

## On Iranian EFL Learners' Pragmatic Competence and Appropriate Use of "Request" in English Contexts

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Aliakbari, M., & Gheitasi, M. (2014). On Iranian EFL learners' pragmatic competence and appropriate use of "request" in English contexts. *Journal of Pan-Pacific Association of Applied Linguistics*, 18(1), 19-31.

This paper investigated the extent to which Iranian EFL students are aware of the appropriate use of request speech act in English speaking contexts in terms of formality, politeness and indirectness. A researcher-made discourse completion test (DCT) including 16 scenarios was distributed among 130 advanced students in private English institutes in Ilam city. Results revealed that 90.5% of the participants adopted formal or highly formal requests, 88.5% requested politely and 67.2% performed indirect requests. In addition, the results of chi-square tests confirmed significant relationships between the three variables, meaning that those participants who were careful about using appropriate degrees of formality tended to act politely and preferably indirectly. The study, thus, led to certain implications for students, teachers, material developers and curriculum designers.

**Key Words:** request strategy, formality, indirectness, politeness, ELT in Iran

### 1 Introduction

A mounting body of empirical support shows that a higher level of grammatical competence in a second language does not assure producing pragmatically appropriate utterances. However, extensive work must still be done on ascertaining precisely how L2 pragmatic competence develops over time. Successful communication in the target language necessitates not only the knowledge of grammar and vocabulary but also pragmatic competence and knowledge of the target culture. According to Cheng (2005), one important dimension of pragmatic competence is comprehension and production of speech acts and their appropriateness in a given context. Study

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of pragmatic development in a second language or inter-language pragmatics (ILP) observes how nonnative speakers comprehend and produce action in the target language and considers how L2 learners develop the ability to understand and perform action in a target language. Yet, a number of scholars have drawn a universal conclusion that nonnative speech act behaviors can be different from native behaviors (Yu, 1999).

Learning an L2 requires mastery over diverse cultural as well as grammatical rules and vocabulary. That is to say, competence in formal properties per se cannot lead to the appropriate use of the language. If L2 learners do not have sufficient knowledge about sociocultural rules of different L2 speech acts, they may use their L1 sociocultural rules (pragmatic transfer) which can result in intercultural misinterpretation and miscommunication.

Al-Falasi (2007) believes that most of the problems that English foreign language (EFL) learners face in intercultural communication are primarily pragmatic. Teachers of EFL often choose not to emphasize pragmatic knowledge in their classrooms, concentrating instead on linguistic knowledge. Eslami-Rasekh and Eslami-Rasekh (2004) warn that this might end in pragmatic failure when EFL learners actually communicate with native speakers (NSs), and that the only way to minimize pragmatic failure between NSs and non-native speakers (NNSs) is by obtaining pragmatic competence; that is, the ability to use language efficiently in order to understand language in context.

“Request” is more frequent in everyday communication compared to other speech acts as apologizing or promising (Trosborg, 1995). It is a speech act common to all languages, thus its representation may differ with cultural norms. Some SLA researchers explored “request” in English (Francis, 1997; Kaneko, 2004; Kim, 1995; Parent, 2002), or focused on request realization in other languages including Spanish (Ruzickova, 2007), and Japanese (Kahraman & Akkus, 2007; Kubota, 1996). The literature on politeness and indirectness is replete with the works of numerous scholars mostly non-Iranians and few Iranian scholars have also worked on different dimensions of the topic. Since request is one of the speech acts frequently used in interpersonal relationships between language users, successful performance of which may bring about positive feelings, while failure in its implementation may lead to undesirable outcomes. Having the above mentioned issues in mind, the present study aimed at examining the pragmatic competence of Iranian EFL learners in request speech act.

## **2 Literature Review**

Studies on English as a foreign language have often focused mostly on acquisition of phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic forms than on the acquisition of pragmatic capability, emphasizing that EFL

learners could acquire knowledge of the lexicon and grammar of the target language without having a reasonable control over the pragmatic uses of language. In addition, while successful communication includes being proficient at grammar and text organization as well as appropriate use of the target language, learners may not yet be certain about the appropriate time and place to use the proper form of language.

