

**An empirical study on the pragmatic competence of
Spanish EFL learners in performing a speech act of request**

by

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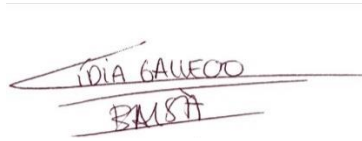
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Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic dimensions of learners' pragmatic competence. The research was carried out by means of a discourse completion test (DCT) which was given to 50 students of a Spanish secondary school. This research is an attempt to answer the following questions: 1) Is there a relationship between language proficiency and pragmatic competence? 2) Which politeness strategies do Spanish students apply to perform a request in English? 3) Are requests performed with a different degree of politeness depending on social distance and context? 4) Are there any cross-gender differences in performing a request? The findings of the study do not show any relationship between language proficiency and pragmatic competence, learners of all levels demonstrated similar ways of request realization. Spanish EFL learners gave a preference to a conventionally indirect strategy of performing a request and social variables were taken into account by the respondents. Statistical analysis of responses revealed that males and females show certain tendencies and patterns in different aspects of performing a request.

Keywords: pragmatic competence, request, DCT, speech act, politeness strategy, EFL.

1. Introduction

1.1. Importance of pragmatics.

Communicative language teaching places the central role on developing skills that are useful in real life situations. Such approach considers communication as the main purpose of learning a L2. To be effective in communication, learners need some knowledge about how to use language appropriately in different contexts and social interactions. Contextual variables should be taken into account in communication, e. g.

social relationship between speakers, age, status etc. In other words, learners need to know sociopragmatic norms in order to make the right pragmalinguistic choices.

Grammatical proficiency does not necessarily mean equivalent pragmatic development. Many students, as mentioned by Hymes (1964), have a perfect knowledge of the L2 grammar rules but nevertheless have difficulties at interpersonal level when establishing a conversation with native speakers. That is to say, some advanced learners do not know sociocultural norms and therefore lack communicative competence.

Thomas (1983) views linguistic competence as the one including the following aspects of language knowledge: grammatical competence, abstract knowledge of phonology, syntax, semantics, communicative/pragmatic competence, the capacity to use a language effectively in order to fulfil a certain goal and to understand language in context. The last pragmatic part is often neglected by teachers and they tend to focus students' attention on memorizing grammar rules and vocabulary. It is important to understand though, that lack of pragmatic competence can lead to pragmatic failure and to a complete communication breakdown. Pragmatic failure may have even worse consequences than a grammatical error: not knowing social or cultural norms may cause interlocutors to misinterpret speaker's intentions or throw negative judgements on speaker's personality or even moral (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003).

Pragmatic failure may be of 2 types (Thomas, 1983):

1. Pragmalinguistic failure: the pragmatic force of a linguistic structure is different from that normally assigned to it by a native speaker.

2. Sociopragmatic failure stems from the different intercultural perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behaviour, e. g. the size of imposition, taboo, power and social distance assessments.

According to Jung (2002), to be competent from a pragmatic point of view, students need to be able to carry out speech acts, produce and interpret non-literal meanings, use politeness strategies, carry out discursive functions, use cultural knowledge. Sociopragmatics is the field of study that investigates interaction and how speech acts are realized in social situation, taking into account conversational context. It considers both sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic dimensions (Trosborg, 1995).

Culture specific variables influence the way speech acts are realized in different languages and cultures. Such differences are a subject of investigation of contrastive and cross-cultural pragmatics. Thus, in order to be pragmatically appropriate in a language it is necessary to know cultural values and norms, and how they are portrayed in linguistic forms (Trosborg, 1995).

Consequences of pragmatic differences in the two languages may lead to pragmatic transfer which is defined by Kasper (1992) as “influence exerted by learners’ pragmatic knowledge of languages and cultures other than L2 on their comprehension, production and learning of L2 pragmatic information”. Students usually carry out speech acts, such as requests or apologies, in accordance with the sociolinguistic norms of their native language (Ellis, 1994).

1.2. A brief history of a politeness theory.

Grice (1975) established the fundament of a politeness theory which is based on the idea that “the key to the management of information in conversational exchanges is the

Cooperative Principle (CP), a tacit principle that governs the way language is used to achieve rational efficiency and effectiveness in communication”. It is comprised of the maxims of quality (be truthful), quantity (provide the right amount of information), relation (be relevant), and manner (be perspicuous).

Robin Lakoff was one of the first to study politeness from a clearly pragmatic perspective. Lakoff (1973) proposed “two rules of pragmatic competence: ‘Be clear’, which is formalised in terms of Grice’s (1975) CP, and ‘Be polite’, which is formalised in terms of a Politeness Principle. The latter Politeness Principle consists of the following maxims: (a) Don’t impose, (b) Give options, and (c) Make your receiver feel good” (as cited in Culpeper et al., 2017).

The first concerted attempt to theorize the effects of context on politeness assessments is due to Brown & Levinson (1987), who proposed three sociological variables: Distance, Power, and Ranking of the imposition. Jointly these variables regulate the degree of politeness appropriate to the performance of a face-threatening act. It is one of the most influential theories of politeness. According to the scholars, certain speech acts inherently threaten either the addressee’s or the speaker’s face-wants (FTAs) and politeness is involved in redressing those face-threats. Thus, weightiness of the speech act is determined by several factors: perceived social distance, perceived power difference, cultural ranking of the speech act, i.e. how threatening it is.

1.3. Justification.

This project is an attempt to analyse a current state of students’ pragmatic competence. Testing students’ communicative competence is vital for improving their learning process, teaching materials and methodology. Very often students who do good at exams are not as competent in real-life communication. Pragmatics is neglected by

teachers in many public schools where studying programs are out-of-date, and methodologies are still very conservative and traditional. Students learn English out of context – they follow the coursebook and do not experience the language in a wider real-life context. Consequently, they fail to apply appropriate linguistic tools once they are faced with a real-life situation, because they are taught the semantic but not the pragmatic meaning of words and expression.

Most probably, after finishing school, they will never use Past Perfect Continuous Tense, but they will more likely find themselves in a situation where they need to apologize, request or complain in a polite manner. Impoliteness and ignorance about sociopragmatic norms are the traits that indicate person's bad education and rudeness. Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei's (1997) study is a good illustration of flaws in a studying programme: they reported that Hungarian and Italian EFL learners recognized grammatically incorrect but pragmatically appropriate utterances more readily than pragmatically inappropriate but grammatically correct utterances. For that reason, Kasper (1997) suggests that "without a pragmatic focus, foreign language teaching raises students' metalinguistic awareness, but it does not contribute much to develop their metapragmatic consciousness in L2".

Request is "an attempt on the part of the speaker to get the hearer to perform or to stop performing some kind of action" (Ellis, 1994). They are categorized by Brown and Levinson (1987) as face-threatening acts (FTA), because the speaker imposes his or her will on the hearer. Depending on the seriousness or weightiness of the FTA, the speaker chooses different strategies and makes an attempt to mitigate the degree of imposition depending on relative power and social distance between the speaker and the hearer. Thus, social distance is a variable that changes the way a request is performed. This aspect is a

very important component of pragmatic competence insofar as inappropriate form of requests might look rude or impolite, and this can lead to communication problems.

Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) identified three major and universal levels of directness in requesting strategies and described them in the following way:

1. Direct (explicit) level – syntactically marked with imperatives or other verbal means that name the act as a request, like performatives and 'hedged performatives'.

2. Conventionally indirect level – realize the act by reference to contextual preconditions necessary for its performance, as conventionalized in a given language, e.g. '*could you do it*' or '*would you do it*'.

3. Nonconventional indirect level – 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*').

Kasper (1997) relies on the same classification and mentions that users of any language distinguish different levels of directness: 1) direct, as in “feed the cat”; 2) conventionally indirect, as in “*can/could/would you feed the cat?*” 3) indirect, as in ‘the cat’s complaining.’

Speech acts are realized in a different way across cultures and languages. Hauzinger (2012) presents the differences between politeness norms of Spanish in contrast to English. The author states that “non-conventional indirectness as well as deictic means of distancing seem to be language-specific realisations of politeness in British English” while “language-specific realisations of politeness in Peninsular Spanish, on the contrary, rather indicate closeness to others”. Such contradictory norms and beliefs,

as mentioned by the author, might be a source of misunderstandings in intercultural communication.

Research in pragmatic competence needs to be done in order to implement improvements to teaching English in schools. Analysing pragmatic errors that students make in communication makes it possible to identify the most common types of errors and their causes: pragmatic transfer from students' L1, poor instruction, teaching approach, textbooks, etc.

To summarize, request was chosen out of all the other speech acts for this study because it is one of the most face-threatening acts which requires politeness strategies and mitigating devices to reduce the imposition on the hearer. Studying Spanish EFL learners' politeness strategies in performing this speech act is beneficial for investigating possible pragmatic failures in communication and raising awareness about cultural influence on communication in a foreign language. It was of great interest to study the use of politeness routines by Spanish students of a secondary school and see if the influence of their L1 is evident in performing requests.

