

# Interlanguage Pragmatic Development and L2 Request Behavior: A Critical Review of the Literature for emergent use of “Polite” Requests

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## ABSTRACT

The way we ask for something, or *request*, is hardly the same across all contexts. The degree to which we show politeness in these instances is closely related to a number of contextual factors (Brown & Levinson, 1987), manifested in the linguistic features that we employ (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989; Searle, 1975). However, the issue becomes particularly thorny when evaluating perceived pragmatic transgressions among English language learners (ELLs). Is the issue their misunderstanding of social expectations (i.e., *sociopragmatic*) or the language used (i.e., *pragmalinguistic*)? Past research in second language assessment (SLA) has focused on how learners develop the ability to perform requests (e.g., Kasper & Rose, 2002). However, what has been left under-addressed is the emergent ability among ELLs to request in a manner considered polite and contextually appropriate. With that issue in mind, this article reviews the literature on second language (L2) developmental patterns in the performance of requests with an eye for evidence of emergent awareness of politeness. The article begins with a discussion of the theoretical and empirical foundations for this question then proceeds into a review of studies among ELLs at three different proficiency levels, concluding with a discussion of the implications that this research has for language teaching and testing.

## INTRODUCTION

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a *request* as “an instance of asking for something, especially in a polite or formal manner” (2017), a definition clearly composed of two distinct parts. Considering the first part, “instances of asking for something,” one could imagine a seemingly endless list of scenarios. However, if we consider which of those scenarios require politeness or formality, the list becomes markedly smaller.

Suffice it to say, not all requests should be held alike. Some are substantively different from others on the basis of *what* is being asked for, *who* is asking for it, and *to whom* (Blum-Kulka & House, 1989; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Trosberg, 1995). Depending on the people involved and the nature of the request, certain cultural norms for politeness, deference and formality may be required (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Hudson, Detmer, & Brown, 1995; Leech,

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1983; LoCastro, 2013; Searle, 1975, Trosberg, 1995; Woodfield & Economidou-Kogdetsis, 2010) and these considerations would often be manifested in the tone, style and phrasing (Blum-Kulka, 1989; Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989; Economidou-Kogdetsis, 2008; Faerch & House, 1989; Lin, 2009; Searle, 1975; Trosberg, 1995). Not to mention, formal requests are often written, rather than spoken, which likely changes how it would be performed as well (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006, 2007; Chen, 2001, 2006; Economidou-Kogdetsis, 2011, 2016).

Given this undeniable influence that context and culture exert upon the language of requests, the issue becomes further compounded when considering populations with developing English proficiency. Assuming politeness is a culturally specific phenomenon which informs request behavior (Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz, 1990; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Locastro, 2013), then what exactly would be considered the root cause when breakdowns occur: understanding of the cultural context or a grasp of the language required (Leech, 1983; LoCastro, 2013; Thomas, 1983)?

Many proficient second language (L2) speakers of English have been acculturated to the norms of request making in the countries which they reside and have sufficient facility in the local language to abide by those norms. With that said, this awareness and acculturation, much like all language learning, is a developmental process. Indeed, past research has given credence to that (Achiba, 2003; Ellis, 1992; Goy, Zeyrek, & Otcu, 2012; Kasper & Rose, 2002; Rose, 2000; Schauer, 2006, 2009; Woodfield, 2012). However, much of the research has primarily focused on the developing ability to simply “ask for something,” rather than asking for something in circumstances requiring politeness. To that end, the question at hand for this essay is how L2 speakers of English develop the ability to request in a manner considered polite.

This essay provides a review of the literature on second language developmental patterns in learning to perform requests. The goal is to identify and further examine evidence of learner’s exhibiting an emerging awareness of politeness. In order to provide a basis for such analysis, it would be necessary to first evaluate the theoretical and empirical underpinnings. In terms of the theoretical foundations, a preliminary definition of *pragmatics* and *speech acts*—concepts central to understanding the literature on request making—will be provided. These preliminary definitions will form a basis for understanding the established analytic frameworks for evaluating politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and the components of prototypically polite requests in English (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989). As for the empirical foundations, we will turn to how these analytical frameworks have been used to evaluate L2 pragmatic development in request use, with an eye for evidence of a developing awareness of politeness (Kasper & Rose, 2002). This critical review will focus on request behavior at three English proficiency levels: beginner, intermediate and high-proficiency English language learners (ELLs). The essay will then conclude with the limitations of this research and the implications that these findings may have for second language research, pedagogy, and assessment.

## **THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS**

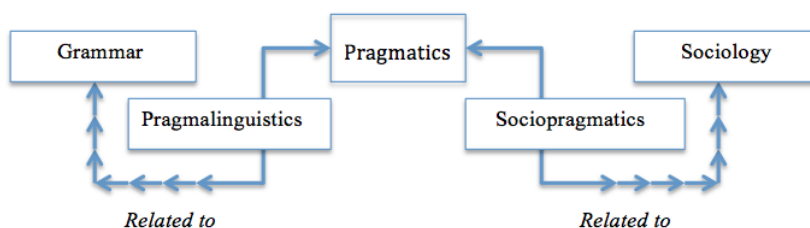
### **Defining Pragmatics: Linguistic & Social Factors**

In the field of linguistics, few definitions have been debated over as much as that of *pragmatics* and *pragmatic competence*. One recent account noted that, “while pragmatics has been consistently defined as the study of language in its sociocultural context, it is unclear what

an individual needs to know in order to be pragmatically competent and communicate appropriately” (Timpe-Laughlin, Wain, & Schmigdall, 2015, p. 1). Although no precise consensus has been reached, most researchers would appear to agree that a definition of pragmatics would involve social and linguistic variables conspiring in communication, with pragmatic competence (or a related competence) as a key component (Bachman & Palmer, 1996, Bialystok, 1993; Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972; Leech, 1983; Purpura, 2004).

An early account of this dichotomy was first articulated in the work of Leech (1983) in which a fundamental distinction was drawn between *sociopragmatics* and *pragmalinguistics* as two primary subcomponents of the definition. As noted, the former is “the sociological interface of pragmatics” (p. 10), related to the situational and cultural conventions for socially appropriate language use in a given speech community (e.g., politeness, social status, taboo). The latter, on the other hand, can be considered the linguistic by-product of these sociological circumstances, or “the particular resources a given language provides” for communicating in a situationally and culturally acceptable manner (Leech, 1983, p. 10). A representation is provided in Figure 1.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Distinction between Pragmalinguistics and Sociopragmatics**  
*Adapted from Leech (1983, p. 11)*



Early L2 research into pragmatics drew from this distinction to explain breakdowns, failures, or infelicities in communication (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; Leech, 1983; Thomas, 1983), deeming issues arising from language use itself to be pragmalinguistic failures, and deeming issues of socially inappropriate language use to be sociopragmatic failures (Thomas, 1983). Seen dichotomously, this falls short at truly conveying the interconnectedness between the two. Rather, it is better to see them, in the words of one critic, as “representing two ends of a continuum or scale since clearly enactment of politeness demands an awareness of sociocultural norms” (LoCastro, 2013, p. 90). Nonetheless, the distinction serves as a reasonable starting place for understanding the subsequent research.

