situations in cross-cultural communication can lead to breakdown in communication (Shima, Op.cit).

Being culturally competent requires the knowledge of speech acts that enable people to communicate appropriately in different contexts. In this section, the focus will be put on how the speech acts of apology and requests are acquired. As these speech acts are used and interpreted differently in English and in Kirundi as shown in their semantic and syntactic structures, their acquisition by Burundian English majors is likely going to be difficultly achieved.

In requests, Kirundi speakers prefer to use positive face through the use of the expression of solidarity or mutual help while English use negative face through the use of the expression of indirectness, formality, and mitigation of imposition, Burundian English majors who have learned English requests in classroom situations will have hard time to use them according to their cultural norms. This is due to the fact that learners have usually had more access to

pragmalinguistics than to sociopragmatics, especially if they have acquired the target language in the classroom (Kecskes, op.cit).

### 2.3 Speech Act Theory

Speech act theory implies that speech is an action that can cause changes in the world of speakers and hearers (Horicubonye, 2015). A speech act is an act performed through speech. It is also what an utterance does beyond just saying something (Platt, 1985) Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) made a distinction between locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts.

The locutionary act is defined simply as the act of producing a linguistically well formed and thus meaningful expression. The illocutionary acts are the real actions which are performed by the utterance where saying something equals doing it, as in promising, complimenting, refusing, and warning.

Searle (op.cit) observes that there are direct and indirect speech acts. In a direct speech act, there is a transparent relationship between form and function as in an imperative used to perform a request. For example, “please pass me the salt”. In an indirect speech act, the illocutionary force of the act is not directly noticed at the surface structure as in an interrogative form that serves as a request: can you lend me a pen? People use indirectness to be polite or to put it otherwise to communicate in a way that does not threaten the hearer’s face. As we are concerned with the study of the speech act of apology and requests, the following section will deal with these two speech acts.

#### 2.2.1 Apology

Apology is a speech act related to politeness and whose function is to redress an offensive act and to satisfy the addressee’s negative face want. Negative face want is the want of every “competent adult member” that his actions be unimpeded by others (Levinson&Brown, 1987). Fraser (1981) observes that there are four assumptions or conditions of an apology. The first assumption says that no matter what kind of act it is; it has happened before the utterance of this speech act. Secondly, an apology assumes that the speaker has offended the hearer. The third assumption states that the speaker feels the need and responsibility of the offense. And lastly, the speaker really regrets for the offense. However, regretting the occurrence of the offense is not enough. One has also to express his/ her feelings in order to compensate for the action that would be costly to the hearer. In so doing, the speaker’s face is more threatened than the hearer’s, hence the apologies impose on the speaker (Brown& Levinson, 1978,1987).

The Cross-Cultural Speech Acts Realisation Project has proposed five possible strategies for effecting an apology (Blum-Kulka, House& Kasper, 1989, Olshtain& Cohen, 1993).

- (a) An expression of apology
- (b) Acknowledgement of responsibility
- (c) An explanation or an account
- (d) An offer of repair
- (e) A promise of non-occurrence.

In order to deliver your apology properly, knowing the strategies is not enough, one should also consider the following factors:

- (a) Your familiarity with the person being apologized to
- (b) The intensity of the act
- (c) The relative authority that each of you has
- (d) Your relative ages
- (e) The place where the exchange takes place (Blum-Kulka et. Al. op.cit).

#### 2.2.2 Requests

A request is described as an act which attempts to get H to do an act which S wants H to do, and which S believes H is able to do; but which is not obvious that H will do in the normal course of the event on his own accord (Searle, 1969). The speech act of request is likely to threaten both the hearer and the speaker’s face. For this, much work face needs to be done in the request speech act realization.

Hence, the choice of linguistic realization has to take into consideration a set of social factors which have to do with the relationship between the speaker and the addressee and the degree of imposition of the utterance (Ellis, op.cit: 180).

The cross-cultural speech act realization project identified three levels of directness for requests. English and Kirundi requests both have the three levels of directness that have been proposed by the cross-cultural speech act realization project (Blum-Kulka, House &Kasper,1989, p.123). That is: direct, conventionally indirect and non-conventionally indirect.

