Experts and novices: examining academic email requests to faculty and developmental change during study abroad

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Abstract

This longitudinal study seeks to contribute to a shortage of email investigations examining expert (L1) and novice (L2) English practices and tracking L2 developmental change during a UK study abroad period. Using a corpus of 315 authentic request emails, distinct features of Chinese ESL and British students' email practices were examined, in addition to changes in Chinese ESL practices between the beginning and end of the ten-month period abroad. Findings firstly indicated that choice of request strategies, internal modification, and request perspective showed much variation between the two groups due to different approaches to projecting politeness. Secondly, exposure to the L2 and engagement in email writing had minimal impact on pragmatic performance over the academic year.

Key words: authentic emails, requests, study abroad, Chinese students, longitudinal study

1. Introduction

The current dominance of email as the preferred means of communication within workplace and educational settings has led to a surge in research activity analysing this form of asynchronous interaction. Nowadays, communicative interaction at university level is increasingly undertaken using some form of online communication and email is typically the go-to option for expediting many academic matters (Félix-Brasdefer 2012). For students,

contacting and accessing information from academic staff is most efficiently achieved via this medium, but a particular set of skills is required to successfully achieve communicative goals in this unique, hybrid form of oral (considered more informal) and written (considered more formal) interaction. Increasing evidence suggests that, in the absence of targeted instruction, L2 English emails are often flawed with a variety of non-L2-like devices. A feature of this longitudinal study is to analyse the extent to which the L2 setting, as part of a study abroad (SA) stay, plays a facilitative role in shaping learners' understanding and production of appropriate email requests to faculty.

Studies on developmental pragmatics often draw on language socialisation theory (Shieffelin and Ochs 1986), which contends that by interacting with expert members of a given community, novices can develop into more competent members themselves. This concept also frames the present study. Given the diversity of opportunities to gain frequent exposure to authentic, contextualised communicative norms means that, in principle, the SA environment is an excellent resource from which to draw valuable linguistic and sociocultural pragmatic knowledge from experts. In the case of this study, as international university students (novice L2 users) are expected to participate in email interaction on a regular basis in the target language with lecturers, peers and other staff members (expert language users), one might expect these novices to naturally develop more L2-like email practices during their SA stay. However, such a linear development of email literacy in L2 English is rarely reported in the short- or long-term. Instead, students from a range of first language backgrounds reportedly struggle to demonstrate appropriate L2 linguistic moves and appropriate sociocultural knowledge of academic norms in their emails: Chinese (Chen 2015; Chen, Rau and Rau 2016); Dutch (Hendriks 2010); Greek (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011, 2018), Norwegian (Savić 2018); Spanish (Alcón-Soler 2015; Bou-Franch 2011); East Asian L1s (Biesenbach-Lucas

2006, 2007). Another feature of this study then is to determine the comparative features of novice and expert user request emails.

Composing academic (request) emails is known to be challenging for a number of reasons. Emails are typically private exchanges, so appropriate models are difficult to come by. Emails are void of non-verbal cues (an extremely useful aid to a novice language user), and feedback is rarely offered beyond knowing whether the request, for instance, has triggered compliance or not. In the absence of clear guidance, request emails therefore pose pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic challenges for the L2 user, further aggravated by the face-threatening nature of the request act itself. Finally, as with pragmatic input more generally, email composition is rarely explicitly taught, leaving students to largely rely on guesswork. By gaining an understanding of how students meet, or fail to meet, linguistic or non-linguistic expectations, researchers and practitioners are in a better position to help learners rise to the pragmatic challenges they face in email writing.

From a data collection perspective, analysing naturally-occurring emails, as in this study, allows the all-important shift from a reliance on elicited data sources to situated authentic discourse. Historically, pragmatic studies have found it challenging to capture or utlilise organically-grown data in an effective way, so this is an important new avenue of exploration for the field. Student-initiated emails can also yield sizeable corpora with considerable amounts of language samples. Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (2005) also note that email data have the desirable functions of *comparability* (variables of setting, topic and participant roles are generally constant in emails), *interactivity* (turn-taking and negotiating outcomes are featured in emails) and *consequentiality* (emails have real-world outcomes). All these factors are said to be key features when evaluating data sources, meaning academic institutions are a "natural

laboratory" to investigate how L2 users develop the pragmatic know-how of the target culture in order to function successfully within it.

