



Supportive Discourse Moves in Iranian English Electronic Requests to Faculty

Masoomah Mohammadi and Homanaz Bahadori

Department of English, Islamic Azad University, Najafabad Branch, Esfahan, Iran.

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to investigate the type and amount of lexical/phrasal and external modifiers employed in the English e-requests of Iranian EFL postgraduate students (nonnative speakers of English) to their professors during their education at Islamic Azad University, Najaf Abad Branch, Esfahan, Iran. To that end, the study employed both quantitative and qualitative approaches to investigate 60 English e-mails composed by the participants. More specifically, Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper's (1989), Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984), and Edmondson's (1981) classification of requests was employed for coding the modification of the collected electronic requests. Findings from the study reveal that the Iranian students' e-mails are not overly adorned with politeness modification. This paper argues that such e-mails fail to create e-polite messages to faculty and therefore capable of causing pragmatic failure.

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Introduction

With the exponential explosion and popularity of the Internet, everyday communication has been influenced by new electrically mediated modes. Electronic mail (e-mail) being heavily employed at many work-sites 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.

With the advent of electronic e-mail, university students greatly apply the new medium for contacting their professors. Over the last 15 years, the interaction between students and their teachers at the university level has been changed from consultations through office hours or brief meetings before or after class to interaction via e-mail (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006). E-mail has therefore become an efficient and accepted substitute means of interaction (Economidou-Kogestsidis, 2011).

Writing an e-mail to faculty requires students to be aware of e-mail etiquette (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007). There are a lot of complaints from 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). As the imposition of the request, and syntactic and lexical devices have effect on request strategies in student-faculty e-mails (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006), status-congruent requests at university level should be organized by "higher formality, avoidance of imperative requests (preference for conventional indirectness instead), fairly high level of mitigation and acknowledgment of the imposition involved" (Economidou-Kogestsidis, 2011, p. 3194).

So far few studies have focused on students' e-mails to faculty in terms of e-politeness in their requests (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006, 2007; Economidou-Kogestsidis, 2011; Hardford, & Bardovil-Harlig, 1996). In Iran, few studies have been done specifically on Iranian electronic requests (Abdolrezapour, & Eslami-Rasekh, 2010; Chalak, Eslami-Rasekh, & Eslami Rasekh, 2010; Ghadir, 2011; Ghasemi, & Hashemi, 2010). None of these studies have specifically focused on the pragmatic

failure in Iranian university students' e-mail requests to their faculty. Regarding the widespread use of this new means of communication (e-mail writing) in the academic settings of Iran, the focus of the present study is to investigate the type and amount of lexical/phrasal and external modifiers in English e-mail requests composed by Iranian (nonnative speaker of English) post graduate university students to their professors. More specifically, the present study aims to find out if the type and amount of modification influence the degree of politeness of students' e-mail requests to faculty. Based on foregoing discussion, the present study strives to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the type and amount of lexical/phrasal and external modification employed in the English e-requests of Iranian university students?
2. To what extent the recipients of the electronic requests perceive them as abrupt and impolite?

Review of Related Literature

Segmentation of Requests

Internal vs. External Modification

According to Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) classification of requests, a request includes one or more optional peripheral elements that work to modify the force of the request head act. The peripheral elements, on the other hand, are additional items that can mitigate or aggravate the force of the request head act without changing its propositional content. These peripheral elements can be internal or external.

Internal modification devices refer to those linguistic components that appear within the same request act in order to soften or strengthen its force. Their presence is not necessary for understanding the utterance potentially as request. The social impact of the utterance can be affected by internal modifications. They may act as downgraders and mitigate the impact of the act, or as upgraders to strengthen its force. Internal modifications operate at two levels: lexical mitigators that consist mitigators (e.g., please, ...) and mental verbs (e.g., think, believe,...), and syntactic mitigators that contain structural modifications (e.g., using conditional sentences, questions, imperfect, etc.).

External modifications devices refer to those immediate linguistic context that surround request act. They are non-compulsory supportive moves that go before or after head acts for modifying them. They affect the context in which the utterance is embedded (e.g., "Could you open the door for me? I'm carrying so many bags that I cannot do it."). These optional supportive moves contain reasons, preparators, disarmers, etc.

Electronic Mail as a Communicative Genre

With the expansion of information and communication technology along with the wide-ranging use of the Internet; e-mail has been a widespread interpersonal interaction medium. It has been broadly used for both personal and institutional interaction because of its high transmission speed and less invasive nature, mainly in academic and business organizations (Baron, 2000; Crystal, 2001).

