

## A Window to L2 Learners' Requests to Faculty in Instant Text-Based Communication

Maryam Farhang-Ju (farhang.mariam@gmail.com)  
Shahrekord University, Shahrekord, Iran

### Abstract

Online chat applications have become increasingly popular with the new generation of L2 learners. These new technologies are used for entertainment as well as communication. In spite of incremental pragmatic studies devoted specifically to analyze requests, little is known about L2 learners' requests to faculty in instant text-based communication. As L2 learners lack a clear instruction for mitigating their requests in instant text-based communication like WhatsApp, the present study aimed to examine the pragmalinguistic features of graduate students' requests to faculty on WhatsApp. Furthermore, attempts have been made to determine the writing features of graduate students' requests. The data were a natural corpus of 196 requests written by Iranian graduate students to their professor on WhatsApp, which were coded and analyzed qualitatively. Findings suggest that conventionally indirect strategies were the most prominent request strategies favored by graduate students. Analysis of alerters indicated that the participants mostly used formal address terms. Furthermore, external and internal modifiers were combined in the participants' requests. Analyses of their writing features revealed that the participants tended to use short sentences. In addition, the quality of punctuation and capitalization was relatively poor. Findings bear pedagogical implications for L2 learners, teachers, and course designers.

**Keywords:** instant text-based communication, internal and external modifiers, pragmalinguistic, request, writing features

### Introduction

The emergence and proliferation of modern technologies such as personal computers, mobile phones, and the Internet have radically changed the way people communicate. The use of e-mail is the most obvious way in which our communicative behavior has changed over the last two decades. E-mail is a free Internet program that provides exchanging capabilities in asynchronous settings and is widely used. Consequently, L2 learning has been influenced by such modern technology. As time passes, traditional face-to-face communication between professors and students is replaced with modern internet-based means of communication. In face-to-face interaction, some paralinguistic features clarify the message; however, in internet text-based means of communication, the message is conveyed through the written words (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005).

Nowadays, instant messaging applications are gaining widespread use with the integration of the Internet into various devices such as mobile phones. In fact, e-mail is gradually being replaced with instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp. WhatsApp is a relatively new application that was developed in 2009 (Olson, 2014). It is the most popular chat application. Based on the reported statistics in Google Play (2019), over one billion individuals use this application. The application provides opportunities for networking with people to send messages, share knowledge, and interact within an affinity space. WhatsApp is accessible from both mobile devices and desktop computers, making it more convenient for communication. Hence, this application is widely utilized for business and academic purposes.

WhatsApp provides an opportunity for users to chat in an instant text-based communication setting. This instant text-based communication has been labeled as a hybrid mode as it carries features of both written and spoken language (Chapelle, 2003). Overall, research has indicated that instant text-based communication has similar benefits to traditional face-to-face interaction because of the real-time interaction in which learners can negotiate meaning, modify input and output, and respond to feedback (Blake, 2000). Nevertheless, this hybrid mode is different from face-to-face as instant text-based communication is a nonvisual mode of communication. For example, paralinguistic features and nonlinguistic behaviors (e.g., intonation, eye contact, and body language), which are important in understanding and interpreting spoken messages in the real world, are not available to users (with the exception of emoticons). It is also different

from written language as it happens in real-time and users have little time to plan their language (Yanguas, 2010).

Over the last decade, the student-lecturer communications in academic settings have moved from face-to-face consultations to cyber consultation (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006). Furthermore, in recent years, the methodology has shifted to learner-centered in Iran. This gives learners an opportunity to discuss their ideas freely. It is acceptable that the relationship between L2 learners and lecturers has become friendlier, as well. Therefore, in contrast to three decades ago where lecturers and students formed the banner community, it is not uncommon for lecturers and students to have a friendlier relationship (Rahimi & Askari Bigdeli, 2014). Hence, students feel free to message their professors through chat applications such as *WhatsApp*.

