

# Analysis of Academic Email Requests Written by Tunisian Postgraduate Students

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## Abstract

This study analyses how requests are written by a group of Tunisian postgraduate students to their professor via emails. The aim of the present study is to examine the email requests in terms of the degree of directness employed and seeks to find out whether the directness level of Tunisian postgraduate students e-requests varies with increasing the imposition of requests. Results prove the reliance of Tunisian postgraduate students on direct strategies when requesting their professor. This is manifested in the preference for direct questions and mood derivables in requests for information and expectation want and need statements for requests for action. The findings also reveal no significant differences between requests for information and requests for action concerning direct strategies and conventionally indirect requests. However, a significantly higher number of hints was found in non-conventionally indirect requests for requests for action. Tunisian postgraduate students realized their requests for information and requests for action with different request realizations, but they displayed a preference for directness in both types of requests. The preference for direct requests strategies may enhance a negative effect on their evaluation by their recipient. This suggests that Tunisian postgraduate students have not acquired enough pragmalinguistic and sociolinguistic knowledge to request appropriately socially superior persons. Accordingly, this study suggests some pedagogical implications and suggestions for Tunisian EFL (English as a Foreign Language) instructors. Henceforth, Tunisian teachers and syllabus designers should devote more attention to developing Tunisian EFL learners' pragmatic competence through teaching L2 pragmatics.

**Keywords:** e-requests, politeness, directness, ranking of imposition.

## 1. Introduction

Lan (2000) notes that email (electronic mail) has become a tool of mass global communication with the advantages of simplicity and flexibility. Indeed, a massive amount of email messages is sent out every day around the world (ibid). As far as the academic setting is concerned, although most student-professor interaction occurs during office hours, in class, before and after class, and perhaps on the phone, email has become a viable alternative means of communication, providing the convenience of obtaining clarification, feedback, and permission almost instantly when students need it (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007). Therefore, email is becoming an accepted means of communication between university students and their professors (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007). As a matter of fact, the use of emails has become a necessary part of students' academic interaction, becoming more common than the student-teacher office hour meeting (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006, p.81).

Though email has become a common interpersonal communication medium, it does not mean that this medium is used without difficulty. While there is a growing feeling that many people indeed live in a web world (Haythornthwaite and Hagar, 2005) and are perhaps becoming digital natives, these technological abilities do not seem to translate to academic emails (Prensky, 2001, 2009). Both NS and NNS are often faced with uncertainties regarding the style and politeness strategies in email interaction (Crystal, 2001; Barron, 2000, 2002, 2003; Biesenbach Lucas, 2006) especially in hierarchical relationships where the power asymmetry needs to be maintained. This is particularly the case in student-faculty email interaction (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). While people can write emails to peers in any manner they like, writing emails to authority figures requires high pragmatic competence and critical language awareness of how discourse shapes and reflects power asymmetry in an institutional context (Chen, 2006). Email writers' ambivalence and uncertainty about how to encode communicative intent in this text-only medium tend to surface especially in hierarchical relationships and in situations involving impositions on the addressee (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007).

In fact, one of the main functions of student-to-teacher email is requests, asking for help or information (Bloch, 2002; Martin et al., 1999). Request according to Byon (2004), is "a directive that embodies an effort on the part of the speaker to get the hearer to do something" (p. 1674). Making e-requests in a foreign language is face threatening because it requires considerable cultural and linguistic expertise on the part of the speaker (Yang, 2009). Inappropriate request strategies can easily cause communication breakdowns. Therefore, in order to have a successful communication the speaker should be aware of some variables namely social power, degree of familiarity and ranking of imposition regarding requests. When NNS make requests in the target culture, despite their grammatical knowledge of that language, they may transfer their native request strategies into the target language and this may result in the production of inappropriate requests (Koike, 1989).

The purpose of the present study is to address the void in the literature since few studies (Hardford and

Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Biesenbach-Lucas and Weasenforth, 2000; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2007; Chen, 2001, 2006; Bloch, 2002; Hendriks, 2010; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011) tackled the issue of examining academic email requests, due to the email's relative newness in the academic sphere. Furthermore, to the researcher's knowledge, there is no study that tackled this issue in the Tunisian context. Hence, the present study attempts to fill in the gap in the literature.

## 2. Method

The corpus of the present study consists of 182 emails written by Tunisian postgraduate students enrolled in several institutions in Tunisia to their professor. The emails were sent between the years 2010-2012. The data were collected from the inbox of the researcher's supervisor. The emails were naturally or spontaneously generated, that is, they are naturally occurring discourse as opposed to elicited discursive data. In most studies on requests, data was collected primarily through either DCTs or oral role-plays. However, only few studies have focused on authentic emails encoding requests addressed by students to faculty (Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Chen, 2001; Lee, 2004; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). This approach was also adopted by Chen (2015) who affirms that this type of data is representational real-life data.

For ethical considerations, the participants were contacted via emails and granted permission for use of data for research purposes. They were informed that their emails would be kept confidential and no personal information would be revealed. The gathered emails are student-initiated interactions, which await a response. However, given the asynchronous character of CMC, all emails constitute apparently complete interactions in the sense that they often contain moves such as initial greetings or final farewells (Bou-Franch, 2006). Then, emails were coded according to their communicative purpose. Only emails that contain request(s) are selected. The first number of the gathered emails was 250 but after selecting only e-requests, it became 182. Thus, all emails contained requests and expected an answer. The emails contain a total number of 371 requests, since in some cases, one email contained several requests.

## 3. Participants

The writers of the emails are 81 Tunisian postgraduate students of English, 67 of whom are female and 14 are male. While it is important to keep in mind that there may be gender preferences concerning the realization of requests (cf. Kouletaki, 2005), this factor is not considered in this study due to feasibility concerns. The participants' mean age is 30.5. Their first language is Arabic. All of these students knew the professor personally. They are enrolled in postgraduate programs. The participants are supposed to be advanced at the level of language proficiency because all of them had studied English for at least 3 years in BA (Bachelor of Art) before enrolling in postgraduate programs. Therefore, they are considered competent enough to write an email of this type without any need for further proficiency level inquiry. The following table summarizes the information related to the description of the participants.

**Table 1: Description of the participants**

<b>Group</b>	81 Tunisian postgraduate students
<b>First language</b>	Tunisian Arabic
<b>Mean age</b>	30.5
<b>Level of education</b>	MA, PhD and aggregation students of English
<b>Gender</b>	Male: 14 Female: 67

The receiver of the emails is a male professor aged over 50. The students-professor relationship in this context could be described as friendly but formal and the postgraduate students are expected to show respect to their professor (as explained through personal communications with the professor).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Analysis of requests' head acts

Through analyzing the requests gathered from the corpus, the aim is to identify the most frequent request strategies used by Tunisian postgraduate students when addressing their professor. Request sequences are divided into request strategies, i.e. the move that most clearly conveys the request proper and request support, i.e. the move(s) that prepare(s) the ground for the request, or mitigate its impact, etc. (Bou Franch, 2006). The current study focuses only on the participants' preferences for the realizations of the head act of requests in terms of the degree of directness. The head act is the part of the request that realizes the act independently of the other elements such as external and internal modifications (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989).

To determine the degree of directness, the researcher used a modified version of request strategies that was proposed initially by Blum-Kulka et al., (1989) and revised by Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) and Felix-Brasdefer

(2012a) to deal with email requests. To identify the type and the frequency of requestive head acts used by Tunisian postgraduate students, the data was analyzed, and the frequency of occurrence and percentage of each type of strategy were calculated.

A total of 371 requests were elicited from the corpus. Three kinds of head act realizations were found: direct, conventionally indirect, and non-conventionally indirect. Thus, there is a variation in the use of requestive strategies on the part of Tunisian postgraduate students of English.

Within direct strategies, the following types were identified: mood derivable (imperatives), performatives, want statements, need statements, direct questions, like/appreciate statements and expectation statements. The coding of data shows that direct request strategies has the highest frequency of use (73.85%). The most favored direct strategy is expectation statements accounting for 16.98% followed by mood derivables accounting for 14.55% and then followed by direct questions (12.66%) and like/appreciate statements (8.62%). The findings have shown that the subjects prefer to resort to more direct strategies when addressing their professor. These results are in line with recent research on student-faculty email communication (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Felix-Brasdefer 2012a), which report a high frequency of direct requests used by NNSs when writing a request to their professors. The preference of directness may be considered as an instance of solidarity politeness or positive politeness strategies, in that it expresses camaraderie. This finding is in accordance with Najeeb et al., (2012) who reported that the majority of Arab nonnative speakers used positive politeness strategies in their requests when emailing their supervisors.

As it is noticed from results, the subjects choose to opt for need and want statements accounting for more than 14%. The choice of using these strategies to convey a “help-needed” tone may help the participants to gain some attention from their addressee. However, as maintained by Chen (2006), this strategic choice is likely to cause two pragmatic problems from the addressee’s perspective. These problems are first the appearance of the student as a needy and helpless student, which is quite the opposite from the expected impression that a graduate student should show such as being independent and self-confident (ibid). Second, when expressing their own needs or wants, the postgraduate students may stress their rights and give no options to their professor other than accepting to do their requests (ibid).

As for conventionally indirect strategies (conventionalized utterances that contained references to ability, willingness, or possibility), all requests realizations at this level of directness belong to the so-called query preparatory conditionals. They refer to the ability or willingness to perform the speech act (Blum- Kulka et al., 1989, p. 18) and mostly take the form of an interrogative construction containing the modal verb ‘can’ (Searle, 1975). Corpus results reveal that the sub-strategy having the highest frequency vis-à-vis all strategies is query preparatory with a percentage of 21.56%. Conventional indirect requests were generally realized by question forms, and the modals used are those that manifest ability (can/could), willingness (will/would), and mind (would you mind). The preference for this strategy could be explained by the fact that it would be better to give the professor a wide range of options to do or not to do the request rather than imposing on him doing it through direct strategies. By using conventionally indirect strategies, the participants try to show a high degree of politeness in order to minimize or soften the impact of request on the professor and to protect their face and the addressee’s face. The requesters try to remove themselves from any imposition and show respect to the requestee. It is clear from the findings that “can/could” was the prominent modal used to make requests. This indicates that Tunisian postgraduates have acquired the basic principles in making requests in English.

The employment of non-conventionally indirect strategies (i.e., hints) was extremely low (4.58%). In line with Biesenbach-Lucas (2007), one reason that may be behind the non-use of hints is that the participants do not know how to produce situation-appropriate hints. This shows that Tunisian postgraduate students have not acquired enough pragmalinguistic knowledge. Another reason is that non-conventional indirect request may not secure uptake, so hints may not be successful in conveying the speaker’s intention.

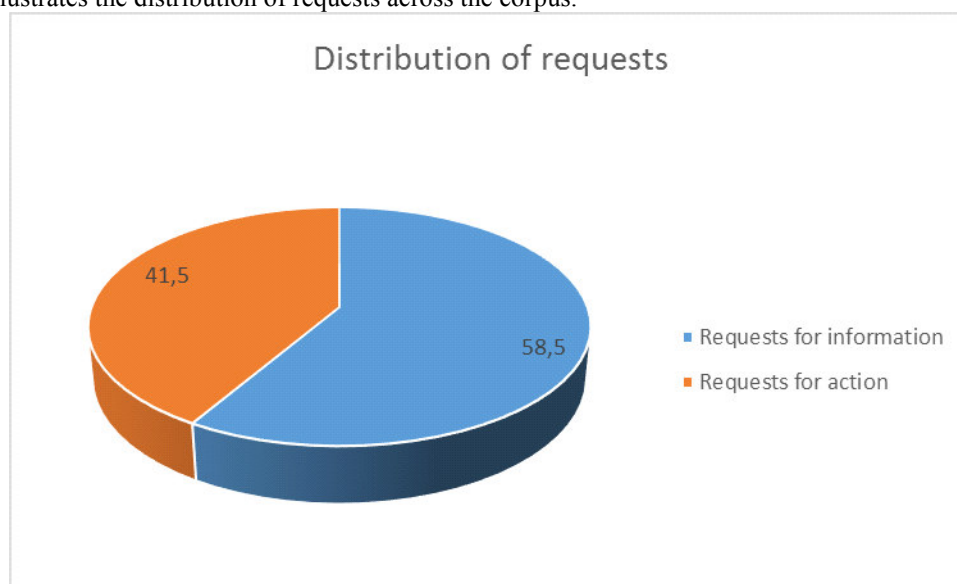
In sum, an overall view of the request data made available by the subjects revealed that direct requests was the strategy widely chosen by the participants. The findings revealed that the most frequently used direct sub-strategy is expectation statements followed by mood-derivables and direct questions.

**Table 2: Type of Strategies and degree of Requestive Directness: General Results (N:371)**

Strategy		Number of occurrence	Percentage (%)	
<b>Direct</b>	<b>Mood derivables (imperatives)</b>	54/371	14.55	73.85
	<b>Performatives</b>	26/371	7.00	
	<b>Want statements</b>	21/371	5.66	
	<b>Need statements</b>	31/371	8.35	
	<b>Direct questions</b>	47/371	12.66	
	<b>like/appreciate statements</b>	32/371	8.62	
	<b>expectation statements</b>	63/371	16.68	
<b>Conventionally indirect</b>	<b>Query preparatory</b>	80/371	21.56	21.56
<b>Non-conventionally indirect</b>	<b>Hints</b>	17/371	4.58	4.58

#### 4.2. Analysis of head acts in requests for information and requests for action

Another aim of requests analysis is to find out whether the directness level of Tunisian postgraduate students email requests varies with increasing the imposition of requests. According to Sifianou (1992, pp. 121-122), requests can be categorized into requests for information, and requests for action. Sifianou (1992) states that requests for action involve a higher degree of imposition than the first category. The gathered requests from the corpus were classified into requests for action and requests for information following the typology of Sifianou (1992). It is found that the 371 requests are made up of 217 requests for information and 154 requests for action. Thus, 58.5% of requests are requests for information while 41.5% of them are requests for action. The following pie chart illustrates the distribution of requests across the corpus.

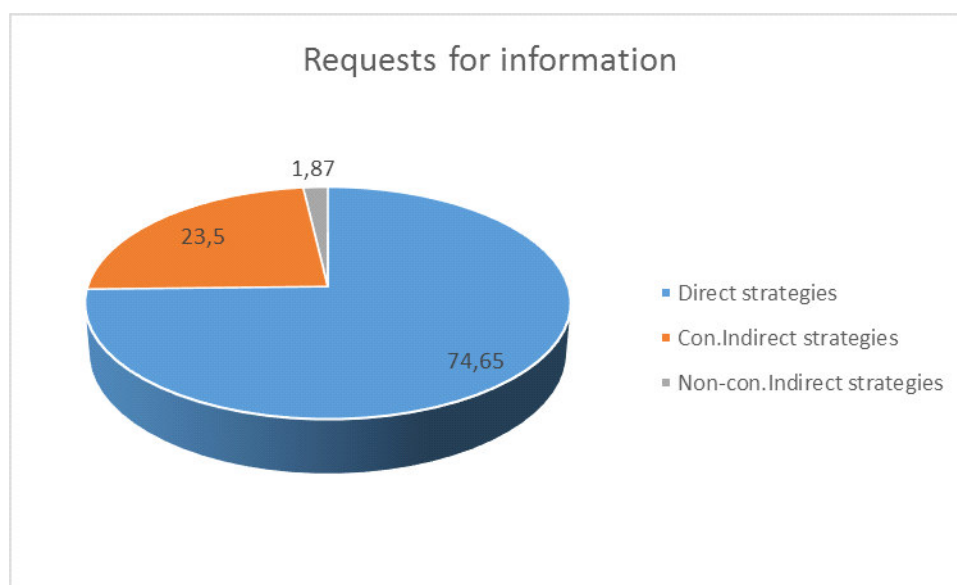


**Figure 1: Distribution of requests according to their types across the corpus**

Both email requests for information and requests for action were analyzed according to the coding scheme proposed initially by Blum-Kulka et al., (1989) and revised later by Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) and Felix-Brasdefer (2012a) as it was done for the overall requests. As far as requests for information were concerned, the participants resorted to direct strategies in the great majority of the English email requests for information. Results reveal that 74.65% of the requests for information are direct whereas 23.5% of them are conventionally indirect and only 1.84% are non-conventionally indirect. The most used direct strategies used in requests for information are direct questions accounting for 21.65% followed by mood derivables (13.82%) and performatives (10.59%) (See table 3 and figure 2).

**Table 3: Type of strategies and degree of requestive directness: requests for information (N: 217)**

Request for information (217)				
Strategy		Number of occurrence	Percentage (%)	
Direct	Mood derivables (imperatives)	30/217	13.82	74.65
	Performatives	23/217	10.59	
	Want statements	16/217	7.37	
	Need statements	12/217	5.52	
	Direct questions	47/217	21.65	
	like/appreciate statements	15/217	6.91	
	expectation statements	19/217	8.75	
Conventionally indirect	Query preparatory	51/217	23.50	23.50
Non conventionally indirect	Hints	4/217	1.84	1.84



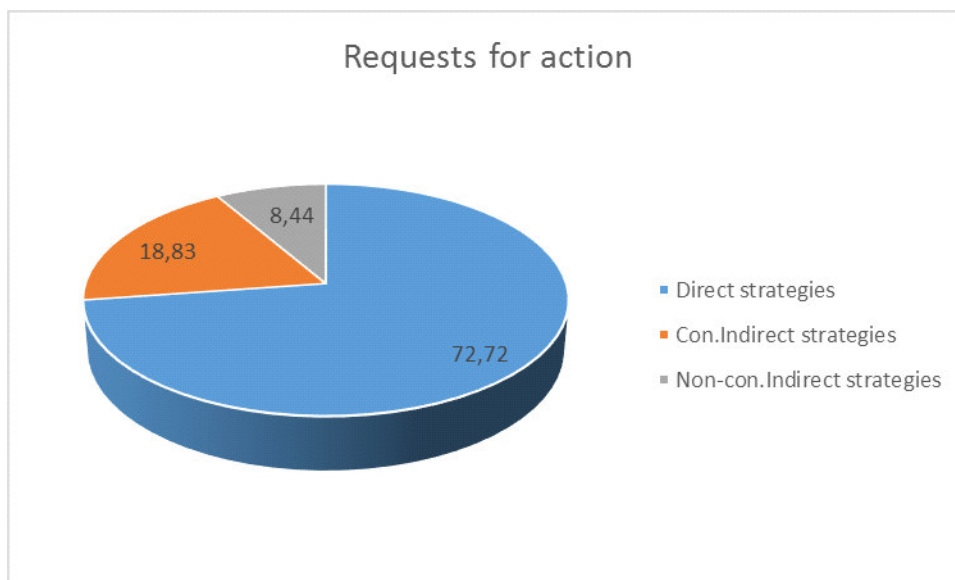
**Figure 2: Request strategy types in requests for information**

Similar to the results of requests for information, the analysis of requests for action shows a tendency on the part of the participants to use direct strategies with a percentage of 72.72%. The most direct sub-strategies are expectation statements accounting for 28.57% followed by mood derivables accounting for 15.58% and need statements accounting for 12.33%. On the other hand, conventionally indirect requests were used with a percentage of 18.83% and 8.44% of the requests for action are identified as non-conventionally indirect as it is shown in table 4 and figure 3.

**Table 4: Type of strategies and degree of requestive directness: requests for action (N: 154)**

Request for action (154)				
Strategy		Number of occurrence	Percentage (%)	
Direct	Mood derivables (imperatives)	24/154	15.58	72.72
	Performatives	3/154	1.94	
	Want statements	5/154	3.24	
	Need statements	19/154	12.33	
	Direct questions	0/154	0	
	like/appreciate statements	17/154	11.03	
	expectation statements	44/154	28.57	
Conventionally indirect	Query preparatory	29/154	18.83	18.83
Non conventionally indirect	Hints	13/154	8.44	8.44





**Figure 3: Request strategy types in requests for action**

The general results indicated that the number of direct strategies and indirect strategies in the participants' English email requests for action and requests for information were to some extent similar, and there was an overall preference on the part of the participants for directness. As it is attested from the results, 74.65% of the requests for information are direct as opposed to 72.72% for requests for action. On the other hand, 23.5% of the requests for information are conventionally indirect compared to 18.83% of the requests for action. As far as non-conventionally indirect requests are concerned, it is found that 1.84% of requests for information and 8.44% of request for action are hints. Chi-square tests of Independence, being suitable for nominal data, were conducted in order to check whether there were significant differences between the directness employed in students' email requests for action and requests for information main strategies. The Chi-square results reveal no significant differences between requests for information and requests for action concerning direct strategies ( $X^2=0.173$ ,  $df=1$ ;  $P=0.677$ ) and conventionally indirect requests ( $X^2=1.162$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $P=0.283$ ). On the other hand, a significantly higher number of hints was found in non-conventionally indirect requests for requests for action ( $X^2=9.03$ ;  $df=1$ ;  $P=0.0027$ ).

**Table 5: Degree of directness for requests for information and requests for action (main strategies and their Chi- square results)**

	Most direct strategies	Conventionally indirect	Non-conventionally indirect
Requests for information	162/217 74.65%	51/217 23.50%	4/217 1.84%
Requests for action	112/154 72.72%	29/154 18.83%	13/154 8.44%
Chi-square test results	$X^2=0.173$ $df=1$ $P=0.677$	$X^2=1.162$ $df=1$ $P=0.283$	$X^2=9.03$ $df=1$ $P=0.0027$

As for requests for information, the statistical results indicated that students employed a significantly higher number of performatives ( $X^2=10.34$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p=0.0013$ ) and also a significantly higher number of direct questions ( $X^2 = 38.19$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p=0.0001$ ). On the other hand, the statistical results indicated that students employed a significantly higher number of expectation statements ( $X^2 = 25.09$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p=0.0001$ ) and also a significantly higher number of hints ( $X^2 = 8.906$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p=0.0028$ ) in their requests for action. These differences were significant at a  $p < 0.01$  level. Direct requests for information were mainly realized through direct questions (21.65%) and performatives (10.59%) while no case of request for action is realized through direct questions. Instead, requests for action are realized through expectation statements (28.57%) and it displays a significantly higher number of hints (8.44%). This might suggest some pragmatic awareness on the part of the participants in that they differentiate between requests for action and requests for information. In other words, while request for action may be perceived as more face threatening by the professor, requests for information may usually be assumed as part of the students' rights in educational settings, and concurrently, teacher's professional responsibility. As a matter of fact, the participants resort to expectation statements (28.57%) instead of direct questions to express direct requests for action. Overall, it could be said that Tunisian postgraduate students

realized their requests for information and requests for action with different request realizations, but they displayed a preference for directness in the two types of requests. Furthermore, requests for information and requests for action differed in their direct realizations with direct questions preferred in the former category and expectations statements preferred in the latter one. The findings revealed that Tunisian postgraduate students resorted largely to direct strategies (rather than conventional indirectness) both in the case of requests for action and for information, with direct questions, mood derivables and expectation statements as the most preferred substrategies. This result is in line with Biesenbach-Lucas (2002, 2004), Biesenbach-Lucas and Weasenforth (2000), Chen (2006) and Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) who similarly found that their NNSs tended to also favor direct strategies.

**Table 6.: Degree of directness for requests for information and requests for action (sub-strategies and their Chi-square results)**

Natural requests	Mood derivables	Performatives	Want statements	Need statements	Direct questions	Like/ appreciation statements	Expectation statements	Query preparatory	Hints
Requests for information	30/217 13.82%	23/217 10.59%	16/217 7.37%	12/217 5.52%	47/217 21.65%	15/217 6.91%	19/217 8.75%	51/217 23.50%	4/217 1.84%
Requests for action	24/154 15.58%	3/154 1.94%	5/154 3.24%	9/154 12.33%	0/154 0%	7/154 11.03%	44/154 28.57%	29/154 18.83%	13/154 8.44%
Chi-square test results	X <sup>2</sup> = 0.224, df=1, p=0.635,NS	X <sup>2</sup> = 10.34 ,df=1, <b>p=0.0013</b>	X <sup>2</sup> =2.872, df=1, p=0.09,NS	X <sup>2</sup> = 0.016, df=1, p=0.897,NS	X <sup>2</sup> = 38.19, df=1, <b>p=0.0001</b>	X <sup>2</sup> = 0.904, df=1, p=0.341,NS	X <sup>2</sup> = 25.09, df=1, <b>p=0.0001</b>	X <sup>2</sup> = 1.169, df=1, p=0.281,NS	X <sup>2</sup> = 8.906, df=1, <b>p=0.0028</b>

## 5. Discussion and summary

The analysis of the e-requests elicited from the corpus under scrutiny revealed that three kinds of head act realizations were found : direct, conventionally indirect, and non-conventionally indirect. Within direct strategies, the following types were identified: mood derivables (imperatives), performatives, want statements, need statements, direct questions, like/appreciate statements and expectation statements. Thus, there is a variation in the use of requestive strategies on the part of Tunisian postgraduate students of English.

The findings teased out that direct request strategies have the highest frequency of use (73.85%). The findings have shown that the subjects prefer to resort to much more direct strategies when addressing their professor. These results are in line with recent research on student-faculty email communication (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011 ; Felix-Brasdefer, 2012a, Najeeb et al., 2012), which report a high frequency of direct requests used by NNSs when writing a request to their professors.

The preference for directness may be considered as an instance of solidarity politeness or positive politeness strategies, in that it expresses closeness. It can also be considered as an evidence of transferring Tunisian cultural norms since it is the expected behavior in the Tunisian context when requesting a higher-ranking subject. However, such direct e-requests can be perceived as impolite and discourteous, and therefore capable of causing pragmatic failure. This is primarily due to the fact that the participants may appear to give the professor no options other than accepting to do their requests.

It is also noticed from the findings that the subjects choose need and want statements. The choice of using these strategies to convey a “help-needed” tone may help the participants to gain some attention from their addressee. The present study is in line with previous studies on L2 students’ email requests to professors (Biesenbach-Lucas and Weasenforth, 2000; Chang and Hsu, 1998; Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig, 1996) and FtF talk (Gee, 2002) which have also found that many L2 students made requests with this tone (cited in Chen, 2006).

However, Chen (2006) explains that the frequent use of want statements along with the word "help" by a student is likely to project a negative image as a needy and helpless student, which is quite the opposite from the attitudes such as independence, and confidence that a graduate student is expected to demonstrate. Gee (2002) particularly notes that the word "help" indicates a situated meaning of "charitable assistance" and the word "need" implies the student's neediness and inadequate ability, which projects the student as "a needy, problem-plagued suppliant" (p. 168). He suggests that students ask for "professional guidance" and "supplemented aid" from professors while showing their competence to do things well at a promising level (p. 169). Another problem posed by Chen (2006) is that the use of unmitigated want statements by students suggested a coercive tone, thus failing to show status-appropriate politeness in student-professor communication. In her study, Murphy (2006) notes that direct requests made via email were seen as impolite by their receivers. Whenever the request is worded too directly, the addressee may feel his/her autonomy has been imposed upon and thus feel annoyed (ibid). Indeed, a request needs to be worded in such a way that the receiver feels that his/her rights have been fairly treated and adequately addressed (ibid). Direct requests can threaten relationships since they may

affect the addressee's autonomy, freedom of choice and freedom from imposition (Brown and Levinson, 1987 ; Spencer-Oatey, 2000b). In line with Chen (2006), using direct request strategies could put students out of status in asymmetrical communication. Indeed, requests are inherently face-threatening acts to both the requester and requestee as it is attested in the literature. As a matter of fact, they require more indirect language structures and politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson, 1987). In such interactions, it is expected that the participants opt for the principles of deference politeness or negative politeness proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987).

Thus, Tunisian postgraduate students might use more indirect requests when addressing their professor to show an inclination on their part for non-imposition or not assuming that their request will be automatically carried out. When using conventional indirect request strategies, Tunisian postgraduate students would give their professor the option to choose whether to carry out the request or not, which is the case of negative politeness strategies. Giving options in requests is a principle of politeness in English (Lakoff, 1989, 1990) as it shows consideration for the hearer and also gives him/her a face-saving line of escape (Lakoff, 1989, 1990). These devices act as distancing mechanisms that mitigate and hedge the request.

Hence, for the speech act of request, indirect language style is preferable. Thus, it would be better to give the professor a wide range of options to do or not to do the request rather than imposing on him doing it through direct strategies. Blum-kulka (1987, cited in Marti, 2006, p. 1839) reports that the most polite strategies in English are perceived to be conventionally indirect ones. The conventionally indirect strategy might be a universal method of making request toward the addressees (Ellis, 1994 ; Trosborg, 1995).

Al-Ali and Alawaneh (2010, pp. 327-328 cited in Tawalbeh and Al-Oqaily (2012)) pointed out that in Arab norms, a university professor is one who has gained much academic knowledge, and, thus placed at the top of the academic and social hierarchy. Accordingly, the participants have to reflect their awareness of this asymmetrical professor-student relationship. Part of that reflection is the use of conventionally and non-conventionally indirect strategies to give the professor more options and diminishes the force of the request (ibid). However, this is not the case in the corpus under examination since results revealed that the subjects overuse direct request strategies.

The employment of non-conventionally indirect strategies (i.e., hints) was extremely low (4.58%). This shows that Tunisian postgraduate students have not acquired enough pragmalinguistic knowledge. In line with Biesenbach-Lucas (2007), one reason that may be behind the non-use of hints is that the participants do not know how to produce situation-appropriate hints. Another reason is that non-conventional indirect request may not secure uptake under the circumstances and hints may not be successful in conveying the speaker's intention (ibid).

It could be said that Tunisian postgraduates, in spite of the so many years they spend in learning English, were sometimes not capable of performing adequate polite requests in English since they heavily rely on using direct request strategies when addressing their professor via emails. Even though the participants used a proportion of conventionally indirect strategies and mitigated their requests, instances of pragmalinguistic failure may arise. More specifically, the analyses of email requests for action and requests for information indicated that, in both cases, Tunisian postgraduate students resort largely to direct strategies (rather than conventional indirectness).

## 6. Conclusion and implications

The current study focuses on the participants' preferences for the realizations of the head act of requests in terms of the degree of directness. The preference for using direct request found through data analysis when students initiate requests to their professor suggest that the participants are not fully aware of the social factor of power and they are unaware of the politeness conventions that arise as a result of the influence of power. This suggests that they were not also aware of the social and situational rules governing request making. The direct requests found in the students' emails can easily put these postgraduate students out of status as they often fail to observe these deference principles and tend to assume compliance on the part of the addressee.

Consequently, the findings of this study could be of help to curriculum designers in Tunisia in the sense that it raises their awareness in recognizing the gaps Tunisian EFL learners experience in their interlanguage pragmatic system. Indeed, the contribution of this study is to help notice the gaps in Tunisian students' pragmatic interlanguage system specifically when they request via emails.

Accordingly, this study suggests some useful pedagogical implications. English language teachers are required to pay closer attention to the pragmalinguistic nuances of the ways in which speech acts such as request are realized. There are, however, two potential challenge areas for language instructors : understanding the importance of explicit instruction of L2 pragmatics, and creating instructional materials needed for the activities.

Tunisian teachers and syllabus designers should devote more attention to developing Tunisian EFL learners' pragmatic competence through teaching L2 pragmatics. Tunisian EFL learners need to be supplemented with explicit instruction regarding the pragmatics of English and specifically teaching pragmatic issues concerning requesting via emails. This may be achieved by using authentic materials and more classroom awareness-raising



activities (Aribi, 2014). Instances of authentic material include authentic academic emails for various requests. As Kasper (1997, p. 9) argues that the conscious-raising activities in classrooms could help learners to “make connections between linguistic forms, pragmatic functions, their occurrence in different social contexts, and their cultural meanings” and to ultimately improve the learners’ sociopragmatic competence. The use of authentic materials in the context of pragmatics instruction is highly recommended as it can highly benefit Tunisian EFL learners to raise their awareness about pragmatic issues such as politeness. Non-native learners in general and Tunisian learners in particular should be offered native models of English email requests in order to know how native speakers perform requests according to different contexts and social factors.

However, the goal of teaching pragmatic practices and offering native models of emails for making requests in English may not necessarily be to encourage Tunisian learners to achieve native-like speech proficiency. There is an assumption that NSs norms are an ideal target for non-native speakers; however, privilege constructs of nativeness in English are debatable on the cross-cultural, functional, and pragmatic ground (Canagarajah, 1999; Kachru, 2001; Seidlhofer, 2005 cited in Najafabadi and Paramasivam, 2012). Non-natives may choose being distinct to assert their identity, and NSs may prefer some degree of divergence as a sign of fully belonging to the target community (ibid)

Thus, Tunisian learners of English should be aware of the socio-cultural and pragmatic differences between English and Arabic (Aribi, 2012). They should be aware that indirectness is highly valued with Anglo-Saxon societies and being direct with NS of English may cause misunderstandings. This knowledge can help Tunisian EFL students to use appropriate language in specific situations, according to an accurate assessment of contextual features. In order to help learners develop pragmatic knowledge, L2 teachers may need to attract the learners’ attention to cultural and situational factors that shape language use in context through employing explicit and implicit pragmatic instruction.

It is also suggested that Tunisian learners be given input (both native forms and usage as well as those of competent non-native speakers) to help them distinguish the appropriate forms from the non-appropriate ones. After that, they should be allowed to make their own decisions on how to make requests. It should, therefore, be a major goal in English language teaching to teach cultural schemata and to make non-native learners aware of differences between their own cultural schemata and those of NSs (Najafabadi and Paramasivam, 2012).

Instructors should remind students that, in teaching sociopragmatics, the intent is not to impose values and beliefs on learners, but to inform them about the differences in sociopragmatic norms between cultures and how these norms are reflected in language (ibid). Thus, it is worthy to say that Tunisian EFL learners need more explicit instruction that would help them make their emails and requests more socially appropriate and polite

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