
“You Must Let Me Pass, Please!”: An Investigation of Email Request Strategies by Taiwanese EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates Taiwanese EFL learners' pragmatic competence in the production of email request to their professors in a university setting. It sets to find out their use of politeness strategies, including the requestive head acts, the internal and external modifications, and the information sequencing of their email messages. Students of two linguistic levels (i.e., low-intermediate, high-intermediate) were included and the differences in their realization patterns of politeness strategies would allow for further understanding on the developmental aspect of interlanguage pragmatic acquisition. In total, sixty Taiwanese university students participated in this study and 60 English request emails were composed for investigation. An open-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were also conducted to investigate the factor(s) which influence students' choice of politeness strategies and the difficulties they encountered in composing the email request. By applying Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper's (1989) CCSARP framework, the results revealed that students of both levels did not vary significantly in their use of request strategies and internal/external politeness devices. Both groups adopted more direct strategies as the main requestive head acts. However, the higher level group displayed more resources in their emails by using a wider range of internal and external modifiers for their request than their less proficient counterparts. Some developmental sequences in interlanguage pragmatics can thus be identified.

Key Words: pragmatic competence, requestive head acts, internal/external modifications, information sequencing, interlanguage pragmatics

1. INTRODUCTION

More and more interests in examining the usage of email by second language learners have been generated over the past decade. Particularly, research effort has been directed to the pragmatics of email messages in the instructional setting (e.g., Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005, 2006a, 2007; Chen, 2000, 2001, 2006; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Siu, 2008; Woodfield & Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2010, etc.) In fact, the use of email is a frequently employed communication medium between students and professors and very often, it serves

as a requesting purpose such as students requesting for appointments, advice, and other course-related information to their professors. Among the studies conducted in investigating how L2 learners compose e-mail messages to faculty in terms of communication strategies and discourse styles, Hartford & Bradovi-Harlig (1996) found nonnative speakers used fewer politeness strategies and thus, their requests were considered less effective than those written by native speakers. Biesenback-Lucas (2007) indicated that although native and nonnative students tended to use the same general strategies, nonnative students' use of politeness strategies lacked linguistic flexibility and idiomatic expressions, and were unable to select appropriate lexical modification.

Apparently, writing emails to professors requires sophisticated use of language on the part of L2 learner since it is a type of face-threatening acts (FTA). The problem can be further complicated by cross-linguistic and cross-cultural differences between the addresser (i.e., the nonnative student) and the addressee (i.e., the English professor) (Chen, 2001). Thus far, most of the email research has been interpreted from the professor's perspective. Hence, why L2 learners chose to use certain politeness strategies for their requests are still not fully understood. In addition, most of the email research conducted so far was comparative rather than acquisitional in nature and thus, little has been known about how L2 learners develop their pragmatic competence overtime. Therefore, this exploratory study aims to explore Taiwanese EFL learners' competence in the production of email request in the instructional setting. It sets to find out the politeness strategies adopted by Taiwanese university students when they make email requests in English to their professor, including their choice of linguistic forms of the requestive head act (i.e., the main request strategies such as *can you, could you, how about...?*), the internal and external modifications and the information sequencing of their emails. To gain more insights on the acquisitional aspect of interlanguage pragmatics, students of two levels of proficiency, lower-intermediate and higher-intermediate, were included in the current study. It seeks to find if and how students' use of politeness strategies in emails to their professors would vary as their level of linguistic proficiency increases.

Thus the research questions posited for the current study are:

1. Do students' emails to professors promote more direct or indirect request strategies in and between the students of two different linguistic levels?
2. How do the two groups differ in terms of the use of politeness features such as internal and external modifications, and information sequencing in their email requests?
3. What are the factors which might influence students' choices of politeness strategies and what difficulties do they encounter in the process of composing the email

request?

2. RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Request and Politeness: Features Contributing to Politeness in Requests

The notion of politeness is often in close association with indirectness (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In English politeness, in addition to the choice of directness levels of requestive act, features of internal modifications (i.e., lexical and/or syntactical downgraders) are often used to mitigate the imposition caused by request (Blum-Kulka, 1987; Cenoz, 1996; Eslamirasekh, 1993; Faerch & Kasper, 1989). However, for Chinese language, features contributing to politeness are different from English language. For example, Zhang (1995a) carried out a study to investigate the relationship between indirectness and politeness of Chinese request behavior. He found that Chinese indirectness of request utterances was achieved by external modifications (i.e., supportive moves which are external to the head act, occurring either before or after it), instead of internal modifications (i.e., lexical or syntactical downgraders added to soften the impositive force of the head act). In addition, research findings pointed out that Chinese politeness is mainly attained by using pre-posed supportive moves in which a combination of speech acts are used before the main requestive head act to convey request intention (Chen, 2000, 2001, 2006; Kirkpatrick, 1991; Yu, 1999; Zhang, 1995b). That is, unlike English which the internal modifiers are obligatory in making request (Faerch & Kasper, 1989), the supportive moves are “mandatory” politeness strategies for Chinese (Zhang, 1995b).

2.2 Learners’ Linguistic Proficiency and Pragmatic Transfer

For the role of linguistic proficiency in relation to pragmatic transfer, some pragmatic studies have suggested both lower level and more advanced learners transfer their L1 pragmatics to L2, and yet advanced learners engage in more negative transfer because they are equipped with more linguistic tools to do so (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989; Cohen & Olshtain, 1981; Tanaka, 1988). Specifically in the speech act of request, Hill (1997) found that with increasing proficiency, Japanese learners of English decreased their use of direct strategies and increased the use of conventionally indirect requests almost up to native speaker level. As for the supportive moves, Su (2004) discovered that with increasing proficiency, the EFL learners in Taiwan employed a wider range of lexical modifiers and at the same time, used less external modifications which move toward the native speakers’ norm. However, the advanced EFL learners did differ from the native speakers in using longer utterances for external modifiers, a phenomenon not due to L1 transfer but EFL learners’ lack of confidence and their eagerness to ensure the message gets across (Su, 2004).

2.3 Research on E-mail Request

The earliest effort in the research of email request is the study done by Hartford and

Bardovi-Harlig in 1996. In comparison with native students, they found that nonnative students used fewer downgraders in their requests, mentioned personal time needs more often, and acknowledged imposition on faculty less often, which lead to negative perlocutionary effect on the faculty.

Chen's study (2001) compared how requests were made to professors via email by Taiwanese overseas students and American students to identify the preferred request strategies by these two particular cultural groups. She discovered that both groups preferred to use query preparatory' (e.g., *can you..*) and 'want statements' (e.g., *I want/ would like to..*) to realize their requests, but they differed in the amount of lexical or syntactic mitigating features (e.g., *please, possibly, I was wondering if, etc.*), which made native speakers' requests more indirect and polite. She also pointed out that Taiwanese students tended to transfer Chinese rhetoric to their request by employing supportive moves prior to their requestive act (Chen, 2001). While this may make their request less persuasive from the professors' perspective, Taiwanese students believed that it would enhance the politeness value and thus make the addressee more likely to comply with the request (Chen, 2001). In her later study, Chen (2006) reported that Taiwanese EFL students believed by using direct request strategies, their email request their email request would sound urgent and important for the professors to attend to their message.

In Biesenbach-Lucas's study (2007), she examined the email requests sent by native and nonnative English graduate students to faculty and compared the directness level in the request strategies, the syntactic and lexical modifiers, and the request perspective preferred by these two groups. By varying the level of imposition, she discovered that both groups selected more direct strategies for the lower imposition requests, but not for the highest imposition requests, an indication of students' awareness of situational factors (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007). While both groups used similar general strategies, She pointed out that nonnative students used less syntactic modifications, but more lexical modifications (particularly *please*) than native speakers. Overall, She believed that nonnative speakers' request strategies showed "a lack of the linguistic flexibility and idiomatic expressions and an inability to select appropriate lexical modifications" (2007, p. 74).

