

# Pragmalinguistic Variation in L2 Learners' E-Requests to Faculty: Looking at Degree of Imposition

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## Abstract

Politeness plays an important role in initiated e-mail requests sent from students to faculty. One such feature of requests susceptible to politeness is the degree of imposition, which is one of the important variables in speech act production. Although the literature on requests is abundant, there are few studies on low- and high-imposition requests, in general, and on Iranian L2 learners' low- and high-imposition requests, in particular. Through analyzing L2 learners' requests, this study was an attempt to explore the distribution of pragmalinguistic means when writing English e-mail requests with low- and high degrees of imposition. For the purpose of this study, a corpus of 208 e-mail requests was collected for a rigorous qualitative analysis. The e-requests were classified into 4 categories: information, validation, feedback, and action. They were, then,

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coded and analyzed. It appeared that, though similar in many ways, the distribution of request type, openings, head act strategies, and internal and external modifiers were relatively conditioned by the degree of imposition. The findings can have valuable resources for future studies of potential interlanguage pragmatics studies, which are concerned with L2 learners' performance and pragmatic competence in L2 learning.

**Keywords:** Degree of Imposition, E-requests, Internal and External Modifiers, Pragmalinguistics, Speech Acts.

## Introduction

Pragmatic competence refers to “the ability to communicate your intended message with all its nuances in any sociocultural context and to interpret the message of your interlocutor as it was intended” (Fraser, 2010, p. 16). According to Bachman (1990), pragmatic competence consists of two illocutionary and sociolinguistic competences. Bachman defines illocutionary competence as the knowledge of the pragmatic rules to carry out appropriate communicative functions, and sociolinguistic competence as the knowledge of sociolinguistic rules of appropriateness in a given context.

Traditional pragmatic theories (e.g., Lakoff, 1973; Leech, 1977) consider meaning as fixed linguistic forms (e.g., *would you, I was wondering if*), used to indicate politeness. In recent years, some second/foreign (L2) researchers' perceptions of pragmatic competence have changed (e.g., Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011; Locher & Watts, 2005). It is now believed that meaning is context-dependent. According to this view, politeness is created by interlocutors, which is fundamentally different from traditional views (Locher & Watts, 2005). However, when communicating with others, pragmatic failure may occur if interlocutors are not able to use appropriate functions (Thomas, 1983).

Speech acts, as the main parts of pragmatic competence, are widely used in daily communication. Among different types of speech acts, requests have been the focus of L2 pragmatics research (e.g., Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006, 2007; Chejnová, 2014; Hashemian & Farhang-Ju, 2017; Savic, 2018). Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that three variables can influence the weight of the face-threatening act of requests: power, social distance, and degree of imposition. The degree of imposition, as an important variable, has been overlooked. The degree of imposition, as defined by Brown and Levinson (1987), is the “degree to which they are considered to interfere with an agent's wants of self-determination or of approval (negative and positive face wants)” (p. 77).

Félix-Brasdefer (2012) suggests that the degree of mitigation and politeness expressed in request e-mails is often determined by the type of request. Requests for action, with the highest degree of imposition, are requests by which the interlocutors ask the address to perform an action for them (e.g., *Will you please send me a sample of proposal?*). The second highly imposed request type is the request for feedback (e.g., *Can you please explain this section?*). In this type of request, interlocutors “seek advice, ask general questions about home-

work, and/or final papers” (Félix-Brasdefer, 2012, p. 97). Requests for validation are the third request type with a low degree of imposition. As for requests for validation, these requests seek confirmation or verification of information already provided in the discourse (e.g., *We should give a presentation next week, right?*). Finally, the requests with the lowest degree of imposition are requests for information (e.g., *When can I meet you?*), in which the speaker seeks information that has not been already provided in the previous discourse (Félix-Brasdefer, 2012). Félix-Brasdefer argues that requests for information and validation are among requests with lower degrees of imposition because such request types are related to the faculty member’s duties. Consequently, they are less face-threatening than requests for feedback and action.

As e-mail has become the most convenient way for communication among L2 learners and faculty members in academic contexts, it is important to see if L2 learners are able to mitigate their requests politely in e-requests with varying degrees of imposition. This is especially important because most L2 learners are not sufficiently aware of the sociolinguistic and sociopragmatic norms of e-mail writing (Najeeb et al., 2012). Therefore, the current study was conducted to see if Iranian L2 learners are able to modify their low- and -high imposition e-requests.

The goal of the current study was to examine the different elements (i.e., opening, head act, and internal and external modification) of low- and high-imposition e-requests (i.e., request for information, request for validation, request for feedback, and request for action) used by Iranian university-level students when writing English e-mail requests to faculty.

## Literature Review

### Request Components

Based on the cross-cultural study of speech act realization patterns (CCSARP), requests consist of alerters, head acts, and supportive moves. A head act is considered the core of the request. CCSARP classified nine substrategies or variations in the (in)directness levels of the head act: (1) mood derivable, (2) explicit performative, (3) hedged performative, (4) locution derivable, (5) want statement, (6) suggestory formula, (7) query preparatory, (8) strong hint, and (9) mild hint.

