

Business students' email requests: pragmatic production and perception of power and social distance

Peticiones de estudiantes de negocios en correos electrónicos: producción pragmática y percepción de poder y distancia social

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates Business and Administration students' pragmatic production and perception of high-imposition email requests. Thirty L1 Spanish students with a high proficiency level in English wrote four requestive emails by means of Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs). These tasks included two distinct social variables: more power and social distance (+P, +D) in emails addressed to the manager, and less power and social distance (-P, -D) in emails addressed to a colleague. Results show that students opted for conventionally indirect strategies regardless of power and social distance, and that only closings partly contributed to soften the degree of imposition. As for pragmatic perception, the students who were interviewed reported they were aware of the difference in power and social distance of the addressees; however, this awareness did not show in the strategies used in their requests.

Keywords: email, requests, perception, power, business

RESUMEN

En este estudio se investiga la producción y percepción pragmática de peticiones con alto nivel de imposición en correos electrónicos escritos por estudiantes de Administración de Empresas. Treinta estudiantes españoles con alto nivel de inglés redactaron cuatro correos electrónicos de petición mediante Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs). Estas tareas incluían dos variables sociales diferentes: mayor poder y distancia social (+P, +D) en los correos dirigidos al director, y menor poder y distancia social (-P, -D) en aquellos dirigidos a un colega de trabajo. Los resultados muestran que los estudiantes optaron por estrategias convencionalmente indirectas con independencia del nivel de poder o distancia social, y que solo los cierres contribuyeron en parte a mitigar el nivel de imposición. En lo que respecta a la percepción pragmática, los estudiantes entrevistados señalaron que eran

conscientes de la diferencia de poder y distancia de los receptores; sin embargo, esta concienciación no cristalizó en las estrategias empleadas en sus peticiones.

Palabras clave: correo electrónico, peticiones, percepción, poder, negocios.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the Radicati Email Statistics Report (2023-2027), the expected number of worldwide email users will be over 4, 800 billion by the end of 2027, that is, over half the world population. The universal use of email in business communication is due to its "immediacy, practical efficiency, and organizational exigency collectively" (Louhiala-Salminen, 1999: 103). In addition, in inter- and intra-organisational communication, hierarchical relationships are present, and the notion of negative face (Brown and Levinson, 1987), or the need for respect and autonomy, has to be considered in these status-unequal relationships. This is a concern for businesspeople whose L1 is not English, as communication with partners or other companies in the business context is frequently carried out in English as the lingua franca (Hendriks, 2010). Therefore, the appropriate use of face work and the English language in emails may pose serious problems for non-native speakers in the business setting. In Guffey and Loewy's (2011: 157) words, "Although e-mail is recognized as the mainstay of business communication, it's not always done well". In this sense, as future workers, owners or managers of companies, English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) students have the compelling need to develop their sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic competence when writing emails to ensure smooth interactions and avoid negative reactions on the recipient.

For some decades now, a vast body of research has centred on the analysis of different degrees of imposition in requestive emails in institutional contexts, especially between students and faculty (for example, Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2018). However, results are inconclusive due to the myriad of variables at stake (high/low imposition, level of proficiency in the L2, gender, to mention but a few). For example, whereas some research points to students' choice of formality and deference by means of polite strategies (Bella, 2021) and formal address terms (Savić and Đorđević, 2021), other investigations reveal that EFL students may encounter problems when choosing the appropriate address terms (Schauer, 2021). With regards to students' perception of sociocontextual variables in emails, Codina-Espurz (2022) claimed that students were aware of these factors, especially among peers in order not to jeopardize their relationship.