In the academic domain where most student-professor interaction occurs during office hours, in class, before and after class, and possibly on the phone; e-mail has turned out to be a feasible alternative means of interaction. In spite of the fact that many of today's students have grown up with e-mail and other computer-mediated communication (CMC) technology, e-mail utilized in academia is still a language-using situation with less noticeably identified restraints (Malley, 2006). Socialization into satisfactory e-mail communication is slight and without much direction. Most of the time students are left to their own devices in trying to craft a message that is efficient as well as status-congruent and courteous because books on e-mail netiquette (e.g., Flynn & Flynn, 1998; Hale & Scanlon, 1999) offer little help to students who are seeking recommendation on writing e-mail messages to their professors, with whom they are in a hierarchical relationship.

Consequently, crafting an appropriate status-congruent e-mail message is like aiming at "a moving target" (Baron, 1998, p. 142). While writers can "take time to compose and edit their messages [to be more] formal, and linguistically complex" (Herring, 2002, p. 115), students can never be fairly certain about the impression of their message on the faculty, and are not able to follow consistent "standards of appropriateness set by those [with greater institutional power] in order to communicate successfully" (Chen, 2006, p. 36).

Research on Request Speech Acts in Student-Faculty E-mail

Most of studies done in the e-mail medium focused on how e-mail differed from oral speech in the L2 (Chapman, 1997; Warschauer, 1996), or on how e-mail might help nonnative speakers to improve their second language (Lapp, 2000; Li, 2000; Liaw, 1998).

Few studies have 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 2 faculty recipients. Their study revealed that NNSs' requests were different from those of NSs in the utilizing of mitigation (i.e., politeness aspects) as well as extra-linguistic features, like emphasis on individual requirements and irrational time frames rather than institutional claims.

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 of 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. On the other hand, NNSs had a tendency to utilize more direct requests than NSs, comparable to Chen's (2006) graduate student. Syntactic modification was used more by NSs than NNSs whereas NNSs employed more lexical modification mainly 'please'. Chen (2006) observed a comparable unsuitable concern for student-oriented reasons and individual factors in her case study of a Taiwanese graduate student's e-mail messages to her professors. Biesenbach-Lucas (2006) examined NSs' and NNSs' e-mail messages to investigate the use of lexico-syntactic modification in their e-mails. Her study demonstrated that NSs and NNSs employed few such modifiers in frequently-occurring request patterns, but NSs utilized combinations of syntactic politeness devices in high imposition requests. In contrast, NNSs' syntactic politeness modification was restricted to the past tense, *possibly/maybe*, and *please*, and they did not show evidence of NSs' linguistic and contextual sensitivity. An unexpected result was that "NSs' request realizations [were] not overly adorned with [politeness] modification" (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006, p. 100), proposing "that in the e-mail medium, a minimum amount of ... modification may be considered sufficient for realizing students' requests of faculty ... perhaps in an attempt at message economy and clarity" (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006, p. 101).

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 faculty. Her results indicated that although native speakers displayed greater resources in crafting e-polite messages to their professors than nonnative speakers, most requests were comprehended through direct request strategies.

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 level of the e-mails. He concluded that using extensive external modifiers helped to increase the politeness level of the e-mail and under using of elaborate syntactic and lexical modifiers might result in decreasing the degree of the politeness of their e-mails and therefore to cause pragmatic failure.

Method

The focus of the present study is to investigate the amount and type of external and lexical/phrasal modification in students' e-mail requests to faculty. In order to answer the second research question, a perception questionnaire was utilized to scrutinize the views of a number of Iranian academic staff on the degree of courteousness and/or possible brusqueness of students' e-mails. Quantitative data was collected through the use of this tool to establish the degree to which unmodified and direct e-mails might be pragmatically infelicitous.

Participants

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

The professors who students addressed them were between 35 and 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 native speakers of Persian and had native-like proficiency in English.

Data Collection

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

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

E-mail Analysis Procedures

For e-mail analysis, the request head act of each e-mail message was elicited and analyzed. The researcher coded each request head act regarding internal modification (lexical/phrasal down graders and up graders) and external modification (mitigating supportive moves and aggravating moves added to the head act). Internal modification of the collected e-requests 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 classification that will be used for coding the internal modification of the e-requests are presented in Appendices A and B. CCSARP (Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project) classification (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) were used for coding external modification. The classification adopted for coding external modification are presented in Appendices C and E.

Perception questionnaire and participants

One of the aims of this study was to examine Iranian EFL students' e-mail requests to find out if the lack of modification violates students-teacher distance and therefore causes their e-mails to be impolite. In order to do this more accurately, the perception of a number of Iranian (NNSs of English) university teachers on students' e-mail requests were investigated. The aim of the perception study was to determine the degree to which university teachers perceived such direct and/or unmodified e-mails to be impolite and therefore they failed to be answered by faculty members. The reasons for their perceptions (by referring to certain linguistic or absent linguistic elements) were also sought.

