

LEVELS OF DIRECTNESS IN ENGLISH REQUEST EMAILS FROM STUDENTS TO TEACHERS: A CASE STUDY AT VNU - INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL, HANOI

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ABSTRACT: The study of the relationship between pragmatics and cultural knowledge has attracted growing interest among linguists due to its crucial role in cross-cultural communication. This paper presents the findings of a case study focusing on requestive speech acts in student–teacher communication via English email at the International School - Vietnam National University, Hanoi (VNU-IS). The study employs a qualitative method—interviewing teachers—to collect data on the degree of directness and request strategies found in English request emails that students had previously sent to their teachers. The research is analyzed using the theoretical framework of Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984), which identifies three levels of directness in making requests: conventionally direct, conventionally indirect, and non-conventionally indirect. The findings reveal that most emails received by teachers were written in a direct style, primarily due to students’ limited language proficiency and weak command of politeness markers. The author proposes several suggestions for teachers, learners, and educational institutions to help foreign language learners improve their pragmatic competence in making appropriate and polite requests.

KEY WORDS: Requestive speech acts; Email communication; Directness in requests; Politeness strategies; Cross-cultural pragmatics.

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1. Introduction

Understanding pragmatics and cultural nuances is essential for effective global communication, both spoken and written. Therefore, learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) are encouraged to enhance their awareness of the pragmatic norms in their target language and recognize the differences between their first language (L1) and the pragmatics of the culture they aim to understand (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). Mastery of these aspects allows EFL/ESL students to express themselves more appropriately and politely, thus minimizing the risk of being perceived as impolite when making requests.

However, when sending requests via email—a common part of language learning—EFL learners may face numerous challenges (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). Biesenbach-Lucas (2006) notes that both native and non-native speakers experience uncertainty regarding stylistic choices and politeness strategies in email communication. One particular difficulty lies in students’ ability to express and act appropriately within the context when making requests, which often results in misunderstandings by the receiving teachers. These misunderstandings and errors frequently occur because EFL learners lack sufficient awareness of the sociocultural dimensions of the language (Ysuf, 2018).

In Vietnam, where English is learned as a foreign language, gaps in English proficiency and unfamiliarity with English-speaking cultural norms further complicate how students compose their emails. These challenges affect not only spoken but also written communication, as reflected in the difficulties students face when formulating appropriate request emails to their teachers.

Previous studies have explored the degree of directness in learners’ requests, with findings indicating that most EFL learners tend to use indirect requests (Megaib et al., 2019; Sattar et al., 2009; Yuan & Wei, 2011), whereas both EFL and ESL learners sometimes resort to more direct

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forms (Alfattah & Ravindranath, 2009; Ghazzoul, 2009). Only a few studies have examined this phenomenon from the perspective of EFL teachers regarding student emails, such as those conducted at Jazan University.

This paper presents the results of a case study on requestive speech acts in student emails written in English to their teachers VNU - International School, Hanoi through interviews with five teachers who teach content subjects in English. The study aims to understand teachers' evaluations of the degree of directness and politeness in such emails, identify typical linguistic and pragmatic elements in these emails, determine the reasons behind direct expression, understand teacher interpretations of student communicative intent, and emphasize the requirement for polite academic email writing training in international settings, thereby enabling teachers to improve instructional practices in academic writing, raise students' awareness of intercultural communication norms, and foster more effective and respectful teacher-student interaction in English-mediated learning environment.

2. Background of the study

This part provides a review of the literature and various studies that have underpinned the phenomenon of the speech act of request forming.

2.1. Request

The speech act of requesting has been widely studied in pragmatics and sociolinguistics due to its face-threatening nature and cross-cultural variation. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) define a request as an utterance that seeks to elicit an action or service from the hearer, often involving some degree of imposition. Trosborg (1995) expands on this by emphasizing that a request not only conveys a speaker's desire but also depends on social variables such as power, distance, and degree of imposition. These definitions highlight that requests are context-sensitive, and their formulation requires both linguistic and pragmatic competence, particularly in intercultural and second-language communication.

2.2. Level of directness in requests

Research on direct request speech acts has demonstrated that language learners face challenges when using appropriate directness levels in both intercultural and academic situations. According to Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) non-native speakers tend to use direct request forms because they lack sufficient pragmatic awareness. Biesenbach-Lucas (2006) analyzed email exchanges between students and faculty members and discovered that numerous learners employed direct strategies which although clear might be misinterpreted as impolite in academic environments. The research by Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) revealed that EFL learners made frequent mistakes in using mitigation strategies which led their requests to sound harsh and forceful. The research indicates that students who use direct requests in their writing do not demonstrate rudeness but instead show limited sociopragmatic competence and L1 transfer effects and insufficient exposure to target-language interaction norms in academic writing.