## Investigating the Pragmatics through Speech Acts – Indirectness & Politeness

As a means of investigating pragmatics, a considerable amount of research has pooled from *speech act theory* (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969, 1975). The central binding principle of this field of thought is that a communicative act (i.e., what is said) conveys a communicative intention or function (e.g., requesting, complaining, etc.). This function is referred to as the *illocutionary act*. In terms of its use in empirical analysis, one researcher noted that, “the study of speech acts provides a useful means of relating linguistic form to communicative intent [in that] an utterance is treated as the speaker’s intention and goal in a particular context” (Achiba,

2003, p. 2). Simply put, speech act analysis allows us to draw links between “what is said” to “what is intended” (i.e., pragmalinguistics) and to evaluate its overall appropriateness in that given circumstance (i.e., sociopragmatics).

As it pertains to requests, Searle (1975) categorized speech acts into five different categories, with the language function of ordering (e.g., “Do this for me!”) and requesting (e.g., “Can you do this for me?”) placed into the category of *directives*. It was reasoned that these two functions shared essentially the same illocutionary act, but differed in their *illocutionary force*, manifested in the directness of the speech act. On the one hand, the intention of a direct speech act (e.g., orders) could be derived from the surface structure, while with an indirect speech act (e.g., polite requests) the intention is encoded in some fashion and thus must be surmised contextually (Ellis, 2008).

In considering the purpose of indirectness in many languages, Searle (1975) himself notes that, “politeness is the chief motivation” (p. 64), a sentiment echoed by many since (Blum-Kulka, 1989; Lin, 2009; Trosberg, 1995). In this vein, Leech (1983) reasoned that, “indirect illocutions tend to be more polite because of their optionality” (p. 108). Some have cautioned that this relationship between linguistic indirectness and socially accepted forms of politeness could be a strong association rather an inextricable link (Blum-Kulka, 1987; Fraser, 1990; Kasper, 1990). In order to understand how indirectness relates to politeness and optionality, it is important to evaluate the social purpose of a request. On this matter, past research has pooled from the work of Brown and Levinson (1987).

## Sociopragmatic Dimensions of Polite Requests

In evaluating the speech of directives, Brown and Levinson (1987) defined a request act to be an inherently *face-threatening act* (FTA), in that the speaker is imposing upon the hearer for the purpose of meeting a certain goal with the hearer’s assistance. As this imposition can be accepted or rejected, these face-threatening acts are redressed, modified, or made less direct in order to soften their illocutionary force. The authors termed this behavior *face-saving strategies* or *face-work*.

As has been established, considerations in modifying FTAs do not appear in isolation but are contingent upon the situational variables of who is performing the act, to whom, and what is the reason for the act. As noted, “speakers have to take account of the relationship with the addressee and the degree of imposition imposed by illocution and its propositional content in order to ensure harmonious relations between the speakers are not endangered” (Ellis, 2008, p. 161). Elaborating upon this notion, it was posited that three main social variables were at play in such FTAs: relative power (P), social distance (D), and the rank of imposition in a given culture and context. In a sense, the exertion of the three factors, situated in relation of the speaker to the hearer, could be evaluated on a gradient from low (-) to high (+). Accounting for these variables could serve to provide contextual bases for the demands of politeness in a given culture. A representation of these variables is provided in Figure 2.

**FIGURE 2**  
**Sociological Variables involved in Face-threatening Acts**  
*Adapted from Brown & Levinson (1987, p. 74)*

Dimension	-	=	+
<b>(P) Power relationship</b> (Speaker → Hearer)	Hearer - lower status	Hearer - equal status	Hearer - higher status
<b>(D) Social Distance</b> (Speaker → Hearer)	Well acquainted	Somewhat acquainted	Unacquainted
<b>(R) Rank of Imposition</b>	Not significant	Somewhat significant	Very significant

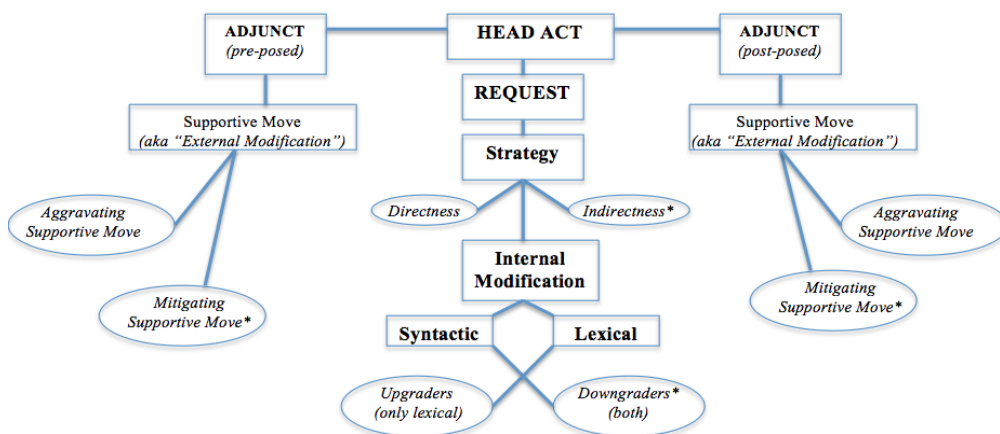
Although the theory has been criticized as simplifying the nature of social interaction and politeness (LoCastro, 2013; O'Keefe, Clancy, & Adolphs, 2011; Trosberg, 1995) and not properly addressing politeness occurring in the absence of these factors (Blum-Kulka, 1989), research into situational request behavior when accounting for these variables has revealed a strong relationship between the strong presence of one or more dimensions and the use of face-saving request strategies (Blum-Kulka & House, 1989; Hudson, Detmer, & Brown, 1995; Trosberg, 1995).

While indirectness is one way in which someone can attempt to be polite or employ face-saving strategies, it is not the only way. Building upon the work of Searle (1975) and Brown and Levinson (1987), the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989) outlined an analytical framework for evaluating requests. Since prototypical politeness requires strategies for softening the illocutionary force, particular attention will be paid to the components of a request used for this purpose.