2. Literature review.

Multiple research has been done on various aspects of pragmatics. Several scholars studied the relationship between language proficiency and pragmatic competence. Khamyod and Aksornjarung (2011) compared the pragmatic competence in performing speech acts of apologies and thanks to 16 high and 14 low English proficiency learners. They used a multiple-rejoinder discourse completion task (DCT) consisting of 24 scenarios. The results of the test revealed that participants with high English proficiency showed high pragmatic ability and vice versa. A similar study was carried out by Tabatabaei and Farnia (2015), but the results showed that there was no correlation

between language proficiency and pragmatic performance. Their study is an evidence that even high proficient learners lack pragmatic knowledge. The researchers explain this by lack of pragmatic instructions and the influence of Indian culture on the speech act production. It was concluded that “the fact that learners with higher proficiency level did not perform significantly better than those with lower proficiency level, even with living in the second language context, with more opportunities to interact in English either by English native speakers or Indians, indicates that another important factor, i.e. metapragmatic awareness might influence pragmatic acquisition of learners” (Tabatabaei and Farnia, 2015, p. 71). The authors suggest that language teachers should make the learners aware of existing differences in speech act production in English and their native language.

Under investigation also had been pragmatic transfer. Tabatabaeia & Samieeb (2013) studied cross-cultural differences in requestive speech acts between Persian and English by using DCT. The results revealed the significant differences in the use of request strategies between EFL learners and English native speakers, however there was no signs of pragmatic transfer of requestive speech act from L1 to L2 in Iranian EFL learners. The authors state that “investigation of the nature and styles of requests can help practitioners and decisions makers in the field to prepare EFL learners to use appropriate strategies to communicate more effectively and efficiently.”

Ardila (as cited in Hauzinger, 2012, p. 66-67) concludes that the English speakers employ imperatives much less frequently than the Spanish speakers (10% in comparison to 29%) and interrogative constructions occur more frequently in English (86%) than in Spanish (68%). Moreover, English native speakers formulate interrogative requests with modals whereas Spanish speakers prefer present indicatives or conditional constructions. Another prominent difference between English and Spanish native speakers is in their use

of direct strategies. In Ballesteros Martín's study (as cited in Hauzinger, 2012, p. 66-67) only 18.33 % of the English speakers against 32.22% of the Spanish speakers employed direct strategies for requests and commands. These findings prove that the Spanish quite often give preference to direct forms over indirect forms.

Márquez Reiter (as cited in Hauzinger, 2012, p. 66-67) concludes that speakers of British English prefer the conventionalised *I'd like* in request situations in which Spanish speakers often employ the verbs *necesitar* [*to need*] and *querer* [*to want*] which may sound too direct and impolite to English speakers. Another observation was made by Franch (1998) about the frequency of use of the routines such as *Perdón*, *Lo siento* and *Por favor* as Spanish equivalents of *Sorry* and *Please*. Spanish learners in the UK are often judged to be brusque and impolite due to their scant use of *Sorry* and *Please*. The author states that her Spanish students of English, after a stay in England, use more frequently these routines. However, in Spain, these students are judged to be extremely or unnaturally polite because these routines are not normally used so frequently by Spanish speakers.

A study by Cenoz & Valencia (1996) compared the request strategies of native and non-native speakers of English. The participants were 29 American and 78 European students with different first languages who were enrolled in English and Spanish courses at the University of the Basque Country (Spain). Data were obtained using a DCT. The analysis of responses gave the following results:

- The conventionally indirect strategy was used in 85.2% of the English requests and 72.9% of the Spanish requests and included preparatories (Can I.. ?, Could I.. ?), and suggestory formula (How about..?).

- The direct strategy was used in 10% of the English requests and 25.37% of the Spanish requests and included mood derivables (Give me...), explicit performatives (I am asking..), hedged performatives (I must ask) and locution derivables (you must/should/have to).

- The nonconventional indirect strategy (strong and mild hints) was used in 4.8% of the English requests and 1.72% of the Spanish requests.

- The use of mitigating supportives by Europeans was much higher (61.7%) than previous reports on the use of supportives in British English (23%). Non-native speakers' requests were longer because they used more mitigating supportives than Americans.

E.g.:

American Native Speaker: *I have to make a really important, long distance phone call. Might I borrow your phone?*

European Non-Native Speaker: *I need to make a long distance phone call. I would be very glad if I could phone from here, and of course, I will pay you the call.*

Finding of Cenoz & Valencia (1996) show differences in the use of request strategies by native and non-native English speakers: Americans use more direct and fewer conventionally indirect strategies than European speakers in English. Besides, non-native speakers showed a higher frequency of using mitigating supportives. In general, the researchers concluded that second language learners and native speakers were aware of the different situations and used different degrees of directness according to context.

Gender differences were under investigation of many linguists and it was proved that women and men express politeness in a different way. Janet Holmes is a New Zealand sociolinguist among whose research interests were language and gender. In her study (Holmes, 1995), she used ethnographic approach to collect data (compliments and their

responses) and revealed that women gave and received significantly more compliments than men did. The differences were also found in syntactic and lexical patterns: women preferred a formula What (a) (ADJ) NP! E.g. *What lovely children! What a splendid hat!* Men, by contrast, used the minimal pattern (INT) ADJ (NP). E.g. *Great shoes. Nice bike.* The findings also suggest that women tend to express compliments with linguistically stronger forms than men do. Moreover, Holmes (1995) states that the same utterance may be used and interpreted differently by different social groups, including women and men. To illustrate this, compliments may be accepted as tokens of solidarity by women but experienced as an embarrassment by men. Men may in some cases interpret compliments as face-threatening acts. However, Kuiper's (1991) observations suggest an opposite hypothesis: insults which would certainly be experienced by women as FTA, appear to perform a solidarity-maintaining function for at least some men, e. g. members of a rugby team, who use different insulting and abusive address terms towards each other (e. g. *wanker, girl's blouse* etc.) (as cited in Holmes, 1995, p. 153). Finally, it was mentioned that Cheris Kramer (1975) found that men used a wider variety of address forms for women and men than women did (as cited in Holmes, 1995, p. 147).

Lorenzo-Dus & Bou Franch (2003) carried out a study on Spanish and British undergraduates aged 19-25. They used a DCT as a data collection tool. Their major findings concerned the strategies and formulas applied by males and females. There were similarities between female responses in British and Spanish corpus: Spanish and British women used twice as many mitigating strategies and supportive moves for minimising the degree of imposition in their requests as their male counterparts. For example, when using the formula *I was wondering if...*, British women tended to use it together with other strategies and supportive moves, whereas men used it on its own, like in the examples below:

Man: *I was wondering if you'd write a letter of recommendation for me?*

Woman: *I was wondering if you'd be so kind as to write a recommendation letter for a university application please?*

In the Spanish data, both men and women used mainly direct strategies in their requests. The authors suppose that in some particular aspects of request formulation, cultural behaviour may be a stronger factor than gender. In one specific situation, women scored twice as highly as men in the use of direct strategies which contradicts the stereotypes that associate male behaviour with directness.

In the British corpus, men and women used in general the same types of request strategies and their choice of request strategies was mainly determined by the power and social distance variables. Most frequent modal verb for men and women was *can* (*Can I have...?*), and in some situations both groups gave preference to the modal *could* followed closely by the preparatory phrase *I was wondering if...* In contrast to Spanish females, British women were not more direct than men. Despite some qualitative and quantitative differences in politeness devices, Lorenzo-Dus & Bou Franch (2003) concluded that both men and women in their study were politeness-oriented.

3. Methodology.

The purpose of this study is to investigate students' pragmatic competence, in particular, whether they take into account such aspects of communication as social distance and awareness of politeness strategies required in each situation. Chaudron (2003) states that "DCT have been developed primarily in order to elicit only certain domains of target structure and have been used predominantly in L2 research to elicit data on pragmatic abilities in a variety of speech acts, with requests and apologies being the most commonly studied."

The experimental design of the study was based on a qualitative approach in collecting data. The data was collected by means of a questionnaire (DCT) that included open-ended questions. The DCT included two situations which were designed to elicit a speech act of request from the respondents. In each situation, different social distance was pictured between interlocutors: close friends and strangers.

The respondents were 50 students of a Spanish secondary school: the public school Joan 23 in Bonavista, Tarragona. Their age was between 13-17 years old and they were attending different classes: 7 respondents were students in 2 ESO, 8 in 3 ESO, 23 in 4 ESO and 12 in 1 BAT. The gender distribution of participants was 25 males and 25 females.

3.1. Procedures.

The DCTs were distributed to the students who voluntarily agreed to participate by filling in the questionnaire. It was done in classrooms during their English lessons from permission of the teachers. A choice of a group-administered data collection method was justified by Griffie (2012) who described an advantage of group-administered questionnaires over self-administered ones: “*Self-administered* questionnaires, that is mailed to participants at their homes or offices, are hard to control because varying conditions under which they were completed are unknown to the researcher. A *group-administered* questionnaire, on the other hand, is a questionnaire administered in person to a group, such as a language class, by the person who designed the questionnaire. By administering the questionnaire to your own class, you can have a high return rate, can clarify questions raised by participants, and know the conditions under which the questionnaire was administered.”

