



**International
Journal of Society, Culture & Language
IJSCL**

Journal homepage: www.ijsc.net
ISSN 2323-2210 (online)

Pragmalinguistic Competence of Directness Request Level: A Case of Saudi EFL Learners

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ARTICLE HISTORY:

Received June 2023
Received in Revised form August 2023
Accepted August 2023
Available online September 2023

ARTICLE HISTORY:

Directness
Language proficiency
Pragmatic competence
Request act
Saudi EFL learners

Abstract

The previous three decades have seen a growing body of research into interlanguage pragmatics (ILP), language proficiency, and their effects on pragmatic competence. One of the most important independent aspects in the field of ILP development is language ability. This study which involved 98 Saudi learners, was conducted to determine whether there was a relationship between language proficiency and pragmatic production and realization. This study depended basically on the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Pattern and politeness theory to analyze the gathered data using a Discourse Completion Task. Findings showed that there were no statistically significant differences in the Directness Level according to the variable of proficiency between the two groups. However, there were statistically significant differences in Conventionally Indirect in producing request acts. Regarding Non-Conventionally Indirect, only the high achiever group employed this strategy. Furthermore, results indicated that language proficiency had a significant influence on Saudi EFL learners' production and comprehension of the request act.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.22034/ijsc.2023.2009932.3139>

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1. Introduction

Researchers in the interlanguage pragmatic (also known as ILP) discipline have demonstrated a significant interest in examining the variables that influence pragmatic ability. Language proficiency has been examined as one of these determinants (Bardovi-Harlig et al., 2015; Li, 2014; Schauer, 2006; Tektigul et al., 2023; Xiao, 2015). It is widely acknowledged that pragmatics is the study of language from users' perspectives in terms of the choices they make and the effects of their employment of language on other people throughout the act of communication (Al-Harbi & Mahfoodh, 2021). According to Syarifuddin (2017), pragmatics is a primary component of the language that seeks to use the language properly in the context. Accordingly, Syarifuddin suggests that "developing learners' pragmatic competence in the language classroom is crucial for language learners. Although they understand linguistic knowledge, they do not understand pragmatic knowledge, they cannot communicate effectively with native speakers of the target language" (p. 1).

Pragmatics is highly essential for language learners. According to Kasper and Rose (2001), pragmatics means understanding and creating a language act (linguistic action) in perspective. Most importantly, both terms perspective and act are included as the two vital components of dialogue actions in linguistics. It should be mentioned that a lack of pragmatic knowledge poses some problems for learners. In this regard, Cohen (2004, p. 3) indicated that "language learners can have all of the lexical items and the grammatical forms and still fail at conveying their message because they lack necessary pragmatic or functional information to communicate their intent". Cohen (2004) clarified speech acts as a constant interest for second and foreign language learners because they face difficulties continually in exploiting speech acts like apologies, requests, complaints, thanking, and refusals. All of this indicates that speech acts have different interpretations for non-native speakers, i.e., they do not grasp explicitly the intended meaning of the speaker due to cultural differences and pragmatic competence.

Pragmatic competence has two aspects, which are core parts of the current study: socio-pragmatic and pragmalinguistic competence

(Kasper & Rose, 2001). Pragmalinguistics might be referred to linguistic knowledge of pragmatics and the range of resources when speakers use them in the target language (Barron & Steen, 2017). These resources are used to achieve the communicative act, including pragmatic strategies such as using the level of directness and internal and external modifications. Pragmalinguistic competence reveals the proper linguistic structure and language function to transfer a specific illocutionary force. Furthermore, sociopragmatic knowledge is defined as the sociological interface of pragmatics which investigates how pragmatic performance depends on social variables such as power and distance in speech (Leech, 2014; Shahzadi et al., 2021). Hence, sociopragmatic knowledge is linked with understanding and realizing social distance and power (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Saudi EFL learners have remarkable problems in using English appropriately for communication and academic purposes because the pragmatic competence of Saudi EFL learners (i.e., SEFL) has been reported as being below the satisfactory level. To support this claim, several studies (Alzahrani, 2022; Zughaibi, 2023) have claimed that Saudi EFL learners encounter challenges in using speech acts for communication, especially in the academic field. For instance, Zughaibi (2023) showed that SEFLs have different pragmatic failures; thus, the author suggests applying more communicative approaches as elements of EFL instructions for the purpose of overcoming such pragmatic failures. Alzahrani (2022) concludes that Saudi teachers' awareness of the significance of integrating pragmatic competence teaching within the EFL context is not yet satisfactory. The author suggests that the embedment of sufficient pragmatic features, such as speech acts in teaching English within daily classroom activities, enhances the quality of EFL learners' performance in using the English language properly and building successful communication. The current study addresses the three research objectives as follows; to investigate the strategies employed by Saudi EFL learners at different levels of English language proficiency in making request acts (linguistic variability). Furthermore, it scrutinizes the relationship between language proficiency and the pragmatic production of making requests by Saudi EFL learners. Finally,

it aims to reveal the effect of contextual variables between high achievers (HAs) and low achievers (LAs) in utilizing the level of directness. The study is an attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. What strategies do Saudi EFL learners at different levels of English language proficiency employ in making the directness level of request act?
2. What is the relationship between language proficiency and pragmatic production of making requests by Saudi EFL learners?
3. How do Saudi EFL learners at different language proficiency vary in using the level of directness based on contextual variables between HAs and LAs?

