

# **E-politeness in Iranian English Electronic Requests to the Faculty**

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## **Abstract**

This paper reports the findings of a study designed to investigate English e-requests of Iranian EFL postgraduate students (i.e., nonnative speakers of English) made to their professors during their education at Islamic Azad University, Najaf Abad Branch, Isfahan, Iran, to find out types of politeness features employed in the students' e-mails and the extent to which these features might influence the degree of politeness of the students' e-mails to the faculty. To that end, both quantitative and qualitative approaches were employed to investigate 60 English e-mails composed by the participants. The findings revealed that the Iranian students' English e-mails were not overly adorned with politeness features. The results also indicated that such direct and unmodified e-mails failed to create e-polite messages to the faculty and, therefore, were capable of causing pragmatic failure.

**Keywords:** E-mail; Requests; Politeness; Pragmatic failure; Directness; Modification

## **1. Introduction**

In recent years, everyday communication has been influenced by technological changes so that new electrically mediated modes of interaction have been brought forth. Electronic mail (e-mail) that is heavily employed at many worksites and within large institutions is one of these organized forms (Gains, 1999). This new medium of interaction has become part of the daily routine (Hawisher & Moran, 1993) and has emerged as a system of language conveyance in circumstances where neither speech nor writing can easily replace. Studies on the characteristics of e-mail language (Barron, 2000, 2003; Crystal, 2001; Herring, 2002) have characterized e-mail as a type of mixed contact system and situated e-mail language along the continuum between oral and written language that resembles informal letters as well as telephone conversations (Baron, 1998, 2000).

Over the last 15 years, the interaction between students and their teachers at the university level has changed from consultations through office hours or brief

meetings before or after class to interaction via e-mail (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006). Therefore, e-mail has become an efficient and accepted substitute means of interaction (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). While students can write to their peers in any manner, they feel uneasy to write e-mails to their professors (Baron, 1998, 2000; Murry, 1988, 1995 cited in Chen, 2006). There are a lot of complaints from the faculty regarding students' e-mails ranging from irrational requests and inappropriate tone, to unsuitable salutation, abbreviations, spelling, and structural errors (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Glater, 2006). In crafting a language-congruent e-mail to academic staff appropriately, both native and nonnative students should consider the kind of relationship that they have with their professors and the degree of imposition that their e-mail requests put on the faculty members. They should express their requests in such a way that their positive face and their professors' negative face, which desire their territory to be respected and their autonomy unconfined, are not at risk (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987).

Due to the widespread use of this new means of communication (e-mail writing) in the academic settings, the focus of this study is to examine the English e-mail requests written by Iranian postgraduate (i.e., nonnative speaker of English) university students to their professors. Based on the foregoing discussion, this study strives to answer the following research questions:

1. What types of politeness features do Iranian EFL learners use in their e-mail requests to the faculty to possibly mitigate their requests?
2. To what extent and why may the faculty members perceive the students' e-mails polite or impolite?

## **2. Studies on E-requests**

Most studies done on e-mails have focused on how e-mails differed from oral speech in L2 (Chapman, 1997; Warschauer, 1996), or on how e-mails might help nonnative speakers to improve their L2 (Lapp, 2000; Li, 2000; Liaw, 1998). Quite a few studies have also focused on those linguistic features that influence the directness and politeness of e-mails. One of the earliest studies on student-faculty e-mail requests was the study of Hardford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996) who investigated the effect of e-mail requests sent by native speakers (NSs) and nonnative speakers (NNSs) to two faculty recipients. Their study revealed that the NNSs' requests were different from those of the NSs in the use of mitigation (i.e., politeness aspects) as well as extralinguistic features, like emphasis on individual requirements and irrational time frames rather than institutional claims.

Chang and Hsu (1998) applied Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) coding framework to examine the request structure in the English e-mail messages written by Chinese learners of English and native American English

speakers. Their study displayed that the Chinese learners applied indirect requestive act structures, whereas their linguistic realizations were more direct. On the other hand, the native American English speakers utilized direct requestive act structures, whereas their linguistic realizations were indirect.

Few more studies on e-mails have applied the CCSARP framework to investigate the sort of request employed in e-mails. Chen (2001) investigated American and Taiwanese graduate students' e-mail requests (prior arrangement, advice, particular consideration) to the faculty with whom the students were either familiar or not. She observed that although both groups of students had a preference on Query Preparatory (e.g., *can you*) and Want Statements (e.g., *I want/would like to*) to comprehend their requests, they were different in the degree of lexico-syntactic politeness aspects (e.g., *use of past tense, please, possibly, I was wondering if*) that made the NSs' requests more indirect and gracious.