3.2. Data analysis.

Primarily, the data was analysed qualitatively in order to define the strategies and mitigating devices used to perform a speech act. Each response was analysed in 2 ways: 1) directness of a request; 2) use of mitigating devices: supportive moves, politeness markers and attention getters. Qualitative data analysis software NVIVO was used for carrying out both qualitative and statistical analysis. In total, 7 categories were found in responses: direct strategy, indirect strategy, use of a politeness marker “please”, grounding supportive move of explanation, alerters in form of an address term, apology and greeting. In order to carry out a statistical analysis of responses, each category was given a code in an analytical programme. This enabled an analysis of frequencies with which certain strategies and linguistic choices appear in responses.

4. Findings.

In this section, the results of data analysis will be presented in the following subsections: strategies (4.1), politeness markers (4.2), alerters (4.3) and supportive moves (4.4). Additionally, other observations (4.5) and findings of cross-gender analysis (4.6) will be displayed.

4.1. Strategies.

It was noticeable that students of all levels gave preference to indirect strategies. Only 14% of all responses were direct requests. Most of them occurred in a situation with a friend, as it can be seen in Table 1. Students used imperatives in direct requests. E.g.:

Bro, give me a napkin, please.

Give me a napkin, I need it.

Change the seat, please. My friend and me, we want to be together.

Table 2 displays distribution of direct and indirect strategies in each of 4 groups of students. The number of students who applied indirect strategies varies between 73-93% in each group. In total, 86% of all responses were conventionally indirect requests. Participants used 4 modal verbs for performing indirect requests: *can* and *could*, which refer to person's ability to perform an action; *would* and *will*, which refer to person's willingness to perform a requested action. E.g.:

Hello! Can you change your seat, please?

Could you, please, sit where my friend is so we can sit together?

Hi! Will you let us sit together, please?

Would you give me a napkin, please?

As it can be seen in Table 3, the most preferable strategy was starting a request with a modal verb *can*, which was used by students of all levels. The number of students who chose it varied between 36-95% in each level. The second most preferable strategy was using a modal verb *could*.

Strategy	N	Social distance
<i>Give me</i>	7	friends
<i>Change your seat</i>	2	strangers
<i>Lend me</i>	1	friends
<i>Bring me</i>	1	friends
<i>Pass me</i>	1	friends
<i>Let me</i>	1	friends
<i>Leave your place</i>	1	strangers

Table 1. Direct requests.

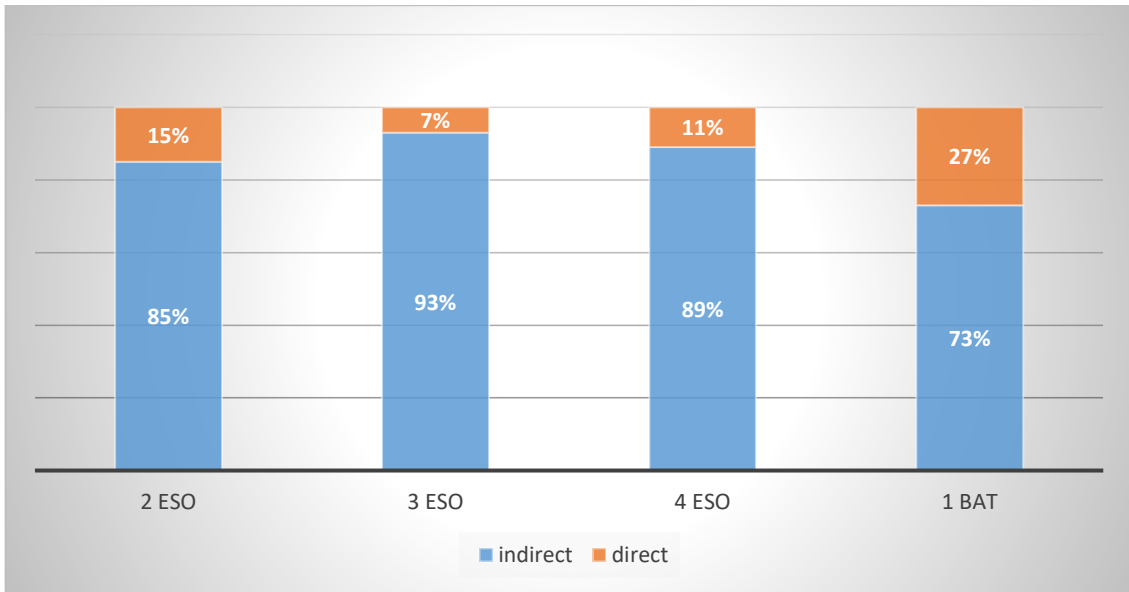


Table 2. Distribution of direct and indirect requests.

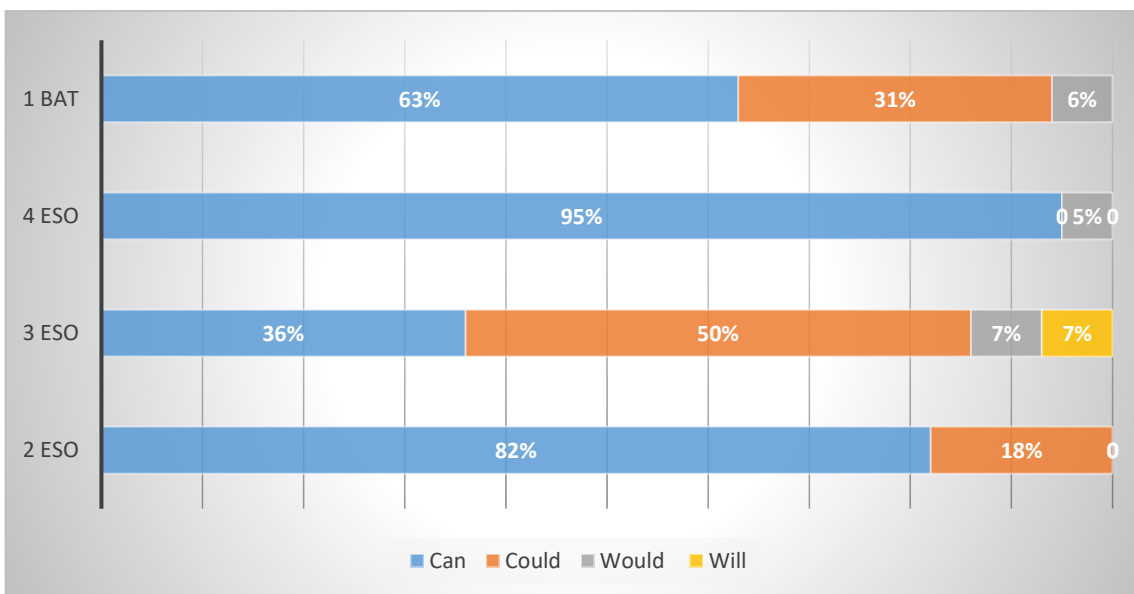


Table 3. Indirect requests.

4.2. Politeness marker “please”.

64% of all responses contained a politeness marker “*please*”. As it can be seen in Table 4, the number of students who did not say “*please*” while performing a request varied between 28-50% in each group.

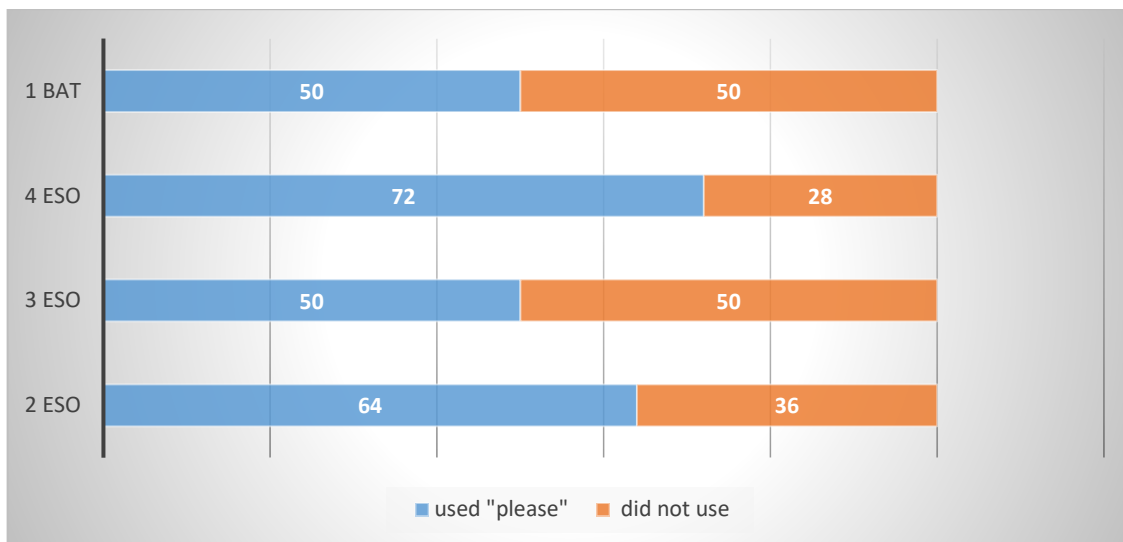


Table 4. Use of a politeness marker “please”.

