

PRAGMATIC VARIATION IN BRITISH AND INTERNATIONAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE USERS' E-MAIL COMMUNICATION: A FOCUS ON REQUESTS

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ABSTRACT. *The present study analyses the use of request strategies and mitigation devices during academic cyber-consultation. More specifically, it explores whether the degree of directness and mitigation in academic virtual communication is conditioned by the type of request. A total of 295 e-mail requests, 145 produced by British English speakers (BES) and 150 performed by International English speakers (IES) were analysed with regard to request type, level of directness, and amount and type of mitigation. Findings of the study show IES' preference for direct strategies and external mitigators in comparison to BES, while no differences are found in the use of lexical and syntactic modifiers. Differences in e-mail requests performed by BES and IES are explained by considering factors that may influence pragmalinguistic variation, among them, lack of pragmalinguistic knowledge, participants' perception of social distance from the interlocutor, and perception of request imposition. Finally, it is reported that the type of request influences teenagers' pragmalinguistic choices.*

KEY WORDS. *e-mail communication, pragmatics, requests.*

RESUMEN. *El estudio analiza las estrategias de petición y los elementos de mitigación en la comunicación académica asistida por ordenador. Se analizan un total de 295 correos electrónicos, 145 escritos en inglés por hablantes británicos (BES) y 150 escritos por estudiantes internacionales (IES) que utilizan el inglés como instrumento de comunicación. Más concretamente, se presta atención a la relación existente entre el tipo de peticiones y el uso de estrategias y elementos de mitigación utilizados. Los resultados del estudio muestran una mayor tendencia al uso de estrategias directas y mitigadores externos por parte de los IES, en comparación con los BES. Por el contrario no se aprecian diferencias entre ambos grupos en relación a la utilización de mitigadores léxicos y sintácticos. Las diferencias en el uso de estrategias y elementos de mitigación entre ambos grupos se explican, además de por falta de conocimiento pragmalingüístico de los IES, a tenor de factores como la percepción de la distancia*

social con el interlocutor o el grado de imposición de la petición. Finalmente, se observa la influencia del tipo de petición en la elección de aspectos pragmalingüísticos.

PALABRAS CLAVE. *Comunicación asistida por ordenador. pragmática. peticiones.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Computer-mediated communication has emerged as a subfield of computer-mediated discourse (Herring 2003), which investigates how speakers from different language backgrounds and settings interact in synchronous and asynchronous communication. In academic contexts e-mail communication has become an accepted asynchronous medium of interaction and has replaced some of the more traditional face-to-face forms of interaction. As suggested by Bloch (2002), it provides effective and instant information on academic-related issues with less attention to the interlocutor's public face and formality.

Data from e-mail communication in academic settings has drawn researchers attention in the field of interlanguage pragmatics, exploring L1 and L2 users' 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 knowledge of appropriate language use taking into account to whom the messages are being addressed and under what circumstances. Following the research conducted so far on e-mail requests in student-faculty cyber-consultations (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Félix-Brasdefer 2012a), the present study focuses on the performance of requests in authentic e-mail messages but, unlike previous research that has mostly focused on adults' e-mail performance, it deals with e-mail requests performed by adolescents. In line with contrastive studies carried out in the field of interlanguage pragmatics, the study examines the performance of British and International English-speaking teenagers when writing e-mail requests in English during cyber-consultation with their mentors. More specifically, the study examines the use of request strategies and mitigation devices produced by these two groups of English language users, and explores whether the degree of directness and mitigation in academic virtual communication initiated by young adolescents is conditioned by the type of request.

2. BACKGROUND RESEARCH

2.1. *Requests in interlanguage pragmatics*

As illocutionary acts, request acts belong to Searle's (1969) category of directives, that is to say, they are performed by the speaker in order to engage the hearer to do something. 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. Most cross-linguistic studies have compared the request realizations of English speakers with those of English language learners. For instance, in House and Kasper's (1987) study data were collected from German and Danish speakers, as well as from German and Danish learners of English, and showed a preference for conventional indirect requests as a syntactic mitigation device across languages and situations. As far as peripheral modification devices are concerned, it was reported that the lexical downgrader "please" was overused by learners. Following this study, different researchers have compared the performance of learners from different backgrounds with data elicited from English native speakers. For instance, Trosborg (1995) collected 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 of this study reveal learners' preference for conventionally indirect strategies, while English speakers showed more frequent use and a greater range of syntactic downgraders than learners. Similar results are found in Woodfield (2008) and Otcu and Zeyrek (2008). While Woodfield (2008) examines the performance of requests by German and Japanese graduate students by means of written discourse completion tasks, Otcu and Zeyrek (2008) compare the role-plays of two groups of Turkish undergraduate students with different levels of proficiency by means of a discourse completion task completed by English native speakers. In both studies it was observed that native speakers modify their requests internally more frequently as compared to the learners' groups.