Direct

- a) Imperative: Ntwaza ibi bitabu. (Carry for me these books) Carry these books for me.
- b) Explicit performative: Nifuza kwandika ikintu kihuta mugabo abandika uyu muni ntibakora. ( I wish to get something typed urgently but typists are not working today ) I would like to get something typed urgently but typists are not working today.
- c) Hedged performative: Nifuza kubasaba ko mwontiza umuduga aho nigira. ( I wish to ask you that you can lend me a car where I want to go). I would like to ask whether you could lend me a car I need to go to do some errands.
- d) Goal statement: Ndabaherekeze mu gisagara? (That I go with you in town?). Can I go with you to town?
- e) Want statement: *Nifuza ko mwonshikana mu gisagara.* I wish that you take me to town. I would like a ride to town. Conventionally Indirect
- f) Query preparatory: ability or permission: Urashoborakuntiza ikaramu? (you can lend me a pen?) Can you lend me a pen?
- g) Query preparatory: availability: Woba ufise amahera? (You would have some money?) Would you have some money on you?

Non-Conventionally Indirect

- h) Question hint: *Woba ugiye I muhira?* (You would go home?) Are you going home?
- i) Statement hint: *Urazi ko nsanze nahinduye ipantalo yarimwo amahera?* (You know that I changed the trousers in which I had put my money?) Did you know that I changed the trousers in which I had put my wallet?

### 2.2.3 Apology and requests and face work

Goffman (1967) who introduced the notion of face for the first time states that face is: "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact". Later, Brown and Levinson (1987) defined face as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself". Face consists of two specific desires: positive face and negative face. Positive face is the desire to have one's self-image appreciated and approved of. The second desire is negative face that is the desire to be free from imposition.

In interaction, speakers must attempt to avoid acts that threaten the face of their interlocutors that are called face-threatening acts. In English, the concept of face reflects the spirit of democratic behavior. Each individual has the freedom of action for that other people should not impede on his/her action. Everything in one's interactions focuses on self as a scale of value.

This view was challenged by many scholars because they thought that it was a deviation in the concept of face. In support to Goffman's sense of face, Gu (1990) and Nwoye (1992) proposed the following concept of group face: "an individual's desire to behave in conformity with the culturally expected norms of behavior that are institutionalized and sanctioned by society". Similarly, face wants in the Burundian context are related to the desire to be accepted by others. In addition, these wants are related to the desire that the family and society be appreciated through the individual's use of language in interaction. In Kirundi, the individual culturally exists in relation to the community.

In fact, the elements that are likely to be used are dictated by the mood of the apologise, the seriousness of the damage, and the circumstances in which the damage occurred. People may also apologise even when there is no damage caused, but just to be polite.

While the English and Kirundi expressions for apologies seem to be similar at the surface structure, their semantic structure differs. The semantic structure for excuse me and I beg your pardon can be described as follows:

- a) I know I did something bad to you.
- b) I feel bad towards you because of this.
- c) I know there is a light infraction.
- d) I know you do not need me to make amends for this.

The semantic structure for the expression I am sorry or I apologise is like this:

- a) I know I did something bad to you.
- b) I feel bad towards you because of this.
- c) I want you to know I want to compensate for it.
- d) I do not know whether you will accept that (Wierzbicka, op.cit p.126).

Consequently, English and Kirundi realisation of the speech of apology is done in a different way. While in English the speaker is an agent in apologising, Kirundi apology operates otherwise. In Kirundi, the apologise is a patient, not because he thinks he does not feel bad towards the addressee, but because he thinks he cannot do enough to make amends for the damage he has caused.

This can be noted in the use of the verb *ku- babar-a* (to suffer) with the derivative suffix *-ir-* that indicates that the addressee has to suffer for the speaker. Then we will have *n- babar-ir-a* that means suffer for me. The meaning behind all this is that the speaker regrets what s/he has done, but s/he cannot do enough to repair the damage caused. So, s/he is requesting the addressee to sympathize with her/him. This expression for apology in Kirundi *n-babar-ir-a* can be assigned the following semantic structure:

- a) I know I did something bad to you
- b) I feel bad towards you because of this
- c) I know I cannot do enough to make you feel good
- d) I say suffer for me since I cannot suffer in your place. (Horicubonye,2005p.92-93)

The apology expression *murantunga munkize* can be assigned the following semantic structure:

- a) I know I did something bad to you.
- b) I feel bad towards you because of this
- c) I know I cannot do enough to make you feel good
- d) I say I am entirely at your mercy.