4.3. Alerters.

Alerters serve as conversation starters and attention-getters. Students showed a scant use of these routines. With a friend, some of the students used different address terms (12%); with a stranger, students started a request with a greeting or apology. 13 % of students started a conversation with a stranger by using a formulaic expression of apology as an attention-getter (Table 6). 25 % of respondents started a conversation with a greeting, as displayed in Table 7.

Address term	N	Examples
Bro	5	<i>Bro, give me a napkin please.</i>
Friend’s name	4	<i>Roberta, would you lend me that napkin?</i>
Friend	2	<i>Friend, can you give a napkin please?</i>
Dude	1	<i>Hey dude, can you lend me a napkin?</i>

Table 5. Address terms.

Apology	N	Examples
Excuse me	8	Excuse me , can you change your seat with me so that I can see the film together with my friend?
Sorry	5	Sorry , could you change the seat to my friend, please?

Table 6. Apology as an attention-getter.

Social distance	Greeting	N	Examples
stranger	hello	8	Hello! Can you change your seat please?
	hi	7	Hi! Nice to meet you, I'm here with my friend and we're wondering if you could change me the place so we can sit next to each other.
	hey	3	Hey , could you switch your seat with me? My friend's seat is on your left
friend	hey	6	Hey friend , can you give me a napkin?
	hi	1	Hi , can you give me a napkin?

Table 7. Greetings.

4.4. Supportive move of explanation.

32% of responses included a supportive move of explanation. Students used a variety of explanations in a situation with a stranger, and only 6% of requests included explanation with a friend. All of them were declarative sentences that expressed a need. Table 8 presents some examples.

Explanation	N	Examples
I need it /one/a napkin	4	Can you give me a napkin please? I need one
I don't have it	1	Please you can lend me your napkin. I don't have it.
I don't have one and I need it	1	Pedro, can you lend me a napkin please? I don't have one and I need it

Table 8. Explanations used with a friend.

In a situation with a stranger, 26% of students employed a wide variety of explanations that provide a mitigating effect:

1) Expressing a desire to sit next to a friend (19%):

a) So (that) I/we can/could sit together/be next to/with my friend (7%). E.g.:

*Sorry, could you sit in the armchair next to me so **I can sit with my friend?***

b) Because we/my friend and I want to sit together/with my friend (5%). E.g.:

*Hi! Please you can change your seat **because I want to sit with my friend***

c) I/ my friend and I want/would like to sit next to my friend/together (7%). E.g.:

*Hi, **my friend and I want to sit together.** Can you change the seat please?*

*Sorry, could you swap seats with me? **I would like to sit next to my friend.***

2) Pointing out to a friend's place (3%). E.g.:

***My friend is next to you.** Can I take your seat and I will let you sit in mine?*

3) Vague explanation (1%). E.g.:

*Hello, **we have a problem,** you change your sit with my friend please?*

4) Misunderstood or contextually irrelevant responses (3%). E.g.:

*Hello, **my tickets are wrong and it is my sit,** can you change me the sit?*

*Excuse me, **the seat in my ticket is this,** can you move to another seat please?*

*Hey **you're on my seat.** Can you up please?*

4.5. Other observations.

While studying the responses, it was noticed that a considerable number of students (12%) repeated the same mistake – employing a verb “*lend*” when asking for a napkin. It is seen as a pragmatic mistake in a given context because it contradicts with the meaning of a word and therefore is not appropriate: napkin is not normally something that is expected to be returned after using. Students of all levels made this mistake: 2 respondents from 2 ESO, 5 from 3 ESO, 2 from 4 ESO and 3 from BAT.

Another observation relates to the expression of a wish in a supportive move of explanation that is accompanying a request. In 11% of cases students showed preference of *want* (9%) over the conventionalised *would like*, which occurred only in 2% of responses. E.g.:

*Could you let your sit please? Because my friend and I **want** to sit together.*

*Excuse me, can you change the seat with me? I **want** to sit with my friend, please.*

*Excuse me. Can you move? We **want** sit together.*

*Sorry, could you swap seats with me? I **would like** to sit next to my friend.*

*Please, can you change me the seat? I **d like** to sit with my friend.*

4.6. Cross-gender analysis.

Additionally, analysis of data was made based on gender of the respondents. A certain pattern repeated in almost all calculations: females outscored males in almost all aspects of politeness by 10-16%. A significant difference was related to the use of apologetic formulas *Sorry* and *Excuse me* – females outscored males by 23%. The only exception was greetings – males outscored females by 20%.

Male participants used more direct strategies (18%) than females (10%). On the other hand, conventionally indirect strategy was preferred by both males (78 %) and females (88 %).

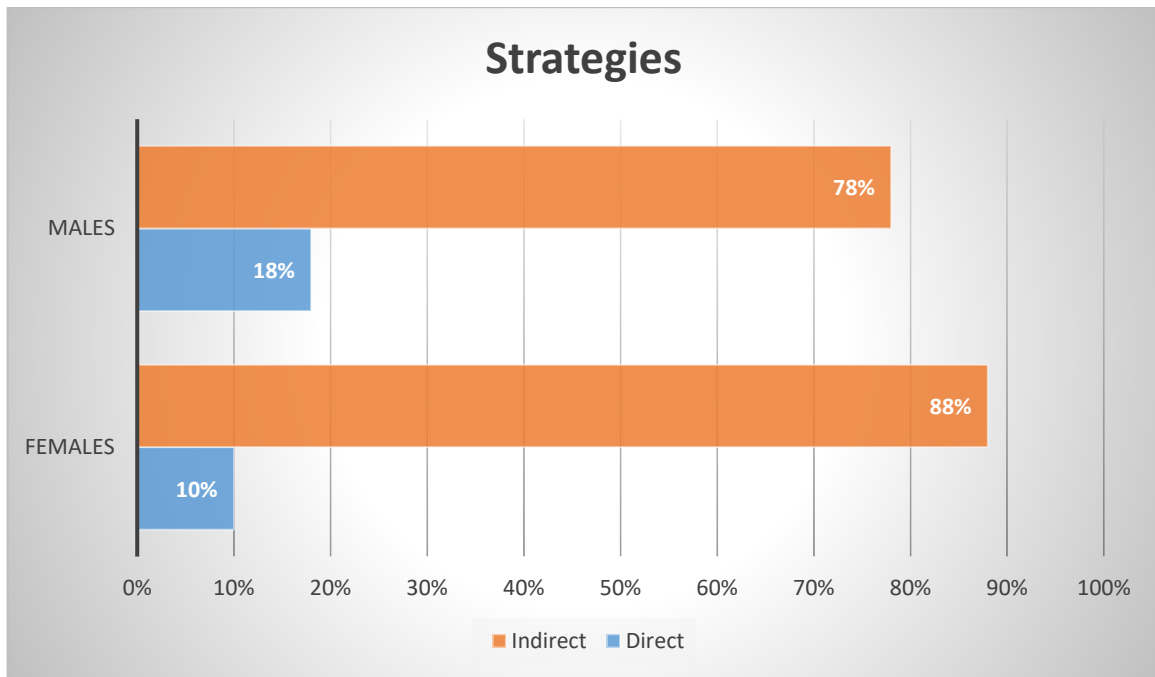


Table 9. Gender distribution of request strategies.

Females used more explanations (57%) comparatively to males (43%). Similarly, a politeness marker “*please*” was used by females (55%) more than by males (45%). As for alerters, female respondents applied more address terms (58%) than their male classmates (42%). Moreover, they showed a wider variety of lexical choices, while address terms of 80% of males were limited to “*bro*”. A significant difference was found in the use of apologies as attention-getters: 61.5% of all apologies found in the responses belonged to females. Males used these routines considerably less (38.5%). However, they applied greetings considerably more (60%) comparatively to female respondents (40%).