This study seeks to add to the current body of investigations into L1 and L2 English email practices. What sets this study apart from existing email research is its longitudinal focus, observing developmental change in the study abroad environment, the UK-based research context and the comparison of expert and novice email practices.

The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. What are the distinctive features of expert and novice English users' email requests?
2. Is there evidence of change in novice L2 English request emails over one academic year?

2. Background research

2.1 L2 English request development and study abroad

In the context of the L1 and L2 university student cohorts in this study, SA is defined as "a temporary sojourn of pre-defined duration, undertaken for educational purposes" (Kinginger 2009: 11). Beginning with an overview of the SA context more broadly, research to date has suggested that pragmatic gains made in the SA environment are highly variable despite the obvious advantages a SA environment has to offer. Xiao's (2015) synthesis of existing longitudinal, non-instructed SA investigations ranged in length from five weeks (Masuda 2011)

to 4.5 years (Bouton 1994), with most longitudinal studies typically tracking development over a one-year period. Overall, these investigations of pragmatic comprehension, production and perception (of mostly speech acts) report a combination of largely positive SA effects (e.g., Matsumura 2001, 2003; Schauer 2006), minimal SA effects (e.g., Barron 2006; Iwasaki 2011) and studies generating a mixed picture (e.g., Barron 2003, 2007; Bataller 2010; Cole and Anderson 2001; Schauer 2007). These variable findings may be attributable to individual learner differences (Taguchi 2012), the target pragmatic feature (Sánchez-Hernández and Alcón-Soler 2019), length of stay, quality and quantity of L2 exposure and contact (Bardovi-Harlig and Bastos 2011), and even programmatic variables of the SA sojourn itself (Pérez-Vidal and Shively 2019).

Examination of pragmatic development of spoken and written L2 English requests during short- and long-term SA also follows this variable trend. In terms of evidence of moves towards more L2-like norms, a greater use of, indirect requests over time has been reported (Cole and Anderson 2001; Schauer 2007; Woodfield 2012), in addition to an increase in the use of formulaic language in requests (Bardovi-Harlig and Bastos 2011; Schauer 2007). Use of internal and external request modification devices (to mitigate or soften requests) is reported to be less successfully acquired during SA. For example, studies highlighting underuse of request modification devices (Schauer 2007; Woodfield 2008, 2012; Woodfield and Economidou-Kogetsidis 2010) appear to outnumber those showing improvement in productive use of request modification across time (Schauer 2007; Woodfield 2012). The viewpoint from which emails are written (perspective) has also been reported as differing between L1 and L2 users (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007, Zhu 2012). In short, SA has been found to offer a facilitative role in pragmatic development of requests, but the picture is highly complex due to the interdependence of the pragmatic target under study, the many influential contextual factors

and individual learner differences. Research on L2 development in email interaction reports similar findings, as discussed in the following section.2.2. Email as institutional talk

Institutional talk (IT) is understood as talk between an institutional representative (e.g., a member of university staff) and a client (e.g., a student) (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford 2005). Whereas general L2 conversation often investigates pragmatics from a much broader view of how learners negotiate intercultural middle grounds, within IT there is a need to achieve an end goal within specific constraints and frameworks (Drew and Heritage 1992) such as observing social roles and power relationships, and then making corresponding language adjustments based on this knowledge.

According to Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford, "the maxim of congruence predicts that participants in a speech event will generally employ speech acts that are consistent with their role or status" (1993: 281). A status-congruent request might be a student requesting an academic meeting or course information. In the event of noncongruent interactions, where the status of the representative is challenged (e.g. a student requests an extension to a deadline), status-preserving strategies (SPS) are required as mitigators to both ensure the task is accomplished in a favourable way and to maintain a good academic relationship (ibid.). Asking for an extension to a deadline, for example, could be mitigated by making the request in a brief and timely manner (non-linguistic SPS), and by using situationally appropriate request strategies and lexical modifiers (linguistic SPS). Failing to negotiate noncongruent encounters in an appropriate way is likely to result in non-compliance in the short term (the deadline extension is not granted) but could also risk a (lasting) negative impression of the student in the long term.