To understand the level of directness in student request emails written in English, this study adopts the model proposed by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984). According to their framework, request directness can be categorized into three types and there are three main reasons why non-native speakers favor direct strategies when making requests.

According to Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) framework in the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP), requestive strategies can be categorized into three main types based on their level of directness and the extent to which they mitigate the imposition on the hearer:

Figure 1. Classification of Requests (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984)

Request Categorization	Individual Strategies (in declining directness)
Direct Requests	1- Imperatives 2- Hedged/Unhedged performatives 3- Locution Derivables 4- Want Statements
Conventionally Indirect Requests	1- Suggestory Formula 2- Temporal Availability 3- Prediction 4- Permission 5- Willingness and Ability
Non-Conventionally Indirect Requests	1- Strong Hints 2- Mild Hints

Conventionally Direct Requests: Conventionally direct strategies involve explicitly stated requests using imperatives, performative verbs (e.g., ask, request), or modal verbs like can, will, or must. These expressions make the speaker's intention clear with minimal or no attempt to soften the imposition. They are considered pragmatically transparent and are typically used when the speaker assumes the request is acceptable in the context or when social distance is low.

Example: "I want to ask you the recipe."

Conventionally Indirect Requests: These strategies use indirect linguistic forms that are socially recognized as requests (e.g., Could you...?, Would you mind...?). They are the most common type in formal or polite communication, as they allow the speaker to mitigate the imposition and show deference or politeness. The request is still clear but softened through conventional phrasing.

Example: "Would you mind giving me the recipe?"

Non-conventionally Indirect Requests: In this type, the speaker avoids directly stating the request and instead uses hints, suggestions, or implications that require the hearer to infer the intended meaning. These are less explicit and may involve questioning, statements of need, or comments that indirectly point to the desired action. They are often used when the speaker wants to reduce imposition or maintain a high level of politeness or subtlety.

Example: "Is it difficult to cook this dish?"

Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) also identifies several core causes for non-native speakers' direct strategies when making requests due to limitations in pragmatic competence, first language (L1) influence, and misinterpretation of social norms in the target language context as presented in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Causes of direct style (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984)

Cause	Explanation
Limited Pragmatic Competence	Learners often lack the linguistic and sociopragmatic resources to formulate indirect requests. To avoid ambiguity, they opt for straightforward expressions.
Pragmatic Transfer from L1	Learners unconsciously transfer culturally appropriate request strategies from their L1, which may be more direct. These L1 norms are not always pragmatically acceptable in L2 contexts.
Misjudgment of Social Variables	Learners may underestimate social distance or power differences in academic settings, leading to overuse of direct strategies.

In summary, by adopting Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) framework, this study provides a structured lens to analyze the levels of directness and explore underlying reasons for such linguistic choices in student-teacher email interactions.

3. Methodology

3.1. Methods of the Study

This study employs a qualitative case study design to examine request speech acts in English emails written by students at VNU–International School when addressing their instructors. The research investigates both directness and politeness levels in student requests as well as instructors' assessments of student pragmatic ability.

3.2. Participants

The study participants consisted of five English language lecturers working at VNU–International School. Three participants received their Master's degrees in English or Applied Linguistics from the United Kingdom while all participants held degrees in English or Applied Linguistics. The participants were selected because they both teach English extensively and directly receive requests through request emails from their students of different majors at VNU – International School. These emails were collected with permission and anonymized for ethical research purposes. The emails predominantly contained requestive speech acts, with common types including requests for deadline extensions, clarification on assignments or course materials, grade inquiries, and meeting appointments. A smaller number of emails reflected more personal or informal communication, such as sharing personal concerns or asking for advice.

Their detailed profiles are presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Participant demographics

	Gender	Age	Academic degree	Years of experience
<i>T1</i>	Male	43	PhD	17
<i>T2</i>	Female	38	PhD	14
<i>T3</i>	Male	29	MA	7
<i>T4</i>	Female	29	MA	6
<i>T5</i>	Female	28	MA	4

3.3. Instruments

The research instrument consisted of open-ended interview questions that gathered extensive qualitative data. The research interview consisted of 10 questions which examined teacher assessments of student request email linguistic choices and perceived levels of politeness in English email communication. The 10 open-ended interview questions were designed based on the framework of Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Patterns (CCSARP). They aimed to explore teachers' evaluations of students' email requests in terms of (1) levels of directness, (2) politeness strategies, and (3) perceived respect or rudeness. The questions helped address the study's research questions concerning how teachers assess the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic features of student requestive acts and what factors contribute to perceived inappropriateness in email communication.

