

An Analysis of Iranian EFL Learners' English Written Requestive E-mails

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Abstract—Electronic mail is one of the widely used medium for institutional communication particularly in academic institutions. The main focus of this study was determining requesting strategies and mitigating elements used by the Iranians' EFL learners in English written requestive e-mails to their professors. This study also determined opening and closing strategies and supportive moves. To this aim, 61 e-mail were collected using DCT and analyzed by means of CCSARP (Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Pattern) coding scheme. The results showed that Iranian students, under the effect of L1 norms, used more direct strategies and to soften the force of requests they tended to use mitigating elements and pre-request supportive moves. It had been concluded that Iranian EFL students have lack of pragmatic knowledge; therefore, it is necessary to make them aware of norms of requestive e-mails written by English native speakers.

Index Terms—requestive e-mail, requesting strategies, opening and closing strategies, supportive moves, CCSARP

I. INTRODUCTION

Internet is one of the most remarkable inventions of human beings in communication. It developed in 1960s in the USA and rapidly infuses in all domains of human life. Today internet is one of the most widely used medium of communication. It regards as a channel which moves the barriers of distance and time and facilitates people's communication. Whatever the medium of communication is it affects the way people use language to communicate. In general, discourse is affected by the medium. "Discourse in one medium may be more complex syntactically, have more words, be more cohesive or cohesive in different way and have a different kind of macrostructure, or perhaps less structure, and so on" (Johnstone, 2008, p. 209). In other words, discourse in one medium is different from discourse in another medium. Medium of communication affects the text style. With the advent of the computer technology, various medium of communication are created including synchronous (e.g. chat, instant messaging) and asynchronous mediums (e.g. electronic mail). Each of these computer-mediated communications has its own structure of text. Electronic mail (e-mail), electrically mediated modes of communication, is one of the widely used medium for both interpersonal and institutional communication particularly in academic institutions (Crystal, 2006).

Persons perform various speech acts like requests, apologies, questions, orders, and greetings in their daily life. Request as one of the realization of speech acts attracted lots of attention. The present study is an analysis of Iranians' EFL learners' English written requestive e-mails to their professors.

II. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Communication by e-mail has become increasingly common place and important in corporate and institutional environment (Gians, 1999). As a result of increasing interest in email communication, numerous studies have been produced which have looked at emails as texts and have provided detailed descriptions of the nature and features of the language of email. Previous studies on e-mail have focused on a variety of aspects including the layout, structural components, style, and linguistics (Ho, 2010). For example, in an investigation into e-mail genre, Amirian and Tahririan (2003) found significant differences between emails and conventional letters regarding the strategies and lexicogrammatical features.

Theoretical framework of the present study are speech acts theory and politeness theory. Speech acts theory was developed by J.L Austin in 1962 and expanded by Searle in 1969. According to speech act theory, when we say something we are performing an act. Austin (1975) defines speech acts as conventional acts that we perform with language including requesting, asking, greeting, advising, thanking. J.L Searle classified speech acts into five categories. Searle proposed that all speech acts fall into one of these five main categories (cited in Saeed, p. 228).

These five categories are: representatives (e.g. asserting, concluding), directives (e.g. requesting, questioning), commissives (e.g. promising, threatening, offering), expressives (e.g. thanking, congratulating), and declarations (e.g. excommunicating, declaring, marrying).

Requesting is a common act performed by human beings. Therefore, the study of requesting behavior has attracted much attention. Request is one attempt by a speaker to get the hearer do what he wants him to do. According to Searle's (1979) classification of speech acts, requests fall under the category of directives. "These speech acts embody an effort on the part of the speaker to get the hearer to do something toward some goals" (May, 2001, p. 120). Requests are face-threatening acts (FTAs) based on Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987). In other words, requests threaten the addressee's face. Politeness is an expression of the speaker's intention to diminish face threats carried by certain face threatening speech acts toward another (Mills, 2003, p. 6). According to Brown and Levinson, degree of imposition, relative power, and social distance are determining factors in the level of politeness. Indirectness in requests is related to politeness in the way that indirect strategies are used to mitigate request's face threatening effect on the addressee. Pragmatic politeness theories (e. g., Leech 1983; and Brown and Levinson 1987) suggest a correlation between indirectness and politeness. Most empirical works focus on issues of indirectness and politeness. According to Leech (1983), indirectness implies optionality for the hearer, and the degree of politeness can be increased "by using a more indirect kind of illocution" (p. 108). Blum –kulka, & et al. (1989) identified three levels of directness as followed;