Research on business students' production and perception of impositive requests in emails is, to the best of our knowledge, scant. For this reason, the present study represents a step forward in the examination of email requests with Business and Administration students who were required to write to fictional superiors and colleagues. The way they composed their emails may reveal how able they are from a sociopragmatic point of view and how they perceive the social variables involved in a workplace context, since writing a pragmatically inappropriate email may represent a threat to the recipient's face or create a negative image of the sender.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Requests in the business context

The fact that emails are extensively used in the business world is directly linked to a number of advantages over business letters. On the one hand, their high-speed transmission and low cost are some of the advantages of email communication (Hashemian and Farhang-Ju, 2020); on the other hand, due to their asynchronous nature, the sender and the receiver(s) do not have to be available at the same time (Beer, 2017) and furthermore, emails allow for the possibility of attaching documents, photos, etc. to provide additional information (Thongtong, 2022).

Two decades ago, Tassabehji and Vakola (2005) claimed that email was already “an integral part of how people conduct their business” (p. 66). This statement has been further corroborated by Kozík and Slivová (2014: 69) “email is a preferred form of communication in companies”. However, input from Business textbooks or courses may not mirror actual communication in this context (Kankaanranta, 2006), and prospective professionals (i.e., Business students) may commit pragmalinguistic mistakes resulting in negative consequences on the recipient’s part. Due to the imbalance of power in business situations, the act of requesting in particular requires mastery of pragmatic abilities, since demanding information or asking for a favour is one of the main purposes of email communication (together with confirmation, clarification, forwarding information, among others). In fact, emails involving a high-degree of imposition and addressed to a person who has more power require the use of politeness strategies to allow the interlocutor to save face (Brown and Levinson, 1987). However, in her study of directives in the workplace, Freytag (2019) found that politeness may be overridden by concerns about urgency and efficiency; therefore, the use of direct strategies and upgraders seems to be justified even when a subordinate addresses a superior. These seemingly contradictory results show the need of more research in the workplace setting to account for the interplay of social variables which impact on the email sender’s pragmalinguistic choices.

2.2 Perception of imposition in email requests

In high-imposition email requests, negative face, or the fact of not being impeded by others (Brown and Levinson, 1987) has to be accounted for, especially in asymmetrical relationships. In this sense, three social variables may threaten the recipient’s negative face: social distance, power and imposition. Requesters need to acknowledge and perceive those variables and therefore use politeness strategies to mitigate high-imposing email requests.

For some years now and in the academic setting, a body of research has investigated lecturers’ and students’ perceptions of imposition and (im)politeness in requestive emails (e.g., Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2016; Hashemian and Farhang-Ju, 2019). Overall, lecturers’ main concerns focus on appropriate openings and closings and language accuracy, whereas students seem to put more emphasis on email content than on form.

In the business context, evaluators’ perception of emails sent from employees to managers in Aldhulaee’s (2017) study reported that indirect strategies (in the form of query preparatory) should be used to redress the level of imposition and increase the politeness of the request. However, some other research has showed opposing results: for example, Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005) argued that their Finnish participants opted for more direct requests in an attempt to make communication more efficient and goal-oriented. Xie (2009)

also claimed that the main goal of business communication is to get business done, so directness was preferred in this particular context.

Recently, Hendriks et al. (2023) showed that a less polite email in a work-related context was perceived as more bossy and email writers were regarded as less competent if they underused modification. In a study on hypernegative interpretation of workplace emails, Sillars and Zorn (2021) warned about the potential recipient's perception of face attacks if the message did not conform to the appropriate use of the email, especially if the sender was a subordinate.

3. THE STUDY

Unlike the vast body of research focusing on either natural or elicited student-faculty email interaction, the novelty of this investigation lies in the fact that the participants were Business and Administration students who were required to compose emails framed in a context which may be close to situations they can face in their professional career using English as a lingua franca. Moreover, a small sample of participants was interviewed so that they could provide insights regarding perception of the variables involved in the emails they wrote. For the purposes of the present study, the following Research Questions (RQs) were put forward:

RQ1: What strategies and framing moves do Business and Administration students use in their emails in +/-P and +/-D high-imposition requests?