As the studies reviewed above, nonnative students are faced with interlanguage problems which are possibly due to the lack of knowledge in pragmalinguistic or sociopragmatic norms (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007), or the result of a transfer from the language norms from the native language (Chen, 2006). While most of these comparative studies (i.e., nonnative VS native students) have been made in the target language environment, little is known about how EFL students' pragmatic competence in request develops as their level of linguistic proficiency advances. In addition, the result of previous research has been mainly interpreted from the professors' perspective and thus, the more fundamental causes as why

non-native students choose to use certain linguistic politeness strategies are still not fully understood. The present study is set to examine EFL learners' pragmatic competence in making e-mail request to faculty in understanding their use of politeness strategies, their patterns of discourse styles, and in how these politeness features are acquired overtime by investigating learners of two different proficiency levels.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

The student participants were third-year, English-major university students from two universities in Northern Taiwan. Both higher and lower linguistic groups consisted of thirty students, with TOEIC score ranged between 680 to 850 for higher level and score ranged between 350 to 520 for lower level group. The average age of the students was 21 years old and their mother tongue was mostly Mandarin Chinese. To assure the comparability of the two subject groups, students from the two linguistic level groups did not differ in age, field of study, and language experience in the EFL environment.

3.2 Instruments

3.2.1. Background questionnaire. A background questionnaire collected information including participants' mother tongue use, their English language proficiency, the length of their English language learning, their experience of studying in English speaking countries, and their habits and experience in communication via email.

3.2.2. An experimental writing task. The experimental writing task, a high imposition request scenario- requesting for banding rule, was designed to elicit students' email requests to their professor in order to find out their use of politeness strategies in requests. Specifically, the writing task is to have students make a special request to the professor in allowing him/her to pass a course regardless of the students' poor attendance, while certain attendance rate is required as the regulation of the course and the department.

As for the other two important variables, *relative power* and the *social distance*, they are held constant since the addressee is high in power (i.e., the professors), and the social distance is also high (i.e., a student and an unfamiliar professor due to many class absences). In addition, since the addressee of the email is a native English professor, it is thus natural for students to write an English email request to address their purpose.

3.2.3. An open-ended questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The questionnaire included questions regarding their impression on the imposition level of the email task, their perception on the degree of politeness, and directness they should apply, and the difficulties in composing this email task. In the semi-structured interview, participants were asked to elaborate on how they sequenced their email request in terms of supportive moves and also to

clarify their answers on the questionnaire. The procedures for these tasks were conducted in Chinese in order to elicit as much information from participants as possible.

3.3 Coding Scheme and Data Analysis

3.3.1 Data coding Analysis of the email requests was based on the CCSARP framework developed by Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989). Some modifications for the coding categories were made since some email messages included in the current study did not exist in the original CCSARP framework. The coding categories for request head acts and the corresponding examples to each sub-request strategy are provided in Table 1. The directness levels signify the degree of pragmatic clarity, from least to most ambiguous.

Table 1. Coding categories for request strategies in the current study

CCSARP directness levels	Request strategies	Examples
Direct (least ambiguous)	(1) Imperatives	<i>Please let me pass the course.</i>
	(2) performative	<i>I have to ask for special consideration to let me pass the course.</i> <i>You must let me pass...</i>
	(3) Want statements	<i>I want to ask for your help.</i> <i>I would like to ask for your help.</i>
	(4) Need statements	<i>I will need your help for passing this course.</i>
	(5) Expectation statements	<i>I hope you can understand and let me pass the course.</i> <i>I hope I can pass this course.</i>
Conventionally indirect	Query preparatory	<i>Would you please give me a chance in passing this course?</i>
Non-conventional indirect (most ambiguous)	hint	<i>Please let me show you how much I learn from you.</i>

Within each request head act, the internal modification-syntactic and lexical downgraders were also modified from the original CCSARP coding framework based on the

features identified in the current study. Examples of lexical and syntactic modifiers are listed in Table 2.

Table 2. Coding categories for syntactic and lexical modifiers in the current study

Internal modifiers	Sub-categories	Examples
Syntactic modifiers	1) Past tense 2) Progressive aspect 3) Embedding	<i>I was wondering...</i> <i>I'm hoping...</i> <i>I would appreciate it if you could..</i>
Lexical modifiers	1) Polite marker 2) Subjectiviser 3) Consultative device 4) Downtoner 5) <i>Understater</i> 6) <i>Hedges</i>	<i>please</i> <i>I'm afraid..; I suggest..; I think..</i> <i>Do you think you will ;Would it be possible..</i> <i>possibly; perhaps; maybe</i> <i>(a little; a bit; just)</i> <i>(somewhat; somehow; kind of)</i>

As for the external modifications, some subcategories such as ‘Importance’, ‘Showing the effort’ and ‘Giving option to the addressee’ did not exist in the original CCSARP, but were adopted to accommodate the occurrences of supportive moves appeared in the lengthier stream of discourse of the email messages. In addition, position of supportive moves (i.e., pre-request moves, post-request moves, and both pre-and post- request moves) in the email passages were also analyzed. Table 3 shows the different types of mitigating supportive moves identified in the present study, with the listed corresponding examples.