Biesenbach-Lucas and Weasenforth (2000), Weasenforth and Biesenbach-Lucas (2001), and Biesenbach-Lucas (2002, 2004) applied the CCSARP framework to NSs' and NNSs' e-mail requests to faculty. Their studies revealed that both NSs and NNSs preferred correspondingly direct or indirect strategies for request comprehension, and the distinctions in request strategies selected by both groups were moderately small.

Swangboonsatic (2006) investigated the request speech act in e-mails written by Australian and Thai students in English. The result indicated that the Thai students' messages in making requests were less direct and more polite than those of the Australian students. The researcher attributed these differentiations in requesting style to the dissimilarity between the Thai and Australian cultural norms.

In her recent application of the two versions of the CCSARP coding framework to students' e-mail requests, Biesenbach-Lucas (2006) investigated how findings and conclusions regarding the preferred strategies of any linguistic group (NSs or NNSs) can be influenced by the incompatible assignment of request strategies to directness or indirectness levels observed in request studies. Her study revealed that naturalistic e-mail data produced request realizations that have not formerly been explained in the CCSARP framework and, therefore, created a need for improvement of the original framework.

Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) examined the head requestive acts of e-mail messages to scrutinize how native and nonnative English speaking graduate students formulate low- and high-imposition requests sent for the faculty. Her results indicated that although the native speakers displayed greater resources in crafting e-polite messages to their professors than the nonnative speakers, most requests were achieved through direct request strategies.

More recently, Hendrik (2010) investigated English e-mail requests written by Dutch learners to see the effect of the underuse of syntactic and lexical modifiers on the degree of politeness of e-mails. He concluded that using extensive external modifiers helped to increase the politeness level of the e-mails, and that underusing elaborate syntactic and lexical modifiers might result in decreasing the degree of the politeness of the e-mails and, therefore, capable of causing pragmatic failure.

### **3. Method**

#### ***3.1 Participants for the First Phase***

To collect the data for this study, which employed an exploratory qualitative research design, 60 Iranian postgraduate students (i.e., nonnative speaker of English) were asked to write English e-mails to their own professors. The participants who wrote the e-mails were studying English at Islamic Azad university of Najaf Abad, Isfahan, Iran. They were enrolled in the postgraduate program and had a Persian-language background, and their ages ranged from 25 to 32. The participants were supposed to be advanced at the level of language proficiency, as all of them had studied English for at least four years in B.A. before entering their M.A. program. They had also passed a language proficiency entrance exam for being accepted as M.A. students. Therefore, they were considered competent enough to write an e-mail of this type without any need for further proficiency level inquiry.

The professors whom the participants addressed were 35 to 60 years old, doctorate holders and full-time teaching faculty at the same institution. Their communication style with their students could be characterized as formal (e.g., they had contact with students only during class and office hours). All of these faculty members were the native speakers of Persian and had native-like proficiency in English.

#### ***3.2 Data Collection***

The participants were asked to address one of their professors within their major and write an English e-mail to him or her. Two topics were chosen and offered to the participants to write the e-mails about. The topics in question were selected with a view to fulfilling the requirements for the research questions. An attempt was made to choose the topic with which the participants were quite familiar and in which they had some practice.

Actually, the participants were asked to write an English e-mail to their professors and request for reconsidering their grades and ask their professors to give them a chance of meeting them in their office. The e-mail requests collected involved both requests for information that had higher imposition such as request for revision of grade and requests for action that had lower imposition such as request for an appointment. Therefore, both lower and higher imposition requests were included in the study. In order to address the ethical issues in relation to such a study, the

participants were informed that their e-mails would be kept confidential and no personal information would be revealed.

### ***3.3 E-mail Analysis Procedure***

To answer the first question, the features of politeness were analyzed. The politeness features included the degree of directness (direct requests, conventionally indirect requests, or hints), internal modification (lexical/phrasal downgraders and upgraders), and external modification (mitigating supportive moves and aggravating moves added to the head act), and the form of address used in the participants' e-mails.

To determine the degree of directness, the researchers used a modified version of request strategies that was proposed initially by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) and revised by Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) to fit the e-mail request data. In addition to the above, requests for action and requests for information were analyzed on a separate scale of directness. Both e-mail requests for action and requests for information were analyzed along the following main directness levels of (a) most direct strategies, (b) conventionally indirect strategies, and (c) nonconventionally indirect strategies.