The investigation of request peripheral modification devices has also been the focus of attention of several cross-linguistic studies dealing with different proficiency levels and language backgrounds. Economidou-Kogetsidis (2008, 2009) used written discourse completion tasks to analyse both internal and external request modifiers of advanced Greek learners of English. Findings of these studies showed that, in comparison to BES, advanced language learners of English used fewer internal modifiers and a rather restricted range of request peripheral devices. Woodfield and Economidou-Kogetsidis (2010) reported similar findings. In their study the request performance of advanced mixed-L1 learners and English native speakers was elicited by a written discourse completion test and examined with regard to three dimensions: internal and external modification and request perspective. Significant differences were observed in the three dimensions analysed, such as the fact that native speakers used more impersonal requests, together with a range of mitigators, elliptical and formulaic devices. Economidou-Kogetsidis (2012) also conducted research on request mitigation with low-proficiency learners during the performance of oral role-plays. In line with previous studies, results indicated an underuse of internal modifiers and overuse of external modifiers, mainly grounders. The study also pointed out learners' overuse of zero marking and a preference for speaker perspective. Similar results are 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 used internal modifiers during the performance of role-plays, and pointed out that L2 users rely on external modifiers to mitigate requests.

To sum up, as reported by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1986), Hassall (2012) and Schauer (2009), research on interlanguage requests has shown L2 users' preference for conventional indirect requests and choice of external modification to mitigate requests; that is, learners tend to use supportive moves to give reasons, explanations or justify their requests. In contrast, lexical and syntactic modifiers are not frequently observed in learners' production of requests. Data in the contrastive studies cited above were obtained by means of prompted elicitation techniques, namely either discourse completion tasks or role-plays. In order to examine the use of requests in authentic language use, learners' e-mail messages have recently drawn researchers' attention.

2.2. E-mail requests in academic communication

In the context of virtual communication, the degree of formality and appropriate level of directness in e-mail requests has been addressed in several studies. Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996) focused on e-mail requests produced by native and non-native speakers of English and how they were evaluated by faculty members. Findings of their study revealed that learners did not employ mitigation devices, emphasised students' needs and lacked status-congruent language. Other studies on learners' performance of e-mail requests have examined whether performance is conditioned by the type of request. For instance, Chen (2001) examined differences between Taiwanese and American students in relation to three types of requests: requests for appointment, recommendation letter and special consideration. The author reported differences in the amount of lexical and syntactic modification employed by Taiwanese and American graduate students, while both groups favoured query preparatory strategies. In a similar vein, Biesenbach-Lucas (2006, 2007) used e-mails that students sent to the researcher to examine the degrees of directness and indirectness in three types of requests (requests for appointment, for feedback and for an extension of deadlines). Results of this study showed that both native and non-native speakers used direct requests for appointment and feedback, while there was a tendency to use conventional indirect requests when asking for an extension of deadline, thereby suggesting that the level of imposition of the request may influence the degree of directness of the request.

Recent studies by Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011), Félix-Brasdefer (2012a) and Pan (2012) have dealt with e-mail requests in academic settings. Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) examined e-mail requests sent by Greek Cypriot university students to faculty over a period of several semesters. The author analysed the degree of directness, mitigation and forms of address, reporting that students' e-mails presented a high frequency of direct strategies, an absence of lexical mitigators and inappropriate forms of address. The author also reported that such e-mails were perceived as impolite and thus were capable of causing pragmatic failure. Dealing

with whether request performance during e-mail communication is conditioned by the level of imposition of requests, Félix-Brasdefer (2012a) 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 the internal modification of requests is concerned, results are 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. Finally, Pan's (2012) study also focused on e-mail messages that were sent by learners to their professors and compared internal and external modifiers produced by Chinese learners with those produced by American participants. The author employed an e-DCT to elicit e-mail requests and incorporated data on sociopragmatic judgements of participants' perception of request imposition and e-mail appropriateness. Similar findings to previous studies on e-mail requests were reported, since data showed that L2 users relied mainly on external modifiers and did not frequently use syntactic modifiers.

The above-mentioned studies have focused on performance of e-mail requests and how the level of imposition of the request influences adult performance of e-mail requests. However, given the fact that age, context and cultural variation may also determine speech act performance, the present study focuses on a different population, that of British and International English-speaking adolescents performing e-mail requests in English during cyber-consultation with their mentors. The study examines participants' preferences with regard to performance of e-mail requests, that is to say, the use of request strategies and modifiers, and it explores the extent to which the requesting behaviour is conditioned by the type of request. The following questions guided this study:

- RQ1: Do BES and IES differ in request performance during academic cyber-consultation with their learning mentor?
- RQ2: Are there any differences in the types of e-mail requests performed by BES and IES?
- RQ3: To what extent is request performance conditioned by the type of request?