The level of directness

1. Direct level

Mood derivable: utterances in which the grammatical mood of the verb signals illocutionary force

Performatives: utterances in which illocutionary force is explicitly named

Hedged performatives: utterances in which naming of the illocutionary force is modified by hedging expressions

Obligation statements: utterances in which state the obligation of the heaven to carry out the act

Want statements: utterances in which state the speaker's desire that the hearer carries out the act

2. Conventionally indirect level

Suggestory formulate: utterances which contain a suggestion to do sth

Query preparatory: utterances containing reference to preparatory conditions as conventionalized in any specific language

3. Non-conventionally indirect level

Strong hints: utterances containing partial reference to objects or element needed for the implementation of the act

Mild hints: utterances that make no reference to the request proper but are interpretable as requests by context

Empirical research generally supports the broad distinction between three main levels of directness suggested by Brown and Levinson (1987). There has been an increasing amount of investigations on emails of L2 learners to their professors. Numerous studies applied CCSARP coding framework. Biesenbach-Lucas and Weasenforth (2000) employed the CCSARP coding framework to both NSs' and NNSs' e-mail requests to faculty. The study demonstrated that both NSs and NNSs opted direct and indirect strategies for their requests and the request strategies applied by both groups were approximately similar.

Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) examined requestive e-mail messages to study how native and nonnative English speaking graduate students develop low- and high-imposition requests to faculty. The results demonstrated that more requests were attained through direct strategies while the native speakers utilized more indirect strategies and therefore more e-polite messages to their professors.

Chang and Hsu (1998) applied CCSARP coding framework to investigate the differences between requestive e-mail messages of Chinese learners of English and Native American English speakers. The results indicated that the Chinese learners utilized indirect structures in their requests, while the linguistic forms which they applied were more direct. On the contrary, the Native American English speakers applied direct structures, while their linguistic forms were indirect.

Chen (2001) studied American and Taiwanese graduate students' e-mail requests to their professors. The study included opening features (salutation, greetings and etc...) and closing features (thanks and complementary closing). Findings demonstrated that opening and closing e-mail textual features were not utilized in the same ways by the two groups. Taiwanese and American students applied request strategies in emails that were different from each other. The degree of lexico-syntactic politeness in both groups was different. Native speakers used more indirect structure in their request emails.

Liaw (1996) examined 22 university students in Taiwan to determine the communication strategies (avoidance/reduction, achievement/compensatory, time-gaining/stalling devices) utilized by EFL learners and native speakers of English in e-mail interactions. The findings demonstrated that the NNSs have used most of communicative strategies which were commonly used in verbal communication.

Woodfield and Economidou-Kogetsidis (2010) examined the status-unequal requests of 95 ESL learners and 92 British English native speaker students. The requests were provoked by a written discourse completion task. They observed remarkable differences in all dimensions which were analyzed: internal and external modification and perspective. The results showed that learners' overuse zero marking in internal modification and overuse preparators in supportive moves. Native speakers used more requests applying impersonal perspective and a range of mitigating, elliptical and formulaic devices.

Hashemian (2014) investigated applying requestive speech act by Iranian nonnative speakers (NNSs) of English and Canadian native speakers (NSs) of English. CCSARP was utilized to observe the possible similarities and/or differences between the request, and the influence of the situational variables of power, distance, and etc. Findings demonstrated

that the Canadian culture is indirect and negative politeness oriented, since the Persian culture is more direct and positive-politeness oriented. The results also showed that Iranians utilized more variations in their requests and were more sensitive to power differences.

