



## Request-Making Pragmatics in EFL Learners: A Case of Supportive Moves

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**Abstract** This study addresses the gap in research on the interlanguage pragmatic knowledge of Saudi English learners across two proficiency levels. Recognizing the lack of understanding of interlanguage characteristics within the Saudi context, the research conducts a comprehensive examination of interlanguage pragmatic competence in High Achievers students (HAs) and Low Achievers students (LAs). Using a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) that incorporates essential social variables such as power (P) and distance (D), the study aims to elicit supportive moves in request utterances. Findings indicated that HA students significantly employed a wider variety of linguistic patterns in mitigated request utterances in comparison to LAs. HAs demonstrated awareness of both social power and distance in realizing and producing speech acts, while LAs exhibited less consciousness of social variables influencing external modifications. The study further emphasizes the substantial impact of language proficiency on the use of supportive moves among Saudi EFL learners.

**Keywords:** *External modifications, Linguistic competence, Speech act, Pragmatic competence, Saudi learners*

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### 1. Introduction

Request is a common speech act that occurs in daily interactions. It requires the speakers, especially the language learners, to master such acts that encompass not only the appropriate linguistic structures but also the relevant politeness strategies that are embedded in the act. Foreign or second language learners are advised to mitigate such acts in their communication. In such cases, learners also need to be able to perform the Face Threatening Act (FTA) directly and efficiently to avoid undesired misunderstandings. External modification in request act is used before or after head acts to perform several goals. In most cases, it is employed to mitigate the sharpness of the request act. There are many strategies such as disarmer, preparatory, getting pre-commitment, imposition minimizer, small talk, grounder appreciation, apology, and promise of reward. The investigation of

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supportive moves of a request acts has garnered significant attention in numerous studies (Blum-Kulka, et al., 1989). This field of research has become a focal prominence in interlanguage pragmatic research with the purpose of recognizing the suitable cultural norm of utilizing language in speech. Many studies have accentuated the remarked cross-cultural variations in the exploiting of mitigation strategies across diverse speech acts, encompassing requests.

Speech act research has evidently reported how pragmatic failures or success might be traced as elements of speech acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987), particularly when speech acts are FTAs. Precisely, this type of act needs some sufficient pragmatic knowledge skills to maintain soothing communication, avoiding any misunderstanding or discomfort (see Brown & Levinson, 1987). Employing FTAs efficiently is more necessary than using other target speech acts since if L2 students show pragmatic failure in FTAs, it may lead to critical communication breakdowns, which are sometimes interpreted as offensive and rude (Byon, 2004). In this research, the request act was chosen to investigate the L2 learners' performance and realization of pragmatic competence for groups from different language proficiency levels. The request act was adopted as it covers a great portion of the everyday interactions that need to be requested to achieve successful communication (Green, 2010).

In addition, it has been stated that this type of act threatens the face of the hearer (Su, 2021), which needs speakers to have adequate pragmatic competence to reduce the level of imposition in making requests and prevent miscommunication and embarrassment by saving interlocutors' faces. Moreover, learners' competence in using requests requires proficiency to be conscious of social power and distance. Speakers should show awareness of social power and distance in choosing a request strategy. For example, asking a friend for a calculator is easier than requesting it from your instructors since there is, in the first situation, no power, while in the second situation, the speaker has less power. This explains why speakers have to alter their requests according to social power in their speech. Pragmatic competence is necessary in communication for EFL and ESL learners. As mentioned, pragmatic errors may cause offense and failure to transfer successful communication, unlike linguistic errors, so learners should expand their competence in employing an appropriate utterance.

The appropriateness of using language likely depends on assimilating and realizing the relationship between language and culture. This relationship comes under the umbrella of the pragmatic approach, which concerns the functional perspective of the language. Taguchi (2023) stated that learners should have a solid background in the culture of the target language. However, if the learners do not exhibit any comprehension of the target language culture, they will have problems in learning the language. For example, Al Khasawneh (2021) compared languages and cultures with the objective of determining and describing problems that second-language learners might confront. He concluded that learners transfer forms and meanings, and they render them from their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture.

This study examined the use of request strategies by High Achievers (HAs) and Low-Achievers (LAs) of Saudi English as a Foreign Language (SEFL) learners so as to explore how their understanding of pragmatic knowledge, specifically request acts, could explain their request-making pragmatics. There has been little research on how pragmatic realization and speech act adoption among EFL/ESL learners are influenced by language competence. Pragmatic competence of Saudi learners has not been investigated widely and is insufficient, especially in the Saudi EFL context (Alshraah et al., in press). To be precise, this study intends to:

1. Examine the relationship between the English competence level of SEFL learners and their strategies on how to use external modification in request acts.
2. Uncover (dis)similarities between HAs and LAs in their use of supportive moves of request acts.
3. Examine the variation in using external modification based on contextual variables between SEFL learners of different language proficiency (HAs and LAs).