The opening elements preceding the actual requests include alerters (i.e., address terms, greetings, and phatic communication). The other elements of requests are internal and external modifiers. Internal modifiers act as downgrades (i.e., syntactic and lexical downgraders) to make requests less forceful. The CCSARP coding manual identifies seven types of syntactic downgraders used to alleviate the illocutionary force of requests: (1) interrogative, (2) negation of a preparatory condition, (3) subjunctive, (4) conditional, (5) aspect, (6) past tense, and (7) conditional clause. Further, lexical downgraders are distinguished into the followings: (1) politeness markers, (2) consultative devices, (3) hedges, (4) understaters, (5) downtoners, (6) committers, (7) forewarning,

(8) hesitators, (9) scope-starters, and (10) agent avoiders. The supportive moves are another part of requests that modify the head act externally. The CCSARP coding manual identifies grounder, imposition, preparatory, promise, disarmer, and getting a precommitment as mitigating supportive moves (see Blum-Kulka et al., 1989).

## E-Mail Requests

E-mail is one of the popular means by which university learners and faculty members communicate. High speed, availability, and low cost are among the merits of communication via e-mail. Furthermore, "e-mail constitutes a unique, hybrid type of text, and this hybridity also allows its users to display a wide range of discourse styles in e-mail when used in different contexts and for various communicative purposes" (Chen, 2001, p. 1).

However, misinterpretations may happen when communicating via e-mail among interlocutors. For example, the absence of face-to-face communication features (i.e., body language or nonverbal cues) may lead to misunderstanding or miscommunication (Chen, 2006). The lack of instruction for e-mail communication between L2 learners and faculty members could be another reason. Higher education does not provide sufficient guidelines regarding the form and style of e-mail (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006). In fact, little explicit instruction is included in university syllabuses regarding e-mail writing in Iran. Hence, it may be difficult for L2 learners who use instant messaging applications to change the content of their messages while addressing faculty members. They are not aware that the format and content of e-mails can influence their academic achievements (Jessmer & Anderson, 2001).

Another reason that could lead to misinterpretation is the asynchronous nature of this medium that leads to delayed communication. This may result in further misconstruction of messages. Also, distance and lack of face-threatening context of direct communication may lead L2 learners to overcome inhibitions and ignore politeness conventions characteristic of face-to-face interaction (Lewandowski & Harrington, 2006).

A number of pragmatic studies (e.g., Chang, 2006; Eslami & Mirzaei, 2014; Yuan, 2001) have focused on the differences between oral and written discourse in the L2, whereas the focus of other studies (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006, 2007; Chen, 2006; Eslami, 2013; Mohammadi, 2016) has been on how (non)native speakers mitigate their requests in L2 via e-mail. Chen (2001) examined Taiwanese and American students' e-mails to faculty. The results indicated that both the (non)native speakers used query preparatory strategies and want statements; however, they used lexical and syntactic modifications differently. In fact, the native-speaker participants used lexicosyntactic modification that resulted in their requests to become more indirect and polite.

In 2002, Bloch examined L2 students' e-requests to faculty. He analyzed 120 e-requests written by Chinese, Turkish, Korean, Indonesian, and Taiwanese

students. His findings indicated that some L2 students' request strategies were not appropriate because they had ignored the degree of power in their e-mails to the faculty members.

Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) examined L2 learners' e-requests to faculty. She analyzed different parts of Greek learners' e-mails. Her findings indicated that the learners had used direct strategies in their e-requests to faculty. Absence of lexical downgraders, omission of greetings and closings, and inappropriate or unacceptable forms of address were the other findings of this study.

Zarei and Mohammadi (2012) examined the requests produced by Iranian L2 learners. They reported that the L2 learners' e-mails were typically characterized by frequent use of directness and absence of greetings and closings. Furthermore, lexical downgraders were marginal and different address terms were utilized. Mohammadi (2016) examined 100 requestive e-mails to faculty produced by Iranian and American students. She categorized the e-mails' salutations into 12 salutation strategies categories. The chi-square results showed that the salutation strategies used by the Iranian students were significantly different from the American students in that the Americans included various salutation strategies in their e-mail requests to their professors and had flexibility in their salutations.

Eslami (2013) examined the opening strategies of 300 e-requests composed by Iranian and American graduate students. Her findings illustrated that the Iranian students' e-requests contained a higher number of small talk compared to the American graduate students.

Moreover, Chejnová (2014) analyzed forms of address, opening and closing formulas, degrees of directness, and amounts of syntactic, lexical, and external modification used in the e-requests of Czech students to faculty. It was observed that the learners had used both direct and conventionally indirect strategies, a great deal of syntactic modification, and elaborate external modification. Opening and closing sequences occurred in all the e-mails. More than half of the students avoided deferential forms of address and used only greetings that could be interpreted as equalizing the power asymmetry between interlocutors.

A new area of research interest on e-mail requests that has expanded in recent years is the impact of degree of imposition. Several studies (e.g., Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006; Félix-Brasdefer, 2012) have focused on the request type and level of imposition expressed by L2 learners in student-initiated requests to faculty. Biesenbach-Lucas (2006) examined the degree of directness and politeness features of (non)native speakers' e-mails to faculty. She examined 296 e-requests written by American students and 117 e-requests written by Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese, and Thai students. Her results indicated that the native speakers had used combinations of internal modifiers in requests with high imposition, whereas the nonnative speakers had utilized past tense, downtoners, and the polite marker *please*. Interestingly, the native speakers had not used many internal modifications. This might indicate "that in the e-mail medi-

um, a minimum amount of internal modification may be considered sufficient for realizing students' requests of faculty, as long as basic politeness features are present" (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006, p. 101).

