



Pragmatic Realization in Exploiting Request Expressions: A Study of Language Proficiency and Social Context among Saudi EFL Learners

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Abstract Interlanguage pragmatic studies predominantly focus on teaching and learning English as a second or foreign language. However, there is a substantial research gap in understanding the interlanguage characteristics of those learning English as a second language, particularly within the Saudi context. To bridge this critical gap, this paper undertakes a comprehensive examination of the interlanguage pragmatic competence exhibited by a cohort of 51 High Achievers (HAs) juxtaposed with 48 Low Achievers (LAs). A Discourse Completion Test (DCT) and the Scale-Response Questionnaire (SRQ) were administered to elicit request utterances. The paper concludes that HAs tended to use a wide range of linguistic forms in using mitigated request expressions significantly compared to LAs' performance. Regarding the influence of contextual variables, HAs showed more awareness of both social power and distance compared to LAs. In conclusion, there is a robust connection between language proficiency and the pragmatic competence of request acts among Saudi learners.

Keywords: *Interlanguage pragmatics, Language proficiency, Pragmatic realization, Saudi EFL learners, Speech act*

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1. Introduction

Speakers of L2 should be pragmatically competent by understanding sociopragmatics (social norms) and pragmalinguistics (linguistic sources) depending on social factors (power and distance) (González-Lloret, 2021). Regarding speech acts, as the main interest in this research, most students face difficulty in using request acts employing the same utterance, neglecting the importance of social power and distance between speakers (Alshraah & Daradkeh, 2021). Pragmatic, the most important field in learning and acquiring targeted language, is also defined as Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP). Furthermore, ILP concerns the ability of ESL/EFL learners to understand and produce speech acts (Derakhshan et al., 2021). Although a number of studies deal with the relationship between ILP and language education in general, the studies of ILP among Saudi English

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as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners to improve their pragmatic knowledge are still limited. ILP is the underlying concern of the current study, which has become one of the seminal aspects for linguists when it is adopted in language education (Ghazzoul, 2019).

Results of past studies pertaining to the influence of language proficiency on pragmatic competence development demonstrated controversial outcomes. For instance, some findings stated that language proficiency has a significant role in pragmatic competence (e.g., Bartali, 2022; Rastegar & Yasami, 2014). Other research revealed that language proficiency has an insignificant effect on pragmatic competence (e.g., Hassall, 2001; Khorshidi et al., 2016). However, the impact of language proficiency on pragmatic realization and using speech act for EFL/ESL has not been investigated widely and is insufficient, especially for the Saudi EFL context. Hence, this study hopes to add insights into ILP studies by revealing the influence of language proficiency on pragmatic competence in making and realizing pragmatic competence in the Saudi context, as recommended by previous researchers (Huwari & Al-Shboul, 2015). However, most of these studies centered on the request strategies rather than the modification of requests (Yazdanfar & Bonyadi, 2016). Therefore, the current study can bridge this research gap and expand the research area of ILP in Saudi EFL learner's performance.

The deficiency in pragmatic competence among language learners is reinforced by Qari (2021), who noted that second language or foreign language learners commonly encounter challenges in mastering speech acts during communication. In the context of Saudi learners, Qari (2021) highlighted that they often make grammatical errors in executing speech acts like apologies and requests. Additionally, these learners may resort to their first language, utilizing direct terminology, as it may be more comfortable due to limited practice in the target language. This pragmatic failure can result in misunderstandings in spoken interactions stemming from the differing linguistic structures between the learner's native culture and the target language. This paper examines the relationship between Saudi EFL learners' English proficiency levels and their pragmatic realization strategies in using request acts. Moreover, it sheds light on the situational variability (sociopragmatic competence) between high and low achievers (HAs & LAs) using the 5-Likert scale in terms of familiarity between interlocutors, difficulty in making requests, imposition in carrying requests, right of performing requests, and power).

2. Theoretical Framework

To attain the objective of this study, the framework relies on Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987) and the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Pattern (CCSARP). The current research employs Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987) to explore the impact of English language proficiency on the pragmatic realization of requests among high and low EFL/ESL learners (Byon, 2004).

Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987) delves into the concept of politeness, proposing that it can be achieved by recognizing and respecting the notion of face. Face, as a universal phenomenon across cultures, refers to a public self-image that obliges the speaker to consider the feelings and expectations of others, aiming to avoid face-threatening acts. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), certain types of acts are inherently Face Threatening Acts (FTA), falling into categories such as threatening the speaker's negative and positive face and threatening the audience's negative and positive face.

Mohamed (2019) contended that EFL learners should not focus only on the discourse and structure of the target language (TL) but also on the pragmatic and social rules of the TL that encourage students to use language appropriately. Moroccan learners use English as a foreign language, which means exposure to English is deficient and restricted only in classroom activities, which leads to insufficient language input. Similarly, Almulla (2018) carried out a study concerning education in Saudi Arabia. The study indicated that the educational process in Saudi Arabia confronts significant challenges not only pertaining to teachers' awareness and school resources but also in terms of school curricula, particularly the use of English language textbooks. For instance, most of the textbook's materials are found to be originally constructed within the native speaker's cultural background (Keshmirshakan, 2019).