3. METHOD

3.1. *Participants*

A total of 60 teenagers studying in three different state schools in the south of England were randomly selected from those who filled in the consent form to participate in the study and gave permission to examine the e-mails they sent to their mentors for research purposes. All participants were sixteen years old and were following the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum, which contains 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), and a three-part core made up of extended essay, theory of knowledge and creativity, and action service. In addition to subject teachers, students also received the support of a learning mentor, who they regularly contacted via e-mail and met once a week in order to manage the workload and talk about progress and frustrations during the IB programme.

Moreover, whether they were BES or IES was taken into consideration to form two participant groups: 30 BES and 30 IES. Since one of the BES moved to Australia four weeks after starting the IB programme, 29 BES and 30 IES finally took part in the study. The 29 BES participants had received primary and secondary education in Britain and were permanent residents in the United Kingdom (UK). The 30 IES participants were all European (15 Spaniards, 2 French, 3 Italians, 4 Germans, 1 Pole, 3 Norwegians, 1 Dane and 1 Greek) who 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. Their English language proficiency level was upper intermediate, as established by the standardized Quick Oxford Placement test (Syndicate U.C.L.E., 2001), equivalent to Common European Framework level B2. Six British teachers who were mentors of the IB students 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-mail messages examined for research purposes.

3.2. *Data collection and analysis*

Data from this study came from a corpus of e-mails that 59 teenagers (29 BES and 30 IES) sent to their learning mentors while they were studying the IB. For the present study five e-mails were randomly selected per student from all the e-mail requests that IB students sent to their learning mentors during the autumn term, from September to December 2011. Thus, a total of 295 e-mail requests, 145 produced by BES and 150 performed by IES were analysed as regards request type, level of directness, and amount and type of mitigation.

Following Félix-Brasdefer (2012), the following types of requests were found and analysed in our data: requests for confirmation (*Is the deadline for the psychology project definitely before Christmas?*), requests for information (*Where is the meeting*

tomorrow?), requests for feedback/help (*I can't see the differences in reliability and validity to include in the psychology proposal. Any help?*) and requests for action (*Could you please have a look at my paper on brain stimulation?*). In addition, due to the frequency of requests to meet the mentors both during office hours and after school activities and our attempt to include one communication topic per category, requests for appointments (*Would it be possible to talk after your class on Monday?*) was added as another request type. Thus, five specific request types were finally analysed: request for confirmation (RC), request for information (RI), request for feedback (RF), request for action (RAC) and request for appointments (RA).

The classification adopted for coding the collected e-mail requests was based on Blum-Kulka *et al.* (1989) and modified by Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) and Félix-Brasdefer (2012a) to deal with e-mail requests. In relation to the level of directness, request head acts were coded as direct – imperative, performative, want statement, need statement, direct question, like/appreciate statement, expectation statement; conventionally indirect –query preparatory, ability/willingness/permission; and non-conventionally indirect– hints (see Table 1).

Table 1. Request strategies used to analyse directness of e-mail requests

Directness Level	Request strategies	Examples
Direct	Imperative	<i>Send attachment again</i>
	Performative	<i>I am asking you information about...</i>
	Want statements	<i>I want to confirm the day of the meeting</i>
	Need statements	<i>I need to talk to you</i>
	Direct questions	<i>Where can I find the book?</i>
	Like/appreciate statements	<i>I'd like to have a meeting with you</i>
	Expectation statements	<i>...I hope you can contact me no later than Friday</i>
Conventionally indirect	Query preparatory (ability/willingness)	<i>Can I borrow your book at the end of this week?</i>
Non-conventional indirectness	Hints	<i>There seems to have been a problem with the web lately and I am not sure about your last deadline</i>

In addition, following previous classifications employed in interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) studies (Blum-Kulka *et al.* 1989; Trosborg 1995; Hassall 2001; Achiba 2003; Woodfield and Economidou-Kogetsidis 2012) and the presence of modification devices in our data, each request was coded with regard to request modifiers, taking into account the presence of internal (both lexical and syntactic) and external modifiers to the request head act. These elements, although optional for the performance of the speech

act of requests, are used to mitigate the degree of imposition of the request, and thus they may also influence the degree of directness of e-mail requests (see Table 2 for the taxonomy used for coding internal modifiers and Table 3 for the taxonomy used for coding external modifiers).