2. Theoretical Framework

Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1986) reported that the speech act of request includes three components (i.e., request strategies, external and internal modifications). The preferable method in analyzing data regarding speech act is Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's classification, that is Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Pattern (CCSARP) which is utilized by large numbers of scholars (Qari, 2021; Woodfield, 2012). With respect to request strategies, it is stated that request is realized in three essential universal classifications: Directness (D), Conventional Indirect (CI), and Non-Conventional Indirect (NC-I). Furthermore, the CCSARP taxonomy of Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1986) is adopted in order to answer the first research question concerning the proficiency level (linguistic variability between HAs and LAs SEFLs in making request strategies). To attain this aim, this study investigates the level of directness and proficiency levels between the participants in using request strategies in different situations.

As for the analysis of the data in the light of Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory, the coding of the data is classified into four strategies (from lowest polite to highest polite), using the Face Threatening Act (FTA) on bald record, without redressive action (e.g., "*Give me your calculator*"), using the FTA by positive *politeness strategies* with redressive action (e.g., "*Doctor, you are the best doctor, can you please write a recommendation letter?*"), using the FTA by *negative politeness*

strategies with redressive action, (e.g., "*Sorry to bother you, can I share my ideas with you?*"), and using the FTA off-record by using some hints as asking for something indirectly (e.g., "*I forget mine*").

Daskalovska et al. (2016) scrutinized the request act used by intermediate-level proficiency learners. Data were collected by DCT and role-play instruments adopting CCSARP to analyze data. It was observed that the most frequently used types of strategies were conventional indirect (query preparatory) in both informal and formal situations. This study aligns with the current research as both used CCSARP, but the current study investigates the influence of language proficiency, taking two groups as high and low achievers.

It is necessary to note that the effect of language proficiency is associated with pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge. Pragmalinguistics includes the capability of speakers to utilize a range of lexical, vocabulary, and grammar. At the discourse level, Dalmau and Gotor (2007) claimed that HAs use a range of lexicons and grammar in their speech acts, such as contrasting and adjusting opinions, and this production of discourse features is higher than the production of LAs. Owing to this reason, HAs can master the language, unlike their LA counterparts. In line with the studies investigating the influence of language proficiency of Saudi learners on pragmatic realization, the current study used the Touchstone Placement Test to classify the students into two main groups, namely HAs and LAs.

To investigate the sociopragmatic competence between 64 Moroccan Arabic and 41 American English speakers in using the level of directness in the request act, Mohamed (2019) used DCT to gather data and analyze them in the light of CCSARP to show the influence of social variables in making a request. It was observed that there was a significant difference between the two groups in inclining to directness levels. Regarding sociopragmatic variables, social power, distance, and degree of imposition have a strong impact on using the level of request directness between two groups. This study is consistent in dealing the sociopragmatic knowledge, but the current research hopes to expand this study to cover the factor of language proficiency among SEFL learners

(Alakrash & Bustan, 2020; Al Khasawneh, 2021).

Qari (2021) carried out a study on the use of politeness strategies, namely: requests and apologies among Saudi and British students. The study adopted Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and CCSARP as coding systems by using DCT to gather data. The findings revealed that Saudi males and females generally preferred to use direct strategies in their requests, while EFL and British groups were systematically more indirect. This study did not clarify the differences between the participants because the employed method for eliciting data was insufficient, and it just showed the differences between groups in using speech acts disregarding the factors that influence the development of pragmatic competence. Moreover, this research focuses on the cultural differences in employing speech, neglecting individual differences, and this gap is examined in the current study by investigating the influence of language proficiency among students at different language proficiency levels.

For the purpose of examining the concept of politeness and (in)directness in request realization among American English and Saudi Arabic, Tawalbeh and Al-Oqaily (2012) administered a DCT with 12 situations to 30 American and Saudi undergraduate students. These situations were classified according to their degree of directness: Non-Conventional indirect (N-CI), Imposition (I), and Conventionally Indirect (CI). Interestingly, this research found significant results as follows: 1) American English native speakers preferred conventional indirectness in most cases, even when addressing inferiors, and they preferred to employ direct strategy only in one situation, that is when they deal with close relatives and friends (-Distance). 2) Regarding Saudi learners, CI was employed by inferiors when they were addressing their boss or superiors. In the +Distance and -Power correlations, both speakers preferred independent politeness to decrease the threat and prevent losing face. It was indicated that there was a negative relationship between social variables and indirectness in + Distance and - power correlations 3) Pertaining to the direct request, it was observed that Saudi learners resorted to directness in situations with their close friends and intimates.

