A SOCIOLINGUISTIC INVESTIGATION ON (IM)POLITE EMAIL REQUESTS OF TURKISH EFL STUDENTS

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Abstract

This paper explores gender-based differences in the requests made by 20 Turkish EFL preparation class students (10 males, 10 females) in a state university in İstanbul, Turkey, to their instructor, based on the politeness theory. The data involved the emails sent by the students making a request on several topics to their instructor and were analysed according to the coding scheme of Holtgraves and Yang (1992) including three factors affecting politeness: formality of address phrase, degree of imposition and directness. The analysis of qualitative and quantitative data showed that there are certain differences among these three factors regarding two genders. The evaluation of the data indicated that the females used more formal address phrases than their male counterparts. Both genders employed indirect requests more than direct ones, but the female participants used slightly more indirect requests. The females were more careful about thanking and closing their emails which increased both the imposition and politeness level of the females' requests. The results concorded with the results of the previous studies and so it replicated and justified similar research.

Key words: sociolinguistics, requests, English as a foreign language(EFL), learners

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INTRODUCTION

It has highly accepted lately that pragmatic competence is one of the most essential aspects of language proficiency as some researchers' assert (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Norris, 2001). Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) argued that differences in cultural interactions and determined expectations may cause breakdowns in communication. In order not to be exposed to misunderstandings in intercultural communications, second language (L2) students need to develop their pragmatic skills by learning sociolinguistic norms and politeness strategies of the target language (Norris, 2001). Within the scope of politeness, speech acts have a crucial place. According to Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), performing certain speech acts such as making requests, giving directions, apologizing and so on constitute minimal units of human language. Besides, as e-mails have been gaining popularity as a convenient tool of communication in academic contexts, the present study will specifically focus on the e-mail requests made by Turkish EFL students to their instructors, which is directly related with the politeness issue. Thus, the purpose of the study is to investigate the students' requests in terms of formality of address phrase, degree of imposition, and directness, all of which were used in Holtgraves and Yang's (1992) study as a measure for politeness. The e-mail requests of female and male students will also be compared to each other as an attempt to see the possible effect of gender in using politeness strategies on making requests. Before the relevant literature review, it would be wise to introduce key concepts and explain the underlying theory behind politeness and gender-based differences in making requests.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Politeness Theory and Requests

According to Searle (1979), requests are classified as the directives among the other speech acts. The function of requests is that the speaker gets the hearer to do something on the basis of what he says. Requests have two parts: the core request or head act, and peripheral modifications (Trosborg, 1995; Sifianou, 1999; Reiter, 2000). The head act part expresses the requesting function that can be seen as in the example of "Could/would you pass me the salt?". It can stand by itself. The modification part is used optionally to mitigate the force of the request. It has two subgroups as external and internal modifiers. Internal modifiers are located within the core request act while the external ones precede or follow the head act (i.e. *May I ask you a favour?, Do you think* you could open the window?) (Uso-Juan, 2010, p. 240). The present study focuses on the both parts of requests.

Requests as a speech act have a direct relation to the notion of politeness. According to Verschueren (2003), politeness constitutes of "the strategies used by language users to protect their own and their addressee's face" (p. 51). In politeness theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), face is important and defined as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself (herself)" (p. 61). According to the politeness theory, any statement that threatens other people's face is defined as 'face threatening act' (FTA). For example, requests are considered as FTA since they impose pressure on the hearers (ibid.). Here, face has two aspects as positive and negative. Positive face refers to the want of being approved or desired by others whereas negative face is the want of every adult that his/her actions be unimpeded by others. Thus, it is advised that everyone should save their and others' face by employing certain politeness strategies. Brown and Levinson (1987) suggested five types of politeness strategies to deal with FTAs: Bald-on record (i.e., *Meet with me!),* Positive politeness (i.e., *Let's meet to discuss your ideas*), Negative politeness (i.e., *Would you be willing to meet with me for just a minute about this concept?*), Off record (i.e., *Usually when I talk through a concept, I can understand it better*) and Don't do FTA (no request at all) (for the examples, see Parviz, 2012, p.130). These strategies can be said to go from the most direct/impolite (bald-on record) to the most indirect/polite strategy (off record). As it is clear, the politeness of requests is generally related to the indirectness issue. According to Searle (1975), indirectness refers to the discrepancy between the intention of the speaker and the literal meaning in his utterances. Thus, using indirect requests will lessen the threat to the hearer' face.

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), when choosing a strategy, one should consider the degree of imposition, power relation, and social distance between him/her and the interlocutor. However, the politeness theory of Brown and Levinson (1987) has received some criticisms because of its pessimistic view for it accepts every interaction as a face threatening act. It has been also criticized by non-western cultures where face is perceived differently, which challenges the universality of the theory. Lastly, their theory does not mention the effect or role of gender on politeness (Gibson, 2009).

Gender and Politeness

Language is affected by many social factors. Among them, gender has an obvious role in shaping women and men's linguistic behaviours. The notion of 'genderlect' addresses to the systematic differences in the talk of both genders (Liamas and Stockwell, 2002). These can be resulted from several factors such as:

Social pressure: "certain social pressures require people to appear 'correct', which are more likely to be seen in women's speech as they have more status-conscious ability" (Aitchison, 1999, p.117).

Power talking: "men do not only talk more, but also interrupt more than women" (Aitchison, 1999, p.119). Their speech is also characterised with direct orders.

Conversative purpose: "women's speech is more likely to be less innovative, less aggressive and more conversative" (Trudgill 1974, p.95).

Educational level: "women's talk is often associated with domestic activities and their lady-like behaviour seems to necessitate that they grow their children linguistically and socially. Also, they are to speak nicely so as to get a job based on communication skills rather than strength. On the contrary, men's talk is supposed to be related with outside world and economic activities" (Spolsky, 1998, p.17).

