



*Journal of Teaching Language Skills (JTLS)*  
38(2), Summer 2019, pp. 1-46- ISSN: 2008-8191  
DOI: 10.22099/jtls.2020.34548.2728

A Cross-sectional Study of Iranian EFL Learners'  
Pragmatic Skills Development:  
The Case of Written Requests

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**Abstract**

This study attempts to investigate the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic development of Iranian EFL learners cross-sectionally when making requests in different situations. To this end, 103 university students in three proficiency levels of pre-intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced were asked to write three discourse completion tests (DCTs) of requests in different situations with various social and power relation demands and 20% of them were interviewed about their DCTs. The analyses of these written and verbal reports suggested that parallel with proficiency there was a movement from directness to conventional indirectness and an expansion of the repertoire of both external and internal modification devices. Even though all the participants expressed their awareness of the sociopragmatic requirements of different request situations in their verbal reports,

Received: 10/10/2019

Accepted: 15/03/2020

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increasing proficiency led to the application of this awareness in practice. That is, advanced learners were more successful to differentiate among the situations both sociopragmatically and pragmalinguistically. The results are discussed in light of previous research and available developmental patterns.

*Keywords:* Pragmatic development, Request, Interlanguage pragmatics, EFL learners

The specific field of application of pragmatics in SLA is interlanguage pragmatics (hereafter ILP). “Interlanguage pragmatics is the study of nonnative speakers’ use and acquisition of L2 pragmatic knowledge” (Kasper, 1996, p.145). In other words, it studies how non-native speakers comprehend and perform linguistic activities in a second language, and how they acquire L2 pragmatic knowledge. Research on ILP can be traced back no further than the late 1970s and it can be considered as a relatively recent and promising area of research (Kasper, 1996).

Traditionally, the mainstream research on ILP had been directed toward the comparison between L2 learners’ production of speech acts and those of native speakers. However, many researchers have criticized this trend of research due to the absence of a direct link with SLA and have shifted their attention toward the learning aspects and developmental issues of ILP (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Daives & Tyler, 2005, Chang, 2010; Bardovi-Harlig, 2013).

The current study, through a cross-sectional design, aims to compare the different patterns of performing the speech act of ‘Request’ among Iranian English learners within three proficiency levels in three situations with different power and social distance specifications. The data obtained from DCTs (discourse completion tests) and retrospective interviews were analyzed qualitatively and qualitatively to figure out the probable developmental patterns of ILP of Iranian L2 learners.

The reason for choosing this speech act is twofold. First, this speech act is not uncommon in academic settings (where the participants of this study belong to) and during student-student and professor-student interactions and

written interactions. Second, although the speech act of 'Request' has received a good deal of attention in the literature (e.g. Schmidt, 1983; Ellis, 1992; Achiba, 2003; Warga, 2007), this study may help us to verify previous findings in a new context, i.e. among Iranian EFL learners, in which such studies are scarce.

### **Literature Review**

Based on Searle's (1969, 1975) classification of illocutionary acts, requests have been classified under the category of directives, which are considered as attempts "to get the hearer to do an act which speaker wants the hearer to do, and which is not obvious that the hearer will do in the normal course of events or hearer's own accord" (Searle, 1969, p.66). Accordingly, a request can be defined as a directive speech act in which the speaker asks the hearer to perform an action which is most of the time for the exclusive benefit of the speaker (Trosborg, 1995). Therefore, requests are considered potentially face-threatening acts that would damage the addressee's negative face, i.e. "the individual's need to have his/her freedom of action unimpeded" (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p.61).

According to Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) and Trosborg (1995), requests consist of two main components: the core request or head act and the peripheral modifications. To mitigate the illocutionary force of a request, speakers may exploit a range of internal and external modifications to the head act (see Blum-Kulka et al., 1989, pp. 17-19).

For an L2 learner to produce requests politely, a great deal of both pragmalinguistic (the knowledge of the linguistic resources) and sociopragmatic (the knowledge of the contextual and sociocultural variables) competence is required and the external modifications are "means available for indexing politeness of speech acts" (Blum-Kulka, 1992, p. 266).

The pragmatic development of learners making requests in an FL context has mainly been researched using cross-sectional studies with different learner

populations. For example, Trosborg (1995) examined the development of three speech acts of requests, complaints, and apologies among three age groups of Danish learners of English including students from secondary school, high school, and university. Concerning requests, it was found that conventional indirectness and a preference for internal/external modification increased as the proficiency level increased. Similar findings were obtained by Hill (1997) who explored L2 requests among Japanese EFL learners, and by Warga (2004, 2007) who examined the development of requests among three groups of Austrian high school learners of French.

Rose (2000) examined the pragmatic development of requests among three native groups of primary school children (aged from 7 to 11) utilizing a cartoon oral production task (COPT). She found that conventional indirectness (CI), in particular, the query preparatory strategy, was the most frequent request strategy overall; however, learners in the early stages of development relied on direct requests. Regarding external modification of the request head act, the children in all three groups used supportive moves very limited

Several longitudinal studies on the interlanguage pragmatics development of the speech act of request by, for example, Schmidt (1983), Ellis (1992), and Achiba (2003) provided valuable insights into the developmental pattern of interlanguage pragmatics. Schmidt (1983) studied a male adult Japanese L2 learner for three years in the target context. Schmidt's observations showed that at the beginning of the study, Wes, the participant, employed short requests mostly through the conventionally indirect permission strategy 'Can I. .?'. For his requests, Wes also used non-conventionally indirect hints which seemed to have transferred from his native language. By the end of the study, Wes used more elaborated utterances using 'shall we' and 'let's' formulas with various verbs for a variety of different requests.

In Ellis' (1992) study, three developmental stages were identified: 1) minimal request realizations where the pragmatic intent was highly context-based; 2) unanalyzed routines and direct requests used as formulas (imperatives and query preparatory requests); and, 3) unpacking of formulaic expressions with productive use of various request types and the slow emergence of conventional indirectness even after two years of residence in a target language context.

Achiba (2003) investigated the pragmatic development of her 7-year-old Japanese daughter during her 17-month stay in Australia. Unlike the boys in Ellis' study, Achiba's daughter used lesser and lesser imperatives and shifted to conventional indirectness in a short time. Four phases of development were observed: 1) Frequent use of formulaic expressions similar to Ellis' second stage; 2) a shift from formulaic to non-formulaic utterances and a substantial increase in a number of the linguistic forms like Ellis' third stage; 3) pragmatic expansion where a wider variety of pragmalinguistic forms to express requestive intention (productive use of modals) appears and conventional indirectness increases; and, 4) fine-tuning of requests where syntactically mitigated forms to express indirect requests increase.

Kasper and Rose (2002), based on Schmidt (1983) and Ellis (1992), proposed a five-stage process of L2 request development that consists of pre-basic, formulaic, unpacking, pragmatic expansion, and fine-tuning stages.

These studies provide an important insight into the development of requests in the FL context. However, it should be noted that FL requests in these studies were elicited utilizing various instruments like role play, DCTs, cartoon oral production task to elicit requests from drawings, or triangulated utilizing a DCT and a closed role-play. This means that the sources of the data are different across the reviewed studies, and their results should be interpreted with caution and in the light of the eliciting instruments.

In the present study, to analyze the data, Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper's (1989) framework, known as CCSARP (Cross-cultural Speech Act

Realization Patterns) project, has been adopted with some changes in the classification to conform to the data produced by the participants of the study.

The present study due to the scarcity of research on developmental patterns of the speech act of 'request' among Iranian EFL learners (Kodareza and Lotfi, 2012; Hesam and Bemani, 2017) and to verify the developmental changes of this speech act against available patterns (Schmidt, 1983; Ellis, 1992; Achiba, 2003; Kasper and Rose, 2002), tries to answer the following questions:

1. How do Iranian EFL learners at different proficiency levels express their requests in different situations?
2. Are Iranian EFL learners at different proficiency levels sensitive to the specifications of the situations in their requests?

