

ACADEMIC EMAIL REQUESTS: A CHALLENGE FOR EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract: The study aims to investigate the level of pragmatic competence of Romanian learners of English when performing requests in academic email interaction. It focuses on the analysis of the linguistic form of authentic email requests written by students of USARB (Alecu Russo Balti State University) to faculty. The study examines the way politeness is expressed in academic email requests by analysing the level of directness employed, as well as the use of internal modification of the head act of request. The findings reveal cases of negative transfer of strategies from students' mother tongue into English. This stresses the need for pragmatic instruction, which will contribute to developing the EFL learners' pragmatic competence.

Keywords: conventionally indirect request, direct request, non-conventionally indirect request, negative transfer, pragmatic transfer.

The topic of the present study was prompted by my observation that when making requests in English, students tend to be very direct. In my teaching activity I often use email communication with my students. Very often students ask me to send them the PPTs that were used in class or the books that are available in electronic form. Looking at the language they use to formulate their requests, I thought this would be an interesting topic for investigation. There were two issues that attracted my attention: the syntactic form used when making requests and the way politeness is expressed in email requests.

To begin with, here is a request that I received from one of my students: *I am sending you the examples I would like to analyze in my research, please have a look and tell me if they are ok.* As can be seen, it is correct from the grammatical point of view, the student tried to be polite – she used the politeness marker *please*, yet the request does not seem to follow the norms of linguistic politeness characteristic of English. It is easy to notice that it follows the Romanian rules of politeness, according to which an imperative structure accompanied by the politeness marker *te rog/ vă rog* is used to make a polite request. Polite usage in Romanian allows many more direct imperatives than English does. Although *please* is often used as a politeness marker in English, when used with an imperative form, it is not sufficient to make a polite request.

We witness a case of interference of the mother tongue (in this case Romanian) in realizing a language function, and namely when making requests in English. This kind of interference is called negative transfer. As K. Bardovi-Harlig and R. Sprouse explain, negative transfer occurs “when the influence of the native language leads to error in the acquisition or use of a target language” [1, p. 1]. As such, it may occur in different language areas: phonetics, morphology, syntax, vocabulary acquisition and pragmatics. In this article we are interested in the pragmatic transfer that occurs when native speakers of Romanian make requests in English.

Pragmatic transfer refers to “the influence exerted by learners’ pragmatic knowledge of languages and cultures other than L2 on their comprehension, production and learning of L2 pragmatic information” [6, p. 207]. One of its two facets is the pragmalinguistic transfer, defined by J. Thomas as “the inappropriate transfer of speech act strategies from one language to another, or the transferring from the mother tongue to the target language of utterances which are semantically/syntactically equivalent, but which, because of different

'interpretive bias', tend to convey a different pragmatic force in the target language" [8, p. 101].

In other words, pragmalinguistic transfer involves using certain strategies and forms from the mother tongue into the foreign language. Such a transfer may affect the degree of politeness of a particular utterance, which, consequently, may lead to failure and misunderstanding in intercultural communication.

The study focuses on the analysis of the linguistic form of 30 authentic email requests written by students of USARB to faculty. It examines the way politeness is expressed in academic email requests by analysing the level of directness employed, as well as the use of the internal modification of the request. Internal modification of the request includes lexical and syntactic means that soften the force of the request.

The first item of analysis was the level of directness. In the analysis of the data we followed Blum-Kulka's coding scheme, according to which requests are classified into direct, conventionally indirect and non-conventionally indirect or hints [4, p. 201]. We included only the categories for which we found examples in the data. Thus, the category locution derivable (*You'll have to/should/ must/ ought to...*), where the illocutionary intent is directly derivable from the semantic meaning of the locution and which in Blum-Kulka's coding scheme refers to direct requests, was not introduced. Want statements, where the utterance expresses the speaker's desire that the event denoted in the proposition come about (*I want you to advise me a few interesting books*), were omitted too. Similarly, the suggestory formula group (*how about ...?/ why don't you ... ?*), which in Blum-Kulka's coding scheme belongs to conventionally indirect requests, was not included.

Direct requests express the speaker's intention very clearly, without any ambiguity. They include the following categories:

- Mood derivable: where the grammatical mood of the locution conventionally determines its illocutionary force, e.g. the imperative (*Send me the book, please*);
- explicit performatives: where the illocutionary intent is explicitly named by the speaker by using a relevant illocutionary verb (*I kindly ask you to send me the list of topics for the presentations*);
- hedged performatives: where the illocutionary verb denoting the requestive intent is modified (*We would like to ask you to send us the homework for tomorrow*);

- need statements: where the utterance expresses the speaker’s need that the hearer carry out the act (*I need your advice*).
- Conventionally indirect requests are „procedures that realize the act by reference to contextual preconditions necessary for its performance, as conventionalized in a given language” [4, p. 201]. Structures that belong to this category include:
 - Query preparatory (ability, willingness, possibility): *Can you help me with this problem? Could you send me the list of topics?/ Would you like to check the abstract, introduction and conclusion of my thesis?*
 - Stating preparatory: *I will be very grateful to you if you can tell me the title of the article.*

Non-conventionally indirect requests include ”the open-ended group of indirect strategies (hints) that realize the request by either partial reference to object or element needed for the implementation of the act ('Why is the window open'), or by reliance on contextual clues ('It's cold in here')” [4, p. 201].