In line with the above contrastive studies, the present study takes a descriptive view. This study examines the requestive e-mail communication between Iranian EFL learners and their professors. It seeks to provide conceivable answers to the following questions;

1. What kind of level of directness is used by the students in their requestive e-mails?
2. What kinds of mitigators are used by the students in their requestive e-mails?
3. What are opening and closing strategies and supportive moves used by the students in their requestive e-mails?

III. METHOD

A. Participants

20 MA graduated students majoring in teaching English as a foreign language from the university of Guilan were recruited for this study. All of the participants were aged between 25 and 35. The participants consisted of 3 males and 17 females. They were all native speakers of Persian. The participants were selected because all of them had been sent e-mail requests to their professors.

B. Data Collection and Data Analysis

In order to collect requestive e-mails, a discourse completion task (DCT) was designed to elicit the data. Participants were asked to provide e-mail requests to their professors according to the following situations. These situations were divided to high imposition situations, asking for the bending of rules, and low imposition situations, asking for routine institutional demands (Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig, 1996).

1- You have to submit your research paper next week. However, you will be very busy this week and don't have enough time to prepare it for submission. You send an e-mail to your professor and ask for more time.

2- You are conducting a research paper. You need someone to guide you. You believe that one of the professors is the most appropriate person to advise you. So, you send an e-mail to the professor and ask for advice.

3- You need some reference books in order to complete your thesis. These books are not available on the internet and you cannot afford for them. You send an e-mail to your professor and ask for those reference books.

4- You are sick and unfortunately you make use of your possible absence. You send an e-mail to your professor and ask for a leave because of illness.

Totally 61 e-mail requests were collected from the participants. The number of e-mail letters for each kinds of requesting were as followed, requesting for an extension of paper submission day was the most frequent letters (18), following borrowing books (16), asking for extra guidance (15), and the least frequent one was asking for an absence because of illness. All the e-mail requests were made from a lower-status addressor (student) to a higher-status addressee (professor) in academic settings. In order to analyze e-mail data the typology of request patterns developed within the CCSARP project by Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) were used. The CCSARP organized requesting strategies in three categories including directness level, internal and external modifications. In the current study, first, the head acts were classified based on the levels of directness and then using descriptive statistics, the number and the percentage of request strategies used by the students were identified. After that, head acts were analyzed regarding internal modification (syntactical, lexical, and discoursal down towners) and external modification (pre- and post-request supportive moves) features. At the end, opening and closing strategies were also analyzed.

IV. RESULTS

A. Head Act Strategies

Table 1 presents request strategies used by the learners. Conventionally direct strategies were the most frequently used strategies by the learners (72.1%), conventionally indirect strategies was the next frequently used strategies (27.9). None of the students used non-conventionally indirect strategies.

TABLE I.
FREQUENCIES AND PERCENTAGES OF HEAD ACT STRATEGIES

Request strategies	Frequency	Percentage	Subdivision of request strategies	Frequency	Percentage
Conventionally Direct Strategies	44	72.1	Mood derivable	10	16.4
			Performatives	6	9.8
			Hedged performatives	16	26.2
			Obligation statements	2	3.3
			Want statements	10	16.4
Conventionally Indirect Strategies	17	27.9	Suggestory formulate	0	0.0
			Query preparatory	17	27.9
Non-conventionally Indirect Strategies	0	0	Strong hints	0	0
			Mild hints	0	0
Total	61	100		61	100

B. Mitigating Elements

Table 2 shows the frequencies and percentages of the mitigators used by the students to mitigate the imposition of requests. According to the table, syntactic modifiers had been used more often (59.0), following discursal modifiers (31.1), and lexical modifiers (9.8%).

TABLE II.
FREQUENCIES AND PERCENTAGES OF MITIGATORS

Mitigation elements	Frequency	Percentage	Forms of mitigators	Frequency	Percentage
Syntactic	36	59.0	Past tense modal verb forms	17	27.9
			Conditional verb forms	6	9.8
			Embedding	13	21.3
Lexical	6	9.8	Please	4	6.6
			down toners	1	1.6
			Introductory phrases	1	1.6
Discursal	19	31.1	Apology	4	6.6
			Sweeteners	3	4.9
			Preparators	10	16.4
			Supportive reasons	2	3.3
Total	61	100		61	100

C. Opening Strategies

Table 3 presents the frequencies and the percentages of opening strategies used by the students. As can be seen from the table, 77.0% of the students wrote salutation, 18.9% wrote self introduction, 2.7% wrote phatic communication, and 1.4% wrote formal address term.

