

# Request Strategies Used by English Language Learners: Student-Professor Email Communication

**Padam Chauhan**

Adjunct Faculty

Minnesota State University, Mankato

[padam.chauhan.2@mnsu.edu](mailto:padam.chauhan.2@mnsu.edu)

## Abstract

*Recently, email communication between students and professors in the U.S. higher educational institutions where English is the medium of instruction has become increasingly popular. However, ESL students in these educational institutions encounter numerous challenges to write email to their professors because of their unfamiliarity with email etiquette in English, inadequate English language proficiency, and lack of understanding of socio-cultural norms and values. Also, writing emails to professors requires higher pragmatic competence and critical language awareness of how email correspondence takes place in academic setting. Email requests written by ESL students are often seen as inappropriate or informal by their professors, resulting in pragmatic failure and being rejected. To this end, the main purpose of this literature review paper is to explore the request strategies used by ESL students to write email to their professors. Finally, the author concludes the paper by pointing some pedagogical implications to the educators who work with ESL learners at the universities and colleges where English is the medium of instruction.*

## Introduction

Language is a primary means of communication among human beings. In support of this argument, LoCastro (2012) argued, “human beings are inherently social beings, and language is arguably the primary means through which they act in the world of communication with others and are acted upon by others” (p. 37). To communicate with others appropriately, the knowledge of cultures, norms, and values, especially English as second language (ESL) learners, is essential because each language functions differently in relation to society. Additionally, the pragmatic

knowledge is equally important because it informs the language users about language use from the point of view of the users, “especially choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication” (Crystal, 2007, p. 301). Crystal (2008) added, “pragmatics studies the factors that govern our choices of language in social interaction and the effects of those choices on others” (p. 379). For ESL learners, learning a new language is by no means simply the learning of a list of words or grammar rules. Rather, it means more, for instance, learning of speech acts or communicative functions such as making a request, asking for permission, asking for clarification, apologizing, and their exponents, their usage based on politeness, the knowledge of the context where communication takes place, and the social relationship the speaker has with their interlocutors. So, in order to be communicatively competent, the L2 learners should have the knowledge of sociocultural norms of the language being learned.

Past research studies conducted on intercultural and interlanguage pragmatics have consistently shown learning to comprehend and produce speech acts can be a challenge for language learners, even for those with comparatively advanced linguistic competence (Nguyen, 2008, 2013). Due to cross-cultural differences in L2 learners’ first language (L1) and second language (L2) constantly caused miscommunication and social and cultural issues (Akikawa & Ishihara, 2010; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006, 2007; Chen, 2001, 2006, 2016; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011; Hendriks, 2010). For L2 learners, these challenges may even be a bigger problem compared with L1 learners because of their limited English language skills, lack of sociolinguistic and pragmatic knowledge, and limited understanding of how discourse shapes and reflects power relations in the target culture (Chen, 2006, 2016).

In recent years, electronic communication, particularly email correspondence between students and professors in educational contexts, has become increasingly popular. Nguyen et al. (2015) argued “[a]s email requests from students and professors have become increasingly common in academic settings, research has shown that second language (L2) students' unfamiliarity with email etiquette in their L2 has adversely affected their communication with their professors” (p. 169). Since email correspondence uses speech acts in a written medium, it is perceived as a hybrid between spoken and written forms of language that may require many stylistic differences (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006; Harvey, 2013, Nguyen et al., 2015). Email requests written by L2 students are often seen by their instructors as inappropriate or casual resulting in pragmatic failure and being rejected (Akikawa & Ishihara, 2010; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006, 2007; Chen, 2001, 2006; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011; Hendriks, 2010, Nguyen et al., 2015). Therefore, the main purpose of this literature review paper is to explore the strategies used by ESL learners to write email to their professors. Finally, the author concludes the paper by pointing some pedagogical implications to the educators who work with ESL learners at the universities and colleges where English is the medium of instruction.

### **Literature Review**

In recent years, email communication has become important between students and professors in educational contexts where English is the medium of communication. Although this form of electronic communication is common between these two groups, it has resulted difficulty for many L2 learners, particularly when they write email requests to their professors because “writing emails to authority figures [professors] requires higher pragmatic competence and critical language awareness of how discourse shapes and reflects power asymmetry in an institutional context” (Chen, 2006, p. 35). With inadequate language proficiency and

understanding of the socio-cultural norms and values of the target language, L2 learners face many challenges in writing emails to their professors.