The influential work of Brown and Levinson (1987) on politeness and indirectness resulted in a rise of interest in conversational investigation. Since then, many linguists have tried to study politeness and its relationship to indirectness and face, and some scholars have claimed that "indirectness" is culture-dependent (Wierzbicka, 2003).

In a study by Salmani -Nodoushan (2008) on Persian requests, it was found that Persian speakers used conventionally indirect strategies in their requestive speech acts. Marti (2006) investigated the level of indirectness in Turkish-German bilingual and Turkish monolingual requests. The study showed that Turkish monolingual speakers seemed to prefer more direct strategies compared to German speakers. In another study, Akbari (2002) maintained that, in addition to the relative power of the speaker over the listener, the social distance between the speaker and the listener, the ranking of the imposition involved in doing the Face Threatening Act (FTA), the presence of the audience, the liking factor, and the urgency of the act must all be taken into consideration. The given studies along using speech act theory have drawn upon other linguistic theories in general and politeness principles in particular. Learning the appropriate use of language in terms of formality, politeness, and subsequently indirectness, especially for EFL learners, is considered as essential as learning the grammar and vocabulary of the language. Although much has been done on pragmatic learning in EFL contexts, little has been reported in the Iranian context. In other words, owing to the importance of the appropriate language use in EFL pedagogy, the impetus behind the current study was to investigate the extent to which Iranian EFL students are cognizant of the appropriate use of making requests in English speaking contexts. Accordingly, the following research questions were put forward:

1. To what extent are Iranian EFL learners pragmatically competent in appropriate use of requests in terms of formality, politeness, and indirectness in English speaking contexts?

2. Are there any relationships between the three variables of formality, politeness, and indirectness in requests of Iranian EFL learners in English speaking contexts?

### **3 Methodology**

#### **3.1 Participants**

The participants of the study were 130 advanced learners in private English institutes in Ilam city. They had passed at least ten levels in speaking courses and were considered advanced based on the standards of the language institutes. The participants included both males and females from 15 to 35 years of age. They were from diverse social and ethnic backgrounds, and none of them had experienced living in an English speaking or foreign country except for some who had taken short visits.

### **3.2 Instrument**

A researcher-made discourse completion test (DCT) including 16 scenarios was utilized to collect the data. The DCT included four scenarios of equal social status, four scenarios of lower status for the speaker, one scenario of higher status for the speaker, two scenarios of identical gender, two scenarios of opposite gender, two scenarios of intimate friends, and one scenario of speaking to strangers. In every scenario the participants were supposed to request for a favor or help in English. The DCT was modified and revised by the researchers after conducting a pilot study. The scenarios were arranged in a way that the degree of intimacy and social status of the interlocutor was clear for the participants.

### **3.3 Procedure**

At the outset of the study, a questionnaire comprising open ended items was distributed between 30 advanced students to get insights into situations in which people usually request for a favor or help and also to get insights into the possible answers given to the DCT by the respondents. The collected data were then utilized to develop the final DCT including 16 scenarios in which the participants were supposed to request for a favor or help. In each scenario the participants were given sufficient information about their level of intimacy with, as well as social position and gender of the interlocutor which the participants were expected to consider and speak with an appropriate degree of formality, politeness, and indirectness. The DCT was distributed between the participants of the study and collected after a reasonable time; so that the participants had sufficient time to answer to the relatively long DCT. The answers given to the DCT were then rated by two PhDs and two MAs in Ilam University and coded for the 3 categories of formality, politeness, and indirectness (formality: 1=highly formal, 2=formal, 3=less formal, 4=informal, 5=slang; politeness: 1=highly polite; 2=polite; 3=slightly polite; 4=less polite, 5=impolite; indirectness: 1=direct, 2=indirect). Then, the gleaned data were analyzed using SPSS, and frequency analysis and chi-square test were conducted to establish the proportion of the request strategies used by the subjects and whether the differences in the frequency

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of strategies were statistically significant. Examples of each category of the scale are provided in Table 1 below.

