

SUITABLE USE OF VIETNAMESE VOCATIVES AND REQUEST STRUCTURES: EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES AMONG STUDENT YOUTH LEADERS

Dong Thanh Hai*

Can Tho University

Received: 08/10/2019; Revised: 27/11/2019; Accepted: 25/12/2019

Abstract: The researcher, at his position as a lecturer and a secretary of the youth union, tries to investigate how the way people use words and structures influences the effectiveness of communication. In this case, he would like to know how using correct vocatives and imperative structures results in making requests to members of the youth union at his college, most of whom are students. The study was conducted in the contexts of regular meetings or meetings for some specific purposes mentored by the researcher, the youth union secretary of the college. Methods used were observing, interviewing and analyzing the data collected from the responses of participants. The results showed the suitable use of vocatives and imperatives positively affected the communication purposes in terms of the efficiency of the activities needed to be done, the participants' willingness and their motivation in conducting the activities.

Key words: Vocatives, requests, imperative structures

1. Introduction

In Vietnamese culture, the use of vocative cases and imperative structures is inseparable parts in communication. However, the question is how to use them effectively? It is quite hard even to Vietnamese native speakers because Vietnamese vocatives are very complicated. According to Nguyen Thi Diem Phuong (2011), there are more vocatives in Vietnamese than in any other languages in the world. Moreover, the use of vocatives and imperative greatly depends on the relationship between the speaker and the hearer; the purpose, the situation of the conversation; or the background of the speakers. In her study, Nguyen Thi Diem Phuong (2011) also stated that Vietnamese people have a copious spoken language, especially the vocatives that they often use. It always makes learners of Vietnamese confused for the vocatives do not only have the language functions but also the cultural ones.

Instead of the pronouns such as “I, we, they, he, she, you” which are used in English, Vietnamese tend to use various pronouns like “tôi, tớ, tao, chúng tôi, chúng tớ, bọn họ, bọn chúng, anh ta, nó, hắn, mày, bọn mày, etc”.

The vocatives in Vietnamese language are also based on the age, the class, the job positions, etc. When people want to address the elderly or the ones who have higher status in the society, nouns are used instead. For example, chú, bác, cô, dì, ông, bà, etc. are used for addressees who are older or in a higher position. Thanks to Vietnamese cultures, positions must be clearly recognized, and it has been proved by history.

Requests, in addition to the vocatives, in my opinion, may contribute to the success of communication in which the speaker wants the addressees to do something for him or for the organization. When the speaker makes a request, he expects the addressee's expenditure of time, energy or material resource. In other words,

* Email: dthai@ctu.edu.vn

requests impose the speaker's interest on the addressee. And requests may occur in two types, direct and indirect ones. There are, in fact, a lot of layers of meanings which send different messages under what is uttered, so it is hard to realize which intention is wanted by the speakers. Similarly, requests are complicated speech acts involving many different elements. Blum-Kulka (1991) showed that requests are the ones including requesting goals, linguistic encoding, situational parameters and the social meanings of the requests according to cultural and situational factors.

Vocatives and requests are diverse and complicated, especially in the Vietnamese language. They are both challenging for the people, even Vietnamese native speakers, to use them correctly and effectively due to many factors in which the environment and situation play an important role. This means that using appropriate vocatives to appropriate addressees and giving the right request to the hearer in the right situation contribute enormously to the goal of communication.

2. Literature review

Vocatives and imperative structures are always the necessary factors contributing to the success of the communication. They have their own roles in certain contexts to certain speakers and hearers, and they also receive so much attention from researchers and are identified in many ways.

Vocatives are addressee-oriented linguistic units that are used in different speech acts such as greetings, calls, commands, or requests (Parrott, 2010; Poynton, 1990). Their main discourse functions are to identify participants' roles and characterize the speaker in relation to the addressees, as they are especially relevant as markers of power and solidarity (Ahmed, 2007; Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Vocatives are also defined as "noun phrases that refer to the addressee, but are not syntactically or semantically incorporated as the arguments of a predicate" by Levinson (1983). And they generally have three functions: "(1) helping to get attention, (2) helping to identify people as a speaker or an addressee, and (3) help to maintain and enhance social relationships", Biber et al. (1999). According to Zwicky (1974), vocatives also express attitude, politeness, formality, status, intimacy, or a role relationship, and most of them mark the speaker, which show the relationship between the speaker and the addressee. Others have observed how vocatives are used as markers of power and solidarity. There were other researchers who observed that vocatives are also used as the marker of power and solidarity like Hook (1984); or as pseudo-intimacy like McCarthy & O'Keeffe (2001), as equality (Troemel-Ploetz, 1994), as initiators of the conversation and cues for changing topic contextually (Ostermann, 2000); and as an action that redresses for some face-threatening acts (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Ostermann, 2000). Vocatives, therefore, help us to identify the roles of participants, to modulate the politeness, and to set positions within the discourse.

