

REQUEST STRATEGIES IN STUDENTS' REQUESTIVE EMAILS TO FACULTY: A PRAGMALINGUISTIC ANALYSIS ON THE GRADUATE STUDENTS' EMAILS

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Abstract

The motivating basis of the study was generated from the fact that there is still little known about the research investigating request strategies in student's requestive emails in Indonesian context in which the status of English is as a foreign language (EFL). This study intends to examine student's pragma linguistic competence realized in request strategies when emailing their lecturers as well as exploring their consideration in choosing certain linguistic means in their email. Case study was employed to get clear description of this particular case. Then, the CCARP framework was utilized to analyze 30 requestive emails composed by 15 students, and qualitative analysis was also applied to draw conclusion from student's interview. The findings indicated that direct strategies such as mitigated imperatives and want statements were mostly realized in most of student's requestive emails. Moreover, social factors such as age, power, status, and distance become student's reasons in choosing certain linguistic choices when emailing their lecturers. This present study finally offers some recommendations that can be applied in foreign language setting.

Keywords: Requestive email, pragmatic, direct strategies, pragmalinguistic.

INTRODUCTION

In the era of the advance of technology, email has been regarded as one of the main channels of communication in many different settings including in higher education context. The use of email has been customary among university students and faculty members as it is confirmed by Biesenbach-Lucas (2006, p. 81) explaining that "student-faculty interactions at the university level have undergone a shift from face-to-face office hour consultations and brief before/after class meetings to more and more 'cyber-consultations' between students and faculty". The interaction may result in students getting feedback, clarification and information without visiting professor offices (Burgucu-Tazegül, Han, & Engin, 2016). In addition, email provides students with more opportunities to interact and communicate with their teachers which, in turn, may contribute to their educational and social achievement.

Looking at email through its function, Tseng (2015) explains that in students- to- faculty emails, it serves requesting purpose such as students request for appointments, advice, and other

course-related information to their professors. Then, according to Brown and Levinson (1987) request can be classified as face-threatening act since it conveys an imposition on the part of the hearer which in this case are faculties who have higher status as interlocutors. Thus, composing email to the faculties requires sophisticated use of linguistic politeness on the part of EFL learners in order to mitigate the threat to the face.

Despite students' awareness of the necessity to formulate polite messages, they still have difficulties in composing ones. Krulatz (2015) emphasize the language learners' problems in formulating appropriate messages. She explains that students are unable to construct polite message, either because they lack of the linguistic means or because they are unaware of the target language's politeness and appropriateness norms. In similar vein, Biesenbach-Lucas (2007, p. 74) states that foreign language students have "lack of linguistic flexibility and idiomatic expressions, are unawareness of letter conventions transferable to email, and are unable to select appropriate lexical modification". Apart from being influenced by pragmalinguistic aspects, the students' failures in developing appropriate message is also affected by native norm from the native language (Chen, 2006).

Consequently, such limited access to the linguistic choices in performing particular speech act will likely result in pragmalinguistic failure (Krulatz, 2015) that may significantly affect the interaction between students and faculty members. Thomas (1983) explains that such failures may generate language users to compose direct and unrevised messages that can be sensed impolite and perceived fail to comprehend any meaning conveyed by what is said especially for those who learn English as a foreign language. In accordance with that, Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) also states that non-native students of English who lack of pragmalinguistic knowledge might run the risk of not being perceived as appropriately polite.

Numerous studies related to investigating students' pragmalinguistic knowledge in written language, in this case, students' requestive email to faculties have been intensively conducted (Economidou-Kogetsidis M. , 2011; Biesenbach-Lucas S. , 2007; Tseng , 2015; Shim , 2013; Krulatz, 2015; Wei-Hong Ko, Eslami, & Burlbaw, 2015; Danielewicz-Betz, 2013). The focuses of the studies are to compare the pragmatic competence of non-native speakers and native speakers of English in regard to their requestive emails to university authorities (Biesenbach-Lucas S. , 2007; Chang & Hsu , 1998). Thus, they have been mostly conducted in the target language environment or in the context in which English is treated as a second language.

