

MASTER IN ENGLISH LINGUISTICS  
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'Can you upload as soon as you can please?'  
A study of university student requests by  
e-mail in English Medium Instruction

MASTER DISSERTATION  
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## Summary in Spanish

En las dos últimas décadas, las nuevas tecnologías de la información y comunicación (TIC) han creado nuevos medios de interacción en el ámbito académico, como por ejemplo las plataformas de campus virtual y el correo electrónico. Gracias al correo electrónico, las/los estudiantes ya no tienen que esperar hasta las tutorías para consultar a sus profesoras/es. Sin embargo, el uso del correo electrónico entre estudiantes y profesoras/es puede suponer algunas dificultades puesto que a veces las normas de cortesía de las conversaciones cara a cara no son adecuadas para el espacio virtual (Blanchette, 2009; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). Estas dificultades pueden verse agravadas en contextos de educación bilingüe, ya que a menudo las/los estudiantes no reciben formación explícita en la pragmática de la lengua extranjera (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011).

En los correos electrónicos enviados por alumnas/os a sus profesoras/es, uno de los actos de habla más frecuentes son las peticiones (Biesembach-Lucas, 2007). Las/los estudiantes suelen escribir a sus profesoras/es para pedir algún tipo de *acción* (como por ejemplo pedir una tutoría) o para solicitar algún tipo de *información* relacionada con los contenidos de la asignatura (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). Ocasionalmente, estas peticiones pueden resultar problemáticas, debido a que podrían suponer una intrusión en el territorio de las/los oyentes (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989), más aún en un contexto académico, donde existe una diferencia de poder entre estudiantes y profesoras/es.

Aunque algunos de los estudios sobre pragmática en contextos educativos donde el inglés es el idioma usado para la formación se han centrado en el acto de habla de las

peticiones (Dalton-Puffer y Nikula, 2006; Dalton-Puffer, 2007), solamente tenemos conocimiento de un estudio que ha analizado peticiones por correo electrónico en el contexto académico (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). El objetivo de este trabajo es contribuir a la investigación en este campo, analizando peticiones enviadas por estudiantes a profesoras/es en un contexto académico español, donde el inglés es el idioma usado para la formación. Utilizando el instrumento para el análisis de peticiones propuesto por Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) y adaptado para los correos electrónicos por Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011), esta investigación se centra en los diferentes tipos de peticiones de acción e información, en sus diferentes realizaciones lingüísticas y la percepción de estas peticiones por parte de las/los docentes.

El corpus de este estudio comprende dos tipos de datos. El primero está formado por 84 mensajes de correo electrónico enviados por estudiantes de primero y segundo curso de Economía y ADE, pertenecientes al grupo bilingüe de la UCM durante los cursos académicos 2009/2010 y 2011/2012. Los mensajes contenían 109 peticiones, que se han analizado según las estrategias de petición, la perspectiva y los modificadores internos y externos. El segundo grupo de datos comprende 10 cuestionarios distribuidos a 5 profesores y profesoras del área de lingüística inglesa y 5 profesores y profesoras del área de economía. El objetivo de estos cuestionarios es investigar la relación entre forma lingüística y percepción del nivel de cortesía. Los cuestionarios contenían 5 de los mensajes de correo más típicos del corpus.

Generalmente, los resultados del estudio muestran una preferencia por *estrategias convencionales indirectas* en el caso de las *peticiones de acción*, mientras que en las *peticiones de información* las estrategias más recurrentes son las *directas*. Con respecto a la *perspectiva*, tanto en las peticiones de acción como en las peticiones de información se aprecia una preferencia por las formas más *indirectas* (orientadas

hacia el hablante o impersonales). En cuanto a los *modificadores*, las/los estudiantes han hecho uso tanto de *mitigadores internos como externos* para suavizar el impacto de sus peticiones en las/los receptores. Sin embargo, también se han encontrado algunos ejemplos en los que el impacto de las peticiones se ha visto *intensificado*, por ejemplo mediante quejas o críticas hacia las/los receptores. Los resultados obtenidos sugieren la necesidad por parte de los estudiantes de recibir instrucción explícita en la pragmática inglesa.

Esta necesidad ha sido confirmada por los resultados de los cuestionarios, los cuales muestran una preferencia por parte de las/los docentes hacia peticiones que contienen mitigadores. Los resultados también indican que tanto las profesoras/los profesores del área de lingüística inglesa como las profesoras/los profesores de la Facultad de Ciencias Económicas prefieren recibir peticiones directas y claras, pero al mismo tiempo manteniendo la cortesía.

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## 1. Introduction

In the last two decades, the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has somewhat changed educational patterns. More specifically, e-mail communication in the academic setting has to some extent modified the student-teacher relationship (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). Through electronic mail, students no longer need to wait until lesson time or advising sessions to have their queries and requests solved. The use of e-mail seems to have made possible a new kind of relationship between students and instructors, referred to as the ‘third space’ (Bhabha, 1994 in Bretag, 2006). However, electronic mail has also aroused the need for a renewal of both students and professors’ linguistic behavior, since the linguistic strategies used in face-to-face communication are not always appropriate in the online setting (Blanchette, 2009:392).

In student-initiated e-mails to their lecturers, as in classroom discourse in general (see Dalton-Puffer and Nikula, 2006; Dalton-Puffer, 2007) one of the most typical speech acts is precisely *requesting*. Students usually write e-mail requests to their instructors for two main reasons, namely to ask for some kind of *action* from the teacher (e.g. to make an appointment, to have an exam postponed) or to ask for some *information* related to the course content. In other words, student-teacher requests tend to be either requests for action or requests for information (Biesembach-Lucas, 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011).

Requests, however, are a problematic type of speech act in an asymmetrical status relationship such as the student-instructor one, since they imply some kind of “intrusion” on the part of the speaker into the hearer’s territory (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). Furthermore, in the educational setting teachers have more power and status,

and they would therefore expect highly mitigated requests from their students. Concurrently, as Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011:3209) points out, writing status-congruent (i.e. appropriate) e-mails to authority figures is a demanding task, especially for students writing in a foreign language. In contexts in which students use a foreign language for instruction this issue becomes even more complicated, since the curriculum usually does not allow time for instruction in e-mail pragmatics or in the pragmatics of the target language in general. Moreover, due to the limited exposure to the target language, frequently reduced exclusively to the classroom context, and a focus on specialized vocabulary, especially in English for Specific Purposes courses, at advanced levels, students' pragmatic competence is not fully developed.

Though some of the studies that have been published up to date in the pragmatics of English-medium instruction (or EMI) have focused on the speech act of requesting (Dalton-Puffer and Nikula, 2006; Dalton-Puffer, 2007), to our knowledge, only one study has focused specifically on e-mail requests in university settings (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). The present study therefore aims at contributing to the research in this area, by focusing on e-requests sent by first and second year Economics and Business Administration students to their lecturers, in an EMI educational context in Madrid.

Drawing on Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) and Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011), this study aims at answering the following research questions:

- 1) What kind of requests do students display in their e-mails to lecturers?
- 2) Is there a difference between requests for action and requests for information?

And, if so, how are these requests realized linguistically?

- 3) How are these requests perceived by the corresponding lecturers? In other words, do lecturers render requests as more or less polite depending on the linguistic devices used by students?

The corpus for the present study consisted of two sets of data. The first part of the data contained 84 student-initiated e-mails addressed to their lecturers over two academic years: 2009/2010 and 2011/2012. The e-mails consisted of 109 requests that were classified for 1) strategy type, 2) perspective and 3) internal and external modification. This classification draws on the taxonomy proposed by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) and adapted to e-mail requests by Economidou-Koetsidis (2011). This first phase was done with the purpose of answering the first two research questions. The second phase consisted of 10 perception questionnaires distributed to 5 lecturers from the English Linguistics Department and 5 lecturers from the School of Economics and Business Administration (UCM). The questionnaires included five of the most representative e-mails in the corpus that the lecturers were asked to rank for politeness, in order to answer the third research question.

The remainder of this study is structured as follows: chapter two provides the description of the framework used in the analysis and a literature review of requests in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) educational settings; chapter three describes the data and the methodology; chapter four offers a summary and a discussion of the main findings; finally, the last chapter provides the conclusions, pedagogical implications and suggestions for further research.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

### **2.1 On Communicative Competence and Language Learning**

Since the 1960s-1970s communication has become the focus of foreign language classrooms, that is, fluency has been increasingly prioritized over accuracy. As a reaction to Chomsky's (1965) notion of 'linguistic competence', Hymes claimed that there is a need for more than knowledge of grammatical rules to communicate in a given language. Hymes (1972) coined the term 'communicative competence' to refer to the ability of the speaker to produce utterances that are appropriate in a socio-cultural context. Communicative competence has an internal structure formed by effectiveness and appropriateness (Rickheit et al., 2008:16): the former refers to 'the outcome of communicative competence', whereas the latter 'connects it with the situational conditions of the actual social interaction'. The context of situation thus is thought to have a great importance during the communicative act.

John Wiemann (1977:211, as quoted in Rickheit et al., 2008:19) defined the competent communicator as 'the one who is other-oriented, at the same time maintaining the ability to accomplish his own interpersonal goals'. Communicative competence therefore has a strong influence on the extent to which the speaker may achieve success in his/her social life. As pointed out by Schieffelin and Ochs (1986: 170-171), 'one of the basic tenets of sociolinguistic research is that language serves several functions in social life and that consequently spoken and written messages have not only logical (truth-functional) but also social meanings'.

The notion of communicative competence has been applied to instructional and assessment purposes by Canale and Swain (1980), who elaborated a model that included the following components: grammatical competence (linguistic knowledge about

grammatical rules, vocabulary, pronunciation etc.), sociolinguistic competence (knowledge about the appropriate use of language in specific contexts of use, which includes appropriate vocabulary, register, politeness and style), discourse competence (the ability to produce cohesive texts) and strategic competence (the ability to use communication strategies that make communication more effective and which help the speaker to overcome possible communication breakdowns).

### **2.1.1 Pragmatic Competence**

According to Alcón-Soler (2008), pragmatic competence is implicitly included in Canale and Swain's notion of sociolinguistic competence. However, Bachman (1990) was the first applied linguist to explicitly refer to the pragmatic component of communicative competence. In an elaboration of Canale and Swain's model, Bachman's model (as quoted by Celce-Murcia et al., 1995: 8-9) included two main components of language knowledge, namely organizational knowledge and pragmatic knowledge. The former contains two subcomponents, i.e. grammatical knowledge (grammatical competence in Canale and Swain's model) and textual knowledge (similar to Canale and Swain's discourse competence). Pragmatic knowledge is, in turn, composed by lexical knowledge (knowledge about word meanings and figurative language), functional knowledge (the ability to relate utterances to the speaker's communicative purpose) and sociolinguistic knowledge.

Both Canale and Swain (1980) and Bachman (1990) developed their models of communicative competence with the purpose of applying them to tests of language proficiency. Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) instead argued for a model that would rather focus on language instruction. For their model, Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) identified four components of communicative competence, namely discourse competence,

sociocultural competence, linguistic competence and actional competence. They viewed their model as a pyramid containing a circle and enclosed by another circle, as shown in Figure 1.

