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Email requests: Politeness evaluations by instructors from diverse language backgrounds

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Abstract

This study investigates syntactic modifiers as part of the request speech act within email messages and builds on studies of L2 pragmatics within computer-mediated communication to identify how modifications affect perceived politeness. Enrolled in first-year composition courses, the participants formed two groups: English L1 (EL1) students (n=32) and English-language learning (ELX) students (n=25). Request head acts were analyzed using Biesenbach-Lucas's (2007) findings with respect to syntactic modifiers as formulated in the Cross-Cultural Study of Speech Act Realization Coding Framework (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989). Previous research has shown that mitigation of the directness of a request affects the perception of politeness. The results of this study show that syntactic modifiers (e.g., past tense, progressive aspect, and syntactic embedding) were used to a greater extent by EL1 students, and that the modifiers correlated with politeness, as rated by instructors. However, the data also indicate that the limited use of syntactic modifiers did not have an effect on the politeness of ELX writers who were perceived as more polite than their EL1 counterparts. This study calls into question past research that does not take into account the learning environment nor the diverse language backgrounds of both students and *instructors.*

Introduction

Email has become a primary means of teacher-student communication. However, composing and responding to email messages in a pragmatically felicitous manner can be daunting for students learning a new language. Making a request in an email message can be challenging due to the power dynamics between students and teachers and the consequences of pragmatic failure. Furthermore, emails from language learners are often perceived as impolite when read by teachers unfamiliar with their students' different sociopragmatic norms of language use. Therefore, students should learn how to compose emails that are appropriate in relation to the recipient and to the particular request being made.

This study investigates the main syntactic modifiers of request head acts (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007) that mitigate the directness of a request and affect the perception of politeness. With this goal in mind, emails were collected from two populations of students enrolled in first-year composition (FYC) courses at a large research university in the southwest United States. The emails contained requests from students to their instructors.

These FYC courses were designed for those often referred to as *native* English-speaking and *non-native* English-speaking students. The commonly used terms *native speaker* and *non-native speaker*, as well as

first language (L1) user and *second language* (L2) user, have increasingly been criticized for perpetuating language binaries and misrepresenting the language realities of people communicating in global networks (Cook, 1999; Cook & Singleton, 2014; Dewaele, 2018). Matsuda (2018) references world English scholarship to "call for the de-/ re-construction of the concept of native speaker" (p. 4). Heeding this call, the study will follow Dewaele's (2018) term *LX user*, where LX means "any foreign language acquired after the age at which the first language(s) was acquired" (p. 238). However, the term *foreign* in this definition is also problematic because it connotes a sense of otherness. An indigenous person in the Americas or an aboriginal person in Australia might learn their ancestral language on the ground in which it was conceived and spoken. In such cases, it is inappropriate to refer to the language being learned as *foreign*. Thus, the more neutral phrase *LX* will be used in this study to refer to Dewaele's (2018) definition without the inclusion of *foreign*.

This study collected data from four classes: two FYC classes for English language learners (ELX) and two FYC classes for English Ll (EL1) students. This study focuses on the syntactic modifications used in making a request and how these modifications affect the recipient's perception of politeness. Email politeness was evaluated by six FYC instructors who represent distinct varieties of English according to Kachru's (1985, 1992) influential model of World Englishes, which conceptualizes the English-speaking world in terms of three concentric circles, that is, an inner, outer, and expanding circle. Within this framework, the inner circle is the term used to refer to countries where English is used as a first language by a majority of the population. Phillipson (1992) outlines these countries as the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (p. 17). Next, the outer circle is used to refer to countries such as India or Sri Lanka, where colonialism has resulted in a large population of English users, often in addition to their mother tongue. Finally, the expanding circle refers to countries such as China or Korea, where English has gained prominence despite a lack of historical contact with English. In brief, Kachru's three concentric circles represents a historical generalization based on usership: Native, or first language users, are represented by the inner circle; second language users are represented by the outer circle; and foreign language users are represented by the expanding circle.

The literature review will first investigate the importance of technology and give a brief overview of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and computer-mediated communication (CMC), with a focus on asynchronous CMC (ACMC). Email is a primary manifestation of ACMC (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011; Pew Research Center, 2014), but the review will focus on the affordances of email in an effort to avoid a tool-centric approach (González-Lloret, 2019; Sykes, 2018). Next, the speech act of requests will be reviewed and a brief summary of empirical studies will be given in order to situate the current study within the research literature.

Literature Review

Applied linguists have increasingly described how the global forces of technology and migration are impacting language learning (Canagarajah, 2018; Douglas Fir Group, 2016). As such, applied linguists contend that daily communication, including email requests, must be understood within the context of powerful internet communication technologies that are connecting increasingly diverse groups of people. Though physical distances may remain static, the ability to move beyond geography via technology means that students regularly reach into their instructors' personal lives and personal spaces.