Participants

The participants of the questionnaires were 6 university teachers (4 females, 2 males) from 4 universities of Iran, a university of United states, and a university of Malaysia. They were all Persian native speakers (4 university teachers with doctorate degrees in applied linguistics, 2 doctorate candidates in applied linguistics). Their age ranged from late 30s to 50+. Their

experience of teaching in higher education varied according to age from 3 years to 20 years.

Design and procedure

To answer the second research question, six English e-mail messages were sent to six university teachers through their e-mail addresses. The participants were asked to offer their perceptions on the politeness of the e-mail messages. The participants were asked to imagine that these e-mails are from their students (aged 25 to 32) so that they reacted students' e-mail messages naturally. Participants were asked to determine the politeness of the e-mail messages based on a perception questionnaire. The perception questionnaire was based on 5-point Likert scale. The participants were asked to evaluate each e-mail message based on this scale and qualitatively determined those linguistic features from message that caused they decided an e-mail message to be polite or abrupt.

The e-mail messages given to the participants to determine the degree of their politeness were six English e-mails. These e-mails were selected from the e-mail data of the present study after determining to have high degree of directness and not having elaborate lexical/phrasal or external modifiers.

For finding out whether the differences between the means of these e-mails in terms of politeness were significant or not, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were conducted. After determining this matter a post hoc comparisons which used the Tukey HSD test were conducted for determining which e-mails is significantly different from others.

Results

Internal Modification (Lexical/Phrasal Downgraders and Upgraders)

Internal modification of English e-mail requests through lexical/phrasal downgraders and upgraders was analyzed. The results indicated that the majority of students didn't use any lexical/phrasal modification for downgrading the effect of their request (zero marking, Table 1: 28.3%) (see e-mail examples 1 and 2).

[1]

Student No. 7

[Hello Doctor

I'm one of your students in psychology class and I have an object regarding my mark so **I hope you check it again , if it is possible and let me visit you in your office.**

Thanks a lot

..... (student name)]

[2]

Student No. 17

[Hello my best teacher

At first I want to say that thank you for your best way of teaching. I think that you are the best teacher I have ever had. **If it is possible, I want to see you and talk about my grade, I think there is a problem with my grade.**

Your student

..... (student name)]

The first most preferred mitigator was the marker 'please' as it was employed in 49% of the students' English e-mail requests (see example 3). The second most used mitigator was consultative devices that were used in 38% of students' English e-mail requests (see example 4). While subjectivisers were used in 13.3% of English e-mail requests, downtoners were only used in 0.83% of English e-mail requests (see example 5). The rest of the lexical/phrasal downgraders weren't used (see Table 1). Importantly, the use of intensifiers/upgraders in students' English e-mail requests were just 0.83%, (see table 2, example 6). This

indicates that students didn't use intensifiers/upgraders in order to intensify the urgency and coerciveness of their requests.

[3]

Student No. 30

[Dear Mr. (Professor name)

Hello

I am (student name). I want you to check my paper, **please**. I think that there is some mistakes with my paper. So if it is possible, I want you to give me a chance to meet you and talk about my exam.

Thanks]

[4]

Student No. 6

[Dear Doctor

I am one of your students in sociology class. I have an objection on my sociology score. I did very well in my exam but my score was very low. Please, **would you mind** giving me an appointment to meet you and talk about my exam score, if possible. Any time you are free is good for me.

Thanks for your attention

Yours Truly

.... (student name)]

[5]

Student No. 3

[Dear DR. ... (professor name)

I am one of your student in Najaf Abad university and I have psycholinguistics with you. I expected better mark in the final exam so **I am wondering** if it possible I have a meeting with you to review my answer sheet and **probably** change the mark.

Best regards,

.... (student name)]

[6]

Student No. 40

[Hello my master)

I hope you have a good time and be lucked, too. I have a demand that you review my paper again. I want you to consider my application and if it is possible please let me meet you **in your office as soon as possible**.

Thank you so much

... (student name)]

External Modification in Students' English E-mail Requests

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

(a) All students' English e-mail requests included external markers.

(b) The most widely used modifiers were grounder (50%), pre-closing (48. 3%), e-mail closing(45%), discourse orientation move (45%), and greeting/opening (43.3%) (see Table 3, example 7 and 8).

(c) Self-introducer (21.6%), complement/sweetener (20%), and disarmer (16.7%) were the second most used modifiers (see Table 3, examples 9- 11).

(d) While promise and apology were employed in 10% of English e-mail requests, preparator was used in 6.7% of students' e-mail requests (see Table 3, example12 and 13).