TABLE III.
FREQUENCIES AND PERCENTAGES OF OPENING STRATEGIES

Opening Strategies	Frequency	Percentage	Forms of opening	Frequency	Percentage
Formal address term	1	1.4	Title + last name	1	1.4
Salutation	57	77.0	Dear professor	20	27.8
			Dear + title + last name	6	8.3
			Hello + Dr + last name	6	8.3
			Hello/hi dear...	23	31.9
			Others	2	2.8
Self introduction	14	18.9	Name only	0	0.0
			Name and background information	14	19.4
Phatic communication	2	2.7			
Total	74	100		74	100

D. Closing Strategies

Table 4 presents the frequencies and percentages of closing strategies used by the learners. According to the table, the most frequently used closing strategies was 39.8%, following complementary close (34.1%), and sender's name (26.1%).

TABLE IV.
FREQUENCIES AND PERCENTAGES OF CLOSING STRATEGIES

Closing strategies	Frequency	Percentage	Forms of closing	Frequency	Percentage
Thanking	35	39.8	Thank you (very much, so much)	11	16.9
			Thanks a lot/ in advance	18	27.7
			Thank you for...	6	9.2
Complementary close	30	34.1	With best regards	8	12.3
			Sincerely	15	23.1
			Regards	5	7.7
			Faithfully	2	3.1
Sender's name	23	26.1			
Total	88	100		88	100

E. Supportive Moves

Table 5 shows the frequencies and percentages of supportive moves. As it can be seen from the table, pre-request move (47.05), post request move (24.5), and both the pre- and post-request moves (27.9) were the most frequently used supportive moves respectively.

TABLE V.
FREQUENCIES AND PERCENTAGES OF SUPPORTIVE MOVES

Kinds of Supportive Moves	Frequency	Percentage
Pre-request move	29	47.5
Post-request move	15	24.5
Both pre- and post- moves	17	27.9

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study was designed to determine the requestive strategies used by EFL learners in English request e-mails written to their professors. Head acts were being concentrated on in the study while opening strategies, closing strategies, and supportive moves were studied peripherally. The results of this study show that the most frequently used request strategies was conventionally direct strategies including hedged performatives (26.2%), mood derivable (16.4%), want statements (16.4%), performatives (9.8%), and obligation statements (3.3%). The other request strategies were conventionally direct strategies including query preparatory (27.9%). Non- conventionally direct strategies had not been used at all. Students had used mitigators in order to reduce the imposition of requests such as past tense modal verb forms (27.9%), following embedding (21.3%), preparators (16.4%), conditional verb forms (9.8%), please (6.6%), apology (6.6%), sweeteners (4.9%), supportive reasons (3.3%), down toners and introductory phrases (1.6%). As mentioned, request is considered as a face threatening act and indirectness in requests is related to politeness in the way that indirect strategies are used to mitigate request's face threatening effect on the addressee. According to Brown and Levinson, the more the degree of indirectness, the more politeness is (1987). In addition to unequal status, the relationship between the students and their professors were not so friendly; therefore it was expected that the students choose more various indirect strategies. Contrary to expectations, Iranian EFL learners tend to use conventionally direct strategies in their request e-mails (72.1%) while for native English speakers politeness has a direct relationship with indirectness (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). Using more direct strategies than indirect strategies does not mean that Iranian EFL learners are impolite in their requests to a higher-status addressee (professor). A possible explanation for this result might be that students' lack of pragmatic knowledge in addressing someone in higher status leads to the more use of conventionally direct strategies. In other words, although the requests were grammatically right, they were situationally wrong, and it may be caused by lack of sociopragmatic knowledge. Iranian EFL students may be not aware of English cultural norms when using English language. In spite of this, the students used syntactic, discoursal, and lexical mitigating elements respectively to diminish the imposition of their requests and/or to enhance politeness of their requests. The findings of the current study are consistent with those of Jalilifar (2009), and Hashemian (2014) who found that Iranian EFL students tend to use more direct strategies in their requestive e-mails.

