

How EFL students make requests in academic settings: Evidence from power and social distance

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the realization of request speech acts produced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in academic contexts by considering variations in power and social distance. Requests constitute face-threatening acts (FTAs); therefore, their realization is strongly influenced by social and relational factors. This study employed a qualitative descriptive design supported by frequency counts and percentage distributions to quantify strategy use across situational configurations. The data were collected through a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) involving 34 undergraduate students from different semesters of the English Education Study Program at STKIP Taman Siswa Bima. The data were analysed based on request strategy classifications and mitigation devices and were interpreted through the framework of politeness theory and learner pragmatics. The findings generally indicate that conventionally indirect strategies tend to predominate in request realizations across configurations of power and social distance, though variation was observed across individual cases. In contexts characterized by asymmetrical power relations, students predominantly tended to avoid direct strategies and employed layered mitigation devices, such as apologies, politeness markers, and grounders. Meanwhile, social distance exerted a relatively consistent influence on the level of directness, as interactions with close interlocutors allowed for the use of more direct strategies. In addition, the qualitative analysis also identified recurrent patterns such as over-politeness, over-directness, and underuse of power. These tendencies are interpreted as possible reflections of local sociocultural norms and potential indications of pragmatic transfer, although pragmatic transfer was not the primary focus of the study.

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Introduction

Request speech acts play a crucial role in academic communication, as they enable speakers to obtain assistance, resources, or permission in interactions with lecturers and peers. In everyday academic practices, the ability to realize requests appropriately contributes to smooth collaboration and effective knowledge exchange. However, requests are categorized as face-threatening acts (FTAs) because they potentially impose on the interlocutor and threaten negative face, defined as an individual's desire to maintain autonomy and freedom of action (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, the realization of request speech acts frequently constitutes a source of pragmatic difficulty. EFL learners often demonstrate pragmatic inappropriateness despite possessing adequate grammatical competence. Such difficulties are commonly attributed to limited exposure to contextual and socially grounded language norms, which may ultimately hinder effective academic communication (Taguchi, 2015). This challenge is not unique to a single cultural

context. A recent systematic literature review of EFL request and apology strategies across multiple contexts similarly confirms that cultural factors, social power, and social distance consistently shape how EFL learners perform speech acts, with learners frequently departing from target-language sociopragmatic norms (Kulsawang & Ambele, 2024).

The realization of request strategies is closely associated with social variables, particularly power (P) and social distance (D). Power refers to the vertical hierarchical relationship between the speaker and the interlocutor, whereas social distance concerns the degree of interpersonal closeness or relational proximity. Within the framework of politeness theory, these variables are assumed to influence the level of directness and the use of mitigation devices in requests (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Empirical studies have consistently shown that request realizations are highly sensitive to such social and relational contexts. Cross-linguistic and cross-contextual research demonstrates that request strategies are shaped by factors such as social status, power relations, and social distance between interlocutors (Bartali, 2022; Bianchi, 2019; Chang & Ren, 2020; Holtgraves, 2021; Sutton & Shouse, 2018). These variations range from highly direct to highly indirect forms and involve a wide array of mitigation devices that reflect speakers' efforts to align their communicative behavior with social expectations (Dakhs & Ahmed, 2021; Farkas, 2022; Koppen et al., 2019; Markowitz, 2018).

Several studies have specifically emphasized the role of social status and power in shaping request strategy choices. Almasaeed (2023) demonstrated that differences in power relations and social distance significantly influence levels of directness and mitigation in request speech acts. This finding aligns with Ismiyati et al. (2025), who identified a relationship between speakers' social backgrounds and their politeness orientations. From a broader sociological perspective, Tal & Arnon (2018) also argued that social status and socioeconomic background contribute to variation in linguistic choices, including directive speech acts. Other studies similarly indicate that when speakers interact with interlocutors of higher social status, they tend to adopt more indirect and mitigated request strategies (Alkhonini et al., 2024; Khavidaki, 2023; Farkas, 2022). This pattern is further corroborated by recent empirical work examining request production across proficiency levels. AlTameemy et al. (2024) found that lower-proficiency EFL learners demonstrated significant pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failure in request acts, particularly in contexts involving asymmetrical power, whereas higher-proficiency learners exhibited greater strategic flexibility. Critically, however, this study also revealed that even proficient learners showed limitations in exploiting power as a pragmatic resource, suggesting that proficiency alone does not guarantee sociopragmatic calibration.