(e) The use of imposition minimizer 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 students' English e-mail requests (see Table 3)

(f) While the majority of students' English e-mail requests included complaint/criticism (40%) (see Table 4, example 14), emphasis on urgency was not seen in any students' English e-

mail requests (0%). The rest of external modifications weren't used in students' English e-mail requests (see Table 3).

[7]

Student No. 36

[Dear Prof.

Hello

I think that you've made a mistake in my exam paper **because I answered all your questions based on your course papers and the book you recommended at the beginning of the term**, so if you do me a favor and check my answer sheet once more,if it is possible for you, I really appreciate it. Considering that I'm a guest student in this university and I have to go back to where I came from sooner and I have many problems taking this course again because I also have financial problems. I really need to meet you in your office. I would be grateful if it is possible for you let me to meet you in your office and talk about my problem.

Thanks

Sincerely yours

.... (student name)]

[8]

Student No. 54

[Hi Mr. (professor name)

I'm(student name), **your student in literature session**.

I'm not satisfied with my score. Please I want you to check it once again and I want you to make an appointment in a proper time to speak about my score, if possible for you .]

[9]

Student No. 39

[Dear teacher,

This is (student name) your student.

Would you please revise my paper to see if it is possible to change my grade because I think I will get a better score in your lesson based on my activities in the class. In addition, let me have an appointment with you

Thanks in advance]

[10]

Student No. 26

[Dear sir

I hope everything is going well with you. I have a favor to ask indeed. As you know I'm an English teacher at state school. I did my best to be the best but unfortunately I couldn't. I wonder if you would

be kind enough to rescore my answer sheet, if possible. Since I'm studying at the last semester and stuck in a critical stance. I really need a better mark for this course. By the way I have another favor to ask if it isn't too much. Please be kind enough to allow me to make an appointment with you.

... (student name)]

[11]

Student No. 19

[Dear Dr.... (professor name)

I want to thank you for your kindness during this semester; I think there is a problem regarding my sociology score. According to my extra research and my presentation, I expect to have a better score in this lesson **I really realize you don't have enough time and your are too busy** but if you check my answer sheet once more and give me a time to have a meeting with you I really appreciate it. I want to talk to you in person.

Yours Sincerely

.... (student name)]

[12]

Student No. 37

[Dear master

I was in a critical stance this term, losing my father. Please if it is possible change my score. I really need a better mark for this course. **I promise you to study better next term.** By the way I know you are very busy but **I really need a favor so please** let me to meet you in your office. I need to speak with you about my score. In fact I need your advice for my future educational program.

Best regard

.... (student name)]

[13]

Student No. 48

[Dear professor,

Hello

I'm very sorry to disturb you. I'm not sure about my grade. Would you please check my paper again. It's very kind of you if you let me to meet you at your office.

Thanks a million.

Best regards,

.... (student name)]

[14]

Student No. 34

[Dear Dr. ... (professor name)

Yesterday I got my mark from the Internet, but I'm not agreeing with this score, I think you made a mistake. So, I request you if you mind check my examination again and also give me a chance to visit you.

Thank you

.... (student name)]

Perceptions of Iranian (NNSs of English) University Teachers

One of the aims of this study was to examine Iranian EFL students' e-mail requests to find out if the lack of modification violates students-teacher distance and therefore causes their e-mails to be impolite. In order to do this more accurately, 6 English e-mail messages were sent to 6 university teachers (4 university teachers with doctorate degrees in applied linguistics and 2 doctorate candidates in applied linguistics) through their e-mail addresses.

These e-mails were selected from the e-mail data of this study after determining to have high degree of directness and not having elaborate lexical/phrasal or external modifiers. Table 5 indicate a summary of the politeness and modification features of these e-mails.

The participants were asked to offer their perceptions on the politeness of the e-mail messages. Participants were asked to determine the degree of the politeness of the e-mail messages based on a perception questionnaire. The aim of the perception study was to determine the extent to which such direct and/or unmodified e-mails might be perceived as lacking politeness and are therefore capable of causing pragmatic failure (Thomas, 1983). The reasons for their perceptions (by referring to certain linguistic or absent linguistic elements) were also sought. 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 statistical results indicated that there was a significant difference in the degree of politeness of the 6 English e-mails included in the perception questionnaire, $F(5, 30) = 2.67, p = .041$ at a $p < 0.05$ level (see Table 6). Post hoc comparisons that used the Tukey HSD test were conducted for determining which English e-mail/s differed significantly from others. As far as the degree of politeness of the English e-mails was concerned, 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 English e-mails 1, 3, and 5 ($M = 2.83, SD = 0.98$) ($M = 3, SD = 1.26$) ($M = 3, S = 1.09$), and of English e-mails 2 and 6 ($M = 3.83, SD = 0.41$) ($M = 3.67, SD = 1.03$) at a $P < 0.05$ level (see Table 7). (these English e-mails are presented in Appendix E). The English e-mail below is English e-mail 4 that was perceived as significantly less polite than the rest of the English e-mails.