Lakolf (1975) argued that women are likely to speak more politely than men do, and they also prefer using hedges, empty adjectives and tag questions to make their speech more polite. That may be due to the fact that women give more importance to interpersonal rather than informational goals in their talk (Christie, 2006). Moreover, Coates (1993) reports that women are more cooperative and more concerned with the requestee's positive face need. Many studies showing the effects of gender on the use of direct or indirect requesting speech acts propose that females tend to produce indirect (polite) requests while males prefer mostly direct (impolite) ones (Mulac, Bradac, & Gibbons, 2001; Mckelvie, 2000; Macaulay, 2001).

LITERATURE REVIEW

In Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and sociolinguistic research, a significant attention has been given to requests since they influence social relations directly. Elmianvari and Kheirabadi (2013) studied the requests of 21 female Iranian EFL learners who attended a language institute in Iran estimating whether the politeness theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) is applicable to these students' requests, and what kinds of politeness strategies are mostly used by them. For this aim, the authors asked each student to email a request in any topic but in a proper and polite way. As for the data analysis, the authors made use of Holtgraves and Yang's (1992) coding scheme which was based on three points: formality of address phrase, degree of imposition and directness. The analysis of the students' e-mails showed that despite a few exceptions, almost all made requests in a formal, polite and indirect form including long sentences in order to save the negative face. Regarding the politeness strategies in their requests, the students mostly used 'getting attention' (98%) which was followed by 'explanation' as a supportive sentence (87%). However, the form of 'thanking' (34%) is not as explicit as 'greetings' (85%) in Iranian culture. Similarly, 'please' is not culturally used in Iran as much as in western cultures. But, according to the authors, its high usage rate (72%) as a politeness marker by the students shows that pragmatic and politeness strategies may be transferable between languages.

In another article dealing with gender differences in requests, Ishikawa (2013) investigated the role-plays taken from the corpus of National Institute of Information and Communications Technology in which four types of role-plays were performed by the native speakers from the U.S.A.: landlord, train, travel, and shopping. The interviewees and interviewers were given such roles as landlord-tenant, ticket seller-passenger, travel agent-tour participant, and shopkeeper-purchaser. The aims of the study were to analyse possible differences in language used by men and women in making difficult requests, differences in language use according to the degree of imposition, and lastly the differences in politeness strategies between two genders. For the first aim, the most common 40 words were chosen and a chi-square test was conducted to find out if there was a significant difference between two genders in terms of vocabulary distribution. The male participants used more indefinite articles, and the female participant used more negative contractions and hedges. But, the difference was not at a significant level. When it comes to the differences in language use according to the rank of imposition of the requests, there were some differences in the distribution of the words according to the types of role-plays. As for the politeness strategy use, it was seen that there was not a significant difference between two genders, but the female participant had a tendency to use more direct requests in every condition than the males, which was seen as less polite. To sum up, as the researcher states, word distribution and politeness strategies may be influenced by the imposition of the task, the social distance between interlocutors, and the power of the speaker over hearer.

Hameed (2010) explores the role of gender in determining the politeness strategies of 27 Iraqi students of English. Specifically, the author tries to answer whether both sexes have the ability to recognise polite requests from impolite ones; and what kind of politeness strategies (negative and positive) the participants tend to use. The students were supposed to take a written test including two parts. First, they were given some request sentences to be marked in terms of politeness ranging from very polite to rude. then, they were given ten imaginative situations in which they were asked to make requests, offers, give advices, and orders. The analysis of the responses showed that the both sexes had the ability to perceive polite requests, but the males had a significantly better performance than the female participants in terms of making discrimination between what is rather polite and what is rude. Another finding was that males tended to apply more negative politeness strategies to the imaginative situations given in the written test whereas females were appeared to use positive politeness strategies. For the researcher, that may be due to the fact that they feel the significance of solidarity in their social relations. On the other hand, it was seen that both sexes were not aware of the rude connotation of direct requests. Similarly, most of them accepted 'please' as the only mitigating tool, so they could not realize the mitigating effects of such utterances as 'could/would you mind...' that normally ease the threat on the part of the hearer.

In Iranian context, Mohammadi and Tamimi (2014) investigated the degree of politeness of requests made by 30 Iranian M.A. students of English in the light of native speakers' assessments. The researchers aimed to find out the most frequent request and politeness strategies used by the participants as well as the possible strategy differences between two genders. For this aim, the students were supposed to make 6 different requests in a discourse completion task (DCT) consisting of high, low and equal power relations. After completion, their requests were evaluated by two native English speakers as polite, partially polite, or impolite. The findings of the DCT showed that the most used request strategies among the participants were mood-derivable, query preparatory and strong hints. Both genders tended to use more negative politeness strategies, but the females employed positive politeness more than the males. They also depended on the use of hearer-oriented perspective such as '*could/can you..*', which was attributed to the high school textbooks of English produced and used in Iran. Furthermore, 62% of the students used indirect requests, which was claimed to signal the pragmatic development of Iranian EFL students. Apart from the indirectness, there were other signs contributing to the politeness of the requests such as certain semantic formulas, honorifics, and in-group markers, which were to preserve the addressee's negative face. As for the final point, the native speakers labelled the most of the requests as 'partially polite' rather than polite or impolite.

In a similar context, Rahmani et al. (2014) examined the politeness strategies, and lexical and syntactic politeness markers in the e-mail requests sent by 52 M.A. Iranian students to their professors to see if there was any difference between male and female students' requests. Their requests were analysed in three groups: request for topic, for sending files, and for feedback. It was found that both genders used mostly negative politeness strategies in all types of requests, and there were no significant differences between two genders. In terms of syntactic and lexical politeness markers, both genders preferred *embedding* and *subjectivizer,* respectively. But, in requests for sending files, *please* for the females, and *hedge* for the males were the most frequently used politeness markers. On the whole, the politeness markers were employed in the same way by two genders.