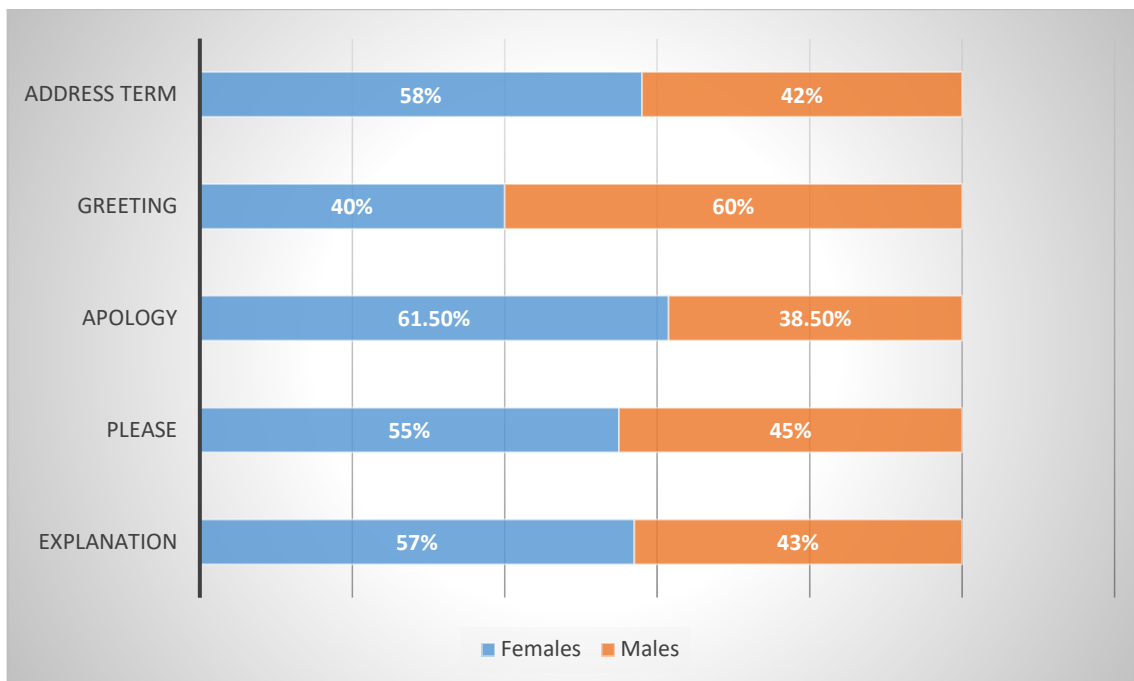


Table 10. Coding frequencies by gender.

5. Discussion.

This study did not find any significant differences between performing a speech act of request by students of different levels. This means that the results of the current study do not show any correlation between language proficiency and pragmatic performance which supports the findings of Tabatabaei and Farnia (2015). However, the collected data contained many cases when grammatically incorrect responses were pragmatically appropriate, i.e. polite, whereas many grammatically correct requests were lacking politeness marking and thus seemed quite rude and straightforward. Here are some examples:

Incorrect but polite:

Hi! Would you put in another sit, please? Because I want to sit next to my friend.

Can I please take you a napkin?

Please you can lend me your napkin. I don't have it.

Correct but impolite:

Excuse me. Can you move? We want to sit together.

I need a napkin, give me.

Pass me a napkin.

This partially correlates with the finding of Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1997) who made an observation that learners recognized grammatically incorrect but pragmatically appropriate utterances more readily than pragmatically inappropriate but grammatically correct utterances. In the case of this study, some students gave more importance to grammatical correctness while neglecting a politeness aspect. On the other hand, students who were not very grammatically competent tried to sound polite. The fact that in spite of the low level of linguistic competence, the students still try to sound polite, may suggest that they are at least unconsciously aware of the fact that language is used in a social context and that social relationships are built through language use.

As for strategies, the use of direct requests by Spanish learners of English was reasonably low (14%). For instance, Cenoz & Valencia (1996) in their research found 25.37% of direct strategies in Spanish requests. And in Ballesteros Martín's study (as cited in Hauzinger, 2012) 32.22% of the Spanish speakers employed direct strategies. In the current research, student's use of direct requests is close to native speakers, who applied direct strategies with the rate 10% and 18.33% respectively in the above-mentioned studies. On the contrary, conventionally indirect requests were preferred by Spanish students with the rate 86% and appeared in form of an interrogative construction with modals. It overlaps with Ardila's (as cited in Hauzinger, 2012) finding that 86% of English native speakers formulate interrogative requests with modals. Cenoz & Valencia (1996) show a similar result: the conventionally indirect strategy was used in 85.2% of English requests.

A politeness marker “*please*” was neglected by 36% of respondents. It could be explained by the influence of students’ native language, because in Spanish, as was mentioned by Franch (1998), *Por favor* is not used as frequently as its English equivalent *Please* by English native speakers.

The third research question regarding a social distance variable can be answered positively. Second language learners showed a certain degree of awareness of the different situations and used different degrees of politeness according to context. While with friends they almost did not apply any additional mitigating devices, with a stranger they used more attention-getters and mitigating supportives. Students showed a scant use of alerters which serve as conversation starters and attention-getters. Moreover, these devices appear mostly in a situation with a stranger where a social distance is bigger. It was observed that address terms (name of a friend, *Bro*, etc.) appeared only in a situation with a friend (12%), while with a stranger, respondents only used a greeting and a formulaic expression of apology (*Excuse me, sorry*). 32% of responses included a supportive move of explanation, most of which occurred in a situation with a stranger. It makes sense, because the “cinema” situation is more face-threatening for a speaker than a “napkin” situation, therefore it requires a certain mitigating device to reduce the level of imposition caused by a request. Comparing this result with the previous studies, it can be said that the use of mitigating supportives by Spanish students was quite low, taking into account Cenoz & Valencia’s (1996) rate of applying mitigating supportives by Europeans (61.7%).

Another finding of this study concerns contextually inappropriate lexical choice. 12% of students used a verb “*lend*” when asking for a napkin. This verb is defined as “to give something to somebody or allow them to use something that belongs to you, which they have to return to you later” (Oxford University Press, n.d.). Normally, napkin, which

is “a piece of cloth or paper used at meals for protecting your clothes and cleaning your lips and fingers” (Oxford University Press, n.d.), is not something that is supposed to be returned back to a person after being used. That is why such inappropriate choice of a verb may be considered as a pragmatic mistake, although it does not have any impact on politeness of a request. However, interlocutor might perceive such request as a joke or think that a person who requests is a bit dirty and this affects person’s public face which is an important concept in the theory of Brown & Levinson (1987). This case could be also explained as a consequence of learning vocabulary out of context.

Another observation relates to the expression of a wish in a supportive move of explanation that is accompanying a request. In 11% of cases students showed preference of *want* (9%) over the conventionalised *would like*, which occurred only in 2% of responses. And this to a certain degree confirms Márquez Reiter’s (as cited in Hauzinger, 2012) statement that Spanish speakers often employ the verb *to want* which may sound quite direct and impolite to English speakers who give preference to a conventionalized *I’d like*.

The majority of the students in this study demonstrated awareness of the politeness aspect and social distance variable. It can be illustrated by a couple of students’ responses who slightly misunderstood what was wanted from them in the DCT and did not produce a speech act per se, but rather provided responses that describe their actions in a given situation. Nevertheless, they made it clear that they would not disregard a politeness aspect in requesting something from a stranger, thus taking into account a social distance variable. Here are some illustrative examples:

I’d be polite and ask her if she could change her place with one of our places. Then, if she doesn’t want to move from her place, we will search for two empty places that are next to each other.

I would kindly say that you leave your place to my friend because he is very excited to see the film with me.

I think I would try to say to her with respect: 'Excuse me, can you please change seats with me?'

Cross-gender analysis of the corpus of this study supported some of the findings mentioned in the literature review as well as showed totally different results in certain aspects compared to studies carried out by other researchers in this field. Similar to the British corpus of Lorenzo-Dus & Bou-Francht (2003), in the current study, males and females gave preference to the same types of request strategies (indirect) and most frequently used modal verbs *can* and *could* that convey conventional indirectness of requests. However, the current study has the opposite findings to the Spanish corpus of Lorenzo-Dus & Bou Francht (2003) where men and women used mainly direct strategies in their requests, and women used two times more direct strategies than men did. In my study, males and females used mainly indirect strategies. And besides, more of direct requests present in the data belonged to males.

In the current study, females used considerably more mitigating devices that serve to reduce the imposition, such as explanations, apologies and politeness markers. This to a certain degree corresponds with the findings of Lorenzo-Dus & Bou Franch (2003) where women used twice as many mitigating strategies and supportive moves as their male counterparts. However, while Cheris Kramer's (1975) research found that men used a wider variety of address forms for women and men than women did (as cited in Holmes, 1995, p. 147), the current study reveals the opposite: women used a slightly wider variety of address terms. Thus, summarizing the fourth research question, certain cross-gender differences were found in request production. Females in this study demonstrated a tendency to apply politeness strategies slightly more frequently than males.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this experimental research was to investigate a current state of pragmatic competence of students in public schools. The practical importance of such kind of research lies in improving teaching methods and increasing their efficiency in developing learners' communicative skills. Kasper (1997) talks about teaching pragmatic competence and states that "it is not subordinated to knowledge of grammar and text organization but co-ordinated to formal linguistic and textual knowledge and interacts with 'organizational competence' in complex ways. In order to communicate successfully in a target language, pragmatic competence in L2 must be reasonably well developed."