Table 3. Coding categories for supportive moves in the current study

Supportive moves	Examples
1) Preparator	<i>May I ask you question?</i>
2) Precommitment	<i>Could you do me a favor?</i>
3) Grounder	<i>The reason that I missed so many classes was that I have to take care of my grandmother in the hospital.</i>

4) Acknowledge the imposition of the request	<i>I know it violates the rules to miss so many classes, but could you make an exception this time?</i>
5) Promise	<i>I promise that I will not miss any class any more.</i>
6) Expectation	<i>I hope I can see your reply as soon as possible</i>
7) Sweetener	<i>I have heard you are very considerate and kind.</i>
8) Apology	<i>I am really sorry for my bad attendance.</i>
9) Thanking	<i>Thank you for taking your time reading my mail.</i>
10) Direct appeal	<i>I really need your help.</i>
11) Imposition minimizer	<i>Please give me some feedback on my situation, under the circumstances that it won't take too much of your time.</i>
12) Importance	<i>This course is really important for me.</i>
13) Showing the effort	<i>I have handed in all the assignments and have got good grades on the tests.</i>
14) Giving options to the addressee	<i>Please let me know what I can do to pass the course.</i>

3.3.2 Data analysis. Frequency of occurrence in terms of types of request strategies, types and amounts of internal modifications (i.e. syntactic and lexical modifiers) and external modifications (i.e. supportive moves) were established and transferred to the SPSS (version16.0) for frequency analysis and *chi square* test. *Chi square* test was performed to establish whether the differences in the frequency of request strategies, syntactic and lexical modifiers, and supportive moves made by two groups were statistically significant.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Comparison of the Directness Levels in the Realization of Request Strategies

For the use of three main request strategies (i.e., direct, conventionally indirect, non-conventionally indirect), the results of the *chi-square* test showed the use of direct strategies ($X^2= 0.73, P=0.787, P>0.05$), query preparatory ($X^2=0.082, P=0.774, P>0.05$) and hint ($X^2=0.000, P=1, P>0.05$) between the two groups were all statistically insignificant. In other words, the two groups did not differ in the realization of main request strategies used in all request types. In general, subjects of both linguistic proficiency levels tended to use more

direct strategies and fewer query preparatory as their main request strategies. Non-conventionally indirect strategy (i.e., hint) was indiscriminately rarely used by both groups (See Table 4).

Table 4. Comparison of request strategies used by the two groups

	Direct strategy	Query	Hints
Higher level group	66.67%	26.67%	6.67%
Lower level group	63.33%	30.00%	6.67%

As for the types of direct strategies used, Table 5 shows the subcategories of direct strategies adopted by both higher and lower linguistic groups. As indicated, among all the direct strategies used, higher level group resorted largely to ‘expectation statements (36.67%) (i.e. *I hope you can understand and let me pass the course*), followed by ‘performative’ (13.33%) (i.e. *You must give me a chance to pass this course*). For lower level students, they also employed the most ‘expectation statements (23.33%) (i.e. *I hope you can help me to pass the course*), followed by imperatives (16.67%) (i.e. *Please don't fail me*).