### **L1 and L2 Learners' Request Forms/Devices**

Past studies have revealed L1 and L2 learners employ different kinds of devices and markers in making requests in different contexts. Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996) investigated emails written by native and non-native speakers of English and asked how they were evaluated by faculty members. The study, while dated, showed non-native speakers' emails did not employ mitigation strategies/devices, emphasized students' own needs, and lacked status-congruent language. Al Masaeed (2017) researched the style in which U.S. university students learning Arabic as a foreign language (FL) in the U.S. demonstrated the capability to make and modify requests using internally "mitigating or aggravating modality markers" such as will, could, can, might, and externally, by "supportive moves" such as giving reasons and emphasizing urgency before or after the main request in formal and informal situations. Data were gathered from discourse completion tasks (DCTs) administered to 56 students divided into four separate proficiency levels. Unlike previous studies' findings, the study found lower-proficiency students most frequently used grounders (i.e., the reasons, explanations, and justifications before and after request forms). Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1986), Kasper and Blum-Kulka (1993), and Ellis (1992) concluded requests were one of the first productive illocutionary acts accomplished by learners. These request skills are acquired because of their communicative necessity. Furthermore, they noticed L2 learners were found to be wordy, while native speakers were found to be concise in their communication. Chen (2006) carried out a 30-month longitudinal case study to investigate how a Taiwanese graduate student learning English as a second language developed her email writing skills at a U.S. university. Employing a critical

discourse approach, the study indicated she regularly faced difficulties using appropriate language and maintaining politeness in her email communication to professors and fulfilling her communicative needs. Furthermore, her improvement in email literacy can be observed, particularly in terms of comprehending email correspondence, increasing knowledge of student-instructor communication, and understanding of socio-cultural values, norms, and respectfulness.

### **Factors Affecting L2 Learners' Pragmatic Features**

Research studies found various factors affect the learning of L2 learners' pragmatic features, including gender, L1 background, social and cultural setting, individual differences, linguistic competence, age, and length of time in the formal study of English. For instance, Thomas-Tate et al. (2017) argued gender bias in cyber communication in educational institutions had been considerably increased, as shown in print media. In an experimental study constructed to investigate language use in different situations, the subjects were requested to write an email to a faculty member whose gender had been experimentally operated. The study found female students demonstrated lower politeness, higher directness, and lower formality when writing an email to female faculty members than to male faculty members to moderate or intensify their email requests. Similarly, Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) investigated email requests sent by students who are non-native speakers of English (NNSs) over different semesters of study at Greek Cypriot University, Cyprus. The study looked at salutations, the level of straightforwardness used, and the level and types of supportive moves and lexical/phrasal modifiers employed by the students. The study found non-native speakers' emails are represented "by significant directness, an omission of lexical/phrasal down graders, the omission of greetings, and inappropriate and unacceptable forms of address" (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011, p. 3193) from the perspective of native speakers of English. Likewise, Aydin and Koch

(2012) conducted a cross-sectional mix-method study to investigate requests and apologies of Romanian English language learners with the purpose of informing ESL and EFL teachers about their enduring instructional pedagogy. Using Modified Cartoon Oral Production Tools (MCOPT), which comprised 16 cartoon drawings portraying settings in which two characters take part in communication, the data were collected from 80 students, including males and females. The participants were chosen from first to seventh grade from the International School of Cluj-Napoca, Romania (ISC), Romania. The study revealed the sophistication of speech acts increases with age more than with the length of study. In other words, the study did not find a positive correlation with the duration of formal English teaching.

### **Efficacy of Explicit Classroom on ESL and EFL Students' Pragmatic Knowledge**

#### **Development**

Previous studies conducted in the field of pragmatics have shown explicit classroom instruction helps ESL and EFL learners to better develop their pragmatic knowledge. To illustrate, Saadatmandi et al. (2018) investigated the influences of teaching English pragmatic features on 50 Iranian high school girls' use of request speech acts. These students with the same English language proficiency level were allocated to treatment and control groups. The data for the study were gathered by administering pre-test and post-test that comprised the multiple-choice discourse completion tests (MDCTs). The control group received conventional instruction, while the treatment group received distinct instruction focusing on request speech acts as an intervention. The statistical analysis of the findings of the inquiry discovered explicit instruction of pragmatic features had a positive impact on the students' performance on request speech acts. The study also revealed that "indirect request speech acts were more widely used than direct request speech acts as the sign of social and cultural politeness" (Saadatmandi et al.,

2018, p. 829). Likewise, Rose (2005) conducted a literature review study on the effects of instruction in second language pragmatics, L2 students' features, and learning situations characterized in the studies. The study found three essential concerns captured in the literature: "the teachability of pragmatics, the relative benefits of instruction versus exposure, and whether different approaches to instruction yield different results" (p. 385). Alcón-Soler (2017) conducted a replication study on the teenage study-abroad students and examined the impact of pragmatic instruction and the pragmatic development trajectories of the students when they move from teaching context to in real email communication. Email requests written by 60 Spanish teenagers were analyzed to examine the impacts of instruction regarding the uses of indirect request strategies and internal modifiers. In addition, pragmatic developmental paths of two students, one with a high producer and the other the low producer of request modifiers, were analyzed qualitatively at four distinct times during the study-abroad experience. The results showed that there were positive effects of teaching on students' use of indirect request strategies and request modifiers. The study concluded two different pragmatic developmental paths were found in two students' email requests.