It is important to note that these results conflict with Leech's (2014) and Brown and Levinson's (1987) claim that the use of indirect strategies among speakers reveals the extent of politeness among them. The study's assumption was consistent with previous studies (e.g., Almathkuri, 2021; Alshraah & Daradkeh, 2021; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2013), which showed that in different cultures, directness should not be tackled as impolite, but should be considered as a way of showing affiliations, closeness, camaraderie, and connectedness. Regarding the Saudi context, most of the requestive studies have been exploited to find similarities and differences between native and non-native speakers of English. However, previous studies focused on pragmalinguistic (production of the speech act), while inadequate studies tackled only sociopragmatic competence, pragmatic transfer, and the relationship between pragmatic competence and linguistic proficiency. Therefore, the current study integrates both competencies in order to further understand the influence of language proficiency on producing and realizing the speech act of request by SEFL learners.

3. Methodology

The current study sought to pinpoint the use of request strategies among SEFLs and the contrast between HAs and LAs. Also, it revealed the pragmatic production among the speakers. The study utilized DCT using CCSARP as a coding scheme for the collected data.

3.1. Participants

The participants in the current study were 98 Saudi male EFL learners: 50 High achievers (HA) and 48 Low Achievers (LA). The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 20 whose first language was Arabic. Both groups of Saudi participants were first-year students recruited from Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University (PSAU), Alkharj, Saudi Arabia. They were admitted into the Preparatory Year Program. The participants were chosen based on their Touchstone Placement Test (TPT) results Fifty students who scored ≥ 44 out of 70 on the placement test were considered as higher achievers. In the second group sample, 48 students scored ≤ 44 out of 70, indicating that they had a low level of English proficiency (Table 1). Data was gathered during the second semester of the academic year 2022-2023 as

planned. Groups were informed previously about the nature of the research, and they were given a written consensual confirmation. DCT was a dual language, as English in Saudi Arabia is considered as a foreign language. After permission was granted to the researchers from the head of the English department and the head of the test unit at PYP, the researchers called three volunteers and then sat with them

individually in their offices at agreed-upon times according to their timetables. During the meeting with them, they were given consent forms and a full explanation of the nature of the research without inserting a request word in the explanation as this word might influence students' responses on their answering DCT. The process of collecting data took two weeks.

Table 1

Distribution of Participants

Level of proficiency	Number of students	Age
Advanced proficiency learners	48	18-20
Low proficiency learners	50	18-20
Total	98	

3.2. Procedure

3.2.1. Data Collection

Data was collected through an open-ended questionnaire written in the English language via DCT consisting of 12 situations that showed the variance of power and degree of distance between interlocutors. The situations were formulated between students asking favors, copying notebooks, and turning down the volume and between students and their instructors and vice versa, such as canceling a class, borrowing short stories, and asking for recommendations. Participants were given a space to write the appropriate linguistic utterances of request act as they use in real-life manifestation. The DCT was adopted from Almathkuri's (2021) study. The formation of the current questionnaire depended basically on two social factors, distance (+D and - D) and power (=P, +P and -P), according to Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory, which are considered as one of the most important variables in realizing the speech act.

3.2.2. Data Analysis

The CCSARP is a universal pattern used by several scholars in different languages to analyze speech act strategies. Additionally, chi-square was used for further analysis by building a table for giving frequency and percentage for each strategy used by each group. Furthermore, the gathered data was analyzed based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, including negative and positive face, politeness strategies, and social variables power and distance through the analysis of the data.

The gathered data were analyzed by utilizing Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) to investigate the influence of social power (Brown & Levinson, 1987), including (S> H), (S=H), and (S<H) and the social distance (Close or Distant) on using request act amongst SEFL. This tool was used to show the frequency and occurrence of each strategy used by both groups to find out the differences and similarities between HAs and LAs. Hence, classifying data depended on the code schemes, as shown in the following Table 2.

Table 2

The Use of Request Strategies among HAs and LAs

Level of Directness	
Mood derivable Explicit performative Hedge performative Obligation statement Want statement	Direct (D)
Suggestory formula Query preparatory	Conventional indirect (CI)
Strong hint Mild hint	Non-Conventional Indirect (N-CI)

4. Results

Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1986) classifications of request strategies were used to find the strategies of making requests between the two groups at different language proficiency levels as the main first research question. More specifically, the direct level includes direct, conventionally indirect, and non-conventionally indirect request strategies based on CCSARP. Understanding the level of directness between the two groups is important to reveal how low achievers and high achievers are different or the same in employing directness level, Arab learners are expected to use a high level of directness, as Alfaleh (2019) claimed, because of pragmatic transfer from the Arabic language, which permits using an extreme level of directness with lower status people and close friends. The following section explains in depth the level of directness, including D, CI, and NCI.

Table 3
The Use of Request Strategies among HAs and LAs

Level of Directness	High		Low		Chi-Square	p-value
	N	%	N	%		
(Direct)	402	67.22	428	83.76	0.814	0.367
(Conventionally Indirect)	170	28.43	83	16.24	29.917	0.000*
(Non-Conventionally Indirect)	26	4.35	0	-	-	-
Total	598		511		6.825	0.009

* Statistically significant at the level of significance ($p \leq 0.05$)

Based on Table 3, there are no statistically significant differences ($p \leq 0.05$) in D according to the variable of proficiency as the value of chi-square was 0.814 ($p = 0.367$). However, there are statistically significant differences at the level of $p \leq 0.05$ in CI according to the variable of proficiency as the value of chi-square was 29.917 ($p = 0.000$). Regarding N-CI, only the HA group employs this strategy with 4.35%.