RQ2: Do Business and Administration students perceive +/-P and +/-D in high-imposition requests?

3.1 Participants

The participants of the study were 30 Spanish EFL students (24 females, 6 males) aged 18-20 with a C1 level of proficiency according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. They were undergraduates of Bachelors' Degree in Business Administration in a private institution in Valencia (Spain) who had not been instructed in the pragmatics of email requests in a business context. In addition, their English textbook mainly focused on linguistic aspects such as grammar or vocabulary, thus resulting in an emphasis on their linguistic competence but not on their pragmatic one. The participants consented to have their emails as part of research, provided that their names were deleted so anonymity was preserved.

3.2 Instrument and data collection procedure

Data were collected by means of Discourse Completion Tasks. This type of tasks has extensively been used in speech act research because they allow for control of social variables and thus comparability of data. Despite some claims (e.g., Beebe and Cummings, 1985) on their artificiality, that is, participants have time to think about what to say in a particular situation so they can organize their ideas (Cohen, 1996) and lack of authenticity (i.e., DCTs may not reflect real language use), if properly contextualised these tasks may mirror life-like situations. In the present study, DCTs were chosen as instruments to collect

data since they represent written discourse and thus served well for the purposes of this investigation, which did not focus on oral interaction.

DCTs involved a high imposition on the email recipient, as either they were requests on deadline extension and action (writing a reference letter) in the case of the emails to the manager or swapping shifts and co-lead a meeting with a very short notice in the emails to a colleague (see Appendix 1). The difference lay in the power relationship and social distance between interlocutors, ranging from +P, +D in the manager situations and -P, -D in the colleague ones. For the sake of simplicity, the former situations were coded as +P and the latter as -P.

In order to collect data on students' perception of power and social distance, four volunteer students carried out a tailor-made interview, that is, they were asked to make comments on the specific strategies they had used when writing the emails. These interviews took place by means of the Zoom platform depending on the students' availability.

3.3 Data analysis

A mixed-methods approach was employed to examine the data from the students' emails. For RQ1, strategies to perform requests, internal and external modification and framing moves were analysed quantitatively, whereas the sample of interviews for perception of power and social distance relationships were addressed qualitatively in order to answer RQ2. On some occasions, more than one request was performed in some students' emails. In these cases, only the first request was analysed as the second or subsequent request was a reformulation or repetition of the first one.

The study followed Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) coding scheme described in the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realisation Project (CCSARP) to examine the strategies students employed in their requestive emails; however, a modified version was used to fit the strategies that occurred in our data (for example, there were no occurrences of Non-conventionally indirect strategies). The analysis to answer RQ 1 centred on the head act (i.e., the request) and on the mitigating elements (internal and external modifications) that contribute to soften the request; in addition, Salazar-Campillo and Codina-Espurz's (2018) typology was used to examine the framing moves in the emails.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RQ1 asked about the strategies and framing moves participants used in their requestive emails. As for Direct strategies, no occurrences of Direct questions were found (see Table 1), a result which differs from Leopold's (2015) findings, which revealed that questions were more often used with recipients sharing a professional and formal relationship, that is, when there was social distance between interlocutors. In the case of Performatives, the same percentage (10.7%) was found irrespective of being hedged or unhedged in +P requests, but Performatives hedged increased to 33.3% in -P situations. The use of the verb "ask" by non-native speakers, which is indicative of a more direct request, is in line with Park et al.'s (2021) results, since their Korean professionals tended to employ this performative verb more often than the native speakers counterparts.