3.4. Data Collection

The research data collection process involved conducting semi-structured interviews with five lecturers. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method because they offer both structure and flexibility, allowing for in-depth exploration of teacher perceptions while maintaining consistency across participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach suited the study's goal of examining teachers' interpretations of directness and politeness in student email requests, which are inherently subjective and context-dependent. The English interviews examined two aspects: students' directness and politeness in request emails and teachers' understanding of these emails. The interviews used student emails from students who took or finished the foundation English program at the school. Students who participated in the study were either taking or had completed international certification programs including CEFR B2, IELTS, TOEFL or APTIS as

prerequisites for entry into the school's thirteen undergraduate programs. Only English-written emails were included for analysis.

3.5. Data Analysis

The interview data received thematic analysis to identify directness patterns together with politeness strategies and teachers' understanding of pragmatic competence. The research applied the Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) framework to analyze request strategies through directness levels which span from mood derivable imperatives to indirect hints. The framework differentiates between conventional direct forms and non-conventional indirect forms and includes both internal and external politeness modifications. The framework allowed researchers to study how student emails demonstrate different levels of clarity and politeness and how instructors understand these elements.

4. Research Findings

Interviews with five teachers revealed clear evaluations regarding the level of directness of student requestive acts in English emails, as well as how the teachers perceived these requests, particularly whether they felt disrespected.

4.1. Level of directness in students' requests in emails to teachers

4.1.1. Teachers' Evaluation of Directness

All five participating teachers observed that the majority of student request emails exhibited a conventionally indirect strategy, but without proper internal or external modification. Although requests were often phrased using imperatives or explicit requests like "Can you send..." or "I want to know...", they lacked the pragmatic softeners or contextual framing typical in polite academic discourse. These structures resembled what Blum-Kulka and Olshtain term "query preparatory" acts, but stripped of mitigating moves or politeness markers.

Teacher T4 remarked:

When I read a student email with a request, I can usually tell what they want me to do or help with from the very first sentence.

This suggests a tendency toward high directness, possibly aligning with the Mood Derivable or Explicit Performative levels of the scale, where the speaker's intention is transparent and unbuffered.

Some requests even fell into direct categories. For instance, Teacher T2 noted:

Students write emails like they're speaking, sometimes like speaking to a friend. One student even bluntly wrote: 'Plz send me the score as soon as possible.'

This example reflects a lack of register awareness and the use of informal, truncated language such as "Plz", which indicates inadequate sociopragmatic competence. There is also no evidence of external modification, such as greetings or thanks—essential moves in polite requestive behavior.

A special case reported by Teacher T1 illustrates a student's attempt at indirectness but with non-native-like formulation: "I will thank you if you tell me the requirements for the group project."

This form demonstrates a literal translation strategy from Vietnamese to English. Although it represents an effort toward politeness and indirectness, it misuses conditional structure and lacks idiomaticity, indicating semantic transfer and formulaic awkwardness.

However, not all students used direct strategies. Both T1 and T5 recalled emails containing features of appropriate indirectness, such as external modifications (greetings, explanations), internal modifications (downgraders), and query preparatory forms. One such example cited by T5 included: "I was wondering if you could..."

This corresponds to a Conventionally Indirect strategy with politeness modifications, closely aligning with native speaker norms for requestive emails in academic settings.

Despite this, both T1 and T5 raised concerns about the authenticity of these well-structured emails. They speculated that students may have received external assistance or used grammar-enhancing tools. This reflects the issue of performance vs. competence—students may produce native-like output without fully internalizing the pragmatic norms, a key challenge when evaluating interlanguage pragmatics.

Generally, teachers perceived students' requests as overly direct, but not necessarily impolite. Instead, they viewed this as a reflection of limited pragmatic awareness, sociolinguistic transfer, and insufficient familiarity with academic conventions.

4.1.2. Causes of Direct Email Style

From the interviews, several reasons emerged to explain why students used a direct request style in emails to their instructors. Three main causes were identified: (1) L1 pragmatic transfer, (2) limited linguistic and pragmatic competence, and (3) lack of familiarity with academic email conventions.