Regarding social variables, Darweesh and Al-Aadili (2017) revealed that EFL students showed a closer realization of native speakers. In contrast with native speakers, EFL learners did not show proper social communication because of their lack of sociopragmatic knowledge. The study agreed that highly proficient learners of English develop their performance of politeness strategy in the request speech act. The researcher inferred that low-proficient students do not have sufficient competence or socio-pragmatic awareness to perform the request. Although Darweesh and Al-Aadili (2017) have shown the influence of language proficiency on the sociopragmatic knowledge of the Iranians, their methodology has limitations. The researchers used only one tool to collect data, which is considered insufficient for collecting data regarding pragmatic realization.

Another study conducted by Tabatabaei and Farnia (2015) focused on the relationship between language proficiency and pragmatic comprehension of the refusal speech act among Iranian EFL learners. For this objective, the participants were divided into two groups, namely, high achievers and low achievers. After that, a multiple-choice discourse completion task (MDCT) was employed to elicit their pragmatic knowledge. The findings of the study revealed that both groups were alike. Another finding was that there was no correlation between learners' language proficiency and pragmatic knowledge. However, this study failed to support appropriate consideration of the use of other instruments for achieving the desirable goals, such as the Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT) and Scale-Resposnes Questionnaires (SRQ), which depend on conversation practice in various situations and at different social status levels.

Generally speaking, Arab EFL students face difficulties and challenges when they are admitted to a university, college, or institution in which the language of instruction is English and some of their instructors are native speakers of English. In a recent study examining the challenges encountered by Saudi EFL learners, Alshraah et al. (2023) shed light on the linguistic obstacles faced in the pursuit of effective English communication and academic success as they stated, "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" (Alshraah et al., 2023, p. 56). Furthermore, Maros and Halim (2018) conducted a study to examine the use of linguistic devices like hedging and politeness among Arabs and Malay from different nationalities when they contact their professors regarding their academic consultations. The aim was to explore the impact of gender on performing these devices. Data were collected by pragmatic questionnaires and one-on-one interaction (student-professor). The findings revealed a significant appearance of using hedges in their speech, although they had a lack of knowledge of the pragmatic function of these devices. Participants manifested awareness of using hedges pragmatically in order to achieve their purpose, which was to satisfy their professors and prevent any hindrances that obstructed their success. However, it is crucial to note that choosing participants from different countries influenced the result, and focusing only on the impact of gender and neglecting other factors was considered a critical limitation of the study.

Altasan (2016) did a contrastive analysis of using requests between two Saudi learners of English from different academic levels; one was a 27-year-old male intermediate learner of English, and the other was a 24-year-old female advanced learner of English. To this end, DCT was used. The data were systemized and analyzed in the light of external modification (supportive moves) and internal modification (phrasal and lexical downgrade). Regardless of the high performance of the advanced learner in terms of using lexical items and grammar competence compared to the intermediate learner, it was found that both learners (advanced and intermediate) underused external and internal modifications in contrast with the native speaker. The finding revealed that intermediate learners employed 4.5 % of internal modification, whereas 5.4% was used by advanced learners.

In a study conducted by Akpanglo-Nartey (2017), Ghana speakers and native English speakers were compared to investigate politeness strategies in requests. The focus was on examining whether there was a pragmatic transfer of politeness strategies from the learners' first language to their second language. The data collection involved role-plays based on scenarios highlighting various power relations, social distances, and costs of imposition. The results indicated the potential transferability of politeness strategies from the learners' first language to their target language.

The examination of the Saudi context in prior research has primarily centered on comparing similarities and differences between British (Qari, 2021) and American (Tawalbeh & Al-Oqaily, 2012) contexts. Other studies have encompassed acts like requests, apologies, and politeness (Alsulayyi, 2017; Qari, 2021). Overall, specific aspects of request strategies, such as directness or indirectness (Tawalbeh & Al-Oqaily, 2012), and pre- and post-Head Act techniques (Bartali, 2022) have been explored, neglecting other strategies like internal and external modifications in making requests. Therefore, there is a need for a comprehensive focus on request acts, examining them thoroughly from various perspectives.

Moreover, there is a scarcity of research on the influence of language proficiency on students' pragmatic realization. Consequently, the present study addresses this gap by investigating the impact of language proficiency levels on making requests. This study aims to fill this void in the literature, offering more focus on this perspective.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

This study involved the participation of 98 first-year students from PYP College in Saudi Arabia, specifically chosen from Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University's (PSAU) engineering and medical programs. All students were admitted to either the engineering or medicine programs upon entering the institution. The participants, aged 18 to 20, and were native Arabic speakers who commenced learning the English language at the age of eleven in Saudi public schools, adhering to the Saudi educational system. Given their shared background of attending Saudi public schools, they possessed similar cultural and academic experiences. The selection process for the study involved categorizing participants based on their performance on the Touchstone Placement Test (TPT), resulting in 50 high-achieving students (HAs) who scored ≥ 44 out of 70 and 48 low-achieving students (LAs) who scored ≤ 44 out of 70 in the TPT.

