An Interlanguage Pragmatic Study on Taiwanese EFL Learners' Email Request

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate EFL learners' interlanguage pragmatic development through the elicited request emails addressed to the faculty in an institutional setting. Sixty Taiwanese students of two linguistic levels (i.e., high-intermediate, and low-intermediate) were included and different email tasks with varied imposition levels were designed to examine if and how students' use of request strategies and politeness features would vary accordingly. In total, 180 emails were composed for comparative analysis. By applying Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper's (1989) CCSARP framework, the results revealed that students of both levels adopted more direct strategies as main requestive head acts for clarity and used the most numbers of supportive moves prior to the request in the highest imposition request. Different combinations of supportive moves were also adopted for different request tasks by the two groups, indicating students' awareness of different imposition levels inherited in different tasks. In addition, the high-intermediate proficiency group displayed more varieties of internal and external modifiers in their request than their less proficient counterparts. Some developmental sequences in the use of politeness features can thus be identified. However, certain syntactic and lexical downgraders never appeared in both groups' email messages, suggesting the need for explicit instruction. From the preferred use of direct strategies, supportive moves, and a pre-posed request sequences, L1 pragmatic transfer can be observed in the email messages of both groups. The possible perlocutionary effect of this transfer and suggestions for classroom intervention will also be discussed.

Key Words: Interlangauge, Requestive Head Act, Supportive Moves, Internal/ External Modification, Perlocutionary Effect

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Introduction

Over the past decade, studies have investigated how L2 learners compose e-mail messages in terms of communication strategies and discourse styles (e.g., Biesenback-Lucas, 2005, 2006a, 2007; Chapman, 1997; Chen, 2001, 2006; Gonzalex-Bueno, 1998; Hartford & Bradovi-Harlig, 1996; Siu, 2008). Hartford & Bradovi-Harlig's (1996) study particularly focused on e-mail requests written by college students (native and nonnative speakers of English) to faculty and analyzed the perlocutionary effects of these e-mails on the faculty and professors. From the professors' perspective, they found that nonnative speakers used fewer politeness strategies and thus, their requests were considered less effective than those written by native speakers. In comparing native and nonnative students' email requests to faculty, Biesenback-Lucas (2007) found that although native and nonnative students tended to use the same general strategies, nonnative students' use of politeness strategies was characterized by a mix of "lack of linguistic flexibility and idiomatic expressions, unawareness of letter conventions transferrable to email, and inability to select appropriate lexical modification" (p.74).

It is apparent that writing emails to professors requires sophisticated use of language on the part of L2 learners since it is a type of FTA. The difficulty can be further complicated by the issue of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural differences between the addresser (i.e., the nonnative student) and the addressee (i.e., the English professor) (Chen, 2001). In addition, the results of previous research were mainly interpreted from the professor's perspective and thus, the more fundamental causes as why non-native students chose to use certain linguistic politeness strategies for their requests were still not fully understood. Furthermore, most studies conducted in the L2 environment are of comparative nature, in comparing how nonnative speakers differed from native speakers in their realization of request strategies. Kasper (1992) pointed out that most interlanguage pragmatic research were comparative rather than acquisitional in nature and thus, little has been known about how L2 learners develop their pragmatic competence over time. By conducting interlanguage pragmatics research cross-sectionally, the result obtained would be more acquisitionally oriented, and thus, shed more light on the developmental aspects of pragmatic acquisition.

Finally, research specifically looking at the EFL learners' pragmatic competence in writing e-mail request to faculty in the Chinese EFL context is relatively scarce, and thus, the current study aims to explore Taiwanese EFL Learners' pragmatic competence in their email request to professors. Specifically, it sets to find out EFL learners' use of requestive head act, the internal, and external modifications used in their emails. In order to gain insights on the developmental aspect of interlanguage pragmatics, students with varied levels of proficiency (lower intermediate, and higher intermediate level) were included. To see how imposition level would impact on students' request strategies, different writing tasks with varied imposition levels were designed to examine if students' request strategies would vary accordingly. Finally, to understand why these EFL students chose certain politeness strategies in their emails, open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were administered to see what factors influenced their choices of linguistic politeness strategies and what difficulties they encountered in the process of composing these email requests.

With designed writing tasks, two groups of students varied in linguistic proficiencies were required to write request emails to their English professors in order to find answers for the following research questions:

(1) For the higher-intermediate level students, do their emails to their English professor promote more direct or indirect request strategies? Do their use of request strategies and politeness features vary with increasing imposition of requests?