The findings of Table 3 indicate that both HAs and LAs prefer direct request strategies the most. However, LAs tend to use it more than HAs. It is necessary to state that the preference of both groups as L2 learners to employ more direct strategies may be associated with the obstacles in formulating the structures utilized in indirect requests in the target language (Taguchi, 2015). The second commonly requested strategy by both groups is CI. HAs employed CI significantly (28.43%) more than LAs (16.24%) as the value of chi-square was

4.1. Directness Level (D)

This section answers the first research question regarding the linguistic level between HAs and LAs in making request strategies by analyzing their proficiency level, i.e., the ability to use the English language appropriately, and directness level, which stands for using request strategies according to two underpinning theories. The first one is Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1986) taxonomy of request strategy, and the second theory is Brown and Levinson (1987) which investigates the effect of social variables (power and distance).

According to Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1986) taxonomy of request strategies, the percentage and level of directness consist of several sub-strategies, namely, five D strategies (mood derivable, explicit performative, hedge performative, obligation statement, and want statement), two CI (suggestory formula and query preparatory) and two N-CI (strong hint, and mild hint).

29.917 ($p = 0.000$). Nevertheless, HAs prefer CI more than LAs. The third frequently used request strategy among the participants is N-CI (4.35%). It is noticed that LAs employ only direct and conventionally indirect with zero occurrences of non-conventionally indirect. A closer inspection of the findings reveals that HAs have a higher proficiency level and familiarity with request strategies that manifest in their tendency towards using conventionally indirect and non-conventionally indirect strategies. Possibly, their academic level and their exposure to the second language more than LAs affect their proper use of request strategies. As Brown and Levinson (1987) stated that speakers tend to use direct strategy more frequently than indirect in request acts particularly when the speaker is in high status ($S > H$) that may conflict with politeness norms.

As shown in Table 4, the overall distribution along the scale of directness shows the use of

request strategies between HAs and LAs. The findings showed that the number of request strategies performed by high achievers, amounting to 598, surpasses the number of request strategies produced by LAs accounting for 511. Possibly, the higher academic level plays a pivotal role in enabling HAs to produce request strategies more than LAs. There is a strong correlation between directness level and linguistic variability. To clarify, the directness level of Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1986) is divided into three sections: directness which reflects the speakers' low proficiency levels; conventionally indirect which shows the speakers' high proficiency levels in making request strategies, and non-conventionally indirect that is divided into mild and strong hint that reflects the politeness of the participants.

On the other hand, the use of mood derivable by LAs, such as "give me your calculator," reflects their impoliteness (bald on record as indicated by Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory and high level of direct and their inability to use modal verbs that are inserted before writing a request such as 'can, could, would' or the mitigation devices such as 'please' to show respect on the part of the speaker to the hearer. The findings of this study stated that the LA group used a bald-on-record strategy in making their requests by employing the imperative forms of verbs to make their requests. Table 4 reveals the percentage for each request strategy.

4.2. Conventional Indirect (CI)

Conventionally indirect includes query preparatory and suggestory formulas. For instance, HAs use query preparatory such as "*can you turn down the volume?*" They performed their request by referencing a preparatory condition, for instance, possibility, ability, or willingness. On the other hand, the least commonly used request strategy by LAs is the conventionally indirect "suggestory formula" (2.54%), such as "*how about making our time late?*" (S6, LA# 11). According to Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness, conventionally indirect is used as a negative politeness strategy, considered as the second preferred strategy by both groups in performing the request act.

4.3. Non-Conventional Indirect (CI)

The non-conventional classification is used by HAs (4.35%), and no occurrence of this

category by LAs, which is employed to ask something implicitly using hints, which are sometimes presented with an evident reference to the illocutionary act (strong hints), and sometimes explicitly (mild hints). A strong hint is used when the speakers use part of a reference, which is required for the implementation of the act, such as "I am busy" and "no class tomorrow", which has never been used by LAs. Non-conventionally indirect is not exploited by any of the LA groups, which might assume that the students are not even aware of them being a viable polite request act in the target language. As mentioned earlier, social power (+/-P) is an essential element that influences the level of directness in the request strategies preferred by Saudi learners. For instance, the mild hint strategy (off-record) increased in use with an increase in the hearer's power (+P). Using off-record as a type of politeness strategy indicates that the speaker employs FTA by using indirect and ambiguous utterances that the speaker leaves the hearer to decide how to interpret the request by indirect and with little information to avoid any face-threatening act.