## Method

### Participants

The participants of the study were 103 university students at B.A. level majoring in both English Literature and Translation at Arak University. They were in four classes of freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. Their ages ranged from 20 to 24 years old and they were, therefore, socially mature enough to differentiate formal from informal situations and the status of their audiences at least in their native language. The participants were chosen among those students whose native language is Persian and have had no short or long term residences in a foreign country since these factors may affect their pragmatic knowledge.

The participants were grouped into three proficiency levels of pre-intermediate (44 students), upper-intermediate (32 students), and advanced (27 students) according to their scores in OPT (the Oxford placement test). The validity and reliability of the test were verified for the purpose of the present study.

### **Instruments**

For the purpose of the current study, the data collection instruments were the written Discourse Completion Tests (DCTs) supported by structured interviews of 20% of the participants for triangulation.

The written DCT has been subject to criticism for not representing the actual wording and the prosodic and nonverbal features used in real interaction adequately (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford, 2005; Beebe and Cummings, 1996; Cohen, 1996; Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig, 1992; Yamashita, 1996). Having these shortcomings in mind, the researchers chose the DCT as a data elicitation instrument for the following reasons. First, in writing a DCT the learners have enough time for thinking and planning their writing tasks, so their requests would better reflect their actual L2 pragmatic competence. Spontaneous oral role-play tasks will probably bring the participants great anxiety (Kasper and Rose, 2002) and therefore would lead to the production of brief and choppy utterances. Second, through organizing DCTs properly one can arrange the intended context and manipulate the relationships so the desired outcome could be achieved; a point that cannot be easily accomplished through role-play or naturally occurring data.

Widespread use of DCT as a data collection procedure does not guarantee the validity of this instrument. Validity must be established and verified independently in connection with the purpose of the research. That is, "asking whether an instrument (or procedure) is valid is not enough—the question is, whether an instrument is valid for what purpose?" (Rose, 2009, p. 2347). To this end, in the selection of scenarios for being included in questionnaires in pragmatics, the participants' assessment of contextual variables, not the assessments of the researchers, needs to be taken into account, (Rose, 2009). Accordingly, in the present study, to develop valid DCTs, a pool of different scenarios was developed based on four criteria of 'Reality of the Situations', 'Cultural Issues', the 'Social Distance', and the status of the intended audience i.e. 'Dominance'.

The final pool of the scenarios as a questionnaire was administered to a group of university L2 learners who were not among the final participants of the study (see Appendix, A). These participants were asked to rate the scenarios according to two criteria of ‘Degree of Imposition’ (in three scales of *Small*, *Medium*, and *High*) and ‘Likelihood of Occurrence’ (with two options of *Yes* and *No*). The final scenarios were chosen among those which had a higher degree of likelihood of occurrence and at the same time medium degree of imposition. Table 1 shows the different scenarios that were followed for the speech act of ‘request’ in this study.

*Table 1.*  
Scenarios for the Speech act of Request

Item	Topics	Social distance	dominance
1	As a teacher, you ask your student(s) to do you a favor (e.g. going to the office and fetching a marker). What would you say in this situation?	+	W > R
2	You don't have access to the sources and materials to complete a class project and you want to ask your friend to provide you with them. What would you say in this situation?	0	W = R
3	You want to ask your professor to change the time of a specific exam. What would you say in this situation?	-	W < R

*(w) is the writer of the request. (R) is the reader or the intended audience of the request.*

*(+ and -) Show high social distance.*

*(<, =, or >) Show the direction of the dominance of writer and the intended audience over each other.*

In order to corroborate the findings of the DCT data and help the researchers “to better understand the rationale for the sociocultural choices that are made and for the sociolinguistic forms that are selected to realize the given speech act” (Cohen, 1996, p. 256), the retrospective interviews were



conducted with 20% of the participants who completed the DCTs. The researchers focused on the three situations under examination and mainly pose fixed questions guided by Ericsson and Simon's (1993, p. 198) four types of statements in the verbalization process: intentions, cognition, planning, and evaluation. The main questions are:

1. What were you paying attention to, when requesting/apologizing in this situation?
2. Were there any differences among these situations regarding 'grammar' and 'diction'?
3. What were the differences among these situations in general?
4. Were you satisfied with your answer?

Some data-driven questions were added in the interviews in order to prompt learners to elaborate on their answers. However, according to Jourdenais (2001), the additional questions were posed with due caution to avoid leading questions and contaminating the data.

### **Procedure**

After obtaining university authorities' permission and students' agreement to participate in this study, the students were asked to take the OPT as the proficiency test to assess their proficiency levels. The participants were grouped into three proficiency levels of pre-intermediate, intermediate, and advanced levels. Of course, using a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B), the participants were screened for their background so that those who had had a long residence in a foreign country or their native language was not Persian were excluded from the study since according to previous research (e.g., Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; Decapua & Dunham, 2007) these factors are thought to affect the participants' pragmatic knowledge and may contaminate the results of the study.

For the main phase of data collection, the participants were asked to write three DCTs for the speech act 'request' according to the given scenarios (see Table 1) to examine their pragmatic performances in various situations based on the social distance and the status of the intended audience (i.e. dominance). In similar studies (e.g., Trosborg, 1995; Hill, 1997; Rose, 2000) on speech acts, the number of DCT is more than four ones for each speech act; however, the researchers in this study think that asking students to complete for instance eight or ten request situations in one session seems to be cognitively demanding for the participants and may cause them to write concise and careless responses to each DCT. In this regard, three DCTs were used to access participants' awareness and performance in situations in which their relations with their intended audience regarding the variable of social distance and dominance vary. The completed scenarios formed the main part of the required data of the study for later quantitative and qualitative analyses.

The other part of the data was elicited through retrospective interviews with about 20% of the participants (21 students) chosen randomly from all proficiency levels according to the above-mentioned criteria.

### **Data Coding and Analysis**

Following Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), requests were examined according to their request type (head act), external modification, and internal modification (syntactic and lexical/phrasal). In this respect, head acts were codified into three degrees of directness: (1) hint (non-conventionally indirect), (2) conventionally indirect, and (3) direct. Each of these degrees comprised various sub-strategies that included the following (the examples are selected from the actual dataset):

#### **1. Hint:**

- Mild hint (e.g. *I'm awfully looking for somebody who has these sources.*)

- Strong hint (e.g. *Can you see what I am writing over the back row?*)
2. Conventionally indirect:
- Query preparatory (e.g. *Would you please go and get a marker?*)
  - Query possibility (e.g. *Is it possible for you to change the time of exam?*)
  - Acknowledging conditional (e.g. *I would really appreciate it if you lend me the sources.*)
  - Query convenience (e.g. *Is it ok if I ask you to take a marker from the office?*)
  - Scope stating (making a wish) (e.g. *I wish you would help me in this situation.*)
3. Direct:
- Mood derivable (e.g. *Please change the time of exam.*)
  - Performative (e.g. *I ask you to go to the office and take a marker.*)
  - Need/want statement (e.g. *I need your help with my project.*)

In the final revision of the request coding scheme, after consulting the trained coding assistants, the hint sub-strategies (mild and strong hints) were merged into the main strategy of 'hint' since the instances of strong hints were very rare but there was a plenty number of mild hints available in the data. In addition, the sub-strategies of 'query possibility', 'query convenience' are the extension of the original sub-strategy of 'query preparatory' in Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) classification to better adjust the data of the current study. The sub-strategy of 'acknowledging conditional' is also a new strategy in the present study based on the produced data.