In another study, Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) tried to illustrate how (non)native speakers of English formulated their low- and high-imposition requests to faculty. She analyzed 151 e-requests composed by Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese, and Thai students and 382 e-request written by American native speakers. Regarding request for modification, the results indicated that both the (non)native speakers had modified half of their requests by adding syntactic politeness features and that the students had relied more heavily on the use of syntactic rather than lexical modification to soften the force of their e-requests. More specifically, the presence of lexical modifiers did not increase with the increased imposition level.

Félix-Brasdefer (2012) examined the American students' requests with low- and high degrees of imposition. She analyzed 240 L1 English and L2 Spanish e-mail requests composed by American students. The results indicated strong preference for direct questions when writing a request to a faculty member. Also, the analysis of the data showed that the distribution of the e-requests was conditioned by the level of the imposition of the request. Lexical and syntactic modifiers were more frequent in the L1 English group. Although lexical and syntactic modifiers were found across the level of imposition continuum with different degrees of frequency, they were mainly used in situations with a relatively high level of imposition, namely request for feedback and request for action; in these situations, higher levels of politeness and formality are often required.

Finally, Economidou-Kogetsidis (2018) investigated the relationship between degrees of imposition with forms of address and degree of directness. She analyzed 200 authentic high- and low-imposition requests written by Greek Cypriot students in English. The results indicated the learners mostly preferred formal forms of address and high requestive directness.

As the above review suggests, few systemic attempts have been made to identify if degree of imposition has any effect on L2 learners' pragmatic production of requests. Besides, most previous studies have ignored the key role gender plays in pragmatics research, as the e-requests analyzed in previous research were written by fe(male) L2 learners. Hence, in the current study, such a variable was controlled. Furthermore, external modifications of a request that make it to be perceived as polite in low- and high-imposition e-requests has not been investigated in previous research. Based on the foregoing discussion, this study was an attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the frequency of the different types of e-requests to faculty?
2. What forms of openings (i.e., address terms, greeting, and phatic communication) do Iranian university students employ in their e-mails to faculty in low- and high-imposition e-requests?

3. What are the request strategies modifications employed in low- and high-imposition e-requests by Iranian university students?
4. What are the internal and external modifications employed in low- and high-imposition e-requests by Iranian university students?

## Method

### Participants

The participants were 32 Iranian female students at one state-run university majoring in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) in Iran and were taking M.A. courses in TEFL or writing their M.A. theses. They were chosen based on convenience sampling. Their ages ranged from 23 to 35. The students were originally from the central, southern, and southwestern provinces of the country, and their L1 was Persian. They were all born and educated in the Persian society and culture. In pragmatics studies, ethnicity is “important in order to avoid influences from other cultures and languages” (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2009, p. 88). None of the participants had previously lived in or visited English-speaking countries. Following ethical issues, the senders of those e-mails completed an online consent form that explained that their e-mails would be used for research purposes, and their personal information would be kept confidential. Demographic information about the participants (i.e., age and L1) was collected employing an online questionnaire.

The participants had passed many courses in General English (e.g., Advanced Reading, Advanced Writing, and English Literature) during their B.A. and M.A. studies. Furthermore, they had to pass the M.A. National Entrance Exam to be admitted to high-ranking universities. On average, they had studied English between 14-16 years, mainly through formal education in Iran and were at the same level proficiency. Based on their academic performance (i.e., speaking, writing, reading, and listening) during their M.A. program and their scores on the General English section of the M.A. National Entrance Exam, the English language proficiency of the participants ranged B2-C2 level in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

### Instruments and Procedure

Following several L2 researchers (Félix-Brasdefer, 2012; Lorenzo-Dus & Bou-Franch, 2013; Merrison et al., 2012), natural data were used for this study. A corpus of e-mail requests written by 32 M.A. students at one state-run university in Iran was used. As highlighted by Merrison et al. (2012), natural data are more likely to mirror the differences among L2 learners. Collecting natural data and accounting for all the elements found in a given message is considered prominent, as they show what L2 students would have done in real-life situations. Hence, natural data may provide a more valid and comprehensive picture of nonnative speakers’ pragmatic competence (Lorenzo-Dus & Bou-Franch, 2013).

The e-mail corpus consisted of 208 authentic request e-mails written in English to a faculty member over a period of 12 months (2014-2015). It is worth mentioning that only e-requests were the focus of the current study and e-mails with other purposes (e.g., apologies and appreciation) were excluded. The recipient of e-mails was a male member of full-time teaching faculty at a state-run university in Iran. He was a nonnative speaker of English and in his forties at the time of data collection. He was teaching B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. courses in English methodology, discourse analysis, and academic writing, as well as supervising M. A. theses. His relationship with the L2 students was formal, and the L2 students were in contact with him during class and office hours and e-mailed him when they needed assistance.

It should be noted that the confidential e-mails were removed from the study. The topics of participants' e-requests to their instructor were: (1) ask the instructor, (2) to explain an ambiguous part, (3) extend the deadline of an assignment, (4) send a paper or sample of proposal/thesis, (5) grade their exams again, and (6) make an appointment for a consultation.