The utilization of NCI strategies may conflict with Gricean's maxim of relation in reference to Grice's works, as mentioned by Sbisà (2006) when the speaker uses these strategies properly. Actually, using this type of strategy needs the speaker to be competent in sociopragmatics and pragmalinguistic competence, which is why HAs use this strategy, whereas LAs do not have sufficient knowledge to perform such a type of request. On the other hand, the mild hint is used when the speaker conveys the illocutionary intent by providing less strong clues, but it is still interpretable as a request with the help of the context. Greater inference is required on the part of the addressee, such as "I can't concentrate" (this utterance violates quantity and relation maxims), which needs context "I can't write without a calculator" (S11, HA# 23) by HAs. In fact, non-conventionally indirect request strategies are less employed by HAs (4.35 % compared to CI 28.43%) and D (67.22%). In addition, it is observed that NCI has never been used by LAs due to their insufficient sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge. Table 4 shows the level of directness employed by groups identified by the nine strategies as sub-types of directness.

Table 4
The Level of Directness among HAs and LAs Groups

Level of Directness	Low		High		Chi-Square	p-value
	N	%	N	%		
Mood derivable	234	45.79	2	0.33	228.068	0.000*
Explicit performative	26	5.09	57	9.53	11.578	0.001*
Hedge performative	32	6.26	178	29.77	101.505	0.000*
Obligation statement	103	20.16	56	9.36	13.893	0.000*
Want statement	33	6.46	109	18.23	40.676	0.000*
Suggestory formula	13	2.54	9	1.51	0.727	0.349
Query preparatory	70	13.70	161	26.92	35.848	0.000*
Strong hint	0	0.00	10	1.67	-	-
Mild hint	0	0.00	16	2.68	-	-
Total	511		598		6.825	0.009*

* Statistically significant at the level of significance ($p \leq 0.05$)

In terms of how the directness level affects the social power distance in such a context, there is a need to further analyze the data based on the face-threatening act theory posited by Brown and Levinson (1987). Table 4 illustrates this instance, in which the former mood derivable direct request strategy is considered as face-threatening (Brown & Levinson, 1987) on the part of the hearer because it begins with an imperative verb such as “give me”. The latter hedged performative request strategy is considered as face-saving on the part of the hearer because it contains a politeness device such as “I would like to ask you” followed by conventionally indirect query preparatory, such as “can you please give me your calculator?” (S11, HA # 15) by HAs, whereas LAs use “can gave calculator?” (S11, HA # 33). They are unable to write a request question correctly, they start with the modal auxiliary verb “can” without writing the subject pronoun “you”, moreover, the wrong tense of the verb form “gave”, rather than “give” that did not follow an object pronoun “me”, furthermore, the article “a” did not precede the noun “calculator”. However, the least commonly used strategy by both groups is non-conventionally indirect, such as “I forget my calculator” (S11, HA # 15).

The second most common strategy by LAs is obligation statements that account for 20.16%, such as “you have to turn down the volume” (S8, LA #11). Third, the participants prefer using query preparatory (13.70%) in which the speaker uses a reference to a preparatory condition, for instance, possibility, ability, or

willingness., such as “Can you give me your story” (S12, HA#15) subsequent by want statement, such as “I want to postpone the date of submission” (S6, LA #15).

To sum up, the examples illustrate that mood derivable is an example of an impolite request strategy, as posited in the FTA theory, that is considered as face-threatening and impolite. These include responses such as “write a recommendation letter, please” (S7, LA# 15), “turn down the volume” (S8, LA#15), and “I am absent tomorrow?” (S1, LA#15). It is observed that the participants employ direct and imperative request strategies in which the grammatical mood of the verb in the utterance represents its illocutionary force as a request in the context of low achiever performance. The least commonly used request strategy by LAs is the conventionally indirect “suggestory formula” (2.54%), such as “how about making our time late?” (S11, LA #.15).

The most commonly used request strategy by HAs is hedged performative (29.77%). They indicate their request by using utterances involving verbs or modal verbs expressing intentions such as “I would like to ask you to write a recommendation letter for me”(S7, HA# 15). Their use of hedged performative reflects their pragmatic knowledge and their proficiency in using polite request strategy for addressing those of higher power.

The second commonly used request strategy by HAs is conventionally indirect query preparatory strategies which amount to 26.92%. HAs significantly overuse this strategy compared

with LAs (13.70%). Examples of indirect query preparatory strategies include phrases such as “*could I borrow your calculator?*” (S11, HA #36), and “*could you change my appointment?*” (S10, HA #15). Indirect query preparatory strategies are considered to involve higher proficiency in language use. In keeping with Alshraah and Daradkeh (2021, p. 405), “both EFL and ESL use conventional indirect request strategies more than direct request strategies which are used more than non-conventional requests strategies”, students employ conventionally indirect strategies query preparatory more than other strategies when there are social distance and power on the part of hearer over the speaker.

The third commonly used request strategy by HAs is the want statement category (18.23%). This category involves phrases such as “*I want to postpone our appointment*” (S6, HA #15). As stated by Daskalovska et al. (2016), such phrases identified in this category require the addressee to meet the addresser’s need, such as “*I want you ...*”, hence their use of the utterance “postpone” reflects their high proficiency levels. As for HAs, the least commonly used request strategy is mood derivable which amounts to 0.33%, followed by conventionally indirect request strategy suggestory formula (1.51%), preceded by non-conventionally indirect request strong hint (1.67%).