[15]

Student No. 53

[Hello, My name(student 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 name)]

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 visually in Figure 1.

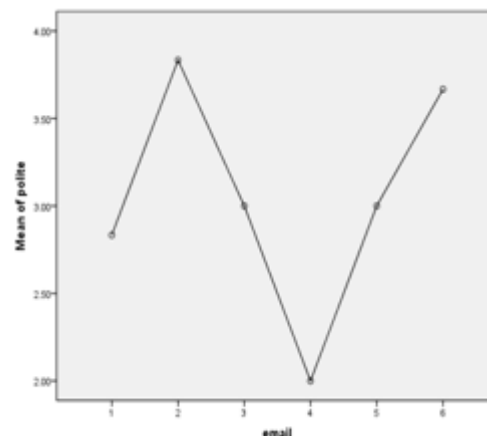


Figure 1. Perception questionnaire : Mean scores of degree of politeness of English e-mails

Discussions

Internal Modification in English E-mail Requests

Significantly, the results indicated that the majority of English e-mail requests were without any lexical/phrasal modification for downgrading the effect of the request. A closer examination of the students' English e-mail requests revealed that students frequently used 'please' marker in their English e-mail 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, the ability or willingness 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 English e-mail requests indicated that the majority of students used this marker in initial position of their English e-mail requests. One explanation for this might be that students were influenced by their first language, as marker

'please' in Persian is used mostly in initial position in imperatives.

As consultative devices such as 'momken ast', 'dar surate emkaan', 'agar maqdur mibaashad', and 'agar emkaan daarad' (all of them have the same meaning as 'is it possible') are used frequently in Persian, the high preference for the consultative devices in English e-mail requests suggests that students were influenced by their first language and over-used these devices so that they used them in combination with other lexical modifications such as subjectivisers.

The linguistic form comparison of consultative devices indicated that students mostly used the linguistic form 'if it is possible' in their English e-mail requests. Students significantly used more consultative devices in their English e-mail requests. Significantly, the results additionally indicated that the majority of students didn't use any lexical/phrasal modification for downgrading the effect of their English e-mail requests, something that can also cause pragmatic failure by adding a coercive tone to these e-mails. This under-use of internal modification had a negative effect on the participants' examination of the personality of the senders of the e-mail.

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 perceived as the most abrupt caused that they evaluated this e-mail as quite abrupt. They believed that using 'Please' is a marker of the politeness as the writer place himself or herself in lower rank. "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 lecturer in applied linguistics, 38 - 42 +)

A closer examination of the structure of English e-mail 4 perceived as the least polite by the lecturers allows one to see that it includes imperative structure for both requests for action and information without adding 'please' marker for mitigating the requests, while English e-mails perceived as the most polite include 'please + imperative' structure for requests for action or information.

These views are in line with Hendriks' (2010) study revealing the lack of mitigation in English e-mail requests had a negative effect on the faculty participants' evaluation of the personality of the sender of the e-mail, and also with Hardford and Bardovi-Harlig's (1996) study that unmitigated choice of forms was caused by a conflict of rights and obligations as it reflected an overestimation on the part of the student of the faculty member's level of obligation to comply. Hardford and Bardovi-Harlig state that: In an institutional setting such as academic, the use of unmitigated, speaker dominant 'I want' and 'I need' forms by lower status requesters seems to elevate both the right of the requesters and the obligation of the requestee. At the same time, however, these forms appear to remove the student requester from the framework of the institution to a more individual context, which makes it even less likely that the faculty member has the obligation to grant the request (p. 58).

External Modification in English E-mail Requests

Results also indicated that students preferred to use external modification in their English e-mail requests. These findings are in line with Weasenforth and Biesenbach-Lucas (2001), and Biesenbach-Lucas (2004) whose e-mail studies also revealed that 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) revealed 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 adhering to Grice's (1975) principle of clarity.

As external modifiers are more explicit in learners' intended politeness function, they opt for such modifiers (Faerch & Kasper, 1989). A further explanation for this preference might be found in NNSs' "lack of linguistic flexibility that would allow them to craftily select lexicon-syntactic modifiers" (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006, p. 86). Hassall (2001) similarly argued that as external modifiers in general tend to be syntactically less demanding and pragmalinguistically less complex, learners are more able to use such modifiers to mitigate their requests.

A closer examination of the structure of English e-mail requests revealed that some students employed external modification before they uttered the request acts while some after the acts. Some even enfolded their supportive moves before and after the acts. These phenomena lead us to say that students were influenced by their first language so that they applied the cyclical pattern that is commonly used by natives of Asian languages.

