

Differences in EFL Learners' Requests to Faculty in Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication: The Case of Gender and Proficiency

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate EFL learners' request strategies to faculty to see whether politeness is interpreted differently or similarly across gender and different levels of language proficiency in text-based synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC). Data included initial semistructured interviews with 4 EFL instructors and 10 college EFL learners. Based on the interviews, an online task was developed that included request situations that were most likely to occur in real life in SCMC settings. Having administered the Quick Placement Test (QPT), the online task was completed by 99 lower-intermediate and 118 upper-intermediate EFL learners in 4 universities in Iran. Participants' request strategies were coded and analysed to explore the possible differences. Chi-square findings suggested that gender had no relations with the choice of request strategies by the participants to faculty in SCMC; however, level of proficiency made a difference. This research provides guidelines for course designers to generate appropriate pedagogic guidelines for EFL learners in their hierarchical relationships with their teachers.

Keywords: Gender, Proficiency, Request Strategies, Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (SCMC)

1. Introduction

The use of synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC; i.e., chat or video) has become pervasive in recent years. This new technology facilitates interpersonal communications by connecting people (Lenhart & Madden, 2007). Thus, it could also be used to establish a series of academic connections between EFL teachers and learners. Moreover, the teacher-student relationship may have become less asymmetric. This may root in recent changes in the values of the younger generation that influence teacher-student relationship.

As a result, EFL students are allowed to contact their teachers through SCMC. SCMC has features of written language in conversational style with a variety of speech acts including greeting, request, compliment, apology, and gratitude (Sykes, 2005). Therefore, it is not surprising if EFL learner mitigate their requests through SCMC.

Request as “one of the speech acts articulating the speaker’s purpose that he or she wants the hearer to do something for him or her” (Hashemian, 2014, p. 56) is closely associated to the sociolinguistic aspect of language learning. Both (in)direct speech acts constitute an important part of pragmatic competence that demonstrates learners’ appropriate use of the L2 in social context (Kasper & Rose, 2002). However, most EFL teachers claim that EFL learners fail to use appropriate polite strategies when mitigating their requests in SCMC settings.

As Holmes (2013) highlights, requests are intrinsically face-threatening because they are intended to threaten the addressee’s negative face (i.e., freedom of action and freedom from imposition). Therefore, requests offer a good opportunity to examine the potential connections between sociolinguistic competence, language proficiency, and, gender.

Considering the lack of incorporation of video-based SCMC in educational settings in Iran, the text-based mode of SCMC was utilized. The text-based mode of SCMC allows L2 researchers to analyze the manner in which EFL learners utilize the resources of linguistic diversity available to them in communication with other people (Lin, Huang, & Liou, 2013). Hence, the present study was undertaken to investigate the EFL production of request strategies in text-based SCMC. Further, the present study aimed to reveal the role of gender and proficiency in EFL learners’ production of request strategies to their faculty.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Proficiency

One of the most important factors in language learning is EFL learners’ ability to use language knowledge in different tasks known as language proficiency (Ellis, 2008). Language

proficiency includes organizational and pragmatic competences (Bachman & Palmer, 2010). In the present study, language proficiency is defined as organizational competence: It includes organizational knowledge that refers to the knowledge of organizing utterances and texts such as lexical and grammatical knowledge (Bachman & Palmer, 2010). As standardized test scores are considered to be the most reliable tool to determine levels of language proficiency (e.g., Allami & Naeimi, 2011; Nguyen, 2008; Taguchi, 2006; Xu, Case, & Wang, 2009), the Quick Placement Test (QPT; Oxford University Press & Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, 2004) was utilized to determine the EFL learners' level of language proficiency in this study.