3.2. Instruments

The primary tools employed for data collection in this study were a questionnaire based on the discourse completion test (DCT) and the Scale-Response Questionnaire (SRQ).

3.2.1. *The Discourse Completion Test (DCT)*

The DCT was adopted by Alshraah et al. (2023). The formation of the current questionnaire depended basically on two social factors, social distance (+D and -D) and power (+P, -P, and =P), according to Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. The open-ended format of the DCT questionnaire featured 12 situational scenarios and was designed to elicit request strategies. The combination of these two variables leads to six possible formulations within the current DCT framework: situations 6 and 1 (-D, +P), situations 3 and 4 (+D, +P), situations 2 and 5 (=P, +D), situations 12 and 7 (-P, -D), situations 10 and 8 (+D, -P), and situations 11 and 9 (=P, -D). To ensure the dependability and validity of the gathered data, this integration involves two distinct situations in the DCT, resulting in a total of 12 unique scenarios.

3.2.2. *The Scale-Response Questionnaire (SRQ)*

As the pivotal question of the current study set out to investigate the pragmatic realization of making requests across high and low SEFL learners (situational variability), the SRQ (Alshraah et al. 2023) was used as one of the potential tools to obtain sociopragmatic competence for learners. It consisted of a predefined answer list with options that were connected with each other and aimed at investigating the intensity concerning a respondent's feelings toward or about a specific request act. This tool included an elaborated image of the scenario with related information given to learners, like imposition and power in the same situations from employed DCT.

3.3. Procedure

3.3.1. Data Collection

Data collection was conducted in the third week of the second semester of 2022/2023 with the assistance of volunteers. The participants were asked to sit for the DCT and SRQ according to the groups they were assigned to earlier. The session began with the participants being invited to ask any questions that they were uncertain about before the beginning of the tests. The participants were informed about the two different tests to be taken. They were also briefed that a 15-minute break was given between the tests to ensure the students felt comfortable and to avoid any confusion that may affect the student's performance.

3.3.2. Data Analysis

The Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Pattern (CCSARP) model, employed universally by scholars in various languages (Abdulrahman & Ayyash, 2019), was used in this study to analyze speech act strategies, providing frequencies and percentages for each group. The chi-square test was then applied for the further analysis of the DCT.

A t-test was utilized to analyze sociopragmatic assessments of respondents from both high and low-achiever groups. This test revealed statistical differences and explored the speaker's perception of speech acts, including sociopragmatic and pragma-linguistic evaluations. The collected data underwent further analysis depending on Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, considering negative and positive faces, politeness strategies, and social variables like power and distance.

4. Results

To gain the required data, students were instructed to assess social variables from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest). A t-test was performed to investigate if there was any significant difference between the two groups in realizing social variables in making a request act. The analysis focused on all six social classifications. The integration of the social variables led to six possible formulations in the current SRQ as follow: situation 6 and 1 (-D, +P), situations 3 and 4 (+D, +P), situations 2 and 5 (=P, +D), situations 12 and 7 (-P, -D), situations 10 and 8 (+D, -P), and situations 11 and 9 (=P, -D).

As stated, the letter (P) stands for the power of the speaker over the hearer and includes three possible cases: (+P) the speaker has more power, (-P) the speaker has less power, and (=P) the speaker and hearer have the same degree of power. Moreover, social distance (D) refers to the extent to which interlocutors know each other; in this variable, it would be either they are familiar with each other (+D) or not familiar (-D).

4.1. Familiarity between Interlocutors

Familiarity between interlocutors is the first variable that influences the use of request strategy among HAs and LAs. The ability of both groups to perform requests by considering the familiarity between interlocutors to carry out requests is illustrated in Table 1. The independent-samples t-test (or independent t-test) compares the means between the two groups on the same continuous, dependent variable. An independent t-test could be used to understand whether means responses on a 5-Likert scale differed based on proficiency (the dependent variable would be "means responses in 5-Likert scale" and the independent variable would be "proficiency", which has two groups: "LOW" and "HIGH").

Table 1 shows that there are no statistically significant differences at the level of significance ($p \leq 0.05$) in the familiarity (=P, +D) and (+P, -D) fields according to the variable of proficiency. However, other four categories showed significant differences in favor of high achievers at the level of significance ($p \leq 0.05$) as follows: +P, +D ($t = -2.783$, $p = 0.006$), -P, +D ($t = -2.739$, $P=0.007$), =P, -D ($t = -2.578$, $p = 0.011$), and -P, -D ($t = -3.750$, $p = 0.000$).

In this category (+P, +D), HAs ($M = 3.02$) assessed the speaker's familiarity significantly more than LAs ($M = 2.35$) at $p = 0.006$. Based on the foregoing, it can be deduced that HAs were completely aware of the social power and distance between the speaker and the hearer, in which there was social

rapport between them in terms of the familiarity field. For instance, they use a politeness device when the speaker has power over the hearer and there is a social distance between them. For example, they used the following request “Could you please fetch the charger from my office? Highly appreciated? (S3, HA#16). On the other hand, LAs have less pragmatic competence in understanding social power and distance. For instance, using mood derivable is considered as an imperative request strategy in this situation (+P, +D), for example, “tell them no class tomorrow”.