Communication Technology

Kitade (2013) explains that CMC "refers to any communication that occurs when human beings interact with one another through messages exchanged via networked computers" (p. 1). Thorne (2008) defines CMC as "multimodal, often (but not exclusively) internet-mediated communication" (p. 325). Traditionally, within the field, two types of CMC are recognized—synchronous (SCMC) and asynchronous (ACMC). That said, the affordances of new communication technologies are blurring the lines of synchronicity (Kitade, 2013). As noted, email is a primary mode of ACMC that is widely used in the workplace (Pew

Research Center, 2014) and education (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). Kitade (2013) notes that "email from student to a professor is one of the most common modes of ACMC" (p. 3), and one of the main reasons why email has become so popular is that it can be used with relatively limited access to internet technologies (Blake & Guillén, 2020, p. 76).

Applied linguists have frequently noted that CMC blurs the conventional lines between spoken and written discourse (Abrams, 2019). For instance, Crystal (2001) explains that "[emails], though expressed through the medium of writing, display several of the core properties of speech… their utterances display much of the urgency and energetic force which is characteristic of face-to-face conversation" (p. 29). Biesenbach-Lucas (2006) asserts that the production of emails are naturalistic and can be analyzed as texts. The Cross-cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) Coding Manual has been the foundation of a body of literature on apologies and requests after its publication presented results from the study of six languages (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989). This study will employ an adaptation of text-based syntactic modifiers identified in Biesenbach-Lucas (2007). In particular, the current study will focus on the use of past tense, grammatical progressive aspect, and syntactic embedding to mitigate the illocutionary force of requests.

Email

The prominence of email in modern life serves as a reminder as to why there is a continued interest in the topic. Language learners are constantly negotiating their complex lives in contexts where pragmatic errors or miscalculations could affect interpersonal relationships (González-Lloret, 2019). Along similar lines, Sánchez-Hernández and Herraiz-Martínez (2018) stress the importance of developing pragmatic competence for email users. They explain that students and "individuals all over the world nowadays need to learn how to be pragmatically appropriate in contexts that have emerged in the current era of globalization, such as computer mediated communication" (p. 10). Technology is not a neutral factor that is external to the communication, "technology shapes the conversation process" (González-Lloret, 2019, p. 116).

Email has taken hold as the preferred mode of extramural communication in professional and academic settings. A survey conducted of 1,066 full-time and part-time adult workers by the Pew Research Center (2014) found email to be the primary technology for workplace communication. For the classroom context, Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) observed that "email has become a viable alternative means of communication, providing the convenience of obtaining clarification, feedback, and permission almost instantly when students need it" (p. 61). The widespread use of email in academic settings has caught the interest of CMC researchers (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). For instance, Shim (2013) notes that the request speech act "has drawn considerable attention in research on academic emails" (p. 113). In a request context, the level of directness in an email represents an obligatory choice by the author and is defined as "the degree to which the speaker's illocutionary intent is apparent from the locution" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989, p. 278). It is this degree of directness that can be syntactically modified to raise or lower the illocutionary force, which affects the perceived level of politeness. Since email is ACMC, the person making the request is divorced from both the temporal and physical space of the recipient, which means that a student's multilinguistic, communicative, and semiotic repertoire is not available to negotiate meaning.

From my own teaching experience, students are increasingly comfortable using this mode of ACMC, so it is important to understand the discrete aspects of how students make choices and how those choices affect the perception of the cultural appropriateness of email requests. Being able to write appropriate emails in academic settings is not just important in English inner circle countries (Kachru, 1985,1992), but around the globe. In a Korean context, Shim (2013) contends that "the ability to write polite, status-congruent academic emails is increasingly important" (p. 112). In another global context, Salazar and Codina (2018) looked at 25 email sequences in which students contacted their instructors, got responses, and then wrote follow-up emails. Elements associated with politeness greatly decreased in the follow-up emails. A continued focus on emails and politeness in a spectrum of academic contexts could undercover the possible effects of email communication on interpersonal relationships between students and their

instructors.

Economidou-Kogetsidis (2015) states that "It is now widely accepted that [second language] learners need to become able to accomplish goals as social actors who do not just need to get things done, but get these things done *appropriately* by taking into account the sociocultural context" (emphasis in original, p. 2). This is true of both EL1 and ELX students, who should understand how to approach written and spoken requests by considering the rhetorical situation as part of an appropriate request strategy. The current study analyzes requestive head acts, where a head act "is the minimal unit which can realize a request" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989, p. 275). In general, previous research has found that syntactic downgraders do not necessarily change the pragmatic meaning of requests but serve to increase the perception of politeness by distancing the writer from the request (ibid.).

Requests

Requests are speech acts, that is by saying or writing the utterance, we are doing the request by making the request. The definition of a speech act is that "when we say something we are always also doing something" (Cameron, 2013, p. 69). Requests require pragmatic awareness, and ability that Sykes (2018) defines as "one's capability to express communication intentions and interpret the communicative intentions of others" (p. 120). This ability becomes even more complex with interlanguage pragmatics when a language learner is charged with interpreting situations that complicate the language learning process (Bardovi-Harlig, 2017).