Table 5. Subcategories of direct strategies adopted by the two groups in high imposition request

Request types	Imperatives	Performative	Want statements	Need statements	Expectation statements	Total direct strategies used
Higher-level	6.67%	13.33%	10.00%	0.00%	36.67%	66.67%
Lower-level	16.67%	6.67%	13.33%	3.33%	23.33%	63.33%

4.2 Comparison of Politeness Features Used

4.2.1 Internal modifications. As for the use of internal modifiers, the results of the *chi-square* test showed the use of syntactic downgraders ($X^2= 2.695, P=0.260, P>0.05$), and lexical downgraders ($X^2=2.301, P=0.317, P> 0.05$) between the two groups were both statistically insignificant. Table 6 shows different types of syntactic downgraders used by

both groups. The totals in Table 6 indicate that for both groups, less than half of the email requests were modified by adding syntactic politeness devices (shown in the Total row), and higher level group used more syntactic downgraders (40%) than the lower level group (23.3%).

Table 6. Comparison of different syntactic downgraders used by the two groups

Syntactic Downgraders	Req. bending rule	
	Higher	Lower
past tense	23.33%	10.00%
progressive aspect	6.67%	3.33%
Embedding	23.33%	13.33%
Total	40.00%	23.33%

Note: (1) % indicates the percentage of messages within each request type that contained the type of modification indicated; percentages add up to more than 100% since syntactic devices are not mutually exclusive but can occur together. (2) The total includes all emails with syntactic modifications.

Table 7 shows the percentage of email messages with lexical downgraders used by both groups. The totals in Table 7 suggested for both groups, less than half of the emails were internally modified by adding lexical downgraders. A close examination of specific lexical politeness devices revealed that ‘politeness marker’ (i.e., *please*) was the most preferred lexical downgrader by both groups, particularly for the lower level group. Only the higher level students used ‘downtoner’ (i.e., *possibly, perhaps, maybe..*) and consultative device (i.e., *Would it be possible....*) as politeness devices to modify the requestive head act lexically.

Table 7. Comparison of different Lexical downgraders used by the two groups

Lexical Downgraders	Req. bending rule	
	Higher	Lower
politeness marker (please)	23.33%	33.33%
Subjectivizer	3.33%	3.33%
consultative device	6.67%	0.00%
Downtoner	20.00%	0.00%
Understate	0.00%	0.00%
Hedges	0.00%	0.00%
Total	46.67%	36.67%

Note: (1) % indicates the percentage of messages within each request type that contained the type of modification indicated; percentages add up to more than 100% since lexical devices are not mutually exclusive but can occur together. (2) The total includes all emails with lexical modifications.

4.2.2 External modifications. As for the use of external modifiers, the result of the *chi-square* test showed the use of supportive moves ($X^2= 5.359, P=0.499, P>0.05$) between the two groups was statistically insignificant. Table 8 shows the percentage of email messages with supportive moves used by the both groups. The totals in Table 8 suggest both groups invariably used supportive move(s) as their politeness devices to externally modify their requests. A close examination of specific supportive moves revealed that ‘grounder’ was used nearly by all participants. The next most employed external move was ‘acknowledge imposition’ for higher level group and ‘apology’ for lower level group. As for other external modifiers such as ‘preparator’, ‘precommitment’, ‘sweetener’, ‘direct appeal’ and ‘showing

the effort’, the higher level group used more of these modifiers than their less proficient counterparts, although ‘imposition minimizer’ (i.e., ...*under the circumstances that...*) did not appear in the data of both groups.

Table 8. Comparison of Different Supportive moves used by the two groups

Supportive move	Req. bending rule	
	Higher	Lower
(1) preparatory	16.67%	6.67%
(2) precommitment	23.33%	13.33%
(3) grounder	110.00%	90.00%
(4) acknow.imposition	80.00%	63.33%
(5) promise	46.67%	63.33%
(6) expectation	13.33%	16.67%
(7) sweetener	13.33%	3.33%
(8) apology	66.67%	86.67%
(9) thanking	56.67%	76.67%
(10) direct appeal	26.67%	16.67%
(11) imposition minimizer	0.00%	0.00%
(12) importance	13.33%	10.00%
(13) effort	20.00%	3.33%
(14) giving options	3.33%	0.00%
Total	100.00%	100.00%

Note: (1) % indicates the percentage of messages within each request type that contained the type of modification indicated; percentages add up to more than 100% since supportive moves are not mutually exclusive but can occur together. (2) The total includes all emails with supportive moves.