Table 1

Independent Samples T-Test Results for the Detection of Differences for Familiarity across High and Low SEFL Learners

Field	Proficiency	No	Mean	Standard deviation	t value	p-value
(+P, +D) Familiarity	LOW	48	2.352	1.067	-2.783	0.006
	HIGH	50	3.023	1.320		
(-P, +D) Familiarity	LOW	48	2.426	1.143	-2.739	0.007
	HIGH	50	3.068	1.169		
(=P, -D) Familiarity	LOW	48	2.519	1.145	-2.578	0.011
	HIGH	50	3.182	1.402		
(-P, -D) Familiarity	LOW	48	2.611	1.280	-3.750	0.000
	HIGH	50	3.568	1.228		
(=P, +D) Familiarity	LOW	48	2.426	0.988	0.681	0.497
	HIGH	50	2.284	1.070		
(+P, -D) Familiarity	LOW	48	2.924	0.988	-0.095	0.924
	HIGH	50	2.940	1.291		

In this category (-P, +D), HAs (M = 3.068) assessed the speaker’s familiarity significantly more than LAs (M = 2.42) at p = 0.007. The researcher found that HAs were inclined to employ a variety of external and internal modifications and less level of directness, meaning that they were conscious of social power and distance as the speaker in this category has less power, namely, the use of query preparatory, such as “Can I ...? I am willing to, ..., is it possible”, want statements such as “I want ...”, hedged performatives such as “I would like to...”, etc.

In this category (=P, -D), HAs (M = 3.18) assessed the speaker’s familiarity significantly more than LAs (M = 2.51) at p = 0.011. Regarding the equity of power and distance (=P, -D) between the speaker and the hearer, HAs showed more awareness of social variables compared with LAs, but they used less external and internal modification since there is equal power between the speaker and hearer.

In this category (-P, -D), HAs (M = 3.56) assessed the speaker’s familiarity significantly more than LAs (M = 2.61) at p = 0.000. It is observed that the speaker increased their use of request strategy (internal and external modification) when the speaker has less power and no distance. For example, HAs increase in the use of politeness devices such as “Can I please ...?”, and the use of downtoner such as “I just want to ...”.

In this category (=P, +D), the speaker’s familiarity assessment between HAs (M = 2.28) and LAs (M = 2.24) was not significantly different. In this situation, it is observed that both HAs and LAs assessed the familiarity somehow in the same way, with slight differences. The reason may refer to the nature of the situation, as there is equal power between the speaker and hearer. Finally, in this category (+P, -D), the speaker’s familiarity assessment between HAs (M = 2.94) and LAs (M = 2.92) was not significantly different. In terms of a superiority of power on the part of the speaker over the hearer, there is no social distance between the speaker and the hearer (+P, -D).

4.2. Speaker Power over the Hearer

Speaker power over the hearer is the second variable that influences the use of request strategy among HAs and LAs. The ability of both groups to perform requests by considering the power of the speaker over the hearer is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2

Independent Samples T-Test Results for the Detection of Differences for Power across High and Low SEFL Learners

Field	Proficiency	No	Mean	Standard deviation	t value	p-value
(+P, +D) Power	LOW	48	2.185	1.230	-2.713	0.008
	HIGH	50	2.818	1.040		
(-P, +D) Power	LOW	48	2.528	0.823	-2.579	0.017
	HIGH	50	3.045	0.971		
(=P, -D) Power	LOW	48	3.222	1.550	-2.076	0.041
	HIGH	50	3.818	1.225		
(-P, -D) Power	LOW	48	2.806	1.025	-0.540	0.590
	HIGH	50	2.920	1.073		
(=P, +D) Power	LOW	48	2.330	0.977	-1.458	0.148
	HIGH	50	2.630	1.056		
(+P, -D) Power	LOW	48	3.065	1.270	-2.147	0.034
	HIGH	50	3.534	0.773		

Table 2 shows there are no statistically significant differences at the level of significance ($p \leq 0.05$) in the power (-P, -D) and (=P, +D) fields according to the variable of proficiency. Accordingly, four categories show significant differences in favor of high achievers at the level of $p \leq 0.05$ as follows: +P, +D ($t = -2.713$, $p = 0.008$), -P, +D ($t = -2.579$, $p = 0.017$), =P, -D ($t = -2.076$, $p = 0.041$), and =P, -D ($t = -2.147$, $p = 0.034$).

In this category (+P, +D), HAs ($M = 2.81$) assessed the speaker's power significantly more than LAs ($M = 2.18$). LAs used mood derivable like "Fetch my charger from my office." while HAs inclined to use politeness devices such as "Can you please bring my charger?" In addition, in this category (-P, +D), the speaker's power assessment between HAs ($M = 3.045$) and LAs ($M = 2.528$) was significantly different at $p = 0.017$. Category 2 includes situation 1 (canceling a class) in which HAs used hedged performative such as "I would like to tell you that I will not attend tomorrow's lecture", whereas LAs used want statements such as "I want to tell that I will not attend tomorrow's lecture".

