Second language pragmatic competence in digitally mediated communication: Exploring requests and refusals

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ABSTRACT: The present study investigates second language (L2) pragmatic strategies of requests and refusals used by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in digitally mediated communication (DMC). It is a cross-sectional study that employed a mixed-method approach. The participants were 93 first-year undergraduate students enrolled in the Translation and Interpretation degree at a public university in Spain. They completed an online questionnaire which included background questions and a discourse completion task (DCT) that featured request and refusal scenarios with varying degrees of imposition, power, and social distance in emails and WhatsApp messages in an academic context. Speech act production was evaluated based on appropriateness rates and types of speech act strategies employed. Aspects such as formality, politeness, directness, as well as structure and content used were considered. The statistical analysis was complemented with a qualitative analysis of the speech act strategies used by the participants. Findings revealed that sociopragmatic factors determined the students' ability to craft appropriate emails and WhatsApp messages. Specifically, the participants performed significantly better in producing requests and refusals in contexts involving symmetrical social distance, equal power and low imposition. These results underscore the importance of acquiring EFL pragmatics withing the DMC context.
Keywords: pragmatic competence, requests, refusals, digitally mediated communication, English as a Foreign Language.

Competencia pragmática en una segunda lengua en la comunicación mediada digitalmente: Explorando peticiones y rechazos

RESUMEN: Este estudio investiga las estrategias pragmáticas de peticiones y rechazos utilizadas por estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera en la comunicación mediada digitalmente. 93 estudiantes de primer curso del grado de Traducción e Interpretación de una universidad pública en España completaron un cuestionario en línea incluyendo preguntas sobre sus antecedentes y una tarea de completar del discurso con escenarios de peticiones y rechazos con distintos grados de imposición, poder y distancia social en correos electrónicos y mensajes de WhatsApp en un contexto académico. Este estudio transversal empleó un método mixto, complementando el análisis estadístico con el análisis cualitativo de las estrategias utilizadas por los participantes. La evaluación se efectuó basándose en la adecuación y los tipos de estrategias de actos de habla empleados, teniendo en cuenta la formalidad, la

cortesía, la franqueza, la estructura y el contenido utilizados. Los resultados revelaron que los factores sociopragmáticos determinaron la capacidad de los estudiantes para elaborar los actos de habla apropiados. Específicamente, los participantes tuvieron un desempeño significativamente mejor al producir peticiones y rechazos en contextos que implicaban una distancia social simétrica, poder igualitario y baja imposición. Estos resultados subrayan la importancia de la adquisición de la competencia pragmática en el contexto digitalizado.
Palabras clave: competencia pragmática, peticiones, rechazos, comunicación mediada digitalmente, inglés como lengua extranjera

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, digitally mediated communication (DMC) has become an essential part of everyday life. A significant portion of personal, academic, and professional interactions now occur through emails and messaging applications such as WhatsApp. In this context, English has achieved a key prominence. Globalization and increased student mobility have established English as the primary language for international DMC (Shishavan & Sharifian, 2016). In particular, it is a widely used language in the academic sphere, which involves interactions among a diverse range of interlocutors, such as professors, students or academic personnel (Vrocharidou & Efthymiou, 2012).

Engaging in DMC in English in the academic sphere requires an understanding of the hierarchical relationships, as well as an awareness of the intercultural background that shapes the different interactions. Individuals need to have knowledge of what is situationally appropriate in English as a second language (L2) to effectively manage various virtual interactions. In other words, they need to have a certain level of L2 pragmatic competence, understood as the ability to convey and interpret meaning adequately in a given social context (Taguchi, 2019). The lack of pragmatic knowledge or its inappropriate use may lead to a communicative failure and, consequently, negative interpersonal rapport in the academic sphere (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). More specifically, such negative communication outcomes are likely to be derived from an inappropriate management of face-threatening speech acts (FTAs), such as requests and refusals. Despite the extensive attention these two speech acts have received in the field of interlanguage pragmatics, their study in the particular context of DMC is still developing.