Following Félix-Brasdefer (2012), the request e-mails were classified into four categories: (1) request for information, (2) request for validation, (3) request for feedback, and (4) request for action. Out of the 208 request e-mails, 51 (24.5%) were classified as requests for information, 30 (14.5%) as requests for validation, 42 (20.3%) as requests for feedback, 85 (40.7%) as requests for action. The followings are examples of the L2 learners' requests:

- Extract # 1 (requests for action)
  - F1: *I will buy the books that you introduced. but could you please send their e-books to me??*
- Extract # 2 (requests for feedback)
  - F2: *Would u plz be kind enough and tell me if i'm doing it correctly?*
- Extract # 3 (requests for information)
  - F3: *I would appreciate it if you let me know when I can meet you.*
- Extract # 4 (requests for validation)
  - F4: *I should send my writing assignments by next week. I wonder if that is the deadline.*

In the present study, based on the CCSARP manual (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989), the aforementioned parts of requests (i.e., alerters, head act, internal and external modifiers) were examined. Below is an example of the participants' e-mails:

- Extract # 5 (requests for action)
  - F4: ***Dear Dr. X, [address term]***  
***I hope you are doing well [phatic communion]. May I ask for a favor? [external modification, perpetrator]. I am writing to you regarding your recently published paper entitled X. Unfortunately, I failed to download it. I am truly eager to read the paper [external modification, grounder]. Would it be possible for you to***



**mail me a copy** [*head act, conventional indirect*]? **I appreciate your consideration** [*preclosing thanks*].

**Best Regards**, [*closing*]

*Student's Name*

The data were coded by two experts in the field of pragmatics. In cases where they disagreed in the analysis, the coders discussed the coding and arrived at an agreement. Overall, the intercoder reliability was found to be 93%. Once the data were coded, the frequency of each pragmlinguistic means of each subcategory (i.e., openings, closings, etc.) was counted.

## Results and Discussion

The analysis of the e-mails included the following: (a) frequency of openings (i.e., address terms, greetings, and phatic communication), (b) degree of the directness of head acts, (c) and external and internal modifications. The following sections provide the detailed analyses of each.

### First Research Question

This study aimed to investigate the L2 learners' requests to faculty with high and low degrees of imposition. In order to answer the first research question, the frequency of e-mail type was calculated. As shown in Table 1, the most frequently e-mail type occurring in the data was request for action (40.7%):

**Table 1.**  
*Frequency of Different Types of Requests in the Corpus*

Request	Requests for Information	Requests for Validation	Requests for Feedback	Requests for Action
Frequency	51 (24.5%)	30 (14.5%)	42 (20.3%)	85 (40.7%)

The results of the frequency of the request types in the present study were similar to previous research (e.g., Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2018). For example, Economidou-Kogetsidis (2018) examined e-mail requests sent from L2 students to one faculty member and found that the majority of the requests were requests for action. In the current study, the students specifically had initiated requests for action significantly. Such results might be explained by learners' perceptions of lecturers' duty. The Iranian learners might have believed the lecturer would respond favorably to the requests because they might instinctively consider lecturers as individuals who have to fulfill their social duties. Hence, they constantly mitigated requests for action.

However, the results do not support previous research that found a preference for requests for information (e.g., Félix-Brasdefer, 2012). These differences might be due to the differences of the recipient of the e-requests. In the study by Félix-Brasdefer (2012), the e-mails were sent to both (fe)male faculty members, with different ages, whereas the recipient of the e-mails was a male faculty member in this study. So, gender and age might have led to the different results. One reason for the lower percentage of requests for feedback in comparison with Félix-Brasdefer's (2012) study is that asking for feedback implies exposing themselves as inferior, and this exposure threatens their self-esteem (Karabenick & Gonida, 2018; Sánchez Rosas & Pérez, 2015). Therefore, L2 learners might avoid seeking feedback, as it is a sign of weakness in their view.

### Second Research Question

In order to answer the second research question, the data were coded and analyzed qualitatively. Table 2 shows the frequency and percentage of the occurrence of the different address terms. The results indicated the dominance of formal address terms. Overall, 10 types of address terms occurred in the corpus. The majority of the e-mail requests began with an address term (90.38%). A few number (9.62%) of the e-mails did not contain any address terms at all. The most frequently used address term was *Dear Dr. X* (32.21%) with low- and high degrees of imposition. The second frequently employed address term was *Dear Professor X* (18.26%):

**Table 2.**  
*Frequency of Address Terms in the Corpus*

Address Terms	Request for Information	Request for Action	Request for Feedback	Request for Validation	Total
<i>Doctor</i>	0 (0%)	1 (1.17%)	0 (0%)	3 (10%)	4 (1.92%)
<i>Dear Dr. X</i>	8 (15.69%)	28 (32.94%)	22 (52.39%)	9 (30%)	67 (32.21%)
<i>Dear Professor X</i>	20 (39.22%)	12 (14.12%)	0 (0%)	6 (20%)	38 (18.26%)
<i>Dear Dr.</i>	0 (0%)	1 (1.17%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (.47%)
<i>Dear Professor</i>	10 (19.60%)	9 (10.6%)	8 (19.04%)	3 (10%)	30 (14.42%)
<i>Dear Sir</i>	1 (1.96%)	8 (9.42%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	9 (4.39%)
<i>Dear Instructor</i>	0 (0%)	1 (1.17%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (.47%)
<i>Professor</i>	0 (0%)	1 (1.17%)	0 (0%)	3 (10%)	4 (1.92%)
<i>My Dear Ostad</i>	0 (0%)	2 (2.35%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (.96%)
<i>Dr. X</i>	7 (13.73%)	12 (14.12%)	10 (23.81%)	3 (10%)	32 (15.37%)
Zero Address Term	5 (9.8%)	10 (11.77%)	2 (4.76%)	3 (10%)	20 (9.62%)
Total	51 (100%)	85 (100%)	42 (100%)	30 (100%)	208 (100%)