In a Turkish setting, Uzun (2013) examined requesting preferences of 35 Turkish EFL students enrolled at a high school in Turkey. It was aimed to scrutinise the effects of age, gender and proficiency level on the pragmatic competence of the learners. A 15-item multiple choice test was designed to test direct, indirect and nonconventional indirect requesting tendencies of the students. The findings showed that the female students preferred indirect requests more than the male students at all linguistic proficiency levels (pre-intermediate, intermediate, upper-intermediate) and ages (15, 17, 18). Also, it was seen that the pre-intermediate students used more direct requests whereas the upper-intermediates least used them. The researcher claimed that as the age and linguistic proficiency increases, the directness of requests decreases in this study. Interestingly, the tendency of employing indirect requests increased at an approximate rate of 20% for males while the increase rate for females was 8%. Another finding was that the use of nonconventional indirect request decreased as the indirect strategy increased. Lastly, it was claimed that the students were aware of the social distance, degree of imposition and power in their preferences of requests.

Tseng (2015) investigated the email requests of Taiwanese EFL university students with regard to their pragmatic competence. He aimed to reveal their use of politeness strategies, including the requestive head acts, the internal and external modifications, and the information sequencing of their email messages. Therefore, he explored the differences in the politeness strategies used by low-intermediate and high-intermediate students to see the developmental pattern of interlanguage pragmatic acquisition with an open-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The email requests of 60 students were analysed by using Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper's (1989) CCSARP framework. The results showed that there was no significant difference in the use of

request strategies and internal/external politeness devices between two groups of students. However, the high-intermediate group made use of more diverse internal/external modifiers than the low group, which can be an indication of some developmental sequences for interlanguage pragmatics. It was also found that more direct strategies as the requestive head acts were preferred by both groups.

As seen from the aforementioned studies, there have been various attempts in different contexts to research the speech act of requests made by EFL learners in relation to the politeness theory developed by Brown and Levinson (1987). These mostly focused on the effects of gender, age, proficiency level or cross-cultural dimensions on the pragmatic competence and consciousness of learners while making requests. The studies focusing on the connection of gender and the use of requests have shown that gender may or may not affect the students' requesting behaviour. In those studies, in general, females are found to be politer in terms of using more indirect requests than males who mostly prefer direct strategies. However, some studies show that this is not the case at all times by arguing that there are no statistically significant differences in choosing polite/impolite requests between males and females. In other words, the hypothesis that 'women use politer requests so they are politer than men' is not supported in those studies. Other factors such as social distance, power and rank of imposition are also found to be influential in requesting preferences of learners. These studies also reveal some implications for the special attention to be paid to the social aspects of language use in language teaching. It is argued that L2 learners should be aware of socio-cultural constraints on requests so as to be more competent in pragmatics. Unfortunately, in Turkey there is limited research on exploring (im)politeness of requests and its relation to the gender (e.g., Uzun, 2013). Thus, the present study aims to fill in this gap partially by investigating the e-mail requests made by female and male Turkish EFL university students to their instructors within the scope of the politeness theory. The research question of the study is as in the following:

1. Are there any gender-based differences in making (im)polite e-mail requests by Turkish EFL students in terms of formality of address phrase, degree of imposition, and directness?

METHOD

Participants

The participants in this study are 20 Turkish EFL students enrolled in preparation class of the School of Foreign Languages in a state university, Istanbul, Turkey, including 10 females and 10 males who were chosen through convenient sampling. Their English proficiency level is B1+ (intermediate) according to CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) which was determined through a proficiency test administered by the department. They are approximately at the age of 19, and native speakers of Turkish.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection procedure lasted from the 20th of April to the 6th of May. The students were asked to send one email consisting of a common request to their instructor in a polite and appropriate form. The topic of the emails was not specified. So, the students tried to imagine a context that they felt the need to email to their instructor who forwarded all the email-requests to the researcher for analysis.

Coding Scheme for Data Analysis

This study adopted a mixed-method approach. As the emails appear as qualitative data, they were analysed qualitatively by making use of codes. For this aim, Holtgraves and Yang's (1992) politeness measure was used in the present study. This coding scheme includes three significant factors (Holtgraves & Yang, 1992):

1. Formality of address phrase: the formality of address phrase affects the politeness of the request; the more formal it is, the more polite the request is. In this coding scheme, the greeting at the beginning of an email and the address phrase are considered as the same. Titles such as *Dr.*, *Miss.* and etc. refers to a formal address phrase whereas the use of nicknames, first names, or inappropriate titles such as *Prof., teach*, *doc.* makes informal address phrase.

2. Degree of imposition: the requests involving a higher degree of imposition were rated as more polite. The examples for emails including low and high degree of imposition are as in the following:

A request with low degree of imposition:
1. Getting attention
2. (Supportive sentences)
3. Requesting
4. Thanking

A request with high degree of imposition:
1. Getting attention
2. (Small talk)
3. *Supportive sentences*
4. Requesting with *modifications*
5. Thanking
6. (Closing a conversation)

The Table 4.1 below shows possible supportive sentence types and some examples:

Table 4.1. Supportive sentence types

Supportive sentences	Examples
Ask the potential availability of the hearer or ask for the hearer's permission to make the request.	Are you busy right now?Have you got a minute? I have got a question to ask you. Could you do me a favour?
Give a reason or an explanation for your request.	I missed the class yesterday. Could you give me a handout?
Promise a reward for the hearer if the request is carried out.	Could you give me a lift? I'll pay for the gas or take you out to dinner.
Reduce the imposition placed on the hearer by the speaker's request.	A: Maybe this weekend. B: This weekend works fine. Whatever works for you.