The difference between English and Kirundi apology expressions lies in the illocutionary purpose(c). While in English, the illocutionary purpose(c) is to compensate for the damage, in Kirundi the illocutionary purpose (c) is to recognize that the damage cannot be compensated for.

Normally, a speaker should choose to use the directness or the indirectness in requests depending on the status of the interactants but in many situations it is not the case.

Another difference between English and Kirundi requests that is very important is their semantic structure. The semantic structure of English requests is described in this pattern (Wierzbicka, op.cit, p. 159):

- a) I say I want you to do something good for me
- b) I say this because I want you to do it
- c) I think you do not have to do it
- d) I do not know if you will do it

The semantic structure of requests in English is the same for all the levels of directness. The only difference that is found is the scales of politeness that the speaker uses. In direct requests, the addressee's face threat is very high while in conventionally indirect and non-conventionally indirect the face-threat goes decreasing. From this semantic structure, it is clear that English speakers attend very much to one's freedom of action. In requests, speakers want their needs satisfied but at the same time they want the interests of the addressee to be safeguarded.

In Kirundi, the semantic structure is described in this pattern:

- a) I say I want you to do something good for me
- b) I say this because I want you to do it
- c) I think you will do it because I will do the same for you
- d) I know that if you do not do it, it is because you cannot do it. (Horicubonye,2005p.155)

As it can be observed in the illocutionary purpose (c) I think you will do it because I will do the same for you, Kirundi values are community-based. Kirundi speakers express the idea of complementarity rather than individual needs. It is, therefore, here that English and Kirundi requests differ despite their similarity in their levels of directness. This is explained by the fact that in African culture and specifically in Burundian culture there is mutual assistance between individuals. So, requesting something from someone is not face-threatening. This shows that Burundians care more about the community than they care for themselves. So, face in the Burundian context is community-based rather than individual- oriented.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Our research has been conducted on students who were in the third and fourth years in the Department of English Language and Literature in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences as well as those of the third, fourth and fifth years in the English Department of the Institute for Applied Pedagogy at the University of Burundi (2002-2003). All the students were 200, but used only 50 students as our informants on the basis of 10 students per class.

These 50 students were selected using the convenience sampling technique that consists in inviting students to participate in the study, but only volunteers were given the questionnaire and considered for role plays.

The questionnaire both in Kirundi and English were elaborated in the form of a discourse completion test (DCT) on speech acts under study. The questionnaire was on a wide range of situations that would enable the researcher to assess

how informants use the speech acts under study. The role plays were also prepared on the same speech acts. The role plays were tape recorded. The aim of giving the role plays was to crosscheck how respondents use those speech acts without monitoring.

After the data collection, responses to speech act of apology were categorised following the semantic formulas (Cohen and Olsain, 1983), their syntactic structures, and the semantic structure (Wierzbicka, 1991). Requests were analyzed following their semantic formulas ((Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989), and their semantic structures (Wierzbicka, 1991). They were afterwards analyzed following Searle's (1969) speech act theory and Goffman's (1967) and Levinson's (1987) notion of face.

#### 4. Results

##### 4.1 Use of apology by Burundian English majors

Table 1: **situation 1: Infraction causing serious physical damage to someone or 's property**

In this situation, the semantic formula for an expression of apology plus explanation, repair or responsibility scored higher than the others with 73.4% in English questionnaire, 67.7% in Kirundi and 46.6% in the role plays. The expression of apology only was mainly found in the role plays with 25.8% against 9.9% in English questionnaire and 2.1% in Kirundi. Explanation was found in Kirundi and role plays in bigger proportions with 15.6 % to 14.1% and repair was only found in the English role plays with 5.8%.