Gee (1999) tells us that we do not use generic language, but "specific social languages. The utterances of these social languages have meaning… embedded in specific social conversations" (p. 34). So, it is problematic to assume that the intentions of a request's locutionary act will follow with the intended illocutionary force and result in the perlocutionary effects. Even when a request is intended to be polite, "it is problematic to treat linguistic meaning as dependent on the accurate retrieval of the speaker's intentions" (Cameron, 2013, p. 71). In electronic communications, this holds true for readers of emails, who can only use their own resources to retrieve meaning. All this is to say, making an appropriate request by email can be difficult.

Empirical Studies of Email Requests

During the past two decades, researchers in pragmatics have analyzed student email requests, though none of them have expressly incorporated Kachru's (1985, 1992) concentric circles to frame the sociopragmatic norms of instructors from diverse language backgrounds. Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996) compared the effects of email requests produced by ELX learners and EL1 learners on their professors. In general, the greater the perceived imposition of the request, the more negatively the professors viewed the request. More specifically, they found that ELX learners used fewer downgraders than EL1 users and did not acknowledge the imposition on the professor to the same extent as EL1 users. Sotillo (2000) examined the email production of 25 advanced ELX learners in ACMC and SCMC contexts. Students were found to produce longer and more syntactically complex messages in ACMC contexts since the absence of time constraints allowed them to develop their answers more fully (Sotillo, 2000, p. 94).

Biesenbach-Lucas (2006) explored email requests that students make of their professor by comparing EL1 to ELX learners, finding that the EL1 learners did not use many modifications to their emails to make their "request patterns more polite and to mitigate [the] requestive force" (p. 100). When modifications were used, they were syntactic, and where emails were composed for greater impositions, they were composed with "syntactic modification *combinations*" (ibid.). ELX learners were found to limit their modification "to past tense, downtoners, and please" which did not demonstrate the same linguistic flexibility as EL1 writers when making requests. She found few modifications in both ELX and EL1 emails, which led to the conclusion that modifications were not often used to mitigate directness in the email genre.

Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) examined graduate student emails from EL1 and ELX backgrounds for both syntactic and lexical modification for politeness. EL1 learners were found to create polite emails despite

the absence of face-to-face contextual clues that are indicative of emails. She suggests that students practice composing emails in which they ask a professor for feedback on an assignment.

In a study of email requests produced by ELX students in China, Zhu (2012) compared requests produced by students who were English majors with those produced by non-English majors. It was found that non-English majors used more direct strategies than the English majors, and the non-English majors used "fewer and more limited syntactic and lexical mitigation devices for enhancing politeness that did the [English majors]" (Zhu, 2012, p. 230). Based on the findings, Zhu (2012) calls for politeness strategies to be taught explicitly in ELX contexts.

Shim (2013) asked three native EL1 professors working in Korean universities to rate 150 requestive emails from ELX learners on a scale of 1 to 4 (1 = very inappropriate, 2 = somewhat inappropriate, 3 = somewhat appropriate, 4 = very appropriate). In addition, each professor was randomly assigned 40 of the 150 emails and asked to provide commentary. Of the emails, 71% were rated as inappropriate or impolite. Furthermore, 73% of the email requests contained direct strategies that lacked mitigation. Not surprisingly, the evaluators often commented that the direct requests "left them with a negative impression of the email, and, by extension, the email writer" (p. 122). Shim (2013) concludes that the norms and conventions used to communicate via email in an academic setting between students and their professors were not fully grasped by students since a portion of the emails were perceived to be "inappropriate and even rude" (p. 112).

The use of EL1 professors to rate the politeness of the requests fails to recognize the population of ELX professors who also receive emails from their students. ELX students could draw on their native sociopragmatic norms based on their home discourses, communities, and societies when they attempt to produce email requests in a second or foreign language. Not including a range of diverse raters from the English-speaking world, which would better represent many of our institutions of higher education, causes a gap in understanding a broader range of perceptions of politeness for these email requests.

Research Questions

Previous research studies of email requests exhibit an EL1 bias since they make no attempt to take into account the diverse language backgrounds of both learners and teachers. More precisely, past email studies have measured politeness solely based on EL1 professors who come from inner circle communities (Kachru, 1985). However, many professors who teach English come from outer circle and expanding circle countries. In order to fill this gap, six instructors were recruited, two each from Kachru's (1985, 1992) three different geographic regions in the English-speaking world, to evaluate the politeness of student email requests. This study comprises three main research questions:

1. What relationship exists between the syntactic modifications in an email request and its perceived politeness?
2. How do EL1 and ELX speakers employ syntactic modification in their email requests?
3. To what extent do raters, overall, agree on the politeness of requests and to what extent do raters from each circle agree?