**Table 1. Sample Responses of Formality, Politeness, and Indirectness**

Highly formal	1- I wonder if I could take two hours off. I really need it. 2- I'm really sorry to say that unfortunately we can hear you in our apartment.
Formal	1- It is late. I have to wake up early tomorrow. 2- Would you please be a little quiet?
Less formal	1- Please be quiet, I want to sleep. 2- Excuse me! Do you have any time to talk? 3- Can you drive a car? Please bring my car from the parking.
Informal	1- Guys, I'm going to sleep. Be a little quieter. 2- You're making a lot of noise, I can't stand it. Work quietly. 3- I need your book, Dan. Can I have it?
Slang	1- Stop it. You are getting on my nerve. 2- Hey fellow, pass me the book. 3- Got an extra pen? Give me one.
Highly polite	1- I would be thankful if You could smoke outside! 2- I would be grateful if I could have your pamphlet, professor. 3- I was wondering if you'd mind lending me your car.
Polite	1- Sorry sir can I talk with you please? 2- Would you please speak a little slower?
Slightly polite	1- Ladies, please discuss it somewhere else. Inside a car is not an appropriate place to discuss such things. 2- Can I borrow your car for a short time?
Less polite	1- I should go immediately, boss. 2- Oh, I can't write fast, teacher, and you speak rapidly.
Impolite	1- Stop it. You are getting on my nerve. 2- Hey fellow, pass me the book.
Direct	1- Give me a pen please. 2- Please submit my project to professor!
Indirect	1- Excuse me; can you help me with the car? 2- Reza, May I use your car for an hour?

### 4 Results and Discussion

The collected data were tabulated and presented in the tables that follow. To answer the first research question, multiple response frequencies were calculated. Also, frequencies of the three variables of formality, politeness, and indirectness within each situation (Table 2) and average of the three variables in terms of status of the speaker, gender of the interlocutor, and degree of intimacy with the interlocutor based on the scenarios in the DCT (Table 3) were calculated.

Table 2 shows the frequency of the variables of formality, politeness, and indirectness. As the table shows, 46% of the subjects requested formally, 42.8% less formally, 9% informally, 1.7% highly formally, and 0.5% used slangs to make requests. Also, 43.7% requested slightly politely, 42.3%

politely, 11% less politely, 2.5% highly politely, and 0.5% impolitely. Regarding indirectness, 32.8% requested directly and 67.2% requested indirectly. Also, the results show that, overall, 90.5% of the participants used informal or highly formal language, 88.5% spoke politely, and 67.2% used indirect requests. It is noteworthy that most participants used formal, polite, and indirect language even when it was not necessary, for example, when they talked to a friend, a person of equal or even lower status.

It should be mentioned that, for all of the cases of highly formal, slang, highly polite, and impolite requests, i.e. the two extremes of formality and politeness, the figures were not really significant (less than 3% as can be seen in Table 2). Only 1.7% used highly formal requests and 0.5% used slangs. Regarding politeness, 2.5% used highly polite requests and 0.5% requested impolitely.

Table 2. Frequencies of Formality, Politeness and Indirectness in All and within Situations

