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Mitigating e-mail requests in teenagers' first and second language academic cyber-consultation

Abstract: The study analyses teenagers' e-mail requests during academic cyber-consultation, exploring how the performance of request modifiers is influenced by participants' perceptions of the degree of imposition of the speech act and social distance with the recipient. A total of 295 e-mail requests, 145 produced by British English speakers (BES) and 150 performed by International English speakers (IES), were randomly selected from all the e-mail requests that International Baccalaureate students sent to their learning mentor between September and December 2011. They were analysed with regard to the use of internal and external request mitigators and participants' judgments of the degree of request imposition and social distance with the e-mail recipient. Results of the study show that participants do not frequently rely on mitigators, but whenever they perceive the need to mitigate the request, pragmatic variation is observed between BES and IES. Thus, when the request is perceived as demanding, BES activate their pragmalinguistic knowledge and use a wider range of internal modifiers (both lexical and syntactic). In contrast, IES seem to lack pragmalinguistic knowledge to soften the request. Finally, although teenagers do not perceive their relationship with their learning mentor as one of +social distance, BES and IES show variation in their choice of form of address. Findings from the study suggest the need to incorporate training on e-mail politeness in future pragmatics-based pedagogical interventions.

Keywords: pragmatics, teenagers, e-mail communication, request modifiers, e-mail requests, pragmatic variation, intercultural communication

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1 Introduction

Pragmatics research has frequently dealt with speech act performance. Among the different speech acts, requests have motivated a great deal of interest in

the field of interlanguage pragmatics (ILP). While contrastive studies on requests have revealed quantitative and qualitative differences in the degree of directness and in terms of the internal and external modification of L1 and L2 performance of requests (Hassall 2001; Woodfield 2008; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2008; Woodfield & Economidou-Kogetsidis 2010), cross-sectional studies have examined the pragmatic development of learners at different stages of proficiency (Trosborg 1995; Safont 2008; Göy *et al.* 2012). In addition, longitudinal studies have tracked learners' pragmatic ability to perform requests over an extended period of time (Ellis 1992; Achiba 2003; Barron 2003; Schauer 2009; Woodfield 2012). Regardless of the research perspective adopted, most interlanguage studies have examined pragmatic variation across languages and cultures (see Félix-Brasdefer & Koike 2012 for recent research on pragmatic variation in first and second language contexts), and they have examined requests by means of elicited data such as role plays, discourse completion tests or multimedia tasks.

More recently, natural data from e-mail communication have drawn researchers' attention. As suggested by Herring (2003), computer-mediated communication allows us to investigate how speakers from different language backgrounds interact in synchronous and asynchronous communication and use this as data from authentic language use. Within the field of computer-mediated communication, Bloch (2002) mentions e-mail communication as a widely accepted asynchronous medium of interaction, sharing features of oral and written discourse (see Crystal 2006 for further information on language use in e-mail communication) and different studies have examined requests in academic cyber-consultation. So far, studies have focused on adults' e-mail request performance (Biesenbach-Lucas 2006, 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Félix-Brasdefer 2012) but, as far as we know, no study has dealt with adolescents. In addition, research has been conducted mainly on performance, and the few perception studies available have focused on L1 speakers' perception of e-mail requests (Hartford & Barvodi-Harlig 1996; Hendriks 2010; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011). To our knowledge, the only e-mail study exploring second language users' perception of sociopragmatic variables in making requests is that conducted by Pan (2012), and the author suggests that further research should be conducted on how the perception of sociopragmatic variables influences the performance of e-mail requests.

From this perspective, the study examines British (users of English as a first language) and International speakers (users of English as a second language) in their late adolescence as they perform e-mail requests during cyber-consultation with their mentors. The aim of the present study is to explore how British English speakers (BES) and International English speakers (IES) differ in their

use of request modifiers and how their performance is influenced by their perceptions of the degree of imposition of the requests and the social distance from the recipient. The study addresses an issue that has now become particularly relevant due to the process of globalisation and internationalisation taking place in education. We are referring to the ability to write appropriate e-mail requests as part of the pragmatic knowledge required to communicate effectively in a language. Following Leech (1983) and Thomas (1983), this includes pragmalinguistic knowledge, that is to say, knowledge of the linguistic resources needed to express a specific communicative intention, and sociopragmatic knowledge, which may be defined as awareness of appropriate language use taking into account to whom the messages are being addressed and under what circumstances. Nowadays, an increasing number of students face e-mail communication as intercultural speakers. This means that, besides dealing with e-mail as a non-standard hybrid discourse, intercultural speakers also make pragmalinguistic choices taking into account their perceptions of social norms. Understanding English language users' choice of linguistic devices based on their perception of social and contextual norms is important to avoid possible misunderstandings or the perception of e-mail impoliteness. Finally, research findings from the present study may also provide insights into training in e-mail literacy.