It is the negotiation of these noncongruent encounters which L2 learners can find particularly challenging. In fact, it is the use, kind and number of status-preserving strategies which are often markers differentiating novice language users from their expert peers (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford 1990, 1993). Learners' awareness of (non)congruency does not guarantee the academic exchange will be successful either. A further level of risk a student faces is formulating status-congruent requests in an inappropriate way. For instance, although a request for an academic meeting is a status-congruent request for a student, if the appropriate framing devices and content moves are absent, research has reported this affecting compliance and/or having a negative impression of the sender (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2016; Savić 2018). In short, novice L2 users need to be mindful of three specific elements for email success: L2 language, L2 (institutional and local) cultural norms and adequate knowledge of email conventions (Chen 2006).

As is the trend in oral and written pragmatic research more generally, most email request studies are designed as single-moment studies, taking a 'slice' of performance over a specific (and limited) period of time. Email studies in this category can be organised into those focusing on the framing moves (openings and closings) of L2 English request emails (e.g., Biesenbach-Lucas 2009; Codina-Espurz and Salazar-Campillo 2019; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2018), studies examining content moves in emails (levels of directness and/or lexical modification of the request sequence) (e.g., Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2018), and a handful of perception studies which have evaluated L2 emails from a sociopragmatic perspective (e.g., Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011, 2016; Hendriks 2010; Li and Chen 2016; Savić 2018).

Unlike single-moment studies which can only offer a moment-in-time snapshot of what a learner knows, longitudinal studies are able to show the dynamic process of actual change in individual or group behaviour. Email studies in this category are uncommon and are currently limited to the occasional examination of non-instructed (Chen 2006) and instructed (Nguyen 2018) email performance. Chen's (2006) case study tracked the changing email performance of a Taiwanese graduate student's two-and-a-half-year study in the US as she struggled to master writing situationally-appropriate emails to her professor (and peers). Though emails to her professors in the later stages of her studies were more in line with institutional expectations of status-unequal communication (e.g., more query-preparatory statements and fewer want statements), the journey to this point was slow and complicated. Exposure and practice in the L2 environment were simply insufficient to master L2 email literacy and avoid L1 influences. Contrasting implicit learning in Chen's study, Nguyen (2018) reported the results of an eight-month investigation into the long-term impact of explicit instruction of email requests with a group of Vietnamese university students. The results indicated instructional advantages which were sustained even after eight months. Specifically, opening email sequences, use of request strategies and avoidance of aggravating devices appeared most amenable to instruction.

Drawing on these studies, this chapter aims to contribute to the shortage of longitudinal investigations into L2 email practices. Within UK-based academic sojourns, international students from L1 Chinese backgrounds are the biggest source of non-UK students (21.5%) outside of the EU (30.5%) (Universities UK, 2018). At the institution where this study is located, Chinese students represent over 50% of the international student body, so examining the study abroad experience of this dominant international group is valuable locally and to the wider UK Higher Education (HE) sector.

2.3 Chinese-speakers' L2 email requests

From early examinations of L2 English request emails by L1 Chinese users (Chang and Hsu 1998) through to more recent investigations (Li 2018), results tend to show consistent patterns of L2 sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic behaviour. As reviewed in the following studies, research shows L2 English emails from this learner group often lack a demonstrable understanding of L2 norms at the institutional and community-wide levels, and typically contain L1 culturally-loaded strategies.

Taking Chang and Hsu's (1998) study of authentic emails as a starting point, results showed their Chinese-speaking graduate students' emails typically employed indirect email structures with direct request constructions, in comparison to their American peers where the opposite pattern was evident. Preceding the request itself, 83% of the L2 emails in status-unequal interactions also featured extended facework and reasons for the request, considered mitigating strategies by the Chinese students to reduce imposition and make the recipient feel good. In addition, 60% of the emails adopted direct strategies (want statements and imperatives), which failed to offer the recipient adequate optionality. The most indirect strategy (query preparatory) was only used 10% of the time. Many of these features were reportedly transferred from L1 Chinese. In contrast, the American students made requests more directly in terms of information sequencing, employed minimal facework and positioned the request head act much earlier. Indirect (query preparatory) strategies were also the preferred choice 90% of the time. The authors concluded that the Chinese students were underprepared for communicating via email.