Internal modification of the collected e-requests was examined based on the classification that Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984), and Edmondson (1981) utilized for coding the modification. The CCSARP classification (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) was used for coding external modification.

This study also examined forms of address that the Iranian students used in their e-mails. The features investigated were those examined by Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) including, “the presence or absence of the term of deference ‘dear,’ the inclusion of greeting in the title (e.g., Hi Dr. Kokinaki), the use of titles (Mr./Mrs., Miss. instead of Dr.), the use of constructions such as Title + FN (e.g., Dr. Paul), zero forms of address (i.e., e-mails without a salutation), and formal and less formal constructions (e.g., Dear Dr. Kogetsidis vs. Dear Maria)” (p. 3199).

### ***3.4 Participants for the Perception Phase***

The participants at this phase were six university instructors (four females and two males) from Islamic Azad University of Najaf Abad, Isfahan, Iran. They were all Persian native speakers (four university teachers with Ph.D. in applied linguistics and two Ph.D. candidates in applied linguistics). Their age ranged from 35 to 60. Their experience of teaching in higher education varied from 3 to 20 years.

### ***3.5 Analysis of Teachers' Perception***

As the aim of this part was to investigate those linguistic features that violated students-teacher distance and, therefore, caused the e-mails to be impolite, the perceptions of some Iranian university teachers (i.e., nonnative speakers of

English) on the students' e-mail requests were studied. The reasons for their perceptions (by referring to certain linguistic or absent linguistic elements) were also sought.

The e-mail messages given to the instructors to determine the degree of their politeness were six English e-mails selected randomly from among all others. They determined the politeness of the e-mail messages based on a 5-point Likert scale perception questionnaire. As a matter of fact, the instructors evaluated each e-mail message based on this scale and qualitatively determined those linguistic features from messages that made them decide an e-mail message to be polite or abrupt.

#### 4. Results

##### 4.1 Degree of Directness of the Participants' English E-mail Requests

English e-mail requests for action and requests for information were analyzed separately. The results in Table 1 indicated that the participants employed a great deal of indirect strategies in the English e-mail requests for action (65%), and particularly, a large number of query preparatory was used:

Table 1. *Degree of Requestive Directness: Requests for Action*

Strategies	Instances	F (%)	Total (%)
Direct	Imperatives/Mood Derivable	10 (16.6%)	21 (35%)
	Elliptical Requests	0 (0%)	
	Performatives	4 (6.6%)	
	Want Statements	6 (10%)	
	Need Statements	0 (0%)	
	Expectation Statements	1 (1.6%)	
	Reminder Requests	0 (0%)	
Conventionally Indirect	Query Preparatory	37 (61.6%)	37 (61.6%)
Hints	Strong Hints/Mild Hints	2 (3.4%)	2 (3.4%)

As far as requests for information were concerned, the NNSs resorted to direct strategies in a great majority of the English e-mail requests for information and more specifically, to imperative sentences for information (see Table 2):

Table 2. *Degree of Requestive Directness: Requests for Information*

Strategies	Instances	F (%)	Total (%)
Direct	Direct Questions	0 (0%)	38
	Elliptical Requests	0 (0%)	(63.4%)
	Imperatives/Mood Derivable	23 (38.4%)	
	Performatives	4 (6.6%)	
	Want Statements	9 (15%)	
	Need Statements	2 (3.3%)	
Conventionally Indirect	Query Preparatory	22 (36.6%)	22 (36.6%)
Hints	Strong Hints/Mild Hints	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

The general results indicated that the number of direct strategies and indirect strategies in the participants' English e-mail requests for action and requests for information were almost the same, and there was no overall preference on the part of the participants for directness (see Table 3).

As seen in Table 3, 49.2% of the participants' English e-mails included direct requests, 49.2% of the participants' English e-mails included conventional indirectness, and Hints were present in 1.6% of the participants' English e-mails. The three most widely used direct substrategies in the participants' English e-mail requests for action and requests for information were as follows: (a) Imperatives/Mood Derivables (27.5%), (b) Want Statements (12.5%), and (c) Performatives (6.6%).