2 Background research

2.1 E-mail requests in academic contexts

One of the speech acts that occurs frequently in e-mail academic interaction and has stimulated interlanguage research is that of requests. This research has reported information on topics, degree of directness and type of mitigation in e-mail requests. Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig (1996) carried out one of the earliest studies which focused on the e-mail requests of native (NSs) and non-native speakers (NNSs) of English. Findings from their study revealed that learners did not employ sufficient mitigation and emphasised their own needs. Differences in NSs' and NNSs' e-mail requests were also pointed out by Chen (2001), who reported differences in the amount of lexical and syntactic modification employed by Taiwanese and American graduate students. Other studies on learners' performance of e-mail requests have examined whether performance is conditioned by the level of imposition of requests. Using e-mails sent to the researcher by international students, Biesenbach-Lucas (2006, 2007) examined

the degrees of directness and indirectness in three types of requests (requests for appointment, for feedback and for extension of deadlines). Results from this study showed that both NSs and NNSs used direct requests for appointment and feedback and that there was a tendency to employ conventional indirect requests when asking for the extension of a deadline, thus suggesting that the level of imposition of the request may affect its degree of directness. In a similar vein, Félix-Brasdefer (2012) analysed the request head acts and lexical and syntactic modifiers found in 240 e-mail requests written by US university-level students. E-mails were written in L1 English and L2 Spanish to faculty members in four situations that ranged from low to high imposition, namely requests for validation, requests for information, requests for feedback and requests for action. Results of the study showed that the distribution of e-mail requests and use of strategies were conditioned by the level of imposition of the requests. While requests for information and feedback were the second and third most frequent request types for L1 data, in the L2 data requests for feedback were followed by requests for action and finally by requests for information. In addition, requests for validation were the most frequent in both L1 and L2. Similarly, the use of strategies was reported to be conditioned by the level of imposition: direct questions predominated in lower imposition situations, while query preparatory strategy was used more frequently with higher levels of imposition. As far as internal modification of requests is concerned, results were in line with previous studies that made use of prompted elicited techniques, that is to say, it was found that lexical and syntactic modifiers predominated in L1 requests and were less frequent in L2 request data.

The above-mentioned studies have focused on the performance of e-mail requests, and more recently the impact of certain linguistic features on native speakers' perception of students' e-mail requests has also been examined (Hendriks 2010; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011). Hendriks (2010) analysed English e-mail requests written by Dutch learners and examined the comprehensibility of the e-mail requests and personality dimensions, taking into account native speakers' perceptions of non-native request modification. Findings from the study suggested that under-use of lexico-syntactic modification may reflect negatively on the sender's personality. Native speakers' perceptions on students' e-mail requests are also addressed in Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011). The author examined how direct and unmodified e-mail requests were perceived by a number of British lecturers, as far as politeness/appropriateness is concerned. Similar to previous studies, findings from the study showed that both directness and lack of mitigation were observed in students' e-mail requests to faculty members. In addition, omission of greetings and closings and inappropriate forms of address were also found. The author argues that these linguistic fea-

tures influence the perception of e-mails, since they are perceived as impolite and may result in pragmatic failure. The innovative studies by Hendriks (2010) and Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) addressed the need for perception studies, and their focus was on native speakers' perception of e-mail politeness.

Another study dealing with perception and production of L1 and L2 e-mail requests is that conducted by Pan (2012). This study employed an e-DCT to elicit learners' e-mail requests to their professors and compared internal and external modifiers produced by Chinese learners with those produced by American participants. In addition, data on sociopragmatic judgments of participants' perception of request imposition and e-mail appropriateness were also collected. Similar findings to those from previous studies on the performance of authentic e-mail requests were reported, since data showed that L2 learners relied mainly on external modifiers and did not often use syntactic modifiers. Dealing with participants' level of confidence in terms of request appropriateness and assessment of the degree of request imposition, the author reported that the Chinese were less confident in their judgments of language appropriateness and perceived the requests to be more imposing than the American participants did. However, neither the Chinese nor the Americans perceived the requests addressed to their professors as very imposing. The author acknowledges that the relationship between participants' perception of sociopragmatic factors and choice of linguistic forms is not addressed and suggests the need to explore that relationship in future studies. Following this suggestion, the current study examines e-mail request mitigators performed by a population that has received scant attention in ILP studies, that of young teenagers. In addition to the performance of request mitigators, the study focuses on participants' perception of the degree of imposition of the request and the social distance from the interlocutor, and how participants' judgements influence performance of request modifiers.