To shed light on the second research question entitled “what is the relationship between language proficiency and pragmatic production of making requests by Saudi EFL learners”, the findings show the inclination of both groups towards using direct strategy, which might be attributed to the challenges they confront in formulating indirect request strategies in the target language. This finding is in alignment with Taguchi (2015), who argued that indirect request strategies pose difficulties to EFL learners. EFL/ESL learners have an insufficient linguistic repertoire, which assumes that they tend to focus more on communication to transfer their purpose, neglecting the socio-cultural norms of the target language. In this case, as reflected in Table 4, both HAs and LAs tend to use direct strategies the most, while the latter group frequently tends to use direct request strategies more than the former group. The findings show that there are differences

among HAs and LAs in using direct level but not significantly at $p < 0.367$ in which there is an equity of power and distance between the interlocutors. HAs employ fewer direct strategies (67.2%) than LAs (83.76%) which confirms that HAs have more pragmatic knowledge in using conventionally and non-conventionally indirect strategies in their speech compared with LAs.

4.4. Contextual Variable in Using Level of Directness between HAs and LAs

The subsection entails the third research question, which focuses on how Saudi EFL learners at different language proficiency levels vary in using a level of directness based on contextual variables between HAs and LAs.

A main assumption in speech act research is that speech act is directly connected with contextual variables (Brown & Levinson, 1987). An evident example is the relationship between the weightiness of social distance and power and the choice of a particular politeness strategy. Contextual variables may determine the speaker to realize the request act by using the directness level and type and amount of external and internal modifications (Blum-Kulka & House, 1989). Brown and Levinson (1987) described a request as a “face-threatening” speech act since the speaker is imposing on the hearer’s freedom of action. Hence, the request act is constrained by several sociocultural factors and needs the use of particular pragmatic strategies to soften the act and minimize the threat to face (see Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986). One of the FTA strategies is negative politeness which is used when there is social distance and power between interlocutors. Hence, the speakers try to be as polite as possible when making their request. This study shows how groups differ in altering their request strategies according to social variables.

The level of directness between groups was investigated in the light of social power and distance. Table 5 shows the relation between power categories among both groups in using direct level as follows: +P/=P, =P/-P and =P/-P indicating that +P (S>H), =P (S=H) and -P (S<H). The chi-square test was used to compare groups based on social power variables.

Table 5*The Influence of Social Power between Groups in Using Directness Level*

Level of directness	+P		=P		-P	
	HA	LA	HA	LA	HA	LA
Mood derivable	2	84	0	86	0	64
Explicit performative	27	9	17	9	13	8
Hedge performative	88	12	55	9	35	11
Obligation statement	21	29	19	35	16	39
Want statement	58	9	32	10	19	14
Suggestory formula	4	9	3	1	2	3
Query preoparatory	40	27	52	23	69	20
Strong hint	0	0	5	0	5	0
Strong hint	2	0	5	0	9	0
Total	242	179	188	173	168	159
	(40.46%)	(35.02%)	(31.43%)	(33.85%)	(28.09%)	(31.11%)

* $p < 0.05$

On the other hand, Table 6 summarizes the relationships between power categories for both groups by using Chi-square, and p -value to

reveal the influence of social power in using the direct strategy for each group separately.

Table 6*Chi-square Results in the Effect of Social Power between HAs and LAs in Using Directness*

Group	+P		=P		-P		+P/=P	+P/-P	=P/-P
	N	%	N	%	N	%	Chi-square P-value	Chi-square P-value	Chi-square P-value
HA	242	(40.46%)	188	(31.43%)	168	(28.09%)	6.781 0.009*	13.356 0.000*	1.124 0.289
LA	179	(35.02%)	173	(33.85%)	159	(31.11%)	.102 0.749	1.183 0.277	.590 0.442

* $p < 0.05$

As mentioned earlier, this study aimed to investigate the use of request act among SEFL at different language proficiency based on social power variables: (+P) speaker has power over hearer, (-p) speaker has less power over hearer, and (=P) speaker and hearer have equal power. According to the previous tables (Tables 5 and 6), it is clear that HAs show an awareness of using direct levels in different social power categories. For instance, HAs shift in using directness levels according to social power. They are more direct when the speaker has more power over the hearer (+P (S>H)), less

direct when there is equal power (S=H), and more polite when there is no power over the hearer (-P (S<H)). Statistically, there is a significant difference between (+P and =P) and (=P and -P). However, LAs show fractured shifting in using direct level, which shows their inability to make control on using speech act based on power variable with no statistical difference between any power relationships. Table 7 shows the social distance relationships between HAs and LAs in using directness strategies.

Table 7*The Influence of Social Distance between HAs and LAs in Using Directness Level*

Level of directness	Familiar		Unfamiliar	
	HA	LA	HA	LA
Mood derivable	2	116	0	118
Explicit performative	35	14	22	12
Hedge performative	124	24	54	8
Obligation statement	36	63	20	40
Want statement	76	16	33	17

Suggestory formula	5	11	4	2
Query preparatory	75	39	86	31
Strong hint	4	0	6	0
Mild hint	6	0	10	0
Total	366 (60.70%)	283 (55.38%)	235 (39.29%)	228 (44.61%)

* $p < 0.05$

In keeping with Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory, the results of Table 8 stated that HAs and LAs are more direct when using requests with familiar interlocutors. A statistical

difference is observed between (familiar/unfamiliar) situations among two situations for each group, and both are less direct with unfamiliar interlocutors.