### Pragmalinguistic Dimensions of Polite Requests

Within the CCSARP framework, the request forms the core of the speech act, termed the *head act*. Internally, at the sentential level, the head act can be softened or strengthened through the use of a given strategy (direct or indirect) and through other forms of syntactic or lexical modification. Externally, at the discourse level, forms of introduction or elaboration, known as *adjuncts* or *supportive moves*, can likewise soften (i.e., mitigate) or strengthen (i.e., aggravate) the request. Features of indirectness, downgrading and mitigation are all associated with politeness. A representation of all components in the coding scheme is provided in Figure 3.

**FIGURE 3**  
**The Components of the speech act of Requests**  
*Adapted from Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989, p. 275-289)*





Focusing on the request strategies used in the head act, gradations of directness to indirectness can be employed, with imperative forms (i.e., mood derivable) considered the most direct. Other forms stating a request are also considered direct but not to the same degree. It was reasoned that a request becomes fundamentally less direct (or conventionally indirect) when it shifts to a question form and, most commonly, makes use of some modal form (i.e., query preparatory). The taxonomy denoting this shift is presented in Figure 4.

**FIGURE 4**  
**Head Act Taxonomy: Direct and Indirect Request Strategies**  
*Adapted from Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989, p. 278-281)*

Directness Level	Request Strategy	Example
<b>Direct</b>	Mood Derivable ( <i>Imperative</i> )	" <u>Go</u> to bed!"
	Obligation Statement	"You <u>need</u> to clean your room."
	Performative	"I'm <u>asking</u> you to be nice."
	Want Statement	"I'd <u>like</u> to borrow your notes."
	Hedged Performative	"I <u>have to ask</u> you to be quiet."
<b>Conventionally Indirect</b>	Query Preparatory	" <u>Could</u> you lend me your assignment?"
	Suggestory Formula	" <u>How about</u> we eat out tonight?"
<b>Unconventionally Indirect</b> ( <i>Implied based on context</i> )	Hint ( <i>Possible Implicature</i> )	"It's a bit cold in here" ( <i>Can you close the window or turn on the heat?</i> )

In addition to indirect strategies, internal modifications can also help soften the speaker's intent through the use of particular syntactic, phrasal, and lexical forms. Downgrading, in this sense, is considered a key pragmalinguistic feature of politeness (Economidou-Kogdetsis, 2008; Faerch & Kasper, 1989). Notable forms of syntactic, phrasal and lexical downgrading are presented in Figure 5.

**FIGURE 5**  
**Head Act Taxonomy: Internal Modification - Syntactic and Lexical Downgraders.**  
*Adapted from Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989, p. 281-285)*

Syntactic downgraders	Example	Lexical/Phrasal downgraders	Example(s)
Interrogative Form	" <u>Will</u> you help me?"	Politeness marker	"please"
Modal Form	" <u>Could</u> you help?"	Understater	"a bit", "a little"
Negation Preparatory	"I <u>don't</u> suppose..."	Hedge	"somehow"
Subjunctive	"It'd be better if we <u>were to</u> ..."	Subjectivizer	"I wonder", "I suppose"
Aspect	"I <u>was wondering</u> "	Downtoner	"possibly", "perhaps"
Past tense	"I <u>was hoping</u> you might..."	Cajoler	"(As) you know..."
Embedded if-clause	"I wanted to know <u>if</u> ."	Appealer	"is that alright?"

Much of the research on internal syntactic mitigation, in particular, has revealed it to be an integral part of conveying politeness in English, forming the basis for strategies of conventional indirectness (Economidou-Kogdetsis, 2008; Faerch & Kasper, 1989; Lundell & Erman, 2012; Trosberg, 1995). To provide an understanding for why this is so, one researcher emphasized that, "a common feature of syntactic downgraders lies in their ability to distance the request from reality. A shift from the deictic center of the speaker (on temporal or personal

dimensions) increases the politeness of the request by downtoning the expectations as to the fulfillment of the request” (Trosberg, 1995, p. 210). Just as optionality is a key feature of politeness, so too is tempering one’s expectations.

At the discourse level, requests can be supported by setting the foundation or following up on the speech act itself through external modifications or supportive moves. Like internal modification, these can serve to soften the request through discursive strategies, such as acknowledging the extent of the imposition, enticing the addressee through promises of reward, or providing reasons. A categorization of mitigating supportive moves can be found in Figure 6.

**FIGURE 6**  
**Supportive Moves – External Modification - Mitigators.**  
*Adapted from Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper (1989, p. 287-288)*

Mitigating Supportive Moves	Example
<b>Preparator</b> (before request)	<i>“I’d like to ask you something...” “May I ask you something?”</i>
<b>Getting precommitment</b> (before request)	<i>Could you do me a favor?</i>
<b>Grounder</b> (before or after)	<i>“Could I borrow your notes? <u>I missed class yesterday</u>”</i>
<b>Disarmer</b> (before or after request)	<i>“<u>I know you don’t like giving extensions, but...</u>” “<u>I realize this is an usual favor I am asking...</u>”</i>
<b>Promise of Reward</b> (typically after request)	<i>Could you give me a lift? <u>I’ll pitch in for gas.</u></i>
<b>Imposition Minimizer</b> (typically after request)	<i>Would you mind reading my paper, <u>but only if you have the time, of course.</u></i>

The research of Blum-Kulka et al., (1989) and Brown and Levinson (1987) have played an important role in the research into L2 pragmatics and language learners’ ability to perform requests. With these understandings in mind, we will now turn to how these frameworks have been used in second language research on request acts for evaluating pragmatic development.

## EMPIRICAL FOUNDATIONS

### Research Methods for Speech Act Behavior and L2 Pragmatic Development

Although early contributions to L2 pragmatics research noted above have left an indelible mark on research methods, there are a number of ways in which this early work on request behavior was limited in identifying developmental patterns, particularly when it comes to data collection methods and research design.

Regarding data collection methods, early research on L2 request behavior overwhelmingly relied on questionnaires consisting of *discourse completion tasks* (DCT), first developed as part of the CCSARP, to collect speech act data (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). These tasks were meant to elicit speech act behavior comparable to real life. They consisted of a description of the situation, followed by a brief dialogue with one turn left blank. An example of a DCT meant to elicit a polite request is provided in Appendix A.