Within the EFL learner context, research indicates that students often experience difficulties in adjusting request strategies to varying social situations. Mukhroji et al. (2019) found that EFL learners encounter challenges in producing pragmatically appropriate requests, particularly in interactions involving asymmetrical social relations. Similar findings have been reported in studies specifically situated in Indonesian EFL settings. Nugroho et al. (2021) examined acts of requesting as realized by English for Specific Purposes students in Indonesia and found that conventionally indirect strategies predominated regardless of situational demands, reflecting a general tendency toward indirectness that may be rooted in local communication norms rather than in context-sensitive pragmatic calibration. These findings are reinforced by studies reporting pragmatic infelicities in learners' use of request strategies (Almegren, 2017; Banikalef & Bataineh, 2017; Han & Burgucu-Tazegül, 2016). Furthermore, several studies suggest that EFL learners tend to transfer pragmatic norms from their first language into the target language, resulting in request realizations that do not fully conform to English sociopragmatic expectations (Saeli, 2016; Ebadi & Pursiah, 2015; Nikmehr & Jahedi, 2014; Hedayatnejad et al., 2016). However, the nature and directionality of pragmatic transfer are contested. Qian et al. (2024) argue that pragmatic transfer in second language acquisition is not a uniform phenomenon; rather, it operates selectively depending on the degree of structural and cultural distance between the L1 and L2, as well as on learners' metalinguistic awareness. This perspective implies that interpretations of transfer should be approached with caution, as observed patterns may reflect instructional influence or limited pragmatic repertoire rather than direct L1 norm projection. This indicates that grammatical competence does not automatically entail pragmatic competence.

In academic settings, students, who are both learners and future professionals, are confronted with complex communicative demands that require sensitivity to social variation. Research has shown that students may display inconsistency in selecting request strategies when interacting with individuals of differing social status, such as lecturers or academic authorities (Chang & Ren, 2020; Dakhs & Ahmed, 2021; Alkhonini et al., 2024). The consequences of such inconsistencies extend beyond face management to affect interpersonal perceptions. Economidou-Kogetsidis et al. (2020) demonstrated that email requests produced by non-native EFL teachers to faculty, despite exhibiting a developed sociopragmatic orientation, were still evaluated as pragmatically inappropriate by native-speaking lecturers due to over-reliance on

directness and excessive grounders. Crucially, the native-speaking evaluators rated the senders' personalities significantly less favorably, underscoring that pragmatic miscalibration in academic communication carries real social and professional consequences beyond mere linguistic deviation. Such inconsistency reflects uncertainty in interpreting social positions and aligning linguistic choices with context-specific expectations.

Although research on request speech acts has developed substantially, several limitations remain. First, many previous studies have focused primarily on typologies of request strategies or cross-cultural comparisons involving native speakers, with less attention to how multiple social variables interact within a single learner population. Second, while sociocultural influence is frequently acknowledged, it is often treated as a secondary interpretive dimension rather than being systematically integrated into the analytical framework. As a result, the relationship between universal politeness principles and culturally specific orientations toward hierarchy, respect, and interpersonal harmony remains insufficiently theorized.

This issue is particularly relevant in the context of English education students in the Sumbawa region of West Nusa Tenggara, especially those from the Mbojo sociocultural background. The Mbojo community is characterized by a relatively hierarchical social structure and strong norms of deference toward authority, which may influence how speakers conceptualize and perform requests. From a pragmatic perspective, such norms can be understood as shaping learners' sociopragmatic knowledge, particularly their perceptions of power relations, social distance, and appropriate linguistic behavior. As prospective English teachers, these students occupy a strategic position in future educational contexts, making sensitivity to social variation an essential component of their professional competence.