Language proficiency has been suggested to be a key factor in EFL pragmatic studies (e.g., Allami & Naeimi, 2011; Jalilifar, 2009; Rose, 2000; Xiao, 2015). The results of some pragmatic studies have illustrated that language proficiency positively affects L2 pragmatic competence (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Kasper & Rose, 2002). However, contradictory findings regarding this exist (e.g., Allami & Naeimi, 2011; Cook & Liddicoat, 2002), suggesting that even highly proficient EFL learners still lack pragmatic competence. Considering this, more studies with a larger sample size need to be done to make valid and solid decisions regarding this issue. Further, mode of communication (i.e., face-to-face or CMC) is an important factor in designing pragmatic studies. Therefore, concerning the incremental development of text-based SCMC use in language learning and teaching, this study was an attempt to examine lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate EFL learners' request strategies to faculty in text-based SCMC. More specifically, it aimed to see whether lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate EFL learners behave differently when requesting to faculty in text-based SCMC setting.

2.2. Gender

Previous studies investigated the role of gender as one of the social factors in L2 teaching (Bacha, Bahous, & Diab, 2012; Coates, 1993; Holmes, 1995; Fasold, 2000, Mills, 2003, 2004; Saidi & Khosravi, 2015). Gender refers to female's and male's proper behavior in each society (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dansen, 2002). It has been attributed as a factor to differentiate in communication, based on the idea that females and males are different in their language. One of the differences is that females are considered to be politer than males (Wardhaugh, 2000). According to Speer (2002), females have a higher tendency than males to

apply politeness strategies in their speech such as the use of more compliments, more apologies, and more thanks. Also, when talking with same gender peers, females use many positive politeness strategies. On the other hand, males in similar circumstances do not show this tendency (Hobbs, 2003).

Further, previous studies on gender differences in language (e.g., Coates, 1993; Saito, 2010) have indicated linguistic differences at phonological, semantic, syntactic, and discourse levels. The findings of these studies have shown that the females were politer and more cooperative than the males in the verbal interactions. The findings of Coats (1992) indicated that the females were more cooperative and more concerned with the requestees' positive face need. Saito (2010) explored seven Japanese male use directive speech acts in a higher percentage in workplace. The findings revealed that the gender of the speaker had a key role in the choice of the directive form chosen. Parvaresh, Bidaki, and Farahani (2014) observed a significant difference between the females and males in that the female participants used hedging, postponement, statement of regret, statement of empathy, statement of principle, and unspecific reply more frequency than the male participants. Moreover, the female participants were more probably to be sensitive. Also, Arani and Tehrani (2013) conducted a study with 30 American native speakers of English and 60 Iranian EFL learners. The findings indicated that there were significant differences between the female and male participants' use of direct and indirect strategies. In another study, Pishghadam and Sharafadini (2011) found that the male participants tended to utilize more direct strategies such as imperatives, whereas the female participants employed more indirect suggestions like yes-no questions.

However, the results of a recent study done by Saidi and Khosravi (2015) with 60 EFL students indicated that there was not a significant difference between the female and male participants. The results of Lorenzo-Dus and Bou-Franch (2003), further, indicated that both female and male participants tended to use politer strategies. Allami's (2006) findings also indicated that the female and male participants paid equal attention to griping strategies.

2.3. Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication

SCMC refers to the exchange of messages between people via networked computers in the text-based or video-based mode that occurs in real time (Maloney, 2007). Texted-based SCMC, as the focus of the present research, provides online users with interactive services in which they can communicate in real time by typing messages onto their computer screen while having control over their information (Madden & Fox, 2006).

Although it is generally assumed that SCMC follows the patterns of spoken discourse, research findings on text-based SCMC in language learning have illustrated that this medium of communication differs in fundamental ways from that of face-to-face communication (e.g., Blake, 2008; Freiermuth, 2011). For example, face-to-face interaction is supported by the use of paralinguistic features and nonlinguistic behaviors (e.g., intonation, eye contact, and body language; Hung & Higgins, 2016). Though paralinguistic features and nonlinguistic behaviors do not exist in text-based SCMC, some nonlinguistic signs such as emoticons in text-based SCMC express additional meaning (Rassaei, 2017) and provide more information to the interaction (Huang, Yen, & Zhang, 2008).

Text-based SCMC, further, carries unique features like (1) lack of turn adjacency (e.g., Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974), (2) use of simplified registers (e.g., timesaving spellings; Freiermuth, 2011), (3) producing a larger quantity of better output and feeling less threatened (Blake, 2008), (4) higher motivation and self-confidence (e.g., Kern, 1995), and (5) freeing up learners' working memory by reduced pace of interaction (Payne & Whitney, 2002).