(2) For the lower-intermediate level students, do their emails to their English professor promote more direct or indirect request strategies? Do their use of request strategies and politeness features vary with increasing imposition of requests?

(3) Are there preferred linguistic realizations by students of different linguistic levels for different request types? How do they differ in terms of the realization of request strategies and politeness features in their email requests?

(4) For these EFL learners, what are the factors which might influence their choices of linguistic politeness strategies used and what difficulties do they encounter in the process of composing these email requests?

Research on E-mail Request

By using the authentic data based on naturally-occurring requests, the available studies on actual email messages, due to the privacy and ethical reasons, have been mostly based on limited number of messages sent to the researchers themselves (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006a, 2007; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Warschaur, 1999). Analyzing from professors' perspective, Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996) investigated how native and nonnative students composed email messages in terms of communication strategies and discourse styles. They found that in comparison, nonnative students used fewer downgraders in their requests, mentioned personal time needs more often, and acknowledged imposition on faculty less often, which lead to negative perlocutionary effect on the faculty.

Chen's study (2001) compared the request emails to professors by Taiwanese overseas students and American students to identify the preferred request strategies by these two particular cultural groups. She discovered that both groups preferred to use 'query preparatory' and 'want statements' to realize their requests, but they differed in the amount of lexical or syntactic mitigating features, which made native speakers' requests more indirect and polite. Chen (2006) later conducted a longitudinal case study to investigate how two Taiwanese graduate students' email request to their professors changed over two and a half year stay in US. She discovered that students' request strategies changed from primarily 'want statements' to 'query preparatory strategies' and the email messages contained more lexical and syntactic modifications. She also pointed out that a nonnative student chose to adopt direct over indirect forms was their false belief that by making their messages sound urgent, their professors would more likely to attend their messages.

Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) examined the email requests sent by native and nonnative English graduate students to faculty. By varying the level of imposition, she discovered that both groups selected more direct strategies for the lower imposition requests, but not for the highest imposition requests, an indication of students'

awareness of situational factors (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007). In addition, she found that nonnative students used less syntactic modifications, but more lexical modifications (particularly *please*) than native speakers. Biesenbach-Lucas concluded that nonnative speakers' request strategies showed "a lack of the linguistic flexibility and idiomatic expressions and an inability to select appropriate lexical modifications" (2007, p. 74).

Methodology

Participants

In total, sixty sophomore students enrolled in the general English courses participated in this study. Based on students' Toeic scores (or the equivalent TOEFL or GEPT scores), they were grouped as higher-intermediate group (Toeic scores ranged from 680 to 850) and lower-intermediate group (Toeic scores ranged from 350 to 520). Participants have studied English for 12 years. Most of them (93.3%) have never studied in English-speaking countries and the relatively few (6.7%) who did, had studied there for less than a month.

Instruments

The data for the present study were collected from four types of instruments: (1) a written background questionnaire, (2) three experimental email writing tasks, (3) a retrospective open-ended questionnaire, and (4) the semi-structured interview. For the three writing email tasks, they were varied in the levels of imposition on the professor. Three writing tasks were: 1) requesting for bending rules as the highest imposition, 2) requesting for feedback on a paper as the intermediate imposition, and 3) requesting for an appointment to get advice on course matters as the low imposition. Table 1 listed the makeup of the scripts collected from two groups of students. 90 email scripts across three topics were collected from two groups of students and in total, 180 email scripts were collected.

Table 1: The makeup of the scripts collected from two groups of students

	Higher-intermediate level students (30)	Lower-intermediate level students (30)
Topic: Request for Bending rules	30	30
Topic: Request for feedback	30	30
Topic: Request for appointment	30	30
Total emails	90	90

Coding Scheme and Data Analysis

Analysis of the email requests was based on the CCSARP framework developed by Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989). Some modifications regarding the coding categories were made since some email messages included in the current study did not exist in the original CCSARP coding framework. Appendix A, B, C listed the coding categories for main request strategies, syntactic and lexical modifiers, and supportive moves adjusted for the current study. The corresponding examples were also provided.