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Pragmatic competence, as highlighted by González-Lloret (2021), is a pivotal skill for second language (L2) learners, aiming for effective social interaction. This competence encompasses not only

understanding the linguistic structure but also comprehending the functions underlying these structures within specific cultural and social contexts. By delving into the intricacies of pragmatic competence, L2 learners navigate the complex interplay between language form, its intended purpose, and the social norms that shape and dictate these linguistic structures. Mastery of pragmatic competence empowers learners to aptly decode and employ language in ways that align with cultural expectations, facilitating seamless and appropriate communication in diverse social settings. Pragmatic competence of learners depends on the knowledge of pragmalinguistic actions, which focuses on the ability to react with appropriate utterance, and sociopragmatics knowledge, which centers on considering social variables in communication.

Furthermore, it is agreed by researchers that insufficient pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics can result in pragmatic failures (Taguchi, 2023). More concretely, Altasan (2016) mentioned that pragmatic failures occur when students misinterpret what is being said in the target language or use inappropriate expressions that conflict with the cultural norms in the target language. Accordingly, such pragmatic failures can further be classified into sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic failures, which occur when EFL/ESL learners employ inappropriate forms and structures in the target language. Sociopragmatic failure occurs if the person does not pay attention to social norms, values, age, gender, and cultural differences in their speech. For example, when students ask their instructor, “*I need a recommendation letter*”, they employ a high degree of direct speech instead of using a phrase, “*could you please*”. In this instance, the failure is the result of the student’s unconsciousness of the power variable. In contrast, pragmalinguistic failure refers to weakness in using structure properly; an example is that most of LA’s use of request tends to employ direct level (Saleem et al., 2021).

Abdulrahman and Ayyash (2019) analyzed how Omani learners use discoursal, lexical/phrasal, and syntactic request mitigators. They administered a DCT to 130 participants: 30 native speakers, 50 level 1 students, and 50 level 4 students. The data were analyzed using Fisher’s test. The authors found that level 1 and level 4 students had a noticeable difference in their studying and acquisition of English; nonetheless, their pragmatic competence to perform request mitigators was still inadequate compared to native speakers. It appears that linguistic and cultural restrictions are the reasons for this inadequacy. Whereas native speakers used discoursal/phrasal and discoursal mitigators in applying indirectness, Omani students tended to transfer polite requests directly from their mother tongue. Native speakers appeared to be significantly influenced by power, social distance, and imposition when performing the requests. On the other hand, syntactic mitigates, such as modals, were the preference of Omani students, regardless of the three social variables. The study thus showed differences in the use of request between two different cultures.

Hussein et al. (2019) carried out a pragmatic study to investigate the teaching and development of pragmatic ability among Iraqi EFL learners in using speech and request acts for social and cultural communication. Audio and observational data were recorded. The study showed that the students did not use pragmatic competence when interacting with or assimilating request situations. The speech act of request materials were still in progress in the classroom. Iraqi teachers still use traditional English teaching methods, which should be replaced with more effective methods so that students can learn how to produce appropriate speech acts in different situations. In summary, Iraqi students and Arab students generally find it challenging to make requests due to their lack of pragmatic competence. Therefore, curriculum designers and teachers should focus on developing students’ pragmatic competence and performance.

The focus of some previous studies in the Saudi context leans towards the comparison between Saudi learners and native speakers, e.g., the United Kingdom (Qari, 2021) and Americans (Tawalbeh & Al-Oqaily, 2012). Other researchers have examined request act, apology, and politeness (Alsulayyi, 2017; Qari, 2021). Request strategies, while rare, have also been discussed, e.g., internal, and external modifiers (Altasan, 2016), pre- and post-head acts (Fareh et al., 2023), and directness of indirectness (Tawalbeh & Al-Oqaily, 2012). Certain strategies, for instance, internal and external modifications, have been mostly overlooked in the Saudi literature. Therefore, there is an urgency to examine request acts from various perspectives. This study is among the few that focuses on external modifications (supportive moves).