Vietnamese vocatives are the words used to call and address each other in communication. According to Diep Quang Ban and Hoang Van Thung (2002), Vietnamese vocatives are words which are used to replace and represent the participants in a communication process.

Vocatives, especially Vietnamese ones, are quite various. It can be said that Vietnamese vocatives are actually more numerous than those of many other languages in the world. In fact, in real communication, people tend to use different vocatives in different situations depending on their purposes and the addressees of the communication. Most Vietnamese people live in the countryside and they live mostly on agricultural cultivation. This living environment has brought them closer together; therefore, the ways they call themselves and call the others have been also seriously affected in that way. They tend to call each other as if they are members of a family. They may use so many words to address the same person according to

their social positions, gender, ages, etc. They may call “cô (aunt), chú (uncle), anh (brother), chị (sister), etc”, which are dependent on their ages and their genders, right at the first time they meet. It occurs similarly at the university setting where there are various kinds of relationships.

Nguyen Thien Giap (2000) gave a definition of imperative in his book “Dùng học Việt ngữ” as an act which speaker uses to make addressees do something. Imperatives have some functions as (1) telling the addressees what to do, (2) giving them instructions and advice, (3) giving suggestions and making recommendations, and (4) making offers, and they can be expressed in a sentence. According to the previous research by Alisjahbana (1978), Ramlan (2001), Rahardi (2005), and Alwi et al. (2003), the imperatives can be realized if they are expressed based on formal construction structures. Yet in daily discourse, imperatives are expressed both by formal imperative structures and by other structures in context.

Requests in Vietnamese have been rarely discussed in pragmatics literature. Among a few research studies in Vietnam, Vu Thi Thanh Huong (1997, 1999) has shown an insight into requests in Vietnamese. Her studies were requests made by a group of Vietnamese native speakers in social communication contexts. And the results showed that Vietnamese speakers prefer requests made with high level of directness with supportive elements to show the politeness rather than the ones made in an indirect way to express politeness. Indirectness is considered as a politeness device; however, it is not appreciated as highly as the mitigated direct requests.

Although there has been a growing interest in doing research in requests and politeness in the last few decades, most of earlier studies have focused on a limited range of languages, most of which are European ones, and only a small number of studies investigated Asian languages, especially in Vietnamese. It is, therefore, necessary to do more research in order to know how requests are expressed across languages, and to what extent strategies for making requests occurs in communication in different languages. Our study sets out to investigate the strategies for making requests and using Vietnamese vocatives in a specific context of the university where the communication was among a group of Vietnamese native speakers who have special social relationships.

In the discussion below we will see how Vietnamese vocatives and imperative structures are preferred to use for an effective communication in certain circumstances with specific attendants.

3. Objectives

This study aims to discover whether the language we use very regularly is effective or not, and to find out the most effective way in using vocatives and requests in teachers' daily communication with students, especially with the ones who are also in other positions as members of a political system like Youth leaders of the school youth union. The findings are expected to be applied to the author's current job as a faculty youth union secretary in order to improve his communication strategies for the sake of professional effectiveness.

4. Methods

With the research objectives above, the study was done under the writer's real experience and by observing during a long period, with the participation of all members of faculty youth union executive board.

It is a preliminary research on the communication among members of the youth union at the regular meetings of the organization and focuses on the ways Vietnamese vocatives and structures of requests are used.

The data were collected in two ways: questionnaire and open interview questions, which were mainly about addressees' preference and satisfaction in the ways Vietnamese vocatives are used in their communication in the formal meeting context, and their appreciation in the requests being used as well. The interview and the questionnaire were delivered to the participants, who are all student youth leaders; and accessed during the research, to collect their responses.