As Rhem (2000) claims, another difference between face-to-face and text-based SCMC is that EFL learners may adopt different personae in the written mode of communication. However, text-based SCMC may help shy and reticent learners to speak up easily and actively (Rezai & Zafari, 2010). Hoven (2006), further, argues that text-based SCMC can break down barriers between the teacher and learners. Therefore, it may be suggested that face-to-face interaction is different from SCMC and may be expected that EFL learners behave differently when communicating in text-based SCMC.

A number of L2 studies have investigated the pattern of interaction in SCMC (e.g., Darhower, 2002; van der Zwaard and Bannin, 2014). For example, van der Zwaard and Bannin (2014), examined the nature, scope, and possible patterns of negotiated interaction between native speakers and nonnative speakers of English in SCMC. It was found that the L2 learners communicated freely in SCMC and were not concerned with the loss of face. They claimed this was due to the relative anonymity of the chat-medium (i.e., the absence of audio-visual registration).

Darhower (2002) further examined the interactive features of SCMC in an online class. Discourse analyses revealed the unique ways in which the L2 constructed a dynamic, learner-

centred discourse community. The L2 learners developed their sociolinguistic competence in this study while using their L2 in the chat rooms for solidarity and enjoyment.

In another study, Lee (2002) reported how nonnative speakers interacted with native speakers in a SCMC setting. The findings indicated that online communication fostered high levels of interaction using various types of negotiation strategies. Students also failed to perform certain tasks, such as direct and indirect speech acts.

Different from the previous line of research, Skye (2005) and Eslami-Rasekh and Lui (2013) systematically examined the strength of the connection between SCMC and pragmatic instruction. Skye (2005) investigated the effects of three types of synchronous group discussion (written chat, oral chat, and traditional face-to-face discussion) on the acquisition of speech acts (refusals of an invitation) in L2. The qualitative and quantitative analyses illustrated that the synchronous discussion type did not have any effect on the pragmatic development of L2. The written chat groups outperformed the others in terms of both complexity and variety of strategies used.

Eslami-Rasekh and Liu (2013) investigated the effectiveness of explicit pragmatic instruction on the acquisition of requests by the EFL learners in Taiwan in SCMC setting. The results showed that the explicit pragmatic instruction had a positive impact on the EFL learners in SCMC setting.

Finally, in their recently published paper, Mirzaei, Hashemian, and Khoramshekouh (2016) examined the effects of SCMC on the development of the Iranian L2 learners' comprehension of implicatures. Their results indicated that the L2 learners developed significant ILP ability to comprehend and interpret L2 implicatures after the instruction.

As the above review suggests, in spite of a good range of studies (e.g., Eslami-Rasekh & Liu, 2013; Mirzaei, Hashemian, & Khoramshekouh, 2016; van der Zwaard & Bannin, 2014)) that have included text-based SCMC in their research designs, their goals and research designs were entirely different from the present study. In fact, the previous EFL studies have been attempts to examine the effect of SCMC on development of L2 pragmatic. However, little is known about EFL learners' patterns of request strategies in text-based SCMC.

Therefore, considering the importance of contextual and social dimensions of language learning (Norton, 2000; Tarone, 2000), it is necessary to investigate EFL learners' patterns of request strategies in text-based SCMC to see if such learners are able to effectively communicate with their teachers outside the classroom in text-based SCMC settings. Further,

little is known about gender-based differences from the perspective of pragmatics in text-based SCMS settings. Thus, this study may be significant in finding out whether gender-based differences in EFL learners' request strategies to faculty are sustained or neutralized in text-based SCMS settings. Therefore, attempts were made to find answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the request strategies employed by lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate EFL learners to faculty in SCMC settings?
2. Is there any relationship between gender and the request strategies employed by EFL learners to faculty in SCMC settings?
3. Is there any relationship between the level of proficiency and the request strategies employed by EFL learners to faculty in SCMC settings?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

In the beginning of the study, four EFL teachers and 10 EFL learners participated in the interviews to exploit the request situations that fit closely to real situations. They were chosen based on convenient sampling. Then, as participation was completely voluntary in this study, an e-mail explaining the purpose of this study and an invitation for voluntary participation was sent to 283 EFL undergraduate and graduate of four universities in Iran. A total number of 217 EFL learners were volunteered to participate in this study. All the participants were Persian native speakers selected through convenience sampling.