With this in mind, the present study explores the pragmatic competence of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, focusing on the speech acts of requests and refusals, which often pose challenges for L2 learners in adhering to appropriate levels of politeness and directness. Specifically, it examines speech act production during DMC in academic contexts by investigating what role social distance, power and rank of imposition may play on such pragmatic production.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Pragmatic competence in digitally mediated communication

Nowadays, a significant portion of both professional and personal interactions occurs through synchronous (e.g., Zoom, Google Meet) or asynchronous (e.g., emails, WhatsApp) DMC. This trend continues to expand as internet technologies facilitate rapid, location-independent interaction. DMC encompasses language use alongside social and contextual factors shaping interactions (Eslami & Ko, 2015). For instance, a common use of instant messaging

has contributed to more direct email communication (Lazarescu, 2020). Furthermore, digital internal interactions (e.g., teacher-to-teacher) are characterized by brevity and directness, whereas external communication (i.e., interactions beyond one's personal or professional network) is mostly formal. In this regard, adequate pragmatic competence is essential for effective virtual communication. Unlike face-to-face interactions, DMC lacks non-verbal cues that aid understanding. A grammatically correct speech act may still be impolite, leading to negative consequences in formal communication (González-Lloret & Ortega, 2018).

Modern-day higher education students are representatives of the highly digital world, yet they may face difficulties in sustaining digital relationships. According to Brown and Lewis (2022), we can distinguish five common relationships in digital DMC: peers, friends, family, authority figures, and romantic partners, each with varying levels of social distance, power, and degree of imposition (Brown & Levinson, 1987). For instance, students may feel intimidated by the power imbalance with professors but maintain closer social distance due to more frequent communication compared to academic personnel. To avoid misimpressions, they need to manage different aspects of L2 pragmatic competence. According to Taguchi (2019), being pragmatically appropriate requires: (1) linguistic and sociocultural knowledge of what forms to use in what context, (2) interactional abilities to adapt to a given conversation, (3) agency to critically choose their linguistic behaviour. In turn, Mao and He (2021) in their Integrated Model of Pragmatic Competence (IMPC) argue that pragmatic competence comprises internal (i.e., cognitive processes resulting in thought) and external (i.e., the ability to appropriately apply internal knowledge in communication) components, highlighting its complex nature. Therefore, L2 pragmatic competence is a multifaceted skill that entails the management of different linguistic, sociocultural and cognitive skills to be applied that are shaped according to the given context. In the specific context of DMC, it is paramount to evaluate how L2 users navigate various aspects of pragmatic competence across interactions on platforms like email and WhatsApp.

The majority of L2 pragmatics studies on DMC have focused on language use in emails in the academic setting (e.g., Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Chen, 2015), finding that L2 learners lack sociopragmatic skills when writing emails to unequal social status interlocutors. For example, Zheng and Xu (2019) explored Chinese EFL learners' perception of email requests, focusing on how they evaluate pragmatic (in)felicities considering social distance, power, and rank of imposition. Students rated requests on a scale from 1 (very inappropriate/impolite) to 5 (very appropriate/polite). The findings revealed that L2 learners lacked awareness of the pragmatic appropriateness of emails, particularly regarding power and imposition, highlighting the challenge of assessing these factors in different contexts. In a similar vein, Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011), examined 200 authentic email requests for information or action in both low- and high-imposition situations, sent by Greek EFL learners to professors over 18 months. The findings showed that the participants' emails were significantly too direct, lacking lexical or phrasal modifications, greetings, and closings.

Moving onto WhatsApp, there is a paucity of studies focusing on the L2 pragmatic competence of WhatsApp users (exceptions include Farhang-Ju, 2020; Malabarba, 2022). Choosing appropriate language for WhatsApp messages can be challenging due to the absence of linguistic guidelines for this medium (Flores-Salgado & Castineira-Benitez, 2017). The few existing studies on L2 pragmatic competence have pointed out that the phrases in DMC via WhatsApp tend to be short, with poor punctuation and a lack of phatic communication, the use of which could otherwise create a positive impression on the interlocutor. For example,

Malabarba (2022) analised the development of request production by a Portuguese adult English learner over 9 months as she engaged in WhatsApp interaction with her teacher. The results showed that, over time, requests became more routine and less problematic, with shorter phrases the abandonment of the adverb "please" as the interlocutors grew more familiar with each other. Moreover, Farhang-Ju (2020) investigated 196 naturalistic requests from 62 Persian L2 English graduate students to professors through WhatsApp. The findings indicated that the requests were relatively short, using mainly conventionally indirect strategies, frequent lexical modifiers, and formal address terms, reflecting more formal mentor-mentee relationship in Persian than in English.