The data were analyzed statistically, quantitatively and qualitatively and then the discussion was made based on the theory reviewed.

5. Findings and discussion

In the environment of the university, there are relationships among colleagues, among students, and between teachers and students. The vocatives used, therefore, are much fewer than in the society. *Thầy/cô - các trò, thầy/cô - các em, tôi - các bạn/các em, tôi - các anh, chị, etc.* are used as the most common vocatives to address the hearers.

Our observation was on specific cases with other kinds of relationship: the relationships among students and between teachers and students. However, it was in a different position - between the youth leaders (maybe, teachers or students), another way to name interpersonally is *đồng chí* ('comrade'). The context of our study was the regular meetings aimed to discuss the coming activities to be held and to inform the important policies or plans of the organization, in which the researcher is the secretary - the top leader of youth union of the faculty. In these meetings, many tasks were assigned to all members of the executive committee, and so, many requests, or even commands were made to get the job, the activities done effectively.

After some meetings passed, I got all 15 together and a warm and friendly interview was made as if it was a reunion to share what they have thought and how they have felt about the communication strategies used. All of their sharing and opinions were carefully recorded, taken notes and analyzed to go to the findings.

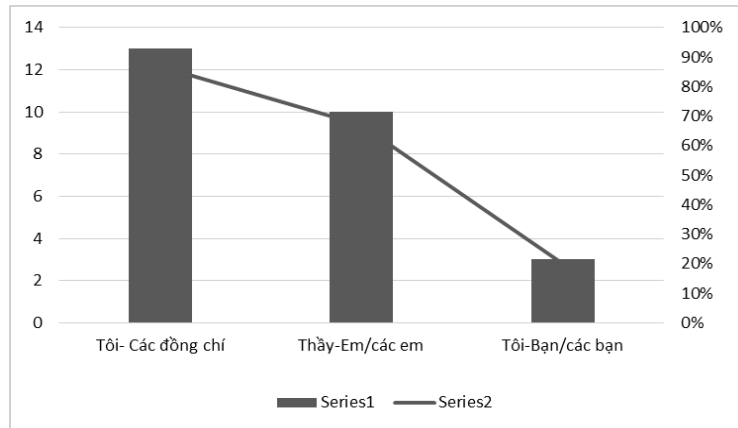


Figure 1. Vocatives used broadly accepted

The findings showed that 13 out of 15 (87%) agreed that the teacher should call them *đồng chí* ('comrade') at such meetings of the organization. However, also 10 out of 15 (67%) agreed that "*thầy - các em*" is also acceptable in case the youth union secretary talks to other members because our organization is also in the university where teacher-student is the core relationship. Also, they believed that when they, student youth leaders, discuss together, *đồng chí* ('comrade') should be used. A few members (3 out of 15- 20%) preferred to use "*tôi - bạn/các bạn*" in the communication with other student leaders, but "*thầy - em, các em*" when talking with the secretary.

It is certain that the majority of the youth leaders are good and active students, and they understand that they are taking part in the political organization. They, therefore, consider that the title they use to call each other at formal meetings must be official and formal, therefore "*đồng chí*" is more preferable. Nguyen Thi Diem Phuong (2011) agreed that the vocatives we use in communication also show whether we respect or are respected by the others or not.

"...I totally agree that we ought to use '*đồng chí*' as a vocative to name at official meetings. Thanks to that, we will be aware that it is a formal case. And more, when being called "*đồng chí*" we think that we are respected and highly appreciated. This will strengthen our motivation at work..." (Minh Khoi (C41)).

Also, some respondents believed that when we call them a serious title like "*đồng chí*", it shows that we recognize their position in the group and in student community. In fact, youth union is a political organization, so "*comrade*" is normally and popularly used.

"...when we are called "*đồng chí*", we know that our roles are recognized, and that is what we need beside the experience. To tell the truth that we are really happy when other people know what we have done and recognize them. We do not do things just for ourselves but the whole student community..." (Thanh Danh & Thanh Thao (C42)).

While most of the respondents agreed that the way we call them in the organization show that we respect them and position them rightly, and they also believed that it is a way to show our recognition toward their contribution; others- also including some in the previous group- think the neutral way. According to these interviewees, they need to be respected, recognized. However, they also thought that the relationship between teacher and students should be paid more attention, so they supposed "*thầy - em, các em*" should be a considerable way, too.