With regard to the external modification, the categories of the present study scheme are based on those by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), Trosborg (1995) and Schauer (2007) with some different items to fit the current data which include the following:

- Preparator (e.g., *May I take your time?*)

- Grounder (e.g., *I left the markers in the office.*)
- Disarmer (e.g., *I know it might be rude to ask this.*)
- Imposition minimizer (e.g., *I'll compensate it for you.*)
- Giving thanks (e.g., *Thank you for understanding.*)
- Apology (e.g., *Sorry for taking your time.*)
- Considerator (e.g., *If it is not a problem and does not follow difficulty for you.*)
- Promise of rewards (e.g., *We can also have a little fun!*)

Finally, in the case of internal modifications both syntactic and lexical/phrasal means were examined. For the classification scheme of syntactic modifiers, the present study adopted a slightly modified version of Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) and Trosborg's (1995) classifications to fit the current data. The main categories of syntactic modifiers found in the produced data are the following:

- Statement (e.g., *Please go to the office and take a marker?*)
- Interrogative (e.g., *Would you please change the time of exam?*)
- Statement-conditional (e.g., *If it is no problem, please do this for me. or If you change the time of exam I would be so thankful.*)
- Interrogative-conditional (e.g., *Would you please bring a marker if it is possible?*)

The categories of the present study classification scheme for lexical/phrasal means are based on Barron's (2007) classification with some modifications to fit the produced data. The final classification includes the following categories:

- Politeness marker (e.g., *please*)
- Solidarity marker (e.g., *dear Maryam, hey bro*)
- Down toner (e.g., *any, just*)
- Understator (e.g., *even, a bit*)
- Intensifier (e.g., *really*)

The data were coded by three raters. Intercoder reliability was 86% in the first round of coding procedure. However, after discussing the discrepancies among the coders, the index of intercoder reliability rose to 94% in the final round of the coding procedure. The calculation of coding items involved assigning one point for the occurrence of each item and adding up the points under the main above-mentioned categories and then dividing the total by the total number of participants in each group. In this way, the obtained data regarded as continuous data.

The main statistical analyses of the present study were carried through Kruskal-Wallis H and Friedman's tests, the non-parametric alternatives to the one-way ANOVA with independent groups and repeated measures respectively. These two tests were chosen since the obtained data were not normal based on the indices of Skewness and Kurtosis and Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, so violated the first assumption of one-way ANOVA. The statistical analyses of the data were performed using version 23 of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). For all analyses in the study, the alpha level was set at 0.05.

In order to answer the first research question, which mostly focuses on comparing the pragmalinguistic competence of learners across proficiency levels, the means of occurrence of head acts, external and internal modifications for requests were compared through Kruskal-Wallis H test among three proficiency levels.

The second research question, which mainly tends to compare the sociopragmatic competence of the learners across proficiency levels, was answered both quantitatively and qualitatively using Friedman test and the obtained data through retrospective interviews. To this end, the DCTs of participants of each proficiency group were compared corroborated with verbal reports data.

## Results

In this section, the main results of the DCTs along with the results of the verbal reports through interviews with 20% of the participants are presented with respect to the research questions of the study.

**Requests DCTs.** The research questions of this study were related to the differences of requests expression across proficiency levels in various situations with different social demands and power relations. In order to answer these questions, the participants at three proficiency levels of pre-intermediate (n=44), upper-intermediate (n=32), and advanced (n=27) were compared both across and within proficiency groups based on their performances in three situations of request (request from a student, request from a friend, and request from a professor). The requests were compared according to the request type (head acts), external modifications, and internal modifications (syntactic modifications and lexical modifications).

**Request types (head acts).** Figure 1 displays the overall results in percentages for the three types of requests, i.e. Hint, Conventionally Indirect, and Direct, for each group in all three situations, and Table 2 shows the overall distribution of request types in each situation for each proficiency level of learners. Results for each situation include the frequency of requests (n) and the percentage (%) used in each situation. Table 3 presents the means, standard deviations, and variances for frequency of request types in all three groups. The abbreviations 'pre', 'upper' and 'adv' stand for pre-intermediate, upper-intermediate and advanced learners respectively and S1, S2, and S3 are Situation 1, Situation 2 and Situation 3 respectively.

As Figure 1 shows, the participants at all proficiency levels preferred conventionally indirect requests in all the request situations which are more polite and less face threatening types of request. This preference is also statically significant, as the results of Friedman's 2-way analysis of variances indicate ( $\chi^2(2) = 90.387, p = 0.000$ ). In order to exactly indicate the differences, a post hoc analysis with Wilcoxon signed-rank tests was conducted with a Bonferroni correction (to avoid a Type I error) applied,

resulting in a significance level set at  $p < 0.017$  which indicated that there were statistically significant differences between hints and conventionally indirect requests ( $Z = -7.994, p = 0.000$ ) and between direct a conventionally indirect requests ( $Z = -5.579, p = 0.009$ ).

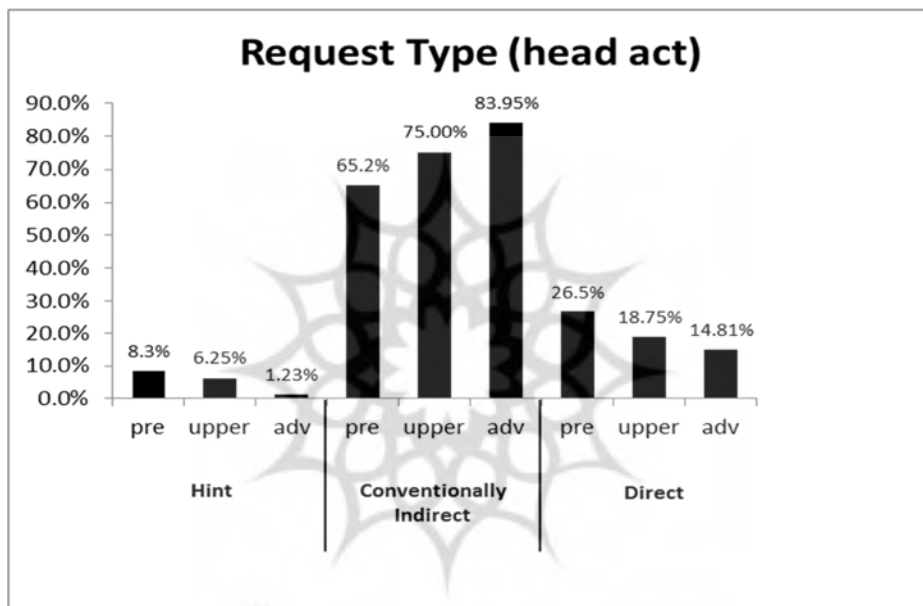


Figure 1. Overall Distribution of Request Types of the Participants in each Group over the three Situations.

According to Figure 1, the learners' preference for hint and direct requests declined in parallel with their proficiency while their preference for conventionally indirect requests increased as their proficiency increased. However, there were not any significant differences among the learners according to their request types in general based on Kruskal-Wallis H 1-way analysis of variances.

Nevertheless, Kruskal-Wallis H analysis indicated that the means of hints in Situation 1 were different statistically ( $H(2) = 7.24, p = 0.027$ ). The results of Dunn-Bonferroni post hoc test showed the significant difference was between pre-intermediate and advanced learners. That is, pre-intermediate learners used hint requests significantly more than advanced learners did when they requested from their students.

In addition, according to Kruskal-Wallis H test, the learners performed differently in applying conventionally indirect requests in situations 1 and 3. In the first situation of the request, the means of conventionally indirect requests had significant difference ( $H(2) = 8.63, p = 0.013$ ) and the Dunn-Bonferroni post hoc test specified the difference between pre-intermediate and advanced learners. The same happened in situation 3 and there was a significant difference between pre-intermediate and advanced learners in applying conventionally indirect requests ( $H(2) = 7.74, p = 0.021$ ). These mean that in both situations 1 and 3 advanced learners utilized significantly more conventionally indirect requests than what pre-intermediate learners did when they requested from their students and professors.

Besides, Kruskal-Wallis H analysis revealed that concerning the direct requests pre-intermediate learners opted to use significantly more direct requests in Situation 3 when they requested from their professors ( $H(2) = 7.085, p = 0.029$ ).

It appears, then, that in extreme situations (regarding the social distance and power relations) advanced learners in comparison with pre-intermediate learners inclined to use fewer hints when they had dominance over their audiences (i.e., Situation 1) and be less direct when they had a request from a person with higher social power (i.e., Situation 3).