2.2 Previous studies on request modifiers

As illocutionary acts, requests belong to Searle's (1969) category of directives, that is to say, they are performed by the speaker in order to get the hearer to carry out an act. There are different linguistic forms that can convey a request act, as described in studies by Blum-Kulka *et al.* (1989), Trosborg (1995) and Safont (2008), among others. In those studies it is pointed out that requests are made up of two main parts: the head of the request and its peripheral modifiers. The former performs the function of requesting while the latter mitigate or aggravate the force of the requests. Interlanguage studies dealing with request

modifiers have used the framework of Blum-Kulka *et al.* (1989), distinguishing between internal (lexical/phrasal and syntactic) and external modifiers, to examine L1 and L2 use of these peripheral modification devices, and they have been widely examined in ILP research (see the books edited by Alcón 2008 and Economidou-Kogetsidis & Woodfield 2012). Early studies pointed out an under-use of internal modification on the part of learners as compared to NSs (House & Kasper 1987; Faerch & Kasper 1989). Since the 1990s, the investigation of request peripheral modification devices has been the focus of attention of several cross-linguistic studies dealing with learners of different levels of language proficiency and language backgrounds. For instance, Trosborg (1995) compared data from native speakers of English and Danish and examined the use of requests by Danish secondary school, high school and university students who were learning English as a foreign language. Findings from this study revealed an under-use and a narrow range of request modifiers, although these increased with higher proficiency. Similar results were found in Woodfield (2008) and Otcu & Zeyrek (2008). While Woodfield (2008) examined the performance of requests by German and Japanese graduate students by means of written discourse completion tasks, Otcu & Zeyrek (2008) compared the role plays of two groups of Turkish undergraduate students with different levels of language proficiency. In both studies it was observed that native speakers internally modify their requests more frequently in comparison to the groups of learners. Economidou-Kogetsidis' (2008, 2009) and Woodfield & Economidou-Kogetsidis' (2010) studies both focused on advanced learners of English. Economidou-Kogetsidis (2008, 2009) used written discourse completion tasks to analyse both external and internal request modifiers of advanced Greek learners of English. Findings from her studies showed that, in comparison to British English native speakers, advanced language learners of English used fewer internal modifiers and showed a rather restricted range of peripheral request devices. In Woodfield & Economidou-Kogetsidis's (2010) study the request performance of advanced mixed L1 learners and English native speakers were elicited by a written discourse completion test and examined in terms of three dimensions, namely internal and external modification and request perspective. Significant differences were observed in the three dimensions analysed, showing that native speakers used more impersonal requests, together with a range of mitigators, elliptical and formulaic devices.

Using oral role plays Göy *et al.* (2012) and Economidou-Kogetsidis (2012) conducted research on request mitigation with learners at different stages of proficiency. In the study by Göy *et al.* (2012) the role play performance of participants of two different levels of proficiency in English was compared with the performance of American English speakers. The results showed that both the

beginner and the upper-intermediate Turkish EFL learners used fewer syntactic downgraders than the American participants. Economidou-Kogetsidis (2012) also used oral role plays to examine the extent to which low proficiency Greek Cypriot EFL learners mitigate requests. In line with previous studies, results indicated an under-use of internal modifiers and an over-use of external modifiers, mainly grounders. The author also pointed out learners' over-use of zero marking and a preference for speaker perspective. Similar results were also obtained in studies dealing with a target language other than English. For instance, Hassall (2001, 2003, 2012) showed that, in comparison to the native speaker group, Australian adult learners of Indonesian rarely use internal modifiers during the performance of role plays. Similar results are obtained in the studies conducted by Félix-Brasdefer (2012) and Bella (2012). The former examines the use of request mitigators by learners of Spanish as a second language, while the latter deals with the use of modification devices used by learners of Greek.