Of these three categories, conventionally indirect requests are considered the most polite. By asking about the hearer’s ability, willingness or possibility to perform an action, the speaker is seen as non-imposing, following thus R. Lakoff’s politeness rule “Don’t impose” [7]. These forms are seldom interpreted in their literal meaning, i.e. questioning ability, willingness or possibility, but are understood as being requests. Direct requests and non-conventionally indirect requests (hints) are treated as containing a lower degree of politeness. Direct requests break R. Lakoff’s rule “Give options” and hints may sound impolite since they require more effort from the speaker to decode their meaning [2, p. 144].

The table below illustrates the frequency of the three strategies (direct requests, conventionally indirect requests and non-conventionally indirect requests) in the data.

Table 1. Level of directness in email requests

Strategy	Frequency
Direct requests	43 % (13)
Conventionally indirect requests	50 % (15)
Non-conventionally indirect requests (hints)	7 % (2)

As can be seen, conventionally indirect requests have the highest frequency (50%), followed by direct requests (43%) and by non-conventionally indirect requests (7%). Taking into consideration the fact that the requests were addressed by students to faculty, the

percentage of direct requests is rather high. This might be interpreted as a case of negative transfer of request strategies from the students' mother tongue into English.

Direct requests express the speaker's intention very clearly, without any ambiguity. However, two pragmatic principles seem to be in conflict with each other in such a case. On the one hand, such requests follow P. Grice's [5] maxim of manner but on the other hand, they break R. Lakoff's politeness rules "Don't impose" and "Give options" [7].

The table below shows the substrategies of direct requests and their frequency in the present study.

Table 2. Frequency of substrategies of direct requests

Substrategy	Examples	Frequency
Mood derivable (the imperative)	<i>Please read my speech and write your remarks.</i>	9
Explicit performatives	<i>I will kindly ask you to let me know when you get these two documents.</i>	2
Hedged performatives	<i>We would like to ask you to send us the homework for tomorrow because we are a little confused.</i>	1
Need statements	<i>I need your advice.</i>	1
TOTAL		13

The study shows that students used imperatives more frequently than other direct substrategies. In fact, this substrategy accounts for the majority of direct requests (9). Since students addressed the requests to faculty, who have a higher status, they mitigated the directive force of the imperative with the politeness marker *please*. In fact, the politeness marker occurred in all the requests that are expressed by means of an imperative. In eight cases it was used in front position and in one case – in mid-position. *Please* was the only internal mitigator used in mood derivable requests in this study. Both the frequent use of the imperative to make requests and the use of the politeness marker *please* are indicative of negative pragmatic transfer from the students' mother tongue. This may hamper communication with native speakers of English, especially in requests addressed by students to faculty.

Conventionally indirect requests have the highest incidence in the present study (50%). They are considered polite since they give

the hearer the option to decide whether to carry out the request or not. Students seem to be aware of the fact that the relationship between interlocutors influences the choice of the request strategy, and namely that a more distant relationship between interlocutors requires an indirect formulation of request.

Of the two substrategies mentioned earlier in this paper, the query preparatory was used more frequently (13 cases). The stating preparatory substrategy occurred only in two cases: *I will be very grateful to you if you can tell me the title of the article./ I'll be grateful if you can give me some individual work for the English lesson.* It is important to point out that students used very few structures to make indirect requests. Most of them were interrogative sentences with the modal verbs *can* and *could*. However, the English language offers many more structures for conventionally indirect requests.

The table below illustrates the types and frequency of query preparatory requests used in this study.

Table 3. Frequency of query preparatory requests

Query preparatory types	Examples	Frequency
Ability	<i>Can you check my paper, please?</i> <i>Could you have a look at the contents of my work?</i>	12
Willingness	<i>Would you like to check the abstract, introduction and conclusion of my thesis?</i>	1
Total		13

It is important to point out that both *can* and *could* were used in requests. However, few students seem to be aware of the difference in the degree of politeness of requests containing these verbs. Thus, *could* (5), which makes a request more polite, had a lower frequency than *can* (7).

Another issue that requires attention in teaching requests is the perspective or orientation of conventionally indirect requests. As pointed out by Blum-Kulka et al. [3, p. 58–9] a speaker can:

1. stress the role of the hearer by making a hearer oriented request, e.g. *Can you lend me your dictionary?*
2. stress his/her own role by making a speaker oriented request, e.g. *Could I have your dictionary for a minute?*
3. use an inclusive ‘we’, e.g. *Why don't we do it now?*

4. use an impersonal construction, e.g. *I was wondering if there'd be any possibility of borrowing a car?*

Of the first two perspectives, the speaker-oriented one is considered more polite since no imposition is placed on the addressee. In the data analyzed for the present study the speaker perspective occurred only once. It shows that students do not know about the possibility of using different perspectives. Nor do they know the difference between them.

Just as was the case with direct requests, the only internal modifier that students used to mitigate the force of the conventionally indirect requests was the marker *please*.

The results of the present study show that students tend to transfer request strategies from Romanian into English. Thus, many of their requests in English are expressed directly, via imperative sentences. In addition, they seem to use the politeness marker *please* as in Romanian to soften the imperative, believing that in such a way they make a polite request. Except that, they seem not to be aware of the fact that the language of requests depends on the relationship between interlocutors. All of this emphasizes the need to pay more attention to teaching English requests, with a focus on the following aspects: linguistic means used to formulate conventionally indirect requests; internal modification of requests which includes lexical and syntactic means that mitigate the force of the request; the perspective in conventionally indirect requests.

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