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Table 2.  
Distribution of Request Types over three Situations by three Proficiency Levels of Learners.

Request type (Head act)	Situation 1: request from a student						Situation 2: request from a friend						Situation 3: request from a professor					
	Pre (n = 44)		Upper (n = 32)		Adv (n = 27)		Pre (n = 44)		Upper (n = 32)		Adv (n = 27)		Pre (n = 44)		Upper (n = 32)		Adv (n = 27)	
	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>
<i>Non-conventionally indirect (Hint)</i>	7	15.9	1	3.1	0	0.0	3	6.8	3	9.4	1	3.7	1	2.3	2	6.3	0	0.0
Query preparatory	24	54.5	20	62.5	22	81.5	23	52.3	17	53.1	11	40.7	23	52.3	13	40.6	9	33.3
Query possibility	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	7.4	1	2.3	2	6.3	0	0.0	4	9.1	6	18.8	11	40.7
Acknowledging conditional	1	2.3	2	6.3	0	0.0	6	13.6	2	6.3	4	14.8	1	2.3	3	9.4	6	22.2
Query convenience	0	0.0	2	6.3	0	0.0	1	2.3	2	6.3	0	0.0	1	2.3	2	6.3	0	0.0
Scope stating (making a wish)	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	3.1	3	11.1	1	2.3	0	0.0	0	0.0
<b>Total conventionally indirect</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>56.8</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>75.0</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>88.9</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>70.5</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>75.0</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>66.7</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>68.2</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>75.0</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>96.3</b>
Mood derivable	9	20.5	7	21.9	3	11.1	7	15.9	4	12.5	5	18.5	12	27.3	6	18.8	1	3.7
Performative	2	4.5	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	2.3	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Need/want statement	1	2.3	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	4.5	1	3.1	3	11.1	1	2.3	0	0.0	0	0.0
<b>Total direct</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>27.3</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>21.9</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>11.1</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>22.7</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>15.6</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>29.6</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>29.5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>18.8</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3.7</b>

Table 3.

*Descriptive Statistics in the use of Hint, Conventionally Indirect and Direct by all Participants in the three Situations*

<b>Request types</b>	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Hint S1	103	.078	.269	.072
Hint S2	103	.068	.253	.064
Hint S3	103	.029	.169	.029
<b>Hint Total</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>.175</b>	<b>.550</b>	<b>.302</b>
Conventionally indirect S1	103	.709	.456	.208
Conventionally indirect S2	103	.709	.456	.208
Conventionally indirect S3	103	.777	.418	.175
<b>Conventionally indirect Total</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>2.194</b>	<b>1.164</b>	<b>1.354</b>
Direct S1	103	.214	.412	.170
Direct S2	103	.223	.418	.175
Direct S3	103	.194	.397	.158
<b>Direct Total</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>0.631</b>	<b>1.129</b>	<b>1.274</b>

Regarding the subcategories of conventionally indirect and direct strategies, the results of Kruskal-Wallis H and Dunn-Bonferroni post hoc tests showed that the learners in all proficiency levels expressed their requests using relatively the same patterns of conventionally indirect and direct strategies except for conventionally indirect strategy of query possibility (e.g. *Is it possible for you to take a marker from the office?*) where advanced learners exploited significantly more query possibility strategies than pre-intermediate learners ( $H(2) = 6.185, p = 0.045$ ).

Among conventionally indirect strategies, query preparatory strategy (e.g. *Would you please change the time of the exam?*) was the learners' preference of all proficiency levels and in all three situations. In addition, among direct strategies, mood derivable strategy (e.g. *Please give me the*

*sources of this project.*) was the favorite one among all participants in all situations.

When it comes to the second research question of the study that was put forward to assess the sociopragmatic differences, the performances of the learners in each proficiency level were compared separately with their own performances across various situations of request. Therefore, the request types (head acts) deployed by learners were analyzed through Friedman's and Wilcoxon signed-rank post hoc tests to see the probable diversities within each proficiency group.

With regard to request types (head acts), pre-intermediate learners' performances were the same in all situations and there were not any significant differences in their preference for the hint, conventionally indirect, or direct requests in any request situations. The results were the same for upper-intermediate learners, as well. However, advanced learners tried to make some differences in exploiting conventionally indirect and direct requests when requesting from their friends and professors. According to the results of Friedman's test, advanced learners had significantly different preferences for applying conventionally indirect ( $\chi^2(2) = 13.000, p = 0.002$ ) and direct ( $\chi^2(2) = 11.143, p = 0.004$ ) requests. In order to specify the differences exactly, Wilcoxon signed-rank post hoc analyses with Bonferroni corrections (significance level of  $p < 0.017$ ) were conducted. Regarding advanced learners' conventionally indirect requests, the analyses revealed that they performed differently in Situations 2 and 3 ( $Z = -2.828, p = 0.005$ ). This means that advanced learners were more indirect in requesting from their professors than in requesting from their friends. There were also statistically significant differences between advanced learners' direct requests in Situations 2 and 3 ( $Z = -2.648, p = 0.008$ ). That is, advanced learners were more direct in requesting from their friends than in requesting from their professors. Together, these two mean that advanced learners tried to differentiate between their requests from their friends and professors so that

they utilized more direct and less conventionally indirect request in requesting from their friends while they performed exactly the opposite in requesting from their professors and used more conventionally indirect and less direct requests.

**External modifications.** External modifications are the techniques used to soften and reduce the face-threatening effects of requests on the addressee(s). These include saying something at the beginning or end of the request to prepare the addressee, providing a reason for your request, admission of the inconvenience you caused, assuring the future compensations, giving thanks, apologizing, considering the difficulties that may occur, and promise of rewards.

The results of Kruskal-Wallis H test accompanied by Dunn-Bonferroni post hoc tests showed that there was a striking difference among the learners with different proficiency levels in their total external modifications in all three situations ( $H(2) = 24.062, p = 0.000$ ). The outcome of the post hoc test revealed that the main differences were between both pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate with advanced learners. But there was not such a difference between pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate learners. That is, the advanced learners, to soften their requests, totally used significantly more external modifications than did pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate learners in all the situations. This is shown in Figure 2. The distribution of external modifications that the participants at three proficiency levels made across three situations is represented in Table 4.

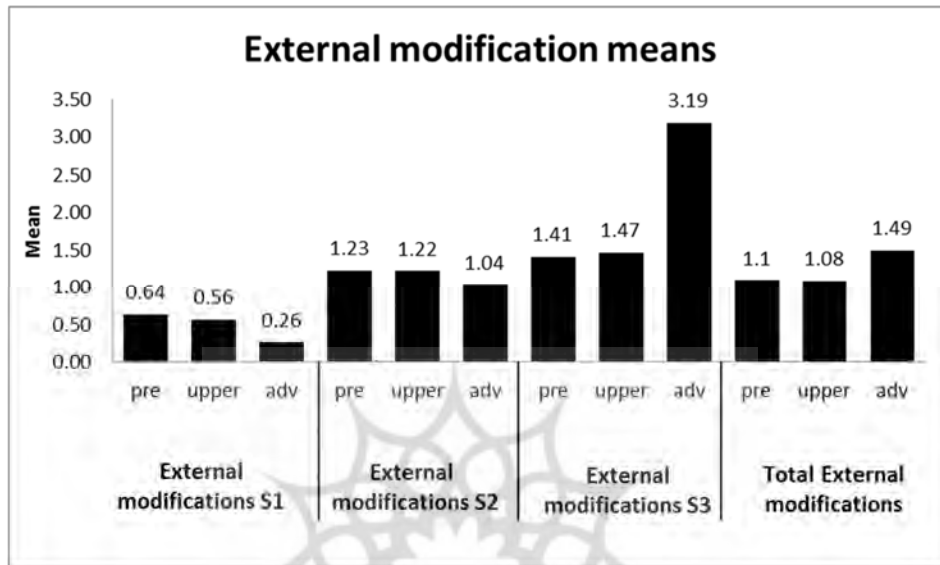


Figure 2. Overall Means of External Modifications in each Situation and in General