Turning to external modifiers, many studies have found that, compared to L1 users, L2 users make more use of external modifiers than internal ones to soften the requests (Faerch & Kasper 1989; Hassall 2003, 2012). In addition, regardless of the degree of language proficiency, the grounder is the most frequent external modifier. For instance, Ellis's (1992) beginner learners used grounders as the only supportive move, and an over-use of grounders was observed in advanced learners (Safont 2005; Schauer 2009; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2008, 2009; Woodfield & Economidou-Kogetsidis 2010). Thus, taking into account previous research on request mitigators, it seems that L2 users tend to rely on external modifiers to mitigate requests, while lexical and syntactic modifiers are not frequently observed in learners' production of requests. As mentioned by Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1986), Hassall (2001) and Schauer (2009), learners tend to use supportive moves or grounders to give reasons or explanations or to justify their request. Different explanations have been offered to account for the predominant use of external over internal modifiers. Economidou-Kogetsidis (2010) suggested that L2 users opt for the use of grounders because knowledge of idiomatic use is not required and it involves the construction of simple clauses. Hassall (2001) argued that L2 users rely on external modifiers in an attempt to avoid imposing on the hearer. Whether L2 users' preference for external over internal modifiers is an attempt to compensate for lack of pragmalinguistic knowledge and/or it signals concern for the interlocutor is still an open question that may be addressed by combining data from e-mail request performance with participants' socio-pragmatic judgments. The present study will therefore examine request modifiers produced by two groups of English language users: (a) British L1 English users and (b) international L2

English users who perform e-mail requests during cyber-consultation with their learning mentors. In addition to examining teenagers' preferences with regard to request modifiers, the study also explores whether teenagers' perceptions of the degree of imposition of the requests and the interlocutor's social distance have an impact on the performance of request mitigators. The following research questions guided the study:

- (a) Are there any differences in the type of request mitigators used by British and international teenagers during cyber-consultation with their mentors?
- (b) Do British and international teenagers differ with regard to their perception of the degree of imposition of e-mail requests and their perception of social distance from their learning mentor? If so, does it have an impact on the choice of request mitigators?

3 Method

3.1 Participants

A total of 60 teenagers who were studying in the sixth form in three different state schools in the south of England were randomly selected from those that filled in the consent form to participate in the study and gave permission to have the e-mails they sent to their learning mentors examined for research purposes. In addition, whether they were British English speakers (BES) or International English speakers (IES) was also considered in order to create two participant groups: 30 IES and 30 BES. Since one of the British participants moved to Australia after four weeks of collecting data, a total of 29 BES and 30 IES finally took part in the study. The British students had received primary and secondary education in Britain and were from the UK. The 30 International students were European (15 Spaniards, 2 French, 3 Italians, 4 Germans, 1 Pole, 3 Norwegians, 1 Dane and 1 Greek), and they had just arrived in the UK either because their parents had moved to live in the country for work-related issues or because they had decided to study in the UK for one academic year. Although we acknowledge that students who choose to come to the UK are probably qualitatively not the same as those who are forced to relocate by parental movement, they are considered to belong to the same population. Their English language proficiency level was upper intermediate, as established by the standardised Quick Oxford Placement test (U.C.L.E.S. 2001), equivalent to Common European Framework level B2. All participants were sixteen years old and followed the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum, which con-

tains six subject groups, from which students have to take three subjects at a higher level (each course representing 240 teaching hours), three other subjects at a standard level (each course representing 150 teaching hours), plus a three-part core consisting of an extended essay, theory of knowledge and creativity, and action service. In addition to subject teachers, students received the support of a learning mentor with whom they were regularly in contact via e-mail communication and whom they met once a week to manage the workload and to talk about progress and frustrations during the IB programme. A total of six British English mentors also participated in the study by forwarding to the researcher the e-mail messages of those students who had previously agreed to have their e-mails examined for research purposes.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

Data from this study are part of a corpus of e-mails that 59 teenagers (29 British English speakers and 30 International English speakers) sent to their learning mentors during the academic year 2011–2012. Five e-mails per student were randomly selected from all the e-mail requests that IB students sent to their mentors between September and December 2011. Thus, a total of 295 e-mail requests, 145 produced by BES and 150 performed by IES, were analysed in terms of the performance of internal and external request mitigators and participants' judgements of two variables potentially influencing request performance, namely, the degree of request imposition and the interlocutor's social distance. Following previous classifications employed in ILP studies (Blum-Kulka *et al.* 1989; Trosborg 1995; Hassall 2001; Achiba 2003; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006; Schauer 2009; Woodfield & Economidou-Kogetsidis 2010; Félix-Brasdefer 2012) and the presence of modification devices in our data, each request was coded in terms of both internal and external modification. Within internal modifications, both lexical/phrasal and syntactic modifications were found. As for lexical/phrasal modifiers, the use of 'please', openers, softeners (downtoners and understaters) and subjectivisers were coded as teenagers attempted to modulate the impact of the request, in contrast to intensifiers, which signal the urgency of the request. The absence of internal modifiers such as cajolers and appealers in the written e-mail corpus was the reason for not including them in the classification of internal modifiers. On the other hand, the use of conditional structures, mainly the use of *could* instead of *can*, tense, aspect and negation of the preparatory condition were coded as instances of syntactic modification. In addition, in line with Félix-Brasdefer (2012), the combination of two or more syntactic modifiers were found in our data and coded as multiple syntactic modifications (see table 1):