Furthermore, research has shown that the majority of students use this type of instant messaging application for issues related to university affairs –not only in their personal lives (e.g., Fondevila-Gascón, Marqués-Pascual, Mir-Bernal, & Polo-López, 2019). Use of *WhatsApp* has several advantages “to promote the contact between students and professors; to foster the interaction between students and encourage academic cooperation; to motivate active learning; to provide an instant feedback; and develop high expectations” (Andújar-Vaca & Cruz-Martínez, 2017, as cited in Fondevila-Gascón, Marqués-Pascual, Mir-Bernal, & Polo-López, 2019, p. 310). Considering the widespread use of online text-based communication among learners and lecturers, it is necessary to examine and analyze learners' conversations with their professors in the outside world (i.e., not in the faculty setting).

Mitigating requests to professors in instant chat-communication requires sophisticated use of language on the part of the L2 learner because it is a type of face-threatening act. Brown and Levinson (1987) claim that “requests are those acts that primarily threaten the addressee’s negative-face want,” as the addresser shows that he or she intends to ask the addressee to do something. This may impede the addressee's freedom of action (p. 65). The problem can be further complicated by cross-linguistic differences between the addresser (i.e., student) and the addressee (i.e., professor) (Chen, 2001). For example, learners' requests may be perceived as abrupt due to the lack of different parts of requests such as internal and external modifiers, opening, and closing. Hence, as L2 learners lack a clear instruction for mitigating their requests in instant text-based communication settings like *WhatsApp*, the present study aimed to examine the pragmalinguistic features of graduate students' requests on *WhatsApp*. Furthermore, their writing features (i.e., complexity, accuracy, and fluency) were examined.

## Literature Review

One major goal of speech act research has been to help L2 learners develop their pragmatic competence by providing them with the chance of understanding and using speech acts in a variety of contexts (e.g., Nelson, Carson, Batal, & Bakary, 2002; Yu, 2003). Of the different speech acts, a multitude of studies on language have been devoted to the speech act of request (Chen, 2006; Chen & Chen, 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2010, 2011; Felix-Brasdefer, 2007; Otcu & Zeyrek, 2006; Woodfield, 2010, 2012), which is defined as “attempts on the part of speaker to get the hearer to perform or to stop performing something” (Ellis, 1994, p. 167). Requests are of interest to be studied because of their face-threatening features. According to Spencer-Oatey (2004), requests are perhaps the clearest examples of “rapport-sensitive speech acts” (p. 18). Accordingly, they can be perceived and produced as face-threatening depending on various cultural, contextual, and personal factors. Hence, they should be managed carefully.

Nowadays, personal computers, the internet, and mobile phones have brought about dramatic changes in the way many people communicate with each other and have added new forms of spoken and written communication from e-mail messages and short text messages to instant text-based communication. Such changes have led L2 researchers to analyze L2 learners' requests in these new forms of communication (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005, 2007; Chen, 2001; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011; Eslami, 2013; Félix-Brasdefer, 2012; Hendriks, 2010; Herring, 2002; Lorenzo-Dus & Bou-Franch, 2013). However, the focus of these pragmatic studies has been on learners' requests via e-mail (asynchronous or offline communication) in the workplace and academic settings.

The burgeoning interest in the contribution of instant text-based communication has expanded in recent years after a relatively few pragmatic studies examined instant text-based communication (e.g., Dayter, 2018; Graham & Hardaker, 2017; Matley, 2018). For example, Pérez-Sabater (2019) investigated the learners' use of emoticons on *WhatsApp* and the findings showed that some differences persisted in exchanges taking place. In another study, Al Rashdi (2018) utilized naturally occurring *WhatsApp* conversations to examine the functions of emoticons used by Omani users. The analysis revealed that in addition to indicating emotions, emoticons served many other communicative functions, such as indicating message tones and creating alignments between the users. Furthermore, Li and Yang (2018) collected a 3000-word corpus to examine the pragmatic functions of emoticons in internet-based communication. Based on their findings, emoticons had high frequency, functionality, and efficiency in internet-based communication. In addition, the users' emoticon preference did not correlate with nonverbal signs in face-to-face communication.

Sánchez-Moya and Cruz-Moya (2015) examined the most common discursive realizations in a set of *WhatsApp* statuses. The analyzed data indicated that the users' discourse choices varied if their external discursive morphology was considered. Based on the analyzed corpus, they divided the status into two groups: automatically-generated and self-generated statuses. Maíz-Arévalo (2018) examined emotional self-presentation in a corpus of 206 Spanish *WhatsApp* statuses. Her findings indicated that users communicated an image of themselves to others using implicature or a default profile automatically generated by the app itself in *WhatsApp* profile statuses. The results further revealed that female users outnumbered male users in the use of emotive speech acts in their *WhatsApp* profile status.

In a recently published study, Dayter (2018) investigated the speech act of self-praise in private *WhatsApp* chats. The results of her analysis gave support to the hypothesis that self-praise is an unmarked speech behavior that is a part of an everyday speech act repertoire. Finally, Flores-Salgado and Castineira-Benitez (2018) examined the politeness of Spanish native speakers on *WhatsApp*. The analysis showed that the participants used conventionally indirect strategies and a great deal of syntactic modification. Opening and closing sequences occurred in all of the interactions analyzed.

As the above review suggests, previous research has relatively ignored the impact that synchronous (online) exchanges may have in academic settings. As no systematic attempt has been made to investigate L2 learners' conversations with faculty members in instant text-based communication, the current study aimed to investigate L2 learners' requests to faculty on *WhatsApp*. Accordingly, the following researched questions were addressed:

1. What are the pragmalinguistic features of L2 learners' requests to faculty in instant text-based communication?
2. What are the writing features (complexity, accuracy, and fluency) of L2 learners' requests to faculty in instant text-based communication?

## Method

### Participants

The participants in this study were a sample of 62 L2 learners who volunteered to take part in this study in response to the researcher's request through social networks. They consisted of 6 male and 56 female graduate students. The participants were native speakers of Persian and belonged to the same racial group (i.e., Persian). Their ages ranged from 24 to 32 ( $M = 26.63$ ;  $SD = 4.79$ ). They were all graduate students or M.A. holders in ELT in different State universities in Iran. Therefore, they had been determined to be proficient in English as a result of the MA National Entrance Exam which is one of the most important high-stakes tests in Iran. The general section of the MA National Entrance Exam is designed to assess the knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension of students who are planning to undertake their graduate studies. As such tests are accessible for examination, and their validity can be investigated by researchers, using such tests to determine the language proficiency of learners enhances the external validity of the research (e.g., Roohani, Dayeri, & Farhang-Ju, 2017). The participants of this study had been exposed to the teaching of the English language for an average of 14 years. These learners were primarily exposed to traditional teaching methods (e.g., grammar-translation method and audio-lingual method) which emphasized grammar rather than communication and pragmatic competence via interaction.

## Instrumentation

Before taking part in the study, a consent form was sent to the participants to explain the study objectives briefly and ensure that they were willing to take part in the study. In the next step, the participants filled out an online demographic form which was utilized to seek demographic characteristics such as gender, age, race, and first language (L1). In addition, personal experiences were surveyed with the following questions: Have you ever traveled to a foreign country? Have you ever lived in a foreign country? The information elicited via such questions shows if learners have been directly in contact with native speakers.

Following Lorenzo-Dus and Bou-Franch (2013) and Merrison, Wilson, Davies, and Haugh, (2012), natural data were used in the current study. Natural data allows researchers to investigate L2 "learning and teaching (here, requests) in their naturally occurring settings without any intervention or manipulation of variables" (Nassaji, 2015, p. 129). As highlighted by Merrison et al. (2012), natural data are more likely to mirror the differences among learners. Collecting such data and accounting for all the elements found in a given message is considered prominent as it shows what students would have done in real-life situations. Hence, natural data may provide a more valid and comprehensive picture of nonnative speakers' pragmatic competence.

*WhatsApp* conversations were used to document the participants' requests. The corpus included 196 requests mitigated to faculty in 2016-2017. It should be mentioned that the focus of this study was on the learners' requests. Hence, the learners were asked to delete their professors' texts. *WhatsApp* conversations provide an opportunity to analyze everyday conversation (Flores-Salgado & Castineira-Benitez, 2018) because this application allows users to store their daily messages. Hence, it enables L2 researchers to analyze them. Furthermore, they enable the study of speech acts by using natural data (Felix-Brasdefer, 2007). Followings are examples of the situations in which the participants mitigated their request to their professor via *WhatsApp*:

- Asking the instructor to explain an ambiguous part or provide some information/feedback related to their course
  - Example: *Is there any difference between summary of an article and its review?*
- Asking the instructor to extend the deadline of an assignment
  - Example: *I wonder would it be possible for me to hand in my assignment a week later.*
- Asking the instructor to recheck their grade
  - Example: *I want you to reconsider my class activity and change my grade for better, please*
- Asking the instructor to make an appointment for a consultation
  - Example: *I am wondering would it be possible for me to meet you.*
- Asking the instructor for validation
  - Example: *would u plz be kind enough n tell me if this is ok for seminar to present?*

## Procedure and Data Analysis

This study consisted of four parts. In the first step of the study, over 200 graduate students in Iran were invited to participate in this study. The participants were informed that the data would be used for research purposes only. Sixty-two graduate students agreed to participate in the current study. Accordingly, 196 e-requests, addressed to four faculty members, were considered as the corpus of study to be analyzed at a later time. The requests were sent through *WhatsApp* to the faculty members, whose relationship with the students was relatively formal. The faculty members were teaching different courses such as linguistics and research to M.A. students in a university in Iran. Based on the results obtained from the demographic form, the addressed professors were 48-60 years old and Ph.D. holders.

By filling the consent form, they agreed to participate in this study. In the second part of the survey, the participants were asked to complete an online demographic form to determine their demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, age, L1) and personal experiences (e.g., Have you ever lived in a foreign country).

In the third part of the survey, the participants were required to mail their requests with their instructor on *WhatsApp* in a word file to the researcher. *WhatsApp* has a feature that provides an opportunity

for users to export their conversation and share it using different applications such as Gmail. A total number of 196 requests were identified in the corpus. The number of requests for each participant was relatively equal.

In the last phase, the data were coded and analyzed. Data analysis included qualitative analyses of *alerters*, *head acts*, and *supportive moves* based on the cross-cultural speech act realization project (CCSARP) manual (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989). Based on CCSARP, alerters are the opening elements, which come before the actual request, including attention-getters (e.g., *hi*) and address terms (e.g., *dear*).

Head acts are the core of the request. Nine distinct strategies are categorized for variation in the (in)directness levels of a head act: (1) direct: mood derivable, explicit performative, hedged performative, locution derivable, and want statement, (2) conventionally indirectness: suggestory formula and query preparatory, (3) nonconventionally indirectness: strong hint and mild hint.

The levels of directness are based on how clear the communicative effect of an utterance is (Blum-Kulka, 1987). For example, in direct request strategies, the grammar and vocabulary used to compose the utterance show the intention of the interlocutor. In conventionally indirect strategies, the utterance itself does not include a request, but due to the choice of specific wording or semantic content, the hearer understands that the addresser is trying to mitigate a request. The interpretation of the intention of interlocutor in a nonconventional indirect request it is not indicated by syntactic, lexical, or semantic means. To interpret the intention of interlocutor in a nonconventional indirect request, the addressee should know more about the context in which the utterance was used.

According to Blum-Kulka et al (1989), internal and external modifiers are the other elements of requests. Internal modifiers act as downgraders (i.e., syntactic and lexical downgraders) to lessen the illocutionary force of request. The CCSARP coding manual identifies different types of syntactic downgraders:

- Interrogative is a statement in which the speaker asks someone to perform an action (e.g., *Can you close the window*).
- Aspect is optionally formed with the addition of an aspect marker (e.g., *I am wondering if you can close the window*).
- Conditional clause is a statement that states the action in the main clause can only take place if a certain condition is fulfilled (e.g., *It would be so nice if you could close the window*).
- Past tense is a verb in a past tense used with a present-tense reference (e.g., *I wanted to ask you if you could close the window*). (Tytar, 2015, p. 10)

Further, lexical downgraders are distinguished into:

- Politeness marker is an optional element added to a request to bid for co-operative behavior (e.g., *Please, close the window*).
- Consultative devices are expressions by means of which the speaker seeks to involve the hearer directly bidding for co-operation (e.g., *Would you mind*).
- Hedge is used not to give a precise propositional content and to leave an option open to the addressee to impose her/his intent (e.g., *I'd kind of like you to close the window*).
- Understaters are adverbial modifiers by means of which the speaker underrepresents the state of affairs denoted in the proposition (e.g., *Could you close the window just a bit*).
- Downtoner is modifiers that are used by the speaker in order to modulate the impact his or her request is likely to have on the hearer (e.g., *Could you possibly/perhaps close the window*). (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989, p. 283)
- Committer, by which the speaker decreases the degree to which addresser commits her/himself to the propositional content of the utterance (e.g., *I think, I believe*)
- Forewarning is a strategy in which the speaker makes some kind of metacomment on an FTA (e.g., pays a compliment) or invokes a generally accepted principle which she/he is about to flout, etc. (e.g., *far be it from me to criticize, but*).

The supportive moves are another part of requests that modify the head act externally. The CCSARP coding manual identified the following supportive moves:

- Grounder is an utterance in which the speaker indicates the reasons for the request (e.g., *Can you*

*close the window? I got very tired at work today).*

- Imposition minimizer is additional information provided by the speaker to reduce the imposition (e.g., *Can you please close the window, but only if you are planning to go outside).*
- Preparatory is an utterance used by the speaker to show prefaces his/her main speech act with an utterance intended to check if the precondition necessary for compliance holds true (e.g., *Please close the window if you are not busy).*
- Disarmer is an utterance in which the speaker indicates his/her awareness of a potential offense, thereby attempting to anticipate possible refusal (e.g., *I know it probably doesn't feel too cold in the room, but may I ask you to close the window).*
- Getting a precommitment is an utterance by which the speaker precedes the act by an utterance that can count as an attempt to obtain a precommittal (e.g., *Can I ask you a big favor? I terribly cold, and I would really appreciate if you closed the window).* (Blum- Kulka et al., p. 205)

Following is an example of one of the participants' requests, which indicates how different parts of e-requests were coded:

➤ Extract # 1

- Student: **Hi dear professor** [alerter]. *How are you?* [Phatic communication]. **I know you are really busy** [external modifier]. *Sorry to keep bothering you ☹️. I am looking for a good journal to submit my paper. Would you please kindly introduce some good journals to me* [head act]? *Thank you you ☺️. I appreciate your kindness* [closing].

All the data were coded by coders. The data were coded by two Ph.D. candidates in TEFL. They were carefully trained in advance on how to code and analyze the data. When the coders disagreed in the analysis, they would discuss the coding and arrive at an agreement. The inter-coder reliability was .93.

Furthermore, the writing parameters of their requests were calculated. In the present study, complexity was measured by calculating the ratio of lexical to grammatical words (Ellis, 2009). The criterion used in the present study for measuring accuracy was adapted from Foster and Skehan (1999). Accuracy was measured by calculating the percentage of the total number of errors to the total number of words in the written text. Following Flores-Salgado and Castineira-Benitez (2018), fluency was considered as the number of words produced by the learners.

## Results

To determine the pragmalinguistic features of the participants' requests, the data were analyzed qualitatively. The detailed analyses of alerters indicated that formal address terms were predominant in the corpus. As shown in Table 1, the most frequent address term found in the participants' requests was *Dr.* Furthermore, attention-getters occurred exclusively in the form of greetings (e.g., *hi*). For example, as indicated in the table, the word *hi* was used 121 times in 121 different situations:

Table 1  
Distribution of Occurrence Alerters in L2 Learners' Requests

	Alerters	Frequency
Greetings	hi	121/121
	hello	60/60
	Salam (hi)	10/10
	dear	130/130
Address terms	Dr.	90/80
	professor	72/71
	ostad (professor)	1/1
	master	1/1
	instructor	1/1
	sir	11/10
	apology	30/28
	Phatic communication	48/48

As for the head acts, negative polite strategies (i.e., conventionally indirect strategies) predominated in the request corpus (76.02). The distribution of direct and nonconventional indirect strategies was marginal. However, the participants opted to employ direct strategies (19.38) more than nonconventional indirect strategies (4.6). Overall, four types of head acts occurred in the corpus. In addition, the results indicated that modals were frequently used and the most preferable modal was *would* (see Table 2):

Table 2

*Distribution of Request Strategies*

Strategy	Mood Derivable	Want Statement	Query Preparatory	Strong Hint
Frequency	26 (13.26%)	12 (6.12%)	149(76.02%)	9(4.6%)

Below are examples of the requests of the participants in the dataset:

- Extract # 2 (Query Preparatory)
  - *I am wondering would it be possible for me to meet you? I would be very grateful if you had some time, at your convenience of course, to talk to me about it.*
- Extract # 3 (Mood derivable)
  - *Please let me know where and when I can meet you.*
- Extract # 4 (Want statement)
  - *I wanted to know if it is possible to consider two different Persian translations of a famous novel as the subject of the study.*

Next, the distribution of internal modifiers was calculated. Table 3 shows the distribution of lexical and syntactic modifiers. The learners' requests were modified using two main syntactic modifiers: interrogative and conditional clauses. Of the syntactic modifiers produced by the participants, interrogative was the most frequently represented type of syntactic modifier with a conditional clause being the other frequently used syntactic modifier in the participants' data .

Lexical modifiers were relatively frequent in their requests. Committer, understater, and forewarning were the least frequent lexical modifiers in the corpus. As shown in Table 3, of the seven types of lexical modifiers that appeared in the data, a politeness marker (*please*) was the most frequent means of lexical modifiers followed by downtoner:

Table 3

*Distribution of occurrence internal modifiers*

		Frequency	Example in the Data
Syntactic	Interrogative	89/89	<b><i>Could you please do me a favor and comment on this topic?</i></b>
	Past Tense	10/10	<i>I wanted to know whether you have any class with students of the 6th or 4th semester.</i>
	Progressive Aspect	6/6	<b><i>I was wondering whether it is ok to contact them again.</i></b>
	Conditional Clause	88/88	<b><i>I would also appreciate it if you tell me about the problems to be solved before the defense date.</i></b>
Lexical	Politeness Marker ( <i>please</i> )	101/90	<i>May I please send the revisions to Dr. X?</i>
	Consultative Device	8/8	<b><i>Do you mind if I call you tomorrow to remind you about viva?</i></b>
	Hedge	57/49	<i>I wonder if I can visit you this week to ask <b>some</b> questions??</i>
	Understater	4/4	<i>Could you please let me know which day I can see you <b>a moment</b> in university (except Thursday).</i>
	Downtoner	57/48	<i>I <b>just</b> need to meet you.</i>
	Committer	9/9	<b><i>I think there is something wrong with Dr. X's mail.</i></b>
	Forewarning	3/3	<b><i>I am absolutely certain that whatever you put as my grade is what I got and I am in no position to complain about it.</i></b>

The rigorous analyses of request supportive moves (i.e., external modifiers) illustrated that the participants mainly used grounders to elaborate the request head act externally. The least common external modifiers used by the participants was a disarmer (see Table 4):

Table 4  
*Distribution of L2 Learners' External Modifiers*

	Frequency	Example in the Data
Grounder	54/54	<i>Unfortunately, I am grappling with a family problem these days. I am not able to write my term papers. I would be most grateful if you could do me a big favor. Is it possible to increase my final exam's points instead of writing papers?</i>
Disarmer	7/7	<i>I know you are really busy but would it be possible for me to meet you??</i>
Imposition Minimizer	14/14	<i>I would appreciate it if you let me know when we can get the flash memory.</i>
Preparatory	11/11	<i>Would you please let me know where &amp; when I can meet you?</i>
Getting recommitment	16/16	<i>May I have a big favor? I am wondering if it is possible for you to ask some of your MA students (male) to help me out</i>

Furthermore, the length of requests was calculated (see Table 5):

Table 5  
*Length of Requests*

Length of request	1-10	11-20	21-30	31-40
frequency	83	90	17	3

The results of analyses of request length (fluency) indicated that the length of most of the participants' requests was relatively short. The results of analyses of request length (fluency) indicated that most of the participants used short messages to mitigate their requests. The length of 90 requests was 11-22 words. The frequency of 1-10 word requests was 83. However, lengthy requests were utilized less frequently.

Table 6  
*Writing Features of Request*

variable	Complexity	Accuracy
Percentage	.86	.84

The average for complexity and accuracy their requests were .86 and .84, respectively:

Table 7  
*Distribution of Closings in L2 Learners' Requests*

closing	appreciation	Goodnight/evening	Have a nice/good/great day
frequency	93 (47.4%)	18(9.1%)	67(34.1%)

Moreover, the distribution of closings indicated that most of the participants used appreciation (e.g., *thank you*). However, 18 requests (9.1%) did not include any form of closing.

## Discussion

The present study examined the pragmalinguistic features of graduate students' requests to faculty on *WhatsApp*. Furthermore, attempts have been made to determine the writing features of their requests. The analysis of alerters indicated that the participants tended to use formal address terms. Using formal address terms might have positively affected the addressee as the established professor and student relationship in

Iran is formal. This is in line with the findings of Mohammadi's study (2016) that students from countries with high power distance cultures preferred formal construction. Hence, by using formal salutations and address terms, the participants of the current study tried to be polite and acknowledge their professors' social status. Using formal address terms in instant text-based communication may further suggest that the mode of communication did not influence the learners' choice of address forms.

The detailed analysis indicated that phatic communication did not predominate in the request corpus and the participants used it less frequently to ask professors to mitigate their requests. Phatic communication is important in maintaining a harmonious ongoing relationship. Such communication is a crucial function of talk with important implications for ongoing and future interactions as students frequently have to ask professors to help them accomplish a variety of tasks. That is L2 learners should keep in mind to include phatic communication in their requests.

In regard to request head acts, conventional indirect strategies were the most frequent request strategy found in the corpus. This finding, which is in agreement with previous studies (e.g., Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Chen & Chen, 2007), suggests the learners might have utilized their pragmatic knowledge to use appropriate requests strategies for their professor, where the negotiation of face relationships is asymmetric (Scollon & Scollon 2001).

Turning to the relatively frequent use of direct strategies (19.38), one explanation might be due to the transfer of L1 request strategies patterns into L2. According to Eslami and Noora (2008), *please verb phrase* [*lotfan VP*] is one of the Persian request strategies. Possibly, such a strategy is part of Iranian L2 learners' L1 pragmatic knowledge. Accordingly, they may refer to them while mitigating their requests in L2. Another argument that may justify the results is the structural simplicity of *please VP*. As the participants mitigated their requests in an online setting, they had less time to think of complex structures. This might have led them to use such a request strategy.

A detailed examination of lexical/phrasal downgraders provides a more comprehensive picture. To begin with, the frequent use of lexical/phrasal downgraders was found in the corpus. Although the use of the politeness marker *please* seems to be important, only half of the requests contained *please*. One of the issues with the learners' indirect requests was that in their requests to faculty, where they asked their professor for a meeting, the politeness marker *please* was not used by the learners. Such requests are requests for action (high imposition). Thus, such requests tend to be more face-threatening as the level of imposition is high. Hence, learners are expected to employ different modifiers to decrease threatening conditions. One more explanation for the underuse of *please* may be attributed to the participants' L1. Persians do not include *please* (*lotfan*) in their indirect requests frequently. Therefore, as it is not a conventionalized politeness marker in Persian, they utilized it in a lower percentage in their L2 requests.

In the current study, the learners displayed a preference for lexical/phrasal modifiers over syntactic forms of modification, supporting the findings in Otcu and Zeyrek (2006). As for the frequent use of internal modification, it may be rooted in social/psychological factors. As the addressee (in the current study, professors) was relatively unknown to the participants, they did not have an intimate relationship. Thus, higher levels of internal modification might indicate the learners' attempt to show respect through the employment of negative politeness strategies.

As to specific forms of external modification in the present study, the grounder was the most frequent external modifier found in the corpus, accounting for 52% of the external modification of the data. This modifier signifies the reasons and explanations for requests and has been shown in several studies (Félix-Brasdefer 2007; Woodfield, 2012) to be a preferred form of external modification in learners' requests. For example, in one of the participants' requests, where she is not happy about her exam grade, she claims that her sister was in labor and she had to take care of her. Such an explanation helps the addressee to understand the addresser better.

In line with previous research, the findings of the current study indicated that (e.g., Flores-Salgado & Castineira-Benitez, 2018) learners use shorter and simpler messages on *WhatsApp*. In instant text-based communication, the amount of time is limited and therefore, the students might have needed more time to process grammatical and lexical information to produce longer texts. Text-based writings tended to be short and few language errors were made by the participants. However, such a difference might be due to the differences between the computer keyboard and phone keyboard. Moreover, the quality of punctuation and capitalization was relatively poor. For example, some of the participants did not start their sentences with a capital letter or they did not end their sentences with a period:

➤ Extract # 5

- *we all **dont** know who are supposed to give a lecture for this week. **you** told me I **dont** need to present*

a lecture on the rest of Punctuation and Abbreviations. **So** what should we do? **plz** let me know this incoming session is 5th session or 6th? **i** will inform the others. **Tnx**.

This may be rooted in the participants' keyboarding skills. Probably, the participants with high keyboarding skills seem to benefit the most from writing in terms of some aspects of writing, such as fluency and accuracy (mechanics of writing). Such results are in line with Al-Khawaldeh, Bani-Khair, Mashaqba, and Huneety (2016) who found participants tended to use more abbreviations. Moreover, the use of abbreviated forms like *plz*, *tnx*, *thanx*, *u* is probably due to the limited amount of time and small size of phone keyboards.

Another finding was the use of code-switching in the learners' texts; however, its use was not pronounced in the data:

- Extract # 6
- *hi dear professor, would u please be kind enough and explain metaphorical learning, since i am very kheng [dumb]. Really, thanx alot.*

The consideration in the students' code-switching is potentially to create solidarity and a sympathetic and/or empathetic state of mind in the reader (i.e., professor). In certain contexts, it is called ingratiating oneself. The whole text is an attempt to create solidarity, not just the use of the word *kheng* (using lower case letters, abbreviated language). Overall, the student was trying to convince the professor to have her or his requests accepted.

## Conclusion

The aim of the present study was two-fold: First, it aimed to examine the pragmalinguistic features of graduate students' requests to faculty on *WhatsApp*. Second, it examined the writing features of requests in the corpus. The findings indicated a fairly strong preference in using the conventionally indirect strategy of query preparatory, formal address terms, and internal modifiers. The writing features of request corpus further indicated that the participants tended to use short messages, more abbreviations, and less capitalized words in their requests on *WhatsApp*.

The results of this study bear certain pedagogical implications for L2 learners, teachers, and course designers in several respects. First, it gives L2 learners some pedagogic guidelines regarding the appropriate ways of mitigating their requests in instant text-based applications with their instructor. For example, L2 students should use phatic communication to improve their pragmatic competence. Further, the percentage of the politeness maker *please* in the participants' request was relatively low. They should be aware that it can significantly enhance the probability of their chance to gain positive feedback, thus leading to better chances for them to succeed in academic settings and enhancing their pragmatic competence. In addition, instant text-based communication can be included in the curriculum so that teachers can instruct the students regarding the conventions prevailing in instant text-based communication writing. Furthermore, learners would become familiar with different ways to open and end their chat with their professors.

However, like any other study, this study has several limitations. First, the number of females predominated in the current study. The results may have been different if chats were collected from an equal number of (fe)male L2 learners. Furthermore, as most of the participants were in their twenties, the results might be different if the participants were younger or older. Therefore, future research may be conducted with an equal number of (fe)male L2 learners of different age groups.

Whereas some aspects of e-politeness have begun to be analyzed in synchronous discourse (Flores-Salgado & Castineira-Benitez, 2018), other forms of synchronous communication (e.g., video-based) should also be examined. Moreover, it would also be advisable to incorporate other types of instruments that elicit learners' self-report data, such as retrospective interviews. By employing these sorts of methods, researchers may examine L2 learners' pragmatic development by paying attention to their planning and thought processes when assessing or producing a particular pragmatic feature (Woodfield, 2010). This would facilitate further analysis of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic features. Furthermore, the current study has not addressed the impact of professors in instant messaging. Further studies can investigate the issue and see if professors' profile and their relationship with the students may influence the texts exchanged between the faculty members and learners on *WhatsApp*.

Finally, it should be mentioned that results have been presented in a qualitative way and, therefore,

cannot be generalized since no statistical tests have been applied. In conclusion, the present study adds further support to the importance of pragmatics in the L2 classroom as it has implications for the development of pragmatic competence in L2 pedagogy.

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