In summary, as DMC continues to evolve, mastering pragmatic skills in this medium is beneficial for L2 learners to maintain successful relationships within the academic context. With this in mind, the next two sections focus on two common speech acts in academic contexts – requests and refusals – carried out through emails and WhatsApp.

2.2. Requests in digitally mediated communication

The speech act of requesting has received considerable attention in the field of L2 pragmatics, as it is one of the most frequent speech acts and is considered highly face-threatening (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Flores-Salgado & Castineira-Benitez, 2017). A request is an illocutionary directive speech act in which a speaker asks a hearer to perform an action for his/her benefit. In the academic sphere, requests are frequently made in student-teacher email communication, where EFL learners often fail to demonstrate an appropriate level of pragmatic competence and may be perceived as rude (Chejnová, 2014; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011).

To avoid pragmatic infelicities, L2 learners must understand not only grammaticality but also L2 sociopragmatic aspects, as requests vary across cultures and situations. Different studies have investigated the performance of requests in DMC, finding that mitigating high-imposition situations is challenging for L2 speakers (e.g., Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Chen, 2015; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). For example, Bou-Franch (2013) analysed naturalistic data and found that L2 English learners in Spain used more direct forms when making requests in emails than are common in British English, possibly due to sociocultural transfer from their first language (L1). Similarly, Codina-Espurz and Salazar-Campillo (2019) reported that L2 Spanish and Catalan students tend to use direct strategies when requesting information from their professors, which can often be perceived as overly demanding. The researchers concluded that, regardless of language choice (i.e., Spanish, Catalan, or English), students failed to adhere to the appropriate level of imposition, suggesting incorporating internal modifiers to achieve a more polite tone.

2.3. Refusals in digitally mediated communication

The speech act of refusing is a complex commissive act that can be face-threatening for both the addressor and the addressee. It occurs in response to another speech act and conveys undesirable content for the hearer (Farrokhi & Atashian, 2012). According to Chang (2009), refusal strategies are universal, but the linguistic forms and the level of politeness conveyed are language- and culture-specific. For example, Chinese speakers prefer an indirect, implicit

and unassertive communication style, whereas American English speakers are more inclined to be direct, explicit and assertive (Chen, 2009). Moreover, the role of sociopragmatic aspects, i.e., imposition, power, and social distance, in making refusals is crucial (Satıç & Çiftçi, 2018; Lee, 2013). Choosing the appropriate pragmatic strategy and understanding sociopragmatic nuances can help EFL learners perceive refusals without taking offence and maintain face.

In the past decade, research on L2 refusals in DMC has gained increasing attention from scholars (e.g., Chang, 2009; Satıç & Çiftçi, 2018; Wang, 2018), finding that EFL learners tend to favor indirect refusal strategies, with social factors significantly influencing their choice. For example, Wang (2018) compared refusal strategies between 23 North American native speakers (NSs) and 24 Taiwanese EFL learners in emails. Using a discourse completion task (DCT) featuring three scenarios of varying social status, the study found that EFL learners readily refused peers but expressed regret when refusing superiors, while NSs conveyed more regret with peers.

In summary, previous research points out that achieving pragmatic competence in an L2 is challenging but essential for successful interactions with diverse interlocutors. While L2 communication through emails has received considerable scholarly attention, research on pragmatic competence in WhatsApp is limited. Additionally, few studies have examined speech act production across situations involving diverse social distance, power, and imposition within a single investigation. Overall, previous studies on requests and refusals demonstrate that, despite the frequent use of emails and WhatsApp messages, EFL learners still need to improve their pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic skills in DMC to communicate appropriately in different contexts.

With this in mind, the current study explores EFL students' L2 pragmatic competence in DMC, specifically examining the request and refusal production, as well as the role that social distance, power, and imposition may play in the production of these speech acts. Three research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What is the role of social distance on EFL students' request and refusal production in DMC?

RQ2: What is the role of power on EFL students' request and refusal production in DMC?

RQ3: What is the role of imposition on EFL students' request and refusal production in DMC?

3. Method

3.1 Research design

The current study employed a cross-sectional design. To examine the request and refusal strategies used by EFL students in DMC, the data collection was carried out at single time point, focusing on pragmatic targets and sociopragmatic variables (i.e., social distance, power and imposition). Additionally, a mixed-methods approach was conducted, the quantitative analysis allowing to report general trends, and the qualitative exploration providing an in-depth explanation of such trends (Sánchez-Hernández, 2018).