Methods

The data are derived from emails that were sent to the researcher in his capacity as an FYC instructor. Students consented to the collection of emails that they had previously written to their professor, which ensured that the email data were free from confounding influences. These naturally occurring emails included different genres and speech acts. Thus, requests were manually identified by the researcher. Next, following the protocols of CCSARP (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) and Biesenbach-Lucas (2007), the email requests were coded for three kinds of syntactic modifications: past tense, progressive aspect, and embeddedness as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Predominate syntactic modifiers; taken from* **Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007***, p. 69*

Tense	Example		
Past tense	I was wondering	Instead of	I am wondering
	Could you	Instead of	Can you
	I would like	Instead of	I want/like
Progressive aspect	I was wondering	Instead of	I wonder
	I'm hoping	Instead of	I hope
Embedding	I would appreciate it if you could		
	Do you think I am on the right track?		

Table 1 labels modals as past tense (e.g. could you, I would like) when they are irrealis (versus realis), but Palmer (2001) indicates that these terms are not a sufficient distinction due to the use in hypothetical conditions. Instead, the term modal-past will be used to indicate modals that employ an irrealis marking, which "depicts situations that were not or are not yet reality, only possibilities" (Whaley, 1997, p. 225). When a student uses an irrealis form of modality, then they are considering the possibility of the request not being fulfilled. There is a lower imposition on the receiver of the request due to the acknowledgment that the request does not have the power to force the fulfillment of the request. This lower level of imposition downgrades the illocutionary force of the request resulting in greater politeness. Biber, Conrad, and Leech (2002) explain the modals contained in Table 2 as paired: modals-past and those that refer to the present or future.

Table 2. *Contrasting Modals that Correspond to Modals in the Past; taken from Biber, Conrad, and Leech, 2002, p. 175*

Present and Future Modals	Corresponding Past Modals
Can	Could
May	Might
Shall	Should
Will	Would

They further explain that although the above modals can be grouped to correspond with modal-past, of the nine central modals, *must* does not fit well into this binary construction. Palmer (2001) indicates that although *must* does not have a past tense form, *ought to* and *should* can be used as past equivalents, for example: "He ought to/should be there by now. (Cf. He must be there now.)" (Palmer, 2001, p. 204).

Using modal-past constructions with the other syntactic modifiers was considered modification for request strategies that mitigate illocutionary force if the items were embedded within the request (Flores-Salgado & Castineira-Benitez, 2018). The verb phrases were analyzed for modification for past tense, including modal past, and for the construction of grammatical progressive aspect (to be + present participle). To ensure that a syntactic modifier was functioning as a mitigating force rather than performing a grammatical function, "only syntactic devices which were optional in the given context" were considered (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989, p. 281). Finally, the embedding of the request head act within another full clause was also counted as a syntactic modification that served to mitigate the directness of a request (ibid.). The number of modifications in each request was tallied and the tallies were used for the following analysis.

Participants

The course instructor was an EL1 speaking male in his thirties. The ELX classes were mostly students from Asia (n = 25), though their nationalities were not the focus of the study and were therefore not systematically noted (see discussion in limitations). The participants had all scored the minimum of 80 (or equivalent) on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL iBT). Students in the EL1 (n = 32) classes were mostly white, with the majority coming from English-speaking homes. A few EL1 students were multilingual but their English did not impede classroom communication

Data

The data contain 114 requests from naturally occurring email messages from 25 ELX and 32 EL1 participants. The students who wrote the emails were enrolled in classes during the same calendar year; the EL1 classes were taught during the spring semester, and the ELX classes were taught the following fall. The courses were 16-weeks in duration, and EL1 emails were collected during weeks 1 to 12 while ELX emails were collected during weeks 1-15. These differences were due to course logistics and did not affect the integrity of the data. The study populations, request data, and average politeness scores are detailed in Table 3.

Table 3. *Overview of Participant Populations and Data*

Group	N	Request Head Acts	Average Politeness Score
ELX	25	58	3.41
EL1	32*	56	3.10
Totals	57	114	3.25

*One student stated they did not participate due to not sending emails, resulting in n=32.

Evaluating Politeness

Request head acts were evaluated by six FYC instructors. These instructors were members of a cohort of teaching associates (TA) enrolled in doctoral programs at the same university and were chosen because they belonged to the same community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Two evaluators from each of Kachru's (1985, 1992) concentric circles model were recruited to rate email politeness. The two evaluators from EL1 backgrounds were pursuing their doctorates in Rhetoric and Composition, while the four evaluators from ELX backgrounds were pursuing doctorates in Applied Linguistics and were international students from Sri Lanka, India, China, and Korea. The six evaluators read the 114 request head acts and evaluated their politeness according to a six-point Likert scale from 0 to 5, where 0 = rude, 1 = impolite, 2 = somewhat impolite, 3 = somewhat polite, 4 = polite, and 5 = extremely polite. However, due to the lack of extreme ratings (rude and extremely polite), these ratings were collapsed, as seen in Table 4.

