



## Request Strategies Employed by Iranian MA TEFL Students in Academic Emails to Professors: An Analysis within Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's Framework

Farhad Mardaneh<sup>1,\*</sup> , Fatemeh Heydari<sup>2</sup>, Elham Eslami<sup>3</sup>, Mohammad Azak<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1,\*</sup>Corresponding author, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Humanities, University of Zanjan, Zanjan, Iran; [mardaneh@znu.ac.ir](mailto:mardaneh@znu.ac.ir)

<sup>2</sup> Department of English, Faculty of Basic Sciences and Modern Technology, E- CAMPUS, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran; [fatemeh.heidary13751996@gmail.com](mailto:fatemeh.heidary13751996@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup> Department of English Language, CT.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran; [708@gmail.com](mailto:708@gmail.com)

<sup>4</sup> Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Literature and Languages, University of Qom, Qom, Iran; [mohammadazak@gmail.com](mailto:mohammadazak@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

The present study investigated the types and distribution of request strategies employed by Iranian MA students of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in authentic academic emails addressed to their professors using Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Pattern (CCSARP) framework across three email categories: (1) homework checking and assignment-related inquiries, (2) requests for thesis editing and feedback, and (3) requests for research topics, recommended readings, or other academic resources. The corpus consisted of 102 naturally occurring emails produced by a gender-balanced sample of 50 advanced-level learners enrolled at Shahre Qods and Tehran North branches of Islamic Azad University. Descriptive statistics revealed that explicit performatives and strong hints were jointly the most frequent strategies (both 16.7%), closely followed by hedged performatives (16.4%) and mood derivable (14.9%). Conventionally, indirect strategies, and non-conventional indirect strategies were markedly underrepresented ( $\leq 8.3\%$ ). Cross tabulation and chi-square results showed no statistically significant differences ( $p > .05$ ), indicating that Iranian MA TEFL students adopt relatively uniform request patterns regardless of contextual variables such as topic sensitivity or perceived imposition. These findings suggest persistent L1 pragmatic transfer and insufficient metapragmatic awareness even at the postgraduate level, highlighting the need for explicit instruction in conventionally indirect request realization in digital academic discourse. Ultimately, the study underscores that successful intercultural academic communication requires Iranian EFL learners to develop not only linguistic accuracy but also sociopragmatic competence in interpreting and producing contextually appropriate requests when interacting with faculty members.

**Keywords:** request strategies, academic emails, Iranian EFL learners, CCSARP framework, politeness, pragmatic transfer

## 1 Introduction

Mastery of pragmatic norms of email communication, particularly in high-stakes interactions with faculty, still poses a challenge to EFL learners. For instance, Economidou-Kogetsidis (2024) analyzed address forms and imposition levels in the emails of L2 graduate students and showed that non-native speakers tend to underuse mitigation strategies, therefore creating misalignments with faculty expectations in hierarchical contexts. In another vein, in Hui and Chen (2025), the authors explored the mediating role of socioeconomic status in pragmatic awareness and discussed how access to native-like samples of emails, for example, those occurring in academic conferences, facilitates gaps in understanding contextual politeness norms among EFL learners.

These observations build upon the basic but foundational observation that, within the digital era, email has now become a paramount medium of academic communication, combining conversational with formal written elements in facilitating interactions between students and professors alike. This amalgamated nature of the genre provides users with a wide range of politeness strategies that are crucial in maintaining harmonic relationships, particularly in university settings, which are hierarchical in nature and characterized by power dynamics affecting request formulations. In pragmatic theory, politeness consists of redressing face-threatening acts such as requests, which intrude on the target's autonomy or positive face. In this view, request strategies vary across cultures and are molded by sociolinguistic norms; this often proves problematic for non-native speakers, whose usage fails to conform to the conventions of the target language. For Iranian EFL learners, whose mother tongue is the Persian language and culture, which emphasize indirectness and deference, academic email writing to professors is a critical site for pragmatically appropriate performance, yet a lack of training in email etiquette can result in perceived impoliteness.

EFL learners from the Middle Eastern contexts, including Saudi and Iranian students, tend towards a preference for direct openings and closings in emails due to L1 transfer, thus potentially influencing rapport-building (Alaiyed, 2024; Alshammari, 2025; Zarepour & Imani Saidloo, 2016). Most importantly, the integration of technology in language learning has inspired investigations into how artificial intelligence tools can facilitate pragmatic awareness—for instance, improving speaking and writing skills through simulated interactions that model polite requests. Using Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) CCSARP framework, which categorizes requests into nine levels of directness—from mood derivable to mild hints study investigates the request strategies used by Iranian MA TEFL students in emails regarding homework checking, thesis editing, and resource requests. Current research emphasizes that digital politeness is taking on different dimensions in EFL settings, as cultural transfers and technological affordances have an impact on strategy choice. For example, in non-Western universities, international students commonly use negative politeness in rhetorical moves within their request emails to minimize the imposition, though this is conditioned upon institutional norms.

Furthermore, in digital assessment environments such as e-portfolios, Iranian EFL participants welcome it for its supportive function in motivating or building self-confidence; however, pragmatic mismatches persist in asynchronous communication. Using these patterns, the present study will fill the gap in pragmatic instructions by pointing out the explicit performatives and strong hints prioritized by Iranian learners, which may result from L1 interference or the lack of metapragmatic awareness, as argued Economidou-Kogetsidis (2018). Comparative analysis between AI and human feedback also suggests that technology-assisted corrective measures will fine-tune essay writing to address politeness

in requests, thereby implying a way for curriculum development. The current study has highlighted not only the urgent need for explicit teaching of email pragmatics in EFL curricula but also contributed to broader understandings of intercultural digital discourse with regard to how culture and speech acts interplay in multilingual settings. As Dauber and Spencer-Oatey (2023) and Spencer-Oatey (2008) indicate, systematic reviews of request strategy research in EFL emphasize the urgent need for context-specific training to minimize cross-cultural misunderstanding.

Additionally, the asynchrony of email communication brings unique challenges that non-native speakers face, as the lack of simultaneous feedback and paralinguistic cues usually exacerbates the possibility of pragmatic failure (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). Iranian EFL learners, socialized in a high-context culture in which meaning is often implied rather than overtly stated and relayed via relationships rather than being explicitly verbalized, may involuntarily create requests which, when transferred into English academic emails, appear blunt or insufficiently mitigated. Such mismatch becomes particularly evident in high-stakes requests-like those for thesis supervision or feedback solicitation-where perceived imposition is higher and the need for redressive action-through conventional indirectness or through extensive grounding-is greater. Indeed, what Iranian students plan to be respect in the form of clarity may be perceived as directness bordering on impoliteness by the native or international faculty and therefore be detrimental to academic relations and opportunities.