In Indonesian context, where English is taught as a foreign language, to the researcher's best knowledge, there is still limited study exploring students' pragmatic competences, especially students' strategies in composing requestive emails to the faculties. As the need to communicate appropriately either across languages or cultures is on attention, it is significant to investigate the pragmalinguistic competence of EFL students.

With that as the basis of the investigation, this present study attempts to fill the gap by investigating university students' pragmatic competence in Indonesian context. Specifically, this study aims to examine the request strategies in the students' requestive emails to the faculties. The reasons of students' choices for using particular linguistic politeness also becomes the focus of investigation. Therefore, to achieve the objectives this study was conducted under the guidance of these following research questions

1. What are request strategies used by the students when emailing the faculty?
2. What are the students' reasons for choosing particular linguistic means when emailing the faculty?

This present study is expected to provide contributions in two ways; theoretically and practically. First, theoretically, this study is expected to become additional information to the literature of pragmatic research especially in relation to the area of politeness in requestive emails of Indonesian students. Second, practically, this study is expected to provide insight to students in general regarding composing emails to faculty that have politeness aspects. Third, this study is expected to be useful for teachers in developing students' pragmatic knowledge (especially pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence) which is crucial in achieving effective communication in the real-life context.

METHODOLOGY

This present study attempts to address the gap in research on students' requestive email to the faculty. Specifically, this research aims at investigating the request strategies used by the students when emailing the faculties as well as figuring out the reason for students' choice of the chosen linguistic politeness. Thus, to accomplish the objectives, this study was conducted under the frame case study design since according to Bassey (1999) it present complete description of particular case which, in this case, request strategies in requestive emails utilized by EFL university students in Indonesian context.

All of the participants were 15 postgraduate students majoring in English Education Program. The participants are 7 males and 8 females with age ranging from 23 up to 39 years old. They were chosen based on several considerations. First, they are all university students who usually consult and communicate academic matter with their lecturers through the use of emails and other electronic means. Second, all of the participants have TOEFL score above 500 which, according to CEFR general description, are regarded as independent language users who have sufficient linguistic resources, can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity without any strain, and can understand as well as produce clear, detailed text on wide range of subjects. Third, all of the informants reported to have joined pragmatic class. This also becomes a consideration because the participants may have background knowledge about the concept of politeness which is in the area of pragmatics.

The investigation of the study was based on a corpus of 30 student's requestive emails to the faculty composed by 15 university students from one of the universities in Bandung, Indonesia. The total number of emails originally forwarded by the students were 45 emails. Those 30 emails that become the object of analysis were selected based on their contents which express requestive functions. The requests include requesting for appointments, asking for guidance for research, confirming the course registration, requesting for feedback on assignment, and requesting for other course-related information. The topic was not specifically defined since the selected emails was natural emails.

Moreover, in attempt to elicit the data which were projected to answer the second research question, this present study selected semi-structured interview as the guide. This type of interview was employed due to its flexibility that, according to Berg (2001, p. 71), the interviewers are permitted (in fact expected) to probe far beyond the answers to their prepared and predetermined questions. The guiding interview questions which consist of 5 questions were self-developed and addressed to all of the participants to explore student's consideration in making emails and investigate their reasons for utilizing the used linguistic resources when emailing their professors. The interview was recorded and noted to ensure the information given in the process of transcription.

In attempt to accomplish the study, there were some procedures undertaken. The first step conducted was determining the intended participants, in this case, 15 university students were

selected based on several considerations. The informed consents were first established as the ethic to conduct the research. The second step was collecting the data; students' requestive email. This was conducted from November 15th to 17th 2016 by asking all of the participants to forward all of their emails (requestive email to their professors) to the researcher's email account. Because all the emails are personal in nature, the participants were ensured that their emails would only be used for the purpose of research analysis and no personal information would be disclosed.