Table 8

Chi-square Results in the Effect of Social Power between HAs and LAs in Using Directness

Groups	Familiar		Unfamiliar		Familiar-Unfamiliar
	N	%	N	%	
HA	366	(60.70%)	235	(39.29%)	Chi-square (28.554) P-value (0.000*)
LA	283	(55.38%)	228	(44.61%)	Chi-square (5.920) P-value (0.015*)

* $p < 0.05$

Based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of social power and distance and as indicated in Table 9, the findings show variation in the use of request strategy by both HAs and LAs based on social categories. The results of the first category (+P, +D), in which there is social power and distance between the interlocutors,

particularly for situations three and four, show that the request strategies made by HAs account for 25.08%, whereas the request strategies made by LAs account for 22.8%. There is a statistical difference between the two groups at Chi-square 4.079 and P-value 0.043.

Table 9

Percentage, Raw Frequency, and Chi-Square Values of Directness levels by Groups in the Six Social Category

Category	Social Category	LAs		HAs		Chi-Square	p-value
		N	%	N	%		
1	(+P, +D) 3 and 4	117	22.8	150	25.08	4.079	0.043*
2	(-P, +D) 1 and 6	104	20.3	136	22.7	4.267	0.039*
3	(=P, -D) 9 and 11	63	12.3	65	10.86	0.031	0.860
4	(-P, -D) 7 and 12	95	18.5	111	18.56	1.243	0.265
5	(=P, +D) 2 and 5	98	19.17	100	16.72	0.020	0.887
6	(+P, -D) 8 and 10	34	6.65	36	6.02	0.057	0.811
Total		511		598		6.825	0.009*

* $p < 0.05$

As for the second category (-P, +D), 22.7% of HAs used request strategies, whereas 20.3% of LAs used request strategies. There is a statistical difference between the two groups at Chi-square 4.267 and P-value 0.039. As for the third category (=P \-D), It can be seen from the

data in Table 9 that the HAs group (10.86%) reported a similar use of the strategies with LAs (12.3%). With respect to the fourth category (-P, -D) there is neither power nor distance between the interlocutors. Both groups showed similar use of direct strategies as 18.5% of the

LAs used request strategies, whereas 18.56% of HAs used request strategies. In the fifth category (=P, +D), the level of directness in performing request strategies among LAs (18.10%) was higher than among HAs (16.60%). As regards the sixth category (+P, -D), in which there is a social power but no social distance between the speaker and the hearer, 6.02% of the HAs used request strategies, whereas 6.6 % of the LAs used direct request strategies.

5. Discussion

A closer inspection of the findings reveals that HAs have a higher proficiency level and familiarity with request strategies that manifest in their tendency towards using conventionally indirect and non-conventionally indirect strategies. This finding confirms Lailiyah et al. (2023) stating that undergraduate Indonesian learners used the modified blame strategy politely to soften the interlocutor, while those with non-undergraduate education used the annoyance strategy employing direct sentences showing irritations.

Results showed that language proficiency has a positive influence on choosing politeness strategy. Findings are consistent with Al-Sallal and Ahmed (2022), as they revealed that advanced Bahraini learners preferred indirect speech acts. It is evident that the HAs group show more pragmatic knowledge in their usage of request act than LAs group by different request strategies. Compared to HA's performance, LAs just employed D and CI. Regarding social variables, HAs shift in using directness level according to social power, however, LAs show fractured changes in using direct level, which shows their inability to make control on using speech act based on power variable. However, the findings contradicted Tabatabaei (2019) as she assumed that language proficiency does not have a significant influence on pragmatic competence, stating that advanced EFL learners did not use speech act significantly better than low achievers in pragmatic production.

Regarding social distance, it is stated that HAs and LAs are more direct when using requests with familiar interlocutors. Such a finding is in line with the results reported in Li's (2014) study that conventionally indirect request strategies are frequently employed by second

language (L2) learners. The results are in line with Mohamed (2019) that the socio-pragmatic variables (power and distance) have a strong correlation with the level of directness used by Moroccan Arabic native speakers.

It is strongly obvious that LAs face challenges in terms of word choice as they do not have the vocabulary knowledge that enables them to select words that demonstrate their language proficiency, such as "*make our time late*". It was used by them rather than saying "postponing our appointment". As it is noticed that non-conventionally indirect mild hints and strong hints are not exploited by LAs. This finding is in line with Daskalovska et al. (2016) that the least commonly used request strategy by EFLs in the Republic of Macedonia is a mild hint due to the lack of pragmatic competence in the second language; therefore, they are inclined towards using direct request strategies.

As there are scarce studies that cover the influence of language proficiency, the current research shows that LAs are more direct (less polite) compared with HAs. The summary of the obtained results displays an evident difference in pragmalinguistic and socio-pragmatic competence between the two groups in using request act. Moreover, this study investigates the influence of language proficiency in producing and realizing pragmatic competence, which shows that LAs have not received sufficient pragmatic input which actually led to pragmatic failure that appeared in their performance and realization of the speech act of request. So, the conclusion agrees with previous research, which claimed that the L2 educational environment may have a significant impact on their pragmatic performance (Al-Harbi & Mahfoodh, 2021).