The present study further revealed that students employed frequently grounders in their English requests. This finding also is in line with the findings from numerous interlanguage studies that indicated that the grounder was used frequently 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).

According to Hassall (2001), the grounder can express positive politeness by presuming the hearer's collaboration. This is achieved by putting forward the belief that request will be responded positively by the hearer once the hearer hears the reasons or explanation for it (Brown & Levinson, 1978, p. 133). Hassall (2001) also claimed that the grounder may also convey negative politeness by enlightening to the hearer that "you would not impose on him or her without a good reason" (Brown & Levinson, 1978, p. 175; House & Kasper, 1987, pp. 1281-1282). Pre-closing were used frequently in students' English e-mail requests and gave a positive effect to the students' English e-mails. A number of lecturers who participated in the perception questionnaire study pointed out the positive effect that the pre-closing 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 wasn't authoritative. They remarked that in this e-mail students appreciated the time that professor would dedicate for reading their e-mails and this kind of asking for requests was persuasive. Therefore, this finding doesn't confirm Economidou-Kogetsidis' (2011) claim that using pre-closing such as 'thank you' or 'thanking you in advance' indicates students' beliefs that the faculty will respond positively to the request. As such a pre-closing openly presupposes that the request will be granted, it can easily give a negative effect to the e-mail.

Table 1. Internal Modification: Phrasal/Lexical Downgraders Across English E-mail Requests

Zero marking	34/120 (28.3%)
Marker 'please'	59/120 (49%)
Consultative devices	46/120 (38%)
Downtoners	1/120 (0.83%)
Understaters/Hedges	0/120 (0%)
Subjectivisers	16/120 (13.3%)
Cajolers	0/120 (0%)
Appealers	0/120 (0%)

Table 2. Internal Modification: Upgraders-Intensifiers Across English E-mail Requests

Intensifier	1/120 (0.83%)
Time intensifier	0/120 (0%)
Overstater	0/120 (0%)
Total	1/120 (0.83%)

Table 3. External Modification: Supportive Moves in Students' English E-mails

Greeting/Opening	26/60(43.3%)
Grounder	30/60(50%)
Disarmer	10/60 (16.7%)
Preparator	4/60 (6.7%)
Getting a precommitment	0/60 (0%)
Promise	6/60 (10%)
Imposition minimizer	0/60 (0%)
Apology	6/60 (10%)
Discourse orientation move	27/60(45%)
Pre-closings (thanks)	29/60(48.3%)
E-mail closing	27/60 (45%)
Complement/Sweetener	12/60 (20%)
Zero marking	0/60 (0%)
Self-introducer	13/60(21.6%)

Table 4. External modification – Aggravating Moves in Students' English E-mails

Complaint/Criticism	24/60 (40%)
Emphasis on urgency	0/60 (0%)

Table 5. Summary of Politeness and Modification Features of Perception Questionnaire E-mails (English Email Requests)

E-mail 1	Dear + title (doctor), [no greeting], preparator, please + imperative, imperative, thanks, [no closing]
E-mail 2	Dear + title (professor) + LN, [no greeting], apology, grounder, please + imperative, please + imperative, thanks, closing
E-mail 3	Dear + 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	Dear + title (professor), greeting, please + imperative, grounder, imperative, thanks, [no closing]
E-mail 6	Dear + title (master), [no greeting], please + imperative, disarmer, imperative, thanks, [no closing]

Table 6. ANOVA Results of Perception Questionnaire E-mails (English E-mail Requests) (1 = not at all, 5 = very much).

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	12.889	5	2.578	2.667	.041
Within Group	29.000	30	.967		
Total	41.889	35			

Table 7. Means and Standard Deviations Perception Questionnaire E-mails (English E-mails) (1 = not at all, 5 = very much)

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

Therefore, such a presupposition in hierarchical relationships isn't proper. (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011).

Although grounder and pre-closing were included in the majority of the English e-mails analyzed, results indicated that the use of greeting and e-mail closing was very much ignored by the NNSs in their English e-mail requests. It could be argued that e-mails phrased without a greeting and without a closing enhance the directness and possibly coerciveness of the message even more, something that can make these e-mails status-incongruent. As a greeting in letter or e-mail writing might serve as small talk through that the speaker makes an effort on being with the hearer by talking for a while about unrelated topic, it can usually function as a positive politeness strategy that presupposes or asserts common ground (Brown & Levinson, 1987). "S can thereby stress his general interest in H, and indicate that he hasn't come to see H simply to do the FTA (e.g., a request)" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 117). This finding is in line with Economidou-Kogetsidis' (2011) finding that positive politeness strategy for softening requests was very much ignored by the NNSs of her study who chose to leave out the small talk and go directly to the point and overtly state their requests.