### **Effectiveness of Explicit Classroom on ESL and EFL Students' Email Communication Skills Development**

Recent studies have shown ESL learners' email communication skills with their professors improved through explicit instruction in ESL and EFL classrooms. Chen (2015b) carried out an experimental study to investigate the efficacy of instructing email requests to professors in a class of 28 intermediate-level Chinese students learning English as a foreign language. Following the genre-based instruction by Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), the six-hour tutoring was designed in the sequence of setting the context, modeling, collaborative

production, and self-directed production. Two hundred twenty-four emails written by the participants during pre-test and post-test instruction were statistically analyzed by running paired t-test and qualitatively by move analysis. The quantitative analysis revealed students made overall improvement after the explicit teaching. Conversely, the qualitative analysis showed the students made greater progress in “framing moves (i.e., subject, greeting, and closing) than in content moves (i.e., request strategies and request support)” (Chen, 2015b, p. 131).

In a mixed-methods study, Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) examined email requests written by native and non-native English-speaking graduate students to a professor for several semesters at the main U.S. university. The data were statistically analyzed employing Blum-Kulka et al.’s (1989) framework to differentiate levels of directness (i.e., pragmatic clarity); and qualitatively to compare syntactic and lexical politeness devices, the request perspectives, and the specific linguistic request realization patterns chosen by native and non-native speakers. The results indicated most of the email requests were written using direct strategies and hints rather than traditional indirect strategies (e.g., “I was wondering if you could give me some money”). The study revealed politeness convention in email correspondence seems to improve, and native speakers of English composed more polite emails to their professors than non-native speakers of English.

Chen (2015a) investigated the cognitive processes of L2 learners involved in an email writing task comprising two requests to the professor. Concomitant and reflective verbal reports were gathered from 15 pairs of intermediate level Chinese EFL students and were analyzed based on intention, cognition, planning, and evaluation. The analysis revealed the students employed different politeness strategies to express their request intentions and emphasized their consideration of a lexical, grammatical, and situational feature of the task. The students



planned their emails analytically in the order of salutation, content, and conclusion and also assessed their presentations based on the degree of politeness and expressiveness of their reasoning.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

Email communication between ESL students and professors in higher educational settings has become increasingly popular. Email has become the primary means of communication in the academic setting, especially during COVID-19 global pandemic due to which the students and teachers cannot meet in person. Nguyen et al. (2015) concluded that email communication, particularly between ESL students and professors, has been common in academic institutions where English is the medium of instruction. However, ESL students encounter many challenges to write etiquette email to their professors. As a result, their communication breaks down. Furthermore, professors also consider ESL students' email improper and impolite because ESL students do not have adequate knowledge of pragmatic markers, socio-cultural values, and norms related to English language (Akikawa & Ishihara, 2010; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006, 2007; Chen, 2001, 2006; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011; Hendriks, 2010, Nguyen et al., 2015). Therefore, the main pedagogical implication of this study is to plan explicit email instruction in the ESL classroom in U.S. university contexts. It is very crucial to do so because research has demonstrated explicit pragmatic instruction improves the pragmatic development of L2 learners (Alcon-Solar, 2015, 2017). In doing so, the students in basic composition courses at a U.S. university context learn the very important skill of writing etiquette email requests to their professors that ultimately improves the student-professor communication and the ESL students' overall learning achievement.