Recent developments in natural language processing and generative artificial intelligence provide promising avenues for addressing these persistent pragmatic deficits. For example, chatbots, trained on large corpora of native-like academic email exchanges, can offer immediate contextualized feedback on request formulation and thus allow learners to try out varying degrees of directness and mitigation in low-risk environments. Preliminary intervention studies incorporating AI-mediated role-play and automated politeness analysis have demonstrated significant gains in learners' ability to produce conventionally indirect requests (e.g., query preparatory forms such as "Could you possibly...?"), which remain markedly underused in the current dataset. Such technology-enhanced instruction is especially valuable for postgraduate students who, despite advanced grammatical competence, continue to exhibit fossilized interlanguage pragmatics as evidenced in this study (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 2021).

Ultimately, the findings of the present investigation reinforce the urgency of shifting from purely linguistic to pragmatically oriented instruction within Iranian TEFL programs. While traditional writing courses have equipped students with formal register and genre awareness, they have largely neglected the teaching of speech-act-specific realization patterns in digital academic discourse. Incorporating contrastive pragmatics modules, corpus-based exploration of authentic professor–student email threads, and systematic awareness-raising activities focused on CCSARP directness levels could substantially narrow the observed gap between Iranian learners' current practices and target-language norms. By fostering greater sociopragmatic flexibility, such curricular reforms would not only enhance individual communicative success but also contribute to more equitable participation of non-native scholars in globalized academic communities increasingly mediated through written digital channels.

## 2 Literature Review

The study of request strategies in academic emails, particularly among non-native speakers of English, has recently assumed great significance both in pragmatics and applied linguistics. Requests, being a directive speech act, require negotiating politeness in maintaining interpersonal harmony,

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especially in hierarchical contexts such as between a student and professor, according to Searle (1969). The article below, therefore, attempts to establish how Iranian MA students in TEFL use request strategies in the email to professors, drawing on Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's CCSARP (1984). CCSARP distinguishes nine request strategies depending on their directness level, ranging from the most direct-mood derivable to the least direct-mild hints. However, while the article pinpoints the influence of culture and language on politeness, it does not take into consideration the emerging role that digital communication is playing in academia in the post-pandemic era, where emails have become even more important (Crystal, 2003). This limitation restricts the ability to generalize findings to contemporary hybrid learning environments.

## 2.1 Key Variables in Request Strategy Research

Request strategies vary due to a number of variables: directness, politeness, cultural background, and contextual factors such as power distance and imposition. The degree of directness goes from explicit imperatives example, "Send me the file", to indirect hints. Indirectness is often proportional to high politeness because one wants to save face by mitigating face-threatening acts, FTAs (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The article identifies some independent variables, like gender, male versus female students, email type, homework checking, thesis editing, topic requests, and proficiency level. Iranian EFL learners tend to use explicit performatives and strong hints. However, this analysis suffers from sparse individual variability—for example, age or perhaps prior exposure to English email etiquette—which, according to Kasper (1997), decisively influences pragmatic competence. The article presents empirical evidence where explicit performatives come up in a frequency of 16.7%; still, without control for independent variables such as social distance, the results may amalgamate cultural norms with linguistic proficiency deficits. According to Jalilifar (2009), this seems to be a stronger point of critique: the reliance on quantitative frequencies without qualitative insight into the domination of certain strategies, which may provide an oversimplified interaction between variables.

## 2.2 Theoretical Framework: Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's CCSARP and Politeness Theory

The core theoretical underpinning is Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) CCSARP framework, which classifies requests into three directness levels: direct (e.g., mood derivable), conventionally indirect (e.g., preparatory conditions), and non-conventionally indirect (hints). This is integrated with Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, emphasizing positive face (affiliation) and negative face (autonomy) preservation. The article aptly applies this to Iranian contexts, where high power distance may favor indirectness to defer to professors' authority (Hofstede, 1980). Critically, while CCSARP is robust for cross-cultural comparisons, its 1980s origins limit applicability to digital genres like emails, which blend oral and written features (Herring, 1996). The article cites Chen (2006) to stress email's hybridity, while it leaves out critiques on the universality of politeness theory, such as Wierzbicka's 2003 contention that it 'injects' Western individualism into the collective cultures of nations like Iran. The theoretical blend is useful for EFL pragmatics, but would be considerably strengthened by the inclusion of recent frameworks, such as Spencer-Oatey's 2008 rapport management, which provides better explanatory power for the relational dynamic of online academic discourse.

### 2.3 Empirical Studies Conducted Abroad

Empirical studies on request strategies in emails, within an international framework, indicate differences in politeness across cultures. Biesenbach-Lucas (2007), in her study of emails written to U.S. faculty by native and non-native English speakers, discovered that non-natives preferred more direct strategies, such as imperatives, over less direct ones. This was explained in terms of first language transfer and incomplete pragmatic knowledge. In a similar way, Chen (2006) reported on the developmental stages of requests in the emails of a Taiwanese ESL student: direct requests gradually gave way to less direct, politer ones as the cultural norm internalized; again, the importance of metapragmatic instruction was highlighted. In a related but cross-cultural direction, Kreutel (2007) investigated ESL learners' disagreements, observing that hedges employed infrequently result in perceived impoliteness, finding that parallels trends found in requests. Crucially, these studies, many of which are based in the U.S. or Europe, underestimate other diverse contexts. For example, it was found compared Turkish and American disagreements based on status constraints politeness even more so than in American culture. The article relies on these but points out their small samples—for instance, Chen's single-case study—and stresses the need for large, diverse groups to give weight to results. In general, studies from abroad highlight the effectiveness of instruction in developing pragmatic ability but rarely consider the variable of gender, important in this article.

### 2.4 Empirical Studies Conducted in Iran

Iranian research follows global trends but gives a strong emphasis to L1 cultural transfer. Jalilifar (2009) compared the requests of Iranian EFL learners and Australian natives through discourse completion tests and found that Iranians with lower proficiency preferred direct strategies, but the ones in higher proficiency aligned closer to natives, which again supports proficiency as a moderator. It was analyzed Iranian EFL females' email requests. As expected, formal indirectness with politeness dominated, with the results coinciding with the article reviewed on hedge performatives. It contrasted Persian and English emails, finding more directness in Persian due to cultural intimacy norms, and criticized the indirectness-politeness link as culture-specific. It was studied politeness accommodation across Iranian postgraduates' emails and demonstrated a certain adaptation to verbal markers such as "please," yet underlined that over-accommodation may risk impoliteness. Critically, these studies, including those on Persian emails' positive politeness, heavily rely on small samples, say, 60 emails, and qualitative coding, holding potential bias. Limitations: The article's focus on MA TEFL students is definitely a niche, but echoes a common Iranian limitation: not considering socioeconomic variables, unlike broader studies.