3.2. Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 93 first-year undergraduate students in the Translation and Interpretation degree program at a public university in Spain. Their average

age was 18.7 years old, and there were 83 females, 9 males, and 1 "other". The results of a Mann-Whitney U test on gender imbalance were non-significant ($p = 0.359$ for requests; $p = 0.326$ for refusals). Hence, all participants were included in the sample. Their L1s included Spanish (n = 36), Catalan (n = 27), and both Spanish and Catalan (n = 30). Regarding English proficiency, 59 students reported an intermediate level, and 34 students reported an advanced level. However, all students were included in the sample, as a Mann-Whitney U test results on the reported proficiency were non-significant ($p = 0.011$ for requests; $p = 0.0.219$ for refusals).

3.3. Instruments

The data on speech act production in DMC was collected via a Google Forms questionnaire which included a background section for demographic information and a DCT designed to elicit students' production of requests and refusals across varying social distance, power, and imposition situations. The DCT was chosen for its ability to elicit a large amount of data under controlled conditions (Félix-Brasdefer, 2010). Different request and refusal scenarios were designed based on their frequency in DMC within the academic sphere. Table 1 displays the description of the speech act scenarios included in the DCT:

Table 1. *Description of the speech act scenarios included in the DCT*

	SCENARIO DESCRIP-TION	ADDRESSEE	DIGITAL MEDIA	SOCIAL DISTANCE	POWER	IMPOSITION
REQUESTS	Asking a roommate to return books to the library	Friend	WhatsApp	Friend	Equal	Low
	Asking classmates for some feedback on a website you launch	Peers	WhatsApp	Acquaintance	Equal	Medium
	Asking a secretary for the academic records	Secretary	Email	Stranger	Unequal	High
REFUSALS	Refusing to attend a friend's presentation	Friend	WhatsApp	Friend	Equal	Low
	Refusing to participate in your professor's workshop	Professor	Email	Acquaintance	Unequal	High
	Declining a job offer	Human Resources	Email	Stranger	Unequal	Medium

As shown in Table 1, the DCT included three requests and three refusals, distributed across three WhatsApp messages and three emails. The scenarios varied in social distance (friends, acquaintances, strangers), power (equal and unequal), and imposition (low, medium and high).

The DCT was validated through a pilot study with 5 students to examine whether the scenarios were comprehended accurately. Based on feedback, the situations were revised to eliminate any ambiguity in students' understanding.

3.4. Data collection

The data collection took place in January 2022 during a regular L2 English class, lasting approximately 30 minutes. Students were briefed on ethical issues, then completed the consent form (5 minutes), background questionnaire (5 minutes), and the DCT with 6 scenarios of varying imposition, power, and social distance (20 minutes).

3.5. Data analysis

The participants' DCT responses were analysed and rated using a 5-point Likert scale (Table 2), developed based on prior studies (Sánchez-Hernández, 2018; Taguchi, 2011). The appropriateness of each response was assessed from 0 (absence) to 5 (excellent).

Table 2. *Appropriateness scale*

RATINGS	DESCRIPTIONS
5. Excellent	Practically perfectly appropriate in a given situation; Adequate level of formality, politeness and directness.
4. Good	Not perfect but precise and appropriate in a given situation; Mainly adequate level of formality, politeness and directness; Contain vocabulary, grammar or discourse errors which inconsiderably impede a response.
3. Fair	Moderately appropriate in a given situation; Level of formality, politeness and directness are either a little overstated or understated; Contain serious vocabulary, grammar or discourse errors.
2. Poor	Distinctly inappropriate in a given situation; Level of formality, politeness and directness has not been followed (either almost rude or too demanding); Contain critical vocabulary, grammar or discourse errors and/ or logical inconsistencies.
1. Very poor	Completely inappropriate in a given situation; A speech act is performed but it does not conform to the target.
0. Absence	A speech act has not been performed.

As shown in Table 2, the level of formality, politeness, and directness, as well as the structure and content used in the speech acts realization were considered. To ensure reliability, the data analysis was performed independently by two researchers-experts on English linguistics. The coded data were then cross-checked, yielding an inter-rater agreement being 78%, and any remaining discrepancies were discussed and resolved.