Table 1: Classification scheme of lexical and syntactic modification devices.

| Type | Sub-type | Examples |
|-----------|--|--|
| Lexical | Please | <i>Please</i> , find attached a document with changes |
| | Openers (do you think ...; would you mind ...; is it all right ...) | <i>It is all right if</i> I pop in Tuesday after lunch? |
| | Softeners (downtoners – possibly, perhaps, just, maybe ...; understaters – just, a little, a minute ...; hedges – kind of ...) | Could you <i>just</i> let me know by the end of the term? I'd <i>possibly</i> need some feedback before the English class. |
| | Intensifiers (really, I'm sure ...) | <i>I really</i> need your help with that project. |
| | Subjectivisers | <i>I suppose</i> I could hand in the paper next week |
| Syntactic | Conditional structures | <i>Could you please</i> tell me when is the deadline for the assignment? |
| | Tense | Is it all right if I <i>booked</i> for the performance later in the week? |
| | Aspect | <i>I was wondering if</i> what I sent for the geography paper was ok |
| | Negation of preparatory condition | <i>I don't suppose</i> there is any choice ... |
| | Multiple syntactic modification | <i>I was wondering whether</i> you could send doc III in word |

The range of linguistic devices used for modifying requests externally includes: preparators, grounders, disarmers, expanders, promises, imposition minimisers and apologies (table 2):

Table 2: Classification scheme of external modification devices.

| External Modification | |
|-----------------------|---|
| Preparators | <i>I really need to talk to you</i> , Could we meet ...? |
| Grounders | <i>I have to go to the dentist tomorrow</i> at 12.00. Could I write to you if ...? |
| Disarmers | I hate bothering you again, but could you confirm ...? |
| Expanders | I would like to know about assignment 4 because I missed your class today (I was sick). Could you please explain what I have to do? |
| Promises | Could I do it next week? <i>I promise this will not happen again</i> . |
| Imposition minimisers | <i>I would like to see you before the Assembly, just for five minutes</i> |
| Apologies | <i>I'm very sorry</i> , but I need to answer some questions ... |

Request modifiers were calculated individually by the researcher and a trained research assistant, following the classification included in table 1 and table 2. Both the researcher and the research assistant coded all the data, discussing cases of discrepancy, and reached an agreement for 95 percent of the data. The frequency of internal and external mitigation devices was calculated to obtain quantitative differences in terms of BES and IES performance of e-mail request mitigators.

In addition, a qualitative analysis was carried out to see how students' perception of request imposition and social distance from their mentor may influence the use of request mitigators. Thus, immediately after sending each e-mail to the learning mentor participants received an automatic e-mail with two previously pilot-tested questions that were especially designed to evaluate students' perception of request imposition and social distance from their mentor. In the first question participants were specifically asked to use a 5-point Likert scale to indicate the degree of request imposition of the e-mail message that had been sent to their mentors (example [a]), while in the second question they had to assess how well they thought they knew their mentor (example [b]). In both questions, students were also requested to justify their perception scores by making reference to specific linguistic features from the message. The perception scores of each student's e-mail were added together to obtain a single score of perception of request imposition and a single score of perception of degree of social distance from the e-mail recipient. Finally, students' explanations of their perception scores were used to explore whether the presence of request modifiers were in line with students' perception of request imposition and social distance from their learning mentor:

Example (a)

Here you have one e-mail sent to your mentor. Please, **read this e-mail** and **choose only one** of the 5-point rating scale answers. You are asked to **explain your choice**. We are interested in your **personal opinion, so your answer can never be wrong**.

E-mail 1

From: xxxxxxxx

To: xxxxxxxx

Subject:

Date: Thu, 22 Sep 2011 16:52:20 +0200

Hi (name of the mentor) I would like to have a meeting with you next week. If you can before Wednesday, what do you think?

Thank you (name of the student)

Do you think that in this e-mail the request to your mentor is big?

1. not at all 2. a little 3. so-so 4. quite big 5. very big

Please explain your choice by referring to specific linguistic features from the message that you use to minimise the size of the request

Example (b)

Do you think that in this e-mail your relationship with your mentor is distant?