With regard to social variable consciousness, LAs seemed to be less sensitive to social variables than HAs, as LAs inclined to employ more direct styles in forming their FTAs than HAs. Further, HAs also appear to employ N-CI to soften their FTAs compared to LAs. This finding may be referred to students' insufficient linguistic ability, which may hinder them from achieving the level of politeness they hope to gain in their target language, as agreed by Almathkuri (2021) and Xiao (2015).

It is necessary to point out that this study presents producing and realizing speech act

without focusing on the obstacles and difficulties that face L2 in using pragmatic knowledge. Future studies may benefit from this study to expand the scope of this research to investigate pragmatic difficulties and solutions to improve pragmatic competence. One of the limitations of the current study is that the gathered data was collected via only DCT, which means using any other tool may lead to different results. It is highly recommended that further studies employ other tools such as interviews and role play, then compare with the current findings to show which might be a more effective tool. Future research may expand the end of the current study to encompass situations that draw more social settings (home, street, market, restaurant, hotel) that support ILP studies with more insight into using request acts from a wide range of social situations.

Acknowledgment

This study is supported via funding from Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University project number PSAU/2023/R/1445.

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Appendix 1

Discourse Completion Test / English Version

The aim of this study is to investigate the influence of language proficiencies on pragmatic realization and strategies for making requests across Saudi Arabia's EFL learners. There are 12 situations in this questionnaire. Kindly reply to each situation carefully and spontaneously and imagine that you are in a real situation. There are no wrong or right answers. This questionnaire is designed for scientific purposes only. Please feel free to ask me any inquiries.

Example

You are an invigilator for the exam at the university. Some students are speaking loudly in the corridor. It is evident that their shouting is bothering the students.

You go to the students and say
Could you please go away from the exam hall; Students are examining.

Discourse Completion Test (DCT)

Situation 1

You register for a course (Physics) with a new professor in the science department, and he does not attend classes today. Due to the adverse weather conditions of the dust and wind, you want to take a professor's **permission to be absent** from tomorrow's class. You never talk or meet this professor, but you decide to go to the professor's office.

You say

Situation 2

You are a student in an ESP or EMP course, and your instructor divided the section into groups to do the course's presentation, but you face trouble in discussing with the members of your group. you know by chance there are excellent students in the X group. You do not have any rapport with them, and even you have never spoken with them. You decide to speak with one of them to **share your idea about** the presentation.

You say

Situation 3

You are a lecturer in a college. On the first day of the semester with the first-year student, you

forget to bring the laptop's charger. You need a student to assist you in fetching it from your office upstairs. You see a student in the first row.

You say

Situation 4

You are a college lecturer. You have a hospital appointment, so you will need to call off tomorrow's lecture. You see one of your students in the library. It is the first time you are teaching this student, and you are not familiar with him. You will need **him to relay the** news about calling off tomorrow's lecture for the students.

You say

Situation 5

You are studying the "English for Medical Purposes" course. Two weeks ago, you had severe flu and you did not attend crucial lectures due to sever flue. You meet one of the best students from your section in the bookshop. **You have not spoken with him** before, and you need to **borrow** lecturer notes.

You say

Situation 6

You have to submit the final homework tomorrow. You may not be able to finish on time since you have other assignments and quizzes. You are thinking of going to your professor who teaches you for the first semester, and you have not talked with him before. You go to his office to talk about **postponing the submission**.

You say

Situation 7

It is the last semester in your bachelor's degree program and you plan to apply for the Master's program. You need to attach a **recommendation letter** to your application, and you need the head of your department, who you are close to you, to prepare it for you.

You go to the professor's office.

You go to the professor's office and say

.....

Situation 8

You have a final exam tomorrow, and you cannot focus because there is a noise from your neighbors' kids. They are listening to music and shouting in front of your flat's door; their ages are between 14 and 15 years (8th and 9th grade). You have been living next to this family

for 3 years. You open your door to ask them to turn down the volume.

You say

Situation 9

You have registered for an elective course named "Islamic Studies." You have to bring books for this course, but it will not be useful next semester, so you are planning to **collect** the used book owned by your friend?

You say

Situation 10

You have been assisting your neighbor, a secondary school student, with his exams for three months now. Your next visit with him is Tuesday night. You have a quiz on Wednesday and you want to **change your appointment** with your neighbor to Thursday evening.

You say

Situation 11

You are living on the university campus, and you have an old friend for three years renting the same apartment. One day, while you were preparing for a math exam, your calculator stopped working. You want to borrow your **friend's calculator** to finish your study.

You go to your friend and say

Situation 12

You have registered for a course in the English department. In one class, the lecturer suggests a new short story "To Build a Fire". You searched for this story on the internet and the library. Unfortunately, you did not find the intended one. So, you plan to go to the lecturer's office and borrow this book. This is your fourth course with this lecturer and you know him well.

You say