In this category (=P, -D), HAs ($M = 3.81$) assessed the speaker's power significantly more than LAs ($M = 3.22$). Meanwhile, in the category (-P, -D), the speaker's power assessment between HAs ($M = 2.92$) and LAs ($M = 2.80$) was not significantly different. Category 4 includes situation 7 (asking for a recommendation), in which both groups used politeness requests such as "Can you please write a recommendation letter for me?".

In this category (=P, +D), the speaker's power assessment between HAs ($M = 2.63$) and LAs ($M = 2.33$) was not significantly different. Category 5 includes situation 2 (sharing ideas). Both groups used hedged performative such as "I would like to share my ideas". In this category (+P, -D), HAs ($M = 3.53$) assessed the speaker's power significantly more than LAs ($M = 3.06$).

Based on the above findings, HAs were able to perform requests by taking into account the social power and distance between the speaker and the hearer, as their assessment was significantly higher than LA. However, LAs assessed the power variable lower than HAs, indicating that they were unable to perform a request when there is a power of the speaker over the hearer, but there is no social distance between them. Such difference is manifested in their pragmatic realization.

4.3. Difficulty of Performing Request

Difficulty of performing request is the third variable that influences the use of request strategy among HAs and LAs. The ability of both groups to perform requests by considering the difficulty in performing requests and social distance variables is illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3*Independent Samples T-Test Results for the Detection of Differences for Difficulty across High and Low SEFL Learners*

Field	Proficiency	No	Mean	Standard deviation	t value	p-value
(+P, +D) Difficult	LOW	48	2.216	0.824	-0.138	0.890
	HIGH	50	2.241	0.930		
(-P, +D) Difficult	LOW	48	2.519	0.916	-4.209	0.000
	HIGH	50	3.318	0.951		
(=P, -D) Difficult	LOW	48	2.148	0.984	-1.559	0.122
	HIGH	50	2.489	1.179		
(-P, -D) Difficult	LOW	48	2.213	0.940	-2.579	0.011
	HIGH	50	2.727	1.031		
(=P, +D) Difficult	LOW	48	2.528	0.993	-2.424	0.017
	HIGH	50	3.045	1.120		
(+P, -D) Difficult	LOW	48	2.157	1.072	-2.272	0.025
	HIGH	50	2.914	0.875		

Table 3 shows there are no statistically significant differences at $p \leq 0.05$ in only two categories of the difficulty, i.e., (+P, +D) and (=P, -D) fields according to the variable of proficiency. However, four categories showed significant differences in favor of high achievers at $p \leq 0.05$ as follows: -P, +D ($t = -4.209$, $p = 0.000$), -P, -D ($t = -2.579$, $p = 0.011$), =P, +D ($t = -2.424$, $p = 0.017$), and +P, -D ($t = -2.272$, $p = 0.025$).

In this category (+P, +D), the speaker's difficulty assessment between HAs ($M = 2.24$) and LAs ($M = 2.61$) was not significantly different. In this situation, there is social power and distance between the speaker and hearer. HAs assessed difficulty more than LAs, but it was still insignificant. However, in this category (-P, +D), HAs ($M = 3.31$) assessed the speaker's difficulty significantly more than LAs ($M = 2.51$). Category 2 includes situation 1 (canceling a class), such as the use of hedged performatives among HAs "I would like to tell you that I will not attend tomorrow's lecture", whereas LAs used mood derivable "I will not come tomorrow". These results showed how HAs were more conscious of social variables than LAs. That is, when speakers have low power, HAs use more polite expressions by employing a variety of request strategies with a person who has more power.

In this category (=P, -D), the speaker's difficulty assessment between HAs ($M = 2.48$) and LAs ($M = 2.14$) was not significantly different. Moreover, in this category (-P, -D), HAs ($M = 2.72$) assessed the speaker's difficulty significantly more than LAs ($M = 2.21$) at $p = 0.011$. Category 4 includes situation 7 (asking a recommendation) in which HAs used politeness devices such as "Can you write ... please, I appreciate you?", while LAs used direct strategy (explicit performative) such as "I ask you to write".

Regarding category 5 (=P, +D), HAs ($M = 3.04$) assessed the speaker's difficulty significantly more than LAs ($M = 2.52$). In addition, category 6 (+P, -D), HAs ($M = 2.91$) assessed the speaker's difficulty significantly more than LAs ($M = 2.15$). For both categories, HAs scored higher levels than LAs in their assessment of the difficulty of performing request strategies. That is an indicator that HAs have more sociopragmatic knowledge than LAs.

It is observed that HAs have a better pragmatic realization depending on their assessment compared to LAs' assessment. That is, LAs showed weakness in their pragmatic competence in realizing social variables that influence speech acts. Moreover, the findings contended that the preferable request strategy was conventional indirectness as recognized by question modals and forms. LAs were not familiar with situational and social rules influencing the making of requests. Also, it was observed that the participants did not have sufficient competence to perform requests in English because of their reliance on "mood derivables" and "want statements" that are considered imperative and face-threatening acts (FTA) on the part of the hearer. Moreover, their performance was not consistent with HAs regarding pragmatic realization. All of these indicate the difficulty of LAs in using request strategy with the same impact as HAs.