The next data collection was verbal data which were obtained from student's interview. The interview was conducted on 23rd December 2016 to 4 participants who develop indirect and direct level of requestive email. Each student was first asked about their experiences and difficulties in composing email to the faculties. Then, the questions continued to explore their considerations in creating requestive messages as well as their reasons in utilizing the used linguistic means in their email. The average time for the interview was 8 minutes, ranging from 7 to 10 minutes. The interview was noted and recorded with the participants' prior permission and also transcribed to get the clear explanation.

In regard to data analysis, the email data were first coded and analyzed based on the head acts of the requests in each requestive email. Moreover, Zhu's (2012) guideline, the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) framework developed by Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989) was included in this study. Zhu's (2012) suggestion in adapting the framework was used to examine the head acts (the nucleus of the speech act) that have been identified in the message. However, for the purpose of coding, the framework was slightly adjusted and modified in order to match the features identified in the email messages included in the study. The coding strategies for head acts of request and its corresponding examples of each sub-strategies are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Coding Categories for Request Strategies Adapted from Zhu (2012)

CCSARP directness level	Request strategies	Examples
Direct (least ambiguous)	1. Imperative	Please give me four days to finish the assignment
	2. Performative	I have to ask you for a leave from your class of pragmatics class
	3. Want statements	I would like to have a chat

		with you if you are convenient
	4. Need statement	I really need your help to confirm my attendance
	5. Expectation statement	I hope that you can write a recommendation letter
Conventional Indirectness	6. Query preparatory	I wonder if you could tell me the examination result before the arranged date
Non-conventional Indirectness	7. Strong hint (intention; change the topic)	I found my paper was not fit on me. Do you give an idea for me?

Moreover, with respect to analyzing data gathered from the interview, Patton’s qualitative analysis procedures developed by Best and Kahn (2006) was utilized. The procedures involved data organization, description, and interpretation. In the data organization stage, it included organizing or sorting the data based on the predetermined categories such as student’s consideration in composing emails, and student’s reasons for involving certain linguistic politeness in their emails. Then, in the next two steps, after the data have been organized based on the categories, the data were analyzed descriptively and presented in narrative forms. The presented data were then interpreted and justified with relevant researches and theories for clarifications.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This part presents the result of data analysis which focuses on the corpus data i.e. students’ requestive email to faculties, and interview. The explanation would be arranged based on the objectives of the study. Thus, the first to be discussed is the findings from emails analysis regarding the request strategies used by the students when emailing the faculty. The second part presents the findings related to the students’ reasons for utilizing the chosen linguistic means.

a. Request strategies used by students when emailing the faculty

The request strategies used by the students were direct, conventionally indirect, and non-conventional indirect strategies. After calculating the data through simple percentage, it was

found that most of the emails composed by the students utilized Direct Strategies (DS) (47%). Meanwhile, the second highest strategies used in the students' emails were Non-Conventional Indirect (NCI) i.e. strong hint (30%) and followed by Conventionally Indirect (CI) i.e. query preparatory (23%). Thus, the order of the strategies was (DS)>(NCI)>(CI). The complete description of the results was presented in the following table.

Table 2. Request Strategies Used by Students in Their Emails

CCSARP Directness Levels	Request Strategies	Percentage (No/Total)
Direct (D)	Imperative	17% (5/30)
	Performative	3% (1/30)
	Want statement	17% (5/30)
	Need statement	3% (1/30)
	Expectation statement	7% (2/30)
Conventionally indirect (CI)	Query preparatory	23% (7/30)
Non-conventional indirect (NCI) (most ambiguous)	Hint	30% (9/30)

Specifically, Table 2 indicated that the students mostly employed direct strategies in which they expressed the intention through imperative sentences (17%) mitigated by politeness marker “please” as in “*please give me your guidance*” and want statements (17%) such as in “*I would like to know about my progress*” or “*I would like you to confirm my attendance*”. Even though it was not in a large number, the students also utilized other direct strategies such as performative (3%) such as in “*I’m asking you to confirm my course registration*”, need statement (3%) as in “*Thus, I really need your help*” and expectation statement (7%) as in “*I hope you can give me advice and suggestion for my research*”.