After coding the data, assumptions of normality were tested using a Shapiro-Wilk test ($p > 0.05$), confirming that the data was not normally distributed ($W = 0.951$; $p = 0.003$, Skewness = –0.902). Therefore, a series of Wilcoxon rank-sum tests (with the significance

level set at 0.05) were conducted to analyse the participants' production of requests and refusals across the sociopragmatic variables of social distance, power and degree of imposition. To gain a deeper understanding of the results, effect sizes (Cohen, 1988) were also calculated, with a coefficient of 0.1 or less indicating a small effect size, 0.3 indicating a medium effect size, and 0.5 a large effect size.

4. RESULTS

4.1. The role of social distance on EFL students' request and refusal production in DMC

The first research question of the study examined the role of social distance in EFL students' L2 pragmatic competence in DMC. Table 3 displays the descriptive statistics – that is, mean (M), and standard deviation (SD) coefficients of the pragmatic performance across social distance situations by the 93 EFL students of the study.

Table 3. *Descriptive statistics of pragmatic production across social distance*

REQUESTS	M	SD	REFUSALS	M	SD
Friend	3.63	0.87	Friend	3.26	1.03
Acquaintance	3.10	0.78	Acquaintance	2.94	1.19
Stranger	2.81	0.81	Stranger	2.92	1.07
Total	3.18	0.62	Total	3.04	0.82

Table 3 shows that the students scored higher on the production of requests to a friend (M = 3.63, SD = 0.87) and refusals to a friend (M = 3.26, SD = 1.03), while the lowest coefficients were observed in requests to a stranger (M = 2.81, SD = 0.81), followed by refusals to a stranger (M = 2.92, SD = 1.07) and to an acquaintance (M = 2.94, SD = 1.19). This means that the students produced the most appropriate messages when addressing friends, whereas the biggest challenge was requesting and refusing strangers. Furthermore, the overall production of requests was scored slightly higher (M = 3.18, SD = 0.62) than that of refusals (M = 3.04, SD = 0.82), suggesting that the former was performed more appropriately.

To examine the significance of such differences, a series of Wilcoxon rank U tests were conducted. The results revealed that the production of requests to a friend in DMC was significantly higher than requests to an acquaintance (W = 2331; p = <0.001) and requests to a stranger (W = 2671; p = <0.001), in the two cases the results indicating a large effect size (r_{rb} = 0.593 and r_{rb} = 0.779, respectively). Also, the students' production of requests to an acquaintance was significantly better than requests to a stranger (W = 1578; p = 0.002), in this case with a medium effect size (r_{rb} = 0.427). As for refusals, the statistical analysis revealed a similar trend: the participants performed significantly more appropriately when refusing a friend compared to a stranger (W = 1986; p = 0.006), with the analysis revealing a medium effect size (r_{rb} = 0.357). Thus, students seemed to find it easier to make requests and refusals with friends compared to acquaintances and strangers.

To illustrate these findings, Examples 1 and 2 show a participant's refusals addressed to a friend and to a stranger, respectively.

Example 1. Refusal to a friend via WhatsApp

SCENARIO: WhatsApp Friend: A good friend of yours sends you a WhatsApp message asking whether you would like to attend a conference where he/she is going to present. Since you have your defence of the TFG (final work) the same day, you refuse to be there by replying with the following WhatsApp message.

RESPONSE:
Hi! I would love to go there with you, but the same day i have the TFG so i won't be abe to be there with you. I am so sorry!
Evaluation: 4.5

Example 2. Refusal to a stranger via email

SCENARIO: Email Human Resources (HR): You receive an email from Ms. Jones, head of the HR department of a company with a positive answer for a job application. However, the working hours are not suitable for you, and you refuse this job offer by sending the following email.