4.4. Right of Performing Request

Right of performing request is the fourth variable that influences the use of request strategy among HAs and LAs. The ability of both groups to perform requests by taking into account the right to perform requests is illustrated in Table 4.

Table 0

Independent Samples T-Test Results for the Detection of Differences for Right across High and Low SEFL Learners

Field	Proficiency	No	Mean	Standard deviation	t value	p-value
(+P, +D) Right	LOW	48	2.778	1.327	-2.063	0.042
	HIGH	50	3.295	1.112		
(-P, +D) Right	LOW	48	2.861	1.143	-0.226	0.822
	HIGH	50	2.909	0.910		
(=P, -D) Right	LOW	48	3.046	1.125	-1.607	0.111
	HIGH	50	3.364	0.742		
(-P, -D) Right	LOW	48	2.954	0.958	-1.438	0.154
	HIGH	50	3.239	0.997		
(=P, +D) Right	LOW	48	2.972	0.983	1.441	0.153
	HIGH	50	2.705	0.823		
(+P, -D) Right	LOW	48	2.991	1.176	-2.893	0.005
	HIGH	50	3.602	0.846		

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), the speaker's right to make the request is considered another factor that could influence the level of directness and politeness in making requests in the English language. Table 4 shows there are no statistically significant differences at $p \leq 0.05$ in the right (-P, +D), (=P, -D), (-P, -D), and (=P, +D) fields according to the variable of proficiency. However, only two categories show significant differences in favor of high achievers at $p \leq 0.05$ as follows: +P, -D ($t = -2.893$, $p = 0.005$) and +P, +D ($t = -2.063$, $p = 0.042$).

In this category (=P, +D), HAs ($M = 3.29$) assessed the speaker's right significantly more than LAs ($M = 2.77$). Category 1 includes situation 3 (fetching the charger), such as the use of politeness devices among both groups, "Can you please bring my charger?" and situation 4 (broadcasting news), in which both groups used politeness devices, such as "Can you inform the students that tomorrow's lecture is canceled?". Furthermore, in this category (-P, +D), the speaker's right assessment between HAs ($M = 2.90$) and LAs ($M = 2.86$) was not significantly different. Both groups used hedged performatives such as "I would like to tell you that I will not come tomorrow" and grounders like "I would like an extension for my assignment because I take a long time typing my work".

In this category (=P, -D), the speaker's right assessment between HAs ($M = 3.36$) and LAs ($M = 3.04$) was not significantly different. Both groups used politeness devices such as "Can I use your old book?" and external modifications (disarmer) "I know you are busy, but can I use your calculator?". The speaker's right assessment in category 4 (-P, -D) was $M = 3.23$ by HAs and $M = 2.95$ by LAs was, and the speaker's right assessment in category 5 (=P, +D) was $M = 2.97$ by HAs and $M = 2.70$ by LAs. This means that in both categories, HAs and LAs showed similarities in assessing the right of the speaker to perform requests. Although HAs were assessed higher than LAs, it was not significant.

Finally, in this category (+P, -D), HAs ($M = 3.60$) assessed the speaker's right to perform requests significantly more than LAs ($M = 2.99$). Category 6 includes situation 10 (changing the time), in which HAs used strong hints such as "I am busy..." and situation 8 (turning down the volume), in which LAs used mood derivables such as "turn the volume down ...".

The findings showed that both HAs and LAs show more similar than different assessments of the right to perform requests. That is, there are no statistically significant differences at $p \leq 0.05$ in the Right (-P, +D), (=P, -D), (-P, -D), and (=P, +D) fields according to the variable of the proficiency. However, there are statistically significant differences at $p \leq 0.05$ in the right (+P, +D) field according to the

variable of proficiency as $t = 2.063$, $p = 0.042$ in favor of high achievers and in the right (+P, -D) field according to the variable of proficiency as $t = 2.893$, $p = 0.005$ in favor of high achievers.

4.5. Imposition to Carry Out Request

Imposition to carry out request is the fifth variable that influences the use of request strategy among HAs and LAs. The ability of both groups to perform requests by taking into account the imposition to carry out requests is illustrated in Table 5.

Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987) reported that context factors such as imposition influence the choosing and realization of the request act to achieve communicative acts. Table 5 shows there are no statistically significant differences at $p \leq 0.05$ in the obligation (+P, +D) and (=P, +D) fields according to the variable of proficiency. However, three categories show significant differences in favor of high achievers at $p \leq 0.05$ as follows: -P, +D ($t = -4.209$, $p = 0.000$), =P, -D ($t = -2.520$, $p = 0.013$), -P, -D ($t = -2.582$, $p = 0.011$), +P, -D ($t = -2.292$, $p = 0.024$).