Therefore, this study aims to contribute empirical evidence by examining how variations in power and social distance influence EFL students' request realizations, while also interpreting the observed patterns in relation to local sociocultural orientations. The analysis focuses on identifying the types of request strategies employed by EFL students across different configurations of power and social distance, as well as examining the use of mitigation devices, including both internal and external modifiers, in relation to these variations. Furthermore, the study interprets the patterns of request realization within the framework of sociocultural norms and learner pragmatics to provide a more comprehensive understanding of language use in context. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to offer a contextually grounded account of learner pragmatics in academic communication, with implications for enhancing pragmatic competence through socioculturally informed language instruction.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design supported by frequency counts and percentage distributions to map patterns in request strategy use. This approach was chosen because the primary objective of the study was to describe and analyze the realization of request speech acts across various social configurations, particularly power and social distance. Qualitative analysis allows for contextual interpretation of strategy variation and mitigation devices, while quantitative summaries serve to illustrate distributional tendencies across scenarios.

Participants

The participants consisted of 34 undergraduate students from the English Education Study Program at STKIP Taman Siswa Bima, West Nusa Tenggara. All participants were EFL learners who were actively engaged in academic interactions with lecturers and peers. Their linguistic and cultural backgrounds were relatively homogeneous, with most participants originating from the Mbojo sociocultural environment. This characteristic made the participants particularly relevant for examining request realizations in academically hierarchical contexts.

Research Instrument

The primary research instrument was a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) designed to elicit request realizations in academic and semi-academic contexts. The DCT was selected because it allows for controlled manipulation of social variables and systematic comparison across situations. The instrument consisted of six scenarios representing combinations of power (P) and social distance (D):

- P+/D+: higher power, close relationship
- P+/D-: higher power, distant relationship
- P=/D+: equal power, close relationship
- P=/D-: equal power, distant relationship
- P-/D+: lower power, close relationship
- P-/D-: lower power, distant relationship

Each scenario required participants to produce an English utterance that they would realistically use in the given situation. The DCT scenarios were adapted from the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) framework proposed by Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1984), with modifications to suit the academic context of the present study can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Discourse Completion Task (DCT) Scenarios across Power and Social Distance Configurations

<i>Scenario</i>	<i>Power-Distance Configuration</i>	<i>Description</i>
1	P+/D+	You are a lecturer and you know the student well. The student parked a motorcycle in the wrong place. You need the student to move it immediately. What would you say?
2	P+/D-	You are a campus security officer. A student you do not know parked a motorcycle blocking the entrance. You need the student to move it immediately. What would you say?
3	P=/D+	You share a room with your roommate. Your roommate left the kitchen dirty this morning. You want your roommate to clean it today. What would you say?
4	P=/D-	You missed a class yesterday. A classmate you do not know well has complete notes. You want to borrow the notes. What would you say?
5	P-/D+	You know your lecturer well. Your assignment is not finished. You want to ask the lecturer for one more day. What would you say?
6	P-/D-	You missed last week's class. You are not close to the lecturer. You need the lecture slides to study. What would you say?

The six scenarios were constructed to systematically manipulate power and social distance while keeping the situational content familiar to the participants. Academic roles such as lecturer, student, and peer were selected to ensure contextual relevance. This design allows for controlled comparison of request realizations across different social configurations. The use of DCT in examining request strategies has been well-established in interlanguage pragmatics research, including in Indonesian contexts. Situmorang (2022) employed an Oral DCT to investigate request strategies among international students in an English as a Lingua Franca setting in Indonesia and found that the instrument effectively elicited a range of conventionally indirect strategies, with address terms and lengthy grounders emerging as dominant features. This affirms the instrument's utility for capturing learners' preferred pragmatic choices in academic and quasi-academic scenarios.

Despite these advantages, it is important to acknowledge that DCT data may not fully represent naturally occurring interaction. Responses elicited through written tasks tend to be more planned and less interactionally dynamic, and therefore may not capture features such as turn-taking, prosody, or real-time negotiation of meaning. Consequently, the findings of this study should be interpreted as reflecting participants' pragmatic knowledge and preferred linguistic choices under controlled conditions, rather than their actual performance in spontaneous communication. This limitation is consistent with findings from recent pragmatics testing research. Huang & Lu (2023) demonstrated that contextual variables such as power, social distance, and degree of imposition interact in complex ways to affect the difficulty of oral speech act production tasks, and that these interactions are not fully captured by written elicitation instruments. Their findings suggest that written DCT data may systematically underrepresent the pragmatic challenges that learners face in real-time communication, particularly for high-imposition scenarios involving power asymmetry, which are precisely the configurations central to the present study.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected by distributing the DCT to participants in written form. Participants were instructed to read each scenario carefully and provide written responses reflecting what they would say in the described situation. No restrictions were placed on response length, allowing participants flexibility in realizing their requests. All responses were subsequently compiled into a research corpus.

Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded in several stages. First, all responses were classified according to request strategy types based on levels of directness: direct strategies, conventionally indirect strategies, and non-conventionally indirect strategies, following the CCSARP framework (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). Direct strategies included imperatives and explicit performatives; conventionally indirect strategies were

primarily realized through query preparatory forms (e.g., *can you, could you, may I*); and non-conventionally indirect strategies involved hints or implicit requests.

Second, the analysis focused on identifying modification devices, including internal modifiers (e.g., politeness markers, hedges, apologies) and external modifiers (e.g., grounders or justifications). Each response could contain multiple modifiers, which were coded independently to capture the layered nature of mitigation.

The coding process was conducted by the researcher. To ensure consistency, the categorization followed clearly defined criteria derived from the CCSARP framework, with explicit distinctions between levels of directness and types of modification devices. The data were coded iteratively, involving multiple readings of the dataset to maintain consistency across cases and to refine category application where necessary.

To address potential ambiguity in classification, particularly in cases where utterances could be interpreted as belonging to more than one category, coding decisions were guided by the dominant illocutionary force of the utterance. When an utterance exhibited features of multiple strategies, it was classified based on its primary communicative function within the given context. Rather than imposing rigid categorization, ambiguous cases were treated cautiously and interpreted in relation to the broader analytical framework.

Subsequently, request strategies and modification devices were analyzed in relation to power and social distance across scenarios. Strategy distributions were presented descriptively to illustrate general patterns within each social configuration. The analysis does not aim to produce broad generalizations but rather to provide a contextually grounded account of how EFL learners realize requests under systematically varied social conditions.

Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings concerning the realization of request speech acts produced by EFL students across different configurations of power and social distance. Frequency counts and percentage distributions are used to illustrate general tendencies across situational configurations, while the qualitative discussion situates these patterns within politeness theory and learner pragmatics scholarship.

Realization of Request Strategies across Power and Social Distance

Analysis of the 204 DCT responses revealed that EFL students employed a range of request strategies with varying degrees of directness. Overall, conventionally indirect strategies emerged as the most frequently used choice across all configurations of power and social distance. These strategies were predominantly realized through query preparatory forms such as *could you, may I*, and *can I*, which pragmatically function to present the request as contingent on the interlocutor's willingness rather than as a direct imposition. This predominance of conventionally indirect forms is consistent with broader patterns identified in the literature. Wang et al.'s (2024) systematic review of forty-two studies on pragmatic competence in EFL and ESL contexts found that speech act production, particularly requests, consistently reflects learners' limited pragmatic repertoire, with a small number of formulaic structures accounting for a disproportionate share of responses across diverse populations. The review further notes that pragmatic competence does not develop automatically with language proficiency, reinforcing the interpretation that the patterns observed in the present study may reflect instructional and formulaic entrenchment rather than flexible sociopragmatic awareness can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of Request Strategies across Power-Distance Configurations (n = 34)

<i>Power-Distance</i>	<i>Direct</i>	<i>Conv. Indirect</i>	<i>Non-Conv. Indirect</i>
P+/D+	9 (26%)	23 (68%)	2 (6%)
P+/D-	7 (21%)	25 (74%)	2 (6%)
P=/D+	12 (35%)	20 (59%)	2 (6%)
P=/D-	3 (9%)	29 (85%)	2 (6%)
P-/D+	2 (6%)	30 (88%)	2 (6%)
P-/D-	1 (3%)	32 (94%)	1 (3%)

As shown in Table 2, conventionally indirect strategies were particularly dominant in low-power (P-) contexts, where they accounted for 88–94% of responses. In equal-power (P=) and speaker-dominant (P+) contexts, indirect strategies remained the most frequent choice, ranging from 59% to 74%. While this overall pattern is broadly consistent with Brown & Levinson's (1987) prediction that increased face threat

correlates with increased mitigation, the near-uniform prevalence of indirect strategies across all power configurations warrants critical examination.