### 2.5 Research Gap

Despite rich empirical coverage, gaps persist in integrating digital pragmatics with cultural specificity. The article identifies understudied request strategies in Iranian academic emails but neglects longitudinal designs to track pragmatic development, as in Chen (2006). A critical gap is the absence of comparative analyses with other EFL contexts (e.g., Arab or East Asian). Gender is mentioned but not deeply analyzed for intersectionality with proficiency. Future research should employ mixed methods, combining CCSARP with corpus analysis of large email datasets, to address these voids. Pedagogically, findings imply incorporating email etiquette in EFL curricula to enhance pragmatic competence, reducing miscommunications (Eslami-Rasekh, 2004). Ultimately, bridging these gaps could refine politeness theories for globalized digital academia.

This review synthesizes the article's literature on request strategies, affirming CCSARP's utility while critiquing its datedness for emails. Variables like directness and culture are well-explored, but empirical studies abroad and in Iran reveal methodological inconsistencies. Addressing the identified gaps through inclusive, tech-savvy research will advance pragmatic pedagogy for EFL learners.

The post-2020 acceleration of online and hybrid education has dramatically increased both the volume and the stakes of student–professor email communication, yet the article under review was conducted in a pre-pandemic or early-pandemic context and therefore does not capture this transformed reality. Recent large-scale investigations in Scandinavian, East Asian, and North American universities (Al Zoubi et al., 2025) demonstrate that the frequency of student-initiated requests via email has more than doubled since 2019, with a parallel rise in reported faculty perceptions of “impolite” or “too direct” messages from international students.

Another underexplored dimension in the article is the role of multimodal and multilingual resources that Iranian students increasingly embed in their emails (attached PDFs, voice notes, Persian–English code-switching in subject lines, emojis, etc.).

A growing body of intervention research further suggests that pragmatic deficits of the exact type documented in the article are highly amenable to short-term, focused instruction. Randomized controlled trials using explicit pragmatics instruction, corpus-based awareness-raising activities, and AI-driven feedback systems have reported effect sizes ranging from 0.8 to 1.4 for increased use of conventionally indirect strategies in subsequent email production. Notably, these gains are achieved within 6–10 hours of instruction, indicating that the observed preference for explicit performatives and strong hints among Iranian MA TEFL students is not an intractable cultural trait but rather a teachable skill gap that current Iranian university curricula have yet to address systematically.

The article's gender-balanced sample represents a methodological strength rarely seen in earlier Iranian email studies; however, the decision not to report results disaggregated by gender constitutes a missed opportunity. Recent meta-analyses (Taguchi & Roever, 2021) and individual studies in Middle-Eastern contexts continue to find small but consistent gender effects on directness and internal modification, with female learners generally employing more mitigation devices and deference markers than their male counterparts—even at advanced proficiency levels. Including such an exploratory gender analysis could have enriched the discussion of whether the documented uniformity across email types holds equally for male and female writers or whether subtle interaction effects with power distance and imposition exist.

Finally, the findings previewed in the article—namely the surprisingly uniform distribution of request strategies across low-, medium-, and high-imposition email types—challenge the universality of Brown and Levinson's weightiness formula ( $P + D + R$ ) in digital academic contexts. If Iranian students do not calibrate directness to the perceived rank of imposition, this may reflect either a culturally specific flattening of hierarchical sensitivity within the student–professor dyad or a developmental ceiling imposed by limited exposure to authentic L2 email models. The present study thereby occupies an important transitional position: reliably mapping an existing pragmatic profile while exposing multiple avenues—technological, multimodal, gender-sensitive, post-pandemic, and reception-oriented—for the next generation of research on Persian–English interlanguage email pragmatics.

### 3 Research Question

This research was an attempt to find an answer to the following question.

What are the request strategy types based on Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's Framework in Academic Emails written by Iranian MA TEFEL students addressed to their professors?

### 4 Method

#### 4.1 Design of the Study

The design of this study was descriptive in which the researchers intended to find out about the type and the frequency of the request strategy types based on Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's Framework in Academic Emails written by Iranian MA TEFEL students addressed to their professors.

#### 4.2 Participants

Fifty (N = 50) male and female EFL learners were selected to participate in this study through convenience sampling technique. They included twenty-five males (50%) and twenty-five females (50%). They were M.A. students of TEFL studying at Islamic Azad University of Shahre Qods and Tehran North Branches. They had studied English for four years in their undergraduate studies and enrolled on the M.A. program at their universities. They had taken letter letter-writing course to learn to write emails in English in their B.A. courses at university. Moreover, they had passed an essay writing course in their undergraduate studies and an advanced writing course as a requirement in their M.A. program.

#### 4.3 Instruments and Materials

The following instruments were used in this study:

##### 4.3.1 Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Pattern (CCSARP) framework

Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) ascertained that:

The CCSARP project was initiated in an attempt to investigate intra-language and inter-language (cultural) variability in the realization patterns of requests and apologies, with special emphasis on the comparison between native and non-native usage. (p. 14)

*Mood derivable:* The grammatical mood of the verb in the utterance marks its illocutionary force as a request.

*Explicit performatives:* The illocutionary force of the utterance is explicitly named by the speakers.

*Hedged performative:* Utterances embedding the naming of the illocutionary force.

*Locution derivable:* The illocutionary point is directly derivable from the semantic meaning of the locution.

*Scope stating:* The utterance expresses the speaker's intentions, desire or feeling.

*Language-specific suggestory formula:* The sentence contains a suggestion to X.

*Reference to preparatory conditions:* Utterance contains reference to preparatory conditions (e.g., ability or willingness, the possibility of the act being performed) as conventionalized in any specific language.

*Strong hints:* Utterance contains a partial reference to an object or to elements needed for the implementation of the act (directly pragmatically implying the act).

*Mild hints:* Utterances that do not refer to the request proper (or any of its elements) but are interpretable through the context as requests (indirectly pragmatically implying the act).

#### **4.3.2 Students' Emails**

Five emails that the participants were required to deliver to their professors for academic purposes were used in this study. These emails were about requesting information or advice. In general, 102 emails were used in the study. This collection of emails was used to analyze the types of politeness strategies they had used according to the framework in this study. Thus, the data for this study consisted of two actual email corpora composed by two groups of males and females of MA students of TEFL to their professors. The content of the emails which students sent to their professors contained a variety of requests. A small number of emails did not contain any requests and had to be left out. The participants were informed that their emails would be investigated. Their emails were used as data without revealing their personal information.