However, this elicitation instrument has been frequently criticized for approximating request behavior by contriving circumstances and social roles (Kasper & Rose, 2002). Studies comparing DCT responses to naturally occurring behavior of other speech acts have revealed

noticeable differences between the two (Beebe & Cummings, 1996; Golato, 2003). Logically, as it relates to request behavior, the findings appear to indicate a greater amount of face-work in natural settings, with greater use of conventionally indirect strategies and speaker justifications in these authentic contexts (Economidou-Kogdetsis, 2013). To address this, researchers have suggested that more interactional elicitation instruments, like role-play tasks aided by well-constructed scenario descriptions, would allow for more realistic politeness strategies to be observed under controlled settings (Sasaki, 1998; Yamashita, 2008). For this reason, numerous studies have opted for interactional elicitation instruments over DCTs (Al-Gahtani & Roever, 2012; Grabowski, 2009; Goy, Zeyrek, & Otcu, 2012; Woodfield, 2012). These elicitation instruments also only approximate request behavior, albeit more closely. Admittedly, there is a trade-off between authenticity and ease of observation in this respect. An overview of these methods is provided in Figure 7.

**FIGURE 7**  
**Overview of Data Collection Methods for observing request behavior**  
*Adapted from Sasaki (1998)*

	<b>Discourse Completion Task</b>	<b>Role Play Tasks</b>	<b>Naturalistic Observations</b>
<b>Benefits</b>	Easy to administer to a large amount of people.  The format can be adjusted to suit the amount of data desired (e.g., multiple choice or extended production, multi-turn or a monologue, written or oral.)	Can administer in a controlled fashion while observing more interactional behavior than written DCT's.  This interactional component allows for more precise observations of politeness strategies.	Most authentic form of data for observing how requests are performed across situations.  Since it is not hypothetical, assumptions can be made about <i>actual</i> differences.
<b>Drawbacks</b>	Approximates polite behavior, sometimes in rather inaccurate ways. Requires a significance use of imagination.	Providing role-play participants with roles and scenarios still is contriving behaviors based on hypothetical assumptions, like DCT's	Time-consuming to collect data and difficult to identify real-life scenarios with robust enough request behavior

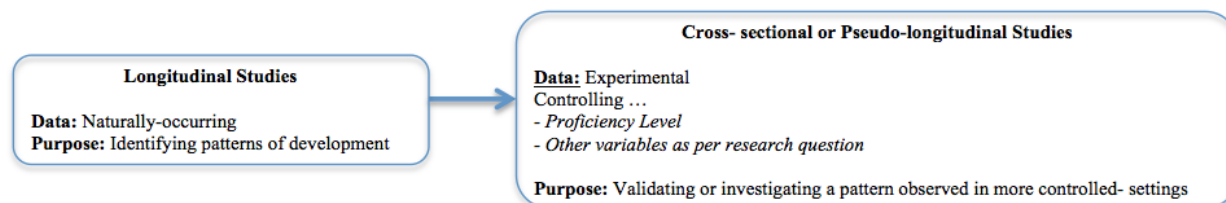
Another issue of early L2 pragmatics research pertains to research design. Early work in the area, mainly in the form of one-time cross-sectional studies, focused primarily on contrasting speech act behavior across languages (Blum-Kulka, 1989; Blum-Kulka & House, 1989; Faerch & Kasper, 1989) or comparing native and non-native speakers of a language, without controlling for the proficiency level of those non-native speakers (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; Hudson, Brown & Detmer, 1995). Logically speaking, using such a research design for tracking progression among ELLs is decidedly limited. As Kasper and Rose (2002) make clear, “in order to inform issues related to L2 pragmatic development (or any development for that matter), research must adopt a longitudinal or cross-sectional design, or a combination of the two” (p. 75).

Longitudinal studies typically track a relatively small number of participants over an extended period of time. Such designs inherently allow for the observation of developing pragmatic behavior and performance, since they “cast some light on the process by which learners gradually master the performance of specific illocutionary acts” (Ellis, 2008, p. 162). Cross-sectional designs, which typically use a large number of participants on one occasion, can serve a secondary function for confirming developmental patterns, but only when accounting for language proficiency (e.g., beginner, intermediate, advanced language learners). With proficiency level controlled among a large enough sample size, cross-sectional studies “do have the potential to offer insight into development by extrapolating from differences observed across various cross-sections” (Kasper & Rose, p. 76), thus “making more robust generalizations



possible, especially when findings support those from (previous) longitudinal studies.” (Kasper & Rose, 2002, p. 141). A diagram of the proposed research agenda for studying L2 pragmatic development, in this case requests, is presented below in Figure 8.

**FIGURE 8**  
**Proposed Research Agenda for L2 Pragmatic Development.**  
*Adapted from Kasper and Rose (p. 75, 2002)*



Taking into account these methodological issues, we will first review the longitudinal studies that tracked development in L2 request behavior among beginner ELLs (Achiba, 2003; Ellis, 1992; Schmidt, 1983), leading to a proposed pattern of development in L2 request use (Kasper & Rose, 2002). This will be followed by a review of subsequent cross-sectional and pseudo-longitudinal studies meant to further investigate this proposed pattern among intermediate and high-proficiency learners (Goy, Zeyrek, & Otcu, 2012; Rose, 2000; Schauer, 2006, 2009; Woodfield, 2012).

The salient developmental patterns have been couched in terms of the CCSARP framework for coding requests (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) and the politeness framework of social factors (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In that vein, particular attention will be paid to pragmalinguistic features of politeness: indirectness, internal mitigation, and external mitigation. Likewise, the studies will be evaluated for the presence of sociopragmatic factors which may demand greater politeness, namely the role of addressee and the goal of the request.

## Longitudinal Studies with Beginner English Language Learners

To date, only three longitudinal studies collecting naturally occurring data have been undertaken. The first examined the general communicative development of a 30-year-old (L1 Japanese) learner living in Hawaii without formal language instruction over the course of three years (Schmidt, 1983). The next one tracked the performance of requests in a classroom from two adolescent ELLs, a 10-year-old (L1 Portuguese) and a 11-year-old (L1 Urdu, L2 Punjabi), enrolled in language courses in Britain over a one-and-a-half-year period (Ellis, 1992). The most comprehensive study (Achiba, 2003) focused on a 7-year-old (L1 Japanese) girl named Yao, living in Australia, who was observed in play situations (i.e. with classmates, neighbors and babysitters) over a 17-month period. Participants in all three studies were considered beginner ELLs.