Source: Elmianvari & Kheirabadi, 2013, p.379

> Modifications are the additional vocabulary to soften the effect of requests:
>   - Tidy up your room *please.*
>   - Tidy up your room *a little* before breakfast *please.*
>   - *Could you please* send me the homework?
>   - *Do you think* I could borrow your laptop?
>   - *Do you mind if* I borrowed your notebook?
>   - *Would it be OK if* you inform me about the project?
>   - *I was wondering if* you could help me.

3. Directness: the more indirect the request, the more polite it is.

Table 4.2. Directness

Direct Strategies	Example
On record	Close the window.
Giving an order with please	I would like to ask you to close the window please.
Showing speaker's desire	I want you to close the window
Using Contractions and slangs	It's very kind of you if you can close the window.
Indirect Strategies	**Example**
Suggesting	How about closing the window?
Asking about the hearer's ability	Can/could/will/would you close the window? Would you mind closing the window?
Off record	You have left the window open… It's cold in here.
No request	

Source: Elmianvari & Kheirabadi, 2013, p.379

The discourse analysis of each student's email was conducted by taking these points into consideration. The female and male students' emails were compared and contrasted to see whether there are gender-based differences in making (im)polite e-mail requests. Based on the qualitative data, some quantitative data was also obtained and shown in the related tables in the results section.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Based on the coding scheme mentioned above, each email was analysed separately in itself, and then the female and male students' requests were compared in terms of politeness. No change was done in the original spelling and punctuation of the emails. But the explanations and comments of the researcher are written in *Italic* and **Bold** within the original requests to make them more noticeable to the reader. The students' names are not mentioned in the emails. The first 10 emails belong to the female students while the second 10 emails refer to the male students' emails. The names of the instructors are given as pseudonyms.

The emails of the female students

1.

> Hello*, (greeting*)
> I'm your student from B1+10 class. *(small talk).* We have lesson with you on Wednesdays*.. (small talk)*.
> This week my mom is going to come and I will be the one who bring her. *(explanation-supportive sentence*). Could you please let me to go airport ? *(request+modification).* I mean , i will go out earlier than normal time and I have absenteeism problem.. *(explanation-supportive sentence)*. Could you please don't write me absent? *(request+ modification)*
> Thank you Mrs.Buse... *(thanking)*

In this request, although the address is missing, the greeting is formal, so the address phrase can be said to be formal. Actually, there are two main requests accompanied by 'please' as a modification, and they are constructed with supporting sentences. This shows the requests' high degree of imposition. Also, both requests refer to 'Asking about the hearer's ability', so they are indirect. At the end of the email, there is a thanking, as well. Therefore, those features of the email indicate that it has a high level of politeness.

2.

> hi teacher, *(getting attention)*
> I am writing to ask you something about the writing exam. *(permission-supportive sentence).* I do not know exactly what I need to do in the exam. *(explanation- supportive sentence)*. Could you send me topics and important points of writing? *(request+modification)*

As the request begins with an informal greeting, the address phrase is informal. There is one request supported with two explanations (supportive sentences). As the request is in the category of 'Asking about the hearer's ability', it is indirect. As the address phrase is informal and there is not a thanking or closing strategy at the end, this request may be regarded as partially polite although the imposition level may be high.

3.

> Miss Durmaz, *(getting attention)*
> I want to ask something to you. *(potential availability- supportive sentence).* I couldn't come to school last week because i was very ill. *(explanation + supportive sentences).*   Fortunately, i am getting well day by day. *(small talk).* I want to study with you after lessons next week *(request)* because i missed a lot of lessons. *(explanation - supportive sentence).* Could you help me, please? *(request+modification)*.
> I am waiting for your reply. *(closing conversation)*
> Thanks very much. *. (thanking)*
> Sincerely, *(closing conversation)*
> ... (the student's name)

This email has a formal address phrase. There are two request acts; one shows 'the speaker's desire' without any modifications, the other is 'Asking the hearer's ability' with modifications (*could* and *please*). So, the first request is direct while the latter is indirect. There are two supportive sentences, two phrases for closing the conversation, and one thanking, which shows the features that are needed for the high level of imposition. Those features can compensate for the presence of one direct request. Therefore, this request is a polite one.

4.

> Dear Miss Durmaz, *(getting attention)*
> Could you bring "Practical English Usage" book to school next week ? *(request+modification)*. We
> need it because we have an exam 2 weeks later. *(explanation-supportive sentence)*
> Yours sincerely. *(closing conversation)*
> ... (the student's name)

This email is not as verbose as the one mentioned above. It begins with a formal address phrase which then followed by the indirect request (Asking the hearer's ability'). The closure is constructed formally and appropriately despite the absence of thanking. The degree of imposition is high due to the presence of the modification and the supportive sentence. These are enough for an email request to be accepted as polite.

5.

> Dear Miss Buse (first name) *(getting attention)*
> I am writing to enquire about how to improve my english**. (permission -supportive sentence)**. As you
> know i have studied english for seven months at our university and i think that i am not being good enough
> for speaking english. *(explanation- supportive sentence)*. New resources can help me for being better**.**
> *(explanation- supportive sentence)*. Could you recommend me a few english books.
> *(request+modification)*. Thank you in advance. *(thanking)*
> Yours sincerely*, (closing conversation)*

This request is constructed through three supportive sentences including explanations, and refers to 'Asking about the hearer's ability', which shows the indirectness of the request. There is an appropriate thanking and closing strategy that is formal. The address phrase is also formal but the first name of the instructor is used, which can be interpreted as the pragmatic transfer from Turkish. The use of the first name in English is accepted as informal whereas Turkish students often address their teachers in Turkish with their first name along with a following title adding "hocam" which means "my instructor" (i.e., Buse hocam) rather than the last name. As a whole, the high-degree of imposition and indirect request strategy makes this email a well-constructed polite request.