The typical imperative construction utilized by the participants was please+imperative. The participants utilized *I want you* for Want Statements. The Performatives were typically phrased with *I request you* and, therefore, employed a speaker perspective:

Table 3. *Degree of Requestive Directness: General Results*

Strategies	Instances	F (%)	Total (%)
Direct	Imperatives/Mood	33 (27.5)	59 (49.2)
	Derivable		
	Direct Questions	0 (0)	
	Elliptical Requests	0 (0)	
	Performatives	8 (6.6)	
	Want Statements	15 (12.5)	
	Need Statements	2 (1.6)	
	Expectation Statements	1 (0.8)	
	Reminder Requests	0 (0)	
	Conventionally Indirect	Query Preparatory	
Hints	Strong Hints/Mild Hints	2 (1.6%)	2 (1.6)

The chi-square tests of independence were also conducted in order to check whether there were significant differences between the directness employed in the participants' English e-mail requests for action and requests for information. The statistical results of the e-mail requests written by the participants in English indicated a significantly higher number of direct strategies in the participants' English e-mail requests for information, and a significantly higher number of conventionally indirect strategies in the participants' English e-mail requests for action,  $\chi^2(1, n = 120) = 8.54$ ,  $p = .003$ . These differences were significant at a  $p < .05$  level.

#### 4.2 Internal Modification in the English E-mail Requests

Internal modification of English e-mail requests was analyzed through lexical/phrasal downgraders and upgraders. The results indicated that the majority of the participants did not use any lexical/phrasal modification for downgrading the effect of their request (see Table 4). The first most preferred mitigator was the marker *please* as it was employed in 49% of the participants' English e-mail requests. The second most used mitigator was consultative devices used in 38% of the participants' English e-mail requests. Whereas subjectivisers were used in 13.3% of the English e-mail requests, downtoners were only used in 0.83% of the English e-mail requests. The other lexical/phrasal downgraders were not used in the e-mails:

Table 4. *Internal Modification: Phrasal/Lexical Downgraders Across the English E-mail Requests*

Types of Modifications	F (%)
Zero Marking	34 (28.3)
Marker <i>please</i>	59 (49)
Consultative Devices	46 (38)
Downtoners	1 (0.83)
Understaters/Hedges	0 (0)
Subjectivisers	16 (13.3)
Cajolers	0 (0)
Appealers	0 (0)

Importantly, the use of intensifiers/upgraders in the participants' English e-mail requests was just 0.83% (see Table 5). This indicates that the participants did not use intensifiers/upgraders in order to intensify the urgency and coerciveness of their requests:

Table 5. *Internal Modification: Upgraders-Intensifiers Across the English E-mail Requests*

Types of Modifications	F (%)
Intensifiers	1 (0.83)
Time Intensifiers	0 (0)
Overstaters	0 (0)
Total	1 (0.83)

#### 4.3 External Modification in the Participants' English E-mail Requests

External modification of the English e-mail requests was analyzed through supportive and aggravating moves. From the analysis, the most striking findings were the following (see Table 6):

- All the participants' English e-mail requests included external markers.
- The most widely used modifiers in order of frequency were grounder (50%), preclosing (48.3%), e-mail closing (45%), discourse orientation move (45%), and greeting/opening (43.3%).
- Self-introducer (21.6%), complement/sweetener (20%), and disarmer (16.7%) were the second most used modifiers.
- Whereas promise and apology were employed in 10% of the English e-mail requests, preparator was used in 6.7% of the participants' e-mail requests.
- The use of imposition defined as the attempt of speaker for reducing the imposition placed on the hearer by his or her request (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989, p. 288) was 0% in the participants' English e-mail requests.

- Whereas the majority of the participants' English e-mail requests included complaint/criticism (40%; see Table 7), emphasis on urgency was not seen in the participants' English e-mail requests (0%). The other external modifications were not used in the participants' English e-mail requests (see Table 6):

Table 6. *External Modification: Supportive Moves in the Participants' English E-mails*

Types of Modifications	F (%)
Grounder	30 (50)
Disarmer	10 (16.7)
Preparator	4 (6.7)
Getting a Precommitment	0 (0)
Promise	6 (10)
Imposition Minimizer	0 (0)
Apology	6 (10)
Discourse Orientation Move	27 (45)
Preclosings ( <i>thanks</i> )	29 (48.3)
E-mail Closing	27 (45)
Complement/Sweetener	12 (20)
Zero Marking	0 (0)
Self-Introducer	13 (21.6)

Table 7. *External Modification: Aggravating Moves in the Participants' English E-mails*

Types of Modifications	F (%)
Complaint/Criticism	24 (40)
Emphasis on Urgency	0 (0)

#### 4.4 Forms of Address in the English E-mail Requests

The quantitative analysis of forms of address was also done in the participants' English e-mail requests. Due to the great variation emerging from the data, a number of different findings were obtained in relation to the forms of address employed in the participants' English e-mails. Some of the constructions used were acceptable, but too direct due to the omission of deference form *dear*, and a number of e-mails included no salutation whatsoever (i.e., zero form of address). The forms of address preferred by the NNSs were as follows (see Table 8):

- 39.9% of the participants used *dear* in their English e-mail requests.
- 16.6% of the participants employed greeting as a way to address their professors.
- 10% of the English e-mails were started without any forms of address.