Despite Chang and Hsu's (1998) recommendations for pedagogical action, subsequent studies of Chinese speakers have evidenced little change. Examining naturally-occurring (Chen 2006; Lee 2010) and elicited (Chen 2015; Li 2018; Tseng 2016; Zhu 2012) email data, investigations have also identified lengthy pre-request moves and 'storytelling', an underuse of internal modification, and an overuse of direct strategies (want/need statement, expectation statements, performatives and imperatives) to be typical features. As confirmed through Chen's (2006) and Tseng's (2016) participant interviews, it is through these L1 practices that Chinese users typically convey politeness and indirectness in the L2, though these contrast the politeness strategies typically employed by L1 speakers.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants and email data

The email data consisted of 315 authentic emails sent to the two authors over a period of 18 months. The researchers were members of faculty in regular contact as tutors with either the L1 users of English on an undergraduate TESOL programme (n=153 emails) or the L2 users of English on an international business (IB) programme (n=162 emails). The IB group were L1 Chinese students from several partner universities across mainland China completing a one-year study period abroad in the UK. The Chinese students' L2 English proficiency level could be described as intermediate to upper-intermediate (B1-B2 on the CEFR) since this is the benchmark needed to join the study abroad programme. No student in the L1 Chinese data set was reported to have a proficiency level beyond B2. Both sets of subjects fell within the age

range of 20-23 and were final year students on their respective programmes. Although it is common practice for students to address faculty members on a first name basis within the majority of UK HE institutions, suggesting a level of informality in the staff -student relationship, there remains an expectation that communication and interaction are carried out in a way which observes the status-unequal roles of each party. This situation also best describes the academic relationship of the researchers and subjects in this study.

Each researcher archived all request emails received during the 18-month period from the two student groups selected for the study. To achieve some level of homogeneity, group selection was based on subjects' age ranges and foreign language learning experience (the TESOL students were also studying a modern foreign language as part of their degree programme). At the end of the research cycle, emails which were self-contained (i.e. not part of longer chains of messages) and did not include any sensitive or personal information, were included in the corpus. The emails in the corpus could be categorised as requests for meetings, requests for information (course information, assessment clarification, academic regulations and advice) or requests for assistance (help with academic work, writing references). The focus of this chapter, however, was not to differentiate between the request types.

After careful consideration of ethical issues, a passive consent approach was adopted, as conducted in other studies of this kind (Merrison, Wilson, Davies and Haugh 2012). Passive consent (opting-out) involves providing a method for subjects to retract permission in contrast to active consent (opting-in), which provides a means for subjects to document permission. In this study, subjects were contacted towards the end of the research period with comprehensive details of the research, including examples of email extracts and how they would be used. Initial contact with the students was also timed to coincide with the end of year formal assessment

period (signaling an end to their taught classes as finalists) so students did not feel unduly pressured to participate. Students had a four-week period to respond and withdraw from the study, resulting in removal of their emails from the corpus. The students remained in contact with the authors during this time and were invited to discuss any aspects of the study or to view email samples. Following Merrison et al. (2012), the rationale for this after-the-moment approach, over gaining prior consent, was to ensure authenticity of the request emails and no possible influence from having prior knowledge of the study (the so-called Observer's Paradox). This was regarded as a critical aspect to maintain internal validity. For these reasons, the opt-out approach was considered equitable for all parties.

3.2 Email analysis

To establish a broader understanding of current email practice and developmental change across the academic year, the study examined several features of the emails beyond insights limited to request strategies alone. In addition to strategy use, the study also analysed frequencies of internal lexical modification (e.g., use of 'please', 'possibly', 'I was wondering' as request mitigators) and request perspective (e.g., use of 'can I' vs. 'can you'). As mentioned, such features are also reported to vary considerably for Chinese EFL/ESL speakers but email pragmatic investigations combining all these elements with naturally-occurring data with this learner group have yet to be conducted. Examinations of syntactic modification and external modification were outside the scope of the current study.

