The request speech act in emails by Arab university students in the UAE

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Abstract

Advanced computer technology has transformed the way instruction is designed and delivered at all education levels including college. However, today's younger 'digital-native' generation may often take their computer skills for granted, which impacts their interaction patterns with university professors who often encourage electronic communication when communication is required. This appears to put strain on students who are not accustomed to composing formal emails. The deficiency in students' skills may also have undesirable effects on their professors. The situation can be even more serious for students studying in a foreign language. Given the significance of requestive emails, the current study investigated how the request speech act set is realized by both native speakers of English and Arab university students in an English-medium university in the UAE, as well as whether or not instruction in formal email writing improves students' pragmatic competence. Data were collected using a discourse completion task requiring the participants to write an email to their professors requesting feedback. Findings revealed that there were some significant differences between the data sets from native speakers of English and Arab learners of English in terms of discourse structure, strategy type, and modifiers employed. It was also found that teaching email conventions in the context of an academic environment has a significant impact on students' pragmatic competence. The results are discussed, and recommendations are made.

Keywords: Request, speech act, email, Arab learners of English, pragmatics

1. Introduction

Whether or not field-specific knowledge alone is enough for an engineering education has become a rather moot argument. Computer skills are also now required qualities for engineers. However, having grown up with computer and mobile technologies, today's younger generation may take computer skills for granted. Should they also lack the necessary interpersonal communication skills required for electronic communication, their communicative competence suffers, which in turn reduces their employability.

The rapid advances in computer and mobile technologies have influenced contemporary communication immensely. Internet access in the UAE, for instance, increased from 14.9% in 1999 to

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88% in 2013 (World Bank, 2013), and a substantial percentage of Internet users appear to be young people. Earlier research had shown that that 86% of the surveyed students in a public and a private university in the UAE accessed the Internet every day (Shen & Shakir, 2009), suggesting that Internet usage has become part of the daily routine for young Emiratis. These students used the Internet mainly for searching, chatting, entertainment, online discussions, and emailing. Further research revealed that university students in the UAE also use the Internet to access information related to their studies and current events (Ayyad, 2011).

1.1. Email Communication and the Rationale for the Study

With the growing interest in using the Internet for communication purposes, email has started to play an important role in academic interaction, often replacing face-to-face meetings between students and instructors (Biesenbach & Weasenforth, 2006). Betz (2013) observes that Japanese students tend to avoid face-to-face contact with their professors and, therefore, resort to email communication with them more often than not. This appears to be the case at the Petroleum Institute (PI) in Abu Dhabi, the UAE, the immediate teaching context of this research papers' authors as well. Both PI students and instructors frequently resort to email communication for one reason or another. Many instructors, for instance, accept submissions through emails, encouraging students to use this mode of communication. Despite this, it is not uncommon for instructors to complain about the inefficiencies in students' emails. The emphasis put on application of technology at the expense of appropriateness of use (Burns cited in Betz, 2013) may be at the root of the problem faced at PI. Consequently, this results in students' lack of knowledge and experience of normative community practice in an academic context. The students' lack of experience in writing emails to their instructors prior to university may also contribute to the problem. Possible (lack of) pragmatic transfer from students' mother tongue (L1) could be another factor in the problem.

It is also important to note the role of culture in determining students' choices of interaction methods with their professors. The UAE is famous for hosting a wide range of cultures. The profile of faculty can vary to a great extent in PI as well. It is only natural that students may find it difficult to adapt to different cultural expectations. Each culture can create a different set of constraints, challenging students to use English as foreign language (Eslamirasekh, 1993). This may lead some to develop their own strategies in utilizing the speech act of request, which seems common in electronic communication at PI.

1.2. The Research Questions

Given these complexities of email communication for PI students, the focus of this research was on PI students' use of the request speech act in an email to their professors. With this emphasis, the following questions were asked and answered:

1. How do request emails to a professor composed by native speakers of English and non-native speakers of English compare in terms of
   a. discourse structure?
   b. strategy types?
   c. internal and external modifiers?

2. How do non-native speakers of English who are given email training and those who are not given it compare in terms of
   a. discourse structure?

b. strategy types?
c. internal and external modifiers?

1.3. A Brief Review of the Relevant Literature

Austin (1962) states that people perform actions by uttering sentences, which has come to be known as 'performative utterances'. He puts these under illocutionary acts. A request is an illocutionary act since the speaker asks the hearer to do something for him/her (Trosborg, 1995). For instance, the utterance 'Will you get the phone, please?' is an illocutionary act since it expresses the speaker's desire that the hearer would do something, in this case, answer the phone.

According to Austin (1962), illocutionary acts require a set of 'felicity conditions' for them to go right and become happy. Felicity conditions are as follows:

> A. (i) There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect
> (ii) The particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate
> B. The procedure must be executed by all participants
> (i) correctly and
> (ii) completely
> C. (i) Where, as often, the procedure is designed for use of persons having certain thoughts or feelings, or for the inauguration of certain consequential conduct on the part of any participant, then a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts and feelings, and the participant must intend so to conduct themselves, and
> (ii) must actually so conduct themselves subsequently. (Austin, 1962, p. 14).

Searle (1975) further elaborated on illocutionary speech acts and came up with the following classification:

a) *Representatives* used to commit the hearer to the truth of the expressed proposition.
b) *Commissives* used to commit the speaker to a future action.
c) *Expressives* used to express the speaker's attitudes and feelings.
d) *Declaratives* used by an authority to bring about a change in the propositional content.
e) *Directives* used to have the hearer do something.