Results and Discussion

Higher-intermediate Level Group: Directness Levels across Request Types and the Use of Politeness Features

Table 2 displayed the comparison of the mean numbers of the different request strategies for different request types by higher level group. As seen on Table 5, only the use of query preparatory was significantly different across different request types. The result of post hoc analysis indicated that students used significantly less query preparatory for the highest imposition request (M= 0.27) in comparison with the medium level imposition request (M=0.63).

Table 2 Comparison of frequency usages of main request strategies across request types by higher level group

Request strategies	Req. (high) rule-bending		Req.(medium) feedback		Req. (low) Appt.		ANOVA	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*F*	*p*
direct	0.67	0.479	0.37	0.490	0.50	0.509	2.790	ns
query pre.	0.27[a]	0.450	0.63[b]	0.490	0.50	0.509	4.421	.015*
hint	0.07	0.254	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	2.071	ns

Note. Means with different alphabet letters within the same category differ significantly (*p< .05) by the post hoc Tukey test., ns= not significantly different

As for the types of direct strategies used, Table 3 showed the subcategories of direct strategies adopted by higher level group across request types. The totals in Table 6 indicated that higher level students resorted largely to 'expectation statements' (76.67%) (i.e., *I hope you can understand and let me pass the course*) across all request types.

Table 3: Subcategories of direct strategies adopted by higher level group across request types

Request types	Imperatives	Performative	Direct questions	Want statements	Need statements	Expectation statements	Total direct strategies
Rule-bending	6.67%	13.33%	0.00%	10.00%	0.00%	36.67%	66.67%
Feedback	0.00%	6.67%	0.00%	13.33%	0.00%	16.67%	36.67%
Appointment	0.00%	6.67%	0.00%	20.00%	0.00%	23.33%	50.00%
Total	6.67%	26.67%	0%	43.33%	0%	**76.67%**	

For the use of internal modifications, statistics indicated that both syntactic and lexical downgraders were not used significantly different across different request types. As for the types of syntactic downgraders used across different request types, Table 4 indicated that students used more syntactic downgraders for medium imposition request (63.33%). Within the subcategories of syntactic downgraders, 'progressive aspect' (*i.e., I'm hoping……*) was least used.

Table 4: Syntactic downgraders used across request types by higher level group

Syntactic downgraders	(High) Req. rule-bending	(Medium) Req. feedback	(Low) Req. appointment
past tense	23.33%	40.00%	40.00%
progressive aspect	6.67%	10.00%	10.00%
embedding	23.33%	33.33%	30.00%
Total	40.00%	**63.33%**	56.67%

Table 5 showed the types of lexical downgraders used across request types. Fewer than half of the students used lexical modifiers to mitigate the force of their requestive acts. Within the subcategories of lexical downgraders, 'hedges' (i.e., *somewhat, somehow, sort of, etc.,*) and 'understater' (i.e., *a little, a bit, etc.,*) were not employed by any subject in any request type. 'Politeness marker' (i.e., *please*) was used the most in the high imposition request (23.33%).

Table 5: Lexical downgraders used across request types by higher level group

Lexical downgraders	(High) Req. rule-bending	(Medium) Req. feedback	(Low) Req. appointment
politeness marker	23.33%	13.33%	6.67%
subjectivizer	3.33%	3.33%	0.00%
consultative device	6.67%	23.33%	13.33%
downtoner	20.00%	10.00%	6.67%
understater	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
hedges	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
others	0.00%	13.33%	10.00%
Total	46.67%	43.33%	30.00%

The use of external modifications across different request types could be observed from Table 6. Significant difference was found in the frequency usages of supportive moves used across different request types. The result of post hoc analysis further indicated students used significantly more supportive moves for the highest imposition request (M= 4.90) than for the lowest imposition request (M=3.93).

Table 6: Comparison of frequency usages of external modifications across request types by higher level group

External modifica-tions	Req.rule-bending		Req. feedback		Req. Appt.		ANOVA	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*F*	*p*
	4.90[a]	1.27	4.23	1.65	3.93[b]	1.26	3.716	.028*

Note: (*p< .05) , Means with different alphabet letters differ significantly (*p< .05) by the post hoc Tukey test.

Table 7 showed the types of supportive moves used across request types by higher level group. All subjects used external modifiers to soften the requestive acts across different request types. Within the subcategories, the use of 'grounder' (i.e., *reasons, explanations*) could be found across different request types by nearly all participants. Most participants also applied 'acknowledge imposition' (80.00%) for highest level imposition. But the percentage of this move dropped drastically for medium and low imposition request. In general, students applied different types of supportive moves for different imposition levels of e-mail tasks.