L1 Pragmatic Transfer

A commonly mentioned reason was unconscious translation of expressions from Vietnamese into English, especially in making requests. In Vietnamese, making direct requests is not considered impolite due to the use of soft intonation and respectful markers like “ạ,” “cô ơi,” or “em xin phép.” However, since these features lack equivalents in English, students' requests may appear impolite. T2 noted:

In Vietnamese, when asking a teacher for something, students often use direct questions... But in English, words like ‘ạ’ cannot be translated, so their requests end up sounding a bit blunt.

This exemplifies pragmatic transfer—learners applying L1 pragmatic norms to L2 interactions without recognizing cultural expectations.

Limited Linguistic and Pragmatic Competence

Another underlying cause is that students lack the vocabulary, grammatical structures, and language strategies to express themselves indirectly. As a result, they opt for simple, straightforward expressions, even if this compromises the politeness of the message. T3 observed:

Using a direct style helps students avoid misunderstanding. It allows them to deliver their request clearly and simply.

Here, learners prioritize informativeness over pragmatic appropriateness—a tendency commonly observed in intermediate L2 learners under performance pressure.

While such simplicity ensures the request content is conveyed, the absence of softeners (e.g., “I was wondering if...”, “Would it be possible to...”) makes the message sound overly blunt to native speakers or instructors with high expectations of academic politeness.

These two factors align with the factors in the framework by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) and the teachers via the interviews also mentions an additional reason why their students tend to use direct style when writing request emails, which is the *lack of knowledge and skills in Academic Email Writing*. Most students have not been taught how to structure a formal email, often confusing email with text messaging. T5 remarked:

I noticed that many students lack email writing skills—not only in English but even in their native language... This reflects not only a gap in language skills but also impacts how they're perceived in academic and future professional settings.

This highlights the lack of formal instruction in academic communication, which is crucial in university environments, especially in international programs.

Additionally, several teachers mentioned the influence of digital communication environments, where instant messaging platforms like Messenger or Zalo promote habits of brevity and skipping formalities such as greetings or closings. These habits often carry over into academic contexts without adjustment.

In short, the frequent presence of direct language in students' request emails is not rooted in intentional impoliteness, but rather stems from linguistic-cultural and educational factors, including L1 influence, a lack of pragmatic strategies, and an underdeveloped awareness of academic writing norms.

4.2. Teachers' Feedback

Although most of the students' emails with requests were evaluated as direct and lacking basic politeness strategies, it is noteworthy that the majority of teachers did not feel offended or consider such behavior personally disrespectful. Instead, they showed empathy and interpreted these linguistic behaviors as stemming from students' limitations in pragmatic skills and awareness, rather than from their attitudes.

4.2.1. The Absence of Politeness Strategies in Emails

All five teachers confirmed that many student emails lacked key components typically expected in academic communication, such as: a clear subject line, a proper salutation, a brief introduction stating the purpose of the email, the use of mitigation strategies, and a polite closing or expression of thanks. Instead, the requests were often made abruptly, sometimes in a single line. Teacher T3 commented:

I often receive emails with just one line like 'Send me the grade.' No greeting, no closing—it feels more like a command than a request.

This observation highlights a case of pragmatic infelicity, not due to incorrect grammatical structure, but due to the absence of markers that reflect social roles and adjust for power asymmetry in teacher–student communication.

Teacher T4 shared a similar view, stating that many emails resembled text messages rather than formal letters.

Some emails look more like messages to friends than formal letters. That might be acceptable in casual conversation, but it's not appropriate in academic settings.

This reflects a confusion between social and academic registers, which is a typical indicator of underdeveloped language proficiency among EFL learners.

4.2.2. Perception of Students' Respect

Despite the substandard format of the emails, when asked directly whether they felt disrespected, four out of five teachers stated that they did not consider the behavior intentionally impolite. On the contrary, they emphasized that students generally maintained respectful behavior in face-to-face interactions through gestures such as greeting, bowing, listening attentively, and interacting in a controlled manner during class. Teacher T1 noted:

I believe they don't mean to be disrespectful. The problem is that they haven't been properly taught how to write polite emails.

This view reflects the teacher's ability to distinguish between linguistic form and communicative intent—an essential aspect in pragmatic analysis.

Teacher T5 added that such email errors reflect gaps in the academic English curriculum rather than flaws in students' personalities or attitudes. She suggested that with proper instruction on how to write academic emails following international conventions, the situation would improve significantly. "If the school offered workshops on academic email writing, the situation would improve greatly," she proposed.