In category 1 (+P, +D), the speaker's obligation assessment between HAs ($M = 3.125$) and LAs ($M = 2.81$) was not significantly different. Moreover, in category 5 (=P, +D), the speaker's obligation assessment between HAs ($M = 2.54$) and LAs ($M = 2.35$) was not significantly different. It is observed based on the t-test results that in category 2 (-P, +D), the speaker's obligation assessment between HAs ($M = 3.18$) and LAs ($M = 2.519$) was significantly different at $p = 0.000$, including situations 1 and 6. In category 3 (=P, -D), HAs ($M = 3.15$) assessed the speaker's obligation significantly more than LAs ($M = 2.66$), including situations 9 and 11. In category 4 (-P, -D), HAs ($M = 3.15$) assessed the speaker's obligation significantly more than LAs ($M = 2.62$). Finally, in category 6 (+P, -D), the speaker's obligation assessment between HAs ($M = 3.38$) and LAs ($M = 2.75$) was significantly different.

Table 5

Independent Samples T-Test Results for the Detection of Differences for Obligation across High and Low SEFL Learners

Field	Proficiency	No	Mean	Standard deviation	t value	p-value
(+P, +D) Obligation	LOW	48	2.815	1.191	-1.324	0.189
	HIGH	50	3.125	1.106		
(-P, +D) Obligation	LOW	48	2.519	0.916	-4.209	0.000*
	HIGH	50	3.18	0.951		
(=P, -D) Obligation	LOW	48	2.667	1.046	-2.520	0.013*
	HIGH	50	3.159	0.848		
(-P, -D) Obligation	LOW	48	2.620	1.149	-2.582	0.011*
	HIGH	50	3.159	0.854		
(=P, +D) Obligation	LOW	48	2.352	0.867	-0.998	0.321
	HIGH	50	2.546	1.025		
(+P, -D) Obligation	LOW	48	2.759	1.400	-2.292	0.024*
	HIGH	50	3.386	1.280		

5. Discussion

The main objectives of the current study were the differences and similarities in the pragmatic realization of making requests between HAs and LAs. The findings of the DCT and SRQ have shown that the lack of pragmatic competence may affect low achievers' communication in the second language due to their use of inaccurate expressions, which lead to unsuccessful communicative events. To illustrate, the use of mood derivable indicates their pragmatic incompetence, which hinders them from performing request in an appropriate manner. This finding is in line with Qassim et al.'s (2021) that negative pragmatic transfer in the context of Iraqi learners is delineated as the manifestation of the speaker's pragma-linguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge within target language settings. This manifestation results in the realization of expressions and behaviors that diverge from those typical of

native speakers of the target language. Such instances of transfer contribute to communication breakdowns and misunderstandings.

This result may be explained by the fact that low achievers are not able to produce utterances to communicate their specific intentions in a second language. However, HAs have shown pragmatic competence. To clarify, HAs are inclined to use hedged performative phrases. Perhaps their pragmatic competence affects their use of request strategies positively. HAs' use of request strategies reflects a high level of pragmatic competence as opposed to the use of mood derivables that are considered a face-threatening act on the part of the hearer. This finding agrees with Chen (2023) that the speaker's failure to employ pragmatic performance effectively and appropriately may cause the interlocutor to consider the utterances as socially rough and impolite. This finding is in line with Shahzadi et al.'s (2021) study that Pakistani ESL learners and Chinese EFL learners tended toward using mood derivables, particularly in situations of different social variables, power, and familiarity between the interlocutors. Therefore, the results support the claim of the current study that LAs show difficulty in using and realizing the request act, and language proficiency has a significant impact on producing a range of request strategies.

However, the findings showed that LAs used mood derivables, which begin with an imperative verb. Using mood derivables in a situation that entails the existence of social power and distances between the interlocutors is considered impolite and denotes the lack of pragmatic knowledge of the LAs, and this strategy comes under the bald record strategy, according to FTA. To clarify, when the speaker has a higher level of social, cultural, and hierarchy than the addressee, losing face is not probable to happen. Therefore, a direct request may be performed. If the speaker has a low power status, the indirect request will be used. Therefore, using force is more likely to happen. Based on the foregoing, HAs are inclined toward using an indirect request strategy more than LAs. This finding lends tremendous support to Darweesh and Al-Aadili (2017), who stated that advanced learners performed more indirect request acts. On the other hand, their findings are consistent with the current study, which states that mood derivables are the most commonly used request strategy among low achievers.

The study found that HAs have higher proficiency levels than LAs in terms of using well-structured sentences that have correct grammar and word choice. Moreover, HAs are more inclined toward using mitigating request devices and polite strategies compared to LAs. Furthermore, HAs used non-conventionally indirect (NCI) strategies, which reveal their high proficiency level as opposed to LAs. Alshraah and Nishat (2023) have uncovered a compelling link between language proficiency and the application of internal modification devices. As the researchers succinctly put it, "Findings show a significant influence of language proficiency on using internal modifications devices" (p. 109). This revelation prompts a closer examination of the intricate interplay between language skills and the utilization of such devices.

Moreover, LAs face challenges in terms of semantic level, such as the use of "daly" rather than "delay", along with having problems in terms of spelling, such as "tomorrow" rather than "tomorow", and grammatical mistakes, such as the use of the auxiliary verb "does", rather than "do". Moreover, the use of weak sentences in terms of grammar and word choice, such as "your have" instead of "you have" and using the assignment soon instead of "delay the date of submission" manifest their low proficiency levels. According to the researchers, achieving pragmatic competence is deemed challenging for non-native speakers, primarily attributable to the cultural disparities existing between the two languages.