Table 3 summarizes the results of the analyses of the greetings (e.g., *Hi* and *Hello*) and phatic communion (e.g., *How are you?* and *Hope you are doing fine.*). The analysis indicated that half of the e-mails included greetings; however, phatic communion (31.73%) did not appear significantly in the corpus. As illustrated in Table 3, greetings and phatic communication occurred most frequently in requests for validation:

**Table 3.**  
*Frequency of Greetings and Phatic Communion in the Corpus*

	Request for Information	Request for Action	Request for Feedback	Request for Validation	Total
Greetings	17 (33.3%)	51 (60%)	24 (57.14%)	21 (70%)	117 (56.25%)
Zero Greetings	34 (66.7%)	34 (40%)	18 (42.86%)	9 (30%)	91 (43.75%)
Phatic Communion	16 (31.38%)	25 (29.42%)	10 (23.81%)	15 (50%)	66 (31.73%)
Zero Phatic Communion	35 (68.62%)	60 (70.58%)	32 (76.19%)	15 (50%)	142 (68.27%)

The results, in line with (Mohammadi, 2016), indicated that the learners tended to use formal address terms in the e-requests with high and low degrees of imposition. Interestingly, *Dear Dr. X* occurred more frequently with the e-requests with request for action request for and feedback. Furthermore, some of the e-requests contained inappropriate forms of address (e.g., *Professor* and *Dr. + X*). According to Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011), such address terms are considered as a grammatically unacceptable construction in English. However, the frequency of the occurrence of such address terms was similar in the requests with low- and high degrees of imposition, and such address terms occurred more frequently in the requests high degrees of imposition.

As mentioned above, 9.62% of the e-requests did not contain any address term. However, the learners started their e-mails via greetings. This might have given them the idea that they should not use any address term:

- Extract # 6 (requests for information)
  - F5: *Hello. According to your email, I called you, but you did not answer my call. As we were talked before about my thesis, now would u plz kindly tell what to do?*  
*Regards*
- Extract # 7 (requests for feedback)
  - F1: *Hi*  
*I hope all is well with you.*  
*Thanks for checking my article, i revised it base on your comments. Could you please check it? i'm grateful to you*

The results of this study are in line with Eslami (2013) in that the opening of the e-mails included greetings and phatic communication. However, in contrast with Eslami (2013), self-introduction did not appear in the data, probably because the learners and the faculty member were familiar with each other in this study. The findings, further, indicated that phatic communication did not significantly occur in the data.

In the data, 142 (68.27%) of the e-requests did not include any phatic communication. These findings lend support to Mohammadi's (2016) study that greetings and phatic communication did not occur significantly in the corpus. Greetings and phatic communion are considered among positive politeness strategies that "presupposes/asserts common ground" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 117). Hence, greetings and phatic communion may alleviate the illocutionary force of a request. Based on this, it seems that most of the participants had ignored the importance of greetings and phatic communion. This low tendency towards using greetings and phatic communication may be rooted in the fact the learners had not been aware of the function of small talk. They might have considered it as an informal form to include in their e-requests.

### Third Research Question

In order to answer the third research question, the request head acts were analyzed and coded. Overall, four types of head act occurred in the corpus: query preparatory, want statement, need statement, and mood derivable. The negative polite strategies (i.e., conventionally indirect strategies, 78.85%) predominated in the e-request corpus, whereas the distribution of direct strategies (21.15%) was marginal. Interestingly, the participants had used query preparatory to mitigate their requests, irrespective of the degree of imposition. In fact, the requests realized by means of a query preparatory strategy occurred frequently with the low- and high-imposition requests (see Table 4). In all the four requests with different levels of imposition, that is, request for information (92.1%), request for validation (60%), request for feedback (71.42%), and request for action (81.18%), query preparatory was the mostly employed head act strategy. However, query preparatory frequently occurred for request for information and request for action, respectively.

Want statement (4.8%), imperatives (15.87%), and need statement (1.48%) did not frequently occur in the corpus. Want statement (14.29%) was the second most frequent strategy type for request for feedback. This strategy type occurred marginally in request for action (4.7%). Imperatives were the other strategy used in the participants' e-mail request. Imperatives (40%) occurred more frequently in request for validation. In fact, direct strategies were the second most frequent strategies (40%) used with requests for validation and request for feedback (30.95%):

**Table 4.**  
Degree of Directness of Requests in the Corpus

Strategies		Request for Information	Request for Action	Request for Feedback	Request for Validation	Total
Direct	Mood Derivable	4 (7.84%)	11 (12.94%)	6 (14.29%)	12 (40%)	33 (15.87%)
	Want Statement	0 (0%)	4 (4.7%)	6 (14.29%)	0 (0%)	10 (4.80%)
	Need Statement	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.37%)	0 (0%)	1 (.48%)
Conventionally Indirect	Query Preparatory	47 (92.16%)	69 (81.18%)	29 (69.05%)	18 (60%)	164 (78.85%)

The examples below are instances of the e-mail requests by the students to the faculty member:

- Extract # 8 (imperatives)
  - F6: *Please find my proposal in the attachment and take a look at it.*
- Extract # 9 (want statement)
  - F8: *I wanted to know you accept this topic or not?*
- Extract # 10 (need statement)
  - F6: *I just need your comments.*
- Extract # 11 (query preparatory)
  - F9: *Would you please let me know if you receive this e-mail?*