| | +P | | -P | | |
|------------------------------|-------------|------|------|------|------|
| | N | % | N | % | |
| Direct (D) | | | | | |
| Direct question | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | |
| Performative unhedged | 3 | 10.7 | 2 | 16.6 | |
| Performative hedged | 3 | 10.7 | 4 | 33.3 | |
| Want/like statement | 15 | 53.2 | 4 | 33.3 | |
| Expectation statement | 1 | 3.6 | 2 | 16.6 | |
| Pre-decided statement | 1 | 3.6 | 0 | 0 | |
| Locution derivable | 5 | 17.9 | 0 | 0 | |
| TOTAL D | 28 | 100 | 12 | 100 | |
| Conventionally indirect (CI) | | | | | |
| Query preparatory | | | | | |
| | Ability | 25 | 78.1 | 38 | 79.1 |
| | Possibility | 4 | 12.5 | 5 | 10.4 |
| | Willingness | 3 | 9.3 | 5 | 10.4 |
| TOTAL CI | | 32 | 100 | 48 | 100 |

Table 1. Frequency of strategies

In over 50% of the +P emails students used Want/like statements in the form of *I'd like to...*, (*I would like to have two more weeks to finish it properly*, S10). Students used more Expectation statements with colleagues (16.6%), in the hopes that their request was granted and not so much with managers (3.6%). Our result contradicts Leopold's (2015) contention that they are more used in emails addressed to superiors. Only one occurrence of Pre-decided statement (*I think that a good idea will be to add two more weeks*, S24) took place in the +P situation, which may be regarded as too imposing for the recipient. Five Locution derivables occurred in +P emails (*It would be better to have a more extended deadline to perfection (sic) every single detail*, S5) when addressing their manager, whereas the students did not opt for this strategy in -P emails.

Conventionally indirect strategies were the most frequently used strategies in students' emails (32 instances in +P situations and 48 instances in -P situations). Although the percentages for these indirect strategies do not differ much in +/-P emails, a closer look reveals that students used more Ability (*Would you be able to swap shifts with me for this weekend?*, S2) and Willingness (*Would you be open to swapping shifts with me?*, S22) strategies in -P situations and more Possibility strategies (*Would that be possible?*, S11) in +P emails. The high incidence of Ability strategies may be explained by the traditional formal instruction Spanish students had received, which focuses mainly on the expression *Can/Could you...?* to make a request (Codina-Espurz and Salazar-Campillo, 2019). Overall, the findings for the choice of strategies in the present study partly corroborate Peterson et al.'s (2011: 93) claim that an email will be more formal "if it is sent to someone with a higher rank", as students produced a similar number of Direct and Indirect strategies (25 vs 32) in those situations in which +P was involved.

The head act in the students' emails was accompanied by external and/or internal modification, as Table 2 below illustrates.

| INTERNAL MODIFICATION | +P | % | -P | % |
|--|----|------|----|------|
| Syntactic (conditional, past, progressive) | 21 | 45.6 | 21 | 35 |
| Politeness marker "Please" | 7 | 15.2 | 18 | 30 |
| Cajoler | 11 | 24 | 12 | 20 |
| Downtoner | 3 | 6.5 | 8 | 13.3 |
| Apprec. embedding | 3 | 6.5 | 0 | 0 |
| Subjectiviser | 1 | 2.1 | 0 | 0 |
| Appealer | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1.6 |
| EXTERNAL MODIFICATION | +P | | -P | |
| Grounder | 39 | 48.7 | 50 | 41.6 |
| Disc. orientation move | 32 | 40 | 20 | 16.6 |
| Preparator | 5 | 6.25 | 14 | 11.6 |
| Disarmer | 2 | 2.5 | 4 | 3.3 |
| Promise of reward | 0 | 0 | 12 | 10 |
| Imposition minimiser | 1 | 1.2 | 11 | 9.1 |
| Intensifier | 1 | 1.2 | 4 | 3.3 |
| Sweetener/ Compliment | 0 | 0 | 3 | 2.5 |
| Alerter | 0 | 0 | 2 | 1.6 |