Generally speaking, HAs have a better ability to minimize the transfer of the first language by using polite expressions and devices that are commonly used in English. According to the politeness scale (FTA), HAs preferred negative politeness by using external modification expressions such as apology in their request, taking into account the importance of the factor of social variables (power and distance) and off-record strategies such as non-conventionally indirect strategies (strong and mild hints). However, LAs' groups use an on-record strategy by using direct requests, and they use fewer internal and external modifications in comparison with HAs' performance.

This paper sought to analyze request realization made by Saudi learners, exploring the impact of language proficiency on pragmatic realization in exploiting request act strategies chosen by respondents from high and low language levels. The findings showed that there are significant differences between

HAs and LAs. The results were in line with those of the previous studies, which assumed that intermediate and advanced learners are inclined to use more external and internal modifications in their speech acts (Zughaibi, 2023). Results confirm those of Al-Sallal and Ahmed (2022), stating that “it requires speakers to have adequate pragmatic competence in a language that enables an interlocutor to mitigate the use of direct strategies to prevent any misunderstanding or offensive interaction” (p. 2). They claimed that such prolixity could show the speaker’s intention to emphasize their linguistic knowledge; that is, to indicate that they are sufficiently proficient at performing verbosity statements in the context of speech act. The decline of using external modification by LAs may refer to the assumption of the influence of their L1 and weakness in language proficiency that may hinder them from producing sufficient pragmatic competence compared to HAs’ performance (Al-Momani et al., 2017).

The results of the current study align with Alsulayyi’s (2016) research, which highlighted a deficiency in pragmatic competence among Saudi learners. The remedy suggested involves enhancing exposure to real-life situations. Understanding the norms, values, and culture of the target language emerges as a potent strategy for boosting their pragmatic abilities. In essence, this study concludes that in the production and realization of speech acts, there were more distinctions than similarities between HAs and LAs, leading to the conclusion of the effect of language proficiency on pragmatic production and realization.

The findings of this paper are also in line with Lailiyah et al.’s (2023, p. 184), believing that “education level shows the difference in language. The added that “people with higher education have a language style different from those with secondary, low, or no education”. That is “undergraduate women have the ability to use complaining strategies at the lowest (hint) and highest (explicit blame person) levels. This implies they soften their speech to consider and maintain good relations with their speech partners” (p. 184).

It is evident that LAs lack both pragmatic and vocabulary knowledge. Additionally, their spelling errors and poorly structured sentences impede their ability to execute request strategies effectively, rendering their sentence structures incomprehensible. This aligns with Al Khasawneh’s (2021) assertion that HAs demonstrate diverse use of internal and external modifications, each with varying percentages. In contrast, LAs tend to be constrained in their use, relying on a limited set of request expressions.

As for the differences between HAs and LAs, the former group has more pragmatic competence and proficiency levels than LAs. Moreover, the proficiency levels and production levels of HAs were better than those of LAs. The study attributed these differences to the academic level, language proficiency level, and pragmatic realization of both groups. Furthermore, LAs faced difficulties performing requests in terms of the following power and distance variables (-P, +D; +P, +D; =P, -D). In addition, the lack of pragmatic competence affects low achievers’ communication in the second language due to their use of inaccurate expressions, which leads to unsuccessful communicative events. LAs resorted to the use of direct request strategies. On the other hand, HAs preferred to use polite request strategies. In keeping with Alshraah and Daradkeh’s (2021, p. 56) findings, which highlight the prevalence of conventional indirect request strategies in both EFL and ESL, it is noteworthy that these approaches are favored over direct request strategies, with the latter being more common than non-conventional request strategies. As they stated: “both EFL and ESL use conventional indirect request strategies more than direct request strategies, which are used more than non-conventional request strategies” (p. 56).

Masruddin et al. (2023) claimed that making the intricacies of pragmatic instruction explicit in the L2 classroom can take various forms. This includes exposing learners to comprehensive and understandable input, involving them in interactive activities that require productive language use, providing metapragmatic comments or information on input features, and fostering awareness of both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic aspects of pragmatic competence.

This study stands out as one of the scarce inquiries delving into the impact of language proficiency on the utilization of request acts, encompassing both sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic dimensions. To advance this research, there is a critical need to broaden its scope by incorporating additional factors. Exploring the influence of variables such as the length of residence on the enhancement of pragmatic competence is paramount. Furthermore, expanding the sample to encompass diverse demographics,

including gender and age, from various universities and high schools would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding.

It is worth noting that this study concentrates on the production and realization of speech acts, omitting a focus on the obstacles and challenges encountered by L2 learners in applying pragmatic knowledge. Future studies could build upon this foundation to explore the specific difficulties faced by L2 learners in the realm of pragmatics, offering insights and solutions to further improve pragmatic competence. It is highly recommended that future investigations incorporate alternative tools, such as interviews and role-playing, in order to compare and contrast their efficacy with the current findings. Subsequent research could extend beyond the current study by encompassing scenarios situated in more diverse social contexts. This expanded scope could contribute to a deeper understanding of the utilization of request acts across a wide array of social situations within the realm of ILP studies.

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