Three alternative interpretations merit consideration alongside the face-threat explanation. First, the dominance of indirect strategies, including in contexts where directness would be pragmatically appropriate such as P+/D-, may reflect pragmatic rigidity rather than pragmatic competence. Rather than flexibly calibrating their strategy choices to contextual demands, students may have defaulted to indirect forms as a generalized safe option, producing what Thomas (1983) terms pragmatic failure through over-caution. Second, this pattern may reflect instructional influence: EFL classroom instruction in Indonesia tends to emphasize politeness norms and formal registers, which may have shaped learners' intuitions toward indirect forms as the default "correct" choice, independently of actual contextual demands (Kasper & Rose, 2002; House, 2003). Third, the prevalence of query preparatory forms specifically, as opposed to the full range of conventionally indirect strategies, suggests that students' strategic repertoire may be relatively narrow, with a small set of formulaic structures (*could you, can I, may I*) accounting for a disproportionate share of responses. This narrowness points toward lexical and formulaic over-generalization rather than nuanced pragmatic calibration. This interpretation is complicated by evidence from comparable EFL populations. Lenchuk & Ahmed (2019), examining request strategies among Omani EFL learners through DCT and focus group discussion, found that, contrary to prevailing assumptions in the interlanguage pragmatics literature that EFL learners tend toward directness, their participants predominantly employed indirect strategies, with 62% of responses categorized as indirect. Crucially, the authors attribute this pattern not to pragmatic rigidity but to culturally rooted scripts that reflect the learners' values of communal deference and relational solidarity. This finding raises an important interpretive question for the present study: the predominance of indirect strategies observed across all power configurations may not represent a deficiency in pragmatic calibration but may instead constitute a culturally coherent communicative orientation, one in which indirectness functions as a positive social value rather than merely a face-threat mitigation device. Such an interpretation does not invalidate the over-caution account but suggests that the two explanations, namely cultural script and pragmatic rigidity, may coexist and are difficult to disentangle without complementary data from learner self-report or interview.

These alternative interpretations, including the possibility that indirectness reflects culturally rooted scripts rather than pragmatic over-caution, do not invalidate the face-threat account but complicate it: what appears as pragmatic awareness may in some cases be pragmatic rigidity, or equally, a culturally coherent communicative orientation operating through a face-threat rationale.

Power, Social Distance, and Mitigation Patterns in Requests

To examine the influence of power relations more specifically, request strategies were analyzed in aggregate according to the power variable can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Request Strategies by Power Relations

<i>Power</i>	<i>Direct</i>	<i>Conv. Indirect</i>	<i>Non-Conv.</i>
P+	16 (24%)	48 (71%)	4 (6%)
P=	15 (22%)	49 (72%)	4 (6%)
P-	3 (4%)	62 (91%)	3 (4%)

Table 3 reveals an important asymmetry in the data. While P- contexts show a clear contrast with other configurations, with direct strategies dropping to 4% compared to 24% in P+ and 22% in P=, the distributions for P+ and P= are strikingly similar. The near-identical profiles of P+ (direct: 24%, indirect: 71%) and P= (direct: 22%, indirect: 72%) suggest that power, at least in the range from equal to speaker-dominant, did not function as a meaningful differentiator in students' strategy choices. In Brown & Levinson's (1987) framework, P+ contexts should theoretically license greater directness, as the speaker holds more authority; the absence of this pattern indicates that students did not consistently activate or exploit their positional power as a pragmatic resource.

This finding points to what may be characterized as an *underuse of power* as a pragmatic variable: while students were sensitive to the asymmetry between P- and other configurations, they did not encode the distinction between P= and P+ in their linguistic choices. One explanation is that the social norms governing the participants' Mbojo sociocultural background emphasize deference and harmony maintenance even in interactions with lower-status interlocutors, making overt exercise of institutional power pragmatically uncomfortable. Another explanation is developmental: learners at this stage may lack the pragmatic repertoire to realize authority-marking strategies in English, defaulting instead to indirect forms that feel socially safe across all non-subordinate configurations. This inability to deploy power as a

pragmatic resource may also be understood through the lens of individual differences in L2 pragmatics. Zhang's (2024) systematic review highlights that learners' sociopragmatic choices are mediated not only by proficiency but also by affective and conative variables including learner identity, willingness to communicate, and sociocultural orientation. From this perspective, the failure to exploit speaker-dominant power in the present dataset may reflect not only a developmental gap but also a dispositional tendency rooted in Mbojo sociocultural norms of relational harmony, which discourages overt assertion of institutional authority even when it is situationally licensed.