Four different types of head acts were found in the corpus (i.e., imperatives, wants, needs, and query); however, conventionally indirect requests (i.e., query preparatory) dominated in the corpus. This finding is in line with previous research (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006; Chen, 2001, 2006) whose results were indicative of preponderance of conventionally indirect strategies. This finding shows that when L2 learners write e-requests to a faculty member, they rely on previously learned knowledge of appropriate speech acts to sound pragmatically appropriate in L2 use situations (see Extract # 12):

- Extract # 10 (requests for action)
  - F6: *Dear Dr. X*  
***Would you please send me one or more thesis from your previous students? I read the sample you sent me, but I like to become familiar with others' language, too.***  
*thank you, in advance, for your help.*  
*sincerely,*  
*Student's name*

In the majority of the L2 requests in this study, the learners relied on query preparatory, when initiating request for action and request for feedback. As for request for information, the participants frequently replied on the strategy of conventional indirectness (92.16%). The query preparatory strategy occurred frequently with the requests for action (81.18%). This finding reflects an appropriate level of e-politeness and formality expressed in the e-mail request head act. The findings add support to Brown and Levinson's claim (1987), sug-

gesting in e-requests with high degrees of imposition, the greater the degree of indirectness is employed by L2 learners.

One probable reason for the level of e-politeness and formality in the e-mail request head act is that the L2 learners had belonged to the academic discourse community for a relatively long period. As each discourse community shares detailed knowledge and appreciation of the trends in that community (Abdi et al., 2010), it can be claimed that the L2 learners had been relatively familiar with appropriate language functions to mitigate their e-quests appropriately.

The findings of the current study, unlike those of Zarei and Mohammadi's (2012), indicated direct request strategies occurred less frequently with requests for information. Such differences could be due to differences in the methodology employed. For example, natural data were used in the current study, whereas the participants in Zarei and Mohammadi's (2012) study were asked to write a sample e-mail in each situation.

Besides, it is important to note the finding that direct requests occurred more in the requests (i.e., request for validation):

- Extract # 13 (requests for validation)
  - F11: *Hi dear Professor, hope you're doing well. I've downloaded 30 articles that you mentioned. Plz let me know whether they're okay. Thanks in advance.*

One possible explanation might be that the learners had considered requests for validation as less face-threatening, probably because they had considered requests for validation as the only request type that had not been cognitively and/or physically demanding for the addressee and could be resolved without much effort. Hence, they might have utilized direct strategies more frequently in requests for validation, as they had perceived compliance might be easily guaranteed.

Similar to Economidou-Kogetsidis (2018), the findings indicated that direct strategies were among the frequently occurred strategies in requests for feedback (28.58%). The results can be taken as evidence to further support Eslami's (1993) claim that the degree of the directness of requests is strongly correlated with the expectation of rights between interlocutors. As argued by Economidou-Kogetsidis (2018), it is surmised that the expectation of the right and obligations of the faculty members has changed. Therefore, the learners of this study might have considered the degree of imposition of requesting for feedback as low. Below is an example of requests for feedback in the corpus:

- Extract # 14 (requests for feedback)
  - F12: *Dear professor I have a question about my thesis subject, "X", I think it is a good idea to substitute Y for Z. Please, let me know your idea. thank you in advance*

## Fourth Research Question

The distribution of internal modifiers (i.e., lexical and syntactic modifier) were measured to answer the fourth research question (see Tables 5 and 6). Ten elements of internal modifiers occurred in the data. Of the four types of main syntactic modifiers that appeared in the learners' e-requests, interrogative (17.27%) and conditional clause (11.51%) were the most frequent ones. However, both lexical and syntactic modifiers were found in the corpus, and lexical modifiers (61.87%) were more frequent in the data. The requests in the corpus were mainly modified using three lexical modifiers: politeness marker (23.98%), downtoner (17.75%), and consultative device (16.31%). Committer (1.68%), understater (.72%), and forewarning (1.42%) were the least frequent lexical modifiers in the request corpus:

**Table 5.**  
*Internal Modification in the Students' E-Mails*

	Internal Modifiers	Request for Information	Request for Action	Request for Feedback	Request for Validation	Total
	Interrogative	13 (15.29%)	35 (18.6%)	18 (16.82%)	6 (16.22%)	72 (17.27%)
	Past	1 (1.18%)	3 (1.6%)	6 (5.6%)	3 (8.1%)	13 (3.12%)
<b>Syntactic</b>	Progressive	4 (4.7%)	1 (.53%)	21 (19.62%)	0 (0%)	26 (6.24%)
	Conditional Clause	11 (12.93%)	22 (11.70%)	6 (5.6%)	9 (24.32%)	48 (11.51%)
	Politeness Marker	15 (17.64%)	55 (29.3%)	18 (16.82%)	12 (32.44%)	100 (23.98%)
	Understaters	3 (3.53%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (.72%)
	Consultative	11 (12.94%)	40 (21.27%)	14 (13.08%)	3 (8.10%)	68 (16.31%)
	Downtoner	20 (23.53%)	28 (14.9%)	22 (20.56%)	4 (10.82%)	74 (17.75%)
	Committer	6 (7.06%)	1 (.53%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	7 (1.68%)
<b>Lexical</b>	Forewarning	1 (1.18%)	3 (1.6%)	2 (1.86%)	0 (0%)	6 (1.42%)
	Total	85 (100%)	188 (100%)	107 (100%)	37 (100%)	517 (100%)
<b>Zero Internal Modifiers</b>		24 (47.05%)	22 (25.88%)	14 (33.33%)	3 (10%)	63 (30.28%)

