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(In)formal Requests in Students' Emails in an Academic Context

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to provide an overview of the rhetorical strategies found in university students' emails when they write to faculty members. The analysis is based on a self-compiled corpus of 100 emails written in English and sent to the author by the English major students at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana over a one-year period. More specifically, the paper examines the sample for the use of forms of address and request strategies, such as the level of directness, internal modification and request perspective. The findings reveal a preference for conventionally indirect strategies and a significant use of consultative devices and subjectivizers. The results highlight the students' awareness of formality and politeness in academic email communication, reflecting in most cases their sensitivity to the hierarchical nature of the student-teacher relationship.

Keywords: students' emails, academic settings, forms of address, requests, Slovenia

(Ne)formalne prošnje v študentski e-pošti v akademskem okolju

IZVLEČEK

Prispevek ponuja pregled retoričnih strategij, ki jih študenti uporabljajo v svojih e-poštnih sporočilih učiteljem. Analiza temelji na lastno sestavljenem korpusu 100 e-poštnih sporočil v angleščini, ki so jih študenti angleškega jezika na Filozofski fakulteti Univerze v Ljubljani v obdobju enega leta poslali avtorici prispevka. Preučuje uporabo nagovorov in strategij v prošnjah, kot so stopnja neposrednosti, notranja modifikacija in perspektiva prošnje. Ugotovitve kažejo na prevlado konvencionalno posrednih strategij ter izrazito uporabo posvetovalnih sredstev in subjektivizatorjev. Rezultati poudarjajo študentovo zavedanje formalnosti in vljudnosti v akademski e-poštni komunikaciji, kar v večini primerov odraža njihovo občutljivost za hierarhično naravo odnosa med študentom in učiteljem.

Ključne besede: študentska e-pošta, akademsko okolje, nagovori, prošnje, Slovenija

1 Introduction

Email has become a prevalent and preferred medium of communication for both business and private purposes. It is popular due to its easy and rapid exchange of information, simple use and low cost, resulting in greatly simplified communication (Sproull and Kiesler 1991, 84–91). According to Statista (2023), approximately 333.2 billion emails were sent and received per day worldwide in 2022, which equates to around 3.8 million emails per second. This number has been projected to increase by 12% by the end of 2025.

Although there are no exact sector-specific statistics available on the number of emails circulating in the educational sector, teachers do tend to receive a considerable number throughout the day, especially at the tertiary level, since students often need extra information and opt for email as the quickest and most convenient way of contacting university staff members. In a small-scale online study (Teacher Tapp 2021), around two-thirds of primary and secondary school teachers surveyed said they receive between five and 20 emails per day, but this number is usually higher in tertiary settings, especially before and during exam periods.

However, compared to the well-codified rules of formal letter writing, it seems there are few predetermined standard email writing rules that are explicitly taught, which can cause uncertainties regarding style and politeness strategies (Biesenbach-Lucas 2006), and can also cause misunderstandings because of the lack of well-developed and generally accepted practices (Kiesler, Siegel, and McGuire 1984). Moreover, the expansion of social networking and instant messaging has influenced the degree of formality and politeness that is expected, making email correspondence less formal and more spontaneous. In fact, it has been claimed that email has made professors not only much more approachable, but too accessible, erasing boundaries that traditionally kept students at a healthy distance (Glater 2006). Complaints from faculty teaching staff regarding students' emails range from unreasonable requests, impolite tone and sentence fragments to inappropriate informality, inappropriate salutations, abbreviations and the use of emoticons (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Glater 2006; Vuković and Bratić 2012).