The participants' language proficiency was measured by QPT (Oxford University Press & Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, 2004) at the outset of this study. Based on the Common European Framework of Reference criteria, they were divided into two groups of lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate EFL learners. The students who scored between 30-39 were considered as lower-intermediate, whereas the students who scored between 31-40 were considered as upper-intermediate learners. The lower-intermediate ($n = 99$; male = 30 and female = 69) participants were B.A. students whose ages ranged from 19-25. The upper-intermediate EFL students ($n = 118$; male = 33 and female = 85) between the ages of 23-48 also participated in this study. They were B.A. holders or graduate students. The lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate level of proficiencies were chosen because most college

EFL learners in Iran fall in these levels of language proficiency. Further, it should be noted that the number of the male and female EFL participants was not equal, which is due the fact that most university EFL students in Iran are female learners.

3.2. Instrumentation

QPT (Oxford University Press & Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, 2004) was used to assure the participants' level of proficiency. The test has two parallel versions: computer-based version and paper and pen version. In the present study, the paper and pen version was used due to the ease of administration. The test consists of 60 questions in multiple-choice format including reading, vocabulary, and grammar, taking approximately 30 minutes to be answered. The reliability of the test, as measured by Cronbach's alpha, was found to be .83. A demography questionnaire was also utilized to elicit the required information (e.g., age, L1, gender; see Appendix A).

Further, an online task (see Appendix B), based on the semistructured interviews with the four EFL instructors and 10 EFL learners, was developed. To better exploit the full range of SCMC situations and to pay more attention to EFL learners, "technology-mediated tasks" (Chapelle, 2001, p. 2) should be identified and developed to fit closely to learner needs as well as to focus on real-world situations. Therefore, a task-based needs analysis must be carried out to identify EFL learners' real-world technology tasks. Moreover, given that it is EFL teacher who typically is the person whom EFL learners are in contact with in SCMC settings, it is important to bring their voices into the needs analysis. Therefore, seven situations were designed (see Appendix B). All the situations had one speech act (i.e., request) with two sociolinguistic variables (i.e., power and distance) being controlled.

The validity and reliability of the task were tested. For validity, expert opinions were attained to see whether the situations were appropriate in measuring the intended research questions and if the explanations were understandable. Based on the feedback received from the experts, the task was modified. Further, analyses were conducted to calculate the reliability of the task. The Pearson correlation between the sets of codes obtained by the two raters indicated 0.97 interrater reliability.

Moreover, a text-based SCMC tool was used. Telegram, as a free online communication tool was utilized. This application provide opportunities for learners to be involved in real-time communication when they are in distant locations. This text-based SCMC is a relatively

new program that is widely used in Iran. Further, this application carries features that make saving conversations possible. As mentioned in the questionnaire, the participants assured that they were familiar with this chat application (see Appendix A).

3.3. Procedure and Data Analysis

First, qualitative data were collected via semistructured interviews with the four EFL teachers and 10 EFL learners. The EFL learners and teachers were interviewed in different settings by the researchers. Each interview lasted for 30 min. The EFL teachers were interviewed to see if their students contacted them in text-based SCMC. Then, they were requested to name the situations in which their students mitigate their request in SCMC the most. The results of the interviews illustrated that the EFL learners felt free to contact their teachers in SCMC settings. The situations in which the EFL learners mitigated their requests in text-based SCMC settings were identified. Then, the EFL learners were interviewed and requested to identify the situations in which they would contact their teachers in text-based SCMC settings. The results of the semistructured interviews indicated that the students' requests to their teachers included the following ones: borrowing books, asking for PowerPoints, requesting explanations, exam date, projects, exam results, and appointments. Based on the results, seven situations were developed.