The mitigation data reinforce can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4. Use of Mitigation Devices in Low-Power Contexts (P-)

<i>Mitigation Device</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Apology	59	87%
Politeness marker (<i>please</i>)	51	75%
Grounder (<i>reason</i>)	62	91%

The high frequencies of apologies (87%), grounders (91%), and politeness markers (75%) in P- contexts are consistent with findings by Dakhs & Ahmed (2021) and Khavidaki (2023) on mitigation overuse in hierarchical interactions. Notably, similar patterns were also present in P+ contexts, where the expectation of authority should theoretically reduce the need for extensive face-work. The persistence of layered mitigation across power configurations suggests that these devices function not primarily as rational face-threat calculators but as socially automatized routines, that is, formulaic sequences that students deploy habitually regardless of whether the interlocutor's face is actually at risk. This automatization of mitigation devices has also been observed in research on speech act production in EFL classroom interactions more broadly. Darong (2024) found that EFL learners' reliance on formulaic politeness sequences, including apologies and hedges, often functions as a default communicative mode rather than a context-sensitive pragmatic choice, and that balancing directive and mitigated language constitutes a critical but underaddressed competency in EFL instruction. This observation supports the view that the layered mitigation patterns identified in the present dataset reflect habituated routines shaped by instructional norms rather than real-time face-threat assessment.

In contrast, the social distance variable shows a more consistent and theoretically coherent influence on directness. Comparing D+ and D- configurations within the same power level reveals a systematic pattern: D+ contexts consistently permitted higher rates of direct strategies (P+/D+: 26%; P-/D+: 35%) compared to their D- counterparts (P+/D-: 21%; P-/D-: 9%). This gradient holds across power levels, whereas the P+ versus P= distinction does not. This differential consistency carries theoretical implications: it suggests that for these learners, social distance, understood as an index of relational solidarity and interpersonal familiarity, functions as a more reliable pragmatic trigger for strategy modulation than institutional power. While power produces a sharp categorical effect at the P- threshold, social distance operates as a more continuous and productive variable across the full range of configurations.

This finding aligns with Bartali's (2022) observation that social distance exerts a stronger and more gradient effect on request strategy choice than power in some populations, and extends it to an Indonesian EFL context where institutional power is culturally salient but may be overridden by solidarity-based norms in relational interactions.

Recurrent Patterns in EFL Students' Request Realizations

The qualitative analysis identified several recurrent patterns in students' request production that cannot be fully captured by strategy classification alone. Three patterns are discussed here, each examined through the specific linguistic features through which it is realized.

Over-politeness in asymmetrical power contexts. The most prominent pattern was the deployment of multiple mitigation devices in P- contexts, often exceeding what the situational face-threat would appear to require. This is illustrated in the following datum:

"Dear Lecturer, I apologize for disturbing your time. Through this message, I would like to request an extension for the deadline for submitting the assignment scheduled for today..." (R3)

Linguistically, this utterance exhibits three distinct features worth identifying separately. First, the formulaic apology "*I apologize for disturbing your time*" functions as a pre-request that frames the upcoming imposition before it is even stated, a discourse-structural choice that is relatively uncommon in English academic requests but characteristic of Indonesian politeness norms governing interactions with

authority figures. Second, the phrase *"through this message"* inserts an explicit channel reference that adds formality and social distance even within a direct address, functioning as a distancing device. Third, the nominal phrase *"the assignment scheduled for today"* employs a highly formal and objectified reference to the task, avoiding first-person ownership (*"my assignment"*) in a way that reduces the directness of the request. Taken together, these features indicate that students are not merely selecting an indirect strategy but are constructing a multi-layered politeness frame at the discourse level, a pattern more consistent with Indonesian deference norms than with English academic pragmatic conventions (Wierzbicka, 2006). The over-politeness pattern illustrated by this datum has been documented in student-to-faculty communication in EFL contexts more broadly. Economidou-Kogetsidis (2015) demonstrated that Greek-Cypriot EFL students' academic email requests, despite being perceived by the writers themselves as appropriately polite, were evaluated by native-speaking faculty as unnecessarily abrupt or as insufficiently acknowledging the imposition involved, a mismatch rooted in divergent sociopragmatic norms rather than in linguistic deficiency per se. Critically, this misalignment had measurable consequences for how faculty evaluated the senders' personalities. This finding extends to the present context: the multi-layered pre-request framing observed in R3 may reflect culturally grounded politeness orientation, but it does not necessarily align with the pragmatic expectations of English academic discourse.