For that reason, some educational institutions have decided to issue official guidelines for appropriate email communication to help both their students and teachers. These mainly concern email etiquette and explain when and when not to write an email, what types of messages will not be answered, how to use appropriate language and tone, and how messages should be drafted, along with templates for different objectives (e.g. personal requests, feedback on assignments, etc.). However, these rules are not generally accepted, and may vary across universities and countries. In addition, the student-teacher relationship can play a significant role when it comes to the level of appropriateness in email correspondence. As Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) states, less formal formulae may become common with more contact hours between students and their lecturers. While some teachers tolerate informality in emails, others include specific guidelines in their syllabi regarding email etiquette and explicitly state they will not respond unless the email is checked for spelling, grammatical accuracy, vocabulary use and proper structure. The attitude and tolerance depend on the teacher, as different teachers have different reactions to student emails and may interpret the

same message in different ways. Fraser and Nolen (1981, 96) argued half a century ago that no sentence is inherently polite or impolite, since the conditions under which sentences and expressions are used determine the judgement of politeness. Furthermore, Biesenbach-Lucas (2006, 85) determined that direct requests are typically perceived as more polite "if they are considered appropriate for a given situation depending on role expectations as well as rights and obligations of interaction participants".

Since this paper focuses on emails written in English by non-native speakers, it should be highlighted that writing "status-unequal emails", such as student-faculty emails, is a task that is demanding both linguistically and culturally, because there are culture-specific norms and values reflected in these high-stakes emails (Chen 2006, 36).

2   Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in Speech Act Theory (SAT), originally proposed by the philosopher John L. Austin (1962). He established the relationship between **form** (the set of lexical units that make up sentences) and **function** (the possibility to fulfil the communicative intention of the speaker and perform various actions by uttering these sentences in a given situation). In addition to the meaning, all utterances contain a dynamic communicative element that maintains interaction between speakers (Thomas 1995, 31), which is the postulate of SAT.

A speech act is the basic and minimal unit of communication, which consists of (a) *a locutionary act* (the utterance of a well-formed, meaningful sentence), (b) *an illocutionary act* (the communicative force of the utterance, e.g. promising, warning, denying, etc.), and (c) *a perlocutionary act* (the effect of the utterance on the hearer / reader) (Yule 1996, 48–49). In other words, language and speech are used to act, since we influence others through what we say. Speech acts can be *direct*, when there is a connection between the meaning of a linguistic structure and its function, and *indirect*, when there is no such connection, as in hints, insinuations, irony, or metaphor (Yule 1996, 54–56), where the speaker's intention can only be established based on context.

According to Searle (1975) and Cohen (1996), speech acts can be classified into five groups based on their functions. These are:

i.   *Declaratives:* speech acts that perform the proposition of declaration (e.g. baptism, marriage, blessing, etc.);

ii. *Representatives:* speech acts that describe a state of affairs (e.g. assertions, statements, claims, etc.);

iii. *Expressives:* speech acts that indicate the speaker's psychological state or attitude towards the proposition (e.g. admiration, contempt, apology, etc.);

iv. *Directives:* speech acts that cause the reader / hearer to perform a certain action (e.g. instructions, advice, orders, requests, etc.);

v.   *Commissives:* speech acts that commit the speaker to a future action (e.g. promises, oaths, threats, etc.).

This paper focuses on requests, i.e. directive speech acts, in which the speaker attempts to make the hearer carry out a particular action in response to what has been said. According to the politeness theory established by Brown and Levinson (1987), requests are considered to be face-threatening acts (FTAs), because the speaker can affect the needs and desires of the hearer's face, as their freedom is affected. Therefore, the speaker should minimize or mitigate the threat by using politeness strategies. For language learners, making requests is a challenging task, as they need extensive cultural and linguistic knowledge to realize this speech act successfully and not threaten the recipient's face (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1984).

The analysis of the requests is based on the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Patterns (CCSARP) framework, proposed by Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper's (1989), which was later modified by Biesenbach-Lucas (2006, 2007) and tailored to the email context. According to them, requests consist of three main parts:

i. the *alerter*, i.e. an opening element, which can include items like attention getters (e.g. *Pardon me…*) and terms of address (e.g. *Mrs. Smith*);
ii. the *head ac*t, i.e. a minimal linguistic unit that can function independently as a request; and
iii. the *supportive moves*, i.e. modifications that precede or follow the head act and serve the purpose of either mitigating or aggravating the force of the request.