Applying the coding scheme of the CCSARP (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989), the findings from Ellis (1992) and Achiba (2003) and to an extent Schmidt (1983), expose some strikingly similar patterns in the performance of requests. First, the starting point for all these beginner ELLs was exclusively direct strategies and with no internal or external modification. The first recorded requests were made using exclusively mood-derivable imperative forms, often with no

verbs, relying on “please” as a request indicator rather than as a politeness marker (e.g., “pencil, please”) (Ellis, 1992; Schmidt, 1983). Over time, the imperative forms saw a greater inclusion of verbs (e.g., “Give me my book, please.”) as well as a shift to increasingly frequent, though formulaic use of conventionally indirect strategies, especially query preparatory forms (e.g., “Could/ Can you...”). Additionally, request forms showed little internal modification and little variation in the phrasing in relation to the addressee (e.g., parents, teachers, classmates).

By the end of the study, it appears that the learner in Achiba (2003) had extended her linguistic repertoire beyond that of the learners in Ellis (1992) and Schmidt (1983). Yao was the only learner who began to use conventionally indirect strategies in more flexible ways, with a greater use of lexical and syntactic modification (e.g., “Could you please pass me the glue?” “May I go play with my friend?”). Furthermore, Achiba (2003) asserts that by the end, “Yao seemed to show an awareness of differences in addressees as the basis for differentiating request forms” (p. 177). However, one must not forget the participant’s age—only 7 years old. While significant gains were made, Yao showed the ability to perform these acts as a “native speakers of approximately the same age,” displaying young child rather than adult level usage. (Achiba 2003, p. 188).

Drawing on these findings, Kasper and Rose (2002), proposed a typical developmental pattern in L2 request use. In their words, “taken together, the longitudinal studies provide a good starting point for describing the development of requests in a second language, with Ellis’, Achiba’s [and Schmidt’s] analysis combined in five developmental stages” (Kasper & Rose, 2002, p. 140). An overview of the stages is provided in Figure 9.

**FIGURE 9**  
**Five stages of L2 Request Development**  
*Adapted from Kasper and Rose (2002, p. 140).*

STAGE	TENDENCIES
1 <sup>st</sup> <b>Pre-basic</b> →	<i>Context-dependent Requests lacking in verbs</i>
2 <sup>nd</sup> <b>Formulaic</b> →	<i>Reliance on unanalyzed formulaic sequences and imperatives</i>
3 <sup>rd</sup> <b>Unpacking</b> →	<i>Formulaic sequences are analysed allowing for more productive use and a general shift to conventional indirectness.</i>
4 <sup>th</sup> <b>Pragmatic Expansion</b> →	<i>Pragmalinguistic repertoire is extended, greater mitigation, more complex syntax.</i>
5 <sup>th</sup> <b>Fine-tuning</b> →	<i>Fine-tuning of requestive force to participants and goals.</i>

To evaluate the pattern, the first three stages (Pre-basic, Formulaic, and Unpacking) are primarily concerned with the pragmalinguistics of request making and were clearly observed in all three studies. The final two stages, on the other hand, (Pragmatic Expansion and Fine-tuning) involve the interplay between a wider pragmalinguistic repertoire (i.e., strategies and modification) and socio-pragmatic factors (i.e., the interlocutor and the goal). Evidence of these stages may have been observed for a young child’s use of requests (Achiba, 2003). However, in applying this pattern to adults in more formal academic and professional contexts, the last two stages are speculative (Economidou-Kogdetsis, 2016).

In the words of several authors, the studies revealed a largely pragmalinguistic rather than sociopragmatic pattern (Achiba, 2003; Economidou-Kogdetsis, 2011; Ellis, 1992; Kasper & Rose, 2002; Woodfield, 2012). This has been mainly based on the lack of situational variation found in their request phrasing according to their addressees or goals. It is important to note that situational variation in request behavior, that is being less direct with certain addressees (e.g.,

teachers, bosses), is typically associated with an awareness of politeness (Bardovi-Harlig & Dornyei, 1998; Kasper & Rose, 2002; Schauer, 2009). As Ellis (1992) explains, “the learners failed to develop the sociolinguistic competence needed to vary their choice to take into account the addressee,” due to the limitations that classroom discourse had in demanding “the conditions for real sociolinguistic needs” (Ellis, 1992, p. 1). In Achiba (2003), the development appeared to be somewhat greater, allowing for slightly more identifiable variation in request use based on the learner’s addressees. Nonetheless, the author notes the limitations that play contexts have for observing social variables required for politeness, emphasizing that “supportive play situations did not create the need for much face-work” and did not require the learner to be more polite with adults (e.g., her mother, babysitter) than with peers (Achiba, 2003, p. 184). Moreover, Achiba (2003) makes clear that Yao “had not mastered the sociopragmatic or pragmalinguistic norms of the adult speech community” (p. 188).

In order to further investigate these developmental patterns, follow-up studies were undertaken, many attempting to control for social variables in contexts more suitable for observing politeness. Subsequent cross-sectional and pseudo-longitudinal studies were undertaken with two research goals: (1) to investigate the pragmalinguistic development observed in the longitudinal studies and (2) to design experimental scenarios that would more strictly control for sociopragmatic factors (Brown & Levinson, 1987) among higher proficiency ELLs, with the aim of identifying instances of participants exhibiting awareness of polite request forms by situationally varying the phrasing of their requests.

## **Cross-sectional Studies with Intermediate English Language Learners**

One cross-sectional study (Rose, 2000) attempted to validate claims of shifting development between the Formulaic and Unpacking stage in making requests (see Figure 9) by testing tendencies towards direct and indirect strategies for conveying politeness. There were 524 participants (L1 Cantonese), pooled from three different English-proficiency levels (low, mid, and high) of a primary school in Hong Kong, the highest of these levels consisting of 11-year-old children who had formally studied English for five years. The data were elicited through a cartoon oral production task (COPT), which was comprised of a cartoon and caption in Cantonese conveying a scenario requiring a spoken request. Each participant was given a tape recorder and told to submit a realistic request in both English and Cantonese.

In line with the hypothesized shift from the Formulaic to the Unpacking stage of development (Kasper & Rose, 2002), the results indeed revealed a clear shift from direct to indirect strategies when comparing the three levels of proficiency in terms of indirect English request forms (e.g., “Can/Could I...”). The indirect forms in the low-level group constituted 35%, in the mid-level group 86%, and in the high-level group 96% of all requests produced. Other supporting data seemed to give further credence that linguistic deficiency in English was the root cause of the underuse of indirect forms at the lowest level, since all groups submitted almost exclusively indirect requests in Cantonese (90%).