- Other forms of address such as *Hello my master* (rough translation of Persian *Salam Ostad*) were included in 33.3% of the participants English e-mail requests.

Regardless of the employment of *dear* or the inclusion of a greeting, all the forms of address employed made use of the lecturer's last name, rather than first name. These results further revealed the participants' overall preference for formality.

Table 8. *Forms of Address in the Participants' English E-mails*

Use of <i>dear</i>	<i>dear</i> + incorrect academic title/title + FN ( <i>Dear Ms./Dr. First Name</i> )	0 (0%)
	<i>dear</i> + LN ( <i>Dear Last Name</i> )	0 (0)
	<i>dear</i> + TLN ( <i>Dear Dr. + Last Name</i> )	22 (36.6)
	<i>dear</i> + incorrect academic title + LN ( <i>Dear Ms. + Last Name</i> )	2 (3.3)
	Other	0 (0)
Omission of <i>dear</i>	Incorrect academic title + FN ( <i>Miss. +First Name</i> )	0 (0)
	TLN ( <i>Dr. + Last Name</i> )	0 (0)
	Incorrect academic title + LN ( <i>Ms. +Last Name</i> )	0 (0)
	Title + FN ( <i>Dr. + First Name</i> )	0 (0)
Use of Greeting (e.g., <i>hi, hello</i> )	Hi/Hello+ incorrect academic title + FN ( <i>Hi Mr. + First Name</i> )	0 (0)
	Hi + FN ( <i>Hi + First Name</i> )	0 (0)
	Hi/Hello incorrect title + LN ( <i>Hello, Ms. +Last Name</i> )	1 (1.6)
	Hi/Hello + TLN ( <i>Hi Dr. +Last Name</i> )	9 (15)
	Hi/Hello + title + FN ( <i>Hi Dr.+ First Name</i> )	0 (0)
Zero Forms of Address		6 (10)
Others	Hi /+ My master	20 (33.3)

#### 4.5 Perceptions of the Iranian University Instructors

Another aim of this study was to investigate those linguistic features that violate the student-teacher distance in Iranian EFL students' e-mail requests and, therefore, render the students' e-mails to be impolite. In order to do this analysis more accurately, six English e-mail messages were randomly selected and sent to six university instructors through their e-mail addresses. A summary of the six e-mails' overall structure is given below (see Table 9):

Table 9. *Summary of Politeness and Modification Features of the Six E-mails*

E-mails	Overall Structure
E-mail # 1	<i>dear</i> + title (doctor), [no greeting], preparatory, please + imperative, imperative, thanks, [no closing]
E-mail # 2	<i>dear</i> + title (professor) + LN, [no greeting], apology, grounder, please + imperative, please + imperative, thanks, closing
E-mail # 3	<i>dear</i> + title (professor) + LN, [no greeting], orientation, please + imperative, imperative, thanks, [no closing]
E-mail # 4	[zero form of address], greeting (hello), self-introduction, imperative, imperative, [no thanks], [no closing]
E-mail # 5	<i>dear</i> + title (professor), greeting, please + imperative, grounder, imperative, thanks, [no closing]
E-mail # 6	<i>dear</i> + title (master), [no greeting], please + imperative, disarmer, imperative, thanks, [no closing]

Taken together, these results suggest that English e-mail # 4 was perceived as significantly less polite than the rest of the English e-mails. English e-mail # 2 was found to be the most polite e-mail. English e-mail # 6 was found to be more polite than English e-mails # 1, 3, and 5. Finally, English e-mails # 1, 3, and 5 were found to be significantly more polite than English e-mail # 4, but less polite than English e-mails # 2 and 6. These results are also presented in Tables 11 and 12. The English e-mail below is e-mail # 4 that was perceived as significantly least polite of all the rest of the English e-mails:

- Student No. 53 (e-mail # 4):

Hello, My name . . . (student's name), I was your students, you was familiar with my activities in classroom. My mark was very bad. Regarding my activities in your class, I think my score should be more. So, recorrect my exam paper and revise my mark. I think I should meet you in person in your office to talk about my score. Therefore, give me time to meet you in your office. (student's name)

A closer examination of the structure of English e-mail # 4 perceived as the least polite by the teachers allows one to see that it includes the imperative structure for both requests for action and information without adding *please* marker for mitigating the requests, whereas English e-mails perceived as the most polite included *please* + imperative structure for requests for action or information (e-mail # 2).