Within the head act, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) proposed a continuum of request strategies based on the level of directness encoded in the head act. Three main levels are distinguished in this continuum:

i. *direct strategies*, which explicitly express the speaker's intention (e.g., imperatives, want statements, or performatives such as *I'm asking you to…*);
ii. *conventionally indirect strategies*, in which the request is framed through socially shared linguistic conventions such as ability or willingness queries (e.g., *Could you open the window?*); and
iii. *non-conventionally indirect strategies*, often realized as hints, where the desired action must be inferred from the context (e.g., *It's really hot in here* as a hint for opening a window).

Apart from the level of directness, the head act can also vary in terms of research perspective. A request can be *speaker-oriented* (emphasizing the agent, e.g., *Can I have it?*), *hearer-oriented* (focusing on the recipient, e.g., *Can you do it?*), *inclusive* (involving both, e.g., *Can we start cleaning now?*), or *impersonal* (avoiding specific actors, e.g., *It needs to be cleaned*). These perspectives carry different social meanings, especially since requests are inherently imposing.

Beyond the head act itself, the CCSARP framework also emphasizes the role of modification in shaping the force and acceptability of requests. Internal modification occurs within the request sentence, often through syntactic and lexical downgraders such as interrogative forms, modal verbs (*could, might*), or mitigating adverbs (*just, maybe*). These devices soften the impositive force without changing the central illocutionary intention. External modification,

on the other hand, consists of supportive moves that occur before or after the head act, such as grounders (justifications for the request), preparators (signals preceding a request), and disarmers (acknowledgements of potential inconvenience).

In applying this framework to authentic email data, Biesenbach-Lucas (2006, 2007) identified several challenges that necessitated modifications to the original taxonomy because of pragmatic and medium-specific constraints. For example, she added certain request realizations that were not addressed in CCSARP and omitted those that did not occur in email requests. She also highlighted the inconsistent coding of strategies like *want* and *need* statements. While CCSARP classifies them as direct, she demonstrated that in emails they can also be coded as indirect or as hints, depending on pragmatic interpretation. These modifications underscore the need to expand and refine the coding in order to adequately take into account distinctive features of request realization in the email medium.

Taken together, the CCSARP framework provides a powerful lens for analysing requests as complex pragmatic acts that combine strategy choice, linguistic form, and social meaning. By distinguishing between levels of directness and types of modification, the model makes visible the cultural variability in the way speakers manage face and negotiate social relationships through language. It also lays the groundwork for the study of cross-cultural pragmatics, as learners often transfer request strategies from their first language, leading to patterns of overuse, underuse, or pragmatic failure in the target language. In this way, the theoretical framework for requests not only illuminates cross-cultural variations, but also deepens our understanding of the pragmatics of second language use and learning.

3 Previous Research

Student-teacher email correspondence at university level has gained increasing attention in recent years, especially because this means of communication has largely replaced face-to-face enquiries about study matters, changing the interaction in academic contexts drastically. Initial research studies were triggered by the necessity to regulate chaotic and random language use in student emails, which was described as a mixture of written and spoken language and leaned towards informality, and to pinpoint and address the problem of students improperly addressing their teachers and forming their requests inappropriately.

Using either discourse-completion tests or authentic emails, previous research studies on email requests have predominantly explored rhetorical strategies in relation to the level of imposition and the cultural dimension, but also investigated differences between native speakers (NSs) and non-native speakers of English (NNSs) and teachers' (recipients') attitudes towards the received emails.