Discourse-level transfer in spoken registers. A different pattern was observed in contexts where students produced requests in a more informal, spoken-like mode:

"Eee... Sir!! Can I tell you something..? Honestly... my assignment is not finish yet... So... Can you give me compensation for one more day?" (R5)

This utterance is notable for several linguistic features. The hesitation marker *"Eee..."* and the ellipsis punctuation throughout signal spoken-register features being carried into written DCT production, suggesting that the student was drawing on spoken L1 interaction norms. The pre-request sequence *"Can I tell you something..? Honestly..."* functions as an attention-getter and a softening preface, which in Indonesian spoken interaction would serve to gradually approach a face-threatening topic. The request itself is then delivered through a query preparatory (*"Can you give me compensation"*), but its force is substantially weakened by the preceding hedging. The grammatical error (*"is not finish yet"*) is secondary to the pragmatic observation: the rhetorical structure of the utterance, building up gradually through prefaces before arriving at the core request, reflects L1 discourse patterning rather than English pragmatic norms, which would typically favor a more direct and organized structure even in informal registers. The transfer of spoken L1 discourse patterns into written English academic registers, as observed in R5, represents a form of pragmatic failure that extends beyond individual strategy selection. Nicholas et al. (2023) analyzed a corpus of Japanese EFL learners' request-based email writing and found high frequencies of pragmatic failure across multiple dimensions of register, with learners consistently failing to adapt their language to the formality demands of academic contexts. Notably, their analysis revealed that such failures were not random but patterned, reflecting systematic influence from learners' L1 spoken interaction norms, a finding directly parallel to the discourse-structural transfer features identified in the present study's qualitative analysis.

Over-directness and expressive transfer in P+ contexts. A third pattern, less frequent but theoretically significant, appeared in speaker-dominant power contexts:

"park it on the right place or lick your motorbike tire? kidding, place it right please hey! are you blind?! move it aside... no excuse" (R6)

From the perspective of English institutional pragmatics, this utterance is face-aggravating and would be classified as impolite in most academic or professional contexts. Linguistically, it features bare imperatives (*"park it", "place it right", "move it aside"*), a rhetorical insult (*"are you blind?!"*), and an explicit refusal of excuses (*"no excuse"*), a constellation of features that in English signals aggressive or authoritative speech rather than legitimate institutional authority. The mitigating move *"kidding"* is inserted mid-utterance but does not sufficiently reframe the surrounding content. This example illustrates that over-directness in this dataset is not simply a matter of choosing a direct strategy but involves the deployment of face-aggravating linguistic features, namely insults, imperatives, and refusal of mitigation, that suggest expressive norms from the L1 informal register are being transferred without adjustment to English pragmatic conventions.

Over-directness in EFL request production has also been documented in Indonesian learner contexts, though its linguistic features and social triggers differ across settings. Suwignyo et al. (2024) examined interlanguage impoliteness in criticism by English learners from Javanese backgrounds and found that overt face-aggravating expressions, including bare imperatives and explicit refusals of mitigation, emerged systematically in high-power speaker contexts, suggesting that the relationship between L1 cultural norms

and over-directness in L2 is not reducible to a simple failure to apply politeness strategies. Rather, such patterns may reflect the selective transfer of expressive L1 norms that govern authoritative or emotionally charged interactions, a mechanism that operates independently of learners' general politeness orientation.