Variable	Situation	Status		Equal status				Speaker lower status				S	Same G		Opposite		Friend		S	M	
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	H	10	11	1	2	3	4	5	6	R	F
Formality	Highly formal	0	0	0	2.3	4.6	0	0	6.9	2.3	0	0	0	0	2.3	2.3	2.3	2.3	2.3	1.7	
	Formal	1.2	2.7	3.4	4.0	4.9	3.0	7.4	4.4	4.4	4.3	5.9	4.3	9.3	3.0	4.0	4.0	3.4	3.4	4.6	.0
	Less formal	5.4	4.0	4.4	2.5	2.0	3.9	2.7	3.6	3.6	6.6	3.9	3.9	1.2	3.0	4.4	4.4	1.1	1.7	4.2	.8
	Informal	5.4	8.5	9.2	4.6	9.2	9.2	0	0	6.9	2.3	3.8	2.6	3.9	6.4	6.4	6.9	6.9	6.9	9.0	
	Slang	2.3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2.3	0	0	0	0	0	0	2.3	0	0.5	
	Politeness	Highly polite	0	0	0	0	2.3	0	3.1	1.5	2.3	4.6	0	2.3	2.3	2.3	2.3	2.3	2.3	2.3	2.5
Polite		1.5	2.5	3.2	1.6	3.6	3.1	4.1	5.5	3.4	3.3	2.7	4.8	5.5	4.2	4.2	4.2	4.2	4.4	7.4	.3
Slightly polite		5.3	4.4	4.3	3.6	4.0	3.4	4.8	3.0	9.9	4.3	2.2	4.3	2.0	3.0	3.3	3.3	6.6	6.3	3.1	4.3
Less polite		1.5	1.6	1.3	1.8	4.6	3.8	4.6	0	3.8	9.2	2.2	2.3	4.6	2.6	4.6	4.6	0	0	11.0	
Impolite		2.3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4.6	0	0	0	0	0.5	
Indirectness		Direct	6.8	4.6	6.9	3.9	8.7	7.7	2.7	2.3	4.6	6.2	3.4	1.4	4.4	1.4	4.4	5.1	4.4	1.7	3.2
	Indirect	8.5	4.0	8.5	3.1	6.4	5.8	7.0	0.8	6.6	7.4	3.8	4.7	8.3	3.8	3.6	6.7	7.3	6.1	6.7	.2

Note: situations 1, 2, 3, 4= Equal Status of the Speakers; 5, 6, 7, 8= Lower Status of the Speaker; 9= Higher Status of the Speaker; 10, 11= Addressing the Same Gender;

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12, 13= Addressing Opposite Gender; 14, 15= Addressing a Friend; 16= Addressing a stranger. MRF= Multiple Response Frequencies, AG= Aggregate

Table 3 shows average of the three variables in terms of status of the speaker, gender of the interlocutor, and degree of intimacy with the interlocutor based on the scenarios in the DCT. The data in Table 3 indicate that in scenarios number 1~4, in which the interlocutors or the partners had equal social status with the participants, 29.6% used formal; 41.3% used less formal; and 9.4% used informal requests. Also, 21.5% requested politely, 44.4% slightly politely, and 15% made less polite requests. In addition, 38.2% requested directly and 43.2% indirectly. In scenarios number 5~8, where the participants had a lower social status than their partners, 50.3% used formal requests, 31.1% less formal, and 18.5% used informal requests. Regarding politeness, 40.7% used polite requests, 38.2% slightly polite, and 5.7% used less polite requests. As for the degree of indirectness, 19% requested directly and 70% indirectly. In scenario number 9, where the participants had a higher social status than their partners, 44.6% requested formally, 36.9% used slightly formal requests, and 6.9% used informal requests. Also, 35.4% requested politely, 39.2% slightly politely, and 13.8% less politely. Regarding indirectness, 46.2% requested directly, and 44.6% used indirect requests.

When speaking with someone of the same gender (scenarios number 10 and 11), 41.5% used formal language, 35% requested slightly formally, and 13% informally. Also, 31.1% requested politely, 39.6% slightly politely, and 17.7% less politely. With reference to indirectness, 30% requested directly and 60.7% indirectly. In scenarios 12 and 13, i.e. speaking with the opposite gender, 41.9% requested formally, 39.6% slightly formally, and 4.6% informally. Also, 36.9% requested politely, 36.1% slightly politely, and 8.4% less politely. Regarding directness, 28.4% requested directly, and 57.7% used indirect requests. In scenarios 14 and 15, i.e. speaking to a friend, 37.5% requested formally, 41.5% slightly formally, and 5.7% informally. Also, 46.9% requested politely and 36.9% slightly politely. Regarding indirectness, 18.4% requested directly and 70% requested indirectly. When speaking to a stranger, i.e. scenario number 16 in the DCT, 34.6% requested formally, 37.7% slightly formally, and 16.2% requested informally. Also, 74.6% requested politely and 13.8% slightly politely. In addition, 27.7% requested directly and 63.1% indirectly.