4.2.3 Sequences of supportive moves. For the position and sequence of supportive moves used, the results showed that both groups preferred the use of both pre-request, and pre-and post- supportive moves, and used very few post-request moves as the sequences of external modifiers (see Table 9). For the two most preferred supportive moves (both pre- and pre- and post- supportive moves), grounders’ were always used before the requestive acts. In other words, the reasons or justifications were always stated first before the actual requestive act was made. Kirkpatrick (1991) pointed out that Chinese indirectness and politeness is established by “because--- therefore” sequence rather than “therefore-- because” structure. The use of pre- grounders in the current study also follows the “because--therefore” sequence and this indirect, inductive way of making requests marks the manifestation of Chinese indirectness and politeness in the use of lengthy supportive moves and pre-grounders at the discourse level. It also explains the little use of post-request moves found in the current study.

Table 9. Position of supportive moves by two groups

Position of supportive moves	Higher level group (30 email messages)	Lower level group (30 email messages)
Pre-request move	12 (40%)	14 (46.7%)
Post-request move	2 (6.7%)	1 (3.3%)
Both pre-and post-moves	16 (53.3%)	15 (50%)

In sum, the data reveals that subjects of both linguistic proficiency levels did not differ significantly in their use of requestive head act, and internal and external modifications. Subjects of both linguistic proficiency levels adopted more direct strategies for the high imposition request in the current study, and ‘expectation statements’ (i.e., *I hope you could understand and let me pass the course.*) was the most preferred requestive head act for both groups. Other more direct strategies which entails the impolite perlocution such as the use of ‘performative’ by higher level students (i.e. *You must give me a chance to pass this course*) and the use of ‘imperative’ by lower level students (i.e. *Let me pass, please*) did also occur in the data. As for the use of politeness features, the results show that both groups invariably used a lot more supportive moves, particularly pre- request moves, than syntactic or lexical downgraders as the politeness devices to soften the requestive force in their email requests. Although not differed significantly, the higher level group did show somewhat more repertoires than lower level group in the use of both internal and external modifiers for their email request in this study.

4.3 Factors which might influence students' choices of politeness strategies

4.3.1 Perceived level of imposition of the email task. From the interviews and questionnaires, students pointed out that the request scenario in the writing task imposed heavily on their professor and thus, they should be more polite in addressing their request. In order to show their politeness, they should be more indirect as they pointed out in its Chinese equivalence, “wei-wan”, in the interview. However, from the realization of their request strategies, direct strategies, particularly ‘expectation statements’ (i.e., *I hope.....*), were used most extensively by both groups. From interviews, students indicated that the Chinese equivalent of “I hope...”, “Wo Xiwang...”, is perceived as a very polite strategy for them since the realization of this strategy is considered as being very modest and humble in Chinese. Besides, they pointed out that strategies of ‘expectation statements’ and other more direct strategy such as “imperative” and “performative” would make their request more concise and less ambiguous. Being clear would be critically important for them, since the compliance of the request will result in either passing or failing the course.

To show their indirectness, students also adopted lengthy supportive moves by using ‘grounders’, and other face work strategies such as ‘preparator’, ‘apology’, and ‘acknowledging imposition’ prior to the actual request. Students pointed out that they should engage in phatic communication (i.e., small talk) first by giving compliment or apology, etc, and then provided justifiable reasons and explanations before bringing up the main requestive act. By doing so, they were able to show their sincerity, politeness and respect to the addressee, and thus, they believed their request would more likely to be granted.

4.3.2 Levels of linguistic proficiency. It is clear from the comparison of the data that higher level students have access to more linguistic resources and thus are able to elaborate more in their emails by using more numbers and types of internal downgraders and supportive moves. On the other hand, lower level students were limited by their linguistic abilities and thus wrote less in producing fewer grammatical mistakes.

4.3.3 Transfer of L1 pragmatic knowledge. From the interviews, students revealed that they were fully aware they were using Chinese rhetoric in terms of the position of supportive moves because that’s how they would sequence their request E-mails in Chinese. However, they also pointed out that without the contextual knowledge in making a proper English email request to professors, they could only resort to their existed L1 pragmatics by using the seemingly direct strategies (i.e. *I hope.....; You must....., Let me pass, please.....*) for being clear and concise, and by using lengthy supportive moves prior to the request for being polite and indirect.