The qualitative data from the perception phase of the present study indicated that those e-mail requests adorned with greeting and closing were valued positively

by the instructors. The instructors mentioned that the lack of greeting and closing made the students' e-mails perceived as abrupt. Here are two examples:

. . . Using 'thank you' and 'best regards' is regarded as politeness markers here. Length of e-mail cannot be judged as the sign of politeness. However, 'give overwhelming reasons' before any request, apology, etc. is claimed to be one way of showing politeness by Brown and Levinson politeness (1987, p. 189). (female teacher in applied linguistics, age: 50)

I evaluated this email as polite, as the writer used a few politeness sub-strategies in it such as 'dear' as an honorific term, 'please' marker, and 'give deference' as one of the sub-strategies of negative politeness. If the writer wants her/his email to be polite enough, by considering sensitivity of the way of expressing her contest to the reader (who is in the higher social position), s/he should use some politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1978). So regarding the higher position of the professor, making requests without any kind of politeness markers (hedge, question, give deference, etc.) is considered impolite . . . . (female teacher in applied linguistics, age: 42)

Table below displays a statistical summary of the perception questionnaire:

Table 10. *Means and Standard Deviations of Perception Questionnaire E-mails (1 = Not at All, 5 = Very Much)*

E-mails	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
E-mail # 1	6	2.8333	.98319
E-mail # 2	6	3.8333	.40825
E-mail # 3	6	3.0000	1.26491
E-mail # 4	6	2.0000	.89443
E-mail # 5	6	3.0000	1.09545
E-mail # 6	6	3.6667	1.03280
Total	36	3.0556	1.09400

To find out whether the differences between the means of these English e-mails in terms of politeness were significant or not, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted. The results indicated that there was a significant difference in the degree of politeness of the six English e-mails included in the perception questionnaire ( $F = 2.67$ ,  $Sig. = .041$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Post-hoc comparisons using Tukey HSD test were conducted for determining which English e-mail(s) differed significantly from the others. As far as the degree of politeness of the English e-mails was concerned, the post-hoc comparisons indicated that the mean score for English e-

mail # 4 ( $M = 2.00$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ) was significantly different from that of the English e-mails # 1 ( $M = 2.83$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ), # 3 ( $M = 3$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ), # 5 ( $M = 3$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ), # 2 ( $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = 0.41$ ), and # 6 ( $M = 3.67$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ) at a  $p < 0.05$  level.

### 5. Discussion

The results revealed that whereas the NNS students relied largely on indirect strategies in the case of requests for action, they resorted largely to direct strategies in the case of requests for information, with the imperatives (*please* + imperative), Direct Questions and Want Statements as the most preferred substrategies. This result is in line with Biesenbach-Lucas (2002, 2004), Biesenbach-Lucas and Weasenforth (2000) and Chen (2006) who found that the NNSs tended to also favor direct strategies. Such significantly direct strategies, however, can easily become responsible for pragmatic infelicities as they appear to give the faculty no choice in complying with the request. The use of Imperatives in particular can be seen as an institutionally inappropriate strategy because, as Bloch (2002) argues, the degree of power in such e-mails is not properly assigned to the professor. General results showed that 50% of the Iranian students preferred to be more direct in their requests. Using direct strategies in the students' English e-mail requests negatively affected the evaluation of the faculty participants offering their perception on the degree of politeness of English e-mails. They pointed out that the use of direct strategies was what they would expect from a supervisor, not a student. The instructors also commented that the imperatives used in the e-mails had a negative effect on their evaluations of the e-mails. They remarked that the use of the imperatives made the e-mails harsh even with *please* added and created the assumption that the instructors would comply.

These views confirm Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig's (1996) claim that the marker *please* alone cannot mitigate or soften the force of imperatives in student-faculty communication. They explain that "students do not have the institutional status to issue directives to faculty, and the use of this form puts them seriously out-of-status . . . . Such noncongruent acts in institutional talk require a fairly high level of mitigation" (1996, p. 59).