RESPONSE:
Hi!! Thank you so much for given me this oportunity but unfortunatly i won't be able to take it since I am not able to work on these hours.
Evaluation: 2.5

As may be observed in the examples, the student demonstrated more appropriate refusal production when interacting with a friend (Example 1) compared to a stranger (Example 2). In Example 1, the student employed both a direct refusal strategy with a negative ability *("I won't be able")* and an indirect strategy with a statement of regret *("I'm sorry")* when refusing to a friend, showing an adequate level of appropriateness. In contrast, Example 2, that is a refusal sent to the HR department, did not reflect the level of formality expected in communication with strangers. Although the speech act contained an expression of gratitude and supportive reasons for refusing, there were several aspects not achieved appropriately for a formal response. First, the student was expected to use the recipient's title and surname (i.e., "Ms. Jones") to begin the email. Also, the message lacked a proper closing (e.g., "Best regards"). In addition, including a condition for future acceptance or an invitation to continue communication for further opportunities would also enhance the message's appropriateness.

Altogether, the findings regarding RQ1 demonstrated that EFL students found it easier to produce requests and refusals addressed to friends rather than to acquaintances or strangers. Therefore, the results highlighted the key role of social distance in speech act production in DMC.

4.2. The role of power on EFL students' request and refusal production in DMC

The second research question of the study addresses the role of power in EFL students' L2 pragmatic competence in DMC. Table 4 presents the descriptives related to the pragmatic performance across power situations for the 93 EFL students of the study.

Table 4. *Descriptive statistics of pragmatic production across varying power situations*

REQUESTS	M	SD	REFUSALS	M	SD
Equal	3.63	0.87	Equal	3.26	1.03
Unequal	2.95	0.67	Unequal	2.92	0.92

Table 4 shows that the participants scored higher on the production of requests (M = 3.63, SD = 0.87), followed by refusals (M = 3.26, SD = 1.03), in situations involving equal power between the interlocutors. Regarding situations with unequal power, the participants scored slightly higher when making requests (M = 2.95, SD = 0.67) than when making refusals (M = 2.92, SD = 0.92). This suggests that the EFL learners produced the most appropriate messages when requesting interlocutors of equal power, and the least appropriate speech acts when producing speech acts of refusal to people of unequal power with them.

A series of Wilcoxon rank-sum tests were conducted to examine the significance of such differences. The results confirmed that the production of requests to equal power interlocutors was considered significant compared to requests to a person with unequal power (W = 3219; p = <0.001), the effect size being large (r_{rb} = 0.721). As for refusals, the statistical analysis revealed a similar trend: students produced significantly better refusals to interlocutors of equal power (W = 2206; p = 0.010), the effect size being medium (r_{rb} = 0.329). Therefore, students appeared to find it easier to make requests and refusals when addressing interlocutors with equal power.

To illustrate these findings, Examples 3 and 4 demonstrate a participant's production of a request. Example 3 shows a request addressed to a friend (equal power interlocutor) via WhatsApp, and Example 4 presents a request addressed to a stranger (unequal power interlocutor) via email.

Example 3. Request to a person of equal power via WhatsApp

SCENARIO: WhatsApp to a friend: You receive a message from your family asking you to come to your hometown immediately, so you don't have enough time to return some books to the library. You send the following WhatsApp message to your roommate asking him or her to do it instead of you.

RESPONSE:
Hi Carol and Julia,
My mother just told me that I have to go home immediately, so I don't have time to return the books to the library. Would you do me that favor? Thank you very much
Evaluation*: 4,5*

Example 4. Request to a person of unequal power via WhatsApp

SCENARIO: Email to a Secretary: You send the following email to the secretary of your faculty asking for your academic records in order to be able to apply for a scholarship.

RESPONSE:
Hello! I'm (name) and I'm writing this message to ask for my academic records, considering that I want to apply for a scholarship. Thank you.
Evaluation*: 2*

As may be observed in the examples, the student demonstrated more appropriate request production when interacting with a friend (Example 3) than with a stranger (Example 4). In Example 3, the student used a hearer dominance *("you")* and a preparatory strategy (getting precommitment) (*"Would you do me that favor?"*), when requesting friends. A grounder explaining the reason for the request preceded the question ("*I don't have time to return the books to the library"),* and a politeness marker ("*Thank you very much")* concluded the message. The speech act was evaluated as appropriate, although the message could adopt a more direct tone; hence the 4.5 score. In contrast, Example 4, that is a request sent to the secretary's office, did not demonstrate the level of formality implied in interactions with interlocutors of unequal power. Although the participant used an explicit performative strategy with speaker dominance ("*I'm writing this message to ask for*") and provided supportive reasons for the request ("*considering that I want to apply for a scholarship"*), several aspects were not appropriately achieved for a formal response. First, the speech act contained a neutral attention getter (*"Hello"*), and it was followed by an exclamation mark, which could be perceived as rude in formal communication. Also, the student could use a downgrader such as a conditional clause (e.g., "if you could send me") to mitigate the force of the request, making it more appropriate. Furthermore, the final part of the message (e.g., "Best regards*")* was omitted.