Despite the importance of the previous studies in the pragmatic field, they have a shortage in dealing with the factors that might influence pragmatic development. There has been little research on how language proficiency influences pragmatic realization. This study, therefore, examined how language proficiency influences the act of making a request. It adopted Brown and Levinson’s (1987) theory of politeness and the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Pattern (CCSARP) as its conceptual framework. The theory was used to inform how the proficiency level of SEFL learners influences their realization of pragmatics in making requests. According to the theory, individuals attain politeness when they are aware and acknowledge the universal concept of face: a public self-image that mandates speakers to take other people’s expectations and feelings into account, thereby avoiding acts that may threaten it. Brown and Levinson identified four categories of threats, subsumed under the broader construct FTA: threats to the negative (or positive) face of the speaker and threats to the positive (or negative) face of the audience.

Overall, the study bridges a gap in the literature and contributes insight into the issue from a different perspective. Additionally, significant challenges are still confronting the educational process in Saudi Arabia. Teachers assessed the students’ critical thinking skills as average, and teachers also have limited influence on curricula and resources, as both are largely determined by the Saudi curriculum makers. Teachers have poor awareness, students are undisciplined, and schools still lack resources and effective curricula (Almulla, 2018). Concerning SEFL learners in particular, their pragmatic competence is still below the satisfactory level, which leads to their difficulty in utilizing English for academic and communication goals; as AlShraah et al. (in press) stated, “Saudi EFL learners have remarkable problems in using English appropriately for communication and academic purposes because the pragmatic competence of Saudi EFL learners (i.e., SEFL) has been reported as being below the satisfactory level”.

### 3. Methodology

External modification in the request act is used before or after head acts to perform several goals. In most cases, it is employed to mitigate the sharpness of the request act. There are many strategies such as disarmer, preparatory, getting pre-commitment, imposition minimizer, small talk, grounder appreciation, apology, and promise of reward. Table 1 shows these strategies with their definition (Ghazzoul, 2019). For the purpose of eliciting responses from the participants, a discourse completion task (DCT) was used.

**Table 1**  
*Classification of External Modification*

Type	Sub-type
External Modification	Self -introduction
	Imposition minimizer
	Availability
	Apology
	Grounder
	Affective appeal
	Disarmer
	Promise of reward
	Getting pre-commitment
	Sweetener
	Appreciation

#### 3.1. Participants

One hundred fifty students from preparatory year deanship in Saudi Arabia participated in this research. They were specifically chosen from the engineering and medical programs at Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University. These students, all native Arabic speakers aged between 18 and 20, were admitted to their respective programs, either in engineering or medicine. Each individual in this sample shared similar cultural and academic backgrounds. The sampling was based on accessibility. HAs and

LAs were categorized based on their performance in the Touchstone Placement Test (TPT). Participants scoring  $\geq 45$  out of 70 were categorized as HAs, while those scoring  $\leq 44$  out of 70 as LAs. Based on these criteria, there were 50 HAs and 78 LAs.

### 3.2 Instruments

The DCT stands out as a widely utilized technique among researchers and linguists across various domains like pragmatics, Interlanguage Pragmatics, intercultural communication, and second language acquisition. Its widespread application owes much to its simplicity and effective control of variables. The current version of the DCT stems from Al-Momani et al.'s (2017) research. Consistent with Brown and Levinson's (1978) theory, its questionnaire structure is mainly founded on different social variables: social distance (-D and +D) and power (=P, +P, and -P). It comprises different situations: 6 and 1 (-D, +P), 3 and 4 (+D, +P), 2 and 5 (+P, =D), 12 and 7 (-P, -D), 10 and 8 (-D, +P), and 11 and 9 (-P, =D).

### 3.3. Procedure

#### 3.3.1. Data Collection

With the support of volunteers, data were collected during the fourth week of the second semester of the 2022/2023 academic year. The participants were assigned into groups to take the DCT. At the outset of the session, participants were encouraged to seek clarification on any uncertainties they had about the test. Clear information about the nature of the test was provided to participants. Additionally, a half-hour break was given between the tests to minimize any discomfort that could affect their responses.