However, while this shift in strategy is an important one, much like in previous longitudinal studies (Achiba, 2003; Ellis, 1992), the data showed little evidence of internal and external mitigation among the participants, and little variation in the forms used based on the addressee (e.g., classmates, siblings, parents, teachers). In this sense, the study again illustrated that “pragmalinguistic rather than sociopragmatic knowledge predominates in the early stages of

L2 pragmatic development” (Economidou-Kogdetsis, 2011, p. 14). If ELLs begin to use indirect request strategies before developing a full awareness of how to use them politely, then how does their use of other features, such as internal mitigation change over time?

With this question in mind, another cross-sectional study (Goy, Zeyrek, & Otcu, 2012), investigated the usage of internal mitigation or syntactic and lexical downgraders in open role-play scenarios among college aged ELLs (18-21 years old, L1 Turkish) at two proficiency levels: beginner and upper-intermediate. For a point of comparison, a control group of native English speakers of the same age also performed the same role-play scenarios. In terms of the developmental patterns (Kasper & Rose, 2002), the study was designed to investigate differences between the early and later stages (Stages 2-3 versus Stages 4-5; see Figure 9) marked by a significant increase in mitigating devices at Stage 4 (the stage of Pragmatic Expansion) and situational variation at Stage 5 (the stage of Fine-tuning). In order to observe situational variation in internal mitigation, the instrument (an open role play) was designed to control for the social variables of power (P+/-), with two scenarios designed around making a request to a professor (P+), one to a classmate (P=) and one to a waiter (P-).

In regards to their respective pragmalinguistic repertoires, the results revealed that the use of syntactic downgrading clearly differentiated native English speakers from the ELLs at both levels, especially in scenarios involving requests to professors (P+), perceived to require greater politeness. In particular, in these scenarios native English speakers used syntactic downgraders in 95% of their requests (60 of 63), frequently in the form of tense (e.g., “I just wanted to know if...”), conditional (e.g., “If it’s at all possible...”) or aspect (e.g., “I was wondering whether...”). By comparison, the upper-intermediate group used such mitigation devices in a mere 14% of their requests (12 of 84), and among the beginners, these devices were practically non-existent, only appearing 2% of the time (2 of 84 requests). This tendency was less stark with lexical downgraders (e.g., “please,” “perhaps,” “Do you mind...”) but still present, suggesting that lexical devices for politeness are acquired before syntactic ones (Goy et al., 2012).

As it pertains to sociopragmatics and politeness, native speakers conveyed greater politeness through more internal mitigation, situationally varied according to the addressee (e.g., the professor and the classmate). In native speaker requests to professors (P+) syntactic and lexical downgraders were used in nearly all instances (95% and 92%, respectively), noticeably less in requests to classmates (P=) (33% and 42%, respectively), and quite rarely with waiters (P-) (3% and 10%, respectively). Some slight situational variation was present in the upper-intermediate group, with 14% syntactic mitigation with professors, 10% with their classmate, and 2% with the waiter. However, this variation was not present in their use of lexical downgraders. As noted previously, this feature showed no variation among the beginner level, aside from the use of “please” and “maybe.”

To summarize, in terms of pragmalinguistics, the results indicated that greater use of internal mitigation (at Stage 4—Pragmatic Expansion), especially polite use of syntactic downgrading, is acquired only at higher stages of development. In terms of sociopragmatics, it appears that using syntactic downgrading was employed as an important feature of politeness in situations that are perceived as requiring polite behavior, and much less in situations perceived as not requiring it (Stage 5—Fine-tuning) (Kasper & Rose, 2002). This awareness is only marginally apparent in the data among the upper-intermediate ELLs in this study. Would such situational request variation appear in high-proficiency ELLs, like graduate students?

## Pseudo-longitudinal Studies with Advanced English Language Learners

To further investigate learners' expanding pragmalinguistic repertoire and the ways of fine-tuning this repertoire for sociopragmatic purposes, similar experimental research designs to Goy et al. (2012) were used in two studies with graduate students studying in the UK (Schauer, 2006, 2009; Woodfield, 2012). These experimental designs incorporated a longitudinal component to observe the effects that living in an English-speaking country and studying at a university would have on pragmatic development.

Woodfield (2012), studied development in the performance of requests among eight non-native-speaking (NNS) graduate students (L1 Korean, Japanese, and Mandarin) at a British university over an eight-month period, in comparison to eight native-speaking (NS) graduate students. The study focused exclusively on the use of internal and external modification over three separate sessions, occurring during the 1<sup>st</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> month of the study. Similar to Goy et al. (2012), groups in the study performed open role plays meant to elicit requests. The social variables of power (P) and imposition (R) were controlled in two scenarios: (1) requesting an extension from a professor (P+ / R+) and (2) asking to borrow notes from a classmate (P= / R-).

Schauer (2006, 2009) used a similar design with nine graduate students (L1 German) enrolled at a British university over a two-year period. The study consisted of four data collection sessions occurring every six months. The results were analyzed in relation to a control group of native speaker graduate students. In order to address possible variation in data elicited from an open role play, a multimedia elicitation task (MET) was employed to elicit request behavior from 16 different scenarios. As with the previous studies, the social variables of power (P) and imposition (R) were controlled for in the design of each situation, eight eliciting high imposition (R+) requests, four of which were directed at addressees of higher status (P+) and four at addressees of equal status (P=). The same design was used for the eight low-imposition requests (R-), four addressed to an interlocutor of a higher status (P+), and four to that of equal status (P=). The results were then analyzed for the participants' use of request strategies, including internal and external modification.

In terms of the learners' pragmalinguistic repertoire, there was a near universal preference for conventionally indirect request forms, especially query preparatory modal forms during all phases of each longitudinal study. This gives credence to the shift noted in Kasper and Rose's (2002) developmental stages (i.e., Stage 3 and subsequent stages). In regards to internal forms of mitigation, both Schauer (2006, 2009) and Woodfield (2012) identified initial differences in native speaker and non-native speaker use of syntactic downgraders, especially in the case of high imposition (R+) and status-unequal (P+) contexts. As Woodfield (2012) points out, "the learners displayed a preference for lexical/phrasal modifiers over syntactic forms in all three phases of the study, supporting the findings of Schauer (2009)" (p. 21). This was most pronounced with the use of tense (e.g., "Is it alright if I *asked* for an extension?"), aspect (e.g., "*I was wondering* if it's possible to get an extension?") and embedded-if clauses (e.g., "I'd really appreciate it *if* you'd allow me some more time."), used much more by native speakers in both studies. By comparison, the ELL graduate students primarily used lexical means of mitigation in tandem with conventionally indirect strategies, especially *downtoners* (e.g., "Could you *perhaps* allow me an extension?"). Both studies reported an increase in the instances of syntactic mitigation among their graduate student ELLs, but did not reach levels equivalent to those of their native-speaking counterparts. Schauer (2009) provided an explanation for this, pointing out that, "syntactic downgraders are inherently more complex than lexical one" (p. 173). This



perhaps more robustly illustrates that lexical mitigation precedes syntactic mitigation in the later stages of development in Kasper and Rose's framework (2002) (i.e., Stages 4 and 5).