6.

> Hi teacher, *(getting attention)*
> I couldn't find anything about my presentation topic. *(explanation- supportive sentence)*. Therefore, i
> want to change my topic**. (explanation- supportive sentence)** Could you send me presentation topics at
> the end of the day ? *(request+modification)*

The request begins with an informal address phrase but followed by two supportive sentences explaining the reason for the request. The main request is 'Asking about the hearer's ability', so it is indirect with a modification. Due to the lack of thanking and the use of informal greeting, the request is partially polite although the level of imposition is high.

7.

> Hello teacher, *(getting attention)*
> I am sorry for disturbing but i have to ask you a question**. (forgiveness- supportive sentence)**. Next
> week ı wont come to school due to illness *(explanation)* so could you send me e-mail about which
> subject we will study? *(request+modification)*
> Thank you *(thanking)*

The email begins with an appropriate and formal address phrase. The student states his apology for disturbing her instructor, which is followed by a well-constructed supportive sentence with an explanation. The request is constructed by 'Asking about the hearer's ability'. It ends with a thanking part. Altogether, it is a polite request containing high degree of imposition and indirectness.

8.

> Miss. Durmaz, *(getting attention)*
> I want to consult something to you. *(potential availability- supportive sentence).* I want to be a successful student but I don't know how can I do that. *(explanation- supportive sentence).* I need your suggestions. *(request).* I believe that you can help me because I think you are really good teacher. *(small talk).* Could you do that for me? *(request+modification).* I am going to wait your answer. *(closing conversation)*
> Thanks for your answer. *(thanking)*
> Yours, *(closing conversation)*
> …. (student's name)

The address phrase is formal. Before making a request, she asks the potential availability of the instructor with a supportive sentence followed by some other supportive sentences including explanations. She also makes a compliment which would probably help her to acquire what she requested. There are two main request acts: the first one is direct referring to 'the speaker's desire' while the second one is indirect which 'asks about the hearer's ability' with a modification. The availability of one direct request cannot fade the effects of proper thanking, closure, small talk, and modification, which altogether produce a high level of imposition. Therefore, the request is at the top of the politeness scale.

9.

> Hello Mrs. Durmaz! *(getting attention)*
> I will not come to school tomorrow. *(explanation- supportive sentence).* May you give the course note? *(request+modification).* Thank you so much *(thanking).*
> Have a nice day *(closing conversation)*

This request is short, easy to understand and to the point. It has all the features needed for a request to be polite. In other words, it is indirect (asking about the hearer's ability), has a high degree of imposition supported with some explanations and a modification, and contains a formal address phrase, thanking and an appropriate closing part.

10.

> Hi Buse, *(getting attention)*
> I have learned English for a long time.*(explanation- supportive sentence).* I want to improve my English. *(explanation- supportive sentence).* I believe that, If I have foreign friends, I can improve my English quickly *(explanation- supportive sentence)*, so could you introduce foreign people, please? *(request+modification).*

The student addresses her instructor with her first name without a title, which is very informal and inappropriate in Turkish, in particular, and also in English as well.The request is indirect (Asking for the hearer's ability) with modifications and three supportive sentences showing high imposition level. However, the absence of thanking and closing features, and the inappropriate address phrase put this request at a low place on the politeness scale.

The emails of the male students

1.

> Hi teacher, *(getting attention)*
> I feel terrible today, so I won't come to school tomorrow. *(explanation- supportive sentence).* Can you delay the quiz which is on tomorrow please? *(request+modification)*
> Regards. *(closing conversation)*

It begins with an informal greeting. But the request is made up of an indirect question with a modification. It has a closing part at the end but no thanking. Due to the lack of thanking and the use of informal greeting, the request is partially polite although the degree of imposition may be at a relatively high level.

2.

> Hi! My lecturer, *(getting attention)*
> I am ... (student's name). Unfortunately ı will not become in the classroom tomorrow because ı will go to hospital. *(explanation- supportive sentence).* But I have problem of absenteeism. *(explanation- supportive sentence).* If you can help me *(request),* I will become so glad to you. *(promise a reward- supporting sentence)*

The email begins with an informal greeting, and the address phrase does not seem to be suitable for the addressing in English because the addition of 'my' to titles (i.e., lecturer) in address phrases is prevalent in Turkish. So, the student transferred this pragmatic knowledge from his the first language (L1) (Turkish) into English in a wrong way. However, after giving some explanations for his situation, he makes his request in an indirect way. Also, his last sentence may be interpreted as being a supportive sentence of promising a reward if the request is carried out. In spite of the indirectness and the high imposition, the presence of the informal address phrase and the lack of closing part and thanking make this email partially polite.

3.

> Mrs. Durmaz, *(getting attention)*
> Can I request about an issue? *(permission-supportive sentence).* My writing exam results have been decreasing day by day. *(explanation- supportive sentence).* Actually, I am always doing practice but results are not still increasing. *(explanation- supportive sentence).* what am I suppose to do? Please, can you recommend what am I doing? *(request+modification)*

The student uses a formal address phrase. Before going on the explanations and supporting sentences, he asks the instructor's permission to make a request, which is a polite beginning. The request is about 'Asking the hearer's ability' with modifications. So, the high degree of imposition and the indirectness of the request can compensate for the absence of thanking or closing. This email is regarded as a polite one.

4.