The findings revealed some positive aspects as well as some common pragmatic problems that students have. In general, the results supported some theories from previous research about Spanish native speakers' ways and preferences in making a request in English. Furthermore, minor observations were made that were not related to the research questions. This survey shows that the relationship between language proficiency is not an influential factor in the pragmatic competence, that most of the Spanish EFL learners give a preference to a conventionally indirect strategy of performing a request which does not support a common belief about "directness" of Spanish native speakers. Besides, social variables were to a certain degree taken into account by most of the respondents. On the basis of the results of this study, it can be concluded that pragmatic competence is reasonably well developed in Spanish students of this secondary school. Additionally, cross-gender analysis of the responses was carried out and the results showed women's tendency to apply politeness strategies slightly more frequently than men.

It should be mentioned that the initial aim was to investigate three speech acts: request, apology and refusal. However, due to time limitation and the scope of the study,

only a speech act of request was analysed. Apologies and refusals could be data for analysis of a future study. It would also be of great interest to study the roots of pragmatic mistakes and whether they are results of pragmatic transfer from students' L1. Besides, perception of politeness very much depends on various non-verbal aspects of communication like intonation, face expression, gestures. But this study focuses exclusively on form and it is probably its biggest weakness. In real life, requests might be perceived and realized differently than on paper. It might bring more insight into the politeness phenomenon by making audio- or video-recordings of students performing speech acts. Finally, in this study, the fact that the respondents might be bilingual (Spanish/Catalan) was not taken into account. Therefore, the study on the influence of bilingualism on the production of speech acts may be extremely beneficial.

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Appendices

Appendix A. DCT.

Your age: _____

Your gender: female male

Please, read the situations and write your responses. What would you say to a person in each situation if it happened to you in real life? Write as much as you feel is necessary.

1. You and your friend want to sit together in the cinema but the seats on your tickets are not next to each other, there is a woman sitting between you. You want to ask her to change seats with you so that you can be next to your friend. What would you say to the woman?

2. You are having lunch with your friend. You need a napkin, and your friend has it, so you want to ask him/her to give it to you. What would you say to your friend?

Appendix B. Questionnaire responses.

2 ESO (13-14 years old)

1. {request stranger} asking a woman to change seats with you

female

1. Sorry, could you sit in the armchair next to me so I can sit with my friend?
2. Please can put on the seat next door so I can sit with him. Thank you
3. Could you let your sit please? Because my friend and I want to sit together, please
4. Hello, my tickets are wrong and it is my sit, can you change me the sit?
5. Hello! Can you change your seat please?

male

1. Please, can you move a seat so my friend and me could be together
2. I would kindly say that you leave your place to my friend because he is very excited to see the film with me

2. {request friend} asking for a napkin

female

1. Can you give me a napkin please?
2. Please you can lend me your napkin. I don't have it. Thank you
3. Can you let me a napkin please? Thanks
4. Can you give me a napkin?
5. Friend, can you give a napkin please?

male

1. Lend me your napkin for a moment please
2. I would tell him how he is and then I would tell him with a soft and believing tone

3 ESO (14 years old)

1. {request stranger} asking a woman to change seats with you

female

1. Hi! Could you please change seats with me, so I can be next to my friend?
Thanks
2. Could you please sit where my friend is so we can sit together?
3. Nothing, cause I'm too shy
4. Sorry, could you change the seat to my friend, please?

male

1. Hey, could you switch your seat with me? My friend's seat is on your left
2. Could you change your seat with my friend please?
3. Hi! Can we change the seats please?
4. Hi! Will you let us sit together please?

2. {request friend} asking for a napkin

female

1. Can you lend me your napkin? Thank you
2. Hey dude, can you lend me a napkin?
3. Roberta would you lend me that napkin?
4. Could you give me some napkin, bro?

male

1. Bring me a napkin please
2. Could you lend me your napkin please?
3. Can you give me a napkin?
4. Can you lend me a napkin?

4 ESO (15-16 years old)

1. {request stranger} asking a woman to change seats with you

female

1. Hi! Would you put in another sit, please? Because I want to sit next to my friend
2. Excuse me, can you change the seat with me? I want to sit with my friend, please.
3. Please, can you change the seat with my friend?
4. Please, can you change the sit with my friend?
5. Excuse me, can you move to another chair please?

6. Excuse me, the seat in my ticket is this, can you move to another seat please?
7. Hello please can you go to another seat?
8. Hello, we have a problem, you change your sit with my friend please?
9. Excuse me, can you change your seat with me so that I can see the film together with my friend
10. Please, can you change me the seat? I'd like to sit with my friend
11. Please, can you let me seat to my friend?
12. I think I would try to say to her with respect: 'Excuse me, can you please change seats with me?'
13. Can you change me the sitting please? I want to be next to my friend.

male

1. Hi! Please you can change your seat because I want to sit with my friend
2. Hey you're on my seat. Can you up please?
3. Hello, you can seat in other place
4. Hello, you can seat in other place
5. Hello, can you sit in other seat?
6. Sorry, I can be change the seats with me please?
7. Please, can we change our seats? Because I have a friend and we want to sit as near as possible
8. My friend is next to you. Can I take your seat and I will let you sit in mine?
9. Excuse me, hello, can we exchange sits please?
10. Please, can you move to other seat, your sitting next to my friend, I can give you my ticket to sit there

2. {request friend} asking for a napkin

female

1. Would you give me a napkin, please?
2. Hi, can you give me a napkin?
3. Please, can you give me a napkin?
4. Please, can you give me a napkin?
5. Can you pass me the napkin please?
6. Can you pass me the napkin please?
7. Hey friend, can you give me a napkin?
8. I need a napkin, give me?
9. Can you give me a napkin please? I need it
10. Can you give it to me a napkin?
11. Marty, can you give me a napkin please?
12. Pedro, can you lend me a napkin please? I don't have one and I need it
13. Can you give me a napkin please?

male

1. Can you give me a napkin please? I need one
2. Would you give me a napkin please?
3. Hey bro, can you give the napkin please?
4. Give me the napkin
5. Hey bro, give the napkin right now
6. Can you give me your napkin please?
7. Can I please take you a napkin?
8. Please, can you give me a napkin?

9. Can you lend me your napkin please?

10. Give me a napkin, I need it.

1 BAT (16-17 years old)

1. {request stranger} asking a woman to change seats with you

female

1. Hi, my friend and I want to sit together. Can you change the seat please?

2. Excuse me. Can you move? We want sit together. Thanks.

3. Please, you changed the seats?

male

1. Please, can we change the seats?

2. Sorry, could you swap seats with me? I would like to sit next to my friend.

3. I will say, "Please, can you sit in my place for could sit next to my friend?"

4. Sorry, can you change seats please?

5. Would you matter if we change the seats?

6. You change the sit, please? My friend and me, we want to be together.

7. Excuse me, can we change the seats?

8. Hi! Nice to meet you, I'm here with my friend and we're wondering if you could change me the place so we can sit next to each other.

9. I'd be polite and ask her if she could change her place with on of our places.

Then, if she doesn't want to move from her place, we will search for two empty places that are next to each other.

2. {request friend} asking for a napkin

female

1. Give me the napkin please.
2. Give me a napkin
3. Could you lend me a napkin please?

male

1. Can you give me a little?
2. Can you give me a napkin?
3. Can you leave me a napkin, please?
4. Hey bro! Can you give me a napkin please?
5. Bro, give me a napkin please.
6. Hey, could you lend me a napkin, please?
7. Pass me a napkin
8. Hey Mariana, could you lend me a napkin please?
9. I'd ask him to let me his napkin

Appendix C. An example of a printed and completed DCT.

Your age: 13

Your gender: female male

Please, read the situations and write your responses. What would you say to a person in each situation if it happened to you in real life? Write as much as you feel is necessary.

1. You and your friend want to sit together in the cinema but the seats on your tickets are not next to each other, there is a woman sitting between you. You want to ask her to change seats with you so that you can be next to your friend. What would you say to the woman?

Please can you put on the seat next door so
I can sit with him. Thank you.

2. You are having lunch with your friend. You need a napkin, and your friend has it, so you want to ask him/her to give it to you. What would you say to your friend?

Please you can lend me your napkin.
I don't have it. Thank you.

3. You agreed to meet with your friend at 15 o'clock in the park, but you missed a bus and arrived 30 minutes later. Your friend is angry because he/she had to wait. What would you say to your friend when you arrive?

Sorry for being late, I missed the bus and
I couldn't get there before.

4. You are in a bus and you accidentally spilled water on a person sitting next to you. What would you say to that person?

Sorry for staining you to be an accident,
take a seat.

5. Your friend invited you to a party, but you can't come because you already have other plans. What would you say to your friend?

I can't go, I made plans the other day,
I'm sorry.

6. You are in a bus and you are going to have a long trip. There is a girl sitting next to you. Another girl, her friend, comes and asks you if you could sit on her place so that she can sit together with her friend. But you do not want to change your seat. What would you say to the girl?

I'm sorry, but no, tell the person back.

Appendix D. Coding frequencies by level.