Table 4. Distribution of External Modifications Across three Situations by the Participants in three Proficiency Levels

External modifications	Situation 1: request from a student			Situation 2: request from a friend			Situation 3: request from a professor											
	Pre	Upper	Adv	Pre	Upper	Adv	Pre	Upper	Adv									
	(n = 44)	(n = 32)	(n = 27)	(n = 44)	(n = 32)	(n = 27)	(n = 44)	(n = 32)	(n = 27)									
	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>						
<b>Preparatory</b>	15	53.6	9	50.0	4	57.1	16	30.0	12	30.8	6	21.4	5	8.1	4	8.5	12	14.0
<b>Grounded</b>	10	35.7	6	33.3	2	28.6	18	33.0	13	33.3	9	32.1	28	45.2	23	48.9	22	25.6
<b>Disarmed</b>	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	2.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	4.8	2	4.3	3	3.5

<b>Imposition on minimizer</b>	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	4.0	5	12.8	5	17.9	5	8.1	7	14.9	15	17.4
<b>Giving thanks</b>	3	10.7	2	11.1	1	14.3	7	13.0	3	7.7	3	10.7	8	12.9	5	10.6	13	15.1
<b>Apology</b>	0	0.0	1	5.6	0	0.0	5	9.0	1	2.6	5	17.9	9	14.5	5	10.6	13	15.1
<b>Considerator</b>	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	5	9.0	4	10.3	0	0.0	4	6.5	1	2.1	8	9.3
<b>Promise of rewards</b>	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	2.6	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>100</b>

In order to have a clearer picture of applying external modifications in each situation, the participants were compared according to the means of their external modifications in each situation separately. The results of Kruskal-Wallis H test indicated that the participants performed differently in situations 1 and 3, the Situations in which the social distances and power imbalances are high. According to Dunn-Bonferroni post hoc tests, in Situation 1, advanced learners used more external modifications than did pre-intermediate learners ( $H(2) = 7.832, p = 0.020$ ). Advanced learners also applied much more external modifications in situation 3 than did both pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate learners ( $H(2) = 48.596, p = 0.000$ ). These show that advanced learners tried to accompany their requests' head acts with more external modifications in the situations they thought the social distance is great so that they would seem more polite and ensure that their requests would be accepted, the points that will be elaborated on in Section 5.

In order to examine the participants' sensitivity to the specifications of each situation (second research question) through applying external modifications more closely, the performances of each proficiency level were

analyzed across the three situations using Friedman's and Wilcoxon signed-rank post hoc tests. The results showed that all the participants applied external modifications differently in different situations with statistically significant indices. The output of Friedman's tests was ( $\chi^2(2) = 29.901, p = 0.000$ ), ( $\chi^2(2) = 30.730, p = 0.000$ ), and ( $\chi^2(2) = 51.228, p = 0.000$ ) for pre-intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced groups respectively.

However, the follow-up post hoc tests of Wilcoxon signed-rank with Bonferroni corrections (significance level of  $p < 0.017$ ) revealed that while pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate participants manage to perform differently only between situations 1 and 2 ( $Z(\text{pre-intermediate}) = -3.388, p = 0.001$ ,  $Z(\text{upper-intermediate}) = -3.535, p = 0.000$ ), and between situations 1 and 3 ( $Z(\text{pre-intermediate}) = -4.475, p = 0.000$ ,  $Z(\text{upper-intermediate}) = -4.284, p = 0.000$ ); advanced learners utilized external modifications differently in all pairwise comparisons of situations, that is between situations 1 and 2 ( $Z = -4.379, p = 0.000$ ), situations 1 and 3 ( $Z = -4.585, p = 0.000$ ), and situations 2 and 3 ( $Z = -4.626, p = 0.000$ ). These mean that advanced learners were sensitive about using external modification in different situations to show that they are aware of the power relations and social distance in each situation. That is, they used increasingly more external modifications throughout Situation 1 to 3. But pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate participants were only sensitive about requesting from a student in comparison with requesting from a friend and in requesting from a student in comparison with requesting from a professor, but they did not have such sensitivity in requesting from a friend in comparison with requesting from a professor and exploited external modifications almost similarly in Situations 2 and 3. This issue can show that advanced learners were sociopragmatically more aware than other learners and managed to use their knowledge in applying the different numbers of external modifications in various situations.

**Internal modifications.** Internal modifications were classified into two categories of syntactic modifications and lexical modifications in the present

study according to Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989), Trosborg's (1995), and Barron's classifications and will be analyzed and discussed separately.

**Syntactic modifications.** The participants of the present study generally exploited four sentence-structure types in their requests' head acts. They were statement, interrogative, statement-conditional, and interrogative-conditional which can be differentiated based on their politeness and face-threatening functions, the issues that will be dealt with in Section 5. Figure 3 displays the participants' preference for these sentence-structures in all three situations. As it is evident and the analysis of Friedman's test shows interrogative sentence-structure is the main preference of all learners in all three situations ( $\chi^2(3) = 106.199, p = 0.000$ ).

However, to see if there are any possible differences among participants' preference for each of these sentence-structures separately, the Kruskal-Wallis H and Dunn-Bonferroni post hoc analyses of learners' performances with different proficiency levels in choosing specific sentence-structure for their requests revealed that there is a significant difference among learners in their preference for interrogative-conditional structure ( $H(2) = 6.001, p = 0.050$ ). That is, advanced learners produced more interrogative-conditional structures than pre-intermediate learners. The follow-up analyses showed that this difference is more evident in Situation 3 ( $H(2) = 6.869, p = 0.032$ ) where the advanced participants had a request from a person with higher social power.



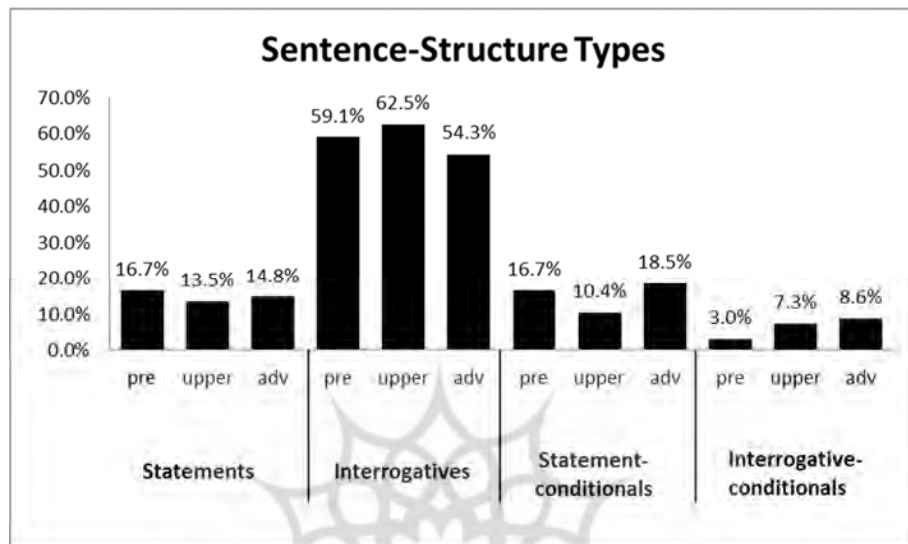


Figure 3.

*Participants' General Preference for the Sentence-structure Types in all the Situations*

Here, in order to explore the preference of each proficiency group for any particular sentence-structure in different situations (the second research question), the obtained data were analyzed through Friedman's test. The result showed that all proficiency groups were selective about exploiting 'statement structure' for their request, a structure which is mostly used to express hint and direct requests. The chi-squares of pre-intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced learners about the comparisons of their preference for 'statements' in different situations were ( $\chi^2(2) = 8.600, p = 0.014$ ), ( $\chi^2(2) = 8.000, p = 0.018$ ), and ( $\chi^2(2) = 14.000, p = 0.001$ ) respectively.