> Excause me i m disturbing you *(forgiveness - supportive sentence)* but i have a problem. *(explanation- supportive sentence)* My marks are low and i could fail exam. *(explanation-supportive sentence)* I m looking forward to helping from you *(request/ closing conversation)*

There is not an address phrase, which is impolite. However, the student is considerate that he apologizes for his disturbance as requests are face threatening acts in nature. Actually, the last sentence is about closing the conversation although it can be interpreted as well as a request showing the speaker's desire. Therefore, it can be said that the request is direct while the level of imposition is somewhere in the middle of the scale. So, this email has a low politeness level.

5.

> Dear my teacher, *(getting attention)*
> Could you send me a my absences please? *(request+modification)*

The email involves a formal address phrase but the transfer from L1 to English is obvious as he adds 'my' to the title, which is a common phenomenon in the Turkish addressing pattern. The request refers to 'Asking about the hearer's ability' with modifications, which shows its indirectness. However, it lacks supportive sentences, thanking, and the closure at the end. Due to those deficiencies and the low degree of imposition, it is not regarded as an appropriate and polite email request.

6.

> Hello Buse Teacher :) *(getting attention)*
> How are you? *(small talk)* I will be asking a question. *(permission-supportive sentence).* I am living a dormitory but I want to hire a house. *(explanation-supportive sentence).* Next year, I dont want to live a dormitory. *(explanation-supportive sentence).* Do you help for me to find a house? *(request)*

In this email, the student wrote instructor's first name within a formal address phrase to establish a rapport with the teacher. This purpose is also understood by the smiley face (which is not suitable for an academic request) in the address phrase and the small talk. After he preludes with permission for the request, he makes some explanations with supportive sentences. On the other hand, the request act is without any modifications such as modals (*could, would, can*, etc.) or *please.* This lowers the indirectness level. The student wants his instructor to help her find a house, which is a highly imposing request, so he has to conduct at least negative politeness with redressive actions. At the end of the email, there is not a thanking and closing part which decrease the politeness level of this request.

7.

> Hi teacher, *(getting attention)*
> I have a problem about our class. *(explanation-supportive sentence)*. In your free time, could we talk it ? *(request +modification)*

This is a short and clear request without being verbose. The student makes his request indirect through a modification (*could*) along with the pronoun 'we', which softens the force of the request. However, the address phrase is informal and there is not a thanking or closing part at the end. Thus, the degree of imposition may be at an intermediate level giving this request a partially polite position in the politeness scale.

8.

> Hi teacher, *(getting attention).* i got one question. *(permission-supportive sentence).* I forget our homework. *(explanation-supportive sentence).* Can you tell me ? *(request +modification)*

The student begins with an informal address phrase. He asks for the permission to make a request and explains his situation with one supportive sentence. The indirect request act refers to 'Asking about the hearer's ability' that has a modification through the use of *can.* However, the informal address phrase, the absence of thanking and closing features lowers the level of imposition and politeness level of the request so can be claimed as partially polite.

9.

> Dear Miss Durmaz *(getting attention).*
> Could you give me a task about your CV ? *(request +modification).* I am writing mine. *(explanation-supportive sentence).*   If I can examine yours , it will be good for me. *(explanation-supportive sentence).*
> Your sincerely *(closing conversation)*

The address phrase conforms to the formality rule. The request (Asking about the hearer's ability) comes with a modification which is followed by two supportive sentences explaining the reasons behind the request. These features show the indirectness and the high degree of imposition. The closing part is constructed formally despite the absence of thanking. Therefore, it has a higher rank in the politeness scale.

10.

> Hi teacher, *(getting attention).*
> I couldn't go to school yesterday. *(explanation-supportive sentence).* So, i couldn't learn my exam notes. *(explanation-supportive sentence).* Could you send me my exam notes please? *(request +modification).*

It begins with an informal address phrase. After giving the explanations through two supportive sentences, the student makes an indirect request referring to 'Asking about the hearer's ability' that has two modifications (*could* and *please).* That increases its indirectness and the level of imposition. However, the informal address phrase and no thanking or closing features produce a moderately polite request.

The qualitative content analysis was tabulated in the Table 5.1 and Table 5.2 below. The first table was constructed to show the occurrence of the influential factors determining the politeness of the students' request

emails whereas the second table indicates the number of the female and male students who conducted the factors affecting the politeness of their requests in their emails.

Table 5.1. The frequency of the factors affecting the politeness of the request emails

Gender	Getting attention		Small talk	Supportive sentences				Requests		Thanking	Closing remarks
	Formal address	Informal address		Asking for permission/ potential availability	Explanation	Promise a reward	Asking for forgiveness	Direct	Indirect		
Female	7	3	4	4	16	0	1	2	11	6	7
Male	4	5	1	3	15	1	1	2	8	0	3

Table 5.2. The number of the students who conducted the factors affecting the politeness of their requests

Gender	Getting attention		Small talk	Supportive sentences				Requests		Thanking	Closing remarks
	Formal address	Informal address		Asking for permission/ potential availability	Explanation	Promise a reward	Asking for forgiveness	Direct	Indirect		
Female (N=10)	7	3	3	4	10	0	1	2	10	6	5
Male (N=10)	4	5	1	3	9	1	1	2	8	0	3

As the tables indicate, the first analysed factor is the 'getting attention' part of the emails. It is actually composed of two sub-groups as the 'address' phrase and 'greeting', but the two were treated as the same according to the coding scheme of Holtgraves and Yang (1992). As it is clear from Table 5.2, most female students (N=7) started with a formal address phrase (i.e., Hello teacher, Miss. Durmaz) while three of them preferred an informal greeting (i.e., Hi teacher). When it comes to the male participants' data, it is clear that half of them (N=5) adopted an informal address phrase or greeting. One of them did not use any kind of address phrase or greeting at the beginning of his email, which lowers the politeness of his request act.