1. not at all 2. a little 3. so-so 4. quite distant 5. very distant

Please explain your choice by referring to specific linguistic features from the message that signal how well you know your mentor

4 Results and discussion

Our first research question aimed to explore whether there were any differences in the type of request modifiers used by British and international teenagers during cyber-consultations with their mentors. Tables 3, 4 and 5 show the percentage of modifiers by subcategories used by BES and IES. In the case of lexical modifiers (see table 3), the use of ‘please’, openers, softeners (downtoners and understaters) and subjectivisers are included as subcategories of lexical modifiers, as an attempt to modulate the impact of the request, while the subcategory of intensifiers signals the urgency of the request:

Table 3: Internal modification: Lexical.

| | ‘Please’ | Opener | Softeners | Intensifier | Subjectivisers |
|-----|----------|--------|-----------|-------------|----------------|
| BES | 100 % | 17.2 % | 51.7 % | 20.7 % | 13.8 % |
| IES | 90 % | 6.7 % | 16.7 % | 26.7 % | 6.7 % |

The results reported in table 3 show that although BES and IES rely on the use of *please*, BES show a preference for the use of softeners (e.g. ‘*I’d possibly need your help, could I see you just for a few minutes before Tuesday*’) in comparison to IES (BES = 51.7 percent and IES = 16.7 percent). In contrast, BES and

IES do not frequently rely on openers (e.g. *‘Do you think that I could have an extension for the deadline?’*), intensifiers (e.g. *‘I really need this extension’*), and subjectivisers (e.g. *‘I suppose there is no problem if I do not attend next week seminar’*) to mitigate the impact of the e-mail request.

In addition, table 4 shows that both BES and IES do not often rely on syntactic modifiers. When they do, they opt for the use of *could* instead of *can*, IES showing a higher frequency of use of this linguistic device (BES = 58.6 percent and IES = 100 percent). In contrast, BES show a higher frequency of multiple syntactic modification (e.g. *‘I was wondering whether I could see you next week’*) than IES (BES = 62.1 percent and IES = 20 percent). The other types of syntactic mitigating devices – tense (e.g. *‘Would you mind if I handed in the essay later this this week’*), aspect (*‘I was wondering if you could move me to Monday’s lecture’*), and negation of preparatory condition (e.g. *‘I don’t suppose I have any other choice, but I would like to know if another extension is possible’*) – are not frequently used:

Table 4: Internal modification: Syntactic.

| | Conditional structures | Tense | Aspect | Negation | Multiple Syntactic Combination |
|-----|------------------------|--------|--------|----------|--------------------------------|
| BES | 58.6 % | 13.8 % | 10.3 % | 6.9 % | 62.1 % |
| IES | 100 % | 3.3 % | 3.3 % | 0 % | 20 % |

Table 5 shows the range of linguistic devices for modifying requests externally, i.e. preparators (e.g. *‘I really need to give you an explanation...’*), grounders (e.g. *‘I would like an extension because I have been sick’*), disarmers (e.g. *‘I know you explained this concept in class, but I need further explanations...’*), expanders (e.g. *‘I need to talk to you and I would like to ask some questions, could I go to your office tomorrow?’*), promises (e.g. *‘Could you give me an extension? I promise I’ll have it ready by Monday’*), imposition minimisers (e.g. *‘I would like to ask for an extension, just for two more days’*), and apologies (e.g. *‘I’m very sorry but I need to ask you for an extension on this assignment’*):

Table 5: External modification.

| | Preparator | Grounder | Disarmer | Expander | Promise | Minimiser | Apologies |
|-----|------------|----------|----------|----------|---------|-----------|-----------|
| BES | 13.8 % | 48.3 % | 27.6 % | 10.3 % | 6.9 % | 13.8 % | 10.3 % |
| IES | 13.3 % | 86.7 % | 3.3 % | 20 % | 13.3 % | 36.7 % | 6.7 % |

As shown in table 5, on the one hand differences in the use of disarmers are observed in favour of BES (BES = 27.6 percent and IES = 3.3 percent), while minimisers and grounders are more frequently used by IES (BES = 13.80 percent and IES = 36.7 percent for minimisers; BES = 48.3 percent and IES = 86.7 percent for grounders). On the other hand, there seem to be minor differences in the use of the other types of external modifiers – preparators, expanders, promises and apologies.

Results related to the first research question, which aims to explore pragmatic variation in BES and IES request modifiers during academic consultation via e-mail, show, on the one hand, that BES display a greater preference for the use of *please* and softeners in comparison to IES, and BES also present a wider range of syntactic request modifiers. On the other hand, IES show a preference for the use of *please* and *could* to internally mitigate the e-mail request. In relation to the use of external mitigators, differences in favour of BES are found for the use of disarmers, while grounders and minimisers are more frequently used by IES. Results related to the use of *please* and *could* as the most frequent request modifiers used by IES, together with the use of external modification, mainly the use of a grounder, support previous ILP research comparing L1 and L2 performance of e-mail requests conducted with adults in academic settings (Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig 1996; Biesenbach-Lucas 2006, 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Félix-Brasdefer 2012).