Table 2. Lexical and syntactic modification devices in students' initiated e.mail requests

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 pop in Tuesday after lunch?</i>
	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 what I sent for the geography paper was ok.</i>
	Negation of preparatory condition	<i>I don't suppose there is any choice...</i>
	Multiple syntactic modification	<i>I was wondering whether you could send doc III in word.</i>

Table 3. External modification devices in e-mail requests

External Modification	
Preparators	<i>I really need to talk to you, Could we meet...?</i>
Grounders	<i>I have to go to the dentist tomorrow at 12.00. Could I write to you if...?</i>
Disarmers	<i>I hate bothering you again, but could you confirm...?</i>
Expanders	I would like to know about assignment 4 because I missed your class today (<i>I was sick</i>). 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 would like to see you before the Assembly, <i>just for five minutes.</i>
Apologies	<i>I'm very sorry, but I need to answer some questions...</i>

The data were coded individually by the researcher and a trained research assistant. Both the researcher and the research assistant coded all the data, discussing cases of discrepancy and reaching an agreement on 96% of the data. The frequencies of request types, request head acts and internal and external mitigation devices were calculated and measured using the Chi-square test of independence to establish statistically significant differences between frequency of request head acts and mitigation devices used by British and International English-speaking teenagers in their e-mail requests to their mentors. In addition, regression analysis was carried out to examine the extent to which request performance was conditioned by the type of request.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to answer our first research question, i.e. whether BES and IES differ in e-mail request performance, we focused our analysis on the use of request strategies (see Table 1 above) and request peripheral modification devices (see Table 2 and 3 above) produced by BES and IES students of the IB programme. First of all, we coded the number and type of request strategies and mitigators produced by each participant. Table 4 reports differences in the following subcategories of direct request head acts – imperative, performative, want statement, need statement, direct question, like/appreciate statement, expectation statement – performed by BES and IES. Few BES and IES make use of the subcategory imperative (*Find document on migration. Thanks*) and performative (*I am asking for information about next year subjects. Can we meet?*), and instances of e-mail request realized by means of want statements (*I want to pay this week, is that possible?*), need statements (*I need to talk to you about next week assignment*), direct questions (*Where is the meeting for the ski trip? I would be interested in it*), like statements (*I'd like to see you after the class, if possible*) and expectation statements (*I hope I can meet you this week*) are produced by BES and IES. Table 4 shows BES' and IES' preferences for request strategies.

Table 4. Request strategies used by BES and IES

	Imperative	Performative	Want statements	Need statements	Direct questions	Like/Appreciate statements	Expectation statements	Query	Hints
BES	5/29 17,20%	0/29 0%	4/29 13,80%	1/29 3,40%	25/29 86,20%	5/29 17,20%	10/29 34,50%	25/29 86,20%	5/29 17,20%
IES	4/30 13,30%	1/30 3,30%	16/30 53,30%	13/30 43,30%	30/30 100%	21/30 70%	2/30 6,70%	27/30 90%	3/30 10%
Chi-square test Results	$\chi^2=0.174$ df=1 p=0.676	$\chi^2=0.983$ df=1 p=0.321	$\chi^2=10.289$ df=1 p=0.001**	$\chi^2=12.961$ df=1 p=0.000**	$\chi^2=4.439$ df=1 p=0.035	$\chi^2=16.652$ df=1 p=0.000**	$\chi^2=7.042$ df=1 p=0.008**	$\chi^2=0.203$ df=1 p=.652	$\chi^2=0.660$ df=1 p=0.417

* p significant at a p < 0.05.

** p significant at a p < 0.01.

Both BES and IES show a preference for direct questions and the IES resort to the use of direct strategies more frequently than the BES when they send an e-mail to their mentor (BES = 86.20%; IES = 100%). IES show a higher preference for the subcategories like statement (BES = 17.20%; IES = 70.00%), want statement (BES = 13.80%; IES = 53.30%), and need statement (BES = 3.40%; IES = 43.30%) than the BES. These differences are statistically significant: like statements ($\chi^2 = 16.652$; $df = 1$; $p = .000$); want statements ($\chi^2 = 10.289$; $df = 1$; $p = .001$); need statements ($\chi^2 = 12.961$; $df = 1$; $p = .000$). In contrast, BES show a preference for expectation statements in comparison to IES (BES = 34.50%; IES = 6.70%; $\chi^2 = 7.042$; $df = 1$; $p = .008$), and the difference is not statistically significant for direct questions ($\chi^2 = 4.439$; $df = 1$; $p = .035$). In addition, analysis of the data shows that both BES and IES display a strong preference for the use of query (*Can we discuss my project for next term on Monday?*) as a conventionally indirect strategy (BES = 86.20%; IES = 90%), and an infrequent use of hints (*Everybody is confused about deadlines, Me too*) as a non-conventionally indirect strategy, the differences between BES and IES not being statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 0.203$; $df = 1$; $p = .652$ for conventionally indirect and $\chi^2 = 0.660$; $df = 1$; $p = .417$ for non-conventionally indirect).