First, the level of imposition of the request may determine the degree of directness or indirectness. Low imposition requests require little or no preparation on the part of the teacher (e.g. asking for routine information, asking for additional material, informing about absence, etc.), while high imposition requests are intrusive in terms of teachers' time and workload (e.g. extending a submission deadline, asking for feedback on the paper during holidays, etc.). Students will usually select more direct strategies for lower imposition requests, but not

for the highest imposition requests (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig 1996). However, this is not always the case. According to Tseng (2016), Taiwanese students, regardless of their English proficiency, frequently opt for direct strategies for high imposition requests, particularly by using 'expectation statements' (*I hope that…*) and 'want statements' (*I would like to*). These students do not perceive these strategies to be impolite, as the same realizations in Chinese are modest and humble. In addition, Tseng concludes that Taiwanese students prefer more explicit and concise requestive head acts to avoid ambiguity and to urge the teacher to respond favourably.

Another key factor in email communication is the cultural dimension of power distance, connected to the distribution of power and authority in certain cultures. In educational settings, this dimension directly concerns the student-teacher relationship. High power distance (HPD) cultures favour a strict hierarchy and foster inequality, which means that teachers are seen as authority figures with higher social power who thus should be treated with respect. In contrast, low power distance (LPD) cultures are egalitarian and based on teacher-student equality. Students from relatively HPD cultures are more likely to use formal alternatives in their email openings and closings (Bjorge 2007). However, Salazar Campillo (2018) investigated the openings in emails written by Spanish students in both English and Spanish. Although the sample was small, the results showed that these students did not transfer the expected behaviour to email, as the forms of address used did not match the HPD index for Spain. Most of the students did not use markers of politeness in openings in either of the languages, and addressed their lecturers using their first names.

When it comes to the difference between NSs and NNSs, it seems that NSs use more mitigators (Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig 1996), more modal constructions and hedged expressions (Biesenbach-Lucas and Weasenforth 2000), and employ a higher frequency and a wider variety of politeness strategies (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Chen 2001; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2008, 2010; Félix-Brasdefer 2009). These research studies showed that NNS students' emails are characterized by significant directness, an absence of lexical/phrasal downgraders and a common use of want statements, imperatives and performatives. Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996) found that NNSs use on average less than one politeness marker, largely relying on the marker 'please'. They rarely use internal modifications to soften the imposition of requests, and more frequently turn to the use of external modifications, i.e. giving reasons or explaining a problem (Balman and Lee 2020; Hassall 2012).

Finally, the limited range of lexical and syntactic modifiers in non-native English-speaking students' emails has an influence on how they are perceived by their teachers. Since NNSs used fewer politeness strategies and mitigating devices, their requests were seen as less effective by their teachers (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig 1996; Savić 2018). Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996) highlighted that NNSs mentioned personal time needs more frequently and were self-centred in their communications, rarely acknowledging the imposition on faculty members, which led to a negative perlocutionary effect on the faculty member. Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011, 3209) argues that such emails can cause pragmatic infelicities "as they appear to give the faculty no choice in complying with the request and fail to acknowledge the imposition involved".

Previous interlanguage research on email requests indicates that non-native English-speaking students, regardless of their proficiency level, struggle when writing emails to their university professors to a large extent because of a lack of appropriate pragmatic knowledge and awareness of the politeness conventions used in the asymmetrical student-professor relationship (cf. Economidou-Kogetsidis, Savić, and Halenko 2021). For example, Tseng (2016) noted that students often choose more direct request strategies in the false belief that their professors will act promptly if their messages sound urgent. This can be attributed to varying cultural backgrounds and transfer of politeness markers from their L1, which are perceived by their professors as inadequate in the target language, English.

4 Methodology

The participants in all the above-mentioned research studies were graduate students from different countries (e.g. Indonesia, Spain, United Arab Emirates, Taiwan, China, Japan, Greece, Norway, the UK, and the USA) attending various study programmes. The English language proficiency for non-native speakers ranged from pre-intermediate to advanced. Zhu (2012), on the other hand, compared English majors and non-English majors at a university in China by using a discourse completion test to elicit emails for a given situation.