As far as external modification (i.e., mitigating supportive moves), the data for both studies (Schauer, 2006, 2009; Woodfield, 2012) were much more idiosyncratic, marked by individual differences for both native and non-native speaking participants. The graduate ELLs in each study appeared to provide explanations, introductions for their requests (through grounders and preparators), as well as imposition minimizers. However, no clear pattern emerged in the situational variation of these supportive moves according to imposition or status. In that same vein, there were no clear differences between native and non-native speakers' use of external mitigation. This perhaps suggests a limitation in using the CCSARP coding scheme for explaining discourse level request behavior, a criticism levied by a number of researchers (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Woodfield, 2012).

Both studies evaluated sociopragmatic development in terms of situational variation of mitigating forms to suit the level of politeness. It was assumed that more mitigation would be used with requests within the status-unequal (P+) or high imposition (R+) scenarios. Indeed, the data suggested graduate students in both studies began to approximate native-speaker behaviors of situational variation of request modification, albeit imperfectly and less frequently. In the words of Woodfield (2012), "regarding the sociopragmatic development, the pattern of syntactic modification for the learners evidenced higher frequencies of modification in the Extension situation (with the professor) compared to the Notes scenario (with the classmate) suggesting that learners varied this form of modification according to the status of the addressee" (p. 35). This variation, likewise, emerged among the graduate ELLs in Schauer (2006, 2009), becoming more pronounced by the end.

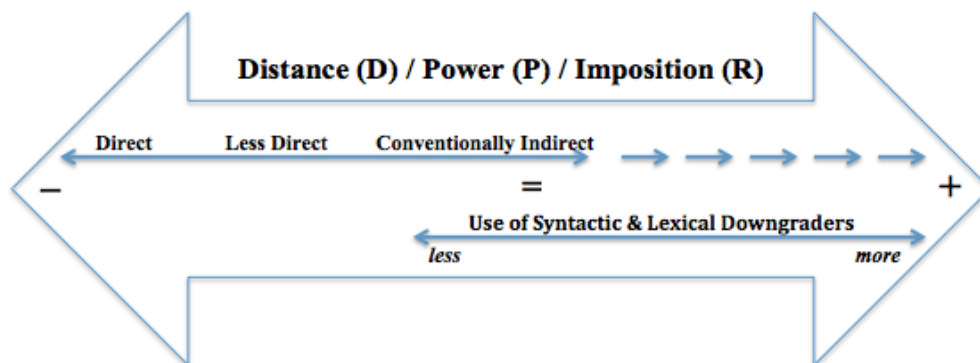
## **On Sociopragmatic Development: Fine-tuning and Perceptions of Politeness**

The question that remains with the stages of pragmatic development (Kasper & Rose, 2002), is what exactly is required to reach Stage 5, marked by "fine-tuning the requestive force to participants and goals" (p. 140) and how this stage relates to politeness. In attempting to draw a link between expanding the grammatical range of structures for making requests and developing an awareness of politeness, researchers have drawn on cross-situational variation and greater mitigation in the use of indirect strategies (Goy et al., 2012; Schauer, 2006, 2009; Woodfield, 2012). In a sense, the use of more conventional indirectness and more lexical and syntactical downgraders with institutional superiors (e.g., professors, managers, bosses) compared to equals (e.g., coworkers or classmates) has been attributed to greater sociopragmatic awareness, and thus greater politeness. Variation in asking for small requests (e.g., borrowing a book) compared to significant requests (e.g., asking for an extension on an assignment) has similarly been attributed to greater sociopragmatic awareness. A diagrammatic representation of fine-tuning or the interplay between requestive forms and contextual factors involving addressees and goals is provided in Figure 10 below.

### **FIGURE 10**

#### **Prototypical Native Speaker Politeness and Sociopragmatic Variation: Approximation of Cross-situational Request Behavior**

*Based on past research (Goy, Zeyrek, & Otcu, 2012; Schauer, 2006, 2009; Woodfield, 2012)*



What is left unaddressed in such interpretations of politeness is the role of the hearer or interlocutor in the interaction, and whether request forms with more indirect strategies and mitigation actually are *perceived* as more polite by the person being given the choice to accept the request or refuse it. Simply said, a request is a cooperative act (Grice, 1975). Studies have investigated the relationship between requestive forms and perceptions of politeness among native English speakers (Economidou-Kogdetsis, 2016; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996) and non-native English speakers (Bardovi-Harlig & Dornyei, 1998; Hendriks, 2010; Schauer, 2009; Schmidt, 1993). Ultimately, the desired outcome from polite requests is a positive impression and oftentimes, acceptance of that request. Bringing together this research with that of the developmental patterns in L2 request performance would serve to draw some link between mitigation, indirectness and politeness.

## CONCLUSION

### Limitations in the Theoretical Frameworks: On Etic and Emic Approaches

As useful as these findings may be, the assumption that behavior falls into simple patterns—linguistic, social, or developmental—appears to be overly simplistic. The forms of analyses used overlook numerous other complexities and individual differences involved in request behavior. This issue in analysis has commonly been referred to as the issue with *etic* approaches to analysis in comparison with *emic* approaches (Al-Gahtani & Roever, 2012; LoCastro, 2013; Trosberg, 1995). To explain, “an etic methodology [like the CCSARP coding scheme] identifies requests according to neither the hearer or speaker’s view, but rather through the observers defined categories” (Trosberg, 1995, p. 50). Emic methodologies, by contrast, elicit categorizations directly from the context, allowing for uniqueness of form rather universally applicable terminology.

Suffice it to say, politeness and requests, although related to the structures used, are greater than the sum of their linguistic parts, contrary to the etic assumptions of the CCSARP (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). Several researchers have pointed out the limitations of strictly coding social interaction (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007), some calling for more qualitative, emic forms of discourse analysis which would account for the unique differences in request behavior (Al-Gahtani & Roever, 2012). Likewise, politeness does not occur as a direct result of some sort of sociological formula, as posited by Brown and Levinson (1987). Some have suggested other

approaches, which can address more idiosyncratic, atypical instance of politeness, for analyzing L2 pragmatics (LoCastro, 2013).

## **Limitations of the Empirical Approaches**

What should appear clear from the past research is that only an authentic context can truly display the actual face-saving strategies one would use. While the first longitudinal studies observed actual request behavior and identified a number of important tendencies, the researchers used participants who did not necessarily need to perform requests in polite and formal domains (Achiba, 2003; Ellis, 1992). To address this issue, subsequent studies attempted to explore polite request behavior in experimental settings by contriving scenarios to control for sociopragmatic influences (e.g., Goy et al., 2012; Rose, 2000; Schauer, 2006, 2009; Woodfield, 2012). The findings, tentatively, identified a certain relationship between request phrasing and an awareness of contextual factors. However, in these instances too, the role of authentic face-work was hampered by the lack of risk in a request being denied or being considered impolite in role-play scenarios. This begs the question as to whether there is an authentic social situation or discourse domain which would allow for the precise observation of developmental, polite L2 request behavior (O'Keefe, Clancy, & Adolphs, 2011)? Is there a situation where an impolite request might be legitimately face-threatening, where face-work is inherently required?

Perhaps, one such context could be academia, where the traditional institutional relationship between students and professors at universities is one of subordinate to superior, requiring greater politeness (e.g., Pan, 2012; Woodfield & Economidou-Kogdetsis, 2010; Zhu, 2012). In order to ask for something politely, the assumption is that “status-congruent requests in academic contexts are usually characterized by higher levels of formality, avoidance of imperative requests, a fairly high level of mitigation, and acknowledgement of the imposition” (Economidou-Kogdetsis, 2011, p. 3194). If this assumption is accurate, it would be logical to collect data directly from this context, would it not? In terms of its potential for empirical observation, it is reasonable to say that e-mail requests sent from students to faculty are a source of naturally-occurring request behavior, albeit a more rehearsed, computer mediated source (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996). As a matter of fact, several researchers have specifically designed corpora to study e-mail exchanges between students of L2 backgrounds and professors at a number of American and European universities (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006, 2007; Chang & Hsu, 1998; Chen, 2001, 2006; Economidou-Kogdetsis, 2011, 2016; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996). Some have revealed findings which seem to confirm the developmental patterns in request making (Chang & Hsu, 1998; Chen, 2001, 2006; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996), while others have found evidence that may run counter to proposed stages of development (Biesenbach-Lucas 2006, 2007; Economidou-Kogdetsis, 2011, 2016).

## **Implications for Second Language Pedagogy and Assessment**

While the frameworks for evaluating pragmatolinguistic and sociopragmatic elements in request behavior seem to fall short for precise research purposes, they perhaps serve as an effective starting place for linking speech act research to pedagogical practice (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010, Timpe-Laugin et al., 2015). If we consider a typical approach to teaching polite

requests, like the one provided in Appendix B (Richards & Leslie, 2000), the main pragmalinguistic features forming politeness are present. However, what is often palpably absent is a discussion of context and how this affects the choice of request, a discussion that could be effectively scaffolded with contextual variables (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Adaptations of this framework for teaching pragmatics and requests in context can be found in recent publications (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Timpe-Laughlin et al., 2015). An example of this framework used as a teaching tool is provided in Appendix C.

Applying these findings to assessment is considerably more complicated, as several have noted, due to the difficulty of identifying the role of pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics in the construct of pragmatic competence (Roever, 2014; Timpe-Laughlin et al., 2015). Logically, “pragmatically competent language users need both sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge. They need to map the two systems onto each other, and they need to be able to activate their knowledge within the time constraints of a communicative situation” (Roever, 2014, p. 2). However, the explicit point in which you draw this distinction is a point of significant debate (Timpe-Laughlin et al., 2015). Moreover, if assessing pragmatic ability involves an awareness of cultural norms, inherent issues of candidate and rater background may risk issues of validity and bias (Chen & Liu, 2016; Grabowski, 2009; Roever, 2007). This review does not endeavor to solve these issues, but simply to shed light on one area of pragmatic research.

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## APPENDIX A

### Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT) – Polite Request Elicitation

(Hudson, Detmer, & Brown, 1995, p. 93-94)

**Form B – Situation #3** (Accounting for variables – P+ / D+ / R+)

**Directions:** Read each of the situations on the following pages. After each situation, write what you would say in the situation in a normal conversation.

**Context:** *In a Bank*

**Situation:** *You are applying for a student loan at a small bank. You are now meeting with the loan officer. The loan officer is the only person who reviews the applications at this bank. The loan officer tells you that there are many applicants and that it should take two weeks to review your application. However, you want the loan to be processed as soon as possible in order to pay your tuition by the deadline.*

You say:

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## APPENDIX B

### Excerpt from ESL Textbook for teaching formal requests

*Material on Requests from the ESL Textbook ‘New Interchange’ (Richards & Leslie, 2000) As cited in Wong & Waring (2010, p. 89).*

Level of Formality	Example of Request
Less Formal	Can I borrow your pencil?
	Can you <i>please</i> lend me your suit?
	Is it ok <i>if</i> I use your phone?
	<i>Do you mind if</i> I use your CD player?
	<i>Would you mind</i> letting me use your laptop?
	I <i>wonder if</i> I could borrow \$100.
	More Formal

## APPENDIX C

### Teaching tool for Employing Contextual Variables in Teaching Speech Acts

*Adapted from Ishihara and Cohen, 2010 (p. 43)*

**Borrowing a Friend's Pen for a Minute:**

Status (S) of your friend:

(S) Lower \_\_\_\_\_ ☆ \_\_\_\_\_ Higher

Distance (D) or Familiarity

(D) Close —☆————— Never met

Extent of Imposition (I)

(I) Minor —☆————— Major

“Hey, could I borrow your pen for a minute?”

**Borrowing a Friend's car for a Week:**

Status (S) of your friend:

(S) Lower \_\_\_\_\_ ☆ \_\_\_\_\_ Higher

Distance (D) or Familiarity

(D) Close —☆————— Never met

Extent of Imposition (I)

(I) Minor \_\_\_\_\_ ☆ Major

“If it's at all possible, I was wondering if I could somehow borrow your car for a week. I'm sorry for asking. It's just that my car is in the shop and I have no other way of getting into work.”

**Asking your supervisor to confirm the date of a meeting**

Status (S) of your supervisor:

(S) Lower \_\_\_\_\_ ☆ \_\_\_\_\_ Higher

Distance (D) or Familiarity

(D) Close —☆?————— Never met

Extent of Imposition (I)

(I) Minor —☆————— Major

“Hi Tom, sorry to bother. **Would you mind telling me when our office meeting is next week?** I know it's usually in the afternoons on Thursdays, but I just wanted to confirm.” (By e-mail)