Having developed the task, an e-mail explaining the purpose of this study along an invitation for voluntary participation was sent to 283 EFL learners. The participants who volunteered to take part in this study were required to fill an online questionnaire, which provided information such as their age, L1, and degree. One week later, the QPT was administered to determine their level of proficiency. Based on the QPT results, they were divided into two levels of language proficiency: lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate.

Then, data were collected online by means of a chat application in the laboratory setting. The data collection session was scheduled so that the participants interacted with the researcher in a time. To avoid any confusion due to unfamiliarity with using Telegram, before beginning the chat, the participants were instructed how to post their answers using Telegram. Then, the participants were reconnected with their interlocutor (i.e., researcher) via Telegram.

The participants had to complete an online task that had seven request situations. Each situation was posted one by one. The participants were supposed to type in their computer screens, using the keyboard, what they believed to be an appropriate response after reading

each situation. The participants had 90 s to prepare and post their answers for each situation. The time limit was set to make sure the answers were as much as possible close to real-world requests employed by EFL learners and students do not think much over each task. The participants' responses were, then, saved.

The request strategies employed by the participants were coded by two raters. As head act is the main part of requests and can stand by itself, the head acts were coded and analyzed. In the example:

Example # 1

➤ *Dear Professor, may I have the PPT file of methodology? Thanks.*

May I have the PPT file of methodology is the head act, a minimal unit of the request realization. The raters classified the participants' responses based on the coding scheme proposed by Blum-Kulka, House, and Olshtain (1989).

Three levels of coding schemes were subdivided into nine distinct sublevels entitled strategy types that together form a scale of indirectness: direct requests (mood derivable, explicit performative, hedged performative, locution derivable, want statement), conventionally indirect requests (suggestory formula, query preparatory), and nonconventionally indirect requests (strong Hint, mild Hint). For example, the request head act *Is it possible for me to hand in my term project on Saturday?* is used as a conventionally indirect request. The frequency and percentage of each strategy used by the participants in each situation were calculated. Finally, two chi-squares were run to answer the second and third research questions.

4. Results

The purpose of this study was to determine the possible similarities or differences between the female and male EFL learners in text-based SCMC settings. Further, this study intended to examine the lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate EFL learners' request strategies in text-based SCMC to faculty. To this aim, the elicited request strategies were coded and examined.

To answer the first research question, the frequency and percentage of occurrence of each situation were calculated. The results indicated that the female and male EFL learners opted to use negative polite strategies in text-based SCMC, though the male participants

employed direct strategies more than their female counterparts. The detailed description of request strategies is illustrated in Table 1:

Table 1.

Gender Differences Between EFL Learners' Request Strategies

Situation	Group	Mood	Performative	Want	Query	Strong	Mild	χ^2
Book	Female	3(1.9%)	1(.6%)	4(2.6%)	141(91.6%)	2(1.3%)	3(1.9%)	7.67
	Male	4(6.3%)	0(0%)	5(7.9%)	53(84.1%)	1(1.6%)	0(0%)	
PowerPoint	Female	3(1.9%)	0(0%)	2(1.3%)	148(96.1%)	1(.6%)	0(0%)	3.29
	Male	4(6.3%)	0(0%)	1(1.6%)	57(90.5%)	1(1.6%)	0(0%)	
Explanation	Female	1(.6%)	0(0%)	2(1.3%)	145(94.2%)	0(0%)	3(1.9%)	10.76
	Male	4(6.3%)	0(0%)	5(7.9%)	54(85.7%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	
Exam Date	Female	1(.6%)	0(0%)	1(.6%)	123(79.9%)	3(1.9%)	26(16.9%)	11.67
	Male	3(4.8%)	0(0%)	4(6.3%)	46(73%)	2(3.2%)	8(12.7%)	
Project	Female	16(10.4%)	0(0%)	3(1.9%)	130(84.4%)	2(1.3%)	3(1.9%)	2.17
	Male	6(5.9%)	0(0%)	1(.6%)	53(84.1%)	0(0%)	3(4.8%)	
Exam Results	Female	18(11.7%)	0(0%)	6(3.9%)	129(83.8%)	1(.6%)	0(0%)	4.7
	Male	6(9.5%)	0(0%)	7(11.1%)	49(77.8%)	1(1.6%)	0(0%)	
Appointment	Female	6(3.9%)	0(0%)	8(5.2%)	138(89.6%)	1(1.6%)	1(1.6%)	3.63
	Male	1(1.6%)	0(0%)	2(3.2%)	57(90.5%)	1(1.6%)	1(1.6%)	