The qualitative data from the perception questionnaire of the present study indicated that those e-mail requests adorned with greeting and closing were valued positively by some lecturers. A number of lecturers mentioned that the lack of greeting and closing made students e-mails perceived as the least polite. "...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 (1987:189)." (female lecturer in applied linguistics, age: 50+) "I evaluate 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 and Levinson, 1978). In other words, s/he should avoid applying 'bald-on record' strategy and recourse to the 'positive', 'negative' and 'off-record' politeness instead of expressing her contest directly. 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 lecturer in applied linguistics, age: 38 - 42+) In general, the finding of this study revealed that insufficient mitigation, and lack of acknowledgment of the degree of imposition characterize non- native speaker e-mail.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate English e-mail requests written by Iranian (NNS of English) post graduate university students to their professors to investigate the type and the amount of lexical/phrasal and external modification. More specifically, the focus of the present study was to find out the extent to which the lack of modification in students' e-mail requests might influence the degree of politeness of their e-mails to faculty. In order to do this more precisely, the study also examined the opinions of a number of Iranian university professors on students' e-mail requests. The results of the study indicated that the NNS students' English e-mails were typically characterized by an underuse of lexical or phrasal downgraders, an omission of greetings and closings. 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. This study suggested that writing e-mails to authority figures appropriately remains a demanding task and requires student to be aware of politeness strategies and to have high pragmatic competence. Students should be aware of e-mail etiquette so that they can write an e-mail to their faculty appropriately (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007).

Implication, Limitations, and Suggestions for Further Research

Due to the newness of the computer-mediated communication (CMC), there are as yet no established conventions for linguistic behavior in e-mail communication (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006). Most native and nonnative speakers are uncertain regarding which kind of politeness strategies in e-mail interaction they should use and also which style in e-mail interaction is appropriate (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006; Crystal, 2001). Although a number of researchers have the same opinion that pedagogical intervention with regard to instruction in and acquisition of proper speech act performance is obliging for NNSs of English (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; House, 2003; Kasper, 2001), until now, few ESL and EFL books include sections on the writing of appropriate and polite e-mail messages in academic contexts. Without training, NNS speakers' language production tends to deviate from NS norms, which often results in negative assessments of their personalities and even cultural groups (Boxer, 2002). The results of this study can be used for teaching in the areas of syllabus design, material development, and classroom activities to make students aware of what is the appropriate relationship between professors and students in the academic context.

The limitations of this study revolve primarily around the way of the data collection process. The data didn't comprise naturalistic due to ethical reasons. This may have some effects on the way participants requests via e-mail. Because of this limitation participants may not make genuine effort to make requests in the way they would normally do in an actual e-mail exchange. This limitation have some effects on participants' actions and behaviors and hence distorts research results. Another limitation of this study is the fact that the findings could have benefited from qualitative interview data, surveys, and introspective reports of students' perceptions toward the factors that influence the appropriateness of e-mail requests with professors at an academic setting.

As e-mail communication can create a healthy academic atmosphere through better interaction between students and the faculty members, it can be worth further research control factors such as proficiency level, amount of input and practice, length of exposure in the target culture and academic environment, and pragmatic transfer to determine optimal intervention. If possible, studies can be undertaken to analyze e-mail messages sent by different genders, and investigate the effect of age, gender, personality, and distance between the students and the faculty members.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Internal Modification: The Classification Scheme – Lexical/Phrasal Downgraders

Name		
Marker "Please"	"An optional element added to a request to bid for corporative behavior" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989, p. 283).	'Please'
Consultative devices	"expressions by means of which the speaker seeks to involve the hearer directly bidding for cooperation" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989, p. 283).	'would you mind', 'do you think', 'would it be all right if', 'is it/would it be possible', 'do you think I could...?', 'Is it all right?'

Downtoners	"modifiers which are used by a speaker in order to modulate the impact his or her request is likely to have on the hearer"(Blum-Kulka et al., 1989, p. 284)	'possibly', 'perhaps', 'just' 'rather', 'maybe', 'by any chance', 'at all'
Understaters/Hedges	"adverbial modifiers by means of which the speaker under represents the state of affairs denoted in the proposition" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989, p. 283).	'a bit', 'a little', 'sort of', 'a kind of'
Subjectivizers	"elements in which the speaker explicitly expresses his or her subjective opinion vis-a` - vis the state of affairs referred to in the proposition, thus lowering the assertive force of the request?"	'I'm afraid, 'I wonder', 'I think/suppose'

	(Blum-Kulka et al., 1989, p. 284).	
Cajolers	"conventionalized, addressee-oriented modifiers whose function is to make things clearer for the addressee and invite him/her to metaphorically participate in the speech act" (Sifianou, 1992, p. 180).	'You know', 'You see...'
Appealers	Addressee-oriented elements occurring in a syntactically final position. They may signal turn-availability and "are used by the speaker whenever he or she appeals to his or her hearer's benevolent understanding" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989, p. 285).	'Clean the table dear, Will you?.....ok/right?'