This research aims to be more specific, investigating email writing among South-Slavic speakers who are English-majors. The data were comprised of 100 student-initiated emails written in English by 73 undergraduate students of English at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana (71% female, 29% male). On average, there were 65 words per email. All the students are native speakers of Slovene, who at the time attended the first or the second year of their studies. In terms of English language proficiency, the majority were at B2–C1 level (The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages – CEFR). Although no placement test was administered prior to enrolment, they all presumably reached the B2 level at their Matura exam upon finishing secondary education. It is presumed that these students were also equipped with sufficient cultural knowledge of English-speaking countries and were eager to embrace these norms. As future English experts, they were likely to have a certain level of pragmatic awareness of what is and is not appropriate when writing in English.

The emails were collected over the course of two semesters, from October 2020 to June 2021. The messages were produced in an academic context by non-native speakers of English belonging to the same cultural background and were sent to the non-native teacher. Only the initial emails in a conversation were considered for the analysis, and not replies and responses to the teacher. All the emails were low imposition requests, with the students enquiring about office hours, notifying the teacher of their absence or asking to swap groups.

Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper's speech act analysis and their CCSARP coding scheme (1989, 275–89), later modified by Biesenbach-Lucas (2006, 2007), was adapted in this paper to analyse email requests, following the methodological steps in Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011). After the analysis of salutations, i.e. opening and closing phrases, any emails containing requests were further investigated in terms of language and structure. There were requests in 72 emails. Each request was examined for request modification strategies, in particular: (1) the level of directness, (2) internal modification, and (3) the request perspective.

The study centres around the following research questions:

i. What opening and closing phrases are used by Slovene students writing emails in English?
ii. Which request strategies do they use when writing email requests?
iii. Which lexical/syntactic modifiers do they use when writing email requests?
iv. To what extent do they use internal modifications as mitigating devices to soften the force of their requests in emails?
v. Which request perspective do they most frequently select?

The next section focuses first on forms of address, i.e. openings and closings, and then further analyses the students' requests in terms of the level of directness, internal modification and request perspective.

5 Findings and Discussion

5.1 Forms of Address

Although some authors in the past claimed that openings and closings are optional elements in email communication (Crystal 2006), forms of address perform an important social role in teacher-student formal correspondence as they establish the social relationship between the sender and the recipient and their omission may result in impolite messages (Salazar Campillo 2023, 322). The use of opening and closing phrases shows a degree of respect to the teacher. According to Hofstede (2001), Slovenia is a high-power society and culture, which means that people accept a hierarchical order and do not question authority. In academic communication, students would be expected to use formal and polite language to address teachers. Table 1 lists the phrases found in openings in the students' emails.

TABLE 1. Opening phrases in students' emails.

The opening phrase	The frequency (%)
Dear + academic title (Professor/Prof./Dr.) + surname	31
Dear + academic title (Dear Professor/professor)	28
Hi/Hello/Greetings	14
Dear + non-academic / general title (Ms) + surname	11
Dear + marital status (Mrs, Miss) / madam + surname	8
Good morning/afternoon/evening	3
Dear + academic title + first name	3
Other (only surname, only Dear)	2

All the emails used an opening phrase. The most frequent salutations (59%) employed a pragmatically and grammatically acceptable combination of the use of 'dear' followed by the academic title and/or the surname. Some openings were acceptable, but not formal (14%), including *Hi*, *Hello* and *Greetings*. Others could be seen as offensive due to the employment

of an incorrect title, i.e. a general title (11%), or even the use of a title associated with the person's marital status (8%). A minority of the emails (8%) were pragmatically inadequate, as they used the first name or the greeting for a particular time of day or an abrupt use of only the surname and an unexpected sole use of 'dear'. Although an analysis of spelling, punctuation and capitalization is outside the scope of this paper (cf. Lan 2000), it should be noted that an exclamation mark was used quite frequently after formal phrases, which is not common in English (e.g. *Dear Professor!*)

As Table 2 illustrates, when it comes to closings, the majority opted for formal closing phrases, including *Kind regards* and *Best regards* (60%). Almost a fifth of the emails ended with less formal phrases, such as *Best*, *All the best* and *Best wishes*. One in ten emails did not use any phrase, but only a pre-closing move, such as *Thank you*, *Have a great weekend* or *Wish you a nice day*. A typical ending for letter writing *(Yours) Sincerely* was sporadically found (8%). Finally, only 2% of the emails had an abrupt ending, with the students only signing their name and omitting a closing phrase.