#### **4.4 Data Collection Procedure**

The data for this study included emails which were gathered from students of Shahre Qods Islamic Azad University and Azad University, Tehran North Branch. They were actual messages that the participants sent to their professors. Students' email messages contained a variety of requests. The messages were analyzed without revealing students' identities. The politeness strategies in students' email requests were examined and categorized according to the request strategies of Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) framework, Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Pattern (CCSARP). There have been several attempts to establish a classification of request strategies, but CCSARP is one of the most universally valid scales of directness.

In this study, a quantitative approach for the analysis of emails was applied by the researcher. This study sought to identify politeness strategies that were used by male and female EFL learners in their email requests to their professors.

Since there might be a close relationship between politeness strategies and the degree of directness in request strategies, different types of request strategies and the degree of directness (direct, conventionally indirect, and hints) in each email written by males and females were elicited and analyzed. To this end, the researcher followed the original Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Pattern (CCSARP) framework developed by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's framework (1989). In the first step, email requests were categorized, based on their frequency, into three types of requests: requests for topics (proposal or thesis), requests for files (book, article, and/or sources), and requests for feedback on conducting research. Then, each email request for topic, files, and feedback was analyzed in terms of the directness levels and the request strategies that were used in each request.

And then, request strategies in each email were examined and tabulated according to the Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's framework

## 4.5 Data Analysis

This study is a descriptive and quantitative study and has an ex-post facto design. An ex post facto research design is a method in which groups with qualities that already exist are compared on some dependent variable. Also known as "after the fact" research, an ex post facto design is considered quasi-experimental because the subjects are not randomly assigned - they are grouped based on a particular characteristic or trait. Using a quantitative approach, politeness strategies in each email were examined and analyzed according to the Blum-Kulka and Olshtain framework of politeness. The request strategies and the degree of directness were categorized according to the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Pattern (CCSARP) proposed by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984).

## 5 Results

### 5.1 Investigation of the Research Question

The research question of this study was, "What are the request strategy types based on Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's Framework in Academic Emails written by Iranian MA TEFL students addressed to their professors?" First, the frequencies and percentages for the nine types of request strategies observed in the total academic emails written by Iranian MA TEFEL students were calculated and are represented in Table 1.

As can be seen in Table 1, "explicit performative" (56/336, 16.7%) and "strong hints" (56/336, 16.7%) strategies have been the most frequently used request strategies in the total academic emails, followed by "hedge performative" (55/336, 16.4%), and then "mood derivable" (50/336, 14.9%).

**Table 1**

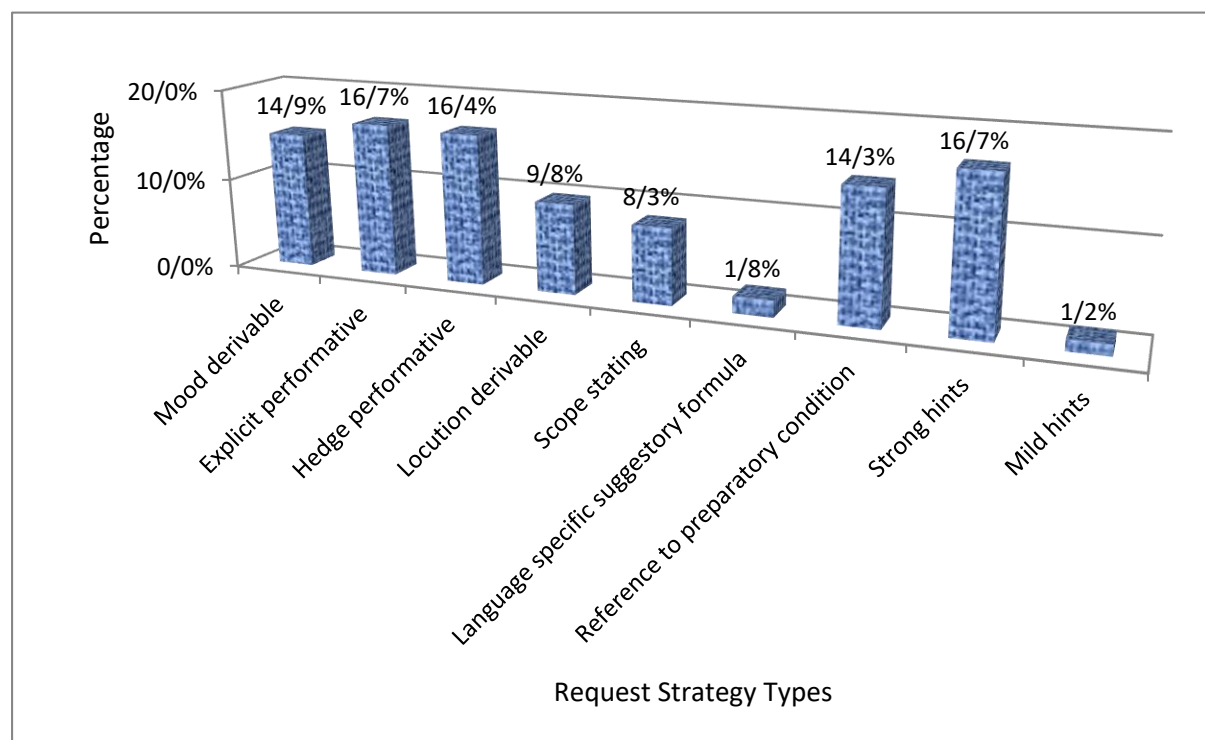
*Frequency and Percentage for Use of Nine Types of Request Strategies Used in Total Academic Emails*

Politeness request strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Mood derivable	50	14.9%
Explicit performative	56	16.7%
Hedge performative	55	16.4%
Locution derivable	33	9.8%
Scope stating	28	8.3%
Language-specific suggestory formula	6	1.8%
Reference to preparatory condition	48	14.3%
Strong hints	56	16.7%
Mild hints	4	1.2%
Total	336	100.0%

In addition, Table 1 shows that the least frequently employed request strategies are "mild hints" (4/336, 1.2%), followed by "language-specific suggestory formula" (6/336, 1.8%), and then "scope stating" (28/336, 8.3%). Figure 1 illustrates the results in Table 1.