Table 2. Frequency of internal and external modification

Within internal modification, syntactic modification was most favoured by students in both situations (45.6% and 35%, respectively) in order to minimize the face threat, in line with previous studies (e.g., Velilla, 2015). Some other research (e.g., Dakrouri, 2024) found a limited use of syntactic modification in business emails, a finding the author attributed to the level of the subjects. As mentioned above, our participants had a C1 level of proficiency in English, and therefore they were likely to include this type of modification in their requests by means of conditional, past or progressive structures. The politeness marker *please* was mostly used before the imperative *let me know*, and it was scarcely used in the +P emails (7 occurrences) with a higher incidence in emails to colleagues (18 occurrences). This finding is in stark contrast to its wide use in other contexts (i.e., Hashemian and Farhang-Ju, 2020, in the academic setting). Very similar occurrences of Cajolers (*As you know*) took place in both situations, and this is a somewhat surprising fact due to the informal nature of this type of modification, which should be more appropriate in -P situations.

Fewer occurrences of other internal modification were present in the data. For example, Downtoners (*for a few days*), although minimally used, were used nearly as much as three times more in -P emails, whereas Appreciative embedding (*I'd appreciate it very much if...*) was only used on three occasions in +P situations; finally, only one Subjectiviser (*I'm afraid*, S9 +P) and one Appealer (*you know?* S1, -P) occurred in our data.

Table 2 shows that students tended to employ more external modification, corroborating recent research among business co-workers (Dakrouri, 2024). In this sense, Grounders were by far the most prevalent strategy. Students seemed to resort to explanations or reasons to fully justify their requests. Our results resemble previous findings (e.g., Pan, 2012) which also revealed a clear tendency to use Grounders on the part of students. Moreover, in our study, Grounders were long utterances including justifications prior to make the request (see Example 1 below). This verbosity had already been pointed out by Hassall (2012), which may result in positive politeness by presupposing the recipient's help.

- (1) *Last night I started to feel a little bit sick but I thought I would be better but it is not the case, I am feeling probably worst but our boss still wanting me to lead the meeting, and I feel I just can't deal with all this by myself. (S18, -P)*

Importantly, in -P situations our students showed an even higher incidence of Grounders, a fact which may show that regardless of degree of familiarity with the email recipient, they feel the need to provide motives in order to have their request accepted and possibly lessen the imposition on their business colleagues. In other contexts (e.g., academic) the extensive use of Grounders has also been attested (Hashemian and Farhang-Ju, 2020) as a means to modify externally the coerciveness of the request. In our data, and especially in +P situations, most Grounders were preceded by Discourse orientation moves with the aim of providing the manager (32 occurrences) or colleague (20 occurrences) with enough background information to justify their request and contribute to negative face work. In the same way as Grounders, most Discourse orientation moves were long stretches of discourse, as Example 2 shows:

- (2) *I have been working on the visibility project of the company, which it (sic) is going pretty well at the moment, however after analysing the progress we have made and the near deadline to complete the task we have, ... (S24, +P)*

Lengthy Discourse orientation moves can be justified by the role they play in providing information about the context of the request and/or any other relevant information needed to introduce it (Park et al., 2021), thus increasing the intelligibility of the content of the email.

Preparators were far more used in -P emails, preparing the colleague for the coming request (*I am going to need a big favour from your part, S17*). Disarmers were used to anticipate the requestee's potential objection and they were found twice as many times in -P emails (*I understand it's a big ask, S2*). Only in -P situations did the students employ Promise of reward (*I will invite you to lunch later on to compensate the favour, S18*), as obviously, they could not offer any type of compensation to their manager if the request were granted. Similarly, many more instances of Imposition minimisers (*I know it is very early, but this is an urgency, S5*) were found in -P emails. Finally, other external modifiers were minimally used, for example, Intensifiers (*ASAP, urgently*) which may exacerbate the aggravating power they involve. Students refrained themselves from using Sweeteners or Compliments when addressing their managers but probably due to the symmetry of social distance, 3 examples were found in -P emails (*You are a very professional person, S15, -P*). Similarly, the two occurrences of Alerters (*Listen*) were only employed by S6 in the -P emails, as they denote familiarity and a close relationship among co-workers.