“... I really want to be called ‘comrade’ to show that I am appreciated as a companion. However, I also think that in addition to the relationship in the organization, we also have the relationships between teacher and students, and friendship among us, the students. Therefore, ‘đồng chí, thầy, bạn, các bạn’ are all accepted to me....” (Thuy Linh (C40)).

Vocatives are a crucial part of language in communication. They play an important role in showing the politeness, the respects, and recognitions to the hearers. Using the correct vocatives in making requests, which aims to require the addressees to do something for the speaker or for the public purposes, is also an important factor contributing to the goal of communication.

In Vietnamese, people make requests in two ways, direct and indirect; and in three types, interrogative, imperative and declarative, among which interrogative is used most often.

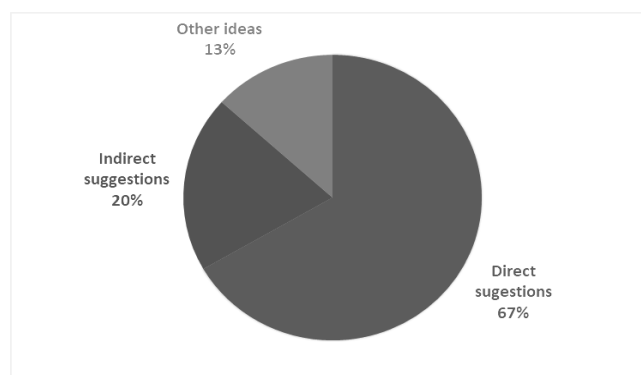


Figure 2. Addressees' preferences in direct requests used

Most student youth leaders (10/15 - 67%) are actually into the direct requests with the clear explanation instead of the indirectness. They think that when the direct request is made, they can get the points and certainly do/follow it in the right way. They also argue that saying something indirectly sometimes makes them confused although “indirectness is often associated with politeness” (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Responses also showed that they agreed with the indirectness in their communication because they needed to be politely treated, but they did not think it is a good way to make request at the meetings with the aims to give commands and assign tasks. On the other hand, a few respondents did still think that the indirect use of requests or suggestions seemed to be softer to their ears and they did not feel some ways to be hurt. Neither did they think that indirectness is the effective way in giving something like a command or a request. This group of respondents also said that indirectness should be used in communication between lower-to-higher speakers for it could better show their respects to the older.

Among the direct requests, the majority of respondents believed that interrogative should be used in making an effective request. “*Danh, em hoàn thành kế hoạch hoạt động này vào thứ Sáu được không?/Danh, could you finish the plan for this activity by Friday, please?*” seems to be more effective than “*Danh, em nên hoàn thành kế hoạch hoạt động vào thứ Sáu./Danh, you should finish the plan for the activity by Friday.*” While the previous sentence seemed to be softer and mitigated, and it also gave the hearer a choice; the later one gave no choice to the addressee. Therefore, the clear preference is for the first one.

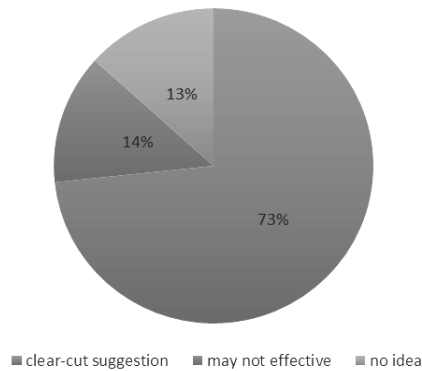


Figure 3. Addressees' ideas on using imperatives as clear-cut suggestions

Even an imperative like “*Làm xong bản kế hoạch này ngay trong tuần này nhé! / Finish this plan within this week, please!*” can be also widely accepted in this case. Most of respondents (73%) agreed that imperative can bring certain benefits, too. It may be clear-cut instructions, especially to the new students, in guiding them what to do and how to do what are expected to be finished while there are still some considerations on whether this kind of suggestion may bring the effectiveness for the communication or not. In fact, the participants of the recent study showed that they strongly preferred the directness, especially, imperatives when making requests (Byon 2006; Hassall, 1999; Lee-Wong, 1994; Matsumoto, 1988; Ogiermann, 2009; Upadhyay, 2003; Vu Thi Thanh Huong, 1997, 1999; Wierzbicka 1985). This study showed a similar result from Vu Thi Thanh Huong (1997, 1999), in which he suggested that imperatives are not necessarily in relation to impoliteness in Vietnamese language. When asked, in fact, 76.7% of the Vietnamese participants in Vu Thi Thanh Huong’s (1997, 1999) studies did not believe that barely mitigated imperatives are inappropriate, while 64% considered mitigated ‘imperatives’ to be polite.