The minor findings of the study are related to opening and closing strategies and overall supportive moves. Among opening strategies, salutation (77%) was the most frequently used opening strategies followed by self introduction (18.9%), phatic communication (2.7%), and formal address term (1.45). It is notable that Iranian EFL learners did not use formal address term to address a professor that they have already knew him or her. But they may use salutation ('dear...', 'hello dear...') as a politeness strategy. In 14% of the e-mail letters, students introduced themselves and gave brief background information. Most of these letters were requests addressed unfamiliar professors; therefore, introducing themselves may be related to the degree of their familiarity with the addressees rather than as a politeness strategy. The last point is that students were not interested in the use of phatic communication inquiries (e.g. how are you?) and this is a personal preference not a strategy. Among the most frequently used closing strategies were also thanking (39.8%), complementary close (34.1%), and sender's name (26.1%) respectively. In the case of thanking, most thanks did not indicate the reason for which the students thanked the professors. At the close of 23% of request e-mails, students wrote their name. It seems that it is not an expression of politeness. Among the supportive moves, pre-request

move (47.5%), post request move (24.5%), and both pre- and post-request moves (27.9%) were the most frequently used supportive moves respectively. According to the data Iranian EFL students showed a tendency to delayed requestive purposes. In other words they used more pre-request supportive moves specially grounder (e.g. giving reason and providing explanations for requests). It seems that Iranian EFL students are affected by L1 norms in L2 request e-mails because in Persian, they use more pre-request supportive moves in letters to soften the imposition of their requests. It has been concluded that Iranian EFL learners are affected by their L1 when writing English written request e-mails. In other words, it shows their lack of sociopragmatic knowledge. Therefore, it is necessary for them to be taught about L2 socio-cultural norms used in requestive e-mails.

VI. LIMITATIONS

This study was limited in several ways. First, it was limited in scope, involving a few numbers of participants and e-mails; so the results are not generalizable. Second, the study just examined requestive e-mails and other sorts of speech acts including questioning, apologizing, thanking ... were excluded. This study was also limited to one medium of communication (asynchronous medium: electronic mail). The other limitation is that, this study did not compare requestive e-mails written by English native speakers and non-native speakers (Persian speakers). Finally, although in this study there were two kinds of requests including high and low imposition requests, the relationship between the degree of imposition and the degree of directness was not considered.

For further research, it would be good to analyze more requestive e-mails in order to be able to generalize the findings. It has been suggested to analyze other sorts of speech acts in e-mails, to analyze different kinds of speech acts in different medium of communication such as chat and instant messaging, and to compare e-mails written by English native speakers and non-native speakers and find differences in details. It would be also interesting to find textual and discursal differences in emails considering students' language proficiency and gender.

VII. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Although the current study is based on a small sample, the findings suggest the importance of pragmatic knowledge of Iranian EFL students. Pragmatics explains the way that people use language in different (cultural, social, religious, professional etc.) context (May, 2001). Language and culture are closely related. Therefore, teaching a foreign language is not separable from teaching its cultural and social norms. Different cultures have different ways of expressing meaning. Regarding request speech act, as a face-threatening act, different cultures have different face saving strategies. According to May (2001) "... speech acts need to be put into their cultural and stylistic context in order to be evaluated properly" (p. 280). An important pedagogical implication of the study is that teachers must pay more attention to pragmatic knowledge and try to inform students about the appropriate request behaviors used by English native speakers. It is necessary for students to be aware of English socio-cultural norms of speech act realizations. As founded, Iranian EFL learners under the effect of Persian produce inappropriate request behaviors. So, teachers must concern teaching culture along with teaching language. The other pedagogical implication of the study is the importance of representing students with more pragmatic focused and culture oriented materials. Textbooks do not emphasize on pragmatic aspect of language. EFL/ESL tests also frequently emphasize structure rather than pragmatics. So, the learners demonstrate imbalance between their grammatical and pragmatic knowledge.

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