It is also worth pointing out that low frequencies were found in the use of some request mitigators (see tables 3, 4 and 5), which point towards individual variation in relation to the type of request mitigators. Besides, when we compare total frequency of use of mitigators in BES and IES e-mail requests, few differences are observed in the case of lexical (BES = 53.78 percent; IES = 46.22 percent) and syntactic modification (BES = 49.44 percent; IES = 50.56 percent), while IES show a preference for external modification (BES = 36.03 percent; IES = 63.96 percent). One possible explanation for these findings could be that participants do not perceive any imposition in the academic e-mail requests or that the academic relationship frequently described as (+ power) and (+ social distance) is not perceived as such in the context of the IB programme. If that is the case, participants might not feel the need to mitigate the requests. This could explain why, besides the use of *please*, participants do not frequently rely on mitigators, but whenever they perceive the need to mitigate the request, pragmatic variation is observed between BES and IES. In such cases, the former opt for the use of softeners, a wider range of syntactic mitigators and the use of disarmers to mitigate the request, whereas the latter rely on the use of *could*, together with the use of grounders, and to a certain extent they opt for the use

of minimisers. This tentative hypothesis is explored further when dealing with the second research question.

The second research question aimed to explore to what extent BES and IES differ with regard to their perception of the degree of imposition of the request and social distance from their learning mentor. Additionally, we aimed to explore whether senders' judgments on socio-pragmatic variables had an impact on their performance of request mitigators. As mentioned above, immediately after sending the e-mail to the learning mentor the students received an automatic e-mail with two questions to be answered using a Likert scale. These questions were designed to evaluate their e-mails in terms of perception of the degree of imposition of the request and social distance from the e-mail recipient. In addition, they were asked to justify their perception scores by making reference to specific linguistic features from the message.

Results related to the second research question point out that requests to the mentor were not perceived by the BES and IES as imposing, since 2.83 was the highest score reached. However, IES' judgment of the degree of request imposition was significantly higher in comparison to BES' judgement (BES = 1.34 and IES = 2.83). In relation to the variable 'social distance', neither BES nor IES reached a score of 3.0, and thus we can claim that participants do not perceive the relationship with their mentor as distant. However, the BES perceived this relationship as being more distant than the IES (BES = 2.57 and IES = 1.90). Data from our corpus of teenagers' e-mail messages show that members of this population do not perceive the performance of e-mail requests in academic interaction as very demanding. This finding is in line with Pan's (2012) study, which reported that the academic requests elicited by means of e-DCT were not treated as imposing by L1 and L2 users. Neither could we define participants' relationship with their learning mentor as one of +social distance. The participants' perception of request imposition and social distance from the learning mentor open up the question as to whether the academic situation that has frequently been described as one of +power and +social distance is subject to variation according to different academic settings. In addition, differences in perception scores for the BES and IES raise the question as to whether participants' judgment of socio-pragmatic variables account for BES' and IES' use of e-mail request modifiers reported above.

Students' comments on their language choice to mitigate the size of the request indicate some interesting patterns. It seems that BES perception of imposition is expressed by means of lexical mitigators, specifically subjectivisers, and multiple syntactic modifications, while IES refer to the use of *could* and external modification whenever they perceive the e-mail request as imposing. These findings are in line with previous studies such as those conducted

by Edmondson & House (1991), Schauer (2009), Hendriks (2010), Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) and Woodfield & Economidou-Kogetsidis (2012), who report that although L2 users rely on the use of *could* and *please*, they find difficulties in using internal request modification, and opt for the use of external modifiers, mainly grounders.

It is also interesting to comment on how BES' and IES' language choice reflects their perception of social distance from the e-mail recipient. Both BES and IES report that they use *could* and *please*, and the closing *thank you*, *thanks*, or *thank you very much* as linguistic devices to express degree of social distance from the e-mail recipient. However, BES, who as reported above perceive their relationship with their learning mentor as more distant than IES, favour more formal greetings such as *Mr/Mrs* + surname or *Dear* + surname. Furthermore, in explaining how the degree of social distance from their learning mentor may influence language choice, BES frequently mention the use of formal forms of address to signal social distance from the e-mail recipient. In contrast, IES favour no greetings or use informal greetings such as *Hi/Hello* + first name or *Dear* + first name, and they do not report the form of address in their attempts to signal social distance from the e-mail recipient. These findings suggest that in academic cyber-consultation, although teenagers do not perceive their relationship with their learning mentor as one of +social distance, BES and IES show variation in their choice of forms of address.