The second part is about the 'small talk' that does not have a direct relation with the request head act, but it is a kind of warming up the conversation wit questions such as *How are you?*, or it may be in a format of complimenting the instructor within a discourse. The tables indicates that small talk is not common in the email requests of both genders as it is used only by one male and three female students.

The third part includes 'supportive sentences' which set the stage for the main request head act through several ways such as asking for the permission for the request, making an explanation for the request, promising a reward when the request is performed, and asking for forgiveness. They can be seen in pre- and post-request positions, and their function is actually to mitigate the force of the request. When analysed closely, it can be easily seen that the frequency of using supporting sentences across two genders is similar. Among the four types of the supporting sentences, the most frequently employed one by both genders is making an explanation for the request. There was at least one explanation as a supportive sentence in every request except for one male student's email. Making explanations is followed by asking permission or potential availability of the instructor, but not at a high frequency. Only 4 females and 3 males asked for their teacher's permission or potential availability before stating their requests.

 The other section is about the 'main request strategies as direct and indirect'. Among the different types of direct strategies mentioned in the coding scheme section above, "*showing the speaker's desire*" (i.e., '*I need...*', '*I want...*') was the only direct strategy employed by only 2 male and 2 female students. Also, the rest of the males (N=8) and all of the female students (N=10) employed "*asking about the hearer's ability*" as an indirect strategy which actually refers to the negative politeness strategy proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). When the qualitative data are scrutinized, it can be easily seen that most of the students preferred the structure "*Could you...?*" as an indirect request while there are a few students who used "*May/Can you...?*" to ask about their teacher's capability to carry out the request.

The last two parts of the emails were composed of 'thanking' and 'closing' conversation sections which were considered to have an influential place in the politeness level of the email requests. The tables reveal that half of the female students used 7 closing remarks in total and were more careful about thanking in their emails than the male students were. Surprisingly, none of the males thanked their teacher after they made a request. Similarly, only three of them considered to close their email request with an appropriate and formal closing phrase (i.e., yours sincerely). The qualitative data also showed that most of the male students ended their emails with the main request sentences rather than thanking or closing strategies.

The factors shown in the tables are supposed to be found in a request with a high degree of imposition that is directly related with the politeness issue. As the highly imposing requests require high politeness (Lee, 2011), the emails in the present study including a formal address phrase, supportive sentences, request head acts with some modifications (i.e., 'please' as a lexical modifier and the modals like 'could/may/can'), thanking, and closing parts are treated to have a high degree of imposition, and so have a high level of politeness. However, some emails lacking of, for example, thanking or closing part, or having an informal address phrase were considered as partially polite requests although the main request head act was well-constructed with modifications and supportive sentences.

If the email included only the request part even if it was supported with supportive sentences and modifications but lacked the other features necessary for politeness, it was accepted to have a low level of politeness. Based on the high degree of imposition, indirect requests, and proper thanking and closing features, 7 female students' requests were found to have a high level of politeness. There were two request emails which were stated as partially polite due to the lack of some features mentioned above, and only one request was found to have a low politeness level. When it comes to the males' data, the scenario has changed to some extent. Based on the aforementioned features, the number of the highly polite emails was only two whereas the partially polite requests were dominant (N=5). Lastly, there were three requests to be placed at a low position on the politeness scale based on the low imposition level and the absence of closing, thanking and formal addressing.

Finally, there was another interesting finding that 'please' was used as a mitigation device by the same number of students across two genders (N=4).

DISCUSSION

The aim of the current study was to find out whether there were any gender-related differences in making polite e-mail requests by Turkish EFL university preparation class students to their instructor in terms of formality of address phrase, degree of imposition, and directness, which were considered to be the measure of politeness according to Holtgraves and Yang's (1992) coding scheme. The detailed data analysis conducted both qualitatively and quantitatively shows us that there are certain differences in the requests of the female and male students based on these three factors discussed in the following sections.

The Formality of Address Phrase

With respect to using the address phrase at the beginning of their email requests, the female students preferred more formal address phrases than the males did. As the formality of an address phrase increases, so the request was considered to be more polite. With regard to this situation, the female students tended to make more polite and appropriate beginning in their requests while more than half of the males' requests started with an informal address phrase that lowered their emails' politeness level.

When the academic context is considered, an instructor has a higher social power than students who need to take this power relation into consideration and should adopt a formal attitude in addressing to them. The male students mostly preferred 'Hi' as greeting referring to 'Selam' in Turkish, which is not an appropriate or acceptable greeting in an academic context in neither English nor Turkish culture, in particular. This high tendency towards using an informal greeting may be due to the fact that the students know their instructors very well for a long time, and want to establish solidarity with her. When this tendency of the students was asked to

the instructor by the researcher, it was seen that the lecturer did not set a language barrier between her students and herself. So, this kind of relax instructor attitude might have affected the students' choice of informal address phrase in their emails. Actually, there is a certain and strong degree of social distance between teachers/instructors/lecturers and students based on the power relationship in Turkish culture. As the instructor is accepted as a superior person, students are supposed to be respectful and polite in addressing them in their emails. In the present study, the female students seem to be more aware of these cultural codes as they preferred more formal address phrases.

The degree of imposition

According to Lee (2011), the highly imposing requests require high politeness. As a request is a face threatening act, the speaker should redress his/her words with some mitigating devices in order to save the negative face of the interlocutor. Such factors as getting attention, supportive sentences, request head acts with some modifications (i.e., 'please', 'could/may/can'), thanking, and closing remarks are accepted as a sign of high degree of imposition of the emails in this study, which leads to a high level of politeness. Among these factors, there is not a big difference between two genders in terms of using supporting sentences used before or after the main request head acts. One noticeable thing was the high frequency of 'making explanations' among the students, which may be interpreted as they wanted to seem to be more persuasive or credible through long explanations as an attempt to save the negative face. The number of the explanations between two genders may be close to each other, but when the qualitative data were scrutinised, it was seen that the females tried to keep their explanations longer with elaboration to save the negative face while the males adopted shorter and sometimes abrupt explanations, which may be the result of the differences in their writing skills and attitudes.