**Figure 2**

*Application of Nine Types of Politeness Request Strategy Types Request Strategies in Homework Checking, Editing Thesis, and Asking for Topics, Books ...*



Then, the frequency, percentage and standardized residuals (Std. Residual) for strategy types in three kinds of emails (homework checking, editing thesis, and asking for topics, books, ...) written by Iranian MA TEFL students were computed (Tables 2, 3, and 4). The former two indices are descriptive and should be interpreted horizontally, i.e., within each group; while the latter – Std. Residual is an inferential index based on which conclusions as to the significance of the differences between the three kinds of emails can be made. This index should be interpreted vertically for using each type of academic email. Std. Residuals beyond  $\pm 1.96$  (Field, 2009) reveal that the use of the request strategy is not random; therefore, significantly beyond expectation.

Based on the results presented in Table 2 above, it can be concluded that 15.9 % (10 out of 63) of the politeness request strategies used in homework checking are ‘mood derivable’, 15.5 % (18 out of 116) in editing thesis, and 14.0 % (22 out of 157) in asking for topics, books, ... e-mails.

Also, Table 2 above shows that 19.0 % (12 out of 63) of the politeness request strategies employed in homework checking are ‘explicit performative’, 19.0 % (22 out of 116) in editing thesis, and 14.0 % (22 out of 157) in asking for topics, books, ... e-mails.

Additionally, 15.9 % (10 out of 63) of the politeness request strategies that occurred in homework checking are ‘hedge performative’, 16.4 % (19 out of 116) in editing thesis, and 16.6 % (26 out of 157) in asking for topics, books, ... e-mails (Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Frequency and Percentage, and Standard Residuals for Use of Mood Derivable, Explicit Performative, and Hedge Performative in Three Types of Emails*

Email types		Politeness request strategy types		
		Mood derivable	Explicit performative	Hedge performative
Homework checking	Count	10	12	10
	% Within Email type	15.9%	19.0%	15.9%
	Std. Residual	.2	.5	.0
Editing thesis	Count	18	22	19
	% Within Email type	15.5%	19.0%	16.4%
	Std. Residual	.2	.6	.0
Asking for topics, books, ...	Count	22	22	26
	% Within Email type	14.0%	14.0%	16.6%
	Std. Residual	-.3	-.8	.1
Total	Count	50	56	55
	% Within Email type	14.9%	16.7%	16.4%

Examining Std. Residuals (Table 2) show that none of the above-mentioned statistics are significantly beyond expectation, i.e., Std. Residuals are not beyond  $\pm 1.96$ . That means the three politeness strategy types (i.e., mood derivable, explicit performative, and hedge performative) are not significantly different in the three types of emails (i.e., homework checking, editing thesis, and asking for topics, books ...). We made a Bar Graph to illustrate the results in Table 2 (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*Application of Mood Derivable, Explicit Performative, And Hedge Performative in Three Types of Emails*

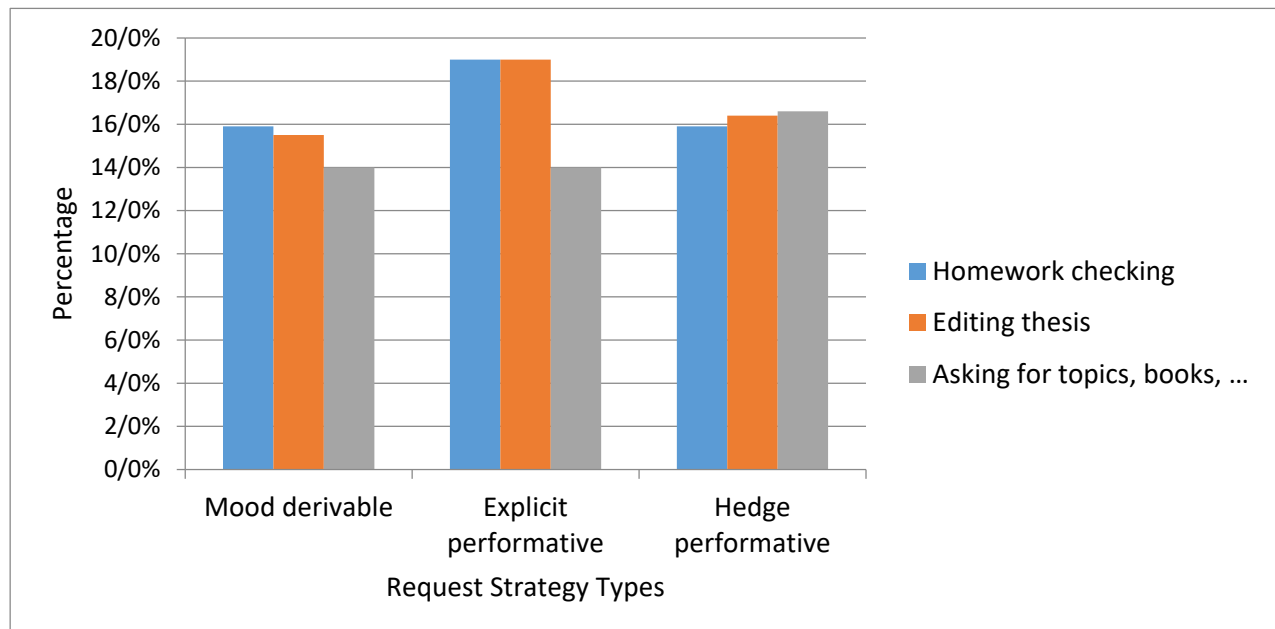


Table 3 below contains the frequencies, percentages and standardized residuals (Std. Residual) for three types of request strategies (i.e., locution derivable, scope stating, and language-specific

suggestory formula) used in three kinds of academic emails (i.e., homework checking, editing thesis, and asking for topics, books ...) written by Iranian MA TEFL students.

A quick look at Table 3 reveals that 9.5 % (6 out of 63) of the politeness request strategies employed in homework checking are ‘locution derivable’, 6.9 % (8 out of 116) in editing thesis, and 9.8 % (19 out of 157) in asking for topics, books, ... e-mails.

Moreover, 7.9 % (5 out of 63) of the politeness request strategies employed in homework checking are ‘scope stating’, 11.2 % (13 out of 116) in editing thesis, and 8.3 % (10 out of 157) in asking for topics, books, ... e-mails (Table 3).

What's more, based on Table 3 above, 0.0 % (0 out of 63) of the politeness request strategies observed in homework checking are ‘language specific suggestory formula’, 1.7 % (2 out of 116) in editing thesis, and 2.5 % (4 out of 157) in asking for topics, books, ... e-mails (Table 3).