Table 7: Types of supportive moves used across request types by higher level group

Supportive Moves	(High) Req. rule-bending	(Medium) Req. feedback	(Low) Req. appointment
preparator	16.67%	6.67%	13.33%
precommitment	23.33%	23.33%	6.67%
grounder	110.00%	96.67%	103.33%
acknow.imposition	80.00%	10.00%	6.67%
promise	46.67%	0.00%	16.67%
expectation	13.33%	30.00%	23.33%
sweetener	13.33%	60.00%	100.00%
apology	66.67%	30.00%	30.00%
thanking	56.67%	93.33%	53.33%
direct appeal	26.67%	30.00%	20.00%
imposition minimi.	0.00%	10.00%	3.33%
importance	13.33%	10.00%	0.00%
effort	20.00%	10.00%	0.00%
giving options	3.33%	13.33%	16.67%
Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Apparently, the higher linguistic proficiency students in the current study used the most direct strategies in the highest imposition request. Particularly, they adopted most 'expectation statements' (i.e., *I hope that…..*) as their main requestive act. Query preparatory was used significantly more for medium imposition request. From the interview, students pointed out that direct strategies, particularly 'expectation statements', did not signify impoliteness but allowed for more explicitness and sincerity since its direct Chinese translation resembled humbleness and respectfulness, and their intention could be conveyed more clearly. As for the significantly more use of query preparatory for medium level imposition, the finding suggested that when the compliance of the request was not as critical, students would resort to the conventional indirect strategy modified by internal downgraders to express their requestive intention. More direct strategy use for the highest imposition request found in the current study thus conflicts with the many previous findings in which more query preparatory was used for high imposition request (see Biesenback-Lucas, 2007; Chen, 2000, 2001). As for the use of politeness features, higher proficiency students used more external than internal downgraders, particularly for the highest imposition request, as students believed that would show more politeness and respect to their addressee.

Lower-intermediate Level Group: Directness Levels across Request Types and the Use of Politeness Features

Statistical result indicated that the frequency usages of main request strategies across request types were not significantly different for lower level group, although more direct strategies were used as the imposition level increased. Table 8 showed the percentage of different subcategories of direct strategies used for different request types. Among all, 'want statements' were the most preferred direct strategy (53.33%), closely followed by 'expectation statements' (50.00%).

Table 8: Subcategories of direct strategies adopted by lower level group across request types

Request types	Imperatives	Performative	Direct questions	Want statements	Need statements	Expectation statements	Total direct strategies
rule-bending	16.67%	6.67%	0.00%	13.33%	3.33%	23.33%	63.33%
Feedback	6.67%	3.33%	0.00%	10.00%	6.67%	26.67%	53.33%
Appointment	6.67%	6.67%	3.33%	30.00%	0.00%	0.00%	46.67%
Total	30.01%	16.67%	3.33%	**53.33%**	10.00%	**50.00%**	

Table 9 showed the comparison of frequency usages of both syntactic and lexical downgraders used across different request types by lower level group. As indicated, frequency usages of syntactic downgraders were significantly different across different request types. Only LSD post-hoc test was able to locate the significance (p =0.047). Specifically, the result pointed out that the use of syntactic downgraders was significantly less for high imposition request (M = 0.27) and more for low imposition request (M = 0.67). As for lexical downraders, no significant difference was found. The result revealed a relative low use of lexical downgraders across different request types by lower level group.

Table 9: Comparison of frequency usages of internal modifications across request types by lower level group

Internal modifica.	Req.rule-bending		Req. feedback		Req. Appt.		ANOVA	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F	p
syntactic.	0.27^a	0.521	0.60	0.675	0.67^b	0.758	3.177	0.047*
Lexical.	0.37	0.490	0.23	0.430	0.17	0.379	1.640	ns

Note: (*p< .05), Means with different alphabet letters within the same category differ significantly (*p< .05) by the post hoc LSD test.

Table 10 showed the types of syntactic downgraders used across three different request types.. Students used significantly more syntactic downgraders for low imposition request (66.67%) than high imposition request (23.33%). Within the subcategories, 'progressive aspect' was least used

Table 10: Syntactic downgraders used across request types by lower level group

Syntactic downgraders	(High) Req.rule-bending	(Medium) Req. feedback	(Low) Req. appointment
past tense	10.00%	40.00%	40.00%
progressive aspect	3.33%	3.33%	3.33%
embedding	13.33%	16.67%	23.33%
Total	23.33%	50.00%	66.67%

Table 11 showed the types of lexical downgraders used across three request types by lower level group. In general, very few lexical modifiers were used except for the 'politeness marker'-*please*.