Evaluators read a short description which defined the request head act based on Blum-Kulka et al. (1989). Next, they were asked to evaluate the overall politeness of the email request based on their intuitions, a decision that is addressed in the limitations. Requests head acts were extracted from the emails by the researcher but were not modified. As a consequence, spelling, grammatical errors, and typos remained. For ambiguous requests, a minimum explanation was provided (e.g. Request: "I just saw my grades and I noticed that im marked down for draft two." Explanation: Student is requesting a reason for an earned grade). These implicit requests were coded as being embedded since they distanced themselves from the request by implying the request. Since the analysis is limited to the three syntactic modifications described above, the highest score a request could receive was three if it was an embedded clause that included past tense and progressive grammatical aspect. Table 4 displays politeness ranking and average number of syntactic modifications for the two participant groups.

Table 4. *Politeness Ranking & Avg. Number of Syntactic Modifications in Requests*

Politeness Ranking		ELX		EL1	
		No. of requests	Request: Avg. No. Syntactic Mod	No. of requests	Request: Avg. No Syntactic Mod
< 2	< Impolite	4	0.17	3	0.00
2-2.99	SW Impolite	7	0.89	19	0.66
3-3.99	SW Polite	36	0.90	28	1.59
≥ 4	≥ Polite	11	1.83	6	2.83

Results

The results that follow are organized around each research question. The first research question asks what relationship exists between the syntactic modifications in an email request and its perceived politeness? To discover this relationship, a Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated, which shows a moderate, positive relationship between use of syntactic modifiers and politeness ranking. For the ELX group, $r = 0.42$ and for the EL1 group $r = 0.59$. An overview of the relationships between these two variables is detailed in Figure 1.
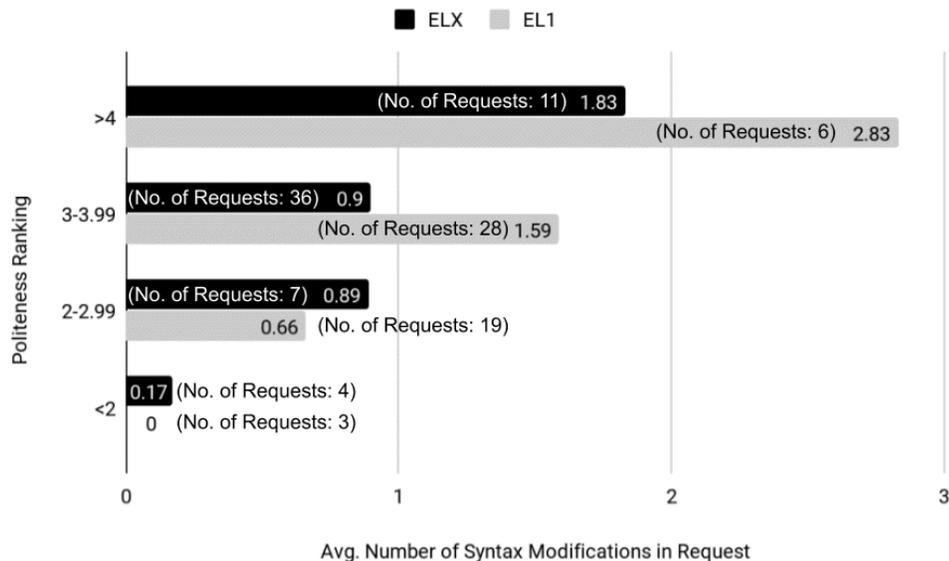
Figure 1. Collated Politeness Ranking & Avg. Number of Syntactic Modifications in Requests

The second research question was formulated to determine how EL1 and ELX speakers employ syntactic modification in their email requests. Results show that EL1 students used a higher rate of syntactic modifiers when making requests than ELX students, as found in Biesenbach-Lucas (2006).