1.3.1. The Request Speech Act

The request speech act, the focus of this research, functions as a directive. As mentioned above, by requesting the speaker aims to cause the hearer to do something for his/her benefit. Depending on the context and power relationship between those engaged in communication, the speaker may employ a variety of request strategies and levels of directedness. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) identified these as indicated in Figure 1 below.
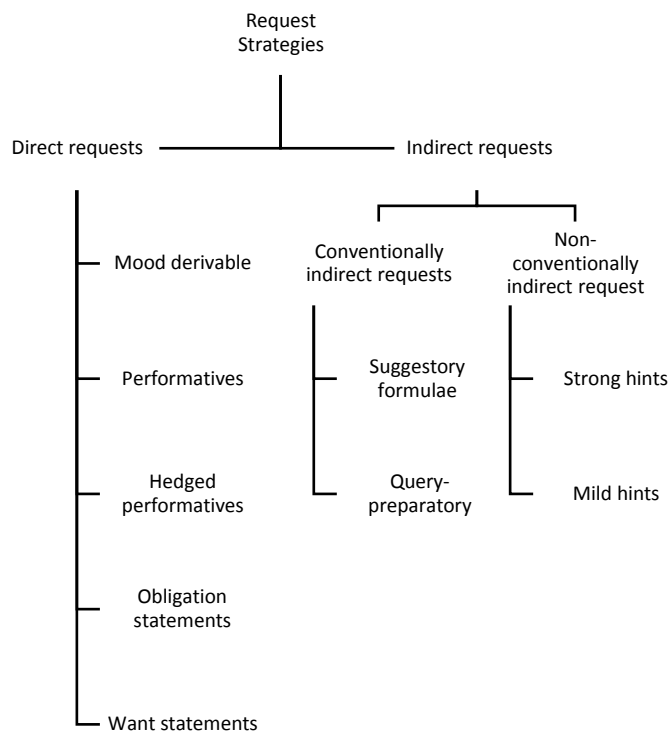
Figure 1. Blum-Kulka and Olshatain's framework of request strategies.

The fact that a request has the potential to threaten the hearer's face makes it a challenging act and requires certain politeness strategies for it to meet the necessary felicity conditions (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Internal and external modification devices can help the speaker to save face when requesting (Sifianou, 1999). The former include linguistic elements appearing in the same act. For instance, the adverb in 'Could you *possibly* open the door for me?' helps mitigate the request's force. The latter, on the other hand, include devices in the linguistic context surrounding the speech act as in the explanatory sentence after the following request: "Could you open the door for me? *I'm carrying so many bags that I cannot do it*." See Tables 1 and 2 below for a more detailed description of internal and external modification devices (Dendenne, 2014).

Table 1. Internal modification devices in requests

Type	Definition	Example
Openers	Elements by means of which the S seeks to involve the H and bids for his/her cooperation	Would you mind lending me little change to make copies?
Understaters	Diminutives or minimizers that serve in softening the imposition	Would you mind if I borrow this book for a while?
Downtoners	Modifiers used for the modulation of the impact of the requestive act on the H	Could you possibly loan me enough ..?
Hesitators	Type of fillers used when the S is uncertain of the impact of his request	So…maybe…I thought…you could lend me a book of yours.
Attention-getters	Used for to alert the requestee before directing the request	Hey Kim, excuse me; hello

Table 2. External modification devices in requests

Type	Definition	Example
Preparators	Used to prepare the addressee for the issuing of the request	Can you do me a favour?
Grounders	The requester gives reasons, explanations, or justifications for the request	It would help me in my research.
Disarmers	Signal awareness of the potential offense and aims at the removal of objection	I should not say that
Promise of reward	Offering the H something in return for the potential fulfilment of the request	I'll be your best friend
		I'll even pay you back
Please	Used to reduce the imposition inherent in the requestive act	Could you please help me in my research?
Imposition minimizers	Used for reducing the imposition placed on the H that is inherently associated with request	I will take a good care of it and return it as soon as possible
Sweeteners	Compliments, flattery, or exaggerated appreciation of the H's abilities	Sir, you are a professional professor
Apology	The S apologizes for minimizing the cost to H	Sorry for the trouble
Closing	*Appreciators*: employed at the end to reinforce the request	I would appreciate being allowed to use this resource
	Considirators: show consideration to the H's situation	Would that be okay?
	Thanking expressions	Thank you so much
Small talk	Used at the beginning to create a positive atmosphere	Thank you for taking time to talk to me

1.3.2. Requests in Email Communication

A request in an email also calls for an action for the benefit of the requester (Al-Ali & Sahawneh, 2008). A request email to an addressee of a higher position is expected to have a discourse structure containing an informative subject line, an opening, a body, and an appropriate closing (Guffey, 2010). Similarly, Zhu (2012) identified the following components in effective request emails: openings which address the recipient, closings which include thanking and the addressor's name, head acts which include the request, and supporters embedding moves such as small talk, an apology, or a promise to support the communication aim.

Research has shown that university students often use the request speech act in their emails to their professors asking for information and/or advice about course-related matters. (Martin, Myers & Mottet, 1999; Marbach-Ad & Sokolove, 2001). Given the higher status of the recipient over the lower status of the sender, a request to a professor may be challenging (Baugh, 2011). The situation becomes even more intricate for students undertaking academic studies in a foreign language. They may, for example, have difficulty using appropriate politeness strategies. Some students may perceive requests as less face-threatening when they engage in electronic communication with their professors instead of face-to-face interaction, and this might lead them to use fewer politeness strategies. Biesenbach and Weasenforth (2006) note that politeness in email communication with a professor requires students to be formal, which is achieved by being indirect instead of being direct and using mitigators. However, students who are not clearly aware of this may unintentionally fail to follow an appropriate style. They

may not be aware of the impact that their inefficient emails may have on their professors (Najeeb, Maros & Nor, 2012). Coupled with a lack of skills in using computer technologies, this challenge may become even more formidable. A report on Arab countries' use of information technology shows that only 28.5 million of the total population in these countries know how to use the computer and the Internet, and that 60% of these people are from the Gulf region (Hamilton, 2007). Taken together, these factors could easily create tension for both students and professors when they are engaged in the request speech act via electronic communication.

1.3.3. The Teaching of the Request Speech Act

Previous research has shown that speech acts improve significantly with instruction. Masouleh, Arjmandi and Vahdany (2014), for instance, studied the effects of "metapragmatic instruction" on sixty Persian students' development of pragmatic competence. Over the course of ten training sessions the participants were provided with study materials taken from online resources and several English textbooks. The participants were tested on the request speech act using a "Discourse Completion Test" on the request speech act. The study found that the mean "pre-test score" for the experimental group was 17.1000 out of 20.0000 possible points, while the mean "post-test score" was 18.3000. On the other hand, the control group's performance on the test dropped from 16.3 to 14.6. The difference in scores between the group that received training and the group that did not was a clear indicator of the positive effect the training sessions had on the participants' pragmatic competence.