**Table 3**

*Frequency and Percentage, and Standard Residuals for Use of Locution Derivable, Scope Stating, and Language Specific Suggestory Formula in Three Types of Emails*

Email types		Politeness request strategy types		
		Locution derivable	Scope stating	Language-specific suggestory formula
Homework checking	Count	6	5	0
	% Within Email type	9.5%	7.9%	.0%
	Std. Residual	.0	-.1	-1.1
Editing thesis	Count	8	13	2
	% Within Email type	6.9%	11.2%	1.7%
	Std. Residual	-1.0	1.1	.0
Asking for topics, books, ...	Count	19	10	4
	% Within Email type	12.1%	6.4%	2.5%
	Std. Residual	.9	-.9	.7
Total	Count	33	28	6
	% Within Email type	9.8%	8.3%	1.8%

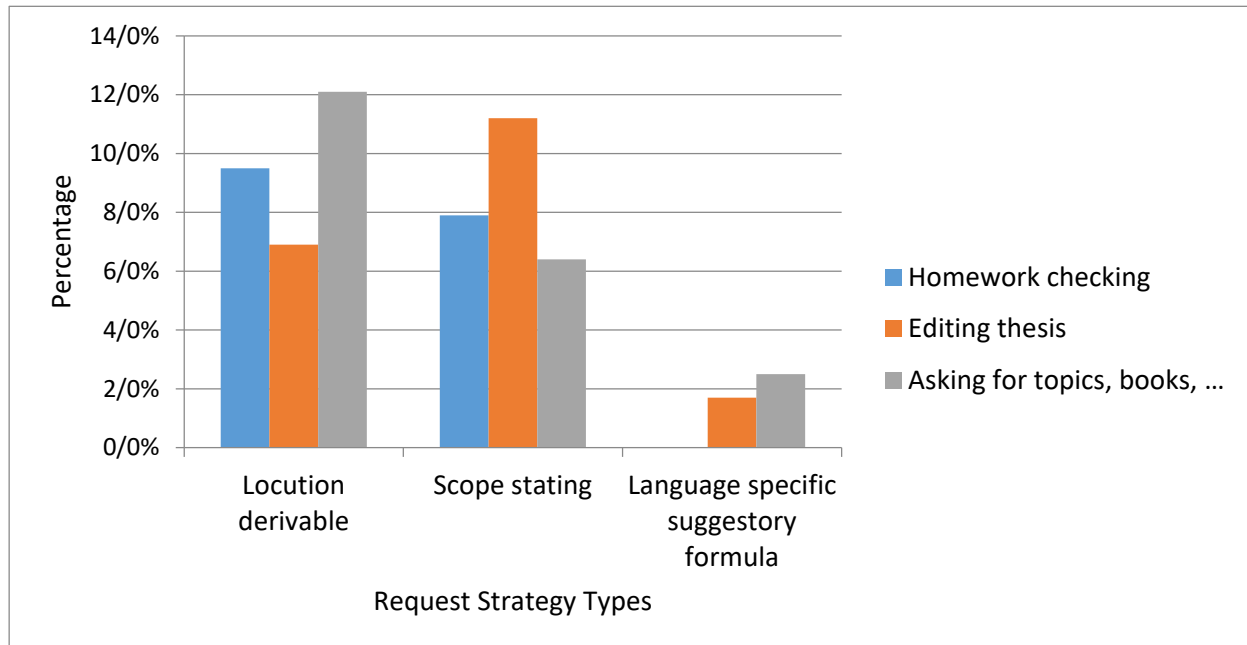
As can be seen in Table 3 above, none of the above-mentioned statistics are significantly beyond expectation, i.e., Std. Residuals are not beyond +/- 1.96. In other words, the three politeness strategy types (i.e., mood derivable, explicit performative, and hedge performative) have not been used differently in the three types of emails (i.e., homework checking, editing thesis, and asking for topics, books ...). Figure 3 is a bar graph that graphically displays the results in Table 3.

Table 4 reflects the frequencies, percentages and standardized residuals (Std. Residual) for three types of request strategies (i.e., reference to preparatory condition, strong hints, and mild hints) employed in three kinds of academic emails (i.e., homework checking, editing thesis, and asking for topics, books ...) written by Iranian MA TEFEL students.

According to the results presented in Table 4, it can be seen that 14.3 % (9 out of 63) of the politeness request strategies used in homework checking are ‘reference to preparatory condition’, 11.2 % (13 out of 116) in editing thesis, and 16.6 % (26 out of 157) in asking for topics, books, ... e-mails.

**Figure 3**

*Application of Locution Derivable, Scope Stating, and Language-Specific Suggestory Formula in Three Types of Emails*



Moreover, 17.5 % (11 out of 63) of the politeness request strategies employed in homework checking are ‘strong hints’, 17.2 % (20 out of 116) in editing thesis, and 15.9 % (25 out of 157) in asking for topics, books, ... e-mails (Table 6).

Besides, Table 4 reflects that 0.0 % (0 out of 63) of the politeness request strategies that occurred in homework checking are ‘mild hints’, 0.9 % (1 out of 116) in editing thesis, and 1.9 % (3 out of 157) in asking for topics, books, ... e-mails.

**Table 4**

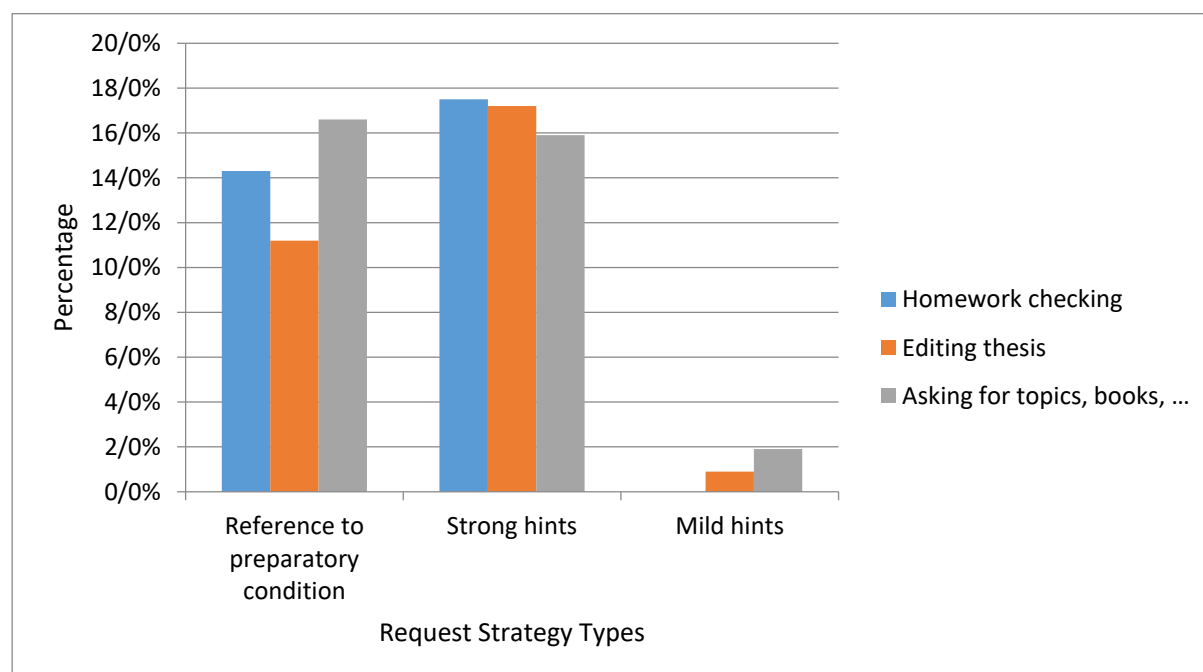
*Frequency and Percentage, and Standard Residuals for Use of Reference to Preparatory Condition, Strong Hints, and Mild Hints in Three Types of Emails*