Figure 2 provides the average number of syntactic modifications per request based on participant groups. Note that ELX students combined syntactic modifications 0.24 times per request, while the EL1 students almost double that rate at 0.45 times per request.
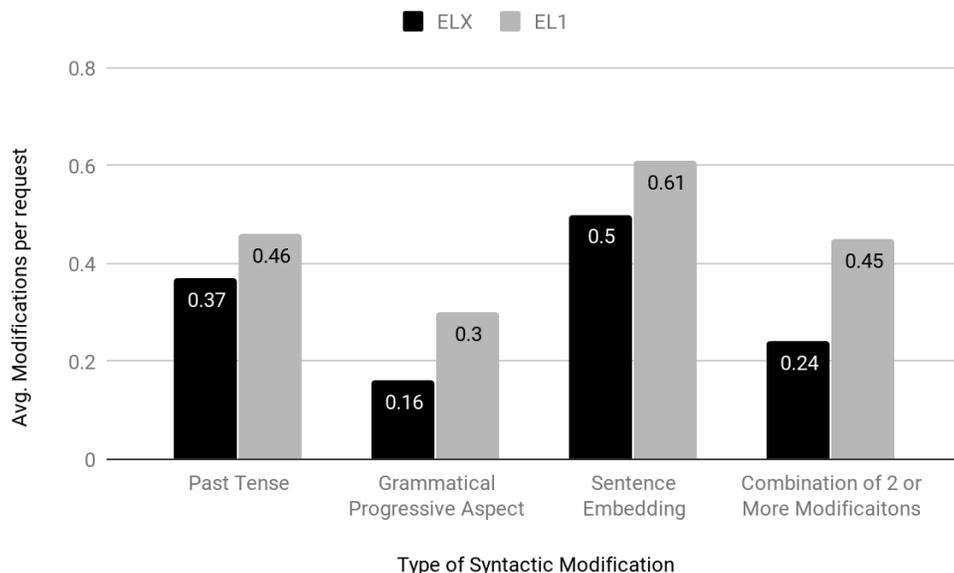
Figure 2. Average Number of Syntactic Modifications per Request for Participants

Unexpectedly, however, higher rates of usage of syntactic modifiers did not always result in higher scores of perceived politeness. Figure 2 shows that ELX students used fewer instances of past tense, progressive aspect, and sentence embedding when composing email requests. In contrast, EL1 students employed a higher number of modifications in their emails and yet fewer of their requests were rated as polite or somewhat polite when compared with the requests made by the ELX students (Figure 3).
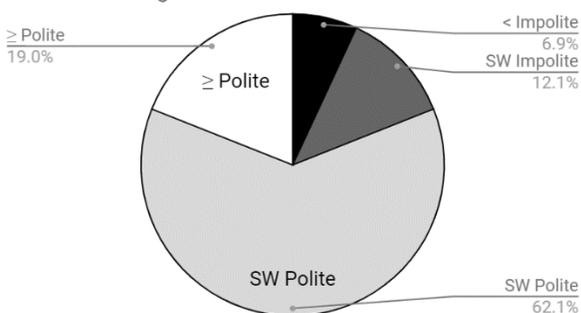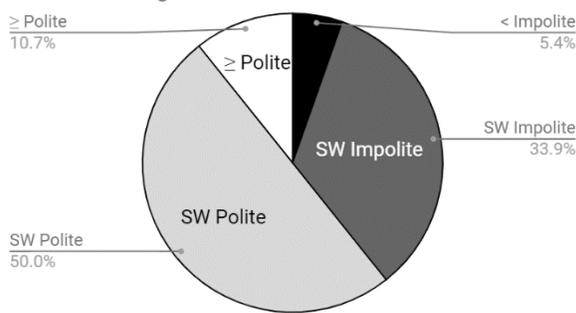

Figure 3. Portion of requests Based on Collated Politeness Ratings

Two requests were rated with highest politeness scores of the study (4.6 out of 5). (1) contained one past-tense syntactic modifier, while (2) did not contain any syntactic modification:

(1) **Could** you offer me the link to read since it hasn't been published on the blackboard?
(2) May I go to your office hours and show you my website? Or is there any way to get my grades?

In (1), the use of *could* is the modal-past of *can* and is the only syntactic modification within the request. This request also uses the lexical verb *offer*, which is followed by an explanation in order to explain why the request is reasonable, lowering the illocutionary force and perlocutionary uptake (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). The second request which was rated highly for politeness (2), contains a supportive move, which is

defined by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) as "a unit external to the request which modifies its impact by either aggravating or mitigating its force" (p. 276). In this case, the force was mitigated (supported) by giving another option. In (2) the modal *may* sounds intuitively polite and is functioning as a downgrader in this sentence, but it was not coded as a syntactic modification, since it is not modal-past nor is it optional. It further uses speaker dominance by using the first-person, subject pronoun *I* in order to shift the focus on what the student, as opposed to the professor, will do in order to realize the fulfillment of the request. These are possible reasons, beyond syntactic modification, that these two requests were evaluated at 4.6.

Despite these outliers, there is a clear relationship between the number of syntactic modifications that were used by EL1 and the ELX students and the evaluations of politeness. That is, within each group, a higher number of syntactic modifications resulted in the request being evaluated as more polite. However, this relationship breaks down when you compare the two groups since ELX student emails were seen as more polite on average than EL1 students even though their emails contained substantially less syntactic modification.

From Figure 3, we can see that 19% of ELX emails and 10.7% of EL1 emails were rated *Polite* or better. For *Somewhat Polite* emails, 62.1% of ELX emails and 50% of EL1 were rated at this level. Even though EL1 students used syntactic modification more than ELX students, ELX student emails were still evaluated as polite or better 8.3 percent more often than their EL1 peers and as somewhat polite 12.1 percent more often. There was also a 1.5 percent increase in impolite emails for the ELX participants.