Findings related to strategies used by BES and IES indicate that teenagers' academic communication via e-mail entails directness. These results are in line with recent research on student-faculty e-mail communication (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Félix-Brasdefer 2012a), which report a high frequency of direct requests when writing a request to a professor. In addition, similar to previous research on e-mail requests such as the study conducted by Biesenbach-Lucas (2006), our work also shows that both groups rely on the use of conventionally indirect request head acts. The use of conventionally indirect strategies in L1 and L2 has also been reported in previous studies where data have been obtained by means of prompted elicitation techniques (House and Kasper 1987; Trosborg 1995), thereby suggesting that this type of strategy is used as formulaic language in request performance.

Further analysis of the mitigation devices used by BES and IES participants was carried out to explore whether significant differences could be found in the requesting behaviour of these two groups of participants. Instances of internal (lexical and syntactic) and external modifications accompanying the request head act were also present in our teenagers' e-mail corpus. These elements can be used to mitigate the degree of imposition of the request and they have been widely examined in ILP research (see the books edited by Alcón 2008, and Economidou-Kogetsidis and Woodfield 2012). Examples of lexical modifiers (Example a), syntactic modifiers (Example b) and external modifiers (Example c) are shown in italics in the following e-mail messages:

Example a:

Subject: Postal address

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

Please could just you confirm school postal address, including post code?

Thanks

(Name of BES)

Example b:

Subject: ipad

Date: Wed, 28 Sep 2011 08:22:49 +0100 (name of the mentor), hi,

Could you please let me have your ipad at the end of the week when you leaves the sixth form.

Thanks (name of BES)

Example c:

Subject:

meeting

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

Hi XXX (name of the mentor) I would like to have a meeting with you next week. If you can before Wednesday *because I have to go back to Spain and I need to explain my choice for next semester*. What do you think?

Thank you, (name of the IES)

Table 5 summarises the number of modifiers used by BES and IES, as well as the results of the Chi-square test of independence and highlights the statistically significant differences found in our data.

Table 5. Request modifiers used by BES and IES

		N. of participants	N. total of use	% of use	Chi 2	df	Sig
LEXICAL	BES	29	64	53,78	4,343	4	0,36
	IES	30	55	46,22			
	Total	59	119	100			
SYNTACTICAL	BES	29	44	49,44	14,75	4	0,21
	IES	30	45	50,56			
	Total	59	89	100			
EXTERNAL	BES	29	40	36,03	12,53	4	0,03
	IES	30	71	63,96			
	Total	59	111	100			

As shown in Table 5, more lexical modifications are observed in the BES' e-mails (53.78%) than in the IES' e-mails (46.22%), although the difference is not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 4.343$; $df = 4$; $p = .360$). In the case of syntactic modification (BES = 49.44%; IES = 50.56%) the difference is not statistically significant either ($\chi^2 = 14.75$; $df = 4$; $p = .210$), although it is worth pointing out that the BES that choose to mitigate the request by means of syntactic modifications frequently rely on syntactic modification, in contrast to those BES that never use syntactic modifiers. This points towards individual variation in the choice of request modifiers. Finally, in the case of external modifications, the frequency of use between the two groups (BES = 36.03%; IES = 63.96%) is statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 12.53$; $df = 4$; $p = .030$), thus indicating IES' preference for external modification.

Results related to the first research question partially support previous findings from studies on e-mail requests that report difference in the degree of directness between L1 and L2 users (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Félix-Brasdefer 2012). More specifically, on the one hand our data reveal that, although both BES and IES resort to conventionally indirect strategies, IES show a greater preference for direct strategies and the use of external mitigators in comparison to BES. On the other hand, results related to internal request modifiers contradict previous ILP contrastive studies, since no significant differences were found for frequency of lexical and syntactic modifiers in BES and IES messages. It should be pointed out that, although no differences are found between BES' and IES' use of lexical and syntactic internal modifiers, the greater use of external modifiers by IES may be the result of a lack of pragmalinguistic knowledge. The sender may be aware of the rules of academic interaction, but he/she is unable to find the linguistic resources to reflect his/her sociopragmatic knowledge and opts for the use of external modification –mainly grounders– in an attempt to compensate for lack of pragmalinguistic knowledge. However, care should be taken in considering this as the only possible explanation, since in the present study lexical, syntactic and external modifications have been analysed as general categories to examine the degree of directness in BES' and IES' request e-mails, but subcategories of request modifiers have not been analysed in detail. Further analyses of the data should examine performance of lexical (use of please, openers, softeners, intensifiers and subjectivizers), syntactic (conditional structures, tense, aspect, negation and multiple syntactic combination) and external (preparatory, grounder, disarmer, expander, promise, minimizer, apologies) subcategories of request mitigators. It would also be interesting to explore whether BES are aware of the social norms in mentor-mentee virtual interaction, since if they do not perceive imposition on the e-mail request, they may not feel the need to mitigate the request. This could explain why, unlike previous contrastive studies on native and non-native performance of e-mail requests, no difference as regards the use of lexical and syntactic modifiers was found between BES and IES.