With regards to the framing moves, Table 3 shows that all emails in our data started with some form of salutation. The presence of a salutation in the students' emails fosters the establishment of a positive tone, as claimed by Dakrouri (2024).

| | +P | | -P | |
|--------------------------|----|------|----|------|
| | N | % | N | % |
| A Salutation | | | | |
| GE* | 28 | 46.6 | 22 | 36.6 |
| GE+T | 19 | 31.6 | 0 | 0 |
| GE+FN | 7 | 11.6 | 29 | 48.3 |
| GE+T+LN | 4 | 6.6 | 2 | 3.3 |
| GE+T+ "Manager" | 2 | 3.3 | 0 | 0 |
| GE+ "colleague" | 0 | 0 | 6 | 10 |
| FN | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1.6 |
| B Pleasantry | 16 | 26.6 | 23 | 38.3 |
| C Identification of self | 3 | 5 | 2 | 3.3 |

*Note: GE stands for "Greeting Expression", FN for "First Name", T for "Title" and LN for "Last Name"

Table 3. Frequency of opening moves in the emails (adapted from Salazar-Campillo and Codina-Espurz, 2018)

In +P emails, salutations were mainly operationalized by means of a Greeting Expression (*Hello, Good morning*), followed by a Greeting Expression plus Title (*Dear Project Manager*). In over 11% of the emails, students chose to start their emails with a Greeting Expression and the recipient's first name. Only 6.6% of students in +P situations opted for the more conventional and deferent form of salutation GE+T+LN (*Dear Mr. Ezzat*). Our findings differ from more common practices found in natural email data, for example, Xie (2009) claimed that T+LN or T+Full Name were the most used forms to greet. In view of these findings, it seems that students did not address their higher-ups with the expected degree of respect in their salutations, and they also skipped formality. In this line, over two decades ago, Briz (2003) pointed out that the Spanish culture favours closeness and egalitarianism. This claim is therefore supported in the present study, since the students adopted an egalitarian stance on the use of more informal salutations in +P situations. In the case of -P emails, almost 50% of the salutations were in the form of a Greeting Expression and the recipient's first name. This is not a surprising outcome, as the use of the first name indicates solidarity and closeness (e.g., Velilla, 2015). This fact may also be applied to those emails starting with only a Greeting Expression (36.6%) and also to the emails starting with *Hello, colleague* (10%) which signals camaraderie. To a much lesser degree, students employed other forms to greet, for example, using a more formal salutation (GE+T+LN) or only the recipients' first name (1.6%).

The higher incidence of Pleasantries (i.e., phatic communication or small talk) in -P emails may be a sign of more informality, as previously suggested by Pérez-Sabater et al. (2008). Example 3 illustrates a Pleasantry:

(3) *I trust this message finds you well (S4, -P)*

In Business oral discourse, Pullin (2010: 459) argued that small talk nurtures "relations and a sense of community among colleagues". Our data seem to support her claim, in the sense that senders accounted for both the transactional and the relational goals of their

emails, especially in their requests to colleagues. As for Identification of self, very few instances of this move were found in the emails, most likely due to the fact that the students assumed that the managers and colleagues knew who the sender was.

The data show that closings were included in the emails, although not all of them featuring the three moves of Pre-closing statement, Complimentary close and Signature (see Table 4). In this vein, closings lessen the degree of imposition of the request (Hashemian and Farhang-Ju, 2020) and this is paramount when there are real communicative needs in unequal professional encounters.

| | +P | | -P | |
|--------------------------|----|------|----|------|
| | N | % | N | % |
| A Pre-closing statement* | | | | |
| Gratitude | 37 | 61.6 | 40 | 66.6 |
| Appeal | 15 | 25 | 15 | 25 |
| Hope/wish | 3 | 5 | 6 | 10 |
| Apology | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1.6 |
| ∅ | 5 | 8.3 | 2 | 3.3 |
| B Complimentary close | 31 | 51.6 | 16 | 26.6 |
| C Signature | | | | |
| FN | 23 | 38.3 | 26 | 43.3 |
| FN+LN | 16 | 26.6 | 13 | 21.6 |
| ∅ | 21 | 35 | 21 | 35 |

*Note: Pre-closing statements add up more than 60 (both in +P and -P) as there were instances of Gratitude+Appeal and they were counted separately.