“...Although I sometimes feel serious about the imperatives, they are more like commands not requests, I still prefer them to the indirect statements. That is because I can find it is easy to understand and follow the request. I do not think they are in relation with impoliteness....” (Thao (C42) & Thu (C44))

Beside the requests used, the intonation, the body language and speaker’s face also contribute to the effectiveness of the conversation, and the hearers’ preference. The speaker’s accent also represents the respect to the hearers, and it may hurt them if the one who gives request talk as if he shouts at them with the serious face. In general, no one denies the contribution of the request structures, but the way the speaker makes requests is not less important.

“...I do not have any ideas about what you requested us, they are okay to me; however, I was sometimes scared because of your frightening accent. When I was frightened, I could not remember even a word you said...” (Toan, a freshman).

Overall, based on the above findings and discussion, it is apparent that in order to make an effective request to hearers, student youth leaders in this case; suitable vocatives and request structures play an important role. The aims of the conversation may fail if a lack of attention is paid to these elements.

6. Conclusion and application

The study showed that the suitable use of vocatives in the right situation can bring the satisfying results for the conversation because they may help the respondents/addressees feel that they are respected. The hearers also feel that their positions and roles are correctly recognized.

In addition to vocatives, the ways we make requests also have positive or negative effects to the success of the communication. Thanks to the study, we found that using direct requests and imperatives may bring positive results for the hearers who have lower position than the speaker. This finding is equivalent to Vu Thi Thanh Huong (1997, 1999) that direct requests were used more often in the equal power or in higher-to-lower relationships, whereas in lower-to-higher power scenarios, indirect requests were required.

The study was conducted in a rather small scale, so it could not be representative of Vietnamese people or the Vietnamese language. However, in some ways, it may run well in the similar situations in which the teacher may apply to communicate with his students who are doing some jobs in a political organization like the youth union at schools and universities.

Thanks to the findings, at the formal situations in which people have equal power relationship (we did not count for the age of the speaker and the hearers), the vocatives like *‘đồng chí, các bạn, các anh chị’* are preferable. Therefore, the speaker should make sure that everyone is equally respected to achieve the goals of communication.

The findings also suggested that in the equal power relationships or in higher-to-lower power conversations, the speakers may use direct requests more often to successfully reach the goals of communication. Whereas, if the speakers are at the lower power position in the communication, indirect requests should be considered more frequently to avoid negative effects that may lead to failed communication. Besides, we should also pay attention to our face expressions, intonations and gestures while giving requests so that we can avoid hurting the addressee's feelings.

The writer, with the hope to reduce the limitation of small population, expects to do some further research which can attract more participants involved in some various environments like in the companies or in the state organizations, so that it can represent as communication strategies and help equip students the skills required in working environment.

References

- Ahmed, M.B. (2007). Vocatives: A syntactic and pragmatic analysis. *Tikrit University Journal for Humanities*, 14(10), 588-602.
- Alisjahbana, S.T. (1978). The concept of language standardization and its application to the Indonesian language. In A.Q. Perez, A.O. Santiago & Nguyen Dang Liem (Eds.), *Papers from the Conference on the Standardisation of Asian Languages, Manila 1974* (pp. 19-41). Canberra: Pacific Linguistic.
- Alwi, et al. (2003). *Indonesian standard grammar*. Akarta: Balai Pustaka.
- Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S., & Finegan, E. (1999). *Longman grammar of spoken and written English*. London: Longman.
- Blum-Kulka, S. (1991). Interlanguage pragmatics: The case of requests. In R. Phillipson, E. Kellerman, L. Selinker, M. Sharwood Smith & M. Swain (Eds.), *Foreign/Second language pedagogy* (pp. 255-272). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Byon, A.S. (2006). The role of linguistic indirectness and honorifics in achieving linguistic politeness in Korean requests. *Journal of Politeness Research*, 2, 247-276.
- Diep Quang Ban & Hoang Van Thung (2002). *Ngữ pháp tiếng Việt* (Tập 1). Nxb Giáo dục.
- Hassall, T. (1999). Request strategies in Indonesian. *Pragmatics*, 9(4), 585-606.
- Hook, D.D. (1984). First names and titles as solidarity and power semantics in English. *IRAL: International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 22(3), 183-189.