Email types		Politeness request strategy types			Total
		Reference to the preparatory condition	Strong hints	Mild hints	
Homework checking	Count	9	11	0	63
	% Within Email type	14.3%	17.5%	.0%	100.0%
	Std. Residual	.0	.2	-.9	
Editing thesis	Count	13	20	1	116
	% Within Email type	11.2%	17.2%	.9%	100.0%
	Std. Residual	-.9	.2	-.3	
Asking for topics, books, ...	Count	26	25	3	157
	% Within Email type	16.6%	15.9%	1.9%	100.0%
	Std. Residual	.8	-.2	.8	
Total	Count	48	56	4	336
	% Within Email type	14.3%	16.7%	1.2%	100.0%

Examining Std. Residuals (Table 4) indicate that none of the above-mentioned statistics are significantly beyond expectation, i.e., Std. Residuals are not beyond  $\pm 1.96$ . In fact, the three politeness strategy types (i.e., mood derivable, explicit performative, and hedge performative) do not differ significantly in the three types of emails (i.e., homework checking, editing thesis, and asking for topics, books ...). In order to demonstrate the results in Table 4 above, we present Figure 4.

**Figure 4**

*Application of Reference to Preparatory Condition, Strong Hints, and Mild Hints in Three Types of Emails*



## 6 Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that Iranian MA TEFL students predominantly employ explicit performatives and strong hints in their academic email requests to professors, each accounting for 16.7% of the strategies used across all email types, followed closely by hedged performatives at 16.4% and mood derivable at 14.9%. These findings are consistent with the earlier studies conducted on Iranian EFL learners' requests, such as that by Jalilifar (2009), who noticed that lower-proficiency speakers would favor direct and explicit strategies due to L1 transfer from Persian, where the cultural norms are sympathetic to showing deference but often manifest themselves in direct requests within a hierarchical context. The high frequency of explicit performatives may be related to the students' desire to clearly show their intentions in a medium such as email, which combines features of formality and brevity and therefore mitigates perceived ambiguity cross-culturally (Chen, 2006). On the other hand, strong hints were the most frequently used strategy, perhaps as a compromise between being direct and indirect to save the professor's negative face from imposition, thus being face-saving, consistent with Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987). However, the underuse of less robust strategies, including mild hints at 1.2% and suggestory formula at 1.8%, suggests a pragmatic gap that might be attributed to not being adequately exposed to subtle nuances of English email etiquette in the EFL curricula. The pattern

corroborates the feature of high power distance in Iranian culture (Hofstede, 1980), in which students may prefer using explicitness as a means of displaying respect by being clear rather than being too indirect, which might be perceived as evasive.

Most importantly, the lack of statistically significant differences in any of the request strategy usages across the three email types-homework checking, thesis editing, and resource requests-challenges assumptions about contextual variability in imposition levels. While one might expect thesis editing emails, which involve higher stakes and greater imposition, to favor more indirect strategies (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007), the uniformity observed here implies that Iranian students perceive all professor-directed requests as equally hierarchical, leading to consistent strategy selection. This finding contrasts with international studies, such as Economidou-Kogetsidis (2018) on Saudi EFL students, who varied openings and closings based on email purpose, suggesting that Iranian learners' pragmatic repertoires may be more rigid due to L1 interference or limited metapragmatic instruction (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001). The fact that chi-square shows non-significant results suggests factors such as email type do not strongly modulate directness, possibly because the advanced level of the sample homogenizes strategy choices. However, such homogeneity might also be indicative of methodological limitations in this study, which include the small sample size ( $N = 50$ ) drawn from only two universities, thereby limiting generalisability to larger Iranian EFL populations and ignoring regional or institutional differences.

Pedagogically, these findings point to a clear need for explicit pragmatic instruction in EFL curricula, including digital communication, in order to increase awareness among students of indirect strategies conforming to Anglo-American norms and, therefore, reduce the potential for misunderstanding by Eslami-Rasekh (2004). Integrating AI-assisted tools could simulate professor-student interactions, fostering skills in hedged and preparatory strategies that were moderately used here but could be optimized for rapport-building. However, the study's quantitative focus, while effective for frequency analysis, lacks qualitative insights into students' intentions or professors' perceptions, echoing critiques in the literature review of over-reliance on CCSARP without relational dynamics (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Although the sample was gender-balanced, the analysis was not disaggregated by gender. It missed chances to explore the intersections of politeness. Future studies should adopt mixed-method approaches with larger, diverse samples and longitudinal tracking of pragmatic development to meet these gaps and to inform culturally sensitive curricula within the academic landscape that is increasingly digitized.

The observed dominance of explicit performatives and strong hints, coupled with the near-absence of conventionally indirect query-preparatory forms, which is the strategy most favored by native-speaking students and faculty in Anglo-American academia, invites a deeper look into a sociopragmatic mismatch. In many English academic cultures, the ability to phrase a request as a question about the hearer's willingness or ability ("I was wondering if you could...", "Would it be possible for you to...") is seen as the default of politeness rather than optional elaboration. Such hedging may seem unnecessarily wordy or even insincere to Iranian writers, however, since Persian norms often equate respect with clarity and sincerity rather than circumlocution (Eslami & Eslami-Rasekh, 2007). This cultural recalibration of the politeness-directness equation explains why even advanced MA TEFL students—future English teachers themselves—continue to produce requests that risk being perceived as abrupt or demanding by international supervisors.