The effect of instruction on students' skill in composing requestive emails was also investigated by Ford (2006) who found that students increased their perlocutionary scores significantly on the immediate post-test, though they regressed to below average acceptability on the delayed post-test. Based on this finding, the researcher suggested that there is a need for more instruction on pragmatic strategies to maintain what has been learned. The same research also revealed that the instructional intervention had a positive effect on students' use of structural features. Students were also found to use more downgraders and supportive moves such as preparators, grounders and disarmers. Flor (2012), on the other hand, found that the inductive-deductive teaching method employed in her study had both immediate and long-term effects on the students' abilities in mitigating requests, and using internal and external modifiers. Research by Betz (2013) also revealed that students who received formal instruction in email writing for academic settings were better at computer-mediated communication like writing formal emails. Taken together, these results indicate that the features of email pragmatics are teachable.

2. Method

2.1. Subjects

a) Students: A total of 105 students in the Communication Department of PI participated in this study. The Communication Department teaches two courses (COMM101 and COMM151) aiming at furnishing engineering students with soft skills they will need in the future. The students mainly consisted of local Emiratis although there were also some students from neighbouring countries such as Jordan (4%), Palestine (3%) and Syria (3%). Forty-seven of these students (45%) had no explicit instruction about how to compose effective emails addressed to professors during their studies in COMM101, while fifty-eight of them (55%) had instructional sessions did have such instructional

sessions. Of the subjects, 42% were female students, and 58% were male. The students' ages varied between 18 and 21, with a mean age of 19.

b) Native Speakers of English: Twenty-one native speakers of English participated in this study to provide the baseline data with which to compare the students' production of request emails. These speakers' ages ranged between 32 and 61. Of the speakers in this group, 55% were male, and 45% were female.

2.2. Instrument

Discourse-completion task: Data were collected using a discourse-completion task requiring the respondents to write an email to their professor asking him/her to give feedback on an assignment prior to a final submission.

2.3. Analyses

The discourse structure of the emails was analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively according to Guffey's scheme (2010). A similar approach was taken to analyze the request speech act set in the emails considering Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) framework of a Cross-Cultural Study of Speech Act Realization patterns (CCSARP). For this purpose, the requests made by the respondents were first classified according to strategy type (i.e. direct, conventionally indirect, and non-conventionally indirect). On the other hand, the qualitative analysis of the emails was comprised of internal and external modification devices. In comparing different data sets, Student's T-test was used and a p-value below 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

3. Results

One of the aims of the first research question was to compare discourse structures in request emails addressed to professors produced by native speakers of English (NSEs) and non-native speakers of English (NNSEs). The results of the data analysis for this purpose are seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Discourse structures of email communication produced by native speakers of English and non-native speakers of English

	Native S. of English N=21		Non-native S. of English N=105		t	p*
	f	%	f	%		
Subject line	21	100	78	74	2.2181	0.0141
Opening remarks	21	100	101	96	0.9047	0.1836
Request	21	100	102	97	0.4500	0.3267
Closing remarks	21	100	85	81	2.2051	0.0146
Thanking at the end	17	81	38	36	3.9772	0.0000
Name at the end	21	100	63	60	-3.7859	0.0001

*p< 0.05

As can be seen in Table 3, a subject line was present in all the emails produced by the NSEs, while only 74% of the NNSEs filled in the subject line. This difference between the data sets was at a statistically significant level (p=0.0141< 0.05). Similarly, an opening remark was present in all the emails by the NSEs. Alongside that, almost all of the NNSEs (96%) also employed an opening remark. The statistical analysis done between the two groups did not reveal a difference at a significant level (p=01836 > 0.05). Furthermore, all the NSEs employed the request speech act in their emails, whereas this speech act was not used by four of the NNSEs (3%). Despite this, no statistically significant difference was detected between the two (p=0.3267>0.05). On the other hand, the difference between the groups was at a statistically significant level for closing remarks, which were produced by all the NSEs, but only 81% of the NNSEs (p=0.0146<0.05). This was also the case with providing a name at the end. Although all the NSEs wrote their names at the end of their emails, only 60% of the NNSEs provided their names (p=0.0001<0.05). The least frequently used discourse element by both of the groups was thanking at the end, which was used by 81% of the NSEs but only 36% of the NNSEs, with a difference at a statistically significant level (p=0.0000<0.05). Taken together, the data show that the NSEs and the NNSEs differed in their employment of email discourse structures to a great extent, with the NNSEs not following the structure as thoroughly as the NSEs.

The first research question further aimed to compare the strategy types used by the two groups. The results can be seen in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Request strategy types produced by native speakers of English
and non-native speakers of English

Strategy types	Native S. of English N=21		Non-native S. of English N=105		t	p*
	f	%	f	%		
Direct	13	62	63	60		
Indirect	8	38	39	37	-0.3663	0.3573
Hints	0	0	3	3		

*p< 0.05

Table 4 shows that direct requests were more common than indirect ones or hints in both the NSEs' and the NNSEs' emails. That is, 62% of the requests in the emails composed by the NSEs were direct; similarly, 60% of emails composed by NNSEs were also direct. Indirect requests also appeared in both groups' emails with almost the same frequency (38% and 37%). The statistical analysis revealed no statistically significant difference between the two data sets (p=0.3573 > 0.05). The only notable difference was related to the use of hints by the NNSEs (3%).

The final part of the first research question aimed to compare the NSEs' and the NNSEs' use of internal and external modifiers in their request emails. Table 5 below presents the results of the data analysis on internal modifiers.