Previous cross-linguistic research on e-mail requests suggests that lack of pragmalinguistic knowledge may explain differences between L2 and L1 request e-mails (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Félix-Brasdefer 2012a), but our findings may add new insights on pragmatic variation in academic virtual communication. Besides differences in BES' and IES' pragmalinguistic knowledge, teenagers' perception of the social norms in mentor-mentee virtual interaction may be the reason why both BES and IES adolescents do not frequently mitigate e-mail requests. Another possible explanation is that participants' perception of interlocutor familiarity may have an impact on request performance. Although the relationship between mentor and mentees was academic, it may be that the academic relationship frequently described in ILP studies as (+ power) and (+ social distance) is subject to change, depending on participants' cultural background. Considering IES' informal forms of address in e-mails, this relationship may be perceived as (– social distance) and it may have had an impact on less frequent use of request mitigators. These hypotheses need to be tested in future studies on teenagers' perception of sociopragmatic norms and how this influences pragmalinguistic choices.

Moving on to our second research question, which aimed to explore whether there were any differences in the communication topics of the e-mail requests performed by British and International students, each e-mail was coded for types of requests, all the request types being coded in the case of multiple topics in one message. For instance, in the following message one IES employed a request for information followed by a request for confirmation and both of them were coded.

Example d:

Subject:

Date: Thu, 28 Nov 2011 18:54:20 +0200

Hi (name of the mentor)

Where can I find the book that I have to read for Monday? Can I get it from admissions?

Cheers!!!

As explained in the data collection section, five types of requests were found in our corpus: request for appointments (RA), request for confirmation (RC), request for information (RI), request for feedback (RF), and request for action (RAC). As shown in Table 6, except in the case of feedback, the BES show a higher percentage of use of all these request types than the IES; however, the difference is only statistically significant for RA ($\chi^2 = 16.413$; $df = 2$; $p = .00$) and RAC ($\chi^2 = 5.72$; $df = 2$; $p = .05$).

Table 6. Types of requests used by BES and IES

		N. of participants	N. total of use	% of use	Chi 2	df	Sig
RA	BES	29	26	57,78	16.413	2	0.00
	IES	30	19	42,22			
	Total	59	45	100			
RC	BES	29	78	50,32	2.98	2	0.40
	IES	30	77	49,68			
	Total	59	155	100			
RI	BES	29	74	51,39	5.56	2	0.14
	IES	30	70	48,61			
	Total	59	144	100			
RF	BES	29	19	41,30	4.576	2	0.10
	IES	30	27	58,69			
	Total	59	46	100			
RAC	BES	29	26	57,78	5.72	2	0.05
	IES	30	19	42,22			
	Total	59	45	100			

These results are slightly different from those reported by Félix-Brasdefer (2012a) on student-faculty e-mail requests. This author reports that requests for confirmation

(validation as he refers to this type of requests) were the most frequent ones for L1 and L2 data, and requests for information were the least frequent in L2 data. However, in our data, although requests for confirmation are frequently used by BES and IES, they are not the most frequent. In addition, requests for feedback are the most frequently used by IES, while BES use requests for action and appointment more frequently. These differences may be explained by context as a variable influencing the performance of e-mail requests. We acknowledge that in the university context, requests for feedback, requests for action and requests for appointment may be perceived as part of the academic interaction between students-faculty. However, in the IB programme both BES and IES rely on their mentors for confirmation of information that they have previously received or to ask them for additional information. Moreover, variation in the type of requests found in our corpus may reflect students' position within the group. Thus, although both BES and IES students' e-mail includes requests for information and confirmation of academic-related issues, the BES, who are students that are at home so as to speak, perform a higher number of imposition requests, that is, they employ a higher frequency of requests for action and appointment. They perform these types of requests even if they may be considered requests with a higher degree of imposition on the recipient. In contrast, the IES, who are still struggling to settle down in a new country and in a new language-learning environment, rely on the type of requests to be expected in mentor-mentee interaction, namely those of asking for confirmation and information on academic-related issues, which may be perceived as less imposing. Finally, the frequency of requests for feedback in IES e-mails indicates the need for academic help that IES ask for at the beginning of the period of study abroad. Whether the choice of pragmalinguistic resources is sensitive to learners' perception of the degree of imposition of the type of request is beyond the scope of this study, but in answering our third research question we may suggest some tentative hypotheses on how pragmalinguistic choices are influenced by type of request.