Further, the lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate participants used negative polite strategies in a higher percentage. The magnitude percentage of the obligation statement, hedged performative, and locution derivable strategies was zero. The detailed description of request strategies is illustrated in Table 2:

Table 2.

Proficiency Differences Between EFL Learners' Request Strategies

Situation	Group	Mood	Performative	Want	Query	Strong	Mild	χ^2
Book	LI	3(3%)	1(1%)	8(8.1%)	83(83.8%)	3(3%)	1(1%)	12.34
	UP	4(3.4%)	0(0%)	1(.8%)	111(94.1%)	0(0%)	2(1.7%)	
PowerPoint	LI	3(3%)	0(0%)	3(3%)	91(91.9%)	2(2%)	0(0%)	6.11
	UP	4(3.4%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	114(96.6%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	
Explanation	LI	6(6.1%)	1(1%)	6(6.1%)	84(84.8%)	0(0%)	2(2%)	11.73
	UP	1(.8%)	0(0%)	1(.8%)	115(97.5%)	0(0%)	1(.8%)	
Exam Date	LI	3(3%)	0(0%)	5(5.1%)	75(75.8%)	2(2%)	14(14.1%)	7.8
	UP	1(.8%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	94(79.7%)	3(2.5%)	20(16.9%)	
Project	LI	15(15.2%)	0(0%)	4(4%)	75(75.8%)	2(2%)	3(3%)	13.3
	UP	7(5.9%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	108(91.5%)	0(0%)	3(2.5%)	
Exam Results	LI	16(16.2%)	0(0%)	8(8.1%)	73(73.7%)	2(2%)	0(0%)	9.53
	UP	8(6.8%)	0(0%)	5(4.2%)	105(89%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	
Appointment	LI	5(5.1%)	0(0%)	8(8.1%)	81(81.8%)	2(2%)	3(3%)	13.92
	UP	2(1.7%)	0(0%)	2(1.7%)	114(96.6%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	

*LI stands for lower-intermediate.

*UP stands for upper-intermediate.

To investigate the possible relationship between gender and the request strategies employed by the EFL learners in text-based SCMC settings, chi-square was run. As illustrated in Table 1, the chi-square results indicated there was no significant relationship between gender and the request strategies employed by the participants. However, the chi-square findings indicated that the level of proficiency of the participants was a determining factor in the EFL production of request strategies in text-based SCMC settings.

5. Discussion

The present study was conducted to examine EFL learners' request strategies in text-based SCMC settings. Further, this study aimed to investigate the role of proficiency and gender in the production of request strategies by the EFL learners. The frequency findings, all in all, indicated a strong distribution of conventionally indirect strategies (i.e., negative polite strategies).

On the one hand, the results illustrated that both female and male participants used more negative polite strategies. The differences between the female and male participants' request strategies were not significant; however, the female participants tended to use nonconventionally indirect strategies more than the male participants. For example, as for the appointment situation, one of the female participants posted her answer as:

Example # 2

- *Good Afternoon, Mr. X. I have some serious questions regarding my term project. Actually, I am not sure about my research questions. Is it possible for you to meet me and discuss about my term project? I would really appreciate it.*

In the above example, *is it possible for you to meet me and discuss about my term project?* is the head act. Based on the taxonomy developed by Blum-Kulka, House, and Olshtain (1989), it is considered as query preparatory strategy that is the sublevel of conventionally indirect strategies. The detailed analysis of dataset indicated that most of the participants employed query preparatory to mitigate their requests.