Table 5. Internal modifiers employed by native speakers of English
and non-native speakers of English

Type	Native S. of English N=21		Non-native S. of English N=105		t	p*
	f	%	f	%		
Openers	4	19	3	3	3.0406	0.0014
Intensifiers	14	67	4	4	10.0348	0.0000
Understaters	8	38	24	23	1.4653	0.0726
Downtoners	4	19	21	20	-0.0991	0.4606
Hesitators	0	0	0	0	-	-
Attention-getters	0	0	0	0	-	-

*p< 0.05

As can be seen in Table 5, the NSEs generally used internal modifiers more frequently than the NNSEs. One of these modifiers was openers, used by 19% of the NSEs but only 3% of the NNSEs. They also used different phrases in their openings. Among the openers used by the NSEs were phrases like "Would you be so kind as to …" and "I wonder if… ." The NNSEs on the other hand used phrases like "Is there any chance…" and " If you don't mind …. ." Another significant finding was related to the much more common use of intensifiers by the NSEs than by the NNSEs (67% vs 4%). The NSEs' most frequently used intensifiers included "greatly" as in "I would *greatly* appreciate it if you would consider reviewing the attached assignment." This was followed by the use of "very" as in the example of "I would *really* appreciate your feedback on my draft." However, the intensifiers used by the NNSEs was limited to the use of 'really'. The differences between the data sets for openers and intensifiers were at statistically significant levels (p=0.0014<0.05 & p=0.0000 < 0.05 respectively).

Although the NSEs used understaters with more frequency than the NNSEs (38% vs. 23%), no statistically significant difference was detected between them (p=0.0726 > 0.05). The most commonly used understater by both groups was "some" as in the example of "I would like to get *some* feedback from you …." There were instances of the use of "quick" in both data sets as well. For instance, one student said, "Can you please have a quick look at it?" Another understater used by both groups was various forms of the word 'brief'. An NNSE said, "Would you please give me *briefly* feedback?" though the word form was wrong. Another NSE said, " I wonder if you can possibly *spare a few minutes* to have a quick look at it."

Downtoners were used by the NSEs and NNSEs with a very similar frequency (19% vs 20%), with no statistically significant difference between them (p=0.4606 > 0.05). It is important to note that the most common type of downtoner used by the students were conditional sentences as in these examples: "I need your feedback more detailed if possible.", "*If* you have time, …", and "…*if* you can." However, the NSEs used different word forms of "possible" in their emails, examples of which are "Do you *possibly* have time to look over my essay before …", "Would it be *possible* for me to meet with you …", and "If it *possible*, it would be wonderful if you could give me some feedback." Hesitators and attention-getters were not employed by either group of participants.

The results of the data analysis on external modifiers can be seen in Table 6 below.

Table 6. External modifiers employed by native speakers of English
and non-native speakers of English

Types		Native S. of English N=21		Non-native S. of English N= 105		t	p*
		f	%	f	%		
Grounders		12	57	43	41	1.3649	0.0873
Hasteners		7	33	3	3	5.1561	0.0000
	Appreciators	10	48	7	7	5.5602	0.0000
Closing	Thanking expressions	17	81	38	36	3.9772	0.0000
	Considirators	1	5	0	0	2.2730	0.0123
Disarmers		3	14	0	0	4.1499	0.0000
Sweeteners		1	5	3	3	0.4512	0.3263
Please		3	14	41	39	-2.1971	0.0149
Small talk		2	10	13	12	-0.3663	0.3573
Apology		0	0	2	2	-0.6334	0.2637
Imposition minimizers		0	0	1	1	-0.4457	0.3282
Preparators		0	0	0	0	-	-
Promise of reward		0	0	0	0	-	-

*p< 0.05

Table 6 shows that in general external modifiers were used by the NSEs more frequently than by the NNSEs. First, 57% of the NSEs used grounders, while 41% of the NNSEs explained the rationale for their requests using a grounder. However, this difference was not statistically significant (p=0.0873 > 0.05). The topic of the grounders used by the NSEs mainly concerned the participants' desire to improve their work. With this aim, they asked the professor to give feedback on whether or not they were on the right track. This was generally supported by their position on trying to do what is expected of them. Although the NNSEs aimed to receive feedback from the professor too, the topic in the grounders centered on their desire to increase their chances of getting a high grade, as illustrated in the words of some students, "because I want to increase my mark" and "I would like you to help me and give me some extra marks."

Hasteners were used much more often by the NSEs than the NNSEs (33% vs 3%), with a difference at a statistically significant level (p=0.0000 < 0.05). The NSEs were much more diplomatic in their use of hasteners compared to the NNSEs. Among the formal phrases they used were "at your (earliest) convenience", and "I look forward to hearing from you as soon as you get the opportunity to reply." The NNSEs' less frequent hasteners, however, were much more direct, with the use of an imperative in some cases as in "Give me feedback as quickly as you can."

The two groups of participants also utilized closings in the request emails in different ways. For instance, the NSEs used appreciators much more frequently than the NNSEs (48% vs 7%). A statistically significant difference between the two (p=0.000 < 0.05) was evident. The NSEs used phrases like "I really appreciate your support", "As always, your ongoing support is greatly appreciated" and "…any feedback you can provide will be greatly appreciated." Among the few instances of appreciators used by the NNSEs were the following: "With all due appreciation," and "I will appreciate your feedback."

Similarly, thanking expressions at the end of the emails appeared much more often in the NSEs' emails than in those of the NNSEs (81% vs 36%). The NSEs often thanked the professor in advance for his/her help, using sentences such as "Thank you so much for your time and input/consideration" and "With thanks in advance for any assistance you can give me on this subject." Some NNSEs' emails also included a thank-you note, although it was generally quite brief, as in "Thank you" or

"Thanks." The statistical analysis conducted to detect the difference between the NSEs' and the NNSEs' uses of thanking expressions yielded a positive result (p=0.000 < 0.05). Used exclusivley by only 5% of the NSEs, considirators in the closing were another difference between the two data sets (p=0.0123 < 0.05). The considirators used by the NSEs involved their acknowledgement of the professor's busy schedule, as illustrated by the following utterances: "I know that you are very busy, but …", "I understand you have a very busy schedule", and "I am aware of your time constraints."