Table 2. Closing phrases in students' emails.

The closing phrase	The frequency (%)
Kind/Best regards	60
No phrase (only a pre-closing move)	10
Best	9
Sincerely / Yours sincerely	8
All the best	6
Best wishes	4
No sign-off	2
Respectfully	1

Greetings and closings in emails are regarded as essential variables in "maintaining politeness and showing respect towards the addressee" (Hallajian and David 2014, 86). These findings reveal that more than a half of the students show a high degree of sensitivity towards the use of formal expressions used as forms of address at the beginning and end of their emails. However, a significant proportion of the future English language experts in our sample still used less formal or even informal phrases. It remains unclear whether other factors influenced formality, such as, for example, the teacher's academic title or age, or even the low degree of imposition of their requests.

In similar studies in two other high power distance cultures, the results were different and did not corroborate Hofstede's results (2001). In a Spanish academic setting, Salazar Campillo (2018) analysed the emails written by Spanish students enrolled in a master's programme. The students' level of proficiency was above B2 CEFR in English. Although almost all of the emails included opening and closing formulae, the vast majority used informal openings (68%), with a greeting followed by the lecturer's first name. Interestingly, 52% of the emails included a pre-

closing move of thanking together with a leave-taking formula. Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) conducted research with Greek Cypriot university students enrolled in various undergraduate and postgraduate study programmes. Their English language proficiency varied from lower intermediate to advanced (A2–C1 CEFR). The results revealed an unexpectedly high number of emails without an opening (83.5%) and without a closing (77%).

We can conclude that the results of this research study reflect the students' awareness of the unequal relationship with the teacher, as very few emails employ informal phrases.

5.2 Levels of Directness

The requests in the student emails analysed in this study had a relatively low degree of imposition. They included students asking to enrol in one of the study groups, to swap groups, to attend another group's class or to choose a topic for a presentation. Low-imposition requests do not require much preparation on the part of professors, as students are asking for routine information (Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig 1996, 60). However, since any request is a face-threatening act, even for low-imposition requests students need to use specific politeness strategies to mitigate the threat.

A total of 86 request heads were identified in the dataset. As was previously mentioned, a head act is the core part of a request sequence which realizes a request (Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989, 17). Table 3 summarizes the use of different request strategies with three levels of directness: (a) direct, explicit level, (b) conventionally indirect level, and (c) non-conventional indirect level (known as hints).

Table 3. The use of different request strategies.

Directness levels	Request strategies	%
DIRECT	Want statements	21
	Imperatives	8
	Performatives	7
	Direct questions	2
	Expectation statements	1
CONVENTIONALLY INDIRECT	Query preparatory	55
HINTS	Strong hints	6

The most frequent strategy in the corpus is query preparatory (55%), at the conventionally indirect level. According to Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989, 280), a conventionally indirect request is an utterance which contains a reference to a preparatory condition for the feasibility of the request. It is also called query preparatory, as the speaker often questions the presence of the chosen condition. Although some findings point to NNSs usually selecting more direct requests than NSs (e.g. Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig 1996), conventionally indirect strategies were dominant in this dataset.

In the students' emails, willingness and permission were typical conditions, realized by the use of modal verbs, such as 'could' in example (1) or 'would' in examples (2) and (3):

(1) _Could_ you add me to one please?

(2) _Would_ you be so kind to explain this to me one more time?

(3) _Would_ it be possible to change groups?

As can be seen from the table, 39% of requests employed direct request strategies, most commonly a want statement (21%). This statement conveys the speaker's wish for the event in the proposition to happen, usually with the use of the phrase 'would like to' as shown in example (4) or the verb 'want' in example (5):

(4) I _would like to_ attend the Wednesday's class.