4.3. Exceptions and Negative Behavior

Teacher T2 identified minimal cases where students failed to show restraint in their emails through their dissatisfaction with grades and delayed teacher responses. She noted that these cases were infrequent and did not reflect the typical student population.

The analysis demonstrates that pragmatically inappropriate expressions affect communication effectiveness yet teachers can interpret messages through contextual understanding and their teaching experience and actual student relationships to prevent negative judgments about student attitudes.

The feedback from teachers demonstrates both the current state of student email communication and the pragmatic sensitivity which recipients display. The teachers' deep understanding of EFL learners' challenges along with their empathy indicates that the main problem stems from students' insufficient knowledge and skills and inadequate training. The findings demonstrate that English

language curricula at universities need to include pragmatic and written communication skills training for international academic students.

5. Conclusion

The research examined the degree of directness and politeness which EFL students used when they sent emails to their teachers at VNU–International School. The majority of students employed conventional indirect strategies yet their messages frequently lacked suitable politeness markers together with contextual framing and idiomatic expressions. The pragmatic weaknesses in student communication resulted from L1 transfer and their insufficient understanding of sociocultural norms and restricted exposure to academic email conventions. Teachers understood student intentions but occasionally detected directness and informality in messages which might impact their relationship with students. The research demonstrates why students need better training in sociopragmatic competence for their academic written communication.

This study bases its recommendations for improving students' email writing skills and pragmatic competence as follows.

For Students

Students need direct instruction about request strategies and directness levels together with appropriate politeness in academic communication to improve their email writing skills and pragmatic competence. Students will develop appropriate communication skills through the practice of writing with proper salutations and formal closings and the use of mitigation and hedging techniques. Students will develop metapragmatic awareness through the analysis of model emails and the comparison of different intercultural communication styles.

For teachers

Teachers need to teach pragmatic content in English and academic writing classes by emphasizing register understanding and appropriate situational usage. Students can learn from authentic student emails which demonstrate both mistakes and successful communication strategies. Teachers need to provide feedback which covers both grammatical and structural aspects and the overall success of communication and politeness. Students can enhance their reflective understanding of pragmatic choices through group email writing and peer review activities.

For Institutions and Curriculum Developers

The integration of pragmatic competence and digital communication needs to become a fundamental part of English language learning objectives within EMI programs at institutions. First-year students and international students should participate in orientation sessions and workshops about academic email writing. The development of clear guidelines for email communication should be done with cultural sensitivity to support learners. The university requires joint work between language instructors and subject-area faculty to establish uniform and effective communication training throughout all departments.

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Mức độ trực tiếp trong email yêu cầu bằng tiếng Anh của sinh viên gửi đến giáo viên:

Nghiên cứu tình huống tại Trường Quốc tế - Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội

Tóm tắt: Việc nghiên cứu mối quan hệ giữa ngữ dụng học và kiến thức văn hóa ngày càng thu hút sự quan tâm của các nhà ngôn ngữ học do vai trò quan trọng của nó trong giao tiếp liên văn hóa. Bài viết này trình bày kết quả của một nghiên cứu tình huống tập trung vào hành vi lời nói yêu cầu trong giao tiếp giữa sinh viên và giáo viên thông qua email bằng tiếng Anh tại Trường Quốc tế - Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội (VNU-IS). Nghiên cứu sử dụng phương pháp định tính - phỏng vấn giáo viên - để thu thập dữ liệu về mức độ trực tiếp và các chiến lược yêu cầu được sử dụng trong các email mà sinh viên đã gửi cho giáo viên. Phân tích nghiên cứu được thực hiện dựa trên khung lý thuyết của Blum-Kulka và Olshtain (1984), theo đó có ba cấp độ trực tiếp khi đưa ra yêu cầu: trực tiếp theo quy ước, gián tiếp theo quy ước và gián tiếp không theo quy ước. Kết quả cho thấy phần lớn email mà giáo viên nhận được được viết theo phong cách trực tiếp, chủ yếu do trình độ tiếng Anh còn hạn chế và khả năng sử dụng các yếu tố lịch sự chưa thành thạo của sinh viên. Tác giả đề xuất một số khuyến nghị dành cho giáo viên, người học và các cơ sở giáo dục nhằm giúp người học ngoại ngữ nâng cao năng lực ngữ dụng trong việc đưa ra yêu cầu một cách phù hợp và lịch sự.

Từ khóa: Hành vi lời nói yêu cầu; Giao tiếp qua email; Mức độ trực tiếp trong yêu cầu; Chiến lược lịch sự; Ngữ dụng liên văn hóa.