Table 4. Frequency of closing moves in the emails (Salazar-Campillo and Codina-Espurz, 2018)

In line with previous research on the use of Pre-closing statements (e.g., Nickerson, 2000), the majority of emails included such a move, regardless of the degree of power. Statements of gratitude were by far the most widely used (although they may indicate the sender's presupposition that the request will be met with compliance), followed by appeals and senders' hopes that their request is fulfilled. This may imply that the higher the degree of imposition involved, the more likely it is that a Pre-closing statement is used to show positive politeness. On the contrary, Complimentary closes (*Best regards*, S9, +P; *Sincerely*, S14, +P) occurred in 51.6% of +P emails and slightly above 25% in -P messages. This finding may corroborate Trang's (2019) claims that Complimentary closes are regarded more as a routine to end an email than as a politeness strategy.

Our participants opted mostly for signatures including their first name only, probably supposing that the manager knew his workers (as mentioned above, in the same way that few Identifications of self were employed) and they fostered a closer relation. When making a request to a colleague, the use of first names seems the most natural way to sign emails; however, in over 20% of the instances the students signed with their full name (i.e., FN+LN). Importantly, 21 emails in both power situations were left unsigned, a fact that may render the emails incomplete especially in the +P situation.

RQ 2 inquired about students' perception of the power and social distance involved in the emails. Their answers reveal that they employed internal and external modification to soften the imposition emerging from their requests, as Example 4 shows in response to why S1 had used "Would you be willing to provide references for me?" when addressing the manager:

- (4) *No es una obligación para el manager, sino si podría él, como una petición más suave* (The manager does not have to feel in the obligation, but if he could, as a more mitigated request)

Overall, the students seem to perceive the role of the social variables in the sense that by means of modifications, they cared for the preservation of status and social relations. However, a closer inspection reveals that they used a similar number of conventionally indirect strategies and syntactic modification regardless of those variables, and that there was a higher incidence of Hedged performatives in the -P emails. In addition, more Preparators, Disarmers and Imposition minimizers also occurred in -P emails, when a priori they should be more appropriate in the emails to the manager in order to mitigate imposition.

With regards to framing moves, it seems that students were aware of contextual variables when composing their emails, as illustrated in Example 5 which refers to a greeting:

- (5) *A un manager, que es como superior a ti, hay que usar una expresión más formal [...] a un compañero le diría Hi or Hello, o algo así* (For a manager, who is above you, you have to use a more formal expression [...], to a colleague I would say Hi or Hello or something like that) (S1).

However, in many emails a lack of deference was found in the salutation to the manager, probably because there was no indication of the manager's name in the prompts. This is clearly expressed by S4 in her following comment:

- (6) *Si hubiera tenido el nombre, por ejemplo, Toby Roberts, habría puesto Dear Mr. Roberts* (If I had had the name, for example, Toby Roberts, I would have written Dear Mr. Roberts)

This student also reported that she had used "Greetings Joan" in one of the emails to a colleague because she was not addressing a superior but a peer (*No le estoy hablando a un cargo superior sino a un igual*). S1 held the same opinion on using a first name with colleagues: *En los correos de los compañeros sí que habría puesto el nombre, en plan "Hi, Kevin"* (In the emails addressed to colleagues, I would have used the name, like "Hi, Kevin"). In this case, awareness of contextual variables resulted in more informality due to inexistence of power and equal social distance.