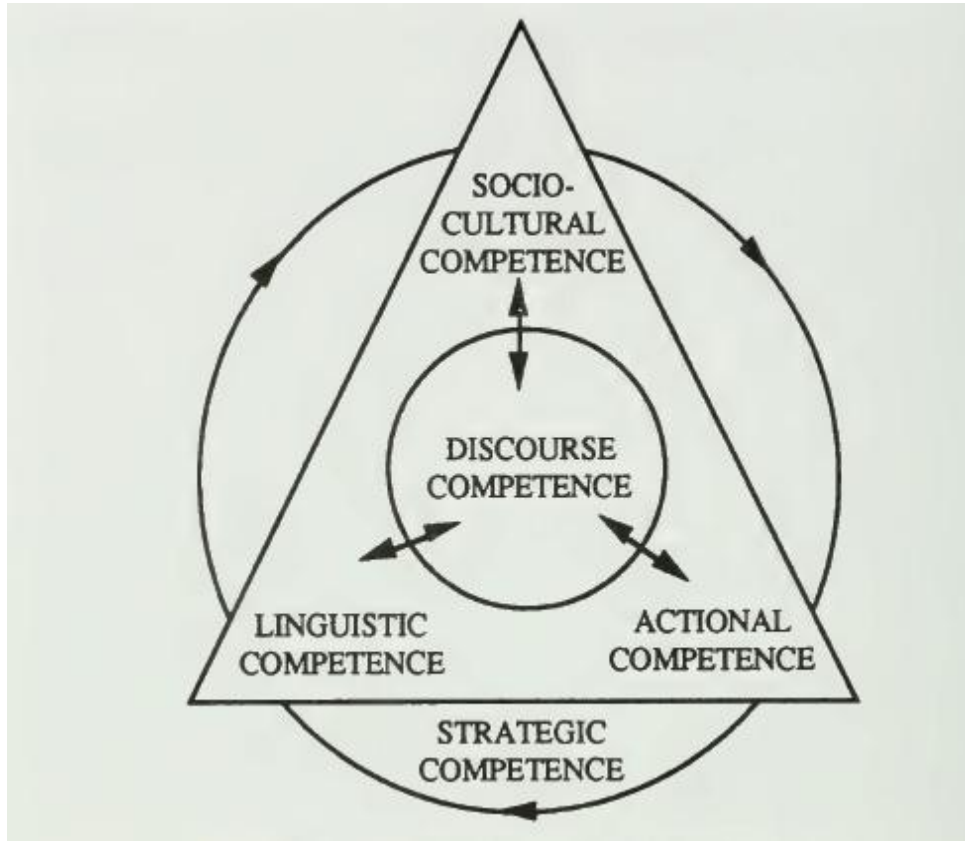


Figure 1. Celce-Murcia et al.'s (1995:10) model of communicative competence

As seen in Figure 1, the central component for these authors is discourse competence, whereas the most relevant one for the purpose of this study is actional competence, defined by Celce-Murcia et al. (1995: 17) as ‘competence in conveying and understanding communicative intent, that is, matching actional intent with linguistic form based on the knowledge of and inventory of verbal schemata that carry illocutionary force (speech acts and speech act sets)’. Actional competence is formed by on the one hand, knowledge of language functions and on the other hand, knowledge of speech act sets. Therefore, actional competence could be understood as pragmatic competence.

### **2.1.2 Pragmatic Competence and Interlanguage Pragmatics**

As a subfield of linguistics, pragmatics, or the study of language in use, has stemmed from the notion of communicative competence (Brown and Levinson, 1988). According to this discipline, which is based on principles rather than rules, an utterance contains two kinds of meanings, namely sentence meaning (i.e. literal meaning) and speaker meaning (i.e. the speaker's communicative intent). Pragmatics therefore 'has as its objective to explain how the gap between sentence meaning and speaker's meaning is bridged' (Sperber and Wilson, 2003: 27).

Pragmatics and the notion of communicative competence have had a strong influence on second/foreign language studies. According to Ohta, (2008: xi), until the 1970s, language instruction focused on the teaching of grammar. However, this tendency changed with the introduction of communicative competence. From the 1990s onwards, pragmatic competence has been considered to be a fundamental component of communicative competence (Bachman, 1990; Celce-Murcia et al., 1995; Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan, 2010). Pragmatics is increasingly becoming more and more important in the foreign language classroom, since it is concerned with the meaning of language in use rather than abstract knowledge about linguistic meaning and therefore, 'performance, rather than competence should be the goal for acquiring a particular target language' (Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan, 2010: 3).

As Biesembach-Lucas (2007:63) pointed out, there seems to be no direct relation between language proficiency and pragmatic competence, since knowledge of the linguistic skills does not guarantee an appropriate use of the language in a given context. In fact, in order to acquire the pragmatics of a second or foreign language, learners need both knowledge of the linguistic resources whereby a specific meaning can be communicated, and knowledge of the particular means which are more

appropriate in a given communicative situation (Alcón-Soler, 2008:18). The former resources stand for what Leech (1983) and Thomas (1983) referred to as the pragmalinguistic component whereas the latter corresponds to their label of sociopragmatic component of pragmatics.

The study of nonnative speakers' use and acquisition of L2 pragmatics has been defined as 'interlanguage pragmatics' (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). According to Kasper and Blum-Kulka (1993: 3), interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) is 'a second-generation hybrid' in the sense that it is a branch of two different interdisciplinary areas in linguistics, namely second language acquisition and pragmatics. This, together with the fact that ILP emerged from cross-cultural pragmatics (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989), has led to two main types of studies in this discipline: on the one hand, comparative studies (usually between native and nonnative speakers), which are close to research on cross-cultural pragmatics and, on the other hand, acquisitional studies, focused on developmental issues that affect learners' acquisition of pragmatics (Alcón-Soler and Martínez-Flor, 2008:3). Both types of studies have tended to pay more attention to the pragmalinguistic component of interlanguage pragmatics, in the sense that they have focused mainly on the linguistic realization patterns of speech acts produced by language learners (Rose and Kasper, 2001). From this perspective, researchers have analyzed realization patterns of speech acts such as requests (e.g. Li, 2000; Biesembach-Lucas, 2007), apologies (Trosborg, 1995; Bataineh and Bataineh, 2006) or refusals (Félix-Brasdefer, 2004).

In more recent studies, it has been claimed instead that pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics should be seen in interaction (Celce-Murcia et al., 1995; Alcón-Soler, 2008). Alcón-Soler (2008), for example, sustained that the relationship between the *form* of a particular speech act and the *contextual factors* of the particular situation has

to be considered. Moreover, Kasper and Rover (2005: 318 in Alcón-Soler, 2008: 22) claimed that becoming pragmatically competent in a second or foreign language is ‘the process of establishing sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic competence and the increasing ability to understand and produce sociopragmatic meanings with pragmalinguistic conventions’.

Some research on interlanguage pragmatics in classroom discourse has integrated pragmatics and Systemic Functional Linguistics (Núñez and Dafouz, 2007; Llinares and Nikula, 2013; Pastrana and Llinares, 2013), since pragmatic competence is reflected in the function of language that Halliday (1973) referred to as the interpersonal metafunction. Núñez and Dafouz (2007) analyzed how Spanish university professors structured their Engineering lectures in English. They found that in some cases lecturers signaled the structures of the lectures implicitly or sometimes used explicit markers with meanings other than their prototypical signaling meaning (e.g. using the expression ‘for example’ to introduce a stretch of language which does not actually fulfill an exemplifying function). The authors suggested that this might negatively affect student comprehension of the lectures. Also in a Spanish educational setting, Pastrana and Llinares (2013) analyzed primary and secondary classroom discourse in Content and Language Integrated Learning<sup>1</sup> (or CLIL), to see whether the students’ functional performance in whole classroom interaction was different from group work interaction. They concluded that directives (or requests) were more frequently instantiated in group work interaction, especially by primary students. In both primary and secondary settings, the students expressed a wider variety of functions in group work than in whole classroom discussion; that is, the study concluded that whereas in whole classroom discussion their contributions were mainly informative (about the content), group work

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<sup>1</sup> Whereas in EMI the focus of instruction is content rather than the language of instruction, CLIL is a dual approach where both content and language objectives receive equal attention (Dafouz et al., 2013).

served the purpose of both informative and personal functions (i.e. expressing personal opinions).

### **2.1.3 Theoretical Basis of Interlanguage Pragmatics**

The acquisition of pragmatics by second/foreign learners of a language has been usually seen as either a cognitive or a socially-oriented phenomenon (Alcón-Soler and Martínez-Flor, 2008:3). From the cognitive point of view, the acquisition of L2 pragmatics is an individual mental process. Studies within this framework have dealt mainly with the issue of teaching pragmatics to second/foreign language learners (e.g. Martínez-Flor and Alcón-Soler, 2007).

The socially-oriented approach to interlanguage pragmatics supports the idea that social interaction is crucial for the acquisition of L2 pragmatics (Alcón-Soler and Martínez-Flor, 2008:6). Within this approach, there are two main theoretical groundings, namely sociocultural theory (Hall, 1998) and language socialization work (Schieffelin and Ochs, 1986). Both theories claim that interaction between experts and novices (teachers and students in this case) plays an important role in the process of language acquisition. Two main issues in these two theories are the integration of language and culture and the mediating role of language in the process of language learning (Alcón-Soler and Martínez-Flor, 2008: 7).

According to language socialization theory (Schieffelin and Ochs, 1986), there is a twofold relationship between language and socialization, namely *socialization to use language* and *socialization through the use of language*. The former refers to cases in which learners are taught what to say in a particular context, whereas the latter is understood as ‘the process by which learners acquire knowledge of the culture in

question as well as of their status and role and their associated rights and obligations as they learn the language' (Dufon, 2008: 27).

#### **2.1.4 Factors influencing the acquisition of L2 pragmatics**

Bardovi-Harlig (2001) identified five different factors that affect foreign language pragmatics acquisition, namely availability of input, influence of instruction, proficiency, length of exposure and L1 transfer (both positive and negative). The next paragraphs will cover these factors in order.

Input is the total of 'language samples learners are exposed to' (Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan, 2010: 10). According to Alcón-Soler (2005; 2008), in foreign language settings, pragmatic input is mainly restricted to classroom interaction, textbooks and audiovisual materials. Regarding classroom interaction, research has shown that this is a type of discourse with very specific characteristics (Christie, 2002). In classroom settings students are mainly exposed to teacher-student interaction. This type of discourse is usually characterized by a repetition of the Initiation-Response-Feedback pattern, where the teacher asks a question, the students give an answer and the teacher provides feedback, as illustrated below:

(I) T: What is the capital of France?

(R) S: Paris.

(F) T: Very good.

As shown in the example, the IRF sequence elicits short answers from the students and therefore does not seem to allow them many opportunities for output. Even one of the most frequent speech acts in classroom discourse, i.e. requesting, seems to be quite limited for the students. As Dalton-Puffer (2007:197) points out:

‘students gain ample experience as addressees of requests to which they have to react adequately, but they have much less opportunity to *make requests themselves*. What active experience they have with addressing requests to a more powerful participant, is almost invariably with requests for information’ (emphasis added).

Researchers also seem to be quite skeptical about textbooks as reliable sources of pragmatic input (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Nuzzo, 2013), especially in comparison to audiovisual input such as TV series. In Nuzzo’s (2013) analysis of compliments, compliment responses, invitation and invitation responses in textbooks for learners of Italian and Italian TV series, she found that these two sources of input are quite different. Whereas both textbooks and TV series contained many examples of invitations, the author only found four examples of compliments in a total of five textbooks. Moreover, Nuzzo observed that textbooks mainly presented students communicative situations characterized by low social distance between participants (generally friendship relationships) and that the range of modifiers was wider in TV series, where it increased with social distance. The author concluded that whereas textbooks seem to offer oversimplified versions of speech acts, TV series seem to be a good resource for pragmatic input, at least for raising learners’ pragmatic awareness.

Influence of instruction also makes a difference in L2 pragmatics in the sense that when learners are taught one semantic structure instead of another, they may overuse it (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001). As stated by Celce-Murcia et al., (1995: 20) some structures such as indirect speech acts are usually not part of the foreign language teaching syllabi, which might lead learners to think that direct realization of speech acts is preferred in the target language. In fact, Chen (2006) found that students writing to their lecturers in a foreign language use directness as a way of making their request

sound important and urgent, leaving aside the effect of coerciveness these may have on the addressees.

The relationship between foreign language proficiency and interlanguage pragmatics seems to be a rather complex one. According to Bardovi-Harlig (2001), pragmatic competence in the target language tends to increase with language proficiency. Some studies have found that certain aspects of pragmatics such as supportive moves (i.e. giving explanation that motivate the speech act) in requests (Rose, 2000 in Alcón-Soler, 2008: 25) tend to improve with increasing proficiency. However, as claimed by Biesembach-Lucas (2007: 63) and explained before (Section 2.1.2), linguistic competence is not the same as pragmatic competence. In this line, Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) found that even very proficient learners of English used request realization patterns that resulted in pragmatic failure; that is, even if the structures they used to realize their requests were grammatically correct in English, in some cases they were inappropriate for the context of situation. For example, using the imperative or time intensifiers such as ‘as soon as possible’ when addressing the lecturer could be seen as an instance of pragmatic failure.

Regarding length of exposure, Niezgoda and Röver (2001: 66) sustained that ‘although it seems that the SL situation confers an advantage for the development of pragmatic competence, this does not mean that it is impossible to improve the learner’s pragmatic competence in the FL setting’. Even if in the FL context the length of exposure to the target language tends to be quite limited, nowadays language learners are exposed to several sources of the foreign language through the use of the Internet, as well as films and videogames. It is even easier for students to get exposed to the target language outside the classroom setting especially if the target language is English. An additional source of exposure in the academic settings is also provided by student

exchange programs, which, apart from exposing the students to the target language, also give them the chance to learn more about the target culture.

Linguistic transfer generally refers to ‘the effects of the learners’ first languages (L1s) on their acquisition or use of the [second or foreign language] L2’ (Su, 2010: 87). More specifically, this kind of transfer is referred to as ‘forward transfer’, as opposed to ‘backward transfer’ (i.e. transfer from the L2 to the L1). Zamborlin (2007:26) explains that sometimes learners opt for (forward) transfer, when they do not retrieve in their interlanguage a structure typical of the foreign language. In Zamborlin’s words: ‘they [students] transfer into the target language the easiest structure at hand corresponding to the option they usually select when communicating in their native language.’

Within L1-L2 transfer, the problem lies in the fact that the structure from the L1 is not always correct or appropriate in the L2. That is, transfer can be both positive and negative. Negative transfer can sometimes lead to what Zamborlin (2007:22) calls ‘dissonances’: ‘circumstances in which speakers, deliberately or not, organize the linguistic action in such a way that hearers perceive it as conflicting with the harmonious flow of the conversation’.

## **2.2 The speech act of Requesting**

Requesting belongs to the speech act category of directives, defined by Searle (1976:11) as ‘attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something’. Requests are thought to have an inherent face-threatening nature (Brown and Levinson, 1987) since they imply some kind of intrusion on the part of the speaker into the hearer’s territory. Requesting has been conceptualized as a pre-event act (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) as it occurs *before* the action referred to by the speaker actually takes place, as opposed to, for example, apologies, which are usually post-event acts.

### 2.2.1 Requests in Cross-Cultural studies

Requests have increasingly attracted the interest of applied linguists since the first study that compared requests and apologies across languages, namely the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP), carried out by Blum-Kulka et al. in 1989. The authors identified different components of the speech act of requesting, namely head act and supportive moves. The head act is the only compulsory component a linguistic unit should contain in order to be interpreted as a request. That is, the head is that part of the conversation turn that can realize the request independently of other constituents (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989), as shown in the following example:

*'I'm really worried about the linguistics exam. Can I please borrow your notes? I promise I'll give them back to you tomorrow'* (head act underlined).

In the CCSAR Project the following categories for the classification of requests were maintained in the different languages included in the study (i.e. Canadian French, German, Australian English, American English, British English, Hebrew and Russian): request perspective, request strategies, syntactic downgraders, lexical and phrasal downgraders and upgraders. The different categories are explained below.

Request perspective refers to the fact that a request may be realized from the point of view of the different participants, and therefore creates four categories of classification:

- hearer oriented (e.g. 'Could **you** send me the handout for lesson 3?')
- speaker oriented (e.g. 'Could **I** have the handout for lesson 3?')
- inclusive perspective ('Could **we** correct the exercise in class?')
- impersonal perspective ('Would **it** be possible to postpone the exam?').

The concept of request strategy type refers to the different linguistic patterns whereby a request head act can be realized. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) found three different strategy types which kept valid for classification across languages, namely direct, conventionally indirect and nonconventionally indirect strategies. These authors included in the first category requests that were realized explicitly through linguistic means such as the imperative or performative sentences. They gathered conventionalized expressions that made reference to contextual necessary preconditions into the second category of strategy type. Regarding nonconventional indirect strategies, these authors defined them as ‘the open-ended group of indirect strategies (hints) that realize the request by either partial reference to the object or element needed for the implementation of the act (‘Why is the window open’) or by reliance on contextual clues (‘It’s cold in here’)’ (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984:210). Within the CCSARP data, nine subtypes of strategy types were identified, which are illustrated in Table 1 and displayed on a scale of indirectness.<sup>2</sup>

| Strategy Category | Strategy Type            | Example                                                           |
|-------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Direct            | 1. Mood derivable        | <i>Please upload lesson 3 to Campus Virtual.</i>                  |
|                   | 2. Performatives         | <i>I am asking you to please upload the handout for lesson 3.</i> |
|                   | 3. Hedged performatives  | <i>I would like to ask you to upload lesson 3.</i>                |
|                   | 4. Obligation statements | <i>You’ll have to/you must/you should upload lesson 3.</i>        |
|                   | 5. Want statements       | <i>I wish you’d leave us more time to do exercise 2.</i>          |

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<sup>2</sup> My own examples, inspired by the data of the present study.

|                            |                                                                       |                                                                                                                                   |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Conventionally Indirect    | 6. Suggestory formulae                                                | <i>How about next Thursday?(request for an appointment)</i>                                                                       |
|                            | 7. Query preparatory                                                  | <i>Could you/would you mind upload (ing) lesson 3 again?</i>                                                                      |
| Nonconventionally Indirect | 8. Strong hints (partial reference to request goal)                   | <i>I cannot download lesson 3...</i>                                                                                              |
|                            | 9. Mild hints (no reference to the request proper, context-dependent) | <i>I haven't got a printer at home... (request for deadline extension when asked to submit an exercise for the following day)</i> |

Table 1. Request strategy types (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989)

Requests can be mitigated or aggravated through the use of internal modifiers (downgrading or upgrading moves occurring within the request head act). Blum-Kulka et al. (1989: 281) identified the following types of syntactic downgraders:

- interrogative ('Could you give me a lift home?' instead of 'Give me a lift home')
- negation of a preparatory condition ('Can't you/ I don't suppose you'd like to...')
- subjunctive ('Might be better if you *were to leave* now')
- conditional ('I would suggest you to leave now' instead of 'I suggest you to leave now')
- tense (past tense forms when used with present time reference, e.g. 'I *wanted* to ask you to present your paper a week earlier')
- aspect ('I'm wondering if I could get a lift home with you'),
- conditional clause ('I was wondering if you could present your paper a week earlier than planned')
- possible combinations of the above strategies.

Apart from internal modifiers, requests can also be downgraded or upgraded through the use of external modifiers, i.e. moves that occur outside the request head act, as in the following example (external modifiers underlined):

Sorry, i have some problems downloading the exercices 2 and 2 bis. I don't know if its moodle problem or my profile problem. Please can you check it.

Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) taxonomy of request external modification devices has been modified by more recent studies which have dealt with second/foreign language learners in academic settings, such as Biesembach-Lucas (2007) and Economidou-Koetsidis (2011). A detailed description of external modifiers will be provided in section 2.2.3 below.

## **2.2.2 Requests in Foreign language/Second language contexts**

Pragmatic competence in a target language affects learner's speech act realization patterns. Due to its inherent face-threatening nature (Brown and Levinson, 1987), requesting has been one of the most studied speech acts. In academic settings, there are further reasons that make this speech act interesting for research. On the one hand, as pointed out by Dalton-Puffer and Nikula (2006: 242), requests (or directives) are 'very common in classroom discourse and provide, therefore, rich opportunities for exploring how teachers and students manage interaction'. On the other hand, the student-teacher relationship is a status incongruent one (Biesembach-Lucas, 2007:63), that is, in the educational setting teachers have more power and status, and for this reason they would expect highly mitigated requests from their students (Economidou-Koetsidis, 2011).

Generally, there seems to be a tendency for second/foreign language users of English to use a high degree of directness in their performance of requests

(Bieseimbach-Lucas, 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). Though this tendency might sometimes be interpreted as a lack of politeness, research in the field of cross-cultural pragmatics has shown that rather than a matter of politeness, different cultures simply realize politeness in different ways (Le Pair, 1996; Ballesteros, 2001; Díaz-Pérez, 2003; Pinto and Raschio, 2007). Speakers whose L1 is Spanish, for example, tend to be more direct in their realizations of requests. Le Pair (1996) compared requests in Spanish by native speakers and Dutch second language speakers of Spanish, collected through the use of discourse completion tasks (DCTs). His interest in this study came from his claim that ‘in every communication situation, especially in intercultural interaction, the interpersonal function of the language is of great importance’ (Le Pair, 1996: 652). Le Pair (1996: 658-9) classified request head acts according to Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) to distinguish their level of directness. He found that conventional indirect strategies (e.g. *¿podrías ayudarme? Could you help me?*) were the most frequently used by both Spanish and Dutch speakers. The author concluded that this was a consequence of shared conventions among the two cultures and he also claimed that the use of this type of strategy by non-native speakers (NNSs) could indicate a preference for ‘safer’ attempts to sound less offensive (668). While none of the groups used non-conventional indirect strategies, the Spanish native speakers (NSs) used far more direct strategies (e.g. *Dame tu bolígrafo/ Give me your pen*) than the Dutch. Le Pair interpreted this finding as an indication of the fact that the Spanish imperative has a different pragmatic force than the Dutch equivalent (661).

In line with Le Pair, Ballesteros (2001) found that Spaniards and British realize requests and commands in different ways. From a data completion task (DCT) compiled by 180 Spanish undergraduate students and 180 British undergraduate students, he found that native speakers of Spanish prefer syntactically more direct strategies. In

contrast, the British use more frequently conventionally indirect strategies. Moreover, the Spanish participants in his study seemed to have a preference for positive politeness strategies to mitigate their requests, whereas the British participants tended to use negative politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson, 1987). That is, whereas the Spanish native speakers seem to value more positively being part of a group, the English native speakers appear to give more importance to their desire of not being unimpeded. Ballesteros therefore showed that there is no objective proof for categorizing speakers from a certain society as more or less polite than speakers from another society. Rather, his findings proved that speakers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds realize politeness in linguistically different ways.

Another comparative study based on DCTs was conducted by Pinto and Raschio (2007). The researchers examined requests produced by heritage speakers of Spanish<sup>3</sup>, L1 speakers of Spanish and L1 speakers of English. Their main aim was to test the use of the level of directness as well as the frequency of downgraders (mitigating devices, e.g. 'please'). They found that Spanish NSs used direct strategies with one downgrader (e.g. *por favor limpia el cuarto/please clean the room*) in 7% of the cases, whereas the English NSs never used this combination; instead, the English NSs preferred indirect strategies with two downgraders (e.g. *Do you think that you could clean the apartment this week?*) in 31% of the cases, while the Spanish NSs only used this combination in 8.5% of their request realizations (143). As for the heritage speakers of Spanish, they tended to avoid directness in the same way that native speakers of English did (146). However, curiously enough, they displayed some characteristics that are typical of neither Spanish L1 speakers nor English L1 speakers, such as the noncanonical 'if'

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<sup>3</sup> Heritage speakers of Spanish are speakers who have inherited the Spanish language from their parents, but who are living in a context where Spanish is not the mainstream language (Spanish speakers in the UK, for example).

conditional instead of the subjunctive (which would be the grammatically correct form) in the following context: '*si podrías limpiar el apartamento por mi me ayudarías mucho/ If you could clean the apartment for me, you would help me a lot*'; another example is the use of 'es posible que' in cases where neither the native Spanish speakers nor the native English speakers used it in the study: '*es posible que me prestes tus apuntes de clase?/Is it possible for you to lend me your class notes?*'. Furthermore, the authors explained that 'findings indicate that for requests, heritage speakers (HS) and L2 learners [of Spanish] share certain characteristics when they attempt to communicate in Spanish' (149). Given this interesting similarity between HS and L2 learners of Spanish regarding request realization patterns, as well as the differences between native speakers of Spanish and native speakers of English, further studies could focus on which of the groups share more common features with Spanish learners of English.

### **2.2.3 Requests in English Medium Instruction Settings**

Although research on requests in EFL and ESL settings has been quite productive, less attention has been paid, up to now, to requests performed by students in English medium instruction settings (but see Dalton-Puffer and Nikula, 2006; Dalton-Puffer, 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011; Nikula, 2012; Nashat, 2013). Most of the research in this area has focused on secondary settings (Dalton-Puffer and Nikula, 2006; Nikula, 2012; Nashat, 2013) and on aural classroom interaction (Dalton-Puffer and Nikula, 2006; Dalton-Puffer, 2007; Nikula, 2012).

Of particular interest to the present paper is the study conducted by Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011), which is, to the researcher's knowledge, the only study so far to address requests by e-mail in a tertiary setting of content-based instruction.

Furthermore, the participants in Economidou-Kogetsitis' study were also enrolled in an Economics and Business administration undergraduate degree. The author analyzed 200 e-mails received from her Greek-Cypriot students, which she divided between requests for action and requests for information. Economidou-Kogetsidis' analysis focuses on request head acts, perspective, internal (lexical and phrasal) and external modification. In addition, she took into account the forms of address in the e-mails and she also created a perception questionnaire which she distributed to some of her colleagues, some of whom were native speakers of English. The author's main concern was to determine the degree of directness in her student's request realization patterns. She found that though the students tended to use conventionalized indirect strategies, they made little use of internal and external mitigators. In fact, in some cases, the requests displayed aggravating moves and forms of address which were considered to be inappropriate by the participants in the perception questionnaire. Her students used forms of address which are acceptable in the Greek-Cypriot context, such as 'Hello Maria', but which were perceived as rather impolite by native speakers of English who belong to a culture where negative politeness is preferred. Economidou-Kogetsidis associated her findings to the positive politeness culture of Greek-Cypriot L1 students and to the lack of explicit instruction in L2 pragmatics. The author sustained that NNS students could benefit from explicit instruction in L2 pragmatics, since writing status-congruent e-mails to authority figures is a demanding task even for students with good language proficiency in English. She further argued that EFL/ESL textbooks should also include explicit e-mail instruction.

The study conducted by Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) is also interesting for the present paper because of the taxonomy she used for internal and external modifiers.

Her taxonomy was, in turn, based on Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) and Sifianou (1992). The different types of mitigators and aggravators are summarized in Tables 2 and 3 below.

| Internal lexical/phrasal downgraders | Category                 | Examples                                                                  |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                      | Marker 'please'          | <i>Please</i>                                                             |
|                                      | Consultative devices     | <i>'would you mind', 'do you think', 'is it/ would it be possible...'</i> |
|                                      | Downtoners               | <i>'possibly', 'perhaps', 'just'</i>                                      |
|                                      | Understaters/Hedges      | <i>'a bit', 'a little', 'sort of'</i>                                     |
|                                      | Subjectivisers           | <i>'I'm afraid', 'I think', 'I suppose'</i>                               |
|                                      | Cajolers                 | <i>'You know' 'You see'</i>                                               |
|                                      | Appealers                | <i>'...will you?', 'ok/right?'</i>                                        |
| Internal upgraders                   | (Adverbial) intensifiers | <i>'I truly/really need this extension'</i>                               |
|                                      | Time intensifiers        | <i>'as soon as possible'</i>                                              |
|                                      | Overstaters              | <i>'I'm in desperate need of material for my essay'</i>                   |

Table 2. Internal lexical/phrasal modification strategies (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011: 3211)

| External supportive moves | Category                  | Example                                                                                     |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                           | Greeting/Opening          | <i>'Good morning' 'How are you?'</i>                                                        |
|                           | Self-Introduction         | <i>'I'm Maria K. from your LAL -141 class'</i>                                              |
|                           | Grounders (explanations)  | <i>'I would like an assignment extension because I could not deal with the typing time'</i> |
|                           | Disarmers                 | <i>'I know that this assignment is important, but...'</i>                                   |
|                           | Preparators               | <i>'I really need a favor'</i>                                                              |
|                           | Getting a precommitment   | <i>'Could you do me a favor?'</i>                                                           |
|                           | Promises                  | <i>'Could you give me an extension? I promise I'll have it ready for tomorrow'</i>          |
|                           | Imposition minimizers     | <i>'I would like to ask for an extension, just for a few days'</i>                          |
|                           | Apologies                 | <i>'I'm very sorry but I need an extension on this project'</i>                             |
|                           | Orientation moves         | <i>'I have a question about the essay'</i>                                                  |
|                           | Compliments or sweeteners | <i>'I hope you feel better'</i>                                                             |
|                           | Pre-closing/Thanks        | <i>'I look forward to hearing from you', 'Thanks for your time'</i>                         |
|                           | E-mail closings           | <i>'Best', 'Sincerely'</i>                                                                  |

|                                   |                                      |                                                                                                |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>External aggravating moves</b> | Complaint/Criticisms                 | <i>'I sent you and e-mail 3 days ago and never replied'</i>                                    |
|                                   | Emphasis on urgency/positive outcome | <i>'I need to have the reference letter in three days' 'I will expect your positive reply'</i> |

Table 3. External request modification devices (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011: 3212)

Also relevant for the purpose of the present paper is Nashat's (2013) work on requests produced by native speakers of Spanish in English. The author gathered her data through a discourse completion task containing two parts which she distributed among secondary school students. The first part of the task had the purpose of eliciting a student-teacher request. Nashat's intention in this research paper was to find out what linguistic resources these students would use as internal and external request modifiers, which she classified according to the CCSARP (1989) framework. Her findings supported those by other researchers (Biesembach-Lucas, 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2008; 2011) in that the requests she analyzed presented quite a limited number of internal mitigators, though they did present more instances of external mitigators (mainly grounders or explanations). Furthermore, these requests displayed some instances of aggravators which were considered not to be totally appropriate in a classroom setting, which included criticism such as representing the teacher's behavior as a source of annoyance for the student (external aggravating moves referred to by Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011 as complaint/criticism moves).

### 2.3 Computer Mediated Discourse and Pragmatic Competence

Traditional classroom communication norms have changed with the introduction of online learning environments (Sunderland, 2002; Bretag, 2006; Schallert et al., 2009; Chalak et al., 2010). This new type of communication between students and professors has created a need for a renewal of their linguistic behavior, since 'the communication

strategies that instructors and students have been socialized to in the face-to-face setting are not always adequate in the online context' (Blanchette, 2009:392).

One of the tools provided by the virtual learning platforms is electronic mail. Crystal (2001: 10), in his classic study defined e-mail as 'the use of computer systems to transfer messages between users'. He devoted an entire chapter in his book on electronic discourse, *Language and the Internet*, to this type of 'netspeak'. Crystal claimed that e-mail displays characteristics of both speech and writing (2001: 29): though rather 'informal' (128) in style, e-mail lacks the immediate feedback, the kinesics and proxemics, as well as the spontaneity of aural conversation (30). Therefore, rather than seen according to the traditional dichotomous model, e-mail should be regarded as a hybrid medium, a continuum between speech and writing. Baron (1998) in fact referred to electronic mail as 'letters by phone or speech by other means' and compared its linguistic evolution to that of letter writing, the telegram or the telephone (Baron, 2002).

Concerning composition, e-mails often contain 3 different structural elements, namely header/heading, body/message and attachment (Crystal, 2001: 97). Apart from the header, whose subject line is considered to be critical, according to Crystal, the body of the message is interesting in terms of 'the extent to which it is preceded by a greeting and followed by a farewell' (99), which might even be inappropriate in some cases (100).

Regarding style, e-mail handbooks seem to be of little help to users, since most of the authors have different opinions regarding the formality and length of the messages (Baron, 2002: 410). Linguistic style in e-mails therefore appears to rely on the individual preferences of the users. However, Baron (2002: 412) argued that in some

contexts, such as academia, there is still a preference for a more formal style. This idea is supported by Ford (2003b), who claimed that e-mails in academic settings should resemble formal letters in style.

In order to determine whether the linguistic forms used by French adolescents in electronic mail are different from those of standard written French, Volckaert-Legrier et al. (2009) conducted a study with 80 adolescents aged from 12 to 15. The data was collected in a natural situation where the students had to introduce themselves to two addressees, namely a peer and a teacher. The findings showed that the e-mails contained a significant number of orthographic deviations that were not linked to the participants' standard writing ability. Moreover, the students used the familiar form 'tu' of the personal pronoun to address the peer and the unfamiliar form 'vous' to address the teacher, therefore showing pragmatic awareness. Volckaert-Legrier (2009:179) concluded that 'e-mail indeed constitutes a specific language register. Moreover, communication in this register was found to follow the pragmatic rules of interaction in terms of addressee adaptation (use of personal pronouns)'.

Electronic mail seems to have made possible a new kind of rapport between students and teachers, which has been referred to by Bhabha, 1994 (in Bretag, 2006) as the 'third space'. In order to analyze the potential of e-mail for re-conceptualizing the traditional student-teacher relationship, Bretag (2006) designed an e-mail communication task for her 10 international students enrolled in a Masters of Business at the University of South Australia in 2002. The author found that e-mail communication facilitated a change in the relationship between most of the students and their teacher, which was also reflected in the fact that 'subjectivity (emotions, personal reactions, daily anecdotes, dreams, and longings), not usually valued in academia, was given a new status and value via the email communication' (Bretag, 2006:1004).

However, the author also observed that this shift towards the ‘third space’ was highly dependent on the students’ individual motivation, as well as on the teacher’s role in modeling this type of relationship. Moreover, Bertag explained that this kind of task was possible thanks to the small number of students in the classroom, which allowed enough time for them and the teacher to interact through e-mail at least once a week.

Some of the studies in the field of e-mails have focused on its use by foreign language learners in the instructional setting with the purpose of performing the speech act of requesting. Most of the studies in this area have dealt with the linguistic patterns displayed in the formulation of e-requests by students who had received no previous explicit instruction on pragmatics (Ford, 2003a; Chen, 2006; Biesembach-Lucas, 2007; Economidpu-Kogetsidis, 2011).

In spite of the fact that the use of English as a medium of instruction in tertiary settings is increasing, instruction of the pragmatics of e-mail communication is frequently absent from the curriculum (Ford, 2003a: 147). Though all of the above-mentioned authors argued for the need of explicit instruction in e-mail pragmatics, only Ford conducted a study that proved its efficiency. Over the 2002-2003 academic year, he completed a study which compared the performance of e-mail requests by second language students of English before and after receiving explicit instruction on ‘netiquette’. The results showed significant improvement regarding the perlocutionary effect of the requests, since non-native speakers of English decreased their overuse of external mitigators. However, they also showed that without reinforcement, this improvement was not completely maintained over time (Ford, 2003a: 155). Thus, Ford argued for the need of more instruction on pragmatics both to increase the positive effects and to maintain them over time. Although Ford’s study was rather limited in scope, since his participants were 15 NNS students and 29 English NSs, he made the

procedure of his study available in order for other researchers to replicate it (Ford, 2003b). He further stressed that ‘teachers must devote more attention to helping students learn pragmatic skills necessary to communicate effectively in this genre’ (Ford, 2003b: 40).

This section has provided the theoretical background for the present study. This study therefore combines interlanguage pragmatics and computer mediated communication (more specifically e-mail), in order to analyze e-mail requests sent by Economics and BA students enrolled in an EMI program. The following section describes in more detail the data and methodology.

### **3. Data and Methodology**

#### **3.1 Corpus and Participants**

The corpus for the present paper consisted of two sets of data. The first part of the data was formed by student-initiated e-mails to their Business Administration lecturers. The second part of the corpus comprised perception questionnaires with the purpose of determining the perlocutionary effect of the e-mail requests on the receivers.

##### **3.1.1 Student-initiated e-mails**

The data for the present study comprised 84 student-initiated e-mails written by first and second-year Economics and Business Administration students enrolled in a bilingual Spanish/English degree at the Complutense University in Madrid. The educational approach in this particular context could be defined as English medium instruction rather than CLIL. That is, ‘the focus is on *content* rather than the integration of both content and language’ (Dafouz et al., 2013:11). The EMI degree at the School of Economics and Business Administration was designed in 2009 and implemented on an experimental level. Currently, there are two bilingual groups for Economics and BA. Both the bilingual and the Spanish monolingual groups follow the same curriculum and assessment procedures. Furthermore, in some cases, the bilingual and the monolingual groups are taught by the same instructors. After completing the studies in the EMI group, the students receive a ‘bilingual certificate’ issued by the UCM.

The messages were addressed by the students to two of their lecturers during two academic years: 2009/2010 and 2011/2012. The e-mails were written in English and sent to the addressees through the electronic mail application of the virtual learning platform. The data were gathered with permission from the e-mail receivers. Some of

the e-mails were addressed to both lecturers, since they jointly taught some of the course subjects.

The 84 e-mails were written within the following content subjects: Financial Accounting (2009/2010; 2011/2012), Analytical Account (2011/2012) and Management Accounting (2011/2012). The e-mails consisted of a total number of 109 requests, since in some cases, one e-mail contained several requests or, on the contrary, two e-mails served the purpose of performing the same request, the first one being the request proper and the second one serving as a supportive move. Unlike previous studies that considered e-mails including only an attachment to be requests for feedback and therefore requests for action (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011), the present corpus only included e-mails containing at least a minimum amount of text that fulfilled the purpose of requesting. The overall length of the e-mails was around forty words.

The writers of the e-mails were 44 students, 20 female students and 24 male students, whose first language was Spanish. In order to take part in the bilingual group, they were required at least a B2 level of English of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The choice of English as the language of the e-mails was optional for the students, though the lecturers did seem to prefer it, as they usually replied in English to messages written in Spanish (according to personal communications from the instructors). The receivers of the e-mails were two female lecturers aged around forty, who were also native speakers of Spanish and who had voluntarily offered to participate in the bilingual program. Most of the students did not know the professors previously, though some of them were more familiar with these instructors from courses that had taken part in the previous semester or due to the fact that it was the second time they enrolled in a given course. The students had not received neither previous explicit instruction in pragmatics, nor specific guidelines for

writing status-congruent (i.e. appropriate) e-mails to their course instructors. In fact, language courses such as English for Specific Purposes were not included in the curriculum of the bilingual degree. The student-teacher relationship in this context could be described as friendly but formal (as explained through personal communications by the professors).

### **3.1.2 Perception Questionnaires**

In order to have a broader view of the data, a perception questionnaire containing five e-mails from the corpus were distributed to 10 lecturers (including the two original addressees of the e-mails) who were asked to rank them for politeness. The participants in the perception questionnaires were higher education teachers from two different areas, namely 5 lecturers from Economics and Business Administration, and 5 lecturers from English Linguistics. This was done with the purpose of looking at the e-mails with both the ‘lenses’ of the content teachers and those of the language teachers, in order to find out their possible distinct views on politeness and its linguistic realization, given their different professional profiles. The initial assumption was that the English Linguistics lecturers would probably rank the requests by taking into account the linguistic realization and therefore somehow favoring indirectness, whereas the Economics and Business lecturers would favor clarity and fluency over linguistic accuracy. The participants from the School of Economics were two male and three female instructors, whereas the five participants from the English Linguistics Department comprised four female professors and one male.

Table 4 below summarizes the data used in the present study.

|                    |                                                              |                                                                                                                                                             |
|--------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| First set of data  | 84 Student-initiated e-mails<br>(44 participants: students)  | 109 requests                                                                                                                                                |
| Second set of data | 10 perception questionnaires<br>(10 participants: lecturers) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5 questionnaires English Linguistics Department</li> <li>• 5 questionnaires Economics and BA Department</li> </ul> |

Table 4. Summary of the data and participants

### 3.2 Taxonomy, Instruments and Procedures

Following previous research on requests in English-medium instruction settings, the requests were grouped according to the speakers' goals into requests for action and requests for information (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). Requests that implied some kind of action on the part of the lecturer (e.g. sending course materials, giving feedback or setting time for an advising session) were labeled under the former category, whereas questions about subject content or procedural questions (i.e. doubts about how or when to carry out an academic project/exam) fell within the latter category.

For ethical purposes, the following step in the procedure was to anonymize the data. In order to preserve the authenticity of the e-mails, they were not edited for spelling or grammar mistakes/typos. Requests were then analyzed for strategy type, perspective and modification (both internal and external) following the framework described in the Theoretical Background Section (Blum-Kulka et al, 1989; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011) with the purpose of answering the two main research questions. Though it dates from 1989, the CCSARP framework has been proved by recent studies to still be suitable for analyzing requests, since 'it allows a more thorough analysis of politeness devices at the syntactic and lexical level' (Biesembach-Lucas, 2007: 63). Two pilot studies showed that the most suitable means to carry out the analysis was a combination of the framework proposed by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) for request strategy type, perspective and internal syntactic downgraders and the one

adapted by Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) to e-mail requests for internal lexical and phrasal modifiers and external modifiers. Unclear cases and queries which showed up during the analysis were discussed with the help of the thesis supervisor and a consensus for classification was reached.

The analysis combined a quantitative and a qualitative approach. For the quantitative analysis, requests were classified according to strategy type and perspective, in order to find out which kind of realization patterns were preferred by the students. Requests were therefore coded for strategy type following the classification summarized in Table 5.

| Strategy type | Category                   | Subcategory                                                           | Example                                                                                                                           |
|---------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|               | Direct                     | 1. Mood derivable                                                     | <i>Please upload lesson 3 to Campus Virtual.</i>                                                                                  |
|               |                            | 2. Performatives                                                      | <i>I am asking you to please upload the handout for lesson 3.</i>                                                                 |
|               |                            | 3. Hedged performatives                                               | <i>I would like to ask you to upload lesson 3.</i>                                                                                |
|               |                            | 4. Obligation statements                                              | <i>You'll have to/you must/you should upload lesson 3.</i>                                                                        |
|               |                            | 5. Want statements                                                    | <i>I wish you'd leave us more time to do exercise 2.</i>                                                                          |
|               | Conventionally Indirect    | 6. Suggestory formulae                                                | <i>How about next Thursday? (appointment request)</i>                                                                             |
|               |                            | 7. Query preparatory                                                  | <i>Could you/would you mind upload (ing) lesson 3 again?</i>                                                                      |
|               | Nonconventionally Indirect | 8. Strong hints (partial reference to request goal)                   | <i>I cannot download lesson 3...</i>                                                                                              |
|               |                            | 9. Mild hints (no reference to the request proper, context-dependent) | <i>I haven't got a printer at home... (request for deadline extension when asked to submit an exercise for the following day)</i> |

Table 5. Framework for request strategy type on a scale of indirectness (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989)

The following step was to classify the data according to request perspective, as shown in Table 6 below. This was done in order to determine if different degrees of imposition (i.e. different request goals) resulted into different preferences in perspective.

| Request Perspective | Category         | Example                                                     |
|---------------------|------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
|                     | Hearer Oriented  | <i>'Could <b>you</b> send me the handout for lesson 3?'</i> |
|                     | Speaker Oriented | <i>'Could <b>I</b> have the handout for lesson 3?'</i>      |
|                     | Inclusive        | <i>'Could <b>we</b> correct the exercise in class?'</i>     |
|                     | Impersonal       | <i>'Would <b>it</b> be possible to postpone the exam?'</i>  |

Table 6. Framework for request perspective (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989)

The qualitative analysis focused on request modification, in order to examine which internal and external downgraders students used to mitigate their requests and which internal and external upgraders, if any, they used to make their requests seem more urgent. As mentioned before, the part of the framework dealing with internal syntactic downgraders drew on Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) since Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) decided to focus only on lexical and phrasal internal downgraders in her analysis. Furthermore, since some of the categories into which Blum-Kulka et al. divided syntactic downgraders (i.e. interrogative and conditional clause) resulted rather confusing and vague, this study focused on the classification of negation of a preparatory condition, subjunctive, conditional, tense and aspect. The classification for internal modifiers is summarized in Table 7 below.

| Internal Modifiers | Category                    | Subcategory                         | Example                                                                   |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                    | Syntactic Downgraders       | negation of a preparatory condition | <i>'Can't you/ I don't suppose you'd like to...'</i>                      |
|                    |                             | subjunctive                         | <i>'Might be better if you were to...'</i>                                |
|                    |                             | conditional                         | <i>'I would suggest you to ...'</i>                                       |
|                    |                             | tense                               | <i>'I wanted to ask you to present your paper a week earlier'</i>         |
|                    |                             | aspect                              | <i>'I'm wondering if ...'</i>                                             |
|                    | lexical/phrasal downgraders | Marker 'please'                     | <i>'please'</i>                                                           |
|                    |                             | Consultative devices                | <i>'would you mind', 'do you think', 'is it/ would it be possible...'</i> |
|                    |                             | Downtoners                          | <i>'possibly', 'perhaps', 'just'</i>                                      |
|                    |                             | Understaters/ Hedges                | <i>'a bit', 'a little', 'sort of'</i>                                     |
|                    |                             | Subjectivisers                      | <i>'I'm afraid', 'I think', 'I suppose'</i>                               |
|                    |                             | Cajolers                            | <i>'You know' 'You see'</i>                                               |
|                    |                             | Appealers                           | <i>'...will you?', 'ok/right?'</i>                                        |
|                    | Internal upgraders          | (Adverbial) intensifiers            | <i>'I truly/really need this extension'</i>                               |
|                    |                             | Time intensifiers                   | <i>'as soon as possible'</i>                                              |

Table 7. Framework for internal modification of requests (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Economidou-Koetsidis, 2011)

Regarding external modification, the present analysis followed the framework by Economidou-Koetsidis (2011), since it was considered to be particularly suitable for e-mail requests. The classification of external downgraders and upgraders is shown in Table 8.

| External modification devices | Category             | Subcategory                          | Examples                                                                                       |
|-------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                               | External downgraders | Greeting/Opening                     | <i>'Good morning' 'How are you?'</i>                                                           |
|                               |                      | Self-Introduction                    | <i>'I'm Maria K. from your LAL -141 class'</i>                                                 |
|                               |                      | Grounders (explanations)             | <i>'I would like an assignment extension because I could not deal with the typing time'</i>    |
|                               |                      | Disarmers                            | <i>'I know that this assignment is important, but...'</i>                                      |
|                               |                      | Preparators                          | <i>'I really need a favor'</i>                                                                 |
|                               |                      | Getting a precommitment              | <i>'Could you do me a favor?'</i>                                                              |
|                               |                      | Promises                             | <i>'Could you give me an extension? I promise I'll have it ready for tomorrow'</i>             |
|                               |                      | Imposition minimizers                | <i>'I would like to ask for an extension, just for a few days'</i>                             |
|                               |                      | Apologies                            | <i>'I'm very sorry but I need an extension on this project'</i>                                |
|                               |                      | Orientation moves                    | <i>'I have a question about the essay'</i>                                                     |
|                               |                      | Compliments or sweeteners            | <i>'I hope you feel better'</i>                                                                |
|                               |                      | Pre-closing/Thanks                   | <i>'I look forward to hearing from you', 'Thanks for your time'</i>                            |
|                               |                      | E-mail closings                      | <i>'Best', 'Sincerely'</i>                                                                     |
|                               | External upgraders   | Complaint/Criticisms                 | <i>'I sent you an e-mail 3 days ago and never replied'</i>                                     |
|                               |                      | Emphasis on urgency/positive outcome | <i>'I need to have the reference letter in three days' 'I will expect your positive reply'</i> |

Table 8. Framework for external modification (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011)

The perception questionnaires were then distributed in order to find out the relationship between the level of directness of the request and the perceived level of politeness (perlocutionary effect). Five of the most representative e-mails were chosen from the corpus. The e-mails were selected on the basis of their realization patterns; that is, examples of the five most recurrent strategy types (i.e. mood derivable, hedged

performative, want statement, strong hint and query preparatory) were chosen. These were also selected because they displayed a variety of internal structures, as shown in Table 11. The participants had to rank the e-mails for politeness on a likert scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being the most impolite one and 5 being the most polite. To help them decide, the request head acts were underlined. The e-mail with the highest score and the one with the lowest score in the perception questionnaires were identified by summing up the total number of points given to each e-mail by each of the participants.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Request analysis

A total number of 51 requests for action and 58 requests for information were identified, a finding which confirmed the initial belief that these are the main kind of requests students address to their lecturers. Overall, the results showed a preference for conventionally *indirect realizations of requests for action*, whereas *requests for information were typically realized directly*, through the use of direct questions or the imperative mood.

Regarding perspective, though the requests displayed instances of the four different categories (i.e. hearer oriented, speaker oriented, inclusive and impersonal), there was a clear tendency to use *indirect* realizations (either speaker or impersonal perspective) more frequently in both requests for action and requests for information.

The students used both internal and external modifiers in their requests, especially grounders (explanations). The most frequent internal downgrader was the politeness marker ‘please’ in both requests for action and requests for information. As for upgraders, the requests displayed some instances of time intensifiers and criticisms/complaints.

#### 4.1.1 Quantitative analysis: Strategy Type

As shown in Figure 2, most requests for action (47%) were realized through conventionally indirect strategies. This result might indicate an acknowledgement on the part of the students of the fact that requests for action may be seen as impositive by the lecturers. Furthermore, it could also be the result of transfer from Spanish, where requests realized through the use of the ability verb ‘poder’ are common among speakers with asymmetrical power relationships. In line with this idea, most requests

within this type of category (83%) showed a preference for query preparatory strategies, as illustrated by Examples 1 and 2:

(1) *‘Could you check the link or send it by e-mail as soon as you can?’*

(2) *‘Can I come to one of your tutorials to have things clarified?’*

However, suggestory formulae were also used in four cases, as shown in Example 3 below:

(3) *Perhaps you could postpone the deadline since [until] Tuesday morning, so tomorrow in the library FN<sup>4</sup> and me can search through the data base.*

The findings regarding conventionally indirect strategies were similar to Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011), who found that 43.6% of the requests for action analyzed were realized through this type of strategy. However, the Cypriot students showed a stronger preference for direct strategies, which they used in 50.58% of the requests for action, as opposed to the Spanish students, whose requests for action displayed direct realizations in 31% of the cases. However, this seems to be still a rather surprisingly high percentage for a status-unequal relationship such as the student-instructor one.

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<sup>4</sup> FN= First Name; FNLN=First Name, Last Name. All personal information has been omitted.

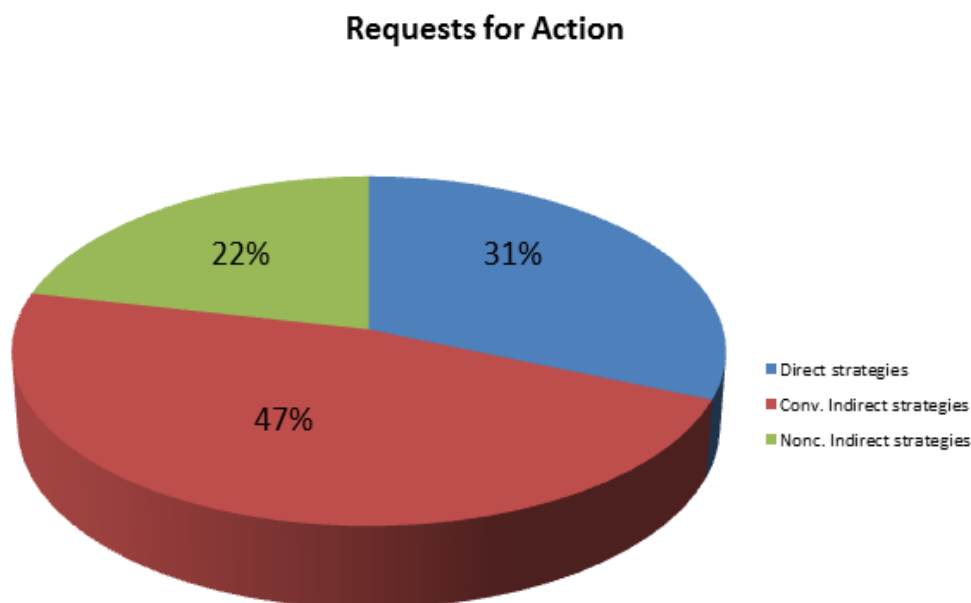


Figure 2. Request strategy type in Requests for Action

Nevertheless, it should be also noticed that half of these direct requests were realized through want statements, which are considered to be the most indirect subtype among direct strategies. Examples 4 to 6 illustrate the range of direct strategies found in requests for action:

- (4) *Please do upload exercises at least 24 hours before we are supposed to hand them in.* (mood derivable)
- (5) *I also wanted to ask for a tutorial to solve the doubts of my test.* (hedged performative)
- (6) *I would like to talk to you as soon as possible in person...*(want statement).

Regarding nonconventionally indirect strategies, only direct hints were found in the present corpus. The use of e-mail as the channel for the requests, as well as the power difference between students and lecturers could be a plausible explanation for the avoidance of mild hints. Moreover, mild hints may have hindered the clarity of the requests. Requests performed by strong hints accounted for 21% of the total requests for action. Examples of this type of realization are illustrated in (7) and (8) below:

- (7) *I have a concern. We can't open exercise 2 and 2bis...thanks...*

(8) *The link to the PWC documentation pdf is broken.*

Requests for information were mainly realized through direct strategies (67%), which might suggest some pragmatic awareness on the part of the students in that they differentiate between requests for action and requests for information. In other words, while requests for action may be perceived as more face-threatening by the lecturers, requests for information may usually be assumed as part of the students' rights in educational settings and, concurrently, teacher's professional responsibility. In fact, 75% of the requests for information realized directly displayed the most direct realization in the framework, namely mood derivable strategies. However, in 62% of the cases they were realized through interrogative direct questions, leaving only 13% in the imperative mood. Examples of requests for information where mood derivable strategies were used are (9) and (10) below:

(9) You said us in the last seminar that we can change our company and we think that we can do: Endesa, Iberdrola, Iberia or Telefonica, if any of them hadn't be choosen. *Please answer me, as soon as possible.* (mood derivable: imperative)

(10) Hello FN, i have a question, *do we have class on monday?* i mean, the 30th, thanks!

The remaining 25% of the direct requests for information were hedged performatives, which accounted for 10%, and want statements (15%). Examples 11 and 12 illustrate these subtypes of strategies:

(11) Hello FN. *I would like to ask what does a B mean?* (hedged performative)

(12) i have just seen my grade and *i would like to know my exam grade and the grade i have on the continuous evaluation.* (want statement)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Though examples (11) and (12) may seem similar, the use of 'ask' in (11) makes it a hedged performative.

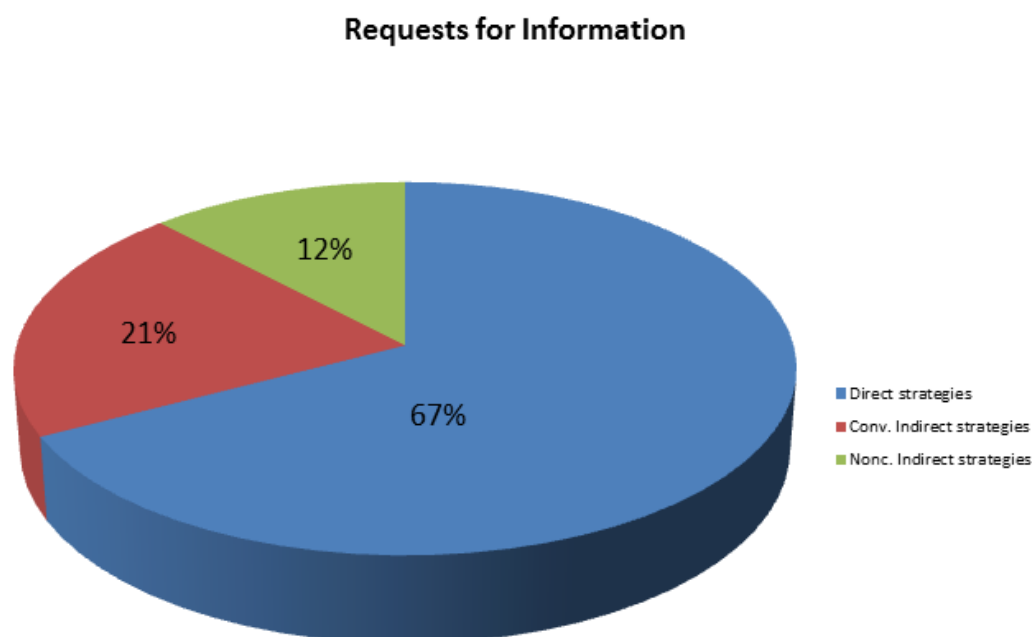


Figure 3. Request strategy types in requests for Information

Regarding conventionally indirect strategies, these accounted for 21% of the requests for information. All the instantiations of this category were of the query preparatory subtype, as illustrated by example (13) below:

(13) I am sorry, but I do not know what we are supposed to do for tomorrow, *could you please explain it to me?*

In line with the overall preference for directness in requests for information, only 12% of the requests with this goal were realized through nonconventionally indirect strategies. As in the case of requests for action, these displayed only strong hints, as in example (14):

(14) The Power Point Presentation exceeded the maximum capacity so we could not upload it on the campus. We tried to sent it by campus email but again it exceeded the maximum capacity. *We mind [might] need a email address to send it.* Sorry for the inconvenience.  
(strong hint)

Overall, it could be said that the students completed their requests for action and requests for information through the use of different realization strategies. The e-mails displayed a preference for indirectness in the former type and the preference for

directness in the latter type. Furthermore, requests for action and requests for information also differed in their direct realizations, with want statements preferred in the former category and mood derivable realizations in the latter category. This difference is illustrated in Figure 4.

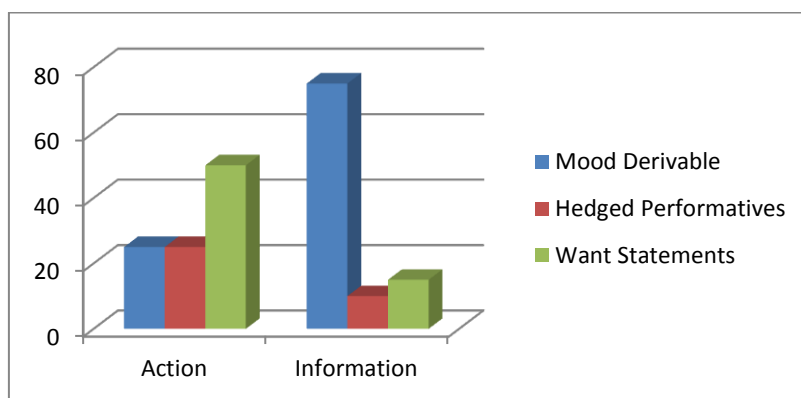


Figure 4. Realization of direct requests for action and information in percentages.

#### 4.1.2 Quantitative Analysis: Perspective

Although the requests displayed the four different categories of perspective, both requests for action and requests for information showed a tendency towards indirectness. As shown in Figure 5 below, a more direct type of perspective, namely hearer-oriented, was found in 39% of the requests for action, whereas the remaining 61% of the cases displayed more indirect types of perspective, both speaker-oriented and impersonal. This finding may point to some kind of pragmatic awareness of the students, in that they acknowledge a high degree of imposition in requests for action and therefore, a need for indirectness to soften this imposition on the lecturers.

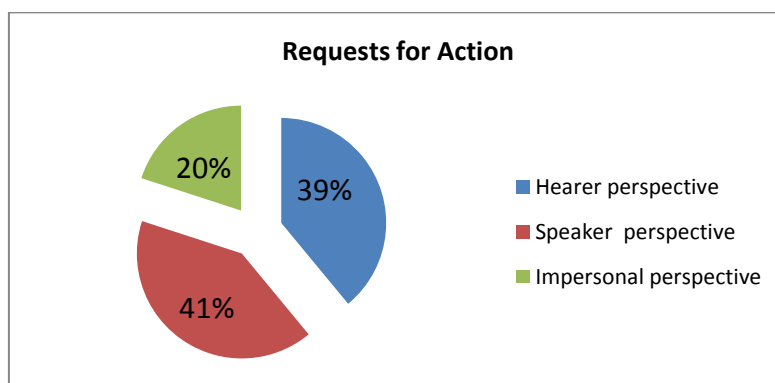


Figure 5. Perspective in Requests for Action

No instances of inclusive perspective were found in the present data. Examples of request perspective in the set of requests for action are (15), (16) and (17).

(15) *We have some problems downloading the 3rd lesson, could **you** check the link or send it by e-mail as soon as you can.* (hearer perspective)

(16) *Hello. Could **I** ask for an appointment with you tomorrow?* (speaker perspective)

(17) ***It is not possible** to open Eolo's exercise nor any other pdf you have uploaded with Just in Tune forecasts.* (Impersonal perspective)

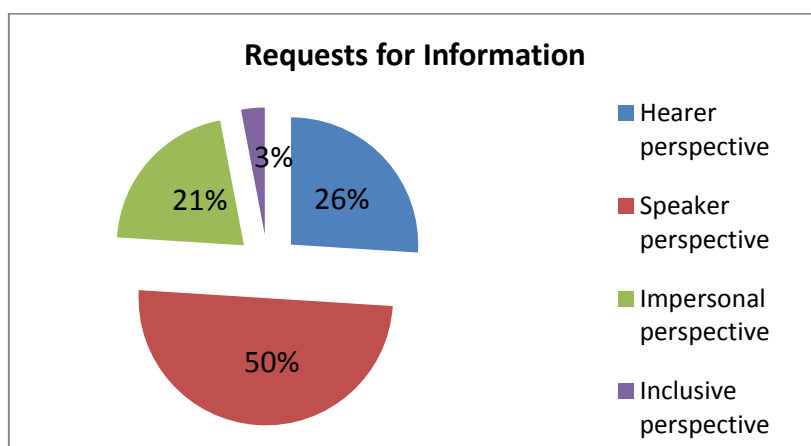


Figure 6. Perspective in Requests for Information

Surprisingly enough, the amount of perspective realizations that tended towards indirectness was even higher in requests for information, since 74% of the requests were realized through speaker, inclusive and impersonal perspective, as shown in Figure 6. Hearer perspective, (that is, the most direct type of realization) was found in only 26% of the instantiations, which seems to contradict the students' tendency towards directness showed by requests strategy types. This finding may suggest some degree of pragmatic failure in the realization of requests, since the inconsistency between request strategy type and perspective may have a confusing effect on the recipient. Examples of the different types of perspective found in requests for information are the following ones:

(18) *FN i have a doubt about [m]y final grade, could **you** please tell me if i have passed the accounting course?* (hearer perspective)

(19) ***I** would like to know if you have already uploaded our final grades.* (speaker perspective)

(20) *I have a small doubt about the exercise concerning Depreciation of Non-Current Assets expense, **shouldnt it be placed** on the debit balance being it an expense?* (impersonal perspective)

(21) *Hello FN, i have a question, do **we** have class on monday?* (inclusive perspective)

#### 4.1.3 Qualitative Analysis: Request Modification

The qualitative part of the analysis had the purpose of determining what kind of internal and external modifiers (if any) students used in order to mitigate or to aggravate their requests. Both type of requests displayed a high amount of downgraders, both internal and external, though they also displayed some instances of aggravating moves.

Quantitatively, 72% of the requests for action and 43% of the requests for information contained internal downgraders. This finding is different from previous research, which found that NNSs tend to underuse internal modification (Ford, 2003a; Biesembach-Lucas, 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2010). The different percentages again show pragmatic awareness on the part of the students in that they acknowledge a higher degree of imposition in requests for action, which they try to mitigate through internal downgraders. Furthermore, the presence of internal mitigators suggests that the students are aware of the difference in status and power between their instructors and themselves; that is, they realize that their instructors would expect highly mitigated requests from them. However, it should also be mentioned that syntactic downgraders did not display wide stylistic variety, since only two of the categories identified by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) were found in the present corpus. These were tense and conditional, as shown in examples (22) and (23):

(22) *I **wanted** to ask if I could still participate in the project.* (request for information: tense)

- (23) ...Therefore it's being impossible for us to fulfill the assignment of this seminar, and it could be really helpful if you **provided** us any kind of help like help sheets with the concept and the document of each transaction...(request for action: conditional/tense)

Among the internal lexical/phrasal downgraders, the most frequent one was the politeness marker 'please', with 14 instantiations in the set of requests for action and 8 instantiations in requests for information. Curiously enough, this marker was often followed by an imperative, a finding which is in line with Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011). Examples of the 'please+imperative' construction are (24) and (25) below:

- (24) *Please if you can postpone the exam for after the easter hollidays.* (request for action)

- (25) *please let me know as soon as possible if there is something that is not clair [clear]or that is not correctly specified.* (request for information)

Also interesting about the politeness marker 'please' was the fact that it sometimes occurred externally, rather than internally, a finding that was in line with Nashaat (2013). Furthermore, some requests displayed double instances of this politeness marker. These findings are illustrated in Examples (26) and (27)

- (26) I was just going to ask you if you could give us more time to finish the Nikea solution, until tomorrow or tonight at 12? **Please**, I was a bit slow understanding the assignment of raw materials but now I've got it! (request for action: 'please' used externally)

- (27) *I am sorry but I did not see in time that for today at 3pm there was any homework.. could you **please** give us some more time to complete the exercise **please**? I just got from my hollidays and did not revise campus virtual...* (request for action: double instance of the marker 'please')

Examples of other types of internal lexical/phrasal downgraders are summarized in Tables 9 and 10. As shown in the tables, the main difference in style between the use of lexical/phrasal downgraders in requests for action and requests for information was that requests for action displayed instances of subjectivizers, whereas requests for information contained appealers.

| Category             | Examples                                                                                                                                                                        |
|----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Consultative devices | <i>Could it be possible to have a change in the date of Interim exam II?</i>                                                                                                    |
| Downtoners           | <i>I was <u>just</u> going to ask you if you could give us more time to finish the Nikea solution, until tomorrow or tonight at 12?</i>                                         |
| Understaters         | <i>I am writting to you to ask for more exercises or exams to solve (or <u>whatever</u> you think is convenient to do), and, if it is possible, with <u>some</u> solutions!</i> |
| Subjectivizers       | <i>thanks in advance, <u>it would be nice if</u> we could hand in exercise 4bis on Wednesday</i>                                                                                |

Table 9. Types of internal lexical/phrasal downgraders in Requests for Action

| Category             | Examples                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Consultative devices | <i>FNLN does not have moodle becuse she had a problem with the matriula[...] so she asked me to sent you an email and see if you could tell me her final grade. <u>Is it possible?</u></i> |
| Downtoners           | <i>Hi, I <u>just</u> wanted to ask when the tutorial hours where, and where to go.</i>                                                                                                     |
| Understaters         | <i>The Power Point Presentation exceeded the maximum capacity so we could not upload it on the campus[...]We <u>mind [might]</u> need a email address to send it.</i>                      |
| Appealers            | <i>Also you told us to read the documentation for tomorrow, <u>am I right?</u></i>                                                                                                         |

Table 10. Types of internal lexical/phrasal downgraders in Requests for Information

In addition to downgraders, the requests displayed some instances of internal upgraders or aggravators. Internal upgraders occurred in 10% of the requests for action and 5% of the requests for information, which are relatively high results for a status-unequal relationship like the student-lecturer one. Some examples of internal upgraders are shown in (28) to (30) below:

(28) *I just saw my grade for the Tibet income statement proposal(E) and I **really** don't understand what I did wrong, and there are no comments either.* (request for information: adverbial intensifier)

(29) *You said us in the last seminar that we can change our company and we think that we can do: Endesa, Iberdrola, Iberia or Telefonica, if any of them hadn't be choosen. Please answer me, **as soon as possible**.* (request for information: time intensifier)

(30) *The file of the chapter 3 is not uploaded well, because we can't open yet and we need it to study for tomorrow, Can you upload **as soon as you can please?*** (request for action: time intensifier)

The use of these aggravating devices might indicate that the students were not completely aware of the coerciveness of their requests on the addressees. The data did not include the instructors' responses to these e-mails, which would be interesting in order to determine the perlocutionary effect of the aggravators on the addressees. To compensate for this, the perception questionnaires focused on the perlocutionary effect of the e-mails (see section 4.2 below).

Regarding external modifiers, 94% of the requests for action and 97% of the requests for information contained external downgraders. Apart from e-mail openings and closings, the most frequently used external downgraders were grounders or explanations, which were displayed by 51% of the requests for action and 22% of the requests for information. Examples (31) to (34) illustrate examples of external downgraders:

(31) *Dear FN*, (opening)

(32) *I did not realize that there were this last part until it was too late. I hope you accept it.*  
(grounder)

(33) *Thank you very much.* (thanks/pre-closing)

(34) *Kind regards.* (closing)

*FNLN*

*Attachment*

The overall results regarding external downgraders seem to suggest that NNSs tend to overuse this kind of mitigators and previous research (Ford, 2003a; Biesembach-Lucas, 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011) also supports it. However, it is quite understandable and moreover desirable that requests written via e-mail to addressees with higher power status contain features such as openings, grounders, thanks and closings. Furthermore, the present data has shown not only a high amount of external, but also of internal downgraders, which seem to show a tendency towards indirectness.

However, this tendency towards indirectness was not supported by the presence of external upgraders. Contrary to expectations, external aggravating moves were especially frequent in requests for action (22%), which doubled the number of instances in requests for information (9%). These findings outnumbered by large those of Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011), which accounted for 5% of the total number of e-mail requests she analyzed, and which according to her rendered the requests particularly coercive. Similar to her findings, however, the external upgraders in the present data consisted of criticisms/complaints and emphasis on positive outcome:

(35) *I just saw my grade for the Tibet income statement proposal(E) and I really don't understand what I did wrong, and **there are no comments either. I even calculated the unitary margin**, so I don't know what is wrong...*(request for information: criticism/complaint; emphasis on positive outcome)

(36) ***I have seen that you have not posted the solution of Bouazizi's exercise.** Could you post it as soon as possible in the campus so I can see the correct way to do it? Thank you.* (request for action: criticism/complaint)

(37) *Could you please upload the exercise made in class solved? **You told us that you will, but it is not uploaded...***(request for action: criticism/complaint)

(38) *I also send you my work at Edison's exercise attached, **very well done :D** Because the one I uploaded was very bad. **Now you can see I study at home!** **I expect a Matricula de Honor after this.*** (request for action: emphasis on positive outcome)

To sum up, the requests displayed a rather high amount of internal and external downgraders. The presence of these downgraders resulted into a desirable degree of indirectness in an unequal status relationships such as the student-lecturer one. However, the presence of internal upgraders and especially the high amount of external aggravating moves might have a negative impact on the perlocutionary effect of the e-requests. The following section of the paper further explores this idea.

## 4.2 Perception Questionnaires

The aim of the perception questionnaire was to determine the perlocutionary effect of the e-mail requests on the receivers. In other words, the purpose of the questionnaire was to analyze the relationship between the linguistic form (direct or indirect linguistic realization of the requests) and the perceived degree of politeness. For a better understanding of the results obtained from the perception questionnaires, Table 11 summarizes the structure of each e-mail request the participants had to assess. The perception questionnaire distributed amongst the informants is included in Appendix 2.

| e-mail | Structure                                                                                                                                                                             |
|--------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| a      | Greeting + self-introduction + orientation move + grounder + head act (direct: mood derivable; mitigated by marker 'please'; aggravated by time intensifier ) + thanks                |
| b      | Opening + head act (direct: hedged performative; modified by tense and conditional) + apology + grounder + apology                                                                    |
| c      | Opening + orientation move + grounder + head act (direct: want statement; modified by conditional) + thanks                                                                           |
| d      | Head act (nonconventionally indirect: strong hint) + grounder                                                                                                                         |
| e      | Greeting + self-introduction + criticism/complaint + grounder + head act (conventionally indirect: query preparatory; aggravated by time intensifier; mitigated by 'please') + thanks |

Table 11. Structure of the e-requests included in the perception questionnaire

For a clearer view of the results, the e-mails used in the questionnaire are included below:

- a) *Hello, I'm FNLN<sup>6</sup> 1F,*  
*I'm going to do the fourth seminar with FNLN and our company was Telecinco, but Telecinco has not .com website, so we can't find some points of the task. You said us in the last seminar that we can change our company and we think that we can do: Endesa, Iberdrola, Iberia or Telefonica, if any of them hadn't be choosen. **Please answer me, as soon as possible.***  
*Thank you.*
- b) *Dear FNLN, FNLN;*
- I wanted to ask if I could still participate in the project. I have missed some of the seminars and I wanted to apologize for it and ask for the opportunity to do this project because I am very interested in doing it.***  
*[...]*  
*Sorry for the inconvenience,*

<sup>6</sup> FNLN= First Name; Last Name; all personal information has been omitted.

FNLN

- c) *Dear teacher:*  
*I send you this email because I feel so worried about the final mark, I studied a lot for this subject, and i went to the tutorships clases and seminars and **i would like to see which are my errors.** Thank you a lot for your attention*
- d) ***I can not access to the solution of exercise 2 and 2 bis.***  
*"Sorry, the requested file could not be found"*
- e) *Hello, I'm FNLN of group F,*  
*The file of the chapter 3 is not uploaded well, because we can't open yet and we need it to study for tomorrow, **Can you upload as soon as you can please?***  
*Thank you.*

The analysis showed that the five lecturers from the area of linguistics differed in their perception of politeness from the five instructors of Economics and Business Administration. Out of the 77 possible points, the lecturers from the English Linguistics Department gave the highest score (23 points) to e-mail b) , whereas the lecturers from the Faculty of Economics considered e-mail c) to be the most polite one. Overall, e-mail b) and e-mail c) obtained the same score when adding the results from Linguistics and BA, namely 41 points. Table 12 below summarizes the findings.

| E-mail | English Linguistics<br>Department Participants | School of Economics and BA<br>Participants | Total     |
|--------|------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|-----------|
| a      | 11                                             | 15                                         | 26        |
| b      | <b>23</b>                                      | 18                                         | <b>41</b> |
| c      | 19                                             | <b>22</b>                                  | <b>41</b> |
| d      | 11                                             | 5                                          | 16        |
| e      | 13                                             | 17                                         | 30        |
| TOTAL  | 77                                             | 77                                         | 154       |

Table 12. Politeness scores obtained by each e-mail in the perception questionnaires

Out of the five lecturers from English Linguistics, four gave the maximum score (5 points) to e-mail b). They considered that the writer in e-mail b) ‘uses short, concise,

clear and well-structured moves...plus final apology showing concern for H's face wants'. In this line, one of the participants mentioned that 'the fact that it has been fronted also helps to understand it better'. Another participant valued 'the use of the verb "I want to" in the past tense to introduce the request' and the fact that 'the reader is positioned in a situation where the decision depends upon him/her'. This finding suggests that on the one hand, lecturers from the area of linguistics prefer clear over too indirect requests and on the other hand, that even a very direct strategy type is perceived as polite when modified by internal and external downgraders.

Lecturers from the area of Economics instead valued the opening ('Dear teacher') in e-mail c), as well as the use of the conditional 'would'. Though e-mail c) obtained the highest overall mark from the lecturers BA Department, there were also some negative comments about it. One of the participants, for example, mentioned that 'it is polite, but at the same time the student puts a little pressure over the teacher because, apparently, attending classes and seminars should be taken into account'. Furthermore, another instructor had the impression that what the student is requiring is 'the "passing" of the subject'.

The e-mail with the overall lowest score was d). Lecturers from the area of Economics felt particularly annoyed by this e-mail, which received the minimum possible amount of points (that is, 5, with 1 point assigned by each participant). The participants associated their choice to the lack of opening, thanks, politeness marker 'please' and closing. They also mentioned that the student should ask for the solution to the problem, rather than saying what the problem is. Moreover, one of the participants even pointed to the need of explicit instruction in how to write status-congruent e-mails, as the testimonial below illustrates:

‘It is very impolite! Without introducing him/herself, without explaining anything!! Here new and deep thinking should be made by the teacher to advice the students not to do this at all.’

The lecturers from the English Linguistics Department gave e-mail d) the same score as e-mail a), namely 11 points. Regarding e-mail d), they explained that it sounds too blunt and harsh. One participant pointed to the lack of hedging and to the fact that the request is too demanding and includes no thanks. However, two of the lecturers from this area assigned 3 points to this requests, explaining that ‘this sounds quite neutral to me, and could be perfectly Ok in a task-oriented context in which effectiveness is primed’ and that, because it is presented in an implied way, ‘the imposition of ‘cost of the (implied) action’’ on the reader’s part is minimized’.

Though the analysis showed different perceptions of politeness among lecturers from the area of Linguistics and lecturers from the area of Economics, it could be said that, overall, there were certain common preferences the participants pointed at. Firstly, direct realizations of request strategy types are preferred over more indirect ones, for the sake of clarity. Secondly, requestive hints (even strong ones) did not seem to be considered appropriate for the academic setting. Thirdly, tutors from both areas valued positively request modification strategies, both internal (such as the use of the conditional or the marker ‘please’) and external (e.g. openings, thanks and apologies when necessary). Lastly, it was quite surprising that a lecturer from the area of Economics (who also happened to be one of the original receivers of the e-mails) actually called for explicit instruction in pragmatics, more specifically, e-mail pragmatics for BA and Economics students enrolled in the bilingual degree.

## **5. Conclusion, suggestions for further research and pedagogical implications**

Due to their somewhat inherent face-threatening nature, their frequency in daily communication and the politeness markers they tend to contain, requests attract substantial attention in the research and the literature (Ballesteros, 2001; Alcon-Soler et al., 2005; Woodfield and Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2010; Puustinen et al., 2010; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2008; 2011). Requests are ‘very common in classroom discourse and provide, therefore, rich opportunities for exploring how teachers and students manage interaction’ (Dalton-Puffer and Nikula, 2006:242). Student-lecturer requests are a complicated issue for students enrolled in bilingual programs, since they usually do not receive instruction in the pragmatics of the target language, nor have full pragmatic competence. Nowadays, many of these requests are made via e-mail.

Though some studies have addressed the issue of student-instructor requests by e-mail in second language settings (e.g. Chen, 2006; Biesembach-Lucas, 2007), only one study, to our knowledge, has focused on requests in a university EFL setting where English is the medium of instruction (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). Hitherto, however, no study has been conducted on student-lecturer e-requests in a Spanish academic setting. In view of this need, this paper has aimed at contributing to the research in the field, by analyzing e-mail requests produced by second-year Spanish Economics and BA students enrolled in a bilingual degree at the Complutense University of Madrid. More specifically, this study has dealt with request realization patterns and lecturers’ perception of these requests.

Drawing on Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) and Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011), this study has shown that requests for action and requests for information in the present data were realized linguistically through different strategy types. Overall, the results showed

a preference for *conventionally indirect strategies* in requests for action and for *direct strategies* in requests for information. Regarding perspective, both requests for action and requests for information showed a preference for indirectness (*speaker-oriented* and *impersonal* perspective). Students used both internal and external modifiers in their requests. Internal mitigators were displayed more frequently in requests for action than in requests for information, the most frequent one being the politeness marker '*please*'. As for external downgraders, apart from e-mail *openings* and *closings*, the most frequent ones were *grounders* (or explanations). Overall, these findings seem to suggest that the students were aware of the higher degree of imposition in requests for action, as compared to requests for information. Furthermore, the findings also seem to point to the fact that students were aware of the differences in status and power between themselves and their lecturers and that therefore their instructors would expect from them highly mitigated requests. However, the analysis also showed that the requests displayed some instances of internal and external upgraders, such as *time intensifiers* and *criticisms/complaints*.

The perlocutionary effect of the requests on the receivers of the e-mails was analyzed in the second part of the study. This part consisted of a perception questionnaire distributed among lecturers from the English Linguistics Department and the School of Economics and BA. The participants were asked to rank for politeness five of the most prototypical e-mail requests in the corpus. Contrary to expectations, the overall results showed that the lecturers from the English Linguistics Department favored clarity over indirectness and that the lecturers from the School of Economics and BA paid special attention to request modifiers when evaluating the e-mails. Moreover, the Economics and BA instructors felt particularly annoyed by one of the e-mails in the questionnaire that lacked mitigation devices.

The results of the perception questionnaires pointed out to the need of looking at these requests from both the perspective of the language teachers and the perspective of the content teachers. Though English in university settings seems to be moving towards a lingua franca (Seidlhofer, 2004) in which fluent communication rather than accuracy seems to be the focus, the results of this study tend to suggest that content teachers also focus on the pragmatics of the e-mails they receive from their students. Moreover, one of the participants in the questionnaires from the Economics and BA School even suggested that students would benefit from explicit instruction in e-mail pragmatics.

The present paper had several limitations that do not allow for generalizations. Firstly, the data regarding both the e-mails and, especially, the questionnaires was rather reduced – a fact that further research will try to solve. Secondly, it focused on only one specific context, namely the bilingual groups of first and second year students from the School of Economics and BA. Thirdly, the number of addressees of the requests was restrained to only two. Generally speaking, it is believed that future research would benefit from a combination of linguistic analysis and classroom observation, which was not possible in the present study due to time limitations. Moreover, a replication of Ford's (2003b) study would also be desirable, in order to find out whether results obtained after explicit instruction in e-mail pragmatics are different from the ones obtained in this study, whose participants had not received any previous instruction in English pragmatics.

Regarding pedagogical implications, the limitations of the paper only allow for some suggestions. As shown by the presence of aggravators in the e-mails and by the perception questionnaires, students would clearly benefit from explicit instruction in English pragmatics. It would possibly be helpful for these students to have specific English for Academic Purposes or English for Specific Purposes courses that would

make some room for the teaching of e-mail pragmatic competence, apart from the conventional subject disciplinary vocabulary. Some researchers have already designed classroom tasks that could improve English learners' pragmatic competence regarding requests (see Martínez-Flor, 2008; Usó-Juan, 2010). Usó-Juan (2010), for example, designed a five-step instructional method consisting of learners' L1 exploration, learners' L2 exploration, learners' recognition, learners' production and learners' feedback. The activities she proposed included exposure to input, awareness-raising questions and opportunities for practice. They were also meant to improve the students' use and variety of *request mitigators*, which were found to play a fundamental role in the perception questionnaire of the present study.

Furthermore, students' pragmatic competence in the target language could benefit from the use of the forum application of the virtual learning platform. As shown by Maíz-Arévalo (2013), when students carry out collaborative tasks through the virtual learning platform forum, they are constantly involved in the negotiation of meaning. The communication with peers in the target language would also expose them to a different status relationship than the student-teacher one, namely an equal status rapport. This type of activities could help them raise their pragmatic awareness and improve their pragmatics of the target language. Furthermore, Maíz-Arévalo (2013) showed that the pragmatic competence of the students in her study improved regardless of their level of language proficiency and therefore all the students would benefit from these activities.

Apart from instruction in the pragmatics of the foreign language, students would also benefit from instruction in the *e-mail genre*, since they might not be used to writing formal e-mails, especially in a foreign language. Both instruction in English pragmatics

and e-mail pragmatics might not only be beneficial for the students in the academic contexts, but also for their future as business professionals.

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## **Appendix 1. Data (I): e-mails**

\* see printed version

## Appendix 2. Data (II): Sample Questionnaire

Subject: \_\_\_\_\_

This questionnaire is part of a **research study on the pragmatic competence in English** of first and second year Spanish university students of Economics and Business Administration, in a context where English is the medium of instruction. The study aims at **inquiring into the linguistic strategies used by the students to formulate requests to their course instructors through electronic mail**. For this questionnaire, five of the most representative examples of requests produced by the students have been chosen. The texts have not been edited and the students' original language has been respected.

*Task: Please **rank in order the following requests from 1 to 5 in terms of politeness** (1=the least polite, the one you would be more upset by; 5=the most polite, the one you would be more willing to receive) and briefly explain your choice. To help you decide, the request head acts (the parts of the e-mails where the request are actually formulated) are **in bold**. You could base your choice on the presence/absence of politeness markers such as 'please' or 'thank you', on the degree of imposition/appropriateness of the requests or any other features that you consider to be related to politeness.*

- a) Hello, I'm FNLN<sup>7</sup> 1F,  
I'm going to do the fourth seminar with FNLN and our company was Telecinco, but Telecinco has not .com website, so we can't find some points of the task. You said us in the last seminar that we can change our company and we think that we can do: Endesa, Iberdrola, Iberia or Telefonica, if any of them hadn't be choosen. **Please answer me, as soon as possible.**  
Thank you.

Score: \_\_\_\_\_ Comment: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- b) Dear FNLN, FNLN;

**I wanted to ask if I could still participate in the project.** I have missed some of the seminars and I wanted to apologize for it and ask for the opportunity to do this project because I am very interested in doing it.

[...]

Sorry for the inconvenience,

FNLN

Score: \_\_\_\_\_ Comment: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

---

<sup>7</sup> FNLN= First Name; Last Name; all personal information has been omitted.

c) Dear teacher:

I send you this email because I feel so worried about the final mark, I studied a lot for this subject, and i went to the tutorships clases and seminars and **i would like to see which are my errors**. Thank you a lot for your attention

Score: \_\_\_\_\_ Comment: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

d) **I can not access to the solution of exercise 2 and 2 bis.**

"Sorry, the requested file could not be found"

Score: \_\_\_\_\_ Comment: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

e) Hello, I'm FNLN of group F,

The file of the chapter 3 is not uploaded well, because we can't open yet and we need it to study for tomorrow, **Can you upload as soon as you can please?**

Thank you.

Score: \_\_\_\_\_ Comment: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*Thank you very much for your collaboration!*