- Lee-Wong, S.M. (1994). Imperatives in requests: Direct or impolite - Observations from Chinese. *Pragmatics*, 4(4), 491-515.
- Levinson, S.C. (1983). *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Matsumoto, Y. (1988). Reexamination of the universality of face. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 12, 403- 426.
- McCarthy, M.J., & O'Keeffe, A.O. (2001). What's in a name? Vocatives in casual conversations and radio phone-in calls. *Paper presented at The Third North American Symposium on Corpus Linguistics and Language Teaching* (pp. 153-185). Boston.
- Nguyen Thi Diem Phuong (2011). Văn hóa xưng hô của người Việt. *Kỷ yếu Hội thảo nghiên cứu và giảng dạy Việt Nam học và Tiếng Việt* (pp. 386-394). Hà Nội: NXB Khoa học Xã hội.
- Nguyễn Thiện Giáp (2000). *Dùng học Việt ngữ*. Nxb Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội.
- Ogiermann, E. (2009). Politeness and in-directness across cultures: A comparison of English, German, Polish and Russian requests. *Journal of Politeness Research*, 5(2), 189-216.
- Ostermann, A.C. (2000). *Reifying and defying sisterhood in discourse: Communities of practice at work at an all-female police station and a feminist crisis intervention center in Brazil*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation. The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor MI.
- Rahardi, K. (2005). *Pragmatics: Politeness of Indonesian language imperatives*. Jakarta: Erlangga.
- Troemel-Ploetz, S. (1994). Let me put it this way, John: Conversational strategies of women in leadership positions. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 22(2), 199-209.
- Upadhyay, S. (2003). Nepali requestive acts: Linguistic indirectness and politeness reconsidered. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 35, 1651-1677.
- Vu Thi Thanh Huong (1997). *Politeness in modern Vietnamese. A sociolinguistic study of a Hanoi speech community*. Unpublished Doctoral Thesis. Toronto: University of Toronto.
- Vu Thi Thanh Huong (1999). Gián tiếp và lịch sự trong lời cầu khẩn tiếng Việt. *Tạp chí Ngôn ngữ*, 1, 34-43.
- Wierzbicka, A. (1985). Different cultures, different languages, different speech acts. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 9, 145-178.
- Zwicky, A.M. (1974). Hey, what's your name?. In M.W. LaGaly, R.A. Fox & A. Bruck (Eds), *Papers from The Tenth Regional Meeting, Chicago Linguistic Society* (pp. 787-801). Chicago: Chicago Linguistic Society.

CÁCH GIAO TIẾP HIỆU QUẢ VỚI LỜI XUNG HÔ, ĐỀ NGHỊ, YÊU CẦU HỢP LÝ

Tóm tắt: Tác giả thực hiện nghiên cứu nhằm tìm hiểu tính hiệu quả của việc sử dụng cách xưng hô và lời đề nghị phù hợp trong giao tiếp giữa cán bộ đoàn là sinh viên. Đề tài được thực hiện trong bối cảnh của các cuộc họp hàng tuần, hàng tháng và các cuộc họp triển khai các hoạt động, phong trào thanh niên tại Khoa Ngoại ngữ, Trường Đại học Cần Thơ. Các cuộc khảo sát lấy ý kiến về sự hài lòng và sự ưa thích của cán bộ đoàn sinh viên về cách xưng hô phù hợp tại các cuộc họp, và thái độ của họ đối với các yêu cầu, đề nghị của bí thư Đoàn của Khoa trong việc phân công thực hiện các hoạt động phong trào tại đơn vị. Kết quả khảo sát cho thấy việc sử dụng phù hợp cách xưng hô và câu mệnh lệnh/đề nghị sẽ mang lại hiệu quả giao tiếp tích cực trong các tình huống trên.

Từ khoá: Xưng hô, lời đề nghị, cán bộ đoàn