Table 11: Lexical downgraders used across request types by lower level group

Lexical downgraders	(High) Req.rule-bending	(Medium) Req. feedback	(Low) Req. appointment
politeness marker	33.33%	13.33%	6.67%
subjectivizer	3.33%	0.00%	3.33%
consultative device	0.00%	0.00%	3.33%
downtoner	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
understater	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
hedges	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
others	0.00%	10.00%	3.33%
Total	36.67%	23.33%	16.67%

The use of external modifications across different request types could be observed in Table 12. Significant difference was found in the frequency usages of supportive moves across request types. The result of post hoc analysis further indicated that students used significantly more supportive moves in requesting for bending rule (M = 4.15) than in requesting for feedback (M = 3.10) and requesting for appointment (M = 3.37).

Table 12: Comparison of frequency usages of external modifications across request types by lower level group

External modifica-tions	Req. rule-bending		Req. feedback		Req. Appt.		ANOVA	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F	p
	4.15^a	1.14	3.10^b	1.09	3.37^b	1.00	14.256	.00*

Note: (*p< .05), Means with different alphabet letters differ significantly (*p< .05) by the post hoc Tukey test.

Table 13 showed the types of supportive moves used across request types by lower level group students. All subjects used supportive moves to soften the requestive acts across different request types. Within the subcategories, the use of 'grounders' could be found across different request types by all participants. 'Acknowledge imposition' and 'promise' were used by more than half of the participants (63.33%) in the highest imposition request, but were not used at all in the lower level imposition requests.

Table 13: Types of supportive moves used across request types by lower level group

Supportive Moves	(High) Req. rule-bending	(Medium) Req. feedback	(Low) Req. appointment
preparator	6.67%	6.67%	3.33%
precommitment	13.33%	23.33%	6.67%
grounder	90.00%	96.67%	93.33%
acknow.imposition	63.33%	0.00%	0.00%
promise	63.33%	0.00%	0.00%
expectation	16.67%	13.33%	16.67%
sweetener	3.33%	26.67%	80.00%
apology	86.67%	13.33%	6.67%
thanking	76.67%	100.00%	80.00%
direct appeal	16.67%	10.00%	23.33%
imposition minimi.	0.00%	6.67%	3.33%
impotance	10.00%	6.67%	3.33%
effort	3.33%	0.00%	0.00%
giving options	0.00%	6.67%	20.00%
Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Apparently, for lower linguistic proficiency students, the use of request strategies across request types did not vary significantly, although they tended to use more direct strategies for the highest imposition request. Among all direct strategies, 'want statements', 'expectation statements' and 'Please + impositives' were often adopted as requestive head acts. Students pointed out these strategies would sound less ambiguous yet polite, and thus were adopted more frequently for highest imposition request. As for the use of politeness features, students used significantly more external than internal downgraders, particularly for the highest imposition request. Similar to the higher level groups, students pointed out the need to be indirect by showing more supportive moves before making the core request. Students showed very limited ability in using lexical modifiers, except for 'please', and only 'past tense' in syntactic downgraders was sometimes adopted. This could be explained by the developmental continuum pointed out by Barron (2003) in that lower level students overuse 'please' and underuse other lexical modifiers such as 'downtoners', 'hedges', 'understaters', etc,.

Higher-intermediate vs. Lower-intermediate Proficiency Level students

As shown in the previous section, both higher-intermediate and lower-intermediate groups used more direct strategies for high imposition request. Statistical results also indicated that the frequency usages of different strategies in all request types were not significantly different between the two groups.

Table 14 showed the comparison of two groups' frequency usages of syntactic and lexical downgraders, and Table 15 showed the comparison of supportive moves in all request types. The results indicated that higher level group used more syntactic downgraders and significantly more lexical dowgraders and supportive moves in comparison with the lower proficiency group in all request types.