Table 3. Average in Terms of Status of the Speaker, Gender of the Interlocutor, and Degree of Intimacy

Status	Equal status	Speaker lower status	SH	Same G	Opposite	Friend	ST
Situation Variable	Average 1,2,3,4	Average 5,6,7,8	9	Average 10,11	Average 12,13	Average 14,15	16
Formality	Highly formal	0.575	2.875	2.3	0	0	2.3
	Formal	29.625	50.375	44.6	41.5	41.9	37.7
	Less formal	41.35	31.15	36.9	35	39.6	41.5
	Informal	9.425	4.6	6.9	13.05	4.6	5.75
	Slang	0.575	0	0	1.15	0	1.15
Politeness	Highly polite	0	4.225	2.3	2.3	2.3	2.3
	Polite	21.525	40.75	35.4	31.15	36.95	46.9
	Slightly polite	44.4	38.275	39.2	39.6	36.15	36.9
	Less polite	15	5.75	13.8	17.7	8.45	2.3
	Impolite	0.575	0	0	0	2.3	0
Indirectness	Direct	38.275	19.05	46.2	30	28.45	18.45
	Indirect	43.275	70	44.6	60.75	57.7	70

Table 4 shows correlation of the three variables of formality, politeness, and indirectness. As the table shows, the relations between the variables in all three cases of formality vs. politeness, formality vs. indirectness, and politeness vs. indirectness are meaningful ( $\alpha=0.05$ ,  $p=.00$ ), suggesting that the three variables were almost used in the same way by the EFL learners. Stated otherwise, those who were aware of the appropriate use of formal or informal language also recognized the appropriate use of language in terms of politeness and indirectness.

Table 4. Correlations between Formality, Politeness, and Indirectness

		Formality	Politeness	Indirectness
Formality	Pearson correlation	1	.969**	.579**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000
Politeness	Pearson correlation	.969**	1	.518**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000
Indirectness	Pearson correlation	.579**	.518**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	
	N	130	130	130

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Likewise, the chi-square tests (Table 5), adopted to confirm if there is a relationship between each pair of the variables, showed the same results ( $\alpha=0.05$ ,  $p=.00$ ).

Besides, it deserves notice that the data in Table 2 confirm these positive relationships since most of the respondents selected options 2, 3 or 4 for the variables of formality and politeness, and option 2, i.e. indirect request, for the variable of indirectness.

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Table 5. Chi-square Tests of the Relationships between Formality, Politeness, and Indirectness

		Value	df	Asymp. sig. (2-sided)
Formality * politeness	Pearson chi-square	1668.501 <sup>a</sup>	399	.000
	Likelihood ratio	551.959	399	.000
	Linear-by-linear association	121.206	1	.000
Formality * directness	Pearson chi-square	1064.917 <sup>a</sup>	323	.000
	Likelihood ratio	475.515	323	.000
	Linear-by-linear association	43.230	1	.000
Politeness * directness	Pearson chi-square	1192.082 <sup>a</sup>	357	.000
	Likelihood ratio	482.809	357	.000
	Linear-by-linear association	34.548	1	.000
N of valid cases		130		

### 5 Conclusion

The impetus behind this study was to examine the extent to which Iranian EFL learners observe pragmatic principles in making requests and care for the appropriate use of formality, politeness, and indirectness. As the results of frequency calculations in Tables 1 and average of the three variables within the DCT scenarios in Table 3 display, the majority of the participants' answers in the DCT were formal or slightly formal and polite or slightly polite, which indicates that the learners tended to make appropriate use of language. However, most of the time, deciding on the appropriate use of language in a given social context is not an easy choice, and EFL learners are not quite certain about the degree of formality and politeness in their speech that is considered normal in that given context. Also, for the variable of indirectness, 67.2% of the participants made indirect requests, which shows that the respondents recognized adoption of indirectness strategy to demonstrate propriety.