2 ESO

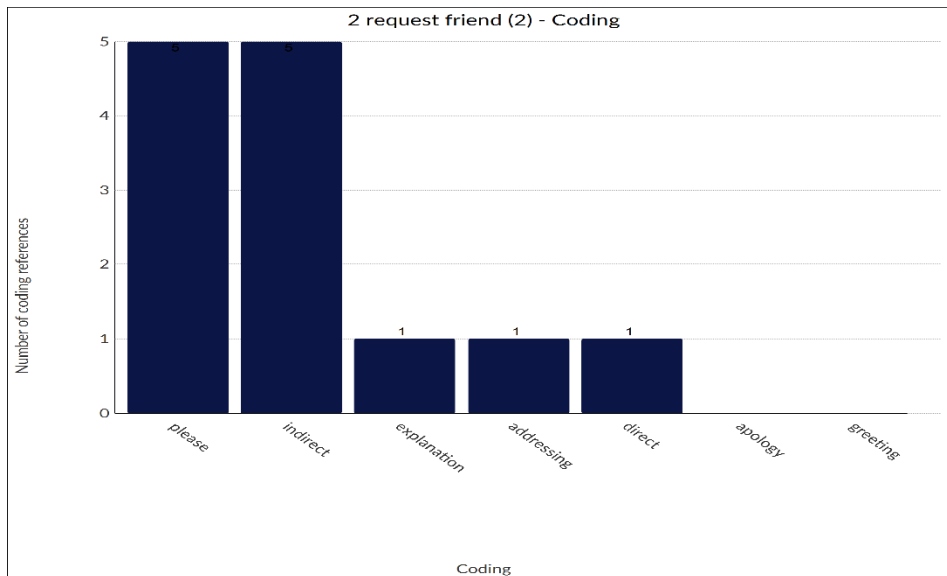


Figure 1. Coding frequencies of request realization in a "friend" situation by students of 2 ESO.

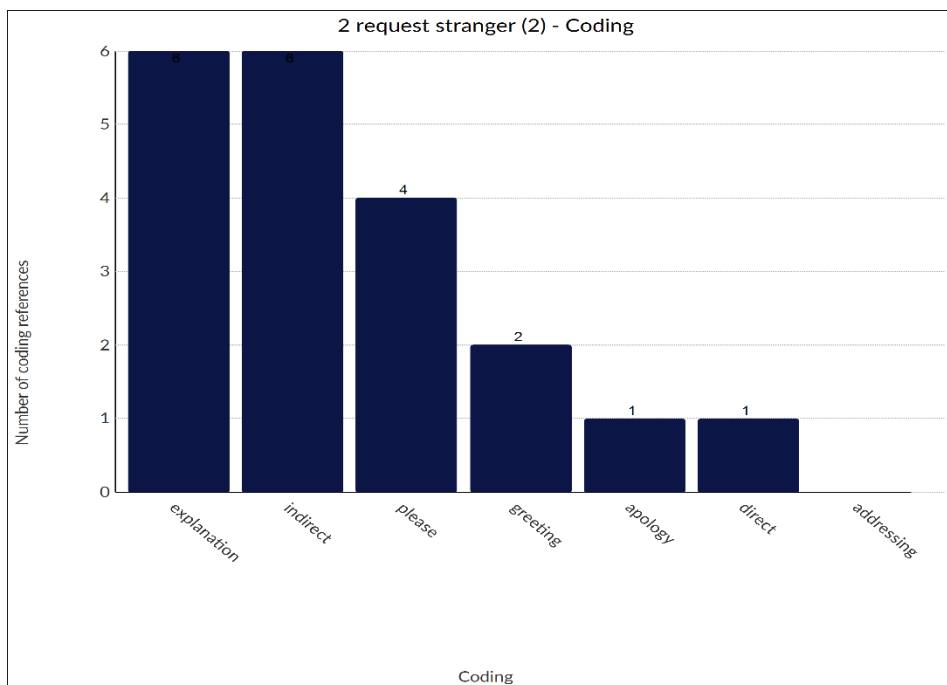


Figure 2. Coding frequencies of request realization in a "stranger" situation by students of 2 ESO.

3 ESO

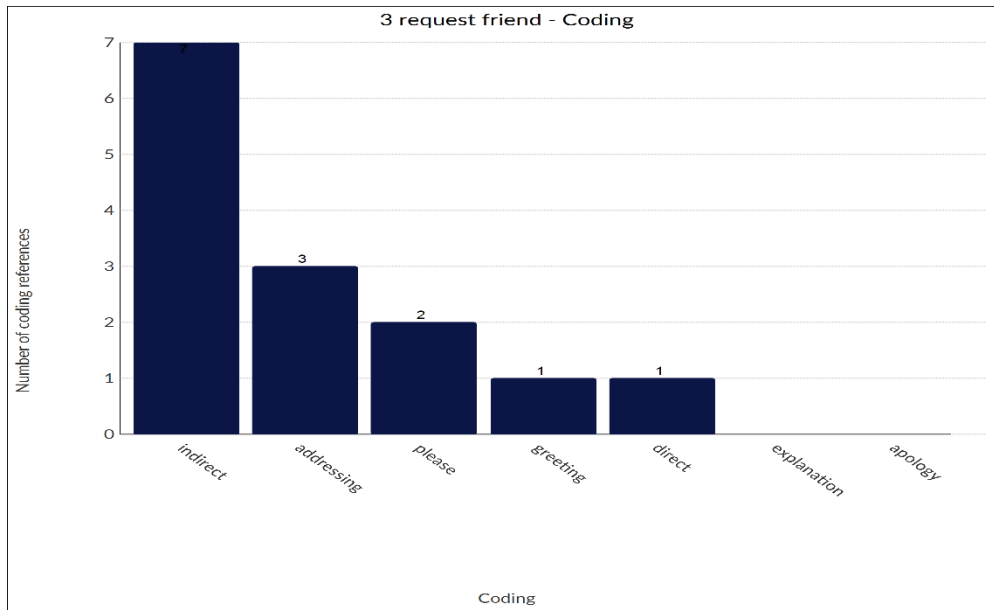


Figure 3. Coding frequencies of request realization in a "friend" situation by students of 3 ESO.

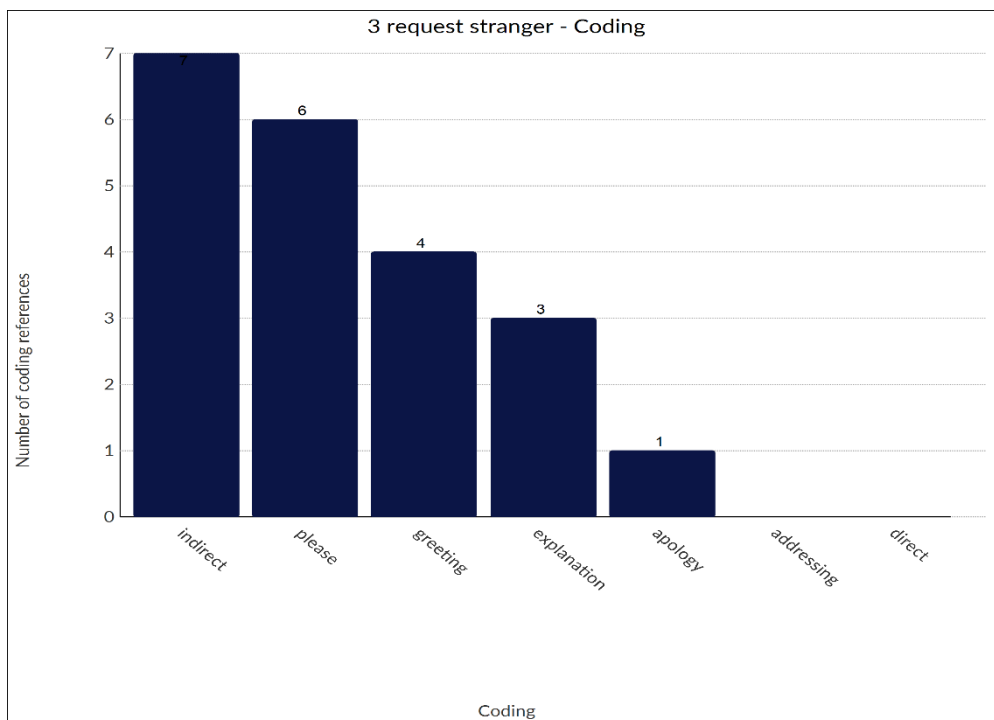


Figure 4. Coding frequencies of request realization in a "stranger" situation by students of 3 ESO.