This study takes a data-driven approach for classifying the data. Since no one coding scheme was able to capture the entire range of request components, an adaptation of several existing taxonomies (as described in Tables 1-3) was used to account for the email data.

Initial data analysis looked to a range of existing coding frameworks to categorise the request strategies in this corpus. Table 1 draws on several studies (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Zhu 2012) to capture the range of direct strategies, indirect strategies and hints identified in the expert and novice English email data sets.

Table 1. Analysis of request strategies

Levels of directness in request emails		
Direct	Request strategies	Examples
	Imperatives	*(Please) send me a time to meet.*
	Performatives (unhedged vs. hedged)	*I'm asking for a meeting.* *I would like to ask for a meeting.*
	Direct questions	*Do you have time for a meeting?*
	Want statements (unhedged vs. hedged)	*I want to meet with you.* *I would like to meet you.*
	Need statements	*I need to meet with you soon.*
	Expectation statements	*I hope we can meet soon.*
	Pre-decided statements	*It's better for me to meet next week.*
Conventionally Indirect	Query Preparatory-can Query Preparatory-could Query Preparatory-would Query Preparatory-Possibility Statement	*Can I meet you?* *Could you meet me?* *Would I be able to meet you?* *Would it be possible/Is it possible to meet?* *May I meet with you?*

	Query Preparatory-Permission Query Preparatory (without modals)	*I was wondering if you are available to meet?*
Hints	Strong or mild hints	*I'm having problems with my work.*

Lexical devices which have a mitigating effect on the request head act were also investigated. Devices which downgraded the request were the focus since upgraders were not present in the data sets. Table 2 is an adaptation of Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) and Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) and lists the internal modifiers present across all the email data. Chinese speakers are not known to exploit internal modification (Li 2018; Wang 2011) so exploring the extent of behavioural change over the academic year was a useful additional focus.

Table 2. Analysis of internal lexical modification

Lexical modifiers	
please	
Downtoners	*possibly, maybe*
Understaters	*just*
Subjectivisers	*I was wondering, I think, I want to know*
Consultative Devices	*If/Is it possible? Is there a chance?*
Hedges	*some, any*

A final point of analysis involved examining the request perspective adopted by the students in their emails. A request utterance can take the speaker (I), hearer (you) or both participants (we) as its agent but can also be avoided altogether (impersonal) to reduce the coerciveness and imposition on others (Zhang 1995). The four categories listed in Table 3 are taken from Blum Kulka, House and Kasper's (1989) CCSARP and show an increase in perceived politeness. Few studies to date have included this as an additional dimension as a politeness measure but since Chinese (Zhu 2012), and East Asian (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007) students more generally, seem to favour the hearer- and speaker- perspectives 80-100% of the time, this examination is also of value for this study.

Table 3. Analysis of request perspective

Request perspective (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Zhu 2012)	
Hearer-perspective (you) (least polite)	*Could you meet me tomorrow afternoon?*
Speaker-hearer perspective (we)	*Could we meet tomorrow afternoon?*
Speaker-perspective (I)	*Could I meet you tomorrow afternoon?*
Impersonal perspective (most polite)	*Is it possible to meet tomorrow afternoon?*

Descriptive statistics were generated to analyse the naturally-occurring emails. To answer the first research question, frequency counts and converted percentages enabled comparisons between the data sets (expert vs. novice). Addressing the second research question involved separating the novice data into two subsets using the mid-way point (month X) of the SA as

the natural break. Emails produced in the first half of the SA (Sept-Jan, *n*=81) were grouped as

T^1 and emails from the second half of the SA (Feb-June, *n*=72) were grouped as T^2. All of the

novices were represented in both data sets but not all novices produced the same number of

emails between T^1 T^2 or across the entire SA stay. As a result, the data analysis aimed to provide

indicators of changes in L2 behaviour at the group level since participant homogeneity had

been established and insufficient emails were generated to directly compare individual

performance across the time periods.

4. Findings

This study aimed to determine the distinctive features of expert and novice English users' email

requests (RQ1) and to ascertain any observable change in novice L2 English request emails

during a SA stay in the UK (RQ2). The findings below are organised according to these two

research goals, within which the types and frequency of request strategies, lexical modification

and request perspective are examined.