Another external modifier present in the data from the NSEs but not in the data from the NNSEs was disarmers. Although few in number, three of the NSEs (14%) used disarmers, the content of which included the potential intrusion on the addressee's time, as in the example of "if it wouldn't be too much trouble, …." Statistical analysis for this external modifier produced a difference at a statistically significant level (p=0.000 < 0.05).

Sweeteners as an external modifier were used quite rarely by the NSEs and NNSEs alike. Only 5% of the NSEs and 3% of the NNSEs used a sweetener. The sweetener used by one of the NSEs focused on the professor's expertise in his subject area as in "Would you be so kind as to …. and provide me with the benefit of your expertise as an editor", while those used by the NNSEs concerned the rapport he had created in the class as in "It is a great experience for me having you as my instructor for two weeks." No statistically significant difference emerged between the two data sets (p=0.3263 > 0.05).

One of the few external modifiers used by the NNSEs more often than by the NSEs was 'please', which appeared in 39% of the NNSEs' emails, but only 14% of the NSEs' emails, with a difference at a statistically significant level (p=0.0149 < 0.05). Similarly, small talk also appeared in slightly more of the NNSEs' emails (10% vs 12%). These students often asked how the professor was. However, there was no statistically significant difference between the two (p=0.3573 > 0.05). Despite these observations, it is important to note that the NNSEs' utterances of small talk were comparatively longer than those of NSEs.

Preparators and promise of reward did not emerge in the emails of either group of participants. However, an apology was produced by two NNSEs, and an imposition minimizer was produced by a single student, resulting in a lack of statistically significant difference between the sets for both of these external modifiers (p=0.2637 & p=0.3282 respectively).

The second research question aimed to compare two groups of students' request emails: those who had not received email training and those who had. With this purpose, first of all, the discourse structures in the two data sets were compared. The results can be seen in Table 7.

Table 7. Discourse structures of email communication produced by students

	Group 1 (Students with no email training) N=47		Group 2 (Students with email training) N=58		t	p*
	f	%	f	%		
Subject line	23	68	55	95	4.2813	0.0000
Opening remarks	43	92	58	100	2.3005	0.0234
Request	45	96	57	98	-0.9154	0.3621
Closing remarks	33	70	52	90	2.5780	0.0113
Thanking at the end	16	34	22	38	0.4086	0.6836
Name at the end	16	34	47	81	5.2251	0.000

*p< 0.05

Table 7 clearly shows that students who received email training (Group 2) outperformed those who did not (Group 1). First, 95% of Group 2 made sure that they filled in the subject line, while only 68% of Group 1 did this. The T-test conducted between these two data sets also produced a difference at a statistically significant level (p=0.0000 < 0.05). Similarly, while all Group 2 students provided some opening remarks in their emails, only 92% of Group 1 wrote an opening remark. There was a statistically significant difference between them (p=0.0234 < 0.05). However, a request was present in almost all student emails from both groups (96% and 98%), with a lack of statistically significant difference between them (p=0.3621). This indicates that nearly all students were successful in producing the intended speech act of request.

It is also seen in Table 7 that the two groups differed in their use of closing remarks, which were present in 90% of the student emails in Group 2, but only in 70% of those in Group 1. This created a statistically significant difference between the two groups (p=0.0113 < 0.05).

The frequency of a thank-you note at the end by both groups was significantly low (34% and 38%) and without statistical significance between the data sets (p=0.6386 < 0.05), indicating that the email training the second group received did not make a significant difference in terms of students' use of a thanking note at the conclusion of their emails.

Data analysis also revealed that there was a sharp contrast between the two groups in terms of providing their names at the end of their emails. The majority of the students in Group 2 (81%) remembered to write their names at the end. In the case of Group 2, only 34% of the students wrote their names. The T-test conducted revealed a statistically significant difference between them (p=0.000 < 0.05).

Alongside this, the emails composed by the two groups were also compared considering strategy types. Table 8 shows the results.

Table 8. Request strategy types produced by students

Strategy types	Group 1 (Students with no email training) N=47		Group 2 (Students with email training) N=58		t	p*
	f	%	f	%		
Direct	30	64	33	57		
Indirect	15	32	24	41	-0.4045	0.3433
Hints	2	4	1	2		

*p< 0.05

As can be seen in Table 8, direct requests were more common in the data from Group 1 than in those from Group 2 (64% vs 57%). It is important to note that these students used the word 'want' fifteen times (30%) in their emails to achieve their communication aims. Some examples are "I want some feedback", "I want your feedback on my final research project", and "I want you to give me a feedback." The verb 'want' in the data from Group 2 emerged six times (10%). One of the students in this group softened his utterance using a downtoner: "I want your feedback on my assignment *if you can.*" On the other hand, another student softened the force of his utterance by using the past tense, as in "I want*ed* your feedback on my work." It is also important to note that imperatives were used more often by Group 2 students than Group 1 student. Eight of the former group (14%) used an imperative in their request, while only one student did so in the latter group. However, it was detected that all eight instances of the imperative use in the data from Group 2 were accompanied by the use of 'please' as an external modifier, some examples of which are "Please send me your feedback", and "Please provide me with feedback from my draft and recommend me any possible improvements." However, the only imperative use by the student in Group 1 did not include this modifier. In fact, the

statement was made even stronger by using the intensifier 'more', and an additional statement which could be regarded as rather bold, "Give me *more* corrections *and the rest is good enough for me*."

Table 8 also shows that indirect requests were employed more often by Group 2 students than Group 1 students (41% vs 32%). The data from the former group often included the modal verbs 'can' and 'could' as in the examples of "*Could* you please take a look at my assignment and give me feedback about it?', and "*Can* I have please your feedback on my task?" There were also two instances of 'may', which was used in a grammatically wrong way, "*May* you check my first draft?' and "*May* you take a look of my work and give me a feedback of my work?" Another commonly used phrase was 'I was wondering if …', which appeared five times in the data from Group 2. "*I was wondering if* you've got some to check it and give me a feedback before submitting" is an example of this. However, none of the indirect requests in the data from Group 1 made any use of this phrase. All of the indirect requests produced by these students were limited to the use of a modal verb such as 'can', 'could', 'would' and 'may', the last of which was misused grammatically.