(5) I _want_ to kindly ask you to assign me to a group that is still free.

The students generally avoided direct questions and expectation statements in their requests. Sporadically, the requests were also realized by the grammatical mood, exclusively the imperative, almost always with the polite marker 'please' as shown in example (6). The performative is illustrated in example (7), where the illocutionary verb 'ask' is used:

(6) _Please_ find attached my worksheet for tomorrow's presentation.

(7) I _am_ kindly _asking_ you if this week I can attend class with the group B.

Finally, hints were rather rare and were found in only 6% of requests. This request strategy is characterized by an implicit illocutionary intent, as in examples (8) and (9):

(8) I was told by my classmates to send you an email in order to get enrolled into one of the groups.

(9) It says that the enrolment is disabled or inactive.

In both examples, the students do not explicitly state the intended illocutionary act, but the utterance implies a request, since the students are implicitly asking to be enrolled. Although politeness is usually considered to be positively correlated with indirectness in English cultures, Blum-Kulka (1987, 144) claims that the most indirect request strategies, i.e. hints, may also be associated with a lack of politeness, because they "testify to a lack of [a speaker's] concern for pragmatic clarity".

5.3 Internal Modification

According to Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989, 60), internal modifiers are lexical and syntactic elements within the head act that modify request realization but do not affect the pragmatic force of a request. In other words, their presence is not essential for the utterance to be understood as a request. In the present study two categories of internal modification will be further analysed: (1) syntactic downgraders, and (2) lexical/phrasal downgraders.

5.3.1 Syntactic Downgraders

Syntactic downgraders modify the head act by the use of different syntactic structures, such as past tenses, aspect markings, embedded clauses and interrogatives. According to the results (Table 4), not all the students exploited syntactic modifiers. However, almost two thirds of requests were realized with the use of embedded clauses (34%) or interrogatives (27%).

Table 4. Syntactic downgraders in students' requests.

Sub-category	%
Embedded clauses	34
Interrogatives	27
Progressive aspect	16
Past tense	13

Although listed separately above, the past tense and progressive aspect were usually combined, as shown in example (10). In this analysis, past tense forms were viewed as downgraders if they were used with a present time reference and the durative aspect marker as a mitigating device, if this formulation could have been replaced by a simple form.

(10) *I was wondering if it would be possible for me to put my signature down on the list.*

This request also illustrates the combined use of an embedded conditional clause, which further mitigates the request. A greater degree of formality and politeness was often achieved with the conditionals, as in examples (11) and (12). They served as distancing elements, making a request more formal and polite:

(11) *I would greatly appreciate it if I could join the class.*

(12) *I would like to ask if there is any other way to enter the classroom.*

5.3.2 Lexical/Phrasal Downgraders

Lexical/phrasal downgraders are additional elements which mitigate the force of the request by modifying the head act with the use of specific lexical and phrasal choices (Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989, 283). Table 5 summarizes a quantitative analysis of these choices in the students' requests.

Table 5. Lexical/phrasal downgraders in students' requests.

Lexical/phrasal choices	Devices	%
Consultative devices	*would you mind, is it possible, is there a chance*	56
Subjectivizers	*I wonder, I think/suppose*	37
Marker 'please'	*please*	13
Downtoners	*possibly, perhaps, just*	1

The results indicate the dominant use of consultative devices (56%), which is in sharp contrast with the findings of Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011). These expressions are used to directly engage the hearer and seek their cooperation, shown in example (13). Furthermore, subjectivizers were the second most preferred modifiers (37%), almost exclusively realized by

the verb 'wonder'. According to Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989, 284), subjectivizers are elements conveying the speaker's personal opinion about the situation, thus lowering the assertive force of their request. In example (14), the student softens the request by introducing the subjectivizer and further mitigates it by employing the past progressive form.