The results of chi-square tests confirmed significant relationships between the three variables, meaning that those participants who were cautious about using appropriate degree of formality were also cautious about using language politely and preferably indirectly. It is important that EFL learners are supposed to be aware of the correct use of language in various social contexts so that they use the appropriate degree of formality, politeness, and indirectness for any given situation. Advanced EFL learners are expected to use formal language in formal and business setting with people who are outsiders or are not close associates or have a higher social status. They are not expected to use highly polite or indirect language to speak with their friends and in a way that is not considered normal in the context of the target culture.

It seems that EFL learners produce language that is almost structurally precise but not pragmatically appropriate. Therefore, an explicit approach to teaching pragmatics in the classroom seems to be more effective in learners' pragmatic development. This does not mean that learners should alter into well-mannered native speakers. However, we should raise their pragmatic competence to incorporate language and culture and make decisions about what and how to communicate in English.

It is hoped that pragmatic studies increase EFL learners' awareness of pragmatic consideration and assist SLA researchers to develop effective methods of teaching pragmatics in EFL education because even advanced EFL learners require classroom and independent work in order to improve their pragmatic competence and strategic capability. In this relation, instructional materials, teaching methods, and assignments at advanced level can promote EFL learners' sociocultural awareness and pragmatic capability using contextual analysis of various speech act realizations. Teachers are expected to consider the influence of instruction in raising learners' pragmatic awareness and address issues of language pragmatics in EFL classes. Also, teachers are supposed to discover and improve the pragmatic issues provided in the textbooks. Besides, material developers and curriculum designers should also comprise pragmatic awareness in the curricula and should not ignore awareness of pragmatic features in their syllabus design. Textbooks should include communicative activities that encourage pragmatic capability.

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Received: March 2, 2014

Revised: July 1, 2014

Accepted: July 20, 2014

**Appendix**  
**DCT**

Please specify what would you say or how you would respond in any of these situations.

**A. Equal status**

1. You are a student in the dorm. It is night. You are going to go to bed; but your roommates make a lot of noise. How would you ask them to be quiet?
2. You are on a bus. The person next to you is smoking and bothering you. How would you ask him to stop smoking?
3. You are going to take a test. You forgot to bring a pen. There is a young woman sitting next to you. How would you ask her for a pen?
4. You live in an apartment. The family upstairs makes a lot of noise all the time. How would you ask them to pay attention or stop it?

**B. Speaker has a lower status**

5. You are a clerk in an office. You need to take two hours off. How would you ask the manager?
6. You are a student. You want to talk to your professor and you know he is really busy. How would you ask him/her to take time to talk to you?
7. You are a student. Your instructor is telling you something to write; but he is speaking very fast and you lag behind. How would you ask him to speak slowly or repeat?
8. You are a student. You want to borrow your professor's pamphlet. How would you ask him/her to give you the pamphlet?

**C. Speaker has a higher status**

9. You are a teacher. You want to ask one of your students to bring you your car from the parking. How would you ask him?

**D. Same gender**

10. You are a student. You want to borrow a book from a classmate of the same gender as you are (man- man / woman-woman). How would you ask them?
11. You are in the bus or in a taxi. There are some people of the same gender as you are. They speak loudly and make a lot of noise. If you want them to be quiet, how would you tell them?

**E. Opposite gender**

12. You are a student. You want to borrow a book from a classmate of the opposite gender as you are (man- woman / woman-man). How would you ask them?
13. You are in the bus or in a taxi. There are some people of the opposite gender as you are. They speak loudly and make a lot of noise. If you want them to be quiet, how would you tell them?

**F. Friends**

14. You are a student. You are supposed to submit your project to your professor but you are not in the university. You want to ask a classmate (at the same gender as you are) who is not a close friend to submit your papers to the professor. How would you ask him/her?
15. Your car is out of order and you need a car. You want to ask a colleague (at the same gender as you are) to lend you a car. How would you ask?

**G. Strangers**

16. You are driving on a snowy street. Your car does not go ahead anymore because of slippery road. You want to ask some people to help you. You do not know them. How would you ask?