Moreover, Table 2 showed that the students employed non-conventional indirect strategies (30%) which were realized in strong hint statements (almost explicit) as in “*I am working on my literature project but I am bit confused about it. Maybe you know some places that I can find the book*”. The other strategy utilized by students was conventionally indirect (23%) as in “*would you mind confirming my course registration?*” This type of strategy often acknowledged as

query preparatory is considered to be the most polite strategy (Clark and Schunk (1980) since it contains reference to the person's ability and willingness to perform the act (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984) as indicated by the modal particle i.e. modal verb which is phrased in the form of question structure. Despite the claim, this strategy was found to be the least used strategy when the students attempted to convey their requests to the faculty.

b. Students' reasons in utilizing the chosen linguistic choices in their email

The interviews conducted to 4 participants generate some important information particularly about their considerations and reasons in structuring their emails to the faculty. The first findings highlighted their consideration in composing the emails. The two respondents agreed that the linguistic politeness should become a priority in composing important messages. The respondents stated that the first thing that they think about when composing an email was the words that may best phrase their intention. The choices of words, according to their knowledge, should be formal, simple, and not rambling. In other words, the words used should be able to appropriately convey the essence of their message.

In addition, the other two participants believed that apart from considering linguistic politeness, they should take into account other aspects such as the time of delivery and email structures. The participants confirmed that time of delivery should be appropriate to the schedule of the faculty. The emails should be sent neither too early nor too late. In the case of email structures, the participants commented that the emails should be structured "politely". By "politely", the students mean that the email should follow the standard of the appropriate emails. It should begin with polite greeting (e.g. salam (Arabic greeting) or English greeting), student's identity, an apology for taking up the faculty's time, statement of intention and hope, and be closed by thanking and Salam.

With respect to their reasons for choosing certain linguistic features in their emails, all of the respondents shared similar views that there are at least two factors that influenced them to write the emails the way they did. The factors are the social variables such as age (older and younger), power and status (higher institutional status (professors) and lower institutional status (students)), horizontal distance (Leech, 2014) and cultural aspect. The students realize that there is a great social distance between the faculty and them, and this realization is then associated with their cultural belief about the importance of treating older people with respect and a high

degree of politeness. All in all, social and cultural factors play significant role in determining the students' choice of words.

Discussions

The aims of this present study are to discover the request strategies used by the graduate students when emailing the faculty as well as the students' reasons for choosing particular linguistic means in their emails.

The findings showed that most of the students' requests in the email were realized through the use of direct strategies. In this case, the students mostly conveyed their requests through the use of imperative and want statements. These findings somehow confirmed those of the other relevant researches conducted in other EFL contexts with large sample such as Taiwanese (Tseng , 2015), Turkish (Burgucu-Tazegül, Han, & Engin, 2016), Iraqi (Abboodi Ali & Pandian , 2016), and other Asian contexts such as Korea, Japan, and Thailand (Biesenbach-Lucas S. , 2007). The findings from those researches concluded almost identical information that more requests made by EFL learners are realized through the use of direct strategies rather than conventionally indirect strategies which in the literature have been acknowledged as a polite strategy.

The preference over direct strategies is probably due to the students' intention to avoid misunderstanding. It is clarified by Brown and Levinson (1987) who claim that being on record in this case being direct may allow speakers to get credit for being honest, being outspoken, to avoid being seen as manipulator, and being misunderstood. Moreover, it is also confirmed by Abboodi Ali and Pandian (2016) who stated in their research that EFL learners tend to express their intention explicitly by being direct such as using want statements because they want to be clear in expressing their wishes and desires in their requests to their professors.

If viewed from Western perspective however, the strategy used by the students is regarded as less appropriate or polite since the nature of requests contains Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) or acts that may threaten someone's self image (Brown & Levinson , 1987). In other words, request may be imposing on someone's freedom since the speakers ask the hearers to do something for them. Zhu (2012) states that the greatness of imposition or something being asked and social aspects such as power, status, and distance will lead to a high

degree of face threat and ultimately require the speaker or writer to choose a high degree of indirect strategies when conveying their requests. In other words, when making serious request that is addressed to higher status interlocutors in this case the faculty, indirect strategies are recommended. The reasons for this proposition are highlighted by Leech (2014, p. 134) who states that English exhibits a tendency to favor indirectness of request more than other languages. Leech (1983, p. 108) explained that "indirect illocutions tend to be politer because (a) they increase the degree of optionality, and (b) the more indirect an illocution is, the more diminished and tentative its force tends to be". The options given to the hearers whether to accept or reject the requests help reduce or mitigate the threat imposed in the request. Thus, it is acknowledged that linguistically indirect strategies promote politeness.