The tendency of using direct strategies in the student' English e-mail requests might have arisen from the characteristics of e-mail medium that is a "hybrid medium." As the language of e-mails is situated along the continuum between oral and written language, resembling "informal letters" as well as "telephone conversations" the students feel that a minimum amount of mitigations is sufficient for realizing their requests to the faculty (Barron, 1998).

The results also indicate that the majority of the English e-mail requests were without any lexical/phrasal modification for downgrading the effect of the requests.

This finding is in line with Faerch and Kasper's (1989) claim that the learners preferred the politeness marker to its double function as an illocutionary force indicator (*Could you please . . .*) and as a transparent mitigator (*Can you please offer me a lift home?*) to show politeness. In this case, pragmatic ambiguity that is found in *Can you?* questions is resolved by the use of *please* marker so as to become a clear request (Blum-Kulka, 1987).

The linguistic comparison of politeness marker *please* in imperatives across the English e-mail requests indicated that the majority of the students used this marker in initial positions of their English e-mail requests. One explanation for this might be that the students were influenced by their L1, as the marker *please* in Persian is used mostly in initial position in imperatives.

The underuse of internal modification had a negative effect on the faculty's perception of the personality of the e-mail senders. Indeed, the qualitative data received from the perception questionnaire indicated that the lack of mitigation affected the faculty participants in their evaluations. They explained that the lack of *please* in English e-mail # 4 made them perceive it as the most abrupt. One such a comment comes below:

I consider this e-mail as an impolite one since the requests are mentioned directly without using 'please' markers for mitigating them. It has almost no greetings as expected. More, the language has grammar problems which render it carelessly written . . . (male teacher in applied linguistics, age: 38)

The results also indicated that the students used external modification in their English e-mail requests (see Tables 6 & 7). These findings are in line with Weasenforth and Biesenbach-Lucas (2001) as well as Biesenbach-Lucas (2004) whose e-mail studies also revealed that the NNSs preferred to use external modification in their e-mail requests. A number of previous interlanguage request modification studies that used discourse-completion tests (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2009; Faerch & Kasper, 1989) and interactive oral role-plays (Hassall, 2001) have demonstrated that NNS students prefer to use external modification for mitigating their requests. Such previous studies found L2 learners prefer explicit and unambiguous means of expressions through an external modification by sticking to Grice's (1975) maxim of clarity.

Students opt for such modifiers because external modifiers are more explicit in the learners' intended politeness function (Faerch & Kasper, 1989). A further explanation for this preference might be found in the NNSs' "lack of linguistic flexibility that would allow them to craftily select lexicon-syntactic modifiers" (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006, p. 86). Hassall (2001) argued that as external modifiers in

general tend to be syntactically less demanding and pragmalinguistically less complex, learners are more able to use external modifiers to mitigate their requests.

Furthermore, some students employed external modification before they uttered the request acts, whereas some others did so after the acts. Some even enfolded their supportive moves before and after the acts. These phenomena lead us to say that the students were influenced by their L1 so that they applied a cyclical pattern that is commonly used by the natives of Asian languages.

The present study further showed that the students frequently employed grounder in their English requests. This finding is also in line with the findings from numerous interlanguage studies that indicate that grounder is frequently used in NNSs requests (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2008, 2009, 2011; Ellis, 1992; Faerch & Kasper, 1989; Hassall, 2001; House & Kasper, 1987; Otcu & Zeyrek, 2006; Schauer, 2007; Woodfield, 2004). An explanation offered for this phenomenon is that “giving reasons, justifications, and explanations for an action opens up an empathetic attitude on the part of the interlocutor in giving his or her insight into the actor’s underlying motive(s)” (Faerch & Kasper, 1989, p. 239).

Preclosings were used frequently in the students’ English e-mail requests and gave a positive effect to the students’ English e-mails. The instructors who offered their perceptions pointed out the positive effect that the preclosings had on their evaluations of English e-mail # 2 perceived as the most polite English e-mail. They commented that this e-mail was polite as it included *thank you* that did not violate the maxim of request, and it was not authoritative. They remarked that, in this e-mail, the student appreciated the time that the professor would dedicate for reading their e-mails and this kind of request was considered persuasive. Therefore, this finding confirms Economidou-Kogetsidis’ (2011) claim that using preclosings such as *thank you* or *thanking you in advance* indicates the student’s beliefs that the faculty will respond positively to the request.