4.1 Distinctive features of expert and novice English user request emails (RQ1)

As can be seen in Table 4, distinctive features of the novice and expert user data lie in both

the directness levels, and the type and frequency of request strategy.

Table 4. Preferred choice of request strategy for expert and novice users

Directness levels	Request strategy	Expert users (L1 speakers)	Novice users* (L2 speakers)
Direct	Imperatives	0	9 (11%)
	Performatives	2 (67%)	13 (16%)
	Direct questions	1 (33%)	14 (18%)
	Want statements	0	18 (23%)
	Need statements	0	5 (6%)
	Expectation statements	0	12 (15%)
	Pre-decided statement	0	8 (10%)
Totals		**3**	**79**
Conventionally Indirect	Query preparatory Ability (can)	6 (4%)	34 (52%)
	Ability (could)	33 (21%)	22 (33%)
	Ability (would)	18 (11%)	4 (6%)
	Possibility statement	61 (39%)	0
	Query-Permission	1 (1%)	4 (6%)
	Query- no modals	39 (25%)	2 (3%)
Totals		**158**	**66**
Hints	Strong/mild hints	0	5 (100%)
Totals		**0**	**5**

Note: *novice user data combines both T¹ and T² figures.

Expert users almost exclusively adopt conventional indirectness in the form of query preparatory strategies to realise email requests. Qualitative examinations of this exceptionally high level reveal strong preferences for possibility statements (39%), conditional clauses prefaced with *I was wondering* (query- no modals) (25%) and the conditional verb *could* (21%) above all others. More complex bi-clausal structures which include a conditional clause such as, *I was wondering if you could…* are commonplace in the expert data. Novice users, on the other hand, tend to switch between either direct or conventionally indirect strategies in almost equal measure. The frequency of direct strategies is slightly higher, however, with want statements (23%), direct questions (18%), performatives (16%) and expectation statements (15%) appearing most often. This finding suggests the novice users show less control (and understanding) of request strategy use and its illocutionary effect, given the very specific (status-unequal) academic context within which the requests were deployed. Observing the

data qualitatively, direct and indirect strategies are indiscriminately chosen regardless of request type. In emails requesting a meeting, for instance, examples from the novice users included, 'I want to meet you tomorrow to discuss the assignment' (direct request) and 'Could you please meet me tomorrow?' (indirect request). In contrast, direct strategies of any kind are rarely adopted by expert users (only three instances recorded). In the three cases where a direct question or performatives appear, these are heavily mitigated as illustrated in (1) in comparison to equivalent examples from novices in (2) which place an emphasis on personal wants and needs with the use of 'I' and 'my':

(1) I'd like to book a place on the trip if at all possible, please?

(2) I would like to ask you for my reference letter which I need to use it to apply for my future university.

Where indirectness is employed by novice users, emails tend to be limited to the modals *can* (52%) and *could* (33%) and show little or no evidence of the strategies favoured by expert users. This finding does not necessarily mean the novice L2 emails are less polite or do not successfully achieve their purpose but suggests the novice users' pragmalinguistic options may be limited due to proficiency or experience of using this medium in the L2. Hints rarely appear in the novice data set (only 5 instances recorded) and are completely absent from the expert user data. This is perhaps due to the need for clarity of message (which hints do not supply) in the absence of verbal and non-verbal cues found in face-to-face communication.

Marked contrasts between the two groups are also evident when analysing internal lexical modification. Table 5 illustrates the distribution of modifiers across the two groups.

Table 5. Preferred choice of internal lexical modifiers between expert and novice users

Internal modifier	Expert users	Totals	Novice users	Totals
please	27	27 (12%)	19	19 (43%)
downtoners	2 (maybe) 4 (possibly)	6 (3%)	1 (maybe)	1 (2%)
understaters	30 (just)	30 (14%)	3 (just)	3 (7%)
subjectivisers	86 (I was wondering)	86 (39%)	5 (I was wondering) 1 (I think) 1 (I wanted to know)	7 (16%)
consultative devices	54 (would it be possible) 2 (is there a chance)	56 (26%)	3 (would it be possible/is it possible) 3 (Is it ok) 1 (Is there a chance)	7 (16%)
hedges	8 (some) 5 (any)	13 (6%)	7 |(some)	7 (16%)
Totals	**218***		**44**	

Note. * the total number of instances in the expert user data is greater than the total number of emails since modifiers can co-occur within a single request.