Although quite few in number, hints were also produced more often by Group 1 students than by Group 2 students (4% vs 2%). Despite the differences between the two groups noted above, there were no differences at statistically significant levels between the data sets (p=0.3433 < 0.05).

The second research question furthered required a comparison of internal and external modifiers used in the student emails. Table 9 below compares the internal modifiers used by the students.

Table 9. Internal modifiers employed by students

Type	Group 1 (Students with no email training) N=47		Group 2 (Students with email training) N=58		t	p*
	f	%	f	%		
Downtoners	4	9	17	29	2.7165	0.0038
Understaters	15	32	9	16	-2.0089	0.0235
Intensifiers	0	0	4	7	1.8480	0.0337
Openers	1	2	2	3	0.4003	0.3448
Hesitators	0	0	0	0	-	-
Attention-getters	0	0	0	0	-	-

*p< 0.05

As Table 9 indicates, the most striking difference between Group 1 and Group 2 emails was the use of downtoners, which were more common in the latter group of emails (9% vs 29%). Each student from the first group used a conditional sentence without any form of the word 'possible', as in "If you have time for us …" However, at least some of the students in Group 2 used modality within a conditional sentence (e.g. "If you could …." or "if it is possible…"), suggesting slightly more flexible usage of downtoners. The results also indicated a statistically significant difference (p=0.0038 < 0.05).

The use of understaters, on the other hand, were twice as frequent in the emails composed by Group 1 than in those composed by Group 2 (32% vs 16%), with a statistically significant difference (p=0.0235 < 0.05). The most frequently used understater by the first group was 'some'. It was also commonly used by the second group of students although they varied their use of understaters by employing the adjectives 'quick' and 'brief' to minimize the impact of their request on the professor.

Another statistically significant difference between the two data sets was detected regarding intensifiers. They were used by four students (7%) in Group 2, whereas they were non-existent in the

data collected from Group 1 (p=0.0337 < 0.05). Meanwhile, openers were very rare in both data sets. Only one student in Group 1 (2%) and two in Group 2 (3%) employed an opener in their request emails. There was no statistical difference between them (p=0.4409). Neither hesitators nor attention-getters were used by either group.

The second research question also asked how external modifiers were used by the two groups of students. The results of data analysis done for this purpose are seen in Table 10 below.

Table 10. External modifiers employed by students

Type		Group 1 (Students with no email training) N=47		Group 2 (Students with email training) N=58		t	p*
		f	%	f	%		
Small talk		3	6	10	17	1.6865	0.0473
Grounders		20	43	23	40	0.2975	0.3833
Please		15	32	26	45	1.3474	0.0903
Sweeteners		1	2	2	3	0.4003	0.3448
	Appreciators	5	11	2	3	-1.4698	0.0723
	Considirators	0	0	0	0	-	-
Closing	Thanking expressions	16	34	22	38	0.4086	0.3418
Hasteners		0	0	3	5	1.5858	0.0579
Apology		0	0	2	3	1.2832	0.1011
Imposition minimizers		0	0	1	2	0.8993	0.1852
Disarmers		0	0	0	0	-	-
Promise of reward		0	0	0	0	-	-
Preparators		0	0	0	0	-	-

*p< 0.05

Table 10 shows that the only difference between the two data sets at a statistically significant level was related to the use of small talk. Although relatively low in percentage, some students from both groups employed small talk at the beginning of their emails. However, those who had received email training used it more often than those who had not (17% vs 6%), with the p value being at 0.0473 < 0.05. There were also qualitative differences between the students' use of small talk. The Group 1 students bid the professor good morning, and two of them asked him how he was. However, the Group 2 students varied the way they asked about the professor's well-being (e.g. "I hope you are feeling great." and "How are you doing this semester? Hope everything is fine.") Some additionally expanded on their small talk by indicating how much they were enjoying the professor's course.

Other external modifiers such as 'please', sweeteners, thanking expressions, appreciators and grounders were also detected in the data sets. These modifiers were used somewhat more commonly by Group 2 students but without a statistically significant difference (p=0.0903 > 0.05, p=0.3448 > 0.05, p=0.0903 > 0.05, p=0.3418 > 0.05, p=0.0903 > 0.05, p=0.0723 > 0.05, p=0.0903 > 0.05, p= 0.3833 > 0.05, p=0.0903 > 0.05 respectively). Qualitatively, they were similar to each other, too. On the other hand, some other external modifiers such as hasteners, apologies, and imposition minimizers were completely absent from the emails composed by Group 1 students. These modifiers were only used by a small number of students in Group 2 (5%, 3% and 2% respectively). No statistically significant difference was detected between these data sets (p=0.0579 > 0.05, p= 0.1011 > 0.05,

p=0.1852 > 0.05 respectively). Disarmers, promises of reward, and preparators were not used by either group of students. Taken together, the data suggest that certain external modifiers were used by the students who received email training more often than those who did not.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to identify how Arabic learners of English as a foreign language use the request speech act in emails addressed to a professor, and how their use of this speech act compares to its use by native speakers of English. It also aimed to identify whether or not instruction in email writing enhances students' use of this speech act. The discourse structures, strategy types, as well as internal and external modifiers employed in their emails addressed to a professor were analyzed for these purposes.