With regard to exploiting other sentence-structures in different situations, pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate learners did not have any significant preferences, but advanced learners were significantly selective in using each sentence-structure for different situations of requests. According to

Friedman's and Wilcoxon signed-rank post hoc (with Bonferroni corrections) tests results the advanced learners used 'statements' differently ( $\chi^2(2) = 14.000, p = 0.001$ ) between situations 1 and 2 ( $Z = -2.449, p = 0.014$ ) and between 2 and 3 ( $Z = -3.000, p = 0.003$ ). They also used 'interrogatives' variously ( $\chi^2(2) = 14.741, p = 0.001$ ) between situations 1 and 2 ( $Z = -3.606, p = 0.000$ ) and between 1 and 3 ( $Z = -3.273, p = 0.001$ ). In addition, they were selective in using 'statement-conditionals' ( $\chi^2(2) = 14.000, p = 0.001$ ) between situations 1 and 3 ( $Z = -3.317, p = 0.001$ ). Finally, they exploited 'interrogative-conditionals' differently ( $\chi^2(2) = 14.000, p = 0.001$ ) between situations 1 and 3 ( $Z = -2.646, p = 0.008$ ) and between 2 and 3 ( $Z = -2.670, p = 0.006$ ). These all may indicate that advanced learners utilized sentence-structures as one option to differentiate among various situations with different social demands in terms of social distance and power relations.

**Lexical modifications.** Lexical modifications appeared in the present data mostly in the form of adding 'please' to the beginning or end of the head acts and to a lesser extent solidarity markers like calling the addressee's first name or expressions like 'dear professor' along with some occasional instances of down toners, understators, and intensifiers. Figure 4 represents the distribution of lexical modifications in each situation and in general, and Table 5 shows the overall distribution of lexical modifications across different situations.

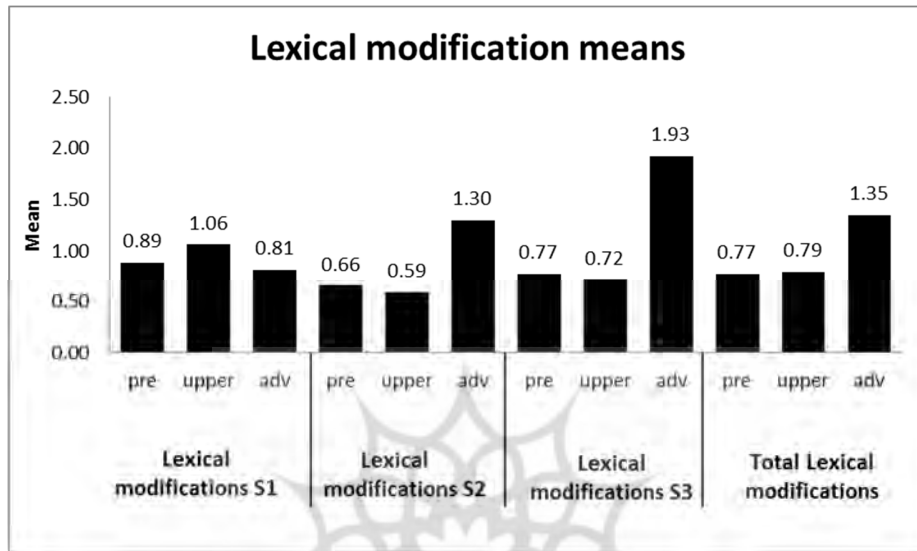


Figure 4. Overall Distribution of Lexical Modifications in each Request Situation and in General.

Table 5. Distribution of Lexical Modifications Across three Situations by the Participants in three Proficiency Levels

Lexical modifications	Situation 1: request from a student			Situation 2: request from a friend			Situation 3: request from a professor											
	Pre	Upper	Advance	Pre	Upper	Advance	Pre	Upper	Advance									
	(n = 44)	(n = 32)	(n = 27)	(n = 44)	(n = 32)	(n = 27)	(n = 44)	(n = 32)	(n = 27)									
	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>				
Politeness marker	30	76.9	22	64.7	15	68.2	19	67.9	7	36.8	8	23.5	21	63.6	18	78.3	25	48.1
Solidarity marker	9	32.1	11	32.4	7	31.8	7	25.0	7	36.8	23	67.6	9	27.3	3	13.0	12	23.1
Down toner	0	0.0	1	2.9	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	5.3	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	8.7	6	11.5
Understa tor	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	5.3	0	0.0	2	6.1	0	0.0	9	17.3
Intensifier	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	7.1	3	15.8	3	8.8	1	3.0	0	0.0	0	0.0

The results of Kruskal-Wallis H test show that advanced learners exploited much more lexical modifications in their requests than both pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate learners ( $H(2) = 42.345, p = 0.000$ ) which is more evident in situations 2 and 3 according to Dunn-Bonferroni post hoc tests results. That is, advanced learners modified their request from their friends and professors lexically much more than what pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate learners did in those situations.

The analyses of Friedman's and Wilcoxon signed-rank post hoc (with Bonferroni corrections) conducted to explore the performance of each proficiency group across the situations (the second research question). The results demonstrated that while pre-intermediate learners could not differentiate among various situations through applying lexical modifications, upper-intermediate and advanced learners exploited lexical modifications variously in different situations. The chi-square was ( $\chi^2(2) = 11.375, p = 0.003$ ) for upper-intermediate and ( $\chi^2(2) = 36.075, p = 0.000$ ) for advanced learners. The follow-up Wilcoxon signed-rank post hoc (with Bonferroni corrections) tests showed that upper-intermediate only managed to differentiate between situations 1 and 2 ( $Z = -2.640, p = 0.008$ ) and between 1 and 3 ( $Z = -3.051, p = 0.002$ ). But, advanced learners modified all pairwise comparisons of situations statistically different with lexical devices. That is, they used different numbers of lexical modifications between situations 1 and 2 ( $Z = -2.667, p = 0.008$ ), between 1 and 3 ( $Z = -4.667, p = 0.000$ ), and between 2 and 3 ( $Z = -3.710, p = 0.000$ ).

These can be interpreted as pre-intermediate learners failed to differentiate between different situations of request utilizing lexical devices, upper-intermediate tried to make differences between requesting from a student and a friend, between requesting from a student and a professor and not between a friend and a professor while advanced learners performed differently in all of these situations in applying lexical modifications.

### **Request Verbal Reports**

The verbal reports of this study were elicited through retrospective interviews with 20 percent of the participants in each proficiency level randomly; that is, 8 learners from pre-intermediate level, 7 learners from upper-intermediate level, and 5 learners from advanced level were randomly asked to get an interview. The data were analyzed and compared qualitatively based on the research questions of the study and according to answers that the respondents provided to the specific questions posed in the interviews.

The main finding of these data was that almost all respondents in all proficiency levels reported that the position of their audiences and the situation of request in addition to other factors, which are referred to in the following, had determining influences on their requests.

Pre1, a pre-intermediate participant, mentioned:

In my requests, I considered to whom I was talking. For example, the situation I have in the class is different from my relationship with my friend...and I should be careful about the style and vocabulary ...uhhh they depend on the amount of intimacy between us.

Another pre-intermediate learner, Pre2, stated:

... I think in the situation I'm talking to my professor, it is more important and I should be more polite.

The participants at the upper-intermediate level had the same opinion and Upper1 for instance said:

I pay attention to my own position and the person you are going to request from...and the thing you are going to ask...these are important to me.

Or, Upper2, an upper-intermediate participant, expressed:

For the first thing I think having request is not a bad thing and we should not think that we should always do everything and asking for help is wrong... But it depends on the addressee and the thing you want and you should not ask for something illogical.

Along similar lines, advanced learners remarked that the relationships were important. For example, Adv1 said:

I pay attention to formality or informality of the situation and who I'm talking to. I think...our answers should be different according to the situation.