Although grounders and preclosings were included in the majority of the English e-mails analyzed, the results indicated that the use of greeting and e-mail closing was underused by the NNSs in their English e-mail requests. It could be argued that the e-mails phrased without a greeting and without a closing enhanced the directness and possibly coerciveness of the message even more—something that can make these e-mails status-incongruent.

The current study further investigated the forms of address that NNS students employed in their e-mails to faculty members. The results were similar to Gains’ (1999), Gimenez’s (2000), and Economidou-Kogetsidis’ (2011) findings in that the students’ e-mails indicated a wide stylistic range in the form of address used. The forms of address ranged from no salutation (zero form of address) to the more formal

Dear + Title + LN. Using a great variation of address forms in the students' e-mails seems to propose that "both native and nonnative students in general might be equally unsure about what is appropriate and preferred when it comes to e-mail communication with faculty" (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011, p. 3209).

Also, the majority of the students addressed their professors with the term of deference *dear* in their English requests. An examination of the forms of address in the students' English e-mails revealed that the majority of the students preferred to start their e-mails with salutation. The high preference for salutation on the part of the students confirms Brown and Gilman's (1960) power-and-solidarity model that the choice of address forms is regulated by the two complementary dimensions (or semantics) of power and solidarity.

More specifically, the result from the perception phase of this study indicated that those e-mail requests that were not adorned with salutation were evaluated negatively by the lecturers. As one piece of evidence, the following teachers wrote:

. . . Giving deference as one of the substrategies of negative politeness is seen here. By using this substrategy, the speaker defuses the potential Face-threatening acts by showing deference to hearer. To show deference to someone, the speaker symbolically raises the status of hearer to one greater than himself or herself. Using the word 'dear' is a marker of this substrategy. (female teacher in applied linguistics, age: 42)

This finding is in line with Economidou-Kogetsidis' (2011) claim that the avoidance strategy (zero form of address) and the omission of deference form *dear* can be considered as a source of pragmatic failure in online communication.

The structure of Title + FN, a grammatically unacceptable construction in English, was not seen in the English e-mails composed by the students. One explanation for not using this structure by students in their English e-mails might be that the students, as a result of studying English at the university, were aware of the ungrammaticality of this construction in English; therefore, they avoided using this ungrammatical structure in their English e-mails as a kind of salutation.

Some English e-mails also involved the use of forms of address such as *Hello my master*. Interestingly, none of the perception phase participants commented negatively on these kinds of forms of address in the students' English e-mails. Moreover, the finding revealed the students' overall preference for formality. The trend of formality seems to be confirmed by the use of the professor's last name, rather than first name in the students' English e-mails.

## 6. Conclusion

The results of this study indicated that the NNS students' English e-mails were typically characterized by significant directness (particularly in relation to requests for information), an underuse of lexical or phrasal downgraders, an omission of greetings and closings, and a considerable variation in the forms of address employed. It has been argued that as these e-mails give the faculty no choice in complying with the request and fail to acknowledge the imposition involved, many of them might become responsible for pragmatic infelicities. The considerable degree of directness and inadequate alleviation, along with the exclusion of a salutation and/or a closing, and the use of unsuitable forms of address, all boil down to an abrupt e-mail result that may occasionally verge on rudeness (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). This study has confirmed that writing e-mails is a demanding task and requires the student to be aware of politeness strategies and to have a high pragmatic competence.

As electronic communication is becoming a more popular medium for bridging the wide gap of physical distance between parties involved in all interactions in general and in academic environments in particular, Iranian EFL instructors, graduate students, supervisors, and program coordinators should help the students to be aware of how to use the electronic medium and how to do this in an effective, yet appropriate manner.

Like any other piece of work, this study suffered from some limitations. One limitation is that only e-mail messages sent by postgraduate students studying English at Islamic Azad University of Najaf Abad, Isfahan, Iran, were investigated. Analyzing e-mails sent by students from other fields of study and at different universities in Iran as well as undergraduate students whose computer experience most likely began at a much earlier age than that of postgraduate students would be more useful in generalizing the findings of this study. Another limitation is the fact that the focus of the current study was on the lexical/phrasal modifiers of the students' e-mails. Further research is needed to also investigate the syntactic modification of these e-mails.

As the results of this study cannot be generalized to all the native speakers of Persian, replications of the study in which other means of data collection and larger samples are involved will definitely shed light on the issues of the appropriateness of students' e-mails to the faculty.

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