On the other hand, the results indicated a significant difference between the participants of different levels of proficiency in that the upper-intermediate participants employed negative polite strategies in a higher percentage than the lower-intermediate participants.

The findings of this study support previous research (Allami, 2006; Saidi & Khosravi, 2015) that reported gender as a nonsignificant variable in the EFL production of speech acts. In the current study, the female and male participants utilized negative polite strategies in a higher percentage. However, the male participants tended to use positive polite strategies (i.e., direct strategies) more than the female counterparts.

More specifically, the detailed review of the dataset indicated that the male participants used direct strategies for two situations: projects and exams. This is one of the male participants answers for the exam results situation:

Example # 3

- *Please score my test again cause I am sure I'd get higher.*

In the example # 3, mood derivable strategy is employed which is subcategory of direct strategies. In the project situation, the learners were supposed to mitigate their requests regarding the possibility of handing their projects with delay. And, in the exam results situation, the learners opted to request if it was possible for their teachers to check their exam grades as it had not seemed fair to them. The possible interpretation, based on Hymes' (1974) point of view, would be that when individuals intend to express their hope and politeness, they employ direct request strategies. Hence, the male participants might have considered direct strategies as suitable and polite strategies to be employed for their teacher.

Further, it is worth noting that male the participants used *please* as a prompt reaction frequently used when they opted to use direct request strategies like mood derivable (e.g., *please give me the powerpoints or check my exam again please*) in the SCMC context. This may suggest that the EFL participants consider *please* as a polite request marker. However, *please* is a polite marker (Martinez, 2009), but it cannot be used with direct strategies for the higher level of politeness (Nodoushan, 2008).

Another justification for the results is Iran society in that men are superiors to women. Therefore, the Persian women feel unsecure due to the fact that they are at lower level in comparison to men. Accordingly, they opt to employ strategies with a higher level of formality more than men to be accepted in the society.

The reason for the significant use of negative polite strategies among the male and female participants is closely associated with the Persian culture. Iranians highly admire and respect their teachers. That is why they attempt to use the most suitable polite strategies to

faculty. Further, hierarchy in Iran is determined by age and, in practice, this age difference influences the choice of polite strategies in that, in the Persian culture, it is assumed that the younger people should talk more politely to the elder people. The results of this study have indicated that the conversations held outside the college in text-based SCMC did enjoy a good level of formality and politeness.

Another possible justification for the participants of this study using negative polite strategies may be the nature of text-based SCMS. As writing takes place at a slow pace (Williams, 2012), learners have more time to access their linguistic knowledge to monitor it. This is what seems to have been important in the text-based SCMS condition. In other words, an extended planning time in text-based SCMC might allow learners to make the cognitive comparisons to choose the appropriate request strategies for more complete or longer polite expressions. Besides this, the high level of politeness in text-based SCMC might result from learners' intentions to ensure they were engaged in cooperative behavior in a limited communication medium (Smith, 2003). The participants' mode of communication was writing. Therefore, there were no interruptions from either the teacher or the classmates. These are both important factors for students with a high-anxiety level who may fail to use appropriate polite strategies due high anxiety in EFL classrooms.

The findings of this study support those of Allami and Naeimi (2011) who found a similar trend that the EFL learners with higher levels of language proficiency outperformed the lower levels. In this study, however, the request strategies in SCMC settings were investigated. The results indicated that most participants tended to use negative polite strategies. However, the lower-intermediate learners opted to employ direct strategies in a higher percentage. In the Allami and Naeimi's study (2011), who investigated the EFL learners' face-to-face apologies, the more proficient learners still seemed to lack pragmatic competence. The findings of the present study suggest that the relation between language proficiency and pragmatic competence varies as L2 learners enter a different developmental stage.

Analyzing the production data of the lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate participants in the present study indicated that the lower-intermediate participants showed little variation across situations with their interlocutors. For example, the lower-intermediate participants overused the familiar expressions (e.g., frequent use of requestive markers such as *may you* and *can you*) which, subsequently, reduces the opportunity to use more target-like

expressions. This may suggest that the EFL learner production will be overgeneralized once speech acts are acquired. Overgeneralization was manifest in the dataset as they employed the expressions with minor differences in form. The possible explanation for the overgeneralization among the participants is that they have yet to develop the pragmatic competence in English to make and execute contextually appropriate requests.