And, Adv2, another advanced learner commented:

The difference depends on the person... I request from my friend easily. You can ask a person who has lower level than you but a person who has higher level than you or has a higher position...it may be more difficult. Power and position are important matters that in an academic setting they are equal to amount of knowledge.

Together, these all show that all the participants are aware of their roles in each situation of request and they know that there should be some differences among their requests in these situations.

The other issue that can be inferred from the verbal report data concerns the interviewees' answers to the second question of the interview which was: "Were there any differences among these situations regarding 'grammar' and 'diction'?" The answers to this question were interesting and meaningful. While pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate interviewees mostly referred to the specific vocabulary they should have used in each situation, advanced learners gave some examples of the differences in both grammatical structures and vocabulary that should be used in different situations.

Pre3, a pre-intermediate learner stated:

I think in professor situation you should be more formal and use more formal words ...cause he has a higher position.

And, Pre3, the other pre-intermediate participant, mentioned:

About the grammar I tried to use correct sentences ...but my grammar is weak and I paid more attention to my meaning rather than grammar.

Upper3, an upper-intermediate learner, commented:

The words that we choose should not be too direct...and similar to orders so our addressee does the request willingly.

Another upper-intermediate participant, Upper4, noted:

... I used the same structure for all situations. Maybe it was better to be more polite with my student and a little more with my friend. For my professor I should have tried to be more formal and polite.

However, advanced learners gave some examples of both grammatical and lexical changes they made in their requests according to their addressees.

Adv3, an advanced learner, noted:

When I talk to my professor I try not to use imperative sentences and use the words like 'would', 'could', 'maybe', 'perhaps', and 'please' and the sentences like them. And for my friend I use a friendly tone, not imperative ones, but a little toned down.

Adv4, the other advanced participant, added:

According to the structure, I tried to use different sentences in different situations to show my respect towards my audience and in using words I used 'dear' to talk to my professor, ...or 'bro' when I called my friend. I used my student's first name when I asked him to bring a marker.

What can be said according to these statements is that even though all participants knew that there should be some differences among their requests in different situations, pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate learners actualized these differences mostly through lexical devices while advanced learners were aware of both structural and lexical varieties.

The other point noteworthy to mention in these interviews is the role of individual differences and especially personal characteristics in expressing the requests. For example, some participants mentioned that they were shy or proud and these attributes might affect their requests.

For instance, Pre5, a pre-intermediate participant reported:

First I should say that requesting is difficult for me whether from my friend or professor, even I requested from friend very formally...in

general I'm a shy person and it was difficult for me to request in all situations and I hardly ever request something.

However, Upper5, an upper-intermediate participant, said the opposite:

For the first thing I think having request is not a bad thing and we should not think that we should always do everything and asking for help is wrong.

Or, Adv5, an advanced participant, expressed:

It is very difficult for me to request and I try to do my own duties...because others may have not any obligation to you and by asking them you are humiliating yourself.

It seems that such learners have a fear of not being accepted by others or be too proud to ask someone something. So, it is reasonable to analyze the participants' requests with due caution and to consider these personal characteristic variables in our conclusions.

Finally, what was evident in all interviews was the interviewees' emphasis on the importance of the subjects of the requests. Almost all the respondents stated that what they were asking would affect their requests above all.

For instance, Upper6, an upper-intermediate interviewee expressed:

It is important to consider if the addressee is able to comply with your request or not...and if your request logical at all.

One of the advanced respondents, Adv6, commented:

The first thing you should consider is to see to what extent your request is realistic...whether you deserve what you want or you want something big! Cause if you ask something unrealistic you both humiliated yourself and impose a strain on your audience.

Pre6, a pre-intermediate participant, also had the same opinion and said:

The content of request is very important for me...in which area I'm asking for help, time, energy, knowledge... In all, my request should not be illogical.



### **Discussion**

This section discusses the findings in three subsections according to the main research questions posed at the beginning of the study which concern the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic differences among learners with different proficiency levels.

#### **Request Head Acts**

Regarding the choice and development of request head acts (request types), it was found that there was a general tendency for conventionally indirect head acts in all situations by all the participants. This finding is in line with almost every study which has examined the directness level of the requests (e.g., Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; Trosborg, 1995, Rose, 2009; Kuriscak, 2015). Due to the face-threatening nature of requests (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Trosborg, 1995); using conventionally indirect request type could be considered as an effort on the speaker's part to be more polite and reduce the imposition on the negative face of the hearer, which seems to be universal according to Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory.

However, further analyses showed that in situations where social distance and power imbalance were high (i.e. Situation 1 and 3 in the present study) advanced learners in comparison with pre-intermediate learners inclined to use less non-conventionally indirect request types (hints) when they had dominance over their audiences (i.e., Situation 1) That is, in Situation 1, advanced learners opted to show and maintain their dominance over their addressee (here their student) through direct or conventionally indirect requests while pre-intermediate learners used non-conventionally indirect requests to show and maintain their dominance in this situation. Hints, according to Achiba (2003), need more creativity in using language than the other strategies since they are open-ended in propositional content, linguistic form, and pragmatic force and their illocutionary force is not explicitly

expressed; however, they are judged less politely by native speakers (Blum-Kulka, 1987; Walters, 1980).

Advanced learners in comparison with pre-intermediate learners were also less direct when they had a request from a person with higher social power (i.e., Situation 3). This means that pre-intermediate learners made more direct requests from their professors (Situation 3) than what advanced learners did. Direct requests are less politely than conventionally indirect requests almost in all studies that had NSs as the control group (e.g. Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; Rintell & Mitchell, 1989; Félix-Brasdefer, 2007).

The analyses of the performances of each proficiency level across three situations revealed that only advanced learners tried to differentiate between their requests from their friends and professors, so that they utilized more direct and less conventionally indirect requests in requesting from their friends and exactly the opposite in requesting from their professors.

Therefore, it can be said that even though there were not any significant differences among the participants in the present study in using different head acts in all situations and in general, advanced learners were more polite in Situations 1 and 3 in comparison with pre-intermediate learners and they tried to adjust their head acts to the social specifications in Situation 2 compared with Situation 3. This can be a sign of the sociopragmatic difference between advanced learners and the other participants of this study since such awareness was not observed among pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate learners despite the fact that in their verbal reports the interviewees from all three proficiency groups agreed that there should be some differences in their requests from a student, a friend, or a professor. The probable explanation is that all the participants of this study are adult university students hence are already fully pragmatically competent in their own language (i.e. Persian); so in their interviews, they emphasized that there should be some differences among the situations regarding the position and power of the addressee. But, when it came to applying this knowledge in their requests in a foreign

language, pre-intermediate, and upper-intermediate learners failed to actualize it through applying different request types (head acts). This can be a support for the studies (e.g. Schmidt, 1983; Ellis 1992; Hill, 1997; Rose, 2000 and 2009; Achiba, 2003; Félix-Brasdefer, 2007) in which it has been shown that the frequency of use of conventionally indirect request types has increased with proficiency and the preference for direct request types seemed to be typical of the lower proficiency groups' performance.

### **External Modifications**

External modifications are, according to Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), the optional strategies that come at the immediate context of a request head act to modify the illocutionary force of the request. The findings about the application of external modifications in the current study revealed that advanced learners totally used more external modifications than did pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate learners in all the situations which are in accordance with Trosborg's (1995), Hill's (1997), and Rose's (2000) studies in which a general increase in external modification with proficiency was found; however, there is a caution here. Since in the present study there was no NSs control group, one may not be confident about the overuse or underuse of the external modifications by the participants. However, it is evident that the application of external modifications increased in parallel with proficiency.

Regarding the second research question that seeks the sociopragmatic development of the participants, the findings showed that all the participants applied external modifications differently in different situations. However, advanced learners were more successful in this area and while pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate participants manage to perform differently only between Situations 1 and 2, and between situations 1 and 3; advanced learners utilized external modifications differently in all pairwise comparisons of situations, that is between Situations 1 and 2, Situations 1 and

3, and Situations 2 and 3. This shows that although all the participants, according to their verbal reports, relatively managed to differentiate among the situations through applying various proportions of external modifications in each situation, advanced learners were more sensitive to the specifications of the situations (i.e. social distance and dominance). Therefore, there seems to be some trace of sociopragmatic development among the participants parallel with their proficiency.