Table 14: Comparison of higher and lower level groups' frequency usages of different internal modifications in all request types

Internal modifications	Higher level group		Lower level group		t-test	
	M	SD	M	SD	t	p
Syntactic downgraders	0.72	0.765	0.52	0.674	1.964	0.051[#]
Lexical downgraders	0.51	0.691	0.26	0.439	2.962	0.003*

Note: (*p< .05), [#]Marginally significant

Table 15: Comparison of higher and lower level groups' frequency usages of supportive moves in all request types

External modifications	Higher level group		Lower level group		t-test	
	M	SD	M	SD	t	p
Supportive moves	4.36	1.448	3.66	1.229	3.497	0.001*

Note: (*p< .05)

In comparing the use of direct strategies and politeness features across different request types by the two groups, the results showed their choice of using direct strategies in making high imposition request was the same. As revealed in the interview and questionnaire, this phenomenon had to do with students' insecurity with their linguistic ability, which enforced them to use more explicit and concise, thus more direct requestive acts for the highest imposition request to avoid ambiguity on the addressee. In addition, both groups did not equate "explicitness and conciseness" with "directness and impoliteness" since the Chinese equivalents of these "direct strategies" were considered humble, indirect, and polite. However, qualitative differences did exist, since higher level group used more politeness devices such as 'past tense' and 'embedding' to internally mitigate the illocutionary force in their request. As for the politeness features, higher proficiency group used more syntactic modifiers, and significantly more lexical modifiers, and supportive moves than lower proficiency group. Thus, as students' linguistic level increased, their adoption of internal as well as external modifications would also increase. However, cautions should be made in that some of the internal modifiers such as 'progressive aspect', 'hedges', and 'understaters' were rarely or never used by higher level students. This suggests some of these modifiers may not be acquired by mere exposure; explicit teaching might be the key for students to effectively learn these devices in making e-polite requests.

Factors which influence students' choice of linguistic politeness strategies in emails

Imposition level of the request

From the questionnaire and retrospective interview, the majority of students' perceived levels of imposition on three email tasks corresponded to the imposition levels originally designed. Most students specified that the most indirect strategy should be used for the highest imposition email request. However, from the actual realization of their request, the direct strategies were most frequently used for the highest level imposition request by both groups. Particularly, 'expectation

statements' (i.e., *I hope that......*) were used extensively. Students pointed out that the Chinese equivalents of "I hope …", "Wo-Xiwang…" could be perceived as very polite strategies since the same realizations of this strategy was very modest and humble in Chinese. In addition, the most adopted 'expectation statements' often combined both direct and indirect elements, "in which the hope expressed is itself a conventionally indirect request that refers to the hearer's ability or willingness" (Yu, 1999, p. 300). Students thus considered these strategies as being indirect, rather than direct strategies as they appeared on the CCSARP scale.

Linguistic proficiency

Both groups addressed their difficulties in making e-mail request in the writing tasks. Some higher proficiency students pointed out that they found it difficult to make their email requests clear and at the same time polite. As for the lower level students, their perceived difficulties mainly came from their limited knowledge of English grammar and word usages. In general, higher level students concerned more about the pragmatic appropriateness, whereas lower level students worried more about their linguistic problems. To overcome the limited capability in related pragmatic norms, the higher level students, with relatively more linguistic resources, tended to elaborate more by using more supportive moves, which might lead to verbosity and cause negative perlocution on their addressee. As for the lower level students, their limited capacity in both linguistic and pragmatic knowledge had hindered their attempts in using some English structures or expressions they were unsure of in order to "play safe" in avoiding making too many mistakes.

Transfer of L1 pragmatic knowledge

Students from both groups pointed out they would resort to their existed L1 pragmatic knowledge of politeness in composing these emails since they were not familiar with the norm and context of making English request to professors. Most of the students also mentioned that they were using the "Chinese way" in composing these email requests by giving reasons prior to requests and by using different types of supportive moves to show their sincerity and respect. Zhang (1995b) pointed out that "to define indirectness in Chinese and to realize it in interaction, external modification of utterances is mandatory, internal modification is not" (p.82). The result of the current study thus echoed Zhang's findings.

Conclusion and Implication

This study intends to explore Taiwanese EFL Learners' pragmatic competence in the production of email request to professors in the institutional setting. The findings pointed out that both higher and lower linguistic groups preferred to use direct strategies in making high imposition email request. This phenomenon revealed that students' preference in making their requestive head acts more explicit and concise, and seemingly more direct (according to CCSARP scale) in order to avoid ambiguity on the addressee, since the consequence of failing or passing the course was at stake. It should be noted that students' perceptions regarding 'expectation statements' (i.e., *I hope that you…*) were neither direct nor impolite since such request statements showed concerns for the hearer's ability or willingness and were thus regarded a conventionally indirect request (Yu, 1999). It could also be inferred

that at this stage of the interpragmatic development, both groups were still strongly influenced by their L1 pragmatics since the conventional request strategies were not their main choices for the highest imposition task in making proper email requests in the target language.