The third research question seeks to illuminate to what extent do raters, overall, agree on the politeness of requests and to what extent do raters from each circle agree. Since speakers from different parts of the English-speaking world have different sociopragmatic norms for what constitutes a "polite" email request, evaluations of politeness from instructors with diverse language backgrounds do not rely on the EL1 or "native speaker" model, which has been criticized (Matsuda, 2018; Sykes, 2017; Sykes, 2018).

To explore the relationship between raters and the scores given for politeness, interrater reliability was calculated using SPSS Intraclass Correlation for Average Measures and Cronbach's Alpha (IBM Corp, 2017). The results show that there is a .705 reliability for the Intraclass Correlation statistic and .735 reliability for Cronbach's Alpha, both of which fall within the acceptable range (> .7).

The Kappa Statistic shows correlations between the two raters and was used to show interrater reliability for raters from the same background based on Kachru's (1985, 1992) concentric circles. The Kappa Statistic was modified by adding an additional score of 0.5 for ordinal ratings that were adjacent (3 = somewhat polite, and 4 = polite would be rated 0.5). A score of 1 was used for exact agreement and a score of 0 was used if the ratings were not the same or adjacent (e.g.: 2 = impolite, and 4 = polite would be rated 0). Each pair resulted in a score that showed moderate agreement (0.41 - 0.60 is considered moderate).

Table 5: *Modified Kappa Statistic for Kachruvian Rater Populations*

Populations (Kachru, 1985, 1992)	Modified Kappa Statistic
Inner Circle (United States)	0.579
Outer Circle (India, Sri Lanka)	0.581
Expanding Circle (China, Korea)	0.564

Discussion

This study examined the relationships between the use of syntactic modifiers in email requests. These requests were evaluated for politeness by six raters, two from each of Kachruvian concentric circles. Syntactic modifiers were found to positively correlate with the perception of politeness, but the correlation is far from straightforward. Specifically, the implications related to each research question are discussed below.

Research question 1: What relationship exists between the syntactic modifications in an email request and its perceived politeness? There is a positive correlation between the syntactic modifications in emails and perceived politeness. This correlation is maintained within the ELX group and the EL1group but not when the two groups are compared. There is a marked lack of syntactic modifications in ELX emails and yet, these requests were rated as more polite by evaluators. Though there is an established relationship between syntactic modification and politeness, other features are clearly influential.

Research question 2: How do EL1 and ELX speakers employ syntactic modification in their email requests? In this study, EL1 speakers employed syntactic modification to a much greater extent than ELX speakers. Moreover, EL1 speakers used a wider variety of syntactic modifications in their requests than ELX speakers (see Figure 2). Even when the ELX population did not produce the same number of syntactic modifiers, they were, on average, judged more successful in producing polite email requests. Certainly, confounding variables that were not examined exist and influenced the perceptions and rating of politeness. For example, lexical devices like the use of *please* could have an influence as could enacting L1 norms in English in addition to unseen contextual realities.

Results indicate that ELX students are aware of the pragmatic context and can produce requests appropriate to the context. In other words, their communication is not deficient but is just different from EL1 speakers' production. If we understand the activity of making a request in specific contexts, it is hard to make judgments beyond the results since the activity itself is highly contextual and "embedded in physical life, with all its messy fluidity and complex unpredictability" (Canagarajah, 2018**,** p. 4).

Research question 3: To what extent do raters, overall, agree on the politeness of requests and to what extent do raters from each circle agree? There was moderate agreement about the politeness of requests, overall, for raters and for raters from each Kachruvian circle. With this group of raters, surprisingly the request head acts from emails of ELX students were evaluated as more polite than those from EL1 students based on the average number of syntactic modifiers present in a request. Though the use of intuition for politeness seems too abstract, interrater reliability statistics show similar evaluations across the six raters. While Economidou-Kogetsidis (2015) found a stark contrast between ELX and EL1 populations that showed a need for intervention on how to write emails that are appropriate to a particular sociocultural context, the current study shows that ELX speakers have a pragmatic awareness of the sociocultural context and are able to produce requests that are judged polite by English speakers who come from inner, outer, and expanding circle speech communities. Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) reports that ELX students could "benefit from explicit email instruction as well as activities that involve discovery and raising of meta-pragmatic awareness" (p. 75) while Bardovi-Harlig and Stringer (2017) call for the teaching of conventional expressions, defined as those which EL1 users "say at least 50% of the time" (p. 84). The ELX population from the current study does not seem to need this kind of intervention to produce effective email requests, at least not from the perceptions of the raters who are representative of diverse language backgrounds. Since CMC norms are changing rapidly, perhaps Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) predicted the results of the current study when she said, "students entering universities in the near and distant future will have grown up with much more exposure and use of CMC in numerous formats than their counterparts who entered universities only five or ten years ago" (p. 74). The internet is developing as a primary source of English language contact and perhaps factors of colonial and imperial influence are permeating multilingual norms (Mair, 2013) resulting in a coherence of pragmatic abilities. This might explain why the ELX speakers in this study do not seem to merit significant intervention.