In summary, the findings on RQ2 demonstrated that students found it significantly easier to request and refuse individuals of the same power. Therefore, the sociopragmatic variable of power also exerted an influence on pragmatic production in DMC.

4.3. The role of imposition on EFL students' request and refusal production in DMC

The third research question of the study addresses the role of imposition in EFL students' L2 pragmatic competence in DMC. To examine the extent to which imposition affects the production of speech acts of requests and refusals, the descriptive statistics are firstly presented in Table 5.

Table 5. *Descriptive statistics of pragmatic production across varying degrees of imposition*

REQUESTS	M	SD	REFUSALS	M	SD
Low	3.63	0.87	Low	3.26	1.03
Medium	3.10	0.78	Medium	2.92	1.07
High	2.81	0.81	High	2.94	1.19

Table 5 shows that the participants scored higher in the production of requests in low-imposition situations (M = 3.63, SD = 0.87), followed by refusals in low-imposition situations

as well (M = 3.26, SD = 1.03). Requests in high-imposition situations were more difficult for the learners (M = 2.81, SD = 0.81) as compared with requesting in medium- (M = 3.10, SD = 0.78) and low-imposition scenarios. As for refusals, the participants scored similarly in high-imposition (M = 2.94, SD = 1.19) and in medium-imposition situations (M = 2.92, SD = 1.07). In other words, the students produced appropriate speech acts in low-imposition situations, whereas the greatest challenge for the participants was making a request in a high-imposition situation.

These differences were further examined by conducting a series of Wilcoxon rank-sum tests. The results confirmed that the production of requests in low-imposition situations was considered significantly higher compared with requesting in medium-imposition (W = 2331; p = <0.001) and high-imposition situations (W = 2671; p = <0.001), with both results indicating a large effect size (r_{rb} = 0.593 and r_{rb} = 0.779, respectively). Additionally, the students' request production in medium-imposition situations was significantly more appropriate than in high-imposition scenarios (W = 1578; p = 0.002), with the size effect being medium (r_{rb} = 0.427). As for refusals, the statistical analysis revealed a similar trend: the participants performed significantly better in low-imposition situations compared with medium-imposition situations (W = 1986; p = 0.006), with the effect size being medium (r_{rb} = 0.357). Thus, students seemed to find performing requests and refusals in low-imposition situations significantly easier and faced challenges in medium- and high-imposition scenarios.

To support these findings, Examples 5 and 6 illustrate a participant's production of requests in a medium- and in a high-imposition situation.

Example 5. Request to a person via WhatsApp in a medium-imposition situation

SCENARIO: WhatsApp Peers: You are going to launch an online website related to your specialization and you decide to ask your classmates for some feedback in order to identify options for improvements. You send the following message to a WhatsApp chat with your classmates asking if anybody could make any comment.

RESPONSE:
Hi!! i'm here because I wanted to tell you that I'm going to launch an online website related to my specialization, I wanted to ask you if you could give me some feedback. Can you make some comments on my website? Thank you very much
Evaluation: 4

Example 6. Request to a person via WhatsApp in a high-imposition situation

SCENARIO: Email Secretary: You send the following email to the secretary of your faculty asking for your academic records in order to be able to apply for a scholarship.

RESPONSE:
Good morning,
I wanted to know if I can have my academic records because I want to apply for a scholarship.
Evaluation: 2

As may be observed in the examples, the student made a more appropriate request production when addressing a medium-imposition scenario (Example 5) than a high-imposition situation (Example 6). In Example 5, the student used a conventionally indirect strategy (*"if you could"*) followed by a direct request (*"Can you"*) when making a medium-imposition request. Also, the message was concluded with an expression of gratitude (*"Thank you very much"*). In contrast, Example 6, a high-imposition request to a secretary, did not demonstrate the formal level of response implied in such an interaction. Although the speech act contained a neutral attention getter (*"Good morning"*), a hedged performative strategy *("I wanted to know"),* and supportive reasons for the request (*"because I want to apply for a scholarship"*), there were several aspects not executed appropriately for a formal response. First, the student could use past tense ("*if I can*", "*because I want*") to downgrade the force of the request. Also, the message was lacking the final part of the email (e.g., "Best regards")*.* In addition, an expression of gratitude (e.g., "Thank you in advance") would have made the message more appropriate.