4.4 Difficulties Encountered in Composing Email Request

As for the difficulties encountered in composing the email requests, the results pointed

towards two aspects of problematic areas: insufficient knowledge of linguistic usages and pragmatics in making e-mail request in English. More students from the higher level group indicated that it was not so much of the language problem but how to make their request messages sound more polite by using idiomatic expressions in English. The lower level group students, on the other hand, stressed their difficulties in finding the proper words and correct grammar, and also in locating the politeness expressions in their email messages. In sum, higher level group of students were more concerned about the sociopragmatic aspect of their email messages while lower level students were struggling with both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic aspects of their email content.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

This study intends to explore Taiwanese EFL Learners' pragmatic competence in the production of formal written request via email to faculty in the institutional setting. It sets to find out the preferred use of request strategies including their choice of linguistic forms of the head act, the internal and external modifications, and the information sequencing of the email messages by the two linguistic level groups.

The findings of the current study pointed out that both higher and lower Linguistic groups preferred to use direct strategies in making high imposition email request. This phenomenon reveals that students' preference in making their requestive head acts more explicit and concise, and seemingly more direct (according to CCSARP scale) in order to avoid ambiguity on the addressee, since the consequence of failing or passing the course is at stake. It should be noted that students' perceptions regarding 'expectation statements' (i.e., *I hope that you...*) were neither direct nor impolite since such request statements showed concerns for the hearer's ability or willingness and were thus regarded a conventionally indirect request (Yu, 1999). It could also be inferred that at this stage of the interpragmatic development, both groups are still strongly influenced by their L1 pragmatics since the conventional request strategies are not their main choices in making proper email requests in the target language.

As for the politeness features used, the results pointed out that as students' linguistic level increased, the amount of internal and external modifiers were not substantially increased in their emails. However, the higher level students started to draw on more types and more numbers of internal as well as external modifiers, an indication of developmental sequences. However, since some of the internal modifiers were never or limitedly utilized by higher proficiency students, it revealed that these devices, which do not exist in Chinese language, may not be acquired by mere exposure; explicit teaching should be the key for students to effectively learn these politeness features. Regarding the sequences of the supportive moves, both groups prefer the inductive move pattern ("justification-request") which may not agree with the deductive move pattern ("request-justification") preferred by

the native Anglo-American culture (Kong, 1998). Since this may cause confusion or even negative perception on the recipients of the target language, explicit instruction would be useful in clarifying the different writing rhetoric across different cultures.

As revealed by the questionnaire and interviews, students believe that being indirect (as in its Chinese equivalence, “Wei-Wan”) was considered as the most respectful way of showing politeness and it was manifested largely via the use of “expectation statement” and pre-posed supportive moves. In addition, students were also aware that they were using Chinese rhetoric particularly in the patterns of supportive moves. However, while lacking the contextual knowledge in how to make a proper English request to professors, they can only resort to their existing L1 pragmatics. In other words, students’ difficulties in composing email requests to higher-ups in institutional settings can be addressed in terms of their limited resources in sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge required in the task of this study. As for the developmental continuum, this study has discovered that as students’ linguistic level advances, more numbers and types of internal as well as external modifiers would emerge in their email requests. However, what constitutes the polite head act and the proper use of diverse internal and external strategies should be made explicit in the language classroom, so students could be equipped with effective means to make effective upward email request.

This paper has its limitations in several aspects. First, the subjects are limited to Taiwanese, English-major students, and hence, conclusions drawn upon may have its limited application. Secondly, the subjects participated in the study were of only two linguistic levels. Therefore, the developmental features of their interlanguage pragmatics, manifested in the politeness strategies can only reflect the partial interlanguage developmental continuum in this regard. Thus, future research which involves more subjects from different academic fields and linguistic levels are suggested. Finally, future studies can include the baseline data of the email requests of Chinese and English native speakers. This would allow us to better identify which aspects of the requesting behavior are of L1 transfer, and which parts would be developmental errors. Being able to write polite as well as appropriate request emails to professors would equip students with another effective medium to interact with professors (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005). When EFL students are made aware of which request types and politeness devices are proper to use when interacting with professors via e-mail, their chances to gain positive feedback will thus increase, leading to better chances for them to succeed in academic settings.

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