The expert users' emails contain almost five times as many instances of internal modification (218 instances recorded) as the novice data set (44 instances recorded), though certain modifiers are clearly more favoured than others, as described below. In addition, combining more than one modifier, as in the cases "Could I *please just* ask…?" or "Could you *possibly* spare *some* time…?", is a common feature in the expert data. The subjectiviser *I was wondering* (39%) and the consultative device *Would it be/is it possible* (25%) are the experts' go-to mitigators with few other devices being used in such a consistent way. The former is often further modified in the expert data with the understater *just,* which also acts as a modifier alongside other main verb forms (e.g. *just look at, just write*). This strategic placement of 'just'

aims to project the simplicity of the task, thereby reducing the coercive tone of the request e.g. "I was *just* wondering", "Could you *just* look at this document for me?". This multi layering of internal modifiers in all these examples points to a subtle yet sophisticated use of mitigators to repeatedly soften the illocutionary force of the requests.

As Table 5 also shows, novice users, by contrast, use internal modifiers sparingly. The data indicate the novice group prefer external modification to achieve the same purpose. Although external modification is not a focus of the current chapter, the data reveal considerable evidence of pre-request supportive moves and small talk prior to the main request head act. Word count totals also indicate this to be the case with novice user requests being between 22-50% longer than those in the expert data.

A particularly interesting outcome for both groups is the use of *please* as a mitigator. Expert and novices both employ *please* though a qualitative analysis of its use suggests the actual outcomes may differ. Whilst the example from the expert data in (3) shows *please* reducing or softening the requestive force (confirmed in 100% of the data cases), the novice example in (4), appears to have the opposite effect of aggravating it. Whilst such examples only represent 38% (of the 19 occurrences) in the novice data, this evidence shows learners need to be mindful of the potential negative effects of even the most basic request components.

> (3) I was wondering if you could please take a look at this draft and let me know if I'm on the right lines.
> (4) Please help me check the work because the deadline is Sunday. Please give me the feedback.

Finally, Table 6 illustrates group preferences for request perspective. Choice of perspective is considered important since it may also affect the recipient's perceived politeness of the request (Blum Kulka et al. 1989).

Table 6. Preferred choice of perspective between expert and novice users

Request perspective	Expert users	Novice users
You	18 (11%)	70 (46%)
We	77 (48%)	1 (1%)
I	6 (4%)	75 (49%)
Impersonal	61 (38%)	7 (5%)

Note: Total emails- expert=162; novice=153

The perspective options 'we' and 'impersonal', at the more polite end of the scale, dominate the expert user data (85%) whilst the options 'you' and 'I', which devolve responsibility to a particular party to perform the action, appear infrequently (15%). The opposite trend can be found in the novice email data. Novices typically assign 'you' or 'I' roles within their requests 95% of the time and appear to use these two perspectives interchangeably regardless of request type. Unlike the expert data, the agent avoiders 'we' and 'impersonal', considered less coercive, rarely feature in the novice emails.

4.2 Examination of changes in novice L2 user email requests (RQ2)

Building on the novice user results obtained for RQ1, this section aims to identify any longitudinal changes in email behaviour between the first and second half of the novices' study abroad period. Whilst the results from RQ1 demonstrate novice user emails are markedly different to experts on all three dimensions investigated, it is still worthwhile examining if there

is any evidence the SA environment has enabled novices to reduce the pragmatic gap uncovered thus far. As a reminder, the mid-way point of the SA stay (month 5/10) was used as the cut-off point to create two data sets at T^1 (Sept-Jan) and T^2 (Feb-June). These two data sets were then compared for changes in group behaviour, with the results presented below. Choice of request strategy between the two time periods for the novice data can be found in Table 7.