Taken together, the findings reveal a complex picture that cannot be reduced to a simple correlation between social configuration and strategy choice. Power produces a strong categorical effect at the subordinate threshold but fails to differentiate meaningfully between equal and superior power positions. Social distance, by contrast, operates as a more continuous and productive variable, consistently modulating directness across configurations in ways that align with solidarity-based pragmatic norms. The recurrent patterns identified in the qualitative analysis, namely over-politeness, discourse-level transfer, and expressive over-directness, are realized through identifiable linguistic features, including formulaic pre-requests, hesitation-based prefaces, bare imperatives, and distancing nominals, all of which suggest that learners' pragmatic choices are shaped not only by their face-threat calculations but also by the sociocultural norms and L1 rhetorical patterns they bring to the task.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine how variations in power and social distance influence the realization of request speech acts produced by EFL students in academic contexts. Specifically, it sought to identify the request strategies and mitigation devices employed across different social configurations and to explore pragmatic tendencies emerging from learners' request production. The findings indicate that conventionally indirect request strategies dominate across all configurations of power and social distance. Prior research has conceptualized pragmatic competence as a multi-layered construct that encompasses not only the selection of appropriate linguistic forms but also the interactional ability to adapt those forms flexibly to changing contexts. From this perspective, the near-uniform reliance on conventionally indirect strategies across all social configurations in the present study raises questions about the depth of learners' pragmatic competence: while learners demonstrate receptive sensitivity to face-threat, particularly in subordinate power contexts, their productive repertoire appears insufficiently flexible to reflect the full range of sociopragmatic distinctions that context-sensitive communication requires. This pattern, while broadly consistent with politeness theory's prediction of increased mitigation under higher face threat, may therefore also reflect a reliance on generalized safe defaults rather than genuine context-sensitive calibration. In low-power situations, students consistently avoided direct strategies and relied heavily on layered mitigation devices, such as apologies, politeness markers, and grounders, reflecting a strong orientation toward protecting the interlocutor's negative face. In contrast, social distance exerted a more consistent influence on levels of directness, as interactions with close interlocutors allowed for more direct strategies with reduced mitigation. These findings contribute to the field of learner pragmatics by providing empirical evidence on the interaction between power and social distance in EFL learners' request realizations within an Indonesian academic context. The study extends existing politeness research by demonstrating that the effects of power are often mediated by sociocultural orientations toward harmony and deference, while social distance plays a more stable role in shaping directive force. This asymmetry qualifies the politeness theory treatment of power and social distance as parallel variables, suggesting that their relative weight varies according to learners' cultural and instructional context. Practically, the findings highlight the need for pragmatics-oriented instruction in EFL classrooms, particularly for prospective teachers, to raise awareness of context-sensitive request strategies and target-language sociopragmatic norms in academic communication.

The pedagogical implications of these findings are supported by empirical evidence on the teachability of pragmatic competence. Research comparing explicit and implicit instructional approaches consistently shows that explicit pragmatic instruction, which includes direct attention to speech act strategies, sociocultural norms, and context-sensitive variation, yields significantly stronger gains than implicit exposure alone. For EFL programs in Indonesia, this implies that pragmatics instruction should be systematically integrated into teacher education curricula, with particular attention to how social variables such as power and social distance interact with culturally specific norms in shaping appropriate communicative behavior.

Several limitations of the study should be acknowledged. First, the participant pool was relatively small and drawn from a single institution with a relatively homogeneous sociocultural background, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the use of a Discourse Completion Task, while effective for controlling social variables, may not fully capture the dynamics of naturally occurring spoken interactions. Third, the alternative interpretations proposed in this study are speculative in the absence of complementary data such as learner interviews, and are offered as theoretically plausible accounts rather than empirically confirmed conclusions. Finally, pragmatic transfer was identified interpretively rather

than measured systematically, as it was not the primary focus of the study. Future research could expand the scope of investigation by involving participants from diverse institutional and cultural backgrounds to allow for broader comparison. Employing multiple data sources, such as role plays or naturally occurring interaction data, may also provide a more nuanced understanding of request realization in real-time communication. In addition, future studies could explicitly examine pragmatic transfer and instructional interventions to assess how learners' pragmatic competence develops over time.

Declarations

- Author contribution** : Khusnul Khatimah conceptualized the study, designed the research instrument, conducted data analysis, and led the writing of the manuscript. Nurhidayat participated in data collection, data transcription, and contributed to the literature review. Moehammad Noeryoko assisted in data collection and participated in the revision of the manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.
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- Ethics Approval** : This study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles applicable to research involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary and that their responses would be used solely for research purposes.
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