The comparison of the discourse structures revealed that the NNSEs did not use the required components as frequently as the NSEs. That is, the required discourse structure components, with the exception of 'thank-you notes' at the end, were present in virtually all the emails composed by the NSEs. However, none of these components was used by the entire group of NNSEs. The analysis conducted between the two data sets also showed differences at statistically significant levels for the following components: a subject line, closing remarks, a thank-you note at the end, and a name at the end. These indicate that the Arabic NNSEs in this study failed to fully conform to requestive email writing conventions in terms of discourse structure in the target language. Similar results appeared in previous research conducted into Arabic speakers' use of email discourse. For example, Najeeb, Maros and Nor (2012) investigated Arab postgraduate students' politeness strategies in the Malaysian context. Of the students, 15% either failed to fill in the subject line while for 35%, their subject line was improper. Similarly, about one third of the students' opening remarks were improper. The closing remarks in about 60% of the emails, on the other hand, were either incomplete or inappropriate. Another study conducted by Al-Ali and Sahawneh (2008) compared the generic features of emails written by Jordanian Arabic undergraduate students and American native speakers of English. They found that the Arabic speakers generally had limited resources of phrases and lexical bundles used in ending their emails, while the native speakers varied the expressions they used. Similarly, the native speakers employed comparatively more formal conventional closings in their emails to their professors. Taken together, these results indicate that Arabic learners of English do not fully follow the discourse structure employed by native speakers of English. One reason for this may be the students' lack of previous experience in composing emails. It is also observed that Arabs tend to put more emphasis on direct discussion through face-to-face or telephone conversations than written communication (Bosrock, n. d.). The Arab participants of this study also often made the remark that they do not normally compose emails in their native language, which likely affects their aptitude for and skills in writing emails in a foreign language.

In terms of request strategy types, the NSEs and the NNSEs did not seem to differ much. That is, both groups of participants employed direct and indirect requests, though the former was more common in the data set produced by the NSEs. The more frequent use of indirect requests by the Arabic speakers contradicts Kerkam's observation (in Grainger & Mills, 2016) that "In Arabic, indirectness is rarely used for the purposes of being polite, as directness is seen as the more expected or appropriate form for requests and excuses." It was also revealed that the NNSEs were the only group of participants who employed hints although these were few in number. Al-Marrani and Sazalie (2010) similarly found that Yemeni Arabic speakers utilized hints in their requests addressed to someone of a higher position. Taken together, these studies could offer some evidence that Arab speakers have a tendency toward indirectness when making a request. Mohamed and Omer (2000)

also note that Arabs have a tendency for implicitness in writing messages with the assumption that it is the reader's responsibility to understand the message.

The researchers of this current study also compared internal and external modifiers in the NSEs' and NNSEs' emails. Regarding the former, it was found that 'intensifiers' and 'openers' were more commonly employed by the NSEs than the NNSEs with statistically significant differences. The most striking difference was related to the 'intensifiers' used to amplify the coerciveness of the target speech act. The NSEs used them much more commonly than the NNSEs (67% vs 4%). This difference may be due to the NNSEs' lower language proficiency causing them to feel less capable of using such devices effectively. They may have thought that intensifiers could create an imposition on the professor, causing them to opt out of using them. Along the same lines, Nickels (2006) found that language learners' use of intensifiers in academic settings was uncommon. This is not an unexpected result given Arab speakers' tendency to maintain harmony with those in power (Rohm, 2010). As regards openers, the NSEs employed them more often than the NNSEs (19% vs 3%). The difference between the data sets may be due to the NNSEs' lack of experience in writing formal emails on top of their comparatively limited language competency. These were also apparent in their frequent use of imperatives while performing the request act. Hausser (1980) warns, "Whether a certain imperative expression is used as a request or an order … depends on pragmatic criteria concerning the status of the speaker" (p. 85), which in the case of this present study may point to the NNSEs' limited pragmatic competence. However, the NNSE's dependency on imperative forms may have been caused by their native tongue, namely Arabic, allowing and encouraging the imperative forms when making a request with the condition that the imperative force is reduced with expressions like *min fadlak* ("out of your generosity") and *wa-llahi* ("By God") which function as the word 'please' in English (Taha, 2013).

It is also important to note that hesitators or attention-getters were not used by either group of participants. The most probable reason for this is the nature of the data-collection tool, which allows for response preparation unlike in spoken discourse in general.

When it comes to external modifiers, the most noteworthy difference was related to the more frequent use of 'please' by the NNSEs (39% vs 14%, p=0.01490). This may be caused by frequent use of 'please' in imperatives in Arabic, which is also noted by Taha (2013). Aubed (2012) notes that this lexical item often occurs at the beginning or end of an Arabic imperative sentence. English language learners' tendency to rely on 'please' in their requests was identified in other research (Goy, Zeyrek & Otcu, 2012). A type of external modifier which was present in the NSE data set but not in the NNSE one was 'disarmers'. Although used by only three NSEs, this modifier helped the addressor to adopt a certain politeness strategy and "mitigate the effect of the refusal and to prevent potential … objections" (Savic, 2014, p. 179). The NSEs' comparatively more frequent use of all three types of politeness moves in closing ('appreciators', 'thanking expressions' and 'considerators') was another indication of the NNSEs' limited pragmatic competence.

In the data set, an additional external modifier was identified: 'hasteners' which were used to expedite the action to be taken by the addressee. This external modifier appeared in the NSE data set more than in the NNSE one. The NNSEs' lower English proficiency level resulting in their lack of pragmatic dexterity may be one of the reasons why they seem to have thought that hasteners might be considered pushy and assertive and therefore inappropriate by their professors. Rohm (2010) notes that people in Arab countries are modest and less assertive in their communication with others, while Americans can be tough and more assertive. Arabs' respect for positions of power and people in authority is also noted as a factor contributing to their reduced tendency for assertiveness. These may be one reason why the Arab participants in this study avoided hasteners as an external modifier in their requests.

Another important finding of this study was that neither the NSEs nor the NNSEs employed 'preparators' or 'a promise of reward'. The absence of preparators might be due to the nature of emails as the data-collection tool. For one thing, the subject line to an email may serve as the addressors' attempt to prepare the addressee for the upcoming request, and therefore a preparator may not be used in the main text. It may also be the case that the addressors took their professor's positive response for granted leading them to avoid using a preparator. This may be the reason for the participants' avoidance of making promises.

The aim of the second research question was to identify whether or not instruction in normal email procedures makes a difference in NNSEs' use of the request speech act set. With this purpose, first the students' use of email discourse structure was investigated. The results showed that those who had received email instruction followed the required structure more fully than those who had not. The analysis results also revealed that the differences between the data sets in terms of 'subject line', 'opening remarks', 'closing remarks', and 'name at the end' were at statistically significant levels, with instruction narrowing the gap between the NSEs and the NNSEs.