Semantic formulas	Role-plays in English		DCQ in English		DCQ in Kirundi	
	Responses	%	Responses	%	Responses	%
An expression of apology / explanation/ repair or forbearance	56	46.6	207	73.4	195	67.7
An expression of apology	31	25.8	28	9.9	6	2.1
Explanation	17	14.1	21	7.4	45	15.6
Repair	7	5.8	7	2.5		
Denial					6	2.1
Forbearance	4	3.3	1	0.3	19	6.6
Non apology	1	0.8	7	2.5	7	2.4
Opt out			5	1.7	6	2.1
Inappropriateresponses	4	3.3	6	2.1	4	1.4
Total	120	100	282	100	288	100

Table 2: Apology

Situation 2: **To be late in an office meeting, not responding to your boss'invitation or miss an appointment with your boss.**

Semantic formulas	Role-plays in English		DCQ in English		DCQ in Kirundi	
	Responses	%	Responses	%	Responses	%
An expression of apology / explanation/ repair or forbearance	31	51.6	109	75.7		
An expression of apology	8	13.3				
Explanation	15	25	29	20.1		
Repair						
Denial						
Forbearance	1	1.6				
Non apology			3	2.1		
Opt out	2	3.3	3	2.1		
Inappropriateresponses	3	5				
Total	60	100	144	100		

Under situation 2, the expression of regret plus explanation, repair or forbearance was found in the role plays with 51.6% and in the English questionnaire with 75.7% but there was no such response in Kirundi. The expression of apology was only found in the role plays with 13.3%. Explanation was only used in the role plays with 25% and English questionnaire 20.1%. Inappropriate responses were also noted in the role plays with 5%.

### Table 3: Situation 3: Forgetting to call a friend

In this situation, it was almost the same as in situation 2. The respondents used the expression of apology plus explanation, repair or forbearance with 73.9% in the English questionnaire and 47.5% in the role plays. There was no such response in Kirundi. The expression of apology was only found in the role plays with 37.5% and in the English questionnaire.

Semantic formulas	Role-plays in English		DCQ in English		DCQ in Kirundi	
	Responses	%	Responses	%	Responses	%
An expression of apology / explanation/ repair or forbearance	19	47.5	71	73.9		
An expression of apology	3	7.5	3	3.1		
Explanation	15	37.5	21	21.8		
Repair						
Denial						
Forbearance	1	1.6				
Non apology			1	1		
Inappropriateresponses	3	7.5				
Total	40	100	96	100		

#### 4.2 Use of requests by Burundian English majors

Table 4: Requests

##### Situation 1: Requests that are expected to cause much face-threat

Semantic formula	Role plays in English		DCQ English		DCQ Kirundi	
	Responses	%	Responses	%	Responses	%
Direct						
Imperative	7	5.8	13	4.5	22	15.3
Explicit Performative					20	13.8
Hedged Performative	9	7.5	17	5.9	31	21.5
Goal Statement	5	4				
Want Statement			8	2.7	10	6.9
Conventionally Indirect						
Query Preparatory	72	60	198	68.4	45	31.2
Non Conventionally Indirect						
Hint	21	17.5	38	13	14	9.7
Opt outs					2	1.38
Total	120	100	288	100	144	100

In this situation, the imperative was used mainly for the role plays and for Kirundi questionnaire with 10.8% and 15.2% respectively. The hedged performance response was found in Kirundi with 21.5%. The explicit performative was noted in Kirundi with 13.8%. Conventionally indirect was very highly used in role plays and English questionnaire 60% and 68.4% and Kirundi responses scored only 31.2%.

Table 5: Situation 2: Requests for which there is less face-threat



Semantic formula	Role plays in English		DCQ English		DCQ Kirundi	
	Responses	%	Responses	%	Responses	%
A. Direct						
Imperative	7	11.6	11	7.6	15	15.6
Explicit Performative						
Hedged Performative			3	2	9	9.3
Goal Statement						
Want Statement						
B. Conventionally Indirect						
Query preparatory	47	78.3	122	84.7	69	71.8
C. Non Conventionally Indirect						
Hint	3	5	3	1.3		
Inappropriate Responses			5	3.4	1	1
Opt outs			3	1.3	2	2.1
Total	60	100	144	100	96	100

In the situation 2, the conventionally indirect scored higher than in the situation 1, with 78.3% in the role plays, 84.7% in the English questionnaire and 71.8% in Kirundi. The imperative is relatively high in the role plays with 11.6% and in Kirundi with 15.6%. The hedged performative is also present in Kirundi with 9.3%.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. The acquisition of Apology by Burundian English majors

The analysis of our data indicates that the participants have acquired the semantic formulas used in the realization of the speech act of apology. This is proved by the high score in the use of the expression of apology+ explanation/ repair or excuse with 48 % in the role-plays, 73.2% in the English questionnaire that is considered as the most appropriate expression for apology in English.