As for the politeness features used, the result pointed out that as students' linguistic level increased, their adoption of internal and external modifiers also increased accordingly, indicating the developmental sequences in the acquisition of the politeness features. However, since some of the internal modifiers were never used by even higher proficiency groups, these devices may not be acquired by mere exposure; explicit teaching might be the key for students to learn these politeness features effectively. Regarding the use of supportive moves, both groups preferred the inductive move pattern ("justification-request") which may not agree with the deductive move pattern ("request-justification") preferred by the native Anglo-American culture (Kong, 1998). Since this may thus cause confusion or negative perception on the recipients of the target language, explicit instruction would be useful in clarifying the different writing rhetoric across different cultures.

As revealed by the questionnaire and interviews, students believed that being indirect was considered as the most respectful way of showing politeness and it was manifested largely via the use of "expectation statement" and pre-posed supportive moves. In addition, students were also aware that they were using Chinese rhetoric particularly in the patterns of supportive moves. However, when lacking contextual knowledge in making proper English email request to professors, they could only resort to their existing L1 pragmatics. Thus, what constitutes the polite head act and the proper use of diverse internal and external strategies should be made explicit in the language classroom, so students could be equipped with effective means to make effective upward email request.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Coding categories for request strategies in the current study

CCSARP directness levels	Request strategies	examples
Direct (least ambiguous)	(1) Imperatives	*Please take a look at my paper.*
	(2) performative	*I request to have special consideration to let me pass the course.* *I am asking you for your help to proofread my term paper.*
	(3) Direct questions	*When do you have time?*
	(4) Want statements	*I want to set up a meeting with you.* *I would like to hear your comments about my paper.*
	(5) Need statements	*I will need your advice in taking this course.*
	(6) Expectation statements	*I hope you can understand and let me pass the course.* *I hope I can have this appointment with you in talking about this course.*
Conventionally indirect	Query preparatory	*Would you please read my paper in your free time?* *I was wondering if you would give me some comments on my paper.*
Non-conventional indirect (Hints)	Strong hint	*Attached is my research paper.*
(most ambiguous)	Mild hint	*I am having a hard time in deciding whether I should take this course or not.*

Appendix B: Coding categories for syntactic and lexical modifiers in the current study

Internal modifiers	Sub-categories	examples
Syntactic modifiers	1) Past tense 2) Progressive aspect 3) Embedding	*I was wondering…* *I'm hoping…* *I would appreciate it if you could..* *Can you take a look at my paper if you have time?*
Lexical modifiers	1) Polite marker 2) Subjectiviser 3) Consultative device 4) Downtoner 5) Understater 6) Hedges	*please* *I'm afraid..; I suggest..; I think…* *Do you think you will; do you mind if; Would it be possible..* *possibly; perhaps; maybe* *a little; a bit; just* *somewhat; sort of; kind of*

Appendix C : Coding categories for supportive moves in the current study

Supportive moves	Examples
1) Preparator	*May I ask you question?*
2) Precommitment	*Could you do me a favor?*
3) Grounder	The reason that I missed so many classes was that *I have to take care of my grandmother in the hospital.*
4) Acknowledge the imposition of the request	*I know it violates the rules to miss so many classes,* but could you make an exception this time?
5) Promise	*I promise that I will not miss any class any more.*
6) Expectation	*I look forward to hearing from you soon.* *I hope I can see your reply as soon as possible.*
7) Sweetener	*You are the expert in the field so I think you are the most appropriate person to give me advice.*
8) Apology	*I am really sorry for my poor attendance.*
9) Thanking	*Thank you for taking your time reading my mail.*
10) Direct appeal	*I really hope you can understand.* *Please understand my situation.*
11) Imposition minimizer	Please give me some feedback on my paper, *under the circumstances that it won't take too much of your time.*
12) Importance	This paper is really *important* for me.
13) Showing the effort	I have handed in all the assignments and have got good grades on the tests.
14) Giving options to the addressee	*Please let me know your available time so I can remove my schedule.*