#### 3.3.2. Data Analysis

The study utilized the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Pattern (CCSARP) model, a widely accepted framework employed by scholars across different languages (Abdulrahman & Ayyash, 2019). In this research, the CCSARP model was applied to examine speech act utterances, presenting frequencies and percentages for each group under analysis. To address the first research question, the chi-square test was employed in the analysis of DCT. To assess the sociopragmatic competence of both HAs and LAs, a t-test, which reveals statistical differences, was used. It assessed the speaker's perception of speech acts and encompassed sociopragmatic and pragma-linguistic evaluations. The collected data were analyzed based on the politeness theory, accounting for positive and negative face, social variables, and politeness strategies in order to address the third research question, which entails the variation in using external modification based on the contextual variables,

## 4. Results

The main purpose of the first research question is to identify the production of external modification among HAs and LAs as adopted by Al-Momani et al. (2017) based on the CCSARP pattern. External modification in the request act is utilized before or after head acts to perform several goals. In most cases, it is utilized to mitigate the sharpness of the request act. Table 2 shows the external modification strategies employed by groups. The external modification column includes 12 strategies as external modification sub-types. The frequency and percentage of LAs and HAs are shown in the next four columns. The Chi-Square values show the difference in frequency and percentage between the two groups for each situation. The final column indicates whether the between-group differences are significant.

**Table 2**  
*Raw Frequency, Percentage, and Pearson Chi-Square Values of Supportive Moves by Group*

External Modification	Low		High		Pearson Chi-Square	p-value
	N	%	N	%		
Availability/preparator	16	4.73	120	26.32	0.947	0.330
Grounder	130	38.46	158	34.65	2.722	0.099
Getting pre-commitment	8	2.37	10	2.19	0.222	0.637
Disarmer	5	1.48	6	1.32	0.091	0.763

Promise of reward	0	0.00	2	0.44	-	-
Imposition minimizer	0	0.00	14	3.07	-	-
Sweetener	4	1.18	6	1.32	0.400	0.527
Small talk	118	34.91	22	4.82	0.017	0.897
Appreciation	1	0.30	24	5.26	21.160	0.000
Self-introduction	12	3.55	26	5.70	5.158	0.023
Affective appeal	2	0.59	6	1.32	2	0.157
Apology	42	12.43	62	13.60	3.846	0.050
Total	338		456		17.537	0.000

Table 2 revealed that HAs group ( $X^2(11, N = 456) = 17.537, p = .000$ ) used external modification significantly more than LAs group ( $X^2(11, N = 338) = 17.537, p = .000$ ). All subtypes of external modification were used by HAs, and only ten out of twelve were used by LAs with significant or non-significant differences between them. As for LAs, the most commonly used subtype of external modification was a grounder ( $X^2(11, N = 130) = 2.72, p = .099$ ) in which the utterances contain justifications, explanations, or reasons for the request act such as “*I waod like time write*” (S7, LA#11). It is clearly obvious that LAs insufficient pragmatic and vocabulary comprehension, along with their spelling errors and ill-structured sentences, hinder them from performing request strategy appropriately. To illustrate, the use of “waod” rather than “would” and the structure of the sentence is considered incomprehensible.

As illustrated in Table 2, small talk documented by LAs ( $X^2(11, N = 118) = .017, p = .89$ ) reflects that the utterance has the social rapport to ease the target request like “*hello doctor, are you good, can submitted the submission*” (S6, LA#21). It is clear that the utterance involves grammatical weakness by using the past form of the verb (*submitted*) after the modal verb (*can*). The third common subtype of external modification used by LAs was an apology in which the speaker expresses apology to the addressee prior to performing the request (12.43%), for instance, “... *sory I ned tym*”. (S6, LA#18). Affective appeal ( $X^2(11, N = 2) = .2, p = .157$ ), appreciation ( $X^2(11, N = 1) = 21, p = .000$ ), and sweetener ( $X^2(11, N = 4) = .40, p = .52$ ) are considered as the least internal strategies employed by LAs group with statistically significant appearance compared with HAs group. For example, sweetener ( $X^2(11, N = 6) = .4, p = .52$ ) in which the utterance includes exaggerated appreciation to raise the probability of responding to the request, such as “*you can daly the work*” (S6, LA#25). Subsequently, by affective appeal, such as “*my mum sik, I not did asymet*” (S6, LA#11). It is clear that low achievers made spelling errors such as writing “daly” rather than “delay”, “sik” rather than “sick”, “asymet” rather than “assignment”. Moreover, word choice such as “delay” rather than “postpone”. Additionally, sentence structure such as “*my mum sick*” instead of “*my mum was sick*”, “*I not did*” instead of “*I did not*”. Moreover, grammatical errors, such as writing the auxiliary verb “did” without writing the main verb “write”. Using the utterance “*mum sick*” may be referred to as a negative pragmatic transfer since, in Arabic, it is common to use such expression أنا مريض (pronoun and adjective). This suggests that speakers tended to transfer the expression from L1 to L2 without taking into consideration the rules of the TL.