Overall, although lexical and syntactic modifiers were found across the level of imposition continuum with different degrees of frequency, they were mainly used in situations with a relatively high level of imposition, namely request for feedback and request for action; in these situations, higher levels of politeness and formality are often required. The results indicated that the requests with syntactic modifiers were used more frequently in the e-mails with requests for action and requests for feedback; 29.32% and 24.51%, respectively). The analysis of the lexical modifiers also indicated that the participants had used lexical modifiers more frequently to modify their requests in requests with high degrees of imposition: requests for action (61.05%) and feedback (26.92%). However, around 30.28% of the requests did not contain any internal modifier. The distribution of zero internal modifiers was relatively equal for the e-

requests of low and high imposition. Examples of lexical and syntactic modifiers in the e-requests are shown below (lexical modifiers are underlined and syntactic modifiers are in bold in the following examples):

- Extract # 15 (requests for feedback)
  - F7: **Could you** please explain it to me?
- Extract # 16 (requests for validation)
  - F3: **I wonder** whether it is possible to hand my PPT in after exams.
- Extract # 17 (requests for action)
  - F13: I just **wanted** to remind u to send me the samples.
- Extract # 18 (requests for information)
  - F14: **Can I** ask some questions linked with feedback?

The findings of the present study indicate that the students had used lexical and syntactic modifiers in their e-mail requests. The analysis indicated that the degree of imposition of the request had influenced the occurrence of lexical and syntactic modifiers. In line with Biesenbach-Lucas (2007), the results of the present study indicate that in e-mail requests to faculty, L2 students employ more lexical modifiers than syntactic modifiers to modify their requests.

The results of this study indicated that the students had used internal modifiers more frequently in the high-imposition requests like requests for action. As explained by Félix-Brasdefer (2012), this finding implies that those learners who had employed these modifiers in their requests possessed a relatively advanced level of sociopragmatic knowledge that allowed them to use lexical and syntactic modifiers more frequently in their high-imposition requests, where appropriate levels of politeness and formality are required:

- Extract # 19 (requests for action)
  - F15: Dear Dr. X,  
Hi. I hope you are having great classes with excellent students.  
**Would you** mind if I asked you to fill the attached form for me?  
I appreciate your help.  
Sincerely yours  
Student's name

Furthermore, such e-mail requests contained formal address terms such as *Dear Dr. X* or *Dear Professor X*, which eventually led to acknowledging the faculty member's social status (the relationship between L2 students and faculty members in Iran is asymmetric).

Conditional clause occurred most frequently with the requests for validation, which might be due to the fact that direct strategies were followed by *if* (e.g., *plz let me know if*). Interrogatives occurred frequently with the high-imposition requests (35.42%). Besides, the most frequent lexical device with the requests for feedback (23.53%) and the requests for information (20.56%) was downtoner. The frequently lexical device that occurred with the requests for actions was *please*:

- Extract # 20 (requests for action)



- F16: *Hi dear professor,  
Would you please send me the thesis file that I'm supposed to present  
it next week?  
with special thanks  
your sincerely*

The politeness marker *please* most frequently occurred with the requests for validation. This is probably because the learners had employed imperatives more frequently for this type of request. Hence, the learners had employed it to lessen the degree of imposition in such direct requests. The underuse of *please* in the requests for feedback and information might be attributed to the fact most of the learners had employed negative polite strategies (e.g., *would you* or *may I*) for these types of requests. They might have perceived that negative polite strategies are inherently polite. Hence, they had not included *please* frequently in their indirect requests.

The rigorous analysis of the request supportive moves indicated that the participants mainly had used grounder (24.80%) to elaborate the request head act externally. This modifier signifies the reasons and explanations for the request. The second most frequent external modifier was preparator (15.12%). The least common external modifiers used by the participants was disarmer (see Table 6):

**Table 6.**  
*External Modification in the Students' E-Mails*

	External Modifiers	Request for Information	Request for Action	Request for Feedback	Request for Validation	Total
External Modifiers	Grounder	20 (30.77%)	19 (17.43%)	16 (33.34%)	9 (25%)	64 (24.80%)
	Disarmer	0 (0%)	4 (3.7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (1.55%)
	Getting a Pre-commitment	0 (0%)	8 (7.33%)	4 (8.33%)	3 (8.3%)	15 (5.82%)
	Imposition Minimizer	5 (7.69%)	10 (9.16%)	4 (8.33%)	0 (0%)	19 (7.36%)
	Preparator	14 (21.54%)	19 (17.43%)	0 (0%)	6 (16.7%)	39 (15.12%)
	Preclosing Thanks	26 (40%)	49 (44.95%)	24 (50%)	18 (50%)	117 (45.35%)
	Total	65 (100%)	109 (100%)	48 (100%)	36 (100%)	258 (100%)
	E-Mail Closing	33 (54.7%)	60 (70.58%)	26 (61.90%)	15 (50%)	134 (64.42%)
	Zero External Modifiers	11 (21.56%)	10 (4.80%)	6 (14.25%)	6 (20%)	33 (15.86%)

As shown in Table 6, external modifiers were used in a higher percentage with request for action (42.24%), followed by request for information (25.19%), and request for feedback (18.60%). The results indicated that 41.56% of the requests with low degrees of imposition did not include any ex-

ternal modifier. The analysis, further, indicated that closing occurred most frequently with the e-mails with high degrees of imposition: requests for action (70.58%) and requests for feedback (61.90%). In fact, the distribution of e-mail closing was conditioned by the degree of imposition. The examples below are instances of external modifiers (the **bold** section):

- Extract # 21 (requests for feedback)
  - F17: **Could you please do me a favor?** [getting a precommitment]  
*Can you please send me the paper?*
- Extract # 22 (requests for feedback)
  - F3: **I know you are so busy but I have a great favor to ask** [preparator], *Is it possible for you to take a look at the passages? I appreciate it* [preclosing thanks].