4 ESO

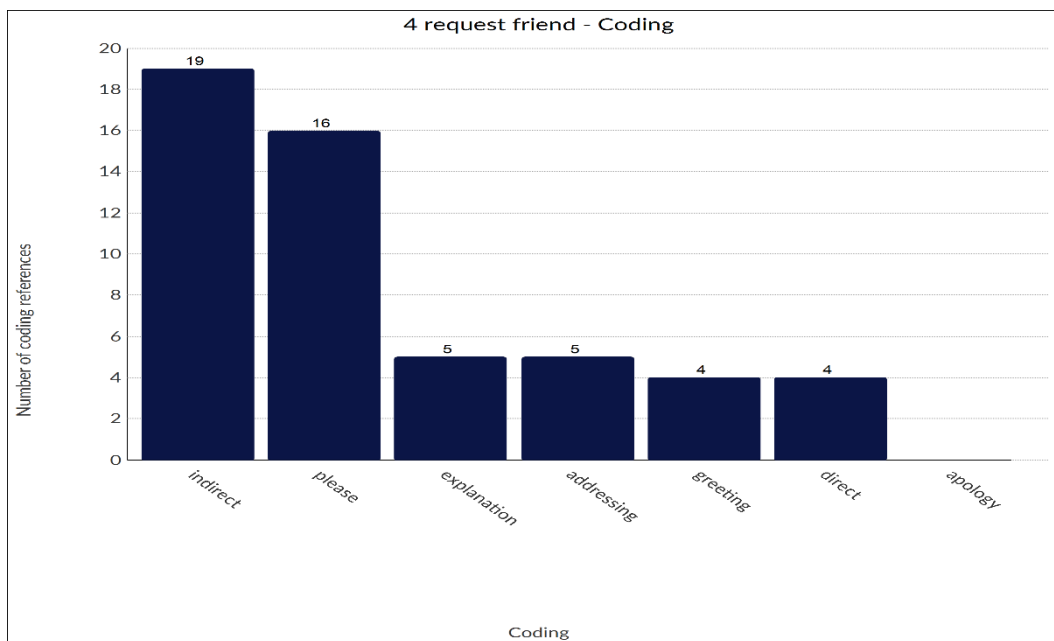


Figure 5. Coding frequencies of request realization in a "friend" situation by students of 4 ESO.

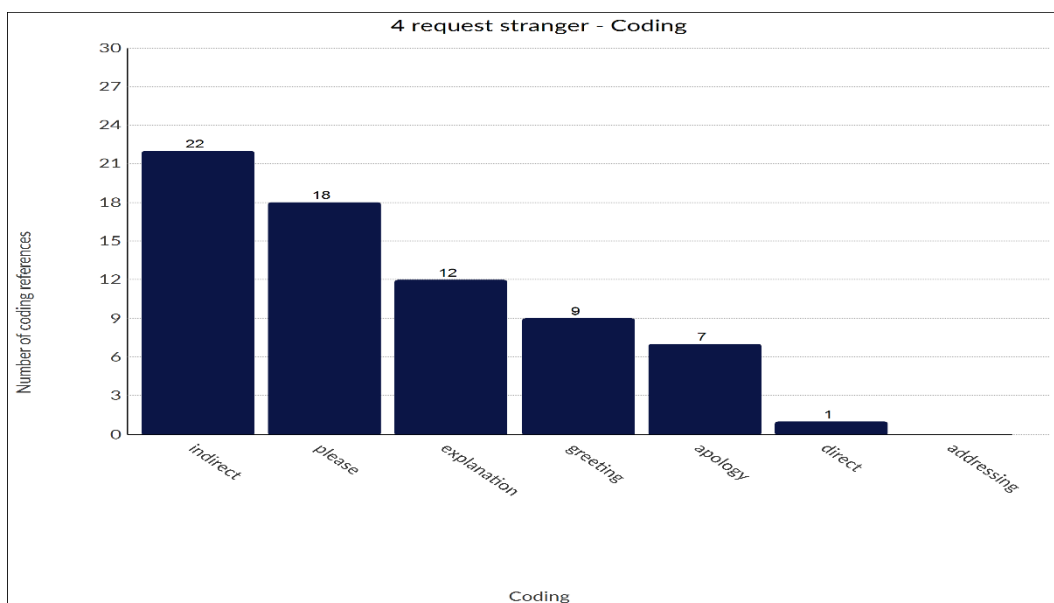


Figure 6. Coding frequencies of request realization in a "stranger" situation by students of 4 ESO.

1 BAT

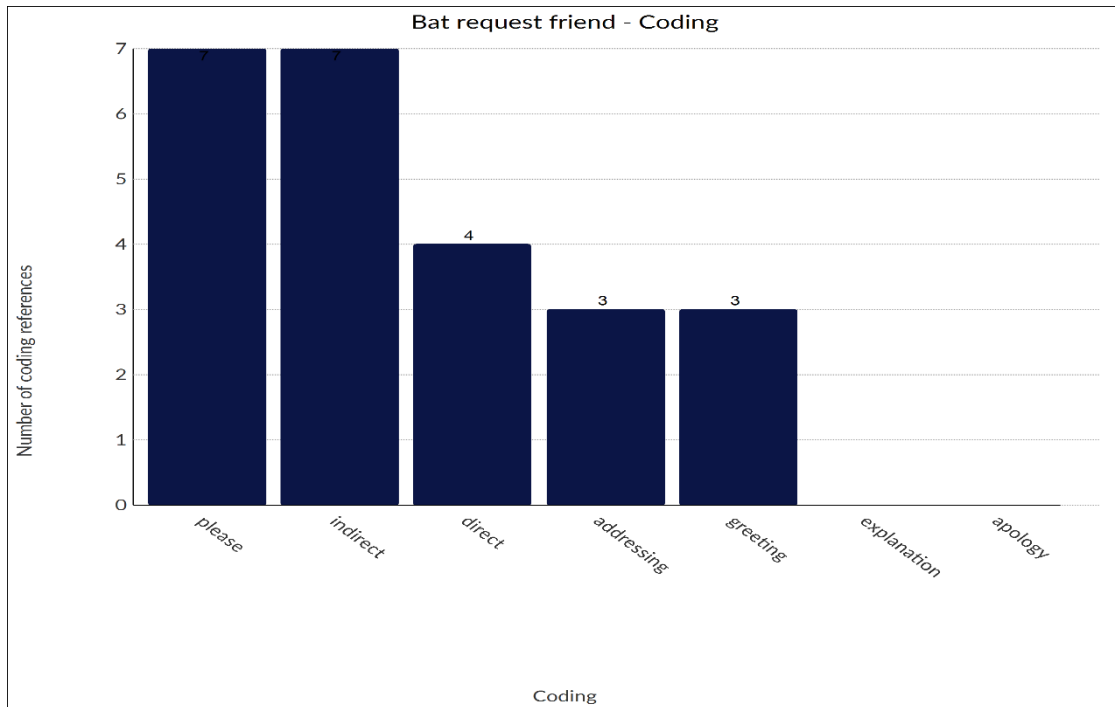


Figure 7. Coding frequencies of request realization in a "friend" situation by students of 1 BAT.

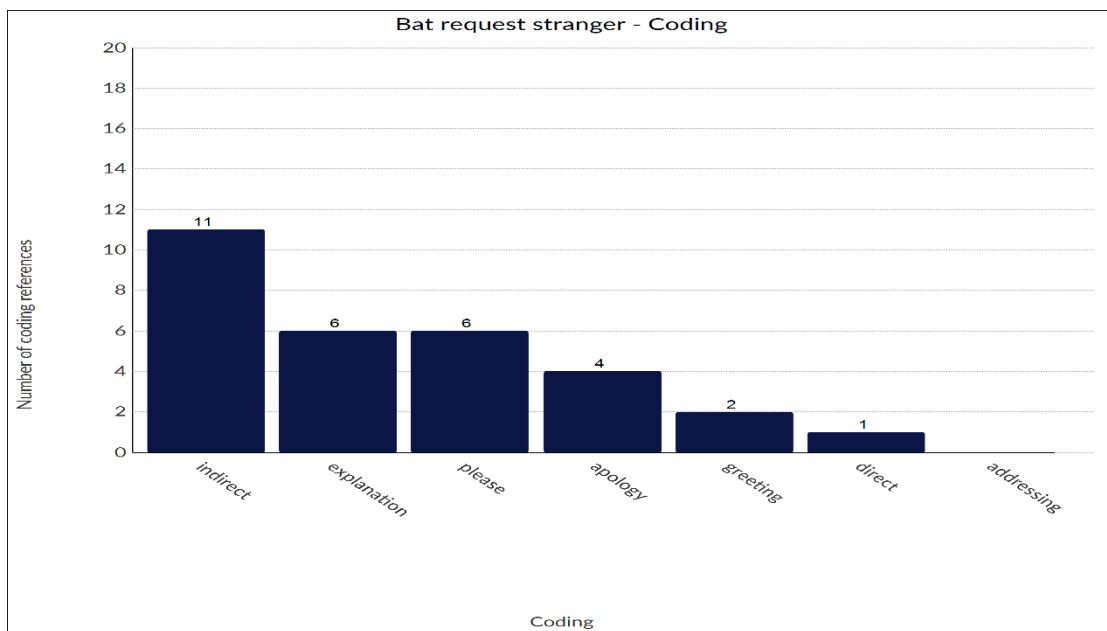


Figure 8. Coding frequencies of request realization in a "stranger" situation by students of 1 BAT.