In summary, the findings on RQ3 demonstrated that students found it significantly easier to make requests and refusals in low-imposition scenarios. Hence, the sociopragmatic variable of imposition also had an impact on pragmatic production of speech acts in DMC.

5. DISCUSSION

Altogether, the results of this investigation revealed that EFL learners' ability to produce requests and refusals in DMC within the academic sphere is influenced by various sociopragmatic variables: social distance between the interlocutors (RQ1), (un)equal power (RQ2), and the degree of imposition involved in the situation (RQ3). The findings showed that greater social distance in DMC makes speech act production more challenging for EFL learners. Requests and refusals in equal-power interactions were generally appropriate, whereas communication in unequal-power contexts required more precise pragmatic strategies. Participants struggled with requests and refusals in high-imposition scenarios but performed successfully in low-imposition situations. Overall, this may be attributed to the frequent communication between friends in DMC which is inherently less face-threatening, as well as the prevalence of "small requests and refusals" in low-imposition situations. In contrast, interactions involving greater social distance (i.e., acquaintances and strangers) or the performance of "major requests or refusals" in DMC occur less frequently and require more mitigating strategies (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007) and careful selection of linguistic units to ensure effective mutual understanding.

As the findings point out, choosing an appropriate pragmatic strategy to make requests and refusals taking into account these sociopragmatic factors represented a challenge for the participants. These results are in line with previous studies that have revealed that writing requests to higher social status people and taking into account aspects such as power and imposition remains challenging task for EFL learners (Chen, 2015; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). Moving on to refusals, this speech act has a more complex nature as it arises in response to another speech act and tends to be more face-threatening (Farrokhi & Atashian, 2012), which may explain why refusal production is more difficult for EFL learners.

The speed of DMC may also provide an explanation for some of the challenges observed. The inappropriate use of strategies such as the omission of greetings and closings

in emails to address individuals of higher social status and power, and in medium- and high-imposition situations may be explained by the directness and fast messaging students are used to in their day-to-day life.

Another assumption is that, since all the scenarios were set in an academic context, participants may have felt a sense of security, producing speech acts typical of close social distance relationships. Also, it may explain the more effective production of requests, as requests for information or action are commonly encountered in the academic context (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). In contrast, producing refusals in DMC within the academic setting is less frequent, indicating that EFL learners are less familiar with it. However, students may recognize the potential to damage their reputation when refusing interlocutors impolitely. This suggests that explicit instruction could enhance EFL learners' pragmatic competence (Farrokhi & Atashian, 2012) as well as practising the speech act performance with varying social distance, power and rank of imposition in DMC.

6. CONCLUSION

This investigation explored the pragmatic competence of EFL learners in DMC. Specifically, the study focused on request and refusal production in emails and WhatsApp, examining the role of sociopragmatic factors such as social distance, power, and imposition. The findings revealed the key role of these three variables. EFL learners produced significantly more appropriate requests and refusals when interacting with a closer social distance (i.e., friends, as compared to acquaintance and strangers) and equal power (i.e., a classmate, as compared to a professor) interlocutors. Moreover, they also showed more appropriate speech act production in low-imposition situations (i.e., asking a roommate for a favour vs requesting academic records from a secretary).

Like all research, the study has limitations, which provide directions for future research. The main limitation concerns the lack of a control group of L1 speakers. However, the study focused on evaluating the pragmatic knowledge of EFL learners, aiming to understand how it is shaped by different sociopragmatic variables. Future work could consider including a control group to compare L1 and L2 speakers' pragmatic competence in DMC. The second limitation of the study was the lack of naturalistic data. A DCT was employed to collect a large amount of controlled data, but future studies could consider engaging learners into real DMC.

Altogether, the present findings have key pedagogical implications. For instance, they provided material for the design of EFL pragmatic tasks in DMC. Additionally, they highlight the importance of practicing pragmatic strategies across different sociopragmatic aspects. Ultimately, the study contributes to understanding how EFL learners perform requests and refusals in DMC, particularly through emails and WhatsApp.

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