However, the students' interviews which explored the students' reasons and considerations for choosing the strategies generated interesting findings. The interview indicated that the students took into account several variables when they made their requests. First, the informants emphasized that in making emails, the appropriate choices of words and ethic of email structured should be carefully established because it may affect the responses from the lecturers and their teacher and student relationship. This finding goes together with the statements of Economidou-Koetsidis (2015) in which he said that in writing emails to authority figures, pragmatic competence of students is needed. Students should have awareness of the politeness conventions, email etiquette, appropriate language that is status-congruent (Biesenbach-Lucas S. , 2007) in order to continue to maintain the relationship between students and teachers.

In addition to those aspects, all of the participants acknowledged that social variable such as powers, status, age, distance, and cultural variable become their main reasons for utilizing polite words. This finding is in accordance with the theory from Brown and Levinson (1987) in which they state that the need to mitigate the imposition (in this case, to be polite) is determined by relative power, social distance, and also imposition. It is also in line with Leech (2014) who classified the parameters of in requesting such vertical distance (age), horizontal distance (familiar or distant), and cost-benefit.

The last aspect of request parameters i.e. imposition which is claimed to determine the need to be polite by the aforesaid theorists is not agreed by the students in this research. They didn't particularly concern with the rank of imposition since the messages that they composed

were sort of routinized. In other words, the imposition factor did not influence their choice of words since they employed almost similar structures and words when emailing the lecturers. Simply, the students have no awareness about that influential factor that may affect the politeness.

These findings from the interview do not go in line with the findings from the email analysis. Despite their considerations and awareness of contextual variables which are enough to encourage someone to use appropriate language (Zhu, 2012), the students remained employing direct strategies in their emails. To put differently, their knowledge about how polite requests can be realized when certain interlocutors are involved does not correspond to their request performance in the emails. It can be assumed that there are other factors (aside from the ones discussed in the earlier part) that derived students to be direct. This can be explained from the Krulatz's perspective (2015) which states that students are unable to construct polite message, either because they lack of the linguistic means or because they are unaware of the target language's politeness and appropriateness norms. Alternatively, the students' choice of strategy can also be caused by the interference of their native language (Chen, 2006; Abboodi Ali & Pandian , 2016). In other word, the students perceived their messages as appropriate because they judged them (the messages) from their native language standards.

CONCLUSION

This present study investigated the request strategies used by the students when emailing the faculties as well as figuring out the reasons for students' choice in choosing certain linguistic politeness. There were several interesting results emerged from the analysis of the head acts of the request and of the interview data. First, the students dominantly used direct strategies such as mitigated imperative and want statements in expressing their intentions. Second, the students considered social aspects such as power, status, age, and distance as their considerations and reasons in making requestive emails. Those two different findings led to the conclusion that despite students' awareness of social norms that may influence the politeness level, their English messages (judged from Western ideology) are regarded to be inappropriate since they do not mitigate the imposition they pose to the faculty. Thus, their pragmalinguistic competences are still in need of improvements.

Based on the findings, this present study offers some recommendations that may be useful for the educators and non-native speakers of English in general as well as other research. First, it is suggested for non-native speakers of English to comprehend and have pragmatics knowledge especially when communicating in the target language and in target language context. Particularly, in the communication that packs speech acts, the norm of pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatic should be thoroughly considered in order to achieve effective and harmonious communication. Second, since pragmatic knowledge is seldom introduced and explicitly taught in Indonesian context, it is recommended for educators to start considering it. It is essential to grasp not only the aspect of language, but also how to use language in context which may lead to endless interpretation.

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