On the contrary, LAs used a subtype of external modification that was self-introduction ( $X^2(11, N = 12) = 5.15, p = .000$ ) in which the speaker prefaced the speech by introducing themselves to the addressee prior to making a request, for example, “*I am good delay*”. It is clearly obvious that LAs lack the ability to write a sentence properly. The majority of the sentences provided by low achievers are ungrammatical and incorrect, such as the structure of their sentences, which reflects their pragmatic incompetence.

The third most frequent strategy employed by HAs was an apology ( $X^2(11, N = 62) = 3.84, p = .050$ ) when the speaker tried to apologize before performing the request act, “*I am sorry, I need extra time*” (S6, HA#23). The fourth most commonly used subtype of external modification by HAs was self-introduction ( $X^2(11, N = 26) = 5.15, p = .023$ ), such as “*I am one of your students in your class, I was extremely sick yesterday, I was unable to attend the class, how about delaying the submission?*” (S6, HA#36). It is noticed both groups employed the grounder strategy the most. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), an apology is used as a means of negative politeness by apologizing to the hearer for

doing the FTA. This type of strategy is used to minimize the effect of impingement on the hearer's negative face.

Referring to the second research question, which entailed the differences and similarities in using supportive moves of request act by HAs and LAs, based on the above, grounder occupies the highest rank among LAs, followed by small talk, subsequent by apology, while appreciation occupies the lowest rank among LAs, subsequent by affective appeal. Further, they showed no occurrence of promise of reward and imposition minimizer in their request. In respect to HAs, grounder occupies the highest rank, followed by availability and apology, whereas promise of reward occupies the lowest rank, followed by sweetener and disarmer. The similarities between both groups occurred in using grounder external modification the most. However, the main difference is that LAs did not show any use of two external modifications, namely, the promise of reward and imposition minimizer, which means they show less use of negative politeness strategy according to FTA theory.

**Table 3**

*Raw Percentage, Frequency, and Pearson Chi-Square Values of External Modification by Group in the Social Variables*

Category	Social Category	Low		High		Pearson Chi-Square	p-value
		N	%	N	%		
1.	(+P, +D) 3 and 4	49	14.50	74	16.23	5.081	0.024
2.	(-P, +D) 1 and 6	60	17.75	88	19.30	5.297	0.021
3.	(=P, -D) 9 and 11	30	8.88	58	12.72	8.909	0.003
4.	(-P, -D) 7 and 12	63	18.64	82	17.98	2.490	0.115
5.	(=P, +D) 2 and 5	71	21.01	80	17.54	0.536	0.464
6.	(+P, -D) 8 and 10	65	19.23	74	16.23	0.583	0.445
	Total	338		456		17.537	0.000

Based on the foregoing, there are considerable differences between HAs and LAs in terms of proficiency level and using external modification; it seems that HA overused external modifications significantly more than LAs did at ( $X^2(5, N = 338) = 17.537, p = .000$ ). To sum up, the majority of low achievers made grammatical mistakes, spelling errors, and sentence structure errors. On the other hand, none of the high achievers made any of these errors. Moving on now, we demonstrate the pragmatic differences between both groups in using external modification in terms of proficiency level and using request strategies by considering the social variables as indicated in Table 3.

Regarding the third research question, Table 3 also shows the pragmatic differences between HAs and LAs in their use of external modifications in social categories in terms of request strategy use. HAs had a significantly higher percentage ( $X^2(5, N = 74) = 5.081, p = .024$ ) than LAs ( $X^2(5, N = 49) = 5.81, p = .024$ ) in the first category (+P, +D). In the second category (-P, +D), the speaker had more power over the hearer. LAs performed significantly lower requests in this category ( $X^2(5, N = 60) = 5.29, p = .021$ ) compared to HAs ( $X^2(5, N = 88) = 5.297, p = .021$ ). This category indicates that the speaker and hearer are not familiar with each other as there is social power and distance between both. LAs typically used three sub-strategies: grounder (e.g., "I like you...?"), sweetener (e.g., "you r good ...", and getting pre-commitment (e.g., "can time write ....?"). On the other hand, HAs used apology (e.g., "I am sorry...."), grounder (e.g., "can ...?"), and imposition minimizer (e.g., "I wonder if you can please..."). The politeness theory states that this strategy falls under negative politeness, where a speaker facilitates the request act by apologizing before making a request.