The Center for Advanced Research in Language Acquisition's (2019; CARLA) Pragmatics and Speech Acts webpage explains that when teaching speech acts, "learners of all languages tend to have difficulty… producing a speech act using appropriate language and manner in the language being learned." The participants in this study, having achieved a TOEFL iBT score of 80+ and gained entrance into an American research university, appear to have already developed the pragmatic skills to produce "a speech act using appropriate language and manner" (ibid.). However, there is a need to ensure that we are measuring students' abilities within the contexts in which they exist and not creating artificial norms or reinforcing an EL1 bias.

The landscape of American higher education includes instructors from diverse language backgrounds whose sociopragmatic norms should not be overlooked.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the FYC instructors who rated the politeness of the student email requests did not have access to the full email. Recall that the evaluators were asked to judge the politeness of the head request act that was extracted from the email message that often included extraneous information. By extracting the request from the rest of the text, context could be distorted. In future studies, evaluators should base their evaluations of politeness on more heavily contextualized requests as found in naturally occurring discourse.

Second, the Likert scale that was used was even (0-5, 6 options). This was done to ensure that instructors made a definitive decision when rating the politeness of an email. However, this means that there was no neutral option, which could have inadvertently inflated numbers for *Somewhat Polite* and *Somewhat Impolite*. Future studies should allow for neutral evaluations since a neutrally polite email is a realistic evaluation.

Third, the instructors were asked to make an evaluation based solely on their intuitions, without norming for the politeness scale used in this study. Future studies should provide more extensive training for evaluators to assure that their ratings are based on the same criteria. Along these lines, it would be beneficial to explore the raters' understanding of the particular classroom dynamics. For example, Kitade (2013) notes that previous studies framed the relationships between students and teachers as static, though more recent scholarship views classrooms as communities of practice "where members actively construct community specific language" used in ACMC exchanges (ibid., p. 3). The lack of access to the full classroom context, including an understanding of student-teacher relationships in those classrooms, could have affected the evaluation of the emails for politeness.

Finally, a limitation concerns differences in the courses from which this study drew its two populations of students. The ELX students were enrolled in the first semester of the year-long composition course while the EL1 students were enrolled in the second semester of the course. Moreover, the majority of the ELX students were enrolled in their first semester of coursework at an American institution of higher learning, meaning ELX students had received less socialization in the institutions' academic language compared to their EL1 counterparts. While there will always be differences between these two populations in terms of their language socialization, future studies should try to avoid such confounding factors.

Conclusion

This study set out to discover if there was a connection between syntactic modifications in student email requests and the perception of politeness based on the views of instructors from diverse language backgrounds. The simple answer is that this relationship appears to exist in the current study, and it is a positive one. Nevertheless, the relationship between syntactic modification and perceived politeness is culturally based and therefore difficult to assess. For instance, despite the lack of syntactic modifications made by ELX students in this study, their requests were evaluated as more polite than the EL1 students by some evaluators. Future studies of email requests would do well to explore the question of diverse sociopragmatic norms when evaluating order to substantiate and generalize these findings.

By including raters that represent Kachru's concentric circles of different sociolinguistic regions, this study aligns with the multilingual turn (cf. Cook, 2001; Ortega, 2013; May, 2013) in SLA research. Ortega (2017) explains that SLA research must embrace the complexity inherent in multilingualism:

> "Once we acknowledge that the majority of the world is multilingual, but inequitably multilingual, and that much of the world is also technologized, but inequitably so, it becomes not only our business, but also our professional responsibility to generate research about language learning and digital literacies for language learning that addresses these problems" (p. 288).

It is important to acknowledge the full and diverse range of both our students and our colleagues. The pragmatic perceptions of EL1 instructors are often considered as normative despite the fact that students and instructors come from diverse language backgrounds, as recognized by Kachru's model of World Englishes. González-Lloret (2019) contends that an EL1 frame should not be a comprehensive approach for the development of pragmatic competence in a world where many interactions may involve neither inner circle speakers nor contexts. This study, with a diverse group of instructors who served as evaluators, acknowledges not just the multilingual world we live in, but the multilingual world we teach in.

Unfortunately, many studies in pragmatics are still framed in terms of an ideal native speaker. Integral to the native speaker construct is the assumption of common ground (i.e. the sociopragmatic norms and beliefs that form the basis of a traditional speech community). By adopting Kachru's World Englishes framework, this study explicitly rejected the hegemony of an idealized native English speaker. Finally, this study raises important questions concerning the pedagogical applicability of pragmatic research based on the traditional native speaker ideal. Future studies in instructional pragmatics should adopt an intercultural framework that more accurately reflects the complex multilingual and multicultural realities of world languages such as English.

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