Our results also point to students' awareness of contextual variables in the form of Complimentary closes in +P emails, since they used more respectful ways to end these emails and thus employed more status-congruent formulas to convey politeness. S1 highlighted the importance of ending an email to the manager in an appropriate way, as Example 7 depicts:

- (7) *Cómo cierras un correo puede afectar la respuesta de esa persona* (The way you end an email may affect that person's reply)

The answers of the small number of students who were interviewed for RQ2 point to the fact that students perceive that contextual variables are important in the process of writing an email; however, the quantitative results for RQ1 do not fully support this

perception. It is likely that the weight of the imposition played a more influential role than the variables of power and social distance. Further research is needed to confirm this assumption, both in elicited and in real workplace situations.

5. CONCLUSION

Requests may represent a threat to the recipient's face, so writing business emails involving this speech act may be a challenging task for employees, especially when they address superiors because variables such as social distance and power are at stake. This study attempted to investigate Business and Administration students' production and awareness of requests in (un)equal power and social distance in elicited emails from a quantitative and qualitative perspective. In light of our results, we found a similar use of Conventionally indirect strategies and syntactic modification irrespective of power and social distance. Contrary to what was expected, a higher incidence of Hedged performatives occurred in -P emails, as well as in the categories of Preparators, Disarmers and Imposition minimizers. The impact of power and social distance is reflected in the use of more Complimentary closes in +P situations, although not much deference was found in a number of salutations in the emails addressed to the manager.

One major limitation to the study refers to the lack of naturalistic data, as the emails were elicited by means of DCTs, which may result in students' productions not reflecting what they would say in natural situations. In addition, the head act, internal and external modification and the framing moves may be used differently if some other variables (for example, older students, gender of the sender and the recipient, level of proficiency, etc.) are the focus of further research. In addition, the analysis of emails from higher-ups (i.e., CEOs, managers) to their employees may also provide valuable insights into how requestive emails are composed (Bartl, 2017). Finally, a wider sample would determine more robust tendencies; however, the present study has contributed to further the research on production and perception of requests by Business and Administration students as prospective professionals who need to be pragmatically competent in English. Our findings may contribute to ascertain the potential difference between what students produce and real workplace communication, thus informing business-oriented instructional materials on students' pragmatic shortcomings.

Contributions according to the CRediT system

Conceptualization: TGR; Literature review: TGR, PSC; Methodology: TGR, PSC; Validation: TGR; Research: TGR; Resources: TGR; Data curation: TGR; Formal analysis: TGR; Visualization: TGR; Drafting the original manuscript: TGR; Review and editing: TGR, PSC.

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Appendix 1. DCTs used in the study

SITUATION 1

You have been working on a project of a few months in which you have been asked to digitalise a local company due to its poor digital resources to enhance its visibility online and on social media. The deadline is next Monday. You have worked hard but you have realised that you still need more time to complete the project appropriately and meet the deadline.

Ask your Project Manager to grant you two more weeks in order to finish the project properly.

SITUATION 2

You have been contacted for a job interview, a job which you applied for six months ago, as a digital marketing designer. You were not expecting this but you are glad that they have contacted you. You are happy with your job but you really think that this position can bring new opportunities to your professional career. You have been asked to provide references from your previous and current jobs. Ask your current Manager to provide some references.

SITUATION 3

It is the evening before Black Friday. Your client is trying a new type of digital device on their website to increase their sales on that weekend and you have been assigned to be on call for the whole weekend. You agreed to this arrangement, but you have just remembered that you were invited to a family event and you booked your flight two months ago.

Ask one of your colleagues to swap your shift for theirs so you can attend the family event.

SITUATION 4

Your manager has assigned you to lead a very important meeting with your clients on your own. You feel very sick on the day of the meeting that you need help to lead the meeting. Even though you have informed your managers about this issue, they still want the meeting to be continued.

Ask one of your colleagues to co-lead the meeting.