Examining the production of the upper-intermediate EFL learners, it could be suggested that EFL learners with higher language proficiency have more linguistic resources to use to demonstrate their pragmatic competence. The implication is that it may be easier for more proficient EFL learners to process meaning and grammatical forms better than the less proficient EFL learners, given that EFL learners with a higher language proficiency do not have to struggle as much with processing meaning during communicative exchanges. Accordingly, using polite strategies is deemed to be cognitively demanding tasks for EFL learners with lower language proficiency because they demand more attention in formulating grammatically correct sentences, which is a relatively automatized process in higher levels of language proficiency. As a result, it calls for greater EFL learners' consciousness and attention to language forms, requiring more effort and expertise and leaving fewer cognitive resources for other aspects of speech, such as appropriateness or politeness.

Finally, the content analysis of the participants' requests to faculty in SCMC indicated that the higher-intermediate participants used wider range of vocabularies and structures. One explanation for the variation in the number and type of vocabularies and structures used according to proficiency could be related to the relative difference in task demands for the higher and lower proficiency learners. Further, their use of linguistic forms for the same strategy and contents of reason when requesting to the interlocutor in their request strategies probably demonstrates more linguistic resources.

6. Conclusion

This study has reported the results of a pragmatic study of EFL learners' requests in text-based SCMC. The analysis of the EFL learners' requests was indicative of the differences between lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate learners in their request strategies. The results also illustrated that gender had no effects on the choice of the request strategies.

Although this study has paved the way for similar studies, there are several limitations that call for more research. The limited generalizability of the findings is one of the

limitations of this study. In addition to a larger sample size, SCMC studies in different social settings are suggested because EFL learners' politeness strategies appear to be affected by social and cultural factors apart from the different modes of communication. Some interesting points for future research, arising from this study, are to examine the influence of factors such as the power, social distance, and degree of imposition of the recipients in SCMC. Further, longitudinal studies may provide further ground to explore how the formality and structure of EFL learners' texts in SCMC change in academic settings.

To conclude, this study suggests EFL learners appear to have relatively acceptable pragmatic competence. However, pedagogical intervention has been claimed to be necessary to raise EFL learners' awareness towards using appropriate request strategies. This research provides guidelines for course designers to generate appropriate pedagogic guidelines for EFL learners in their hierarchical relationships with their teacher.

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Appendixes

Appendix A

- (1) Name (Last, First).
- (2) What is your age?
- (3) Please specify your ethnicity.
 - a) Persian b) Others
- (4) Please specify your gender
 - a) Female b) Male
- (5) Please specify your first language.
- (6) Please specify the list of languages you can speak.
- (7) What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?
- (8) Have you ever been/lived in an English-speaking country?
 - a) Yes b) No
- (10) Do you know how to use Telegram?
 - a) Yes b) No

Appendix B

1. Suppose are a university student. You need to get a book to finish your assignment. There is only one person you know who has the book you need, one of your lectures. How do you ask your lecture for the book by chat?
2. Suppose your lecture uses PowerPoint for teaching writing. You were not able to request for the PowerPoint in person. How would you ask him through chat?
3. Suppose are studying at home about *past tense* and you have not understood a part of it. You want to text your teacher through chat. How do you ask for explanations about the structure of this tense by chat?
4. Suppose you have been sick for a week and you term project due is tomorrow. How would you ask your instructor for an extension through chat?
5. Suppose you have got 14 on your reading test and you are sure that your score must have been higher. You are not able to meet your lecturer in person. How would ask your teacher through chat to ask him to check your exam again?

6. Suppose your lecture has announced the date of midterm exam, but you have another exam on the same day. How would you ask your teacher through chat to change the date of exam?
7. Suppose you want to have an appointment with your teacher this week for asking some questions about your term project. How would you ask him through chat?