However, after a deeper pragmatic analysis, it was noted that there are some problems in the learners' use of the politeness forms of apology in English. It is suggested that in order to accomplish an apologetic action, two or more semantic formulas be used. But in some situations that require that more than one semantic formula be used, only one semantic formula was used. There is for example, a high occurrence of single semantic formulas in situations that require different levels of politeness. From our data we have single semantic formula for apology whose occurrence is relatively high; an expression of regret with 18.4% and explanation with 13.2%. They are found in the following situations: A lady splashed water on an old man who was passing and she said: Oh, I am sorry.

As argued above, such a semantic formula alone is not enough to accomplish an apologetic action in such a situation. First, the addressee is old, which means that the speaker has to consider this age variable. Second, the infraction that the apologizer made is very serious, as a matter of fact, she has to use a politeness form that is appropriate in that context. Here we would not talk about transfer because even in Kirundi, the apologizer should have added an explanation for the politeness form to convey the expected illocutionary force. Different degrees of damage call for different politeness forms.

In the situation 1 where respondents were expected to use politeness forms that are likely to accomplish an apologetic action, we found that more than 40% used only one semantic formula. In addition, repair was used only at 5.8% which leads to believe that there was a bit of transfer from Kirundi politeness forms for apology where interactants consider that they are not able to compensate enough for a serious damage. For that they use the semantic formula *urambabarira* (suffer in my place) that they consider to express the same thing as an expression of apology.

This shows that the participants have not acquired how to use the politeness forms for apology that are appropriate in different contexts which can result in miscommunication by Burundian learners and bad interpretation by Non Kirundi speakers of English. As a consequence, there will be communication breakdown.

We also noted that there is a disparity in the percentages in the use of these semantic formulas in the role-plays and in the questionnaire. In the role-plays, there is a spontaneous use of the politeness forms while in the questionnaire, the participants have time to monitor and make use of the learned semantic formulas. This is explained by the fact that learners depend very much on their linguistic knowledge in the use of the politeness forms of English. This corroborates with Kecskes's (2014) observation that learners in foreign contexts hardly achieve cultural norms of a target language due to the fact that learners have usually had more access to pragmalinguistics than to sociopragmatics, especially if they have acquired the target language in the classroom.

It was found that learners have knowledge of the politeness forms of English for apology, but their use is problematic. The major problem that Burundian English majors face is to produce utterances that take into consideration context, language and culture at the same time. We are convinced that they were aware of all this, but since they did not have the pragmalinguistic sophistication required to combine all these elements adequately, they used roundabout utterances, which resulted in the use of non-targetlike politeness strategies. As a consequence, their communication in English would not be well understood by non-Kirundi speakers of English whose expectation of the use of politeness forms was not met properly. This can be illustrated by this example:

You bump into someone who is carrying glasses and as a consequence, the glasses get broken. The person reacts by saying: Look at what you have just done!

Response: Sorry. It is me who has broken your glasses.

In this response, the speaker is trying to express recognition of responsibility. But this utterance can be interpreted as if this person is denying responsibility because you cannot use it's me who has broken your glasses, when you caused the damage in the presence of the very person you are apologizing to. The addressee may think that the speaker wanted to say this Is it me who broke your glasses? which would be interpreted as denying responsibility.

## 5.2. The acquisition of Requests by Burundian English majors

Results indicated that the participants used mainly the conventionally indirect semantic formula in all the three situations provided in the test. The figures for this semantic formula that are in the table 4 prove it. It scored 66.1% in the role-plays, 73.8 % in the questionnaire. This use is in conformity with the English behavioral norms for requests realization. This is also supported by House and Kasper (1981) who observed that English speakers rely on indirectness in requests to indicate politeness.

However, in this study, it is noted that direct requests were used even in situations where the face threat is expected to be high. We have 17.4% in role-plays and 13% in DCQ in English. A good example that shows that learners depend on the grammatical knowledge to interpret utterances is: why can't we go out tonight? to which the following response was provided because it is getting dark and it is raining. From this response, it is clear that the participant failed to interpret this utterance both pragmalinguistically and sociopragmatically which resulted in pragmatic failure.