In addition to providing interesting patterns on teenagers' first and second language performance of request modifiers, the study suggests issues for further research. For instance, it would be interesting to examine whether use of e-mail request modifiers may influence recipients' perception of e-mails. Since Hendriks (2010) suggested that the sender may be regarded as more or less agreeable by the recipient according to how requests are mitigated, further analysis of the data could explore whether IES' pragmatic deviations from BES can lead to pragmatic failure. The effect of pragmatic deviations on the recipient was analysed by Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011), whose results showed that absence of mitigation, omission of greeting and closings and inappropriate forms of address were some of the features pointed out by L1 users in e-mails described as impolite. In this vein, further analysis of the data might compare L1 and L2 perceptions of e-mail requests with perceptions on the part of the mentor.

Further research should also address some of the limitations of the present study. Thus, a larger sample of e-mail requests and a more detailed analysis of participants' reports concerning which linguistic features are used to signal awareness of the socio-pragmatic variables should be carried out in future studies. It would be interesting to conduct a quantitative analysis of our prelimi-

nary findings, exploring whether form of address is conditioned by BES' and IES' perceptions of social distance from the e-mail recipient. So far, the analysis of greetings and closings in e-mail consultations has motivated pragmatic-based research (see for instance Bou-Franch 2011; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Félix-Brasdefer 2012). In this vein, further studies may shed light on whether participants' perception of the socio-pragmatic variable influences the use of greetings and closings in e-mail consultation. This type of research would help us to further understand English language users' choice of language forms in relation to their perception of social and contextual variables. In addition, the research findings will be useful to deal with e-mail literacy from an intercultural perspective.

5 Conclusion

The study examines how British and International speakers of English in their late adolescence perform e-mail requests during cyber-consultation with their mentors. More specifically, it explores how participants differ in their use of request modifiers and how their performance is influenced by their perceptions of the degree of imposition of the requests and the social distance from the recipient. Data from this study show that teenagers do not seem to perceive e-mail requests as imposing. Neither do they see the relationship with their learning mentor as distant. In addition, the present study shows that both BES and IES attempt to mitigate the request when they are aware of the request imposition, but differences in the range of L1 and L2 use of request mitigators are observed. Whereas the former opt for the use of softeners, a wider range of syntactic mitigators and the use of disarmers to externally mitigate the request, the latter rely on the use of *could*, together with the use of grounders to give reasons or justify their requests. In addition, results from the present study show that BES rely on greetings to indicate social distance from the e-mail recipient, while IES do not. Whether these differences are due to lack of pragmalinguistic knowledge or due to the participants' own culture justifies the incorporation of pragmatic instruction in the training of e-mail literacy (Chen 2006).

To date, teaching pragmatics has proved to be beneficial in increasing L2 users' awareness and performance of different speech acts (Alcón & Martínez-Flor 2005; Félix-Brasdefer 2006; Martínez-Flor & Usó-Juan 2010; Safont & Alcón 2012), but further pedagogical proposals concerning pragmatics should deal with e-mail as a non-standard hybrid discourse. Besides, training in e-mail liter-

acy needs to take into account the fact that cultural and individual variation is likely to influence the performance and perception of speech acts in e-mail communication. In the present study, similar to previous research such as the study conducted by Schauer (2009), individual variation was found in request performance. On the one hand, low frequencies of some of the mitigators point towards variation in relation to type of request mitigators. On the other hand, there were participants (both BES and IES) who frequently relied on request mitigators in contrast to those that did not opt for mitigating the request. Finally, participants' explanations in relation to how linguistic features are used to mitigate the request imposition, or signal social distance with the e-mail recipient point towards variation in pragmatic awareness. Awareness of how different cultural groups understand social norms should be included in future pedagogical proposals to help intercultural speakers make pragmalinguistic choices according to the e-mail recipient. Similarly, awareness of how individual variation may influence the e-mail recipient's perception of the sender should be incorporated to deal with e-mail appropriateness. Thus, as intercultural speakers we can be informed and become aware of the different language choices to express a particular communicative intention, taking into account to whom we are addressing the message and under what circumstances.

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Bionote

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(Peter Lang, 2008); 'Teachability and bilingualism effects on third language learners' pragmatic knowledge' (*Intercultural Pragmatics* 9(3), 2012); 'Discourse and pragmatics in SLA' (*The Routledge encyclopedia of second language acquisition*).

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