Appendix B

Internal Modification: The Classification Scheme – Upgraders-Intensifiers

Intensifier	"Adverbial moodier that stresses specific elements of the request" (Schauer, 2009, p. 91)	-I truly/really need this extension. -I had such a high fever
Time intensifier	"employed to emphasize the temporal aspect of the speaker's request" (Schauer, 2009, p. 91).	-Urgently -Right now -As soon as possible

Intensifier	"Adverbial moodier that stresses specific elements of the request" (Schauer, 2009, p. 91)	-I truly/really need this extension. -I had such a high fever
Time intensifier	"employed to emphasize the temporal aspect of the speaker's request" (Schauer, 2009, p. 91).	-Urgently -Right now -As soon as possible
Overstater	"Exaggerated utterances that form part of the request and are employed by the speaker to communicate their need of the request being met" (Schauer, 2009, p. 91).	-I'm in desperate need of

Appendix C**External Modification: The Classification Scheme – Supportive Moves**

Greeting/Opening	The writer opens the e-mail with a greeting.	Hi/Hello/Good morning -How are you? - I am sorry to hear that you are not well.
Self introduction	The writer introduces himself/herself.	-I'm Maria K. from your LALI-141 class.
Grounder	A clause which can either precede or follow a request and allows the speaker to give reasons, explanations, or justifications for his or her request.	- I would like an assignment extension because I couldn't deal the typing time.
Disarmer	A phrase with which "the speaker tries to remove any potential objections the hearer might raise upon being confronted with the request" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989, p. 287).	-I know that this assignment is important but could you...?
Preparator	The speaker prepares the hearer for the ensuing request.	-I really need a favor
Getting a precommitment	The speaker checks on a potential refusal before performing the request by trying to get the hearer to commit.	-Could you do me a favor?
Promise	The speaker makes a promise to be fulfilled upon completion of the request act.	-Could you give me an extension? I promise I'll have it ready by tomorrow.
Imposition minimize	"The speaker tries to reduce the imposition placed on the hearer by his request" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989, p. 288).	-I would like to ask for an extension, just for a few days.
Apology	The speaker apologizes for posing the request and/or for the imposition incurred.	-I'm sorry but I need an extension on this project.
Orientation move	Opening discourse moves that serve an orientation function but do not necessarily mitigate or aggravate the request in anyway.	-You know the seminar paper I'm supposed to be giving on the 29th
Complement/Sweetener	"Employed to flatter the interlocutor and to put them into a positive mood" (Schauer, 2009, p. 92).	-Your opinion counts. -I hope you feel better.
Pre-closing/Thanks		-Thanks for your time. -I look forward to hearing from you.
E-mail closing		Yours sincerely

Appendix D**External Modification: The Classification Scheme – Aggravating Moves**

Complaint/Criticism	I sent you an e-mail 3 days ago and never replied.'
Emphasis on	I need to have the reference letter in three

urgency/Positive outcome	days.' 'I will expect your positive reply.'
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Appendix E**Perception Questionnaire E-mails (English E-mail Requests)**

[1]

Student No. 25

Dear Doctor

Hereby, yesterday, I saw the mark of my psycholinguistics lesson and I have a contest about my mark. Please revise my score and let me to have a meeting with you and talking about the mark that I have received.

Thanks

... (student name)

[2]

Student No. 11

Dear Dr. ... (professor name)

I am sorry to bother you. I did my best during the semester but I couldn't do well in exam because I was ill. Regarding my activities in your class I expected a better score. Please revise my score. And also Please give me the honour of your meeting in your office to talk to you about my paper exam.

Thank you for your consideration

Best regards,

... (student name)

[3]

Student No. 56

Dear professor ... (professor name)

My Advanced writing score was very low. I did my best in the exam and I expected a better score. Please change my score. By the way let me to meet you in your office. I need to speak with you about my score.

Thanks for your attention

... (student name)

[4]

Student No. 53

Hello, My name(student name), I was your students, you was familiar with my activities in classroom. My mark was very bad. 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 name)

[5]

Student No. 55

Dear professor

Hello

I have problem in literature and my grade was very low. Please check my paper once more because I answered all questions and I think my score should be more, and also make a chance for me to visit you in your office.

Thanks a lot

... (student name)

[6]

Student No. 32

Dear master

I couldn't do well in final exam. Unfortunately my final score is very low. Please, check my paper and change my score. I hope you understand my situation and give me a chance to meet you in your office and speak about my grade.

Thanks

... (student name)