From this example, one can easily assume that foreign language learners are facing various problems in expressing politeness forms. One of the problems is that they tend to interpret utterances too literally by considering only the grammatical form and fail to consider that one sentence form can have different realisations in different contexts. Another equally crucial problem is that learners of a foreign language sometimes lack appropriate terms to use in some situations and prefer to use roundabout utterances which may result in a pragmatic failure.

An example that shows that learners know the politeness forms of English but that they fail to use them appropriately in different contexts is illustrated in the following utterance. A secretary is answering a call by the Minister, but her boss and his guest are talking aloud. The secretary asked them to speak in a low voice and said: Please, keep quiet.

Even though the secretary used the term please that is an illocutionary force indicating device for politeness, the direct semantic formula is inappropriate in this situation where a secretary is addressing her boss.

The secretary can be interpreted as being rude towards her boss while this is a lack of pragmatic competence. To tell one's boss to keep quiet is face-threatening because the secretary's utterance is imposing on her boss and guest because their freedom of action is being impeded on. As Blum- Kulka&Olshtain (1984) observed request is one of the most difficult speech acts for learners and it requires high levels of appropriateness and appreciable cultural and linguistic proficiency on the part of the learners.

## 6. Conclusion

The present study was about the examination of how Burundian English majors use the speech acts of apology and request. Results indicate that respondents have learned the politeness forms for the speech acts under study. However, it was noted that there are some politeness forms that are not typical of English native speakers that were used by the learners.

The way respondents handled politeness forms in the speech acts under study indicated that they did not know well enough the usage of English politeness forms and this may result in communication breakdown with non Kirundi speakers of English.

It should be noted that the findings from this study are a bit confusing because responses in Kirundi DCQ are almost similar to those of the English DCQ despite their differences in the Kirundi and English semantic structures. This may get explanation in that Kirundi semantic formula could have been influenced by the other learned languages like French whose requests are conventionally indirect. This however, needs further investigation to check whether this hypothesis can be verified.

It is hoped that English course curriculum developers will include on the programme the teaching of the pragmatic elements in order to increase the awareness of the importance of these elements for the multicultural competence acquisition.

## References

- Austin, J. 1962. *How to Do Things with Words*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Blum-Kulka, S. J. House & Kasper, G. (1989). *Crosscultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies*. Norwood, NJ. Ablex.
- Cohen, A.D&Olshtain, E, 1981. "Developing a Measure of Sociocultural Competence. The Case of Apology." *Learning Language* Vol 31, 1 pp. 119-125.
- Cohen, A.D and Olshtain, E. 1983. *Apology: A speech Act Set*. In N. Wolfson and E. Judd, *Sociolinguistics and Language Acquisition* (pp. 18-35). Cambridge, Newbury House Publishers.
- Ellis, R. 1985. *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Goffman, Erving, 1967. *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behaviour*. New York, DoubleDay Anchor.
- Horicubonye, I. 2005. *Aspects of Pragmatic Transfers from Kirundi into English by Burundian Advanced Learners: The Case of Politeness Forms*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation. Makerere University, Kampala.
- Kecskes, I. 2014. *Intercultural Pragmatics*. New York, Oxford University Press.
- Levinson, S. and Brown (1987). *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. New York, Cambridge University Press.
- Gu, Yueguo. (1990). "Politeness Phenomena in Modern Chinese." *Journal of Pragmatics* 14, pp. 237-257
- Nwoye, Onmigbo. (1992). "Linguistic Politeness and Sociocultural Variations of the Notions of Face". *Journal of Pragmatics* 18, pp. 309-328
- Plat, J et al. 1985. *Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics*, Longman, Essex.
- Searle, J. 1969. *Speech Acts. An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Shima, R et al, 2015. « The effect of explicit teaching of request strategies to EFL learners of English. » *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 199 (2015) 231 – 239.
- Widdowson, H.G. (1974). "Teaching the communicative use of English." *IRAL*, 12(1), 1-22.
- Wierzbicka, A. (1991). *Cross Cultural Pragmatics: The Semantics of Human Interaction*. New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Wilkins, D.A. 1979. *Communicative Competence in English Language Teaching*. New York, Oxford University Press.