As the students put their teacher in an imposition with their requests, they should give a close attention to the closing part of their emails through proper thanking and closing remarks in an attempt to save the face and seem more polite. Unfortunately, none of the males thanked their teacher after they made a request whereas the females were more considerate in that issue. So, it can be argued that the females produced more polite request emails regarding to thanking and closing remarks than the males did. Another verbal politeness marker 'please' has as much importance as 'thank you' in English culture. On the contrary to the expectation of the researcher, the students' emails show the low and equal usage of 'please' among both genders. This indicates that they have not fully adopted pragmatic strategies in English, or are still unaware of its value as a softener of requests. The solution for this situation may lie in exposing them to richer input involving verbal (i.e., please, thank you) and structural politeness markers (i.e., greeting, closing remarks) through both explicit instruction and implicit ways like encouraging the students to watch relevant films or videos that involve different types of politeness markers rather than sticking to limited coursebook content (which are used in their lessons).

When considered all of the factors affecting the imposition level of the requests, the females' requests were found to have slightly higher degree of imposition leading to politer requests than the males' emails. This finding may be supported by the argument of Lakolf (1975) who stated that women are likely to speak more politely than men do. Thus, the female students in the present study may be said to give more importance to the interpersonal relationships through their longer explanations, modifications, and use of thanking and closing remarks although the difference between two genders may not be so significant.

Directness

Another significant point is that indirect requests (asking about the hearer's ability) were more popular among the students of both genders than the direct request strategies that were employed by only two males and two female students. In fact, 10 female students produced 11, and 8 males produced 8 indirect request head acts. Thus, it can be argued that the females were slightly more indirect and produced politer request head acts than the males. Even if there is a slight difference, the females' tendency to use more indirect requests can be said to be in line with Uzun's (2013) study in that the female students preferred indirect requests more than the male students at all linguistic proficiency levels.

In the coding scheme of Holtgraves and Yang (1992), the indirect strategy 'asking about the hearer's ability' concords with the negative politeness strategy in Brown and Levinson's (1987) classification, and to the conventionally indirect strategy type in Blum-Kulka (1989)'s categorization of request strategies. This strategy is generally used when there is a socially powerful person in the context who is the instructor in the present study. Actually, both groups of students are aware of the power relation between their instructor and themselves, so they aim to soften the force of the requests by using negative politeness. This finding concords with the results in the study of Mohammadi and Tamimi (2014). They found that both genders tended to use more negative politeness strategies depending on the hearer-oriented perspective such as '*could/can you..*', and 62% of the students used indirect requests. However, it contrasts with the findings in Ishikawa's study (2013) which revealed that the female participants had a tendency to use more direct requests in every condition than the males.

The prevalence of the modal 'could' in the main request head acts of both genders can be linked to insufficient instruction and linguistic variation in the English coursebooks used (and published) in Turkey or lack of practising authentic language in English lessons. Thus, different ways of requesting are not practised in detail, and the students are prone to use the same structures over and over in all contexts. For example, none of the students from both genders employed other types of indirect strategies such as off-record or suggesting. This may be due to the fact that they wanted to be more explicit and clear in their requests, which might not have been achieved with the help of the off-record strategy because it just gives some hints, so it has the possibility of not conveying the message to the teacher correctly. This result is consistent with the findings in the study of Khalib and Tayeh (2014) who indicated that the students mostly benefitted from conventionally indirect (negative politeness) strategies, but did not prefer non-conventionally indirect (off-record) requests.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The present study targeted to explore any possible differences between two genders in sending polite email requests by Turkish EFL students at tertiary level to their instructor. The qualitative data analysis indicated that the female and male students' requests showed some different patterns in terms of formality of address phrase, the degree of imposition, and the indirectness, which were altogether responsible for determining the level of politeness of the emails including requests regarding any topic. With regard to the address phrase, the females tended to use more formal address phrases than their male counterparts. Similarly, the female students used indirect requests more than male students although the difference is not that high and is limited to only a few students. Except for two males and two female students who chose to use direct strategies showing the speaker's desire, all the students adopted negative politeness strategies. It can lead us to make a conclusion that Turkish culture complies with the face theory of Brown and Levinson (1987) who emphasized that politeness strategies are performed in order to keep positive or negative face on FTA.

As for the degree of imposition, there were some differences between two genders. When the students' emails were analysed qualitatively by using codes, it was clear that the males' email requests had an average level of imposition leading to partially polite requests that generally lacked a proper closing remark and thanking which decreased both the politeness and imposition levels of their emails. However, the females' requests had often high degree of imposition increasing the politeness level. These results can be enlightening for teachers to develop their students' pragmatic knowledge which is needed to be used in various registers. In Turkish culture, we want our students to make their requests or state their problems to us in a polite and appropriate way. Normally, at schools, we expect that while students write to their superior teachers/instructors, their emails had better be in a harmony with our so called local cultural codes which involve respectful, indirect, polite and formal attitudes. Such results reveal that students may not actually encounter these codes in their daily lives, most probably in their family life and culture, and they are not diffused into their personal life and so they cannot adapt them artificially into their second language use situations.

For these expectations to come true, teachers have an essential role in helping their students develop their awareness of the existence of different types of registers while learning their second/foreign language, English in this case. For this aim, they can, for example, help their students acquire the academic jargon and various kinds of formal structures to be used in their academic writing naturally and authentically.

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