Table 7 shows the results of the regression analysis for the use of request strategies and modifiers explained by the type of request, which are related to the third research question.

Table 7. Regression analysis: level of directness and modifiers explained by type of request

		RC	RI	RF	RAC	RA
Direct	β	-.16	.22*	.11	-.08	.06
	R ²	.02	.05*	.01	.01	.00
Query	β	-.11	-.01	.29**	.16	.40***
	R ²	.01	.00	.09**	.03	.16***
Hint	β	-.26**	-.04	.12	.16	-.11
	R ²	.07**	.00	.02	.03	.01
Lexical	β	-.08	.07	-.15	.31**	-.01
	R ²	.01	.01	.02	.10**	.00
Syntactical	β	-.24*	-.03	.14	.21	-.13
	R ²	.06*	.01	.02	.05	.02
External	β	-.11	-.21	.05	.08	.14
	R ²	.01	.05	.02	.01	.02

*p<.10; **p<.05; ***p<.01

As shown in Table 7, there is a tendency to use fewer hints ($\beta = -.26$; $R^2 = .07$; $p < .05$) or marginally fewer syntactic modifiers ($\beta = -.24$; $R^2 = .06$; $p < .10$) in the performance of requests for confirmation (RC). Requests for information (RI) positively influence the use of direct questions ($\beta = .22$; $R^2 = .05$; $p < .10$), while requests for feedback (RF) and requests for appointment (RA) positively influence the use of query ($\beta = .29$; $R^2 = .09$; $p < .05$ for RF; $\beta = .40$; $R^2 = .16$; $p < .01$ in the case of RA). Finally, the use of requests for action (RAC) increases the use of lexical modifiers ($\beta = .31$; $R^2 = .10$; $p < .05$). The significant correlations found lead us to hypothesize that the performance of e-mail request may be conditioned by the type of requests. These results are in line with previous studies on student-faculty e-mail communication (Biesenbach-Lucas 2006, 2007; Félix-Brasdefer 2012a). For instance, Félix-Brasdefer (2012a) reported that direct questions predominate in lower imposition situations, while query preparatory strategies are used more frequently with higher levels of imposition. In our data, direct questions predominate in those requests or tasks expected to be part of the mentors' job, that is, in requests for confirmation and information. The use of queries, as a conventionally indirect request, predominates in requests for feedback and appointment, thus showing student's perception of a higher degree of imposition of these types of requests. Finally, the use of lexical modifiers in requests for action indicates that the sender may perceive requests for action as more imposing on the recipient.

Whether these tendencies are similar in BES' and IES' request performance is also addressed. Table 8 shows the results of the regression analysis conducted to examine whether IES' levels of directness and modifiers in e-mail requests are explained by the type of requests.

Table 8. Regression analysis: level of directness and modifiers explained by type of request for IES

		RC	RI	RF	RAC	RA
Direct	β	.05	.33*	-.02	.03	-.10
	R²	.00	.11*	.00	.00	.01
Query	β	-.20	-.07	.44**	.10	.56***
	R²	.04	.01	.19**	.01	.32***
Hint	β	-.42**	-.14	.02	.21	-.17
	R²	.18**	.02	.00	.04	.03
Lexical	β	-.14	-.02	.10	.20	-.16
	R²	.02	.00	.01	.04	.03
Syntactical	β	-.12	-.18	.23	.15	-.22
	R²	.02	.03	.05	.02	.05
External	β	-.15	-.13	.03	.24	-.13
	R²	.02	.02	.00	.06	.02

* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$

On the one hand, in IES' performance of requests for confirmation, there is a tendency not to use non-conventionally indirect request, i.e. hints ($\beta = -.42$; $R^2 = .18$; $p < .05$), while requests for information influence the use of direct questions ($\beta = .33$; $R^2 = .11$; $p < .10$). On the other hand, the use of query, as a conventionally indirect request, predominates in requests for feedback ($\beta = .44$; $R^2 = .19$; $p < .05$) and appointments ($\beta = .56$; $R^2 = .32$; $p < .01$). It seems that in the case of IES, level of directness is indicated by the choice of request strategy. Thus, direct questions are used for less imposing request types such as confirmation requests, while non-conventionally indirect requests, that is to say query strategies, predominate in those requests that IES may perceive as more imposing, such as requests for feedback and appointments. In relation to the use of modifiers, no significant correlations were found to explain the use of modifiers by type of requests. In contrast, as shown in Table 9, in the case of BES, the type of request seems to influence the use of request modifiers rather than the choice of request strategy. Similar to IES, BES do not use syntactic modifiers in requests for confirmation ($\beta = -.53$; $R^2 = .28$; $p < .01$), but they do use them in requests for action ($\beta = .43$; $R^2 = .19$; $p < .05$). In addition, and contrary to IES, the use of lexical modifiers is influenced by requests for feedback ($\beta = .37$; $R^2 = .14$; $p < .05$) and requests for action ($\beta = .40$; $R^2 = .16$; $p < .01$).