### **Internal Modifications**

In the present study, internal modifications were examined regarding both syntactic and lexical modifiers and will be discussed separately in the following two subsections.

**Syntactic modifications.** Syntactic modifications, here, were represented and analyzed at the level of sentence structure. This decision was due to the premise that the grammatical structures of sentences in requests have different loads of directness, politeness, and face-threatening act. Hill (1997) discussed that his Japanese participants, similar to native speakers, used complex sentences or syntactic downgraders (e.g., interrogative, negation, continuous, conditional) in higher levels of proficiency. Even though he argued that this was mostly due to transfer from Japanese requests, the idea that sentence structure may increase or decrease the effect of requests seems sensible. Carrell (1981), also in her study on the comprehension of requests showed that lower-proficiency learners had more difficulty interpreting requests stated as syntactically more complex structures, often incorporating interrogatives and negatives than did advanced learners; suggesting a possible hierarchy of difficulty regarding the sentence structure.

The findings revealed that although the participants in all three proficiency groups were grammatically competent to exploit all types of sentence structures (i.e. statement, interrogative, statement-conditional, and interrogative-conditional), advanced learners produced more interrogative-

conditional structures (e.g. *Would you please postpone the exam, if it is possible?*) than pre-intermediate learners especially when they had a request from a person with higher social power (Situation 3). It can be inferred that while other participants utilized different sentence structures without an intentional pattern, advanced learners exploited them purposefully, an indicator of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic development.

**Lexical Modifications.** The most evident differences among the groups under examination involved the frequencies and types of lexical modifiers. That is, advanced learners modified their requests from their friends and professors lexically much more than what pre-intermediate and upper-intermediate learners did in those situations. The results also demonstrated that while pre-intermediate learners could not differentiate among various situations through applying lexical modifications, upper-intermediate and advanced learners exploited lexical modifications variously in different situations. In other words, pre-intermediate learners failed to differentiate among different situations of request by means of lexical devices, upper-intermediate tried to make differences between requesting from a student and a friend, between requesting from a student and a professor, and not between a friend and a professor while advanced learners performed differently in all of these situations regarding applying lexical modifications.

The fact that upper-intermediate and more evidently advanced learners showed evidence of situational variation employing increasing numbers of modifiers with increasing imposition reveals sociopragmatic awareness on their part. This is also in line with their verbal reports where almost all learners had consensus on dealing with different situations variously. This result corroborates previous research findings according to which, language learners are lacking in the use of lexical/phrasal mitigators (Barron, 2007; Bella, 2011; Faerch and Kasper, 1989; Trosborg, 1995). As Trosborg (1995:429) explains, the “optional” nature of these mitigators makes them more difficult to acquire. Furthermore, researchers postulate that the internal modification of

speech acts by means of lexical/phrasal mitigators presents inherent difficulties for learners, since it is likely to increase the complexity of the pragmalinguistic structure (Trosborg, 1995:428-429), as well as the processing effort required for its production (Hassall, 2001:271).

### Conclusion

This study attempted to investigate the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic development of Iranian EFL learners when making requests in different situations. Overall, some effects of development were observed with increasing proficiency both in regard to main requests strategies (head acts) as well as different request modification devices. Specifically, consistent with previous studies, it was found that increasing proficiency brings with it a movement from directness to conventional indirectness and a more extended repertoire of both external and internal modification devices.

Furthermore, it was shown that, at least as far as the learners of this study were concerned, pragmatics precedes grammar in the development of interlanguage. That is, lower proficiency learners, in spite of their comments in their interviews, seem to rely initially on a pragmatic mode to express illocutionary intent making use of their universal and, possibly, L1 sociopragmatic knowledge. Nevertheless, it appeared that the development of grammatical competence is essential to the development of native-like pragmatic performance since sociopragmatic function often requires rather sophisticated grammatical and lexical means to be expressed (Kasper & Rose, 2002).

To verify the developmental patterns of the participants of the present study against available models of interlanguage pragmatics (Schmidt, 1983; Ellis, 1992; Kasper & Rose, 2002; Achiba, 2003), it can be said that these learners are mainly at 'unpacking' level and above, so they have passed 'pre-basic' and 'formulaic' stages and now are able to incorporate the specific requesting formulas into productive language use and shift to conventional

indirectness and in more advanced proficiency levels they have added new forms to the pragmalinguistic repertoire and utilized increasingly more external and internal mitigators and more complex syntactic structures. In order to be sure if they have reached the last stage namely 'fine-tuning', a group of native speakers as the control group should have completed the DCTs. However, the purpose of the present study was to trace the developmental patterns of Iranian EFL learners and not to compare them with any native speakers' data.

Finally, one point that emerged from verbal reports data and worthy to consider in any conclusion about expressing requests is the matter of individual differences. As it was mentioned, some learners expressed that the act of request was difficult for them due to their shyness, low self-esteem, being introverted, or even being conceited. Therefore, their answers to DCTs were brief or compulsory and might not reflect their actual pragmatic competence.

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### Appendix A

The questionnaire used to determine the final scenarios for the speech acts of 'Request'

Dear respondent

Thank you for participating in this study.

The following statements are the occasions of making Requests you may have experienced in your relationships with different people (your professors, your friends, and your possible students in tutoring classes) in academic settings. It would be of great help for us if you rate them according to the degree of imposition (Small, Medium, and Big) they have for you and likelihood of their occurrence (Yes and No). Feel free to add other occasions you may have confronted with at the end of the tables. This will definitely improve our work.

**Table 1: Requests from your professors**

	Description of requests	Degree of imposition			Likelihood of occurrence	
		small	Medium	high	Yes	No
1	Asking your professor to postpone the deadline of the course requirements					
2	Asking your professor to change the time of a specific exam					
3	Asking you professor to cancel a class					
4	Asking you professor to reduce the amount of needed projects and homework for a specific course					
5	Asking you professor for a counseling time					
6	Asking you professor to make a revision to your exam score					

**Table 2: Requests from your friends, classmates, or roommates**

	Description of request	<i>Degree of imposition</i>			<i>Likelihood of occurrence</i>	
		small	Medium	high	Yes	No
1	Asking your friend to help you in a project					
2	Asking your classmates not to break your concentration in class					
3	Asking your roommates to help you clean up the room					
4	Asking your friend to provide you with the needed sources and materials for a project					
5	Asking your friend to lend you some money					
6	Asking your roommates to be less noisy since you have a test tomorrow					

**Table 3: Requests from your private students (e.g. in tutoring classes)**

	Description of request	<i>Degree of imposition</i>			<i>Likelihood of occurrence</i>	
		small	Medium	high	Yes	No
1	Asking your student(s) to do you a favor (e.g. opening the window)					
2	Asking your student(s) to do extra homework					
3	Asking your student(s) to turn off the cellphone(s)					
4	Asking your student(s) to call you on a specific time					
5	Asking your student(s) to help you in conducting research					
6	Asking your student(s) to cancel a class					

Thank you for your time

Best wishes

**Appendix B****Background information form**

First Name:

Last Name:

Age:

Sex: Male  / Female

Mother Tongue:

Native Language:

Field of Study: English Literature  / Translation

Which year of study are you in? Freshman  / Sophomore  / Junior  / Senior

Which semester are you in?

Years of studying English (including school time, language institutes, university classes, etc.):

Have you been in English speaking countries? If 'Yes' how long?

Do you know or study other languages other than Persian and English?

If your answer to the previous question is 'Yes' please specify the language(s) and your estimated proficiency level in that/those language(s)?

Language(s):

Estimated Proficiency Level: beginner  / intermediate  / advance

**Thank you for your participation and time!**

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