Table 7. Novice user change in request strategy T^1 to T^2

Directness levels	Request strategy	T^1	T^2
Direct	Imperatives	5 (12%)	4 (11%)
	Performatives	4 (9%)	9 (25%)
	Direct questions	8 (19%)	6 (17%)
	Want statements	13 (30%)	5 (14%)
	Need statements	1 (2%)	4 (11%)
	Expectation statements	6 (14%)	6 (17%)
	Pre-decided statements	6 (14%)	2 (6%)
Totals		**43**	**36**
Conventionally Indirect	Query preparatory Ability (can)	13 (38%)	21 (60%)
	Ability (could)	15 (44%)	7 (20%)
	Ability (would)	1 (3%)	3 (9%)
	Possibility statements	0	0
	Query-Permission	4 (12%)	3 (9%)
	Query- no modals	1 (3%)	1 (3%)
Totals		**34**	**35**
Hints	Strong/mild hints	4 (100%)	1 (100%)
Totals		**4**	**1**

Note: T^1 (Sept-Jan) and T^2 (Feb-June).

Overall, there is a slight decrease in total frequency of direct strategies over the two time periods, but the choice of linguistic patterns largely remains the same. Closer observation reveals a mixed picture regarding frequency counts. On the one hand, a reduction in the number of want statements by 16% represents the biggest change. At the same time, although imperatives, direct questions and pre-decided statements show only marginal decreases, this

could possibly indicate early beginnings of learners' socialisation into institutional email culture, which only a longer time period could validate. On the other hand, performatives and need statements also show marginal increases at similar levels (16% and 9% respectively) so results may be misleading.

This mixed picture is also evident in the use of indirect strategies. Table 7 shows similar overall frequencies over time though the preferred choice of modal changes from *could* (24% decrease) to *can* (22% increase) towards the end of the SA stay. Since expert users generally opt for the past tense modal *could*, this finding seems to suggest novices are not on a L2 target-like trajectory and prefer to make safer linguistic choices.

Table 8 charts the distribution of internal modifiers and Table 9 illustrates the choice of request perspective. Both data sets reveal little change over the two time periods.

Table 8. Novice user change in internal lexical modification T¹ to T²

Internal modifier	T¹	T²
please	9 (38%)	10 (50%)
downtoners	1 (4%)	0
understaters	3 (13%)	0
subjectivisers	6 (25%)	1 (5%)
consultative devices	2 (8%)	5 (25%)
hedges	3 (13%)	4 (20%)
Totals	**24**	**20**

Note: T¹ (Sept-Jan) and T² (Feb-June).

Table 9. Novice user change in perspective T¹ to T²

Request perspective (least to most polite)	T¹	T²
you	38 (47%)	32 (44%)
I	38 (47%)	37 (51%)
we	0	1 (1%)

impersonal	5 (6%)	2 (3%)

Note: T¹ (Sept-Jan) and T² (Feb-June).

It appears exposure and experience have not benefited the learners on either the frequency and type of internal modification, or request perspective. Both dimensions have been the least susceptible to change over time. The novices continue the trend of underusing internal modifiers throughout their SA stay and employing *please* as the preferred mitigator. In the second half of the SA period, evidence still suggests that *please* often acts as an aggravator rather than as a softener to a request. In terms of request perspective, there is also no uptake of formulating requests from any viewpoints other than the speaker and hearer even at the end of the academic year.

5. Discussion

To a large extent, this study's findings are consistent with existing research on email requests by Chinese or East Asian L2 learners of English (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Chang and Hsu 1998; Chen 2006; Chen 2015; Lee 2010; Li 2018; Tseng 2016; Zhu 2012). The findings also tend to mirror those from studies on spoken request production with this learner group (Lee Wong 1994; Li 2014; Lin 2009; Halenko and Jones 2011, 2017; Wang 2011; Yu 1999; Zhang 1995). Comparisons between the present study and these earlier investigations are discussed below.

The profile of experts favouring indirectness and the novices' tendency for directness found in other studies (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Chen 2015; Wang 2011) is also evident here. In this

British context, the experts show predictable patterns of behaviour to formulate requests and consistently select particular, more linguistically complex forms to maximise tentativeness and reduce imposition. Novices, on the other hand, select direct requests much more frequently. As reported by Chen (2006), direct strategies emphasise the importance and urgency of a request from a Chinese perspective, so a response and help are more forthcoming. Li (2018) suggests, in line with positive face wants which underlie Chinese culture, directness also expresses a sincere belