Investigating Non-Native English Speaking Graduate Students' Pragmatic Development in Requestive Emails

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Abstract

The present study investigated learners' interlanguage pragmatic development through analysis of 99 requestive emails addressed to a faculty member over a period of up to two years. Most previous studies mainly investigated how non-native English speaking students' (NNESs) pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence differed from native English speaking students (NESs) and compared learners with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds with NESs. In addition, most of the existing literature on developmental pragmatics has used elicited data. Naturally occurring data, in the form of emails, offer a more valid reflection of learners' pragmatic competence. This study adopted speech event analysis approach, which seeks to account for all parts of requestive emails and recognizes the "work" each part does in the production of the speech event. Results indicated that, although NNES students did not show much pragmatic development in the frequency and type of strategies they used, the NNES students used a more deferential style in the opening and closing of their emails compared to native speakers. Additionally, the findings revealed the merits of analyzing natural data in interlanguage pragmatics and offered the benefit of recognizing email requests as a situated event.

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1. Introduction

Interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) is defined as the study of the development and use of strategies for linguistic actions by nonnative learners (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996). However, unlike other research in second language acquisition (SLA), most previous studies on interlanguage pragmatics have been comparative (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999; Kasper & Schmidt, 1996). These studies mostly focused on how nonnative speakers' pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge differed from native speakers' and compared learners with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Bergman & Kasper, 1993; Eisenstein & Bodman, 1993; Eslami-Rasekh, 1993, 2008; House, 1989). In fact, Bardovi-Harlig (1999, p. 679) specifically pointed out that, "not only was interlanguage pragmatics not acquisitional, but it was, fundamentally, not acquisitional". Additionally, previous ILP acquisitional studies have used elicited data collected either through discourse completion tasks (DCT) or role-play. It is argued that naturally occurring data, in the form of emails, offers a more valid reflection of learners' pragmatic competence. Thus, the objective of the current study is to track nonnative English speaking graduate students' pragmatic development in their two years of study at a large university through three different time points. This study adopts a speech event analysis approach and analyzes email message components to track the pragmatic development of nonnative English speaking (NNES) graduate students.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Developmental ILP Research

Researchers have investigated the pragmatic development of learners using either cross-sectional or longitudinal design. Cross-sectional studies investigate two or more groups of participants who are in various stages of pragmatic development (Goy, Zeyrek, & Octu, 2012; Felix-Bradsdefer, 2007; Rose, 2000, 2009; Octu & Zeyrek, 2008).

Rose (2000) examined three groups of primary school children's (ages 7, 9, and 11) pragmatic development of requests using oral DCT. Rose (2000) found that conventional indirectness, specifically the query preparatory strategy, was the most frequent strategy in the data. However, grade 2 school children still relied on direct requests. With regards to external modification, there was minimal evidence of use of external modifiers across the three groups. Grounders were only found in the most advanced learners' data. In a follow-up study, Rose (2009) investigated three groups of secondary school students' request development through oral DCT. The findings were similar to the previous study. Additionally, the findings also revealed linear development in the use of internal modifiers. Grade three high school students acquired new modals like would and would you mind while grade two junior high school students relied exclusively on may and can. On the other hand, consistent with Rose (2000), there was minimal use of external modifiers in the data.

Additionally, in a study examining Turkish learners of English's pragmatic development in an English as a foreign language (EFL) setting, Octu and Zeyrek (2008) compared requests of high intermediate and low intermediate learners in interactive role-plays with NES students in three request situations. The latter group's data were collected through DCT. The study found learner's employment of internal modifiers approximating NES level. However, although developmental patterns were observed in syntactic modification, such modification was restricted to conditional clauses. The use of tense was not found in the learner data, an indication that such structures may take time to acquire. The findings related to frequency of external modification revealed little differences across groups of learners and NES students.

Focusing on the development of internal modifiers in requests by Turkish university EFL learners, Goy et al. (2012), showed development in increasing use of internal modifiers by advanced learners compared to beginners, although the frequency still was not comparable to NES students' level of use of internal modifiers. It was found that both learner groups employed significantly fewer syntactic modifiers than native participants. A developmental pattern for sociopragmatic competence was also observed in that advanced learners used more syntactic downgraders for high imposition and high

power request situations compared to beginner and intermediate learners.

As indicated above, cross-sectional studies demonstrate pragmatic development patterns of English language learners using DCT data. However, when compared with baseline data, learner data showed that L2 learners, even with advanced language proficiency, fell short of reaching target language norms (Goy et al., 2012; Octu & Zeyrek, 2008). We now move to longitudinal studies.

Unlike cross-sectional studies, studies with a longitudinal design track a particular group of learners' progress over a certain period of time (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999; Kasper & Rose, 2002). Longitudinal studies have the advantage of tracking long-term development in the same group of learners, enabling analysis of change at the individual/micro levels (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). Studies by Chen (2006), Ellis (1992), Schauer (2004, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009) and Woodfield (2012) have investigated learners' pragmatic development in classroom and study abroad contexts.

Ellis (1992) examined request development of two young learners in a formal setting over 16 and 21 months of observation. Results indicated learners' over reliance on direct request strategies and a restricted range of internal and external modifiers (please and grounder, respectively), with little evidence of development over time. Ellis proposed that the nature of classroom environment, which required mainly low imposition requests with minimal face work, may have hindered development of pragmatic competence.

Additionally, Schauer (2004, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009) conducted a series of studies focusing on 15 German study abroad learners' request development. The data were collected through multimedia elicitation task in a period of eight months and the data collection sessions were divided into three distinct points: the learners' arrival at the UK, in the middle and before their return to Germany. Results indicated learners' growing pragmatic competence as they used indirect request strategies in the last phase of data collection. Also, evidence for request medication was found as learners employed at least one new internal modifier like appreciation embedding (e.g., "it would be really nice if…") and

marked modality and more complex external modifiers such as small talk and considerator (e.g., "only if you got time of course…") starting from the second phase of data collection. The developmental patterns indicated that length of stay at the target language environment influenced learners' pragmatic development.

Finally, Woodfield (2012) investigated eight Asian graduate students' development of request modification during an eight-month sojourn at a British University. Data were collected through open role-play and baseline data were also collected. Woodfield (2012) administered the data collection sessions at three distinct points. Retrospective interviews were also conducted at the conclusion of data collection to explore learners' perspective of their pragmatic development. A linear decrease of internal modification was evidenced. Woodfield (2012) proposed that the growing familiarity with faculty members was related to the gradual decrease in the use of downtoners by the students. Besides, learners' preference for using lexical modifiers, especially at the first data collection phase, indicating that they needed time to develop syntactic modifiers. For external modification, the frequency of use between native English speaking students (NES) and learners was equal across all phases of data collection.

All the previous developmental pragmatics research studies used elicited data collected either through DCT or role-play. Chen (2006), however, used natural email communication and conducted a longitudinal investigation of the pragmatic development of a Taiwanese student, Ling. The corpus consisted of 98 emails sent during her master and Ph.D. studies. Chen (2006) found Ling gradually learned to use indirect request strategies as the length of her stay in the US increased and she observed other interlocutors' use of requestive features. Ling learned new internal modifiers such as conditionals and subjectivizers. For external modification, Ling moved from using personal issues for making requests to institutionally sanctioned reasons. Also, the length of her email messages became shorter and to the point through better understanding of target norms.

To summarize, previous longitudinal studies find that as the length of stay in the target community increases, so does the learners' pragmatic development as they used more indirect strategies and more internal and external modifiers with increased variety. Our study, similar to Chen's study uses email data of a group of students longitudinally to examine the patterns of pragmatic development. In the next section we discuss studies related to student-faculty email communication.

2.2. Pragmatics of Student-Faculty Email Communication

Technological advances in information and communication technology have led to increased use of online communication including email. Email has been widely adopted for both personal and institutional communication because of its high transmission speed (Crystal, 2001). As email lacks paralinguistic cues present in face-to-face or synchronous communication (e.g., chat), an email sender needs to exercise more caution in constructing appropriate messages, especially in a high power difference situation such as student-faculty communication (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007). To effectively communicate with faculty members, students need to have sufficient pragmatic competence, awareness of politeness conventions and understanding of email etiquette (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). They also may need more time to plan and compose emails in which various face-threatening acts may be performed (Chen, 2006; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). Furthermore, they have to make sociopragmatic choices regarding forms of address, degree of formality and directness, closings, amount of mitigation strategies and the types of modification strategies (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011).

Comparative studies have found that, in general, nonnative English speaking students (NNES), even those with high English proficiency, lack appropriate pragmalinguistic ability to sufficiently mitigate their requests and often resort to nonacademic reasons (e.g., working full time), which are not appropriate in academic contexts (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Chalak, Eslami, & Eslami-Rasekh, 2010; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011; Felix-Bradsdefer, 2007; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig,

1996). However, email communication as a speech event is composed of various other components such as opening, small talk and closing, which, if utilized properly, have the potential to mitigate the perceived face threat of request messages.

2.2.1. Openings

A number of studies have investigated opening strategies in authentic emails in workplace and academic settings (Bou-Franch, 2006; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011; Eslami, 2013; Formentelli, 2009; Gains, 1999; Gimenez, 2000, 2006; Lorenzo-Dus & Bou-Franch, 2013; Waldvogel, 2007). Overall, the examination of opening sequences in email communication has revealed differences based on cultural differences, message sequence (initiating or follow-up email) and language proficiency of the students.

Bou-Franch's (2006) examination of opening strategies in thirty requestive emails showed that nearly all emails contained openings, which she further categorized into greetings (e.g. Hi Dr. Bou-Franch, 89%) and self-identification (70%). Also, some greeting moves were more informal than others "e.g., "hola versus estimada name surname". Bou-Franch (2011) studied whether the use of openings was affected by initiating and follow-up emails. She found that 95 percent of initiating emails contained openings, which she categorized into greeting (93%) and self-identification (60%). Results also indicated that students mostly oriented to solidarity with their professors, which Bou-Franch (2011) surmised was the influence of increasing emphasis on solidarity between student-faculty communications in Spanish academic context.

Lorenzo-Dus and Bou-Franch's (2013) examination of opening sequence in British English and Peninsular Spanish students' emails indicated that most emails contained at least one opening move, and greeting and self-identification were the two most common components in these email openings. Furthermore, both groups of students orientated themselves toward informality in these openings.

Eslami's (2013) comparative study of Iranian and American graduate students' email opening strategies corroborated the influence

of cultural factors on strategy use. She investigated 300 requestive emails addressed to one professor. Her findings indicate that both groups adopted openings in their emails, but Iranian students used more and denser opening sequences (13.3 words and 3.6 moves in Iranian students' opening sequence compared to only 5.4 words and 1.5 moves in American's openings). Moreover, Iranian students used more small talk in their opening sequence, pointing to their orientation toward interpersonal relations in opening an email.

Merrison, Wilson, Davies, and Haugh (2012) examined British and Australian students' requestive emails and found that the use of formal title occurred more frequently in British students' data than in the Australian ones. In addition, there was no use of professional titles in the Australian corpus.

Finally, language proficiency has been found to influence the appropriate use of opening strategies in emails. Economidou-Kogetsidis' (2011) examination of Greek students' opening strategies in requestive emails showed wide variation in openings, ranging from those which were grammatically incorrect but acceptable to those which could cause offense due to incorrect use of titles (e.g., Mrs. Instead of Dr.). Specifically, she found that students' omission of deference term "dear", combined with incorrect use of title+ first name construction could seriously affect faculty evaluators' appraisal of appropriateness of email messages.

2.2.2. Small Talk

Opening strategies are not the only elements available for tailoring messages to individual email recipient. Small talk, defined as a non-task oriented conversation about neutral topics, can function as a mitigator to soften face threats and provide an initial time interval that allows interlocutors to size each other up, establish an interactional style and some degree of mutual trust and rapport (Bickmore & Cassell, 1999). Pullin (2010) conducted a study that investigated the function of small talk and how English as a *lingual franca* speaker utilized this important tool to manage rapport with colleagues and clients. She found that small talk served the function of creating a relaxed atmosphere before the beginning of serious talk (meeting) and thus nurtured

rapport. In addition, as the boss joined the banter, small talk helped mitigate power and nurture solidarity.

In addition, Hossjer (2013) introduced two functions of small talk in a study of workplace email communication. She classified small talk as 1) face-boosting act, which mostly consists of people discussing their daily lives or describing annoyances in their work for establishment of a generally positive attitude in a situation or 2) as a tool that mitigates face threatening acts (FTA) such as explanations for why something has not been done. In a corpus of 3200 emails spanning three years, she found both types of small talk. For example, in the last paragraph of an email explaining the delay of an article, the writer used a variety of strategies such as well-wishing, praise, and joke to downgrade the face threat of late submission of an article for publication

2.2.3. Closings

According to Waldvogel (2007), closings in emails consist of three elements: pre-closing phatic comments like "Have a nice day," farewell formula and any name signoff. In addition, "thanks" is considered as a closing strategy when it comes with or without the writers' name. Studies on closing strategies found that these three moves (pre-closing, farewell, and self-identification) were not always present in emails examined and thus stylistic variation existed. One factor that conditions these variations is cultural differences. Bjorge (2007) revealed that consistent with opening strategies, students from more authoritative cultures (e.g., Iran, China, Jordan) tended to opt for formal alternatives in their email closings than students from egalitarian cultures (e.g., U.S., Britain).

Additionally, Bou-Franch (2006) found great variation in the closing strategies in her student email corpus. All thirty emails contained closings, of which thanking and signature were most prevalent. Leave-taking (e.g., "see you in class on Monday"), a subcomponent of pre-closing, also was found in the emails. Bou-Franch's (2011) findings showed that contrary to an emphasis on solidarity in the opening sequences, email senders overwhelmingly opted for deference in

their closing sequences. The author opined that the emphasis on respect-building in the closing sequences could serve to lower the imposition threat of requestive speech acts.

Lorenzo-Dus and Bou-Franch's (2013) comparison between Peninsular Spanish and British English (BE) emails also documented different stylistic conventions for closings. In the PS data, thanking, leave-taking, and signature comprised almost 90 percent of all closing moves, whereas the most two frequently used moves in BE data were signature and thanking.

Furthermore, Eslami (2013) documented cultural differences in closing strategies of Iranian students compared to American ones. She found Iranian students orientated toward a more formal style of communication and used more thanking, apologizing, farewell, and name sign-off in their closing sequences. Not only Iranian students used more closing moves, but also their moves were longer than the American students.

2.3. The Study

This study used natural requestive email communication between students and a faculty member to investigate patterns of pragmatic development in the requesting behavior of NNESs using a longitudinal design. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. Is there evidence of pragmatic development in learners' realization of requests as found in learners' use of request strategies?
2. Is there evidence of pragmatic development as found in learners' use of internal and external modifiers (supportive moves)?
3. Is there evidence of pragmatic development as found in learners' use of openings, small talk, and closings?

3. Methodology

The current study adopts a longitudinal design and investigates patterns of pragmatic development by studying requestive emails written by nonnative speakers of English to a faculty member. The analysis seeks to account for all the components of requestive emails and recognize the function of each component in the production of the overall speech event.

3.1. Participants and Data

The data for this study consisted of two groups of graduate students' email communication. One group included native English speaking graduate students (NES) and the other group consisted of nonnative English speaking graduate students (NNESs) from a variety of countries (China, Taiwan, Iran, etc.). All the students were enrolled in the professor's course during the time of data collection or had taken courses with the professor in previous semesters. 90 percent of NNESs and 85 percent of NES students were female. The learners' English proficiency was considered high since they needed to achieve at least 80 in Internet-based TOEFL (equivalent to 550 on computer-based TOEFL) to gain admission.

The corpus consisted of emails sent to a faculty member over the course of two years. From the original data of 300 emails, 198 emails with a requestive purpose and addressed to only one professor were used for the analysis. The requestive emails were then grouped based on three time periods, namely at the start of the first semester (fall or spring), the middle of the students' study period (third semester) and the end of the 4th semester. The final data included 198 emails (99 NES messages, 99 NNES messages) written by 66 students (33 NES, 33 NNES). The professor was teaching graduate-level ESL education courses at a university in the USA. She maintains a formal style of communication with students. Two raters screened the emails and removed emails that had multiple recipients or did not have requesting as the main purpose of the email from the analysis.

The social variables in the corpus of students' emails were rather fixed. The professor has relative authority over the students by virtue of her institutional role. Additionally, the social distance dimension was also stable as typical faculty-student relationship in institutional context. However, the imposition factor varied in accordance with what types of requests a particular student was making (e.g., seeking information vs. asking for late submission of assignment).

3.2. Data Analysis

Contrary to speech act realization patterns found in elicited data, email communication is

usually realized with inclusion of other additional elements (e.g., openings and closings), and thus a speech event analysis framework was used to analyze the data. In this study, we identified three main sequences in the emails: opening, requesting, and closing sequences. The framework for coding requests developed by Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) was adopted for coding the requests. First, the exact sentence in each message that contained the request head act was identified and categorized according to different requests types such as appointment, feedback, extension, and information. The request head acts were then categorized into request strategies with one of three directness levels: direct, conventionally indirect, and non-conventionally indirect (hints). Internal (syntactic & lexical) and external modifiers (supportive moves) that affect the illocutionary force of the requests were also analyzed.

Additionally, opening sequences containing greeting, self-identification and small talk, and closing sequences with three moves (pre-closing, farewell and name sign off) were analyzed.

After we identified different sequences and moves, we analyzed the pragmatic choice used to accomplish each move. Politeness framework (Brown & Levinson, 1987) was adopted to analyze the pragmatic choices and investigate how deference and solidarity are expressed.

Following completion of analysis of each set of data (NES and NNES), inferential statistics (Chi-Square) was used on data that met chi square analysis criteria to examine if the differences between NS and NNS graduate students is significant.

4. Results

4.1. Email Openings

To have a good understanding of the constructions preferred by NNES students during the data collection phases, we analyzed opening sequences by the following criteria:

(a) in terms of the use/omission of dear and the use of greeting + address forms (e.g., Hello Dr. + LN)
(b) in terms of overall preference for a specific construction

Table 1 presents results of opening sequences across the three phases and native speaker data.

Table 1
Email Openings by Groups

	P1 *f*	%	P2 *f*	%	P3 *f*	%	NES *f*	%
Greeting Title + LN	8	21.6	10	26.3	14	34.1	33	33.3
Greeting Title + FN	2	5.4	1	2.6	1	2.4	1	1
Greeting + Title	1	2.7	1	2.6	0	0	0	0
Greeting + FN	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
Greeting	0	0	2	5.3	2	4.9	11	11.1
Dear Title + LN	17	45.9	16	42.1	13	31.7	6	6.1
Dear Title + FN	1	2.7	1	2.6	1	2.4	1	1
Dear + Title	1	2.7	1	2.6	1	2.4	0	0
Title + LN	4	10.8	5	13.2	6	14.6	40	40.4
FN + LN	0	0	0	0	3	7.3	1	1
FN	3	8.9	1	2.6	0	0	0	0
No opening	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	4
Total	37	100	38	100	41	100	99	100

We found two developmental patterns in terms of learners' opening sequence in emails. First, overall learners preferred formality in addressing the professor. Across three phases the construction of dear title plus last name occupied nearly half of the data during phase 1 and 2 (P1, 45.9%, P2, 42.1%, P3, 31.7%). Interestingly, we also found learners'

increasingly adopting positive politeness strategies in addressing the professor as their stay in the target language environment grew. Learners' use of the construction greeting plus title and last name steadily increased, culminating in one third of all opening strategies in phase 3 (P1 21.6, P2, 26.3%, P3 34.1%). Chi square test was used to examine if difference between learner and NS group was statistically significant. The statistical test revealed that learners' opening strategies used in each phase of data, did not differ from the native speakers' (df=2, χ^2crit=5.99, P1, χ^2obs=5 P2, χ^2obs=1.6, P3, χ^2obs=0.9). The two most frequently used strategies by NNES

students were 'greeting+title+LN' and 'dear+title+LN', whereas NES students used 'greeting+title+LN' and 'title+LN' most frequently. This indicates that NNESs preferred using more formal strategies and show more deference compared to NESs. Longer residence in the target community did not necessarily influence the learners to approximate NESs norms.

4.2. Small Talk

Results of frequencies and percentages of small talk used by each group are shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Small Talk by Groups

	P1 f	%	P2 f	%	P3 f	%	NES f	%
Small Talk	21	63.6	30	90.9	21	63.6	36	27.8
No Small talk	12	36.3	3	9.1	12	36.4	63	72.2
Total	33	100	33	100	33	100	99	100

The findings indicate that learners' in each phase of their stay used considerably more small talks than NESs (twice as much). Content analysis revealed that types of requests made in phase 2 conditioned this variation. An examination of the contents of small talk following Hossjer's (2013) typology revealed that both face-boosting and mitigating small talk were used. In particular, mitigating small talk used by NNESs is unusually long. Example 1 is a sample mitigating small talk used before making requesting help in doing an assignment.

I have been thanking you for your kindness and help. I am interested in your lessons and pragmatics. I try to concentrate on reading your textbooks and articles. Your lessons make my abstract and ambiguous teaching concepts and theories clear and concrete.

4.3. Request Strategies

Requests were analyzed first for head act, which was coded as direct, conventionally indirect or hints. Results of request strategies used by learners across three phases and baseline data are presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Request Strategies by Groups

	P1 f	%	P2 f	%	P3 f	%	NES f	%
Direct	9	23.1	11	23.9	13	31.7	41	40.6
Conventionally Indirect	29	74.4	35	76.1	27	65.9	60	59.4
Hint	1	2.6	0	0	1	2.4	0	0
Total	39	100	46	100	41	100	101	100

Note: Due to the possibility of more than one request in an email, the number of requests in each phase adds up to more than 33 for learner group and more than 99 for NES group

Table 3 presents the distribution of request strategies by groups, indicating NNESs' overall preference for indirect strategies across

all phases (74.4% in p1, 76.1% in p 2, 65.9% in p3).Similarly NESs preferred using indirect strategies (56.4%). However, the use of direct

strategies was more prevalent among NESs (40.6%) than NNESs in each phase (23.1% in P1, 23.9% in p2, 31.7% in p3) with a slight increase in phase 3. Chi square analysis did not show any significant different between NNESs and NESs use of request strategies (df=1, χ^2crit=3.84, P1, χ^2obs=0.8 P2, χ^2obs=2.8, P3, χ^2obs=2.16). It should be noted that the direct strategies used were mainly

hedged performatives (*I hate to have you ask you, I would like to ask you*) and not imperatives.

4.3.1. Internal Modification

The amount of use of lexical and syntactic internal modifiers (used in the head act) is shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4
Lexical and Syntactic Modifiers by Groups

	P1 f	%	P2 f	%	P3 f	%	NES f	%
Tense	24	47.1	15	37.5	20	37	39	25.5
Aspect	4	7.8	0	0	4	7.4	14	9.2
Embedding	7	13.7	7	17.5	15	27.8	52	34
Please	13	25.5	14	35	12	22.2	29	19
Downtoner	3	5.9	2	5	2	3.7	5	3.3
Subjectivizer	0	0	1	2.5	1	1.9	7	4.6
Consultative Device	0	0	1	2.5	0	0	7	3.8
Total	51	100	40	100	54	100	153	100

Table 7 indicates the frequency and percentages of internal modifiers in the three phases for learners and native speaker participants. Instances of zero modification include requests that were realized using conventionally indirect strategy e.g., "can I ask for a leave" without any internal modifiers. As seen in the analysis, the NNES group's total frequencies of use of internal modifiers approximated NES norms (learner: f=145, NES, f=153). Chi square analysis revealed no statistically significant difference between the NESs and NNESs usage at any phases of data collection (df=1, χ^2crit=3.84, P1, χ^2obs=0.1 P2, χ^2obs=3.7, P3, χ^2obs=0.01). This finding is different from both comparative studies (Woodfield & Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2010) and developmental ILP research (Goy et al., 2012; Octu & Zeyrek, 2008; Schauer, 2007;

Woodfield, 2012), which found native speaker group using higher frequencies of internal modification than learner group. The language proficiency level of the students in this study may have contributed to this finding. These learners already had a relative high proficiency level (TOEFL of 550 or above) and thus they may have developed the ability to use internal modifiers. However, as shown above, the more sophisticated syntactic modifiers (e.g., embedding) were found at later stages more than p1 and p2.

4.3.2. External Modification

Table 5 summarizes the analysis of external modifiers (supportive moves) in the NNESs and NESs' requests.

Table 5
Supportive Moves by Groups

	P1 f	%	P2 f	%	P3 f	%	NES f	%
Preparator	27	27.6	25	17.2	24	20.7	67	22.9
Grounder	51	52	84	57.9	63	54.3	181	62
Appreciator	18	18.4	33	22.8	23	19.8	40	13.7
Apology	2	2	3	2.1	6	5.2	4	1.4
Total	98	100	145	100	116	100	292	100

As shown in Table 8, the overall frequency was much higher in the NNESs' data compared to NES students (f=359vs.f=292). However, if we look at supportive move used at each phase by NNESs and NES use, the main difference is in the use of grounders (f=198 vs. f=181). Chi square test revealed no significant difference between NESs and NNESs across any phase of data (df=3, χ^2crit=7.82, P1, χ^2obs=0.7, P2, χ^2obs=1.9, P3, χ^2obs=3.1). If we look at individual supportive move, we can see that grounder or reasons for request dominates the data.

4.4. Message Length

In addition to request realization patterns, internal modifiers and supportive moves, learners' pragmatic development can also be examined in turns of message length. According to Chen (2006) institutional email practice can be best characterized as concise and to the point communication. In other words, the message should only contain institutionally relevant details. Table 6 summarizes the mean length of email messages across three phases and baseline data.

Table 6
Mean Length of Messages by Groups

	P1	P2	P3	NES
No. of Emails	33	33	33	99
Message Length Means	62.8	95.5	75.7	68.4

Table 6 indicates that learners' overall penchant for lengthiness in their emails. This was due to their overreliance on using grounders, or giving reasons and justifications for the requests. Additionally, according to Chen (2006), learners' would often write lengthy emails, which include narratives involving unnecessary personal details in addition to institutionally-sanctioned reasons for asking help from professors. In this study, although learners did include some personal details as reasons for requests, the main reason for lengthy emails were learners' preference for providing more information possibly to ensure their message is clearly conveyed. Below is an example from the data:

Dear Dr. Henson

I found that the Fall registration has started as well, so I thought it would be better to plan ahead of time. I found that a core course EDCI 601 is available (Wednesday), and Dr. May's EPSY 641 Experimental Design in Education II is available too (Monday). When I searched for content courses, I thought it would be good to take Dr. Tamboli's

either RDNG 649 (Reading instruction for high school and college) or RDNG 674 (Developmental Reading in the Elementary School) since they are prerequisite for many other courses in Reading. However, these two courses are on Monday and Wednesday evenings too, so I hope we could discuss about these schedules. Would you suggest that I take another research course to avoid time conflict with RDNG 649, or do you have other recommendations for content courses? (RHA) Thank you!

Regards,
Yuzhen

In all three phases (more so in P2) the NNESs messages were longer than NESs.

4.5. Email Closings

As explained before, email closings usually contain three distinct moves: phatic comments which indicate the message is about to end, farewell formula, and the signature of the sender. Table 7 presents the results related to closing strategies used by each group.

Table 7
Email Closings by Groups

	P1 *f*	%	P2 *f*	%	P3 *f*	%	NES *f*	%
Pre-closing	20	31.3	18	27	14	22.2	43	30.5
Farewell	13	20.7	17	26	16	25.4	9	6.4
FN + LN	13	20.3	8	12.1	11	17.5	21	13.9
FN	17	26.6	22	33.3	20	31.7	66	46.8
No Signoff	0	0	1	1.5	1	1.6	0	0
No Closing	1		0	0	1	1.6	2	1.4
Total	64	100	66	100	63	100	141	100

The analysis indicates that learners were quite adept at utilizing different subtypes of closing strategies from the beginning. In other words, the token counts and frequencies remained quite stable across three phases of data collection. In addition, comparison with NESs data suggested that NNESs utilized more farewell strategy (20.7% in P1, 26 % in P2, 25.4% in P3, NES 6.4%). Chi square test was used to examine if the difference between NNESs and NES group was statistically meaningful. Due to zero frequencies in some cells, a decision was made to collapse no signoff and no closing into one category. The statistical test revealed statistically significant difference between NESs and NNESs' closing strategies across all phases (df=3, χ^2crit=7.82, P1, χ^2obs=7.89 P2, χ^2obs=12.4, P3, χ^2obs=13.8).

To summarize, quantitative findings indicate that NNESs acquired more complex syntactic modifiers (embedding) and used it in their emails. They also increased the use of informal opening strategy. However their style of using more formal openings and showing more deference persisted until the end. This could be related to the differences in cultural values of the NNESs and NESs in this study. NNESs came mostly from Asian countries where formality and respect is conveyed through negative politeness strategies and the students seem to be more comfortable using the more deferent style based on their own cultural values.

5. Discussion

This study investigated the pattern of pragmatic development and change of NNESs of English during their 2 years of stay and studying in the target community. Different components of requestive emails from the NNESs at three phases of their study were analyzed and compared with the use of NESs. For request strategies the finding indicated learner group's approximation to NES group level. Since our NNESs were of high levels of language proficiency, we did not observe change in their requesting strategies. From the beginning the NNESs used indirect requesting strategies similar to NESs. Other studies have indicated that with increasing language proficiency, learners move from using direct strategies to more indirect strategies (e.g., Chen, 2006; Felix-Bradsdefer, 2007; Rose, 2000, 2009; Schauer, 2008). The difference could be related to the already high levels of language proficiency among the students in this study.

Turning to internal modification, we found that NNESs' modification pattern also mirrored that of the NES group. This finding was different from both comparative studies (Woodfield & Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2010) and developmental pragmatics research (Goy et al., 2012; Octu & Zeyrek, 2008; Schauer, 2007; Woodfield, 2012), which found native speaker group using higher frequencies of internal modification than the learner group. Only the use of embedding, one of the more complex syntactic modifiers, showed some evidence of development. Although comparison with NES data showed NNESs' usage still did not approach native speaker level (P1: 13.2%, P2: 10.9%, P3: 26.9% in NES: 31.5%). as length of stay increased, more embedding as a syntactic modifiers was used.

Moving to lexical modifiers, the politeness marker please was the most often used lexical

downgrader. Previous studies (Ellis, 1992; Goy et al., 2012) also found that learners mostly relied on politeness marker please for internal modification, especially at early stage of development. The NNWSs in this study did not use other lexical modifiers (e.g., subjectivizer and consultative device) similar to NESs use.

In line with previous studies (e.g., Octu & Zeyrek, 2008; Schauer, 2007), the NNESs in this study used a high frequency of external modifiers similar to NESs.

Our NNESs used more formal openings compared to NESs. As stated by Bjorge (2007), students from countries with high power distance cultures prefer formal opening and closings. Most of the students in this study were from oriental countries like China and Taiwan, which are characterized as high power distance cultures. The learners seemed to prefer their own cultural style of showing more deference in their use of opening strategies. Researching the relationship between language learning and identity has become more important with the social turn in language teaching and learning (e.g., Pishghadam, 2011; Pishghadam & Zabihi, 2012). The role of agency and identity in second language learning and use is emphasized with the social perspective to language learning. With the postmodern approach to identity (Block, 2007), identity is considered to be a dynamic and fluid construct under the influence of different social contexts (Coker, 2014).

From the beginning students used small talk in their emails. Small talk is a positive politeness strategy to mitigate the force of upcoming request. Even though the NNESs in this study used a rather formal tone for the opening and closing of their emails, the small talk was rather informal. It is possible that these students made a pragmatic choice to create more solidarity and closeness with their professor rather than maintaining the deference style in other parts of their email.

Finally, for closing strategies, result showed learners' preference for letter style closings in the three-step process of pre-closing, farewell and signature. This finding was also similar to what Chen (2006) observed in her case study. The linguistic choices language users make

reflect the social identity of self and others they like to convey. Power, distance, and gender relations affect their choices. The choices that these participants made in their email communication, similarly, encode the existing power difference between faculty and students.

In conclusion, this study presented and analyzed nonnative graduate students' development of pragmatic competence as evidenced in their employments of request strategies, internal modifiers, and supportive moves as well as opening and closing strategies in requestive emails written to a faculty. Results indicated that although students did not show much pragmatic development in the frequency and type of strategies they used. There were some differences in style between the NES and NNES students in that the NNES students used a more deferential style in the opening and closing of their emails compared to native speakers. This, we speculate, could be related to the conscious choice they make to reflect their own cultural values in their linguistic and pragmatic choices. The power distance between the faculty and students is higher in most of the Asian countries and thus these sociocultural values were encoded in their linguistic choices.

Due to space limitation the content analysis of the emails and the individual differences are not discussed in this paper. However, when content analysis was applied to the data, differences related to the type of reasons used to justify requests, using inductive vs. deductive organization in the email message, wordiness, vagueness and clarity were distinguishing factors between NES and NNES students' emails. The developmental patterns are more noticeable when we examined individual learner's journey closely through content analysis.

Our study used natural email communication instead of elicited data and thus a speech event analysis approach was used instead of speech act analysis framework. Obviously using a more situated approach and natural data, in which students have real investment in getting their requests accepted to accomplish their goal, provides us with a more valid reflection of the students' pragmatic competence.

This research, as any other research, has its own set of limitations. First, the emails were addressed to only one professor, and therefore, the influence of gender and distance variables between the interlocutors could not be examined. In addition, the learners' English proficiency level may have contributed to the findings and the evidence of limited pragmatic development or change in the NES participants requesting behavior in emails. Furthermore, our data did not have sufficient number of emails with high imposition level. It is suggested that the level of imposition of requests and differential strategy use be studied in future research.

Undoubtedly, the area of developmental interlanguage pragmatics has much room for future research. Following Merrison et al.'s (2012) and Lorenzo-Dus and Bou-Franch's (2013) lead, it is important to collect natural data, in the forms of emails and account all the elements found in a given email message. This kind of analysis may offer a better reflection of NES students' pragmatic competence and allow researchers better understanding of nonnative learners of English's pragmatic development.

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