In the third category (=P & -D), the speaker and hearer are familiar with each other as there is no distance between both, and they have equal power. LAs ( $X^2(5, N = 30) = 8.90, p = .003$ ) were significantly lower than HAs ( $X^2(5, N = 58) = 8.90, p = .003$ ). In the fourth category (-P, -D), the speaker and hearer are not distinguished by either power or distance. There was no significant difference between HAs ( $X^2(5, N = 82) = 17.98, p = .015$ ) and LAs ( $X^2(5, N = 63) = 17.9, p = .015$ ) in this category. Situations 7 and 12 were under this category. The fifth category (=P, +D) demonstrates a situation where the speaker and hearer are not familiar with each other, though both have equal power. LAs ( $X^2(5, N = 71) = .53, p = .46$ ) were higher in this category than HAs ( $X^2(5, N = 80) = 0.53, p = .46$ ), but there was no significant difference between both. Finally, the sixth category (+P, -D) shows that the speaker has more power over the hearer, but there is no distance between both. HAs had a lower percentage ( $X^2(5, N = 74) = .58, p = .44$ ) than LAs ( $X^2(5, N = 65) = .58, p = .44$ ) in this category, but this difference was not significant.

**Table 4**  
*The Influence of Contextual Variables (power) on Using External Modifications*

External Modification	+P		=P		-P	
	HA	LA	HA	LA	HA	LA
Availability/preparator	5	4	7	8	10	4
Grounder	30	55	50	30	78	45
Getting pre-commitment	2	0	3	4	5	4
Disarmer	0	1	0	2	6	2
Promise of reward	0	0	1	0	1	0
Imposition minimizer	2	0	4	0	8	0
Sweetener	0	0	1	3	5	1
Small talk	23	30	37	25	60	63
Appreciation	4	0	6	1	14	0
Self-introduction	5	3	11	7	10	2
Affective appeal	0	0	4	2	2	0
Apology	12	20	20	10	30	12
		113	144	92	229	133
Total	83 (18.2%)	(33.43)	(31.57%)	(29.28%)	(50.2%)	(39.34%)

To accomplish the third objective regarding the variation in using external modification depending on social variables between groups, the influence of both power and distance, as social variables, on the use of external modification by HAs and LAs was assessed. The use of external modification in different social power situations (+P, =P, -P) by the two groups was compared. It was found that HAs clearly demonstrated differences in the use of supportive moves according to the power value. More strategies were used in -P situations, followed by =P and +P. There were statistically significant differences between the three power relations. LAs, in contrast, were less influenced by +P/-P and +P/-P while showing awareness in =P/-D.

**Table 5**  
*Chi-square Results Effect of Social Power between HAs and LAs in Using External Modification*

Groups	+P	=P	-P	+P/=P Chi-square p-value	+P/-P Chi-square p-value	=P/-P Chi-square p-value
HA	83 (18.2%)	144 (31.57%)	229 (50.2%)	16.392 0.000	68.321 0.000	19.370 0.000
LA	113 (33.43)	92 (29.28%)	133 (39.34%)	2.151 0.142	1.626 0.202	7.471 0.006

Tables 5 and 6 show that HAs used more supportive moves when making a speech act of request from a familiar interlocutor, compared to an unfamiliar one, as they were aware of the social power, for example in the category (-p), HAs shows ( $X^2(2, N = 229) = 16.39, p = .000$ ) increase in their use of request expression compared to (+p) as shown in Table 5 ( $X^2(2, N = 83) = 16.39, p = .000$ ). As Brown and Levinson (1987) and Leech (1983) stated, realizing the social variables (power and distance)



reflects the degree of politeness employed by speakers. LAs slightly or insignificantly changed their request between familiar and unfamiliar interlocutors, suggesting their lack of awareness of the effect of social distance.

**Table 6***The Influence of Contextual Variables (Distance) on External Modifications*

External Modification	Unfamiliar		Familiar	
	HA	LA	HA	LA
Availability/preparator	9	8	13	8
Grounder	60	60	98	70
Getting pre-commitment	3	4	7	4
Disarmer	0	3	6	2
Promise of reward	1	0	1	0
Imposition minimizer	6	0	8	0
Sweetener	1	3	5	1
Small talk	57	45	63	73
Appreciation	10	1	14	0
Self-introduction	11	10	15	2
Affective appeal	4	2	2	0
Apology	30	30	32	12
Total	192 (42.10%)	166 (49.11)	264 (57.89%)	172 (50.88%)

According to the above results, it is noticed that there are differences between HAs and LAs, which are attributed to the following reasons. LAs do not study English as much as HAs students; therefore, their familiarity with the second language is limited. Second, their English level affects the pragmatic realization, i.e., the high English level of HAs affects their use of request strategies positively, while the low English level of LAs affects their use of request strategies negatively.