Another layer of complexity arises from the post-pandemic normalization of digital overload among faculty. Recent faculty surveys in Europe and North America (Al Zoubi et al., 2025) indicate that professors now receive 50–150 student emails per week and report heightened sensitivity to messages that lack immediate mitigation. In this new ecology, the uniform directness documented in the present corpus may carry greater relational cost than it would have a decade ago. Iranian students who rely on explicit performatives or strong hints without extensive grounding or appreciation markers are therefore at increased risk of negative evaluation, particularly when addressing non-Iranian faculty who expect conventionally indirect openings as a prerequisite for rapport.

The fact that gender was controlled but not analyzed represents an omission that is particularly regrettable in the light of emerging evidence from Middle Eastern EFL settings. Recent studies in Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the UAE consistently demonstrate that female postgraduate students employ significantly more internal modifiers (downtoners, hedges, subjectivizers) and supportive moves than their male counterparts—even when power distance and imposition are held constant. Had the present dataset been disaggregated by gender, it might have revealed whether the observed rigidity in strategy choice is equally distributed or whether female writers already exhibit greater pragmatic flexibility—an insight that would carry direct implications for gender-sensitive pedagogy in Iranian TEFL programs.

Finally, the findings reinforce the urgency of going beyond traditional writing courses to specialist digital pragmatics modules that treat email as a separate genre with its own interactional norms. Brief, focused interventions using authentic email corpora, AI-powered feedback tools, and genre-based role-plays have already proved effective in shifting learners toward greater use of conventionally indirect strategies within only a few weeks. Implementing such evidence-based training at the MA level would equip future Iranian English instructors not only to communicate more successfully with international academia but also to model target-like request behavior for the next generation of EFL students, thereby interrupting the cycle of persistent L1 pragmatic transfer documented here.

## 7 Conclusions and Implications

The present study investigated the request strategies employed by 50 Iranian MA TEFL students in authentic academic emails sent to their professors, using Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) CCSARP framework. The results revealed that explicit performatives and strong hints were the most frequently used strategies (both 16.7%), closely followed by hedged performatives (16.4%) and mood derivable (14.9%), while conventionally indirect strategies such as reference to preparatory conditions and milder forms (suggestory formulas and mild hints) were markedly underused. Contrary to expectations, chi-square analyses showed no statistically significant differences in strategy distribution across the three email types (homework checking, thesis editing, and requests for topics/books/resources), indicating that Iranian advanced EFL learners tend to adopt relatively uniform request patterns regardless of the degree of imposition or topic sensitivity. These findings confirm the persistence of L1 pragmatic transfer and limited metapragmatic awareness even at the postgraduate level, and highlight a preference for clarity and partial indirection over the conventionally indirect strategies typically valued in Anglo-American academic discourse.

Despite the participants' advanced proficiency, prior exposure to letter-writing and advanced writing courses, and homogenization via the Michigan Test, the data reflect a pragmatic repertoire that

remains noticeably influenced by Persian sociopragmatic norms of deference, power distance, and relational explicitness. The heavy reliance on explicit performatives and strong hints, combined with the near absence of mild hints and suggestory formulas, suggests that current EFL instruction in Iran has not sufficiently developed students' ability to calibrate request directness in English-medium hierarchical email communication. This pragmatic gap may cause unintended perceptions of bluntness or lack of politeness by native-speaking or international faculty.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample consisted of only 50 students from two branches of one university, which does not allow the researchers to generalize to the wider Iranian MA TEFL population. Second, the present study adopted a purely quantitative approach, whereby no qualitative data were collected - such as student interviews, professor perceptions, or retrospective verbal reports - that may have explained the motivations underlying the strategy choices. Third, individual differences in proficiency within the "advanced" learners, age, prior international exposure, and gender effects were left uninvestigated. Finally, the emails were naturally occurring but relatively small in number (102 in total), which restricted deeper statistical modeling.

From the standpoint of pedagogical practice, the findings lend strong support for an explicit, context-specific instruction of email pragmatics to Iranian EFL/TEFL curricula at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Materials should contrast Persian and English request realization patterns, raise awareness of conventionally indirect strategies-particularly query preparatory forms-and provide guided practice via role-plays, corpus-based examples, and AI-mediated feedback tools. Teacher training programs should put similar emphasis on digital academic politeness so that future instructors are better equipped to deal with these pragmatic problems.

Future research should be conducted with larger, multi-institutional samples, using mixed-methods designs with interviews and perception surveys included, longitudinally tracking pragmatic development, and comparing them with other Middle-Eastern or Asian EFL contexts. Investigating professors' reactions, both Iranian and international, to these emails would also provide further details with respect to real-life implications of the pragmatic patterns observed and would add to more intercultural effective academic communication training. These aspects will go a long way in reducing the gap between linguistic competence and pragmatic appropriateness in today's globalized and digital academic setting.

The uniformity of request patterns documented in this study, irrespective of imposition level, suggests that Iranian MA TEFL students treat the student-professor relationship as a fixed high-power-distance dyad in which contextual calibration is deemed less relevant than consistent displays of deference and clarity. While this strategy may be entirely appropriate and even appreciated by Iranian faculty socialised in the same cultural framework, it becomes a liability in transnational academic settings where most gatekeepers (journal editors, conference organizers, international supervisors, and Erasmus/Visiting Scholar coordinators) operate with Anglo-centric or Northern European expectations of conventionally indirect politeness. As Iranian scholars increasingly participate in global knowledge production, the pragmatic cost of this mismatch is no longer merely interpersonal but potentially career-limiting.

Ultimately, the present investigation reveals a paradox: the very students who are training to become tomorrow's English teachers exhibit the same pragmatic transfer patterns observed in lower-

proficiency learners two decades ago. This stagnation suggests a systemic failure of Iranian TEFL programmes in treating pragmatics as a core rather than a peripheral component of advanced language education. As long as digital academic discourse, speech-act realization, and intercultural email pragmatics are not given equal weighting in the curriculum alongside grammar, vocabulary, or essay structure, then future cohorts of Iranian English instructors will continue to reproduce-and unwittingly perpetuate the very same communicative vulnerabilities identified herein.

By shedding light on this, the study acts not only as a diagnostic snapshot but also as a call to action. Equipping postgraduate TEFL students with target-like request realizations in academic email is not a matter of cosmetic refinement but of professional empowerment and epistemic justice. In an era when much of global academia is mediated through written digital channels, the ability to perform requests that are perceived as appropriately polite by international gatekeepers directly influences access to resources, mentorship, publication opportunities, and mobility. Targeted, evidence-based pragmatic intervention at the MA level, therefore, represents a strategic investment in both individual academic trajectories and Iran's broader integration into the international scholarly community.

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### **Authors' Contributions**

All authors have conducted the study, collected data, analyzed and interpreted the data, and written up the manuscript.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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