Regarding the request strategy type, the students who had received instruction were observed to employ an indirect request more often than their counterparts, which may be considered an indication of their increased awareness of politeness strategies.

When the internal modifiers are considered, it is seen that the instruction played a role in the increased use of 'downtoners' and 'intensifiers' (29% vs 9% and 7% vs 0% respectively). Instruction also appears to have caused students to use 'understaters' less frequently (16% vs 32%). In terms of external modifiers, however, there were no statistically significant differences between the data sets, except for small talk which was employed by those exposed to instruction. One reason for this difference may be connected to the students' relationships to their instructors. That is, some students may have developed more intimate relationships with their instructors which could have had an effect on how they performed the task in the research. Taken together, these results provide at least some more evidence for the positive effect of training on the students' pragmatic competence revealed by previous research. They also lend credence to Kasper's (1997) assertion that instruction in certain pragmatic aspects is essential for learners' pragmatic development.

6. Limitations of the study and future research

This study has some limitations that may lead to certain issues. One of these is related to the nature of the data-gathering tool, namely the discourse completion task. Although it is considered to be useful in gaining insights into social and psychological factors likely to affect performance and in creating an initial classification of semantic formulas and strategies occurring naturally, this data tool may fail to adequately represent the actual wording used in authentic contexts and therefore may limit the range of formulas and strategies employed (Beebe & Cummings, 1985). Future research could consider using more authentic ways of collecting data such as ethnographic observation, which according to Chang (2016) ensures internal validity and provides rich contextual information allowing researchers to consider the pragmatic appropriateness of utterances. Another limitation stems from the number of NSEs involved in the study, which reduces the generalizability of results. This study was also limited in that it did not consider the NSEs' nationality, which may play a role in the utilization of speech acts due to cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Future researchers could consider such factors in the design of their studies. It would also be interesting to explore instructors' judgments of students' pragmatic competence. This would provide researchers with insight into how and when NNSEs fail to communicate effectively (Murphy & Neu, 1996).

7. Conclusion

A request can be face-threatening due to a potential refusal, causing people to opt out. The situation can be even more challenging when the addressor needs to perform this speech act in a foreign language while communicating to someone in a higher position such as a professor. The medium of instruction in almost all universities in the UAE is English, putting students in a delicate situation if they have not mastered the English language. Considering the lack of investigations into Emirati students' use of request speech act in formal situations, it was necessary to conduct research on this aspect of pragmatic competence. Studies of this nature are also particularly important to help avoid potential tension between students and professors. These reasons made the authors of this study decide to identify how native Arabic speakers PI's communication courses employed requestive emails addressed to a professor in English. How a group of native speakers performed the same speech act was also examined, and the data sets were compared to detect the differences between native English-speaking and native Arabic-speaking students. Furthermore, the authors studied the effect of instruction on students' pragmatic skills. For these purposes, the discourse structures, strategy types, as well as internal and external modifiers the participants in this study used were analyzed.

Analyses of the data revealed that native and non-native speakers of English significantly differed in their production of discourse structure, strategy type, and modifiers. It was also found that pragmatic instruction had a significant effect on students' competence, which speaks to the potential role of instruction in developing learners' pragmatic abilities. Therefore, it can be justifiably suggested that language and communication curricula should include instructional sessions focused on pragmatic usage of the target language. As also pointed out by Flor (2012), this is especially important for students who lack "opportunities for exposure to authentic samples of the language outside the classroom" (p. 266).

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BAE'deki Arap asıllı üniversite öğrencilerinin elektronik posta aracılığıyla yerine getirdikleri rica söz eylemi üzerine bir çalışma

Öz

Bilgisayar teknolojisindeki gelişmeler okul ve üniversitelerde gerçekleştirilen eğitim faaliyetlerini derinden etkilemiştir. Ancak 'dijital yerli' olarak nitelenen günümüz gençliği bilgisayar becerilerinin gelişmiş olduğunu sorgusuz kabul edebilmektedir. Bu tür bir aşırı güven, üniversite öğretim görevlileri ile elektronik ortamda iletişim kurmaları gerektiği zaman olumsuz sonuçlara yol açabilmektedir. Özellikle resmi nitelikli elektronik posta yazmaya alışık olmayan gençler bu durumdan daha fazla etkilenebilmektedir. Öğrencilerin iletişim becerilerindeki eksiklikler aynı zamanda öğretim görevlileri için de olumsuz sonuçlar doğurabilmektedir. Eğitimine yabancı bir dilde devam eden öğrenciler için bu tür durumlar daha ciddi sonuçlara neden olabilir. Bu durum dikkate alınarak yapılan bu çalışmada, elektronik posta aracılığıyla dile getirilen rica söz eyleminin nasıl yerine getirildiği incelenmiştir. Araştırmaya BAE'de İngilizce eğitim veren bir üniversiteden 105 Arap asıllı öğrenci katılmıştır. Aynı zamanda İngilizceyi ana dili olarak kullanan bireylerin de bu söz eylemi nasıl yerine getirdikleri incelenmiş ve Arap öğrencilerden toplanan verilerle karşılaştırılmıştır. Ayrıca öğrencilere verilen elektronik iletişim eğitiminin, rica söz eylemini yerine getirmelerindeki etkisi incelenmiştir. Veriler, bir Söylem Tamamlama Görevi kullanılarak toplanmıştır. Bu amaçla, araştırmaya katılan bireylerden öğretim görevlilerine elektronik posta yazarak hazırlamış oldukları ödevler için geri bildirim istemeleri istenmiştir. Elde edilen sonuçlar, İngilizceyi ana dili olarak kullanan katılımcılar ile öğrenciler arasında söylem yapısı, strateji türü ve niteleyiciler açısından farklılıkların olduğunu göstermiştir. Ayrıca verilen elektronik iletişim eğitiminin, öğrencilerin edimbilim yetisi üzerinde olumlu etkileri olduğu belirlenmiştir. Sonuçlar tartışılmakta ve öneriler değerlendirilmektedir.

Anahtar sözcükler: rica; söz eylem; edimbilim; elektronik posta; Arap asıllı öğrenci

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