### References

- Akikawa, K., & Ishihara, N. (2010). 'Please write a recommendation letter': Teaching to write email requests to faculty. In D. Tatsuki, & N. Houck (Eds.), *Pragmatics: Teaching speech acts* (pp. 47-66). Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.
- Alcón-Soler, E. (2015). Pragmatic learning and study abroad: Effects of instruction and length of study. *System* 48, 62-74.
- Alcón-Soler, E. (2017). Pragmatic development during study abroad: An analysis of Spanish teenagers' request strategies in English emails. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 37, 77-92. doi:10.1017/S0267190517000125
- Al Masaeed, K. (2017). Interlanguage pragmatic development: Internal and external modification in L2 Arabic requests. *Foreign Language Annals*, 50(4), 808-820. doi:10.1111/flan.12293
- Aydin, H., & Koch, C. (2012). Romanian second language learners of English requests and apologies. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 2(2), 233-239.
- Biesenbach-Lucas, S. (2006). Making requests in e-mail: Do cyber-consultations entail directness? Toward conventions in a new medium. In K. Bardovi-Harlig, J.C. Felix-Brasdefer, & A. Omar (Eds.), *Pragmatics and language learning* (pp. 81-107). National Foreign Language Resource Center, University of Hawaii Press.
- Biesenbach-Lucas, S. (2007). Students writing emails to faculty: An examination of e-politeness among native and non-native speakers of English. *Language Learning & Technology: A Refereed Journal for Second and Foreign Language Educators*, 11(2), 59-81.
- Blum-Kulka, S., & Olshtain, E. (1986). Too many words: Length of utterance and pragmatic failure. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 8, 47-61.

- Blum-Kulka, S., House, J., & Kasper, G. (1989). The CCSARP coding manual. In S. Blum-Kulka, J., & G. Kasper (Eds.), *Cross-cultural pragmatics: Requests and apologies* (pp. 273-294). Alblex Publishing Corporation.
- Chen, C. E. (2001). Making e-mail requests to professors: Taiwanese vs. American students. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association for Applied Linguistics in St. Louis, February 2001. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 461299).
- Chen, C. E. (2006). The development of E-mail literacy: From writing to peers writing to authority figures. *Language Learning & Technology: A Refereed Journal for Second and Foreign Language Educators*, 10(2), 35-55.
- Chen, Y. (2015a). Chinese learners' cognitive processes in writing email requests to faculty. *System*, 52, 51-62. doi: 10.1016/j.system.2015.04.020
- Chen, Y. (2015b). Developing Chinese EFL learners' email literacy through requests to faculty. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 75, 131-149. doi: 10.1016/j.pragma.2014.05.009
- Chen, Y. (2016). Understanding the development of Chinese EFL learners' email literacy through exploratory practice. *Language Teaching Research*, 20(2), 165-180. doi:10.1177/1362168814562014
- Crystal, D. (2007). *The Cambridge encyclopedia of language*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Crystal, D. (2008). *A dictionary of linguistics and phonetics* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Blackwell.
- Economidou-Koetsidis, M. (2011). "Please answer me as soon as possible": Pragmatic failure in non-native speakers' e-mail requests to faculty. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 43(13), 3193-3215. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2011.06.006>

- Ellis, R. (1992). Learning to communicate in the classroom: A study of two language learners' requests. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 14, 1-23.
- Hartford, B.S., & Bardovi-Harlig, K. (1996). At your earliest convenience: A study of written student requests to faculty. *Pragmatics and Language Learning*, 7, 55-69.
- Harvey, K. (2013). *Investigating adolescent health communication. A corpus linguistics approach*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Hendriks, B. (2010). An experimental study of native speaker perceptions of non-native request modification in emails in English. *Intercultural Pragmatics*, 7(2), 221-255. doi:10.1515/iprg.2010.011
- Kasper, G., & Blum-Kulka, S. (Eds.). (1993). *Interlanguage pragmatics*. Oxford University Press.
- LoCastro, V. (2012). *Pragmatics for language educators: A sociolinguistic perspective* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Nguyen, T.T.M. (2008). Modifying L2 criticisms: How learners do it? *Journal of Pragmatics*, 40(4), 768-791. doi: 10.1016/j.pragma.2007.05.008
- Nguyen, T.T.M. (2013). An exploratory study of criticism realization strategies used by NS and NNS of New Zealand English. *Multilingua*, 32(1), 103-130. doi:10.1515/multi-2013-0005
- Nguyen, T. T. M., Do, T. T. H., Nguyen, A. T., & Pham, T. T. T. (2015). Teaching email requests in the academic context: A focus on the role of corrective feedback. *Language Awareness*, 24(2), 169-195. doi:10.1080/09658416.2015.1010543
- Rose, K. R. (2005). On the effects of instruction in second language pragmatics. *System*, 33(3), 385-399. doi: 10.1016/j.system.2005.06.003

Saadatmandi, M., Khiabani, S. M., & Pourdana, N. (2018). Teaching English pragmatic features in EFL context: A focus on request speech acts. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 8(7), 829-835. doi:10.17507/tp1s.0807.14

Thomas-Tate, S., Daugherty, T. K., & Bartkoski, T. J. (2017). Experimental study of gender effects on language use in college students' email to faculty. *College Student Journal*, 51(2), 222-226.