(13) *Is there any chance I could be placed in any of the "faculty groups"?*

(14) *I was wondering if I can still take the exam.*

Although the marker 'please' seems to dominate in many studies (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Faerch and Kasper 1989; Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig 1996), it was only sporadically used in the requests in our corpus (13%). Finally, the downtoner 'possibly', a sentential or propositional modifier that can modify the impact of a request, was used only once.

It should be highlighted that the downgraders were sometimes used in combination; for example, the requests sometimes included the combination of a consultative device and the marker 'please', as seen in example (15), or a consultative device and a subjectivizer, as in example (16):

(15) *Would you mind helping me out, please?*

(16) *I wonder if it would be possible for me to attend the practical class on Tuesday.*

According to the analysed dataset, the Slovenian students were well aware of the formality level and avoided understaters (*a bit, a sort of*), cajolers (*You know, You see*) or appealers (*will you?*), which are considered inappropriate in written discourse.

5.4 Request Perspective

The study also analysed the request perspective adopted by the students. Depending on the perspective, requests can be (a) speaker-oriented, (b) hearer-oriented, (c) inclusive-oriented or (d) impersonal (Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989, 284). Languages differ in their general preference for the orientation perspective.

In this dataset, there was no instance of inclusive orientation, as shown in Table 6.

TABLE 6. Research perspective in students' requests.

Perspective	%
Speaker-oriented	68
Hearer-oriented	25
Inclusive-oriented	/
Impersonal	7

The most frequent orientation pattern was speaker- (or student-) orientation (68%), such as *Could I come to your office hours this Monday?* which can be interpreted as a request for permission. Gordon and Ervin-Tripp (1984, 308) note that speaker-perspective is considered

to be polite since the hearer is given the option of approving the speaker's wish. On the other hand, one quarter of the requests were hearer- (or teacher) oriented, including the examples: *Could you please send me an alternative for your office hours to discuss the presentation?* which directly imposes an action on the part of the hearer. Finally, only 7% of the requests were impersonal, without explicitly addressing either of the sides, such as *Would it be possible to change groups?*

6   Conclusion

Previous findings have suggested that NNSs from different language backgrounds modify their requests through external modifiers rather than internal modifiers, overuse direct strategies and choose the hearer-oriented request perspective. Also, in order to compensate for their limited linguistic resources, they favour the marker 'please', a strategy also found to be used by students from Asian backgrounds, including Korea, Japan, Taiwan and Thailand (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007), by Arab university students in the UAE (Deveci and Hmida 2017) and by Greek Cypriot students in Cyprus (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011).

Unlike in the above-cited studies, this research revealed that Slovene undergraduate students majoring in English use different devices to soften the impact of requestive force in their emails. Since politeness is associated with indirect strategies, the presence of syntactic and lexical modifiers and non-hearer-oriented request perspective, it can be concluded that the majority are equipped with sufficient pragmatic competence to facilitate formal and polite communication with a professor in academic contexts. This competence may to a large extent be attributed to the cultural and linguistic knowledge acquired throughout their studies. Zhu (2012), for example, compared the requestive strategies used by English majors and non-English majors, and revealed that English majors employed significantly more indirect requestive strategies and used more syntactic mitigation in the request head acts. On the other hand, the occasional use of less formal or informal phrases suggests some variability in students' adherence to formal email etiquette and potentially, a transfer of speech act norms from their native language use, as was argued by Biesenbach-Lucas (2007).

This research, however, has several limitations. The results cannot be generalizable, as the emails were received by only one teacher during a limited period of time. Future research could include emails received by other teaching staff and identify the relationship between the requesting strategies and the seniority and status of the addressee. Another interesting idea could be to investigate netiquette in institutionalized email communication with the emergence of AI-generated texts and compare them with findings from the pre-AI period. Finally, future studies could investigate potential gender differences in email communication practices and how these may affect perceptions of politeness and formality (cf. Salazar Campillo 2023). These future research directions could provide a deeper understanding of the factors influencing email communication practices in a second language and contribute to the development of teaching strategies for enhancing students' pragmatic competence in academic and professional settings.

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