Table 9. Regression analysis: level of directness and modifiers explained by type of request for BES

		RC	RI	RF	RAC	RA
Direct	β	-.21	-.22	.01	.13	.18
	R²	.04	.05	.00	.02	.03
Query	β	-.05	.00	.12	.21	.20
	R²	.00	.00	.01	.04	.04
Hint	β	.13	.00	-.12	.02	.02
	R²	.03	.00	.01	.00	.00
Lexical	β	-.07	.08	.37**	.40**	.26
	R²	.01	.01	.14**	.16**	.03
Syntactical	β	-.53***	.16	-.05	.43**	-.05
	R²	.28***	.03	.00	.19**	.00
External	β	-.02	-.18	-.09	.12	.05
	R²	.00	.03	.01	.02	.00

*p<.10; **p<.05; ***p<.01

Findings related to the third research question seem to indicate that the type of request influences pragmalinguistic choices in teenagers' academic cyber-consultations, and pragmalinguistic variation is observed according to the type of request in BES' and IES' e-mail performance. As mentioned above, IES show a preference for conventionally indirect requests in higher-imposition instances, that is to say, requests for feedback and appointments, in contrast to BES' preference for request modifiers, namely the use of syntactic modifiers in requests for actions and lexical modifiers in requests for feedback. The differences found in relation to how BES and IES mitigate different types of requests may be explained by participants' pragmalinguistic knowledge.

However, although IES' lack of pragmalinguistic knowledge in request mitigators may be one of the reasons accounting for pragmalinguistic variation, BES' and IES' judgments as to level of obligation and rights, and level of imposition may influence request performance. Besides, perception of social distance from the e-mail recipient may also have an impact on request performance. This last tentative hypothesis is based on the degree of formality observed in BES' and IES' forms of address. While BES use more formal terms such as Mrs or Dear, IES rely on no greeting, greeting + first name (Hi John) or Dear + first name (Dear John). The analysis of greetings and closings in e-mail consultations is beyond the scope of this paper (see for instance Bou-Franch 2011; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Félix-Brasdefer 2012b), but the forms of address used by BES and IES seem to indicate that their perception of social distance is not the same. Thus, in further studies it would be interesting to correlate participants' perception of social distance from the interlocutor with performance of e-mail requests. Finally, further research should take into account the limitations of the present study. Thus a

larger sample of e-mail requests and a focus not only on frequency but also on the range of request mitigators should be considered.

5. CONCLUSION

In this study we have examined the degree of directness and the communication topics of the e-mail requests produced by BES and IES teenagers. In addition, we have explored whether the degree of directness and mitigation in academic virtual communication initiated by young adolescents is conditioned by the type of request. In relation to the degree of directness in teenager-initiated e-mails to their learning mentors, our findings support previous cross-linguistic studies on e-mail requests. It was found that BES and IES frequently rely on direct requests, although the IES resort to the use of direct strategies more frequently than the BES. Findings related to differences in BES' and IES' request modifiers differ from previous ILP studies investigating the use of request modifiers in written elicitation tasks (Woodfield 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2008, 2009; Woodfield and Economidou-Kogetsidis 2010) and in authentic e-mail messages (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Félix-Brasdefer 2012a). While previous studies point out that adult L1 speakers internally modify their requests more often than L2 speakers, in the present study no significant differences were found in the use of lexical and syntactic modifications by BES and IES. In line with previous research, significant differences were found for the use of external modifiers.

Findings of the present study also indicate that the type of request influences BES and IES teenagers' pragmatological choices in academic cyber-consultation, and pragmatic variation in the choice of linguistic form is observed in these two groups of English language users. Differences in e-mail requests performed by BES and IES are explained, on the one hand, by the attested assumption of non-native speakers' lack of pragmatological knowledge. On the other hand, it is suggested that further research is needed to examine whether BES' and IES' perception of request imposition and familiarity with the interlocutor may influence the lack of request mitigators in academic cyber-consultation. These issues need to be explored by combining data measuring participants' perception of request imposition and social distance from the e-mail recipient with their performance of e-mail requests.

NOTES

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