The results, further, indicated that the learners had alleviated their requests more frequently with preclosing *thanks* in the requests for feedback (50%). However, as can be seen in Extract # 23, instances of inappropriate closing such as *Me* were found in the corpus. Furthermore, use of abbreviations and lower-case words frequently appeared in the data. This is probably because the L2 learners were used to instant messaging, which might have led the students to use abbreviated language in their e-mail requests.

- Extract # 23 (requests for action)
  - F1: *Dear Dr. X,*  
*Hi*  
*Could you please send me the answers of (the grammar book for TOEFL)??*  
**If u don't have time now, send when u have time** [imposition minimizer]  
*Yours sincerely*  
*With the best wishes,* [closing]  
*Me*

Besides, attempt to provide reasons through explicating their explanation most frequently happened in the requests for feedback (33.34%). Request for feedback is among the request with high degrees of imposition. By means of grounders, the learners had tried to alleviate the illocutionary force of e-requests:

- Extract # 24 (requests for feedback)
  - F6: *Dear Professor X,*  
*Hope you are doing well. I wonder if you mind reading my paragraphs so as to detect where I come in strong and where I need more assistance to cover my weakness. I have been trying to improve my writing in recent months, but I am not sure if I have improved. I know you are really busy, but as we fall short of time in class, I thought I can mail my paragraphs so that you kindly provide me with some feedback. I will really appreciate any help you offer.*  
*Sincerely Yours,*  
*student's name*

For example, in the above e-request, the student explains she needs assistance to improve her writing. By relying on grounders, the learner had tried to modify the e-requests. Such a learner is pragmatically competent as she had been aware that providing an additional explanation would probably result in approval of her request. According to Hashemian and Farhang-Ju (2019), providing sufficient information to prove or justify the request is crucially important for the Iranian faculty members.

The results further show that around 50% of the e-mails had not contained any preclosing (e.g., *thank you*). 36% of the e-mails in the corpus did not end with a closing. It could be argued that such e-mail structure increases the directness and possibly coerciveness of the message—something which can render these e-mails abrupt and inappropriate:

- Extract # 25 (requests for feedback)
  - F18: *Hi Dr. X*  
*This is what I worked on it, previous term. I'll be so thankful if you read it and have some comments on it.* [no phatic communion, no preclosing, and no closing]

Overall, the results indicated that with the requests with high degrees of imposition (i.e., requests for action) on a hearer of superior status (i.e., the lecturer), the L2 learners would assess contextual conditions and linguistic forms of an expression to alleviate the illocutionary force of their e-requests.

## Conclusion and Implications

This study focused on investigating L2 learners' e-mail requests to see if the degree of imposition had any effect on L2 learners' choice of strategies and modifiers. The findings showed that the distribution of type of request and external modifiers were relatively conditioned based on the degree of imposition. Further, the head act strategy type and internal modifiers were relatively based on the degree of imposition involved in each request. However, it seems some participants had failed to mitigate their requests based on the degree of imposition. This is probably because such L2 learners were not completely aware of the importance of pragmalinguistic means.

The findings of this study can have valuable resources for future studies of potential interlanguage pragmatics studies, which are concerned with L2 learners' performance and pragmatic competence in L2 learning. The results of this study provide insights into the relationship between the degree of imposition and pragmatic production of Iranian L2 learners. For example, the results help L2 learners to become familiar with appropriate ways of mitigating their e-requests to faculty.

This study focused on e-mails written by female students. Future research can give more insights into this issue by comparing male and female learners' e-requests. Specifically, if a larger corpus of e-mail messages is used, statistical tests could be utilized to examine (possible) significant differences between the

two genders. Further, a larger corpus of e-mails can be used to gain detailed insights. A larger corpus provides an opportunity to run statistical analysis and offer further evidence to support the findings. Furthermore, as the corpus will be more diverse, it will allow us to discover features of language use among a larger number of L2 students.

Moreover, a triangulation will provide the means to probe pragmalinguistic features of L2 learners' low- and high-imposition e-requests in details. This study did not focus on the role of the proficiency level of the participants. It is supposed that L2 learners' proficiency level may have a determining role in pragmatic competence. Hence, future research might also find it useful to investigate whether language proficiency has any effects on L2 learners' low- and high-imposition e-requests. It is probable that L2 students' developmental patterns of their e-requests over several semesters improve. This might indicate whether familiarity with a faculty member and how to write e-mails influences e-mail messages. As pointed out by the blind reviewers, sometimes the pattern of correspondences with a particular professor becomes similar based on the language or the communication pattern he or she demands. Therefore, further research can focus on e-requests sent by L2 learners to different L2 lecturers to examine if only one recipient could limit the variety of the requests.

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