**Table 7***Chi-square Results in the influence of Social Power between two groups in Using External Modifications*

Groups	Familiar		Unfamiliar		Familiar-Unfamiliar
	N	%	N	%	
HA	264	(57.89%)	192	(42.10%)	Chi-square (11.368) p-value (0.001)
LA	166	(49.11%)	172	(50.88%)	Chi-square (0.107) p-value (0.744)

Findings from Table 7 show that the categories (-P/-D, =P/+D and +P/-D) were not significantly different by proficiency level. On the other hand, +P/+D, -P/+D, and =P/-D were significantly different by proficiency. The total requests between HAs in unfamiliar situations ( $X^2(2, N = 192) = 11.36, p = .001$ ) were significantly different from LAs' performance ( $X^2(2, N = 172) = .107, p = .0744$ ), as mentioned in Table 7.

In summary, HAs recognized social distance and power between speaker and hearer when performing requests. Such ability is manifested in their use of requests that reflect their pragmatic realization, such as "can I", "would you mind", or "I would like to". However, LAs were unconscious of the effect of social power and social distance in performing request strategies. This difference could be seen from their pragmatic realization, e.g., "turn the volume down" and "I am busy". Their strategies also tended to be less polite than HAs. It appears that compared to LAs, HAs demonstrated more pragmatic knowledge in performing request acts.

## 5. Discussion

Findings showed that external modification encompasses imposition minimizer, sweetener, small talk, availability, grounder, getting, disarmer, promise of reward, appreciation, self-introduction, affective appeal, and apology, which are used as negative politeness strategies according to the FTA theory (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987). Furthermore, HAs used sweetener and disarmer when the speaker

tried to use a certain utterance to prevent any possible objections, such as “I know...”. Regarding social categories, as appeared in the tables, HAs used external modifications significantly higher than LAs in three categories as follows: +P, +D, -P, +D, and =P, -D.

It was observed that HAs employed external modification statistically more than LAs. There were significant differences between HAs ( $X^2(11, N = 456) = 17.53, p = .000$ ) and LAs ( $X^2(11, N = 338) = 17.53, p = .000$ ). The results support past evidence concerning the higher tendency of advanced and intermediate ESL learners to use external modifications in their speech acts (Alshraah et al., in press). This tendency may indicate the intention of the speaker to emphasize their linguistic knowledge. In other words, the speaker intends to show their proficiency by performing speech acts with verbose statements (Hassall, 2001). LAs' minimum use of external modification can perhaps be attributed to their L1 influence and poor language proficiency, prohibiting them from producing pragmatic competence that is on par with that of HAs.

On the other hand, both groups showed their preference for using the grounder strategy by giving reasons, justifications, and explanations. It is clearly obvious that LAs' lack of pragmatic knowledge and vocabulary knowledge, along with their grammatical mistakes and ill-structured utterances, hinder them from performing request strategy appropriately, and thus, the structure of the sentence is considered incomprehensible. The result is in line with Al Khasawneh (2021) that the most frequent external mitigation request strategy among Saudi students is grounder, with a percentage of (10%). Further, it is evident that HAs employed all of the external modifications in Table 2 with different percentages, whereas LAs failed to use the promise of reward and imposition minimizer strategies and there is an insufficient use of appreciation.

This study showed that learners of low language proficiency could not have the capability to make a successful request, unlike their high language proficiency counterparts. Their insufficient grammatical and vocabulary competence leads to the use of incorrect speech acts. This study conformed with Kasper's (2000) findings as it stated that language proficiency significantly influences pragmatic competence. In line with Bartali (2022), HAs are more likely to use more variations of linguistic forms when using external modifications in comparison to LAs. Referring to the influence of social variables in using request strategies between groups, we observed that HAs display consciousness of both social distance and power in realizing and producing speech acts. However, LAs show less consciousness of the influence of social power and distance in altering request strategies.

The link between collectivism and individualism in cultural tendencies and the pragmatic competence among HAs and LAs among Saudi English learners is indeed intriguing. The observation that HAs demonstrate a more nuanced understanding of social variables like power and distance in their language use aligns with Hofstede's (2011) collectivist notions, where group harmony and social hierarchies play significant roles. It's evident that their ability to navigate these social nuances influences their pragmatic competence, particularly in employing mitigated request expressions. Conversely, the relatively lower awareness among LAs regarding these social variables might hint at a divergence from collectivist values in their linguistic expressions. This connection emphasizes how cultural inclinations toward collectivism or individualism can potentially shape linguistic behaviors and pragmatic competencies among language learners. By delving deeper into this correlation, the study not only highlights the impact of language proficiency on pragmatic competence but also underscores the intricate relationship between cultural dimensions and language use. It offers a valuable perspective on how cultural values might influence language learning outcomes, especially regarding pragmatic skills in interlanguage contexts (Hofstede, 2011). The findings of this paper are consistent with Alshraah and Nishat (2023), who stated that “there is a significant gap between two groups in producing and realizing mitigated devices. Based on the results, there are important pedagogical implications of this study. LAs show significant pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failure in use request act”(p.120).

HAs had more pragmatic competence and proficiency compared to LAs. Similarly, their production level was higher. These gaps can be attributed to differences in educational and proficiency competence and pragmatic realization of the two groups. LAs found it challenging to perform requests in three situations: -P, +D; +P, +D; and =P, -D. Their second language communication was also inhibited by their poor pragmatic competence, where they used inappropriate expressions that led to unsuccessful

communicative events. The same issue also caused LAs to be more direct in their request strategies. This was contrary to HAs, who tended to be more polite in their request strategies. Conventional indirect request strategies are favored by EFL and ESL learners over direct request strategies, which in turn is more common than non-conventional request strategies (Alshraah & Daradkeh, 2021).

In conclusion, this study primarily emphasizes the production and execution of speech acts, leaving the challenges and complexities faced by L2 learners in applying pragmatic knowledge unexplored. To enhance the depth of future research, the insights from this study could be leveraged by investigating impediments and potential solutions for improving pragmatic skills. A limitation of the current study is its exclusive reliance on data from DCT, suggesting that alternative methodologies might yield diverse outcomes. Future work is strongly recommended to use alternative methods, for example role-playing and interviews, to further complement the current findings. Scenarios from more diverse social contexts can be considered so that the use of request acts in diverse social situations can be better understood. These findings can further enrich the Intercultural Language Pragmatics (ILP) literature.

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## Appendix

### Discourse Completion Task (DCT)

#### Situation 1

You enrolled in an Arabic course with a new instructor in the language unit, and he does not attend class today. **You want to get permission** from your instructor to miss tomorrow's session due to the

severe hot weather conditions. You've never spoken to or met this instructor, but you've decided to visit his office.

You say.....

### Situation 2

You are a chemistry student, and your lecturer separates the section into groups to do some tasks, but you encounter difficulties in dealing with your colleagues in your group. You recognize that there are splendid students in one group. You do not have any connection with them. You decide to speak with one of them to **discuss your contribution to** the task.

You say.....

### Situation 3

You are a professor in a college. You forgot to fetch your academic book. You don't know any students in the college. You need a guy to help you to collect it from your office upstairs. You ask students from the classroom.

You reply.....

### Situation 4

You are an instructor in the university. You have a meeting, so you want to cancel today's class. You see one of your students in front of your office. You do not know this student before. **You ask this student to inform students about calling off the class.**

You say.....

### Situation 5

You are student "introduction to management". You caught a cold, and you did not attend an important class due to a severe cough. You see a good student in the cafeteria, and **you ask him to borrow his notes.** Although you don't have any rapport with this guy.

You say.....

### Situation 6

The last assignment is due tomorrow. You have other homework and tests to complete, so you might not be able to complete on due date. You have never spoken to your first semester professor, but you are considering going to see him. **You visit his office to ask for delaying the submission.**

You say.....

### Situation 7

You want to apply for the master's program, and this is the last semester of your master's program. The head of your department, who you know well, should draft the reference letter you need to provide with your application. You enter the instructor's office.

You say.....

### Situation 8

You are having trouble concentrating since your neighbors' kids are making noise and you have a final exam tomorrow. They are between the ages of 15 and 17 and they are yelling in front of your apartment door. This family has been your neighbors for the past three years. **To ask them to down the noise,** you open your door.

You say.....

**Situation 9**

You are enrolled in “Computer Skills,” an optional subject. You are required to bring books for this course, because this course is not essential in your major, you plan to go your friend to borrow this book.

You reply.....

**Situation 10**

You help your neighbor in his secondary exams for 9 months. Your upcoming session with him is Friday afternoon night but you will be busy in that date so you plan to **change your visiting** to Saturday night.

You say.....

**Situation 11**

One day, your calculator broke down as you were studying for a physics test. To complete your study, you would need to take your friend’s calculator.

You go to your colleague and ask .....

**Situation 12**

The instructor recommends a story. You searched for this story but, regretfully, you did not find the book. So, you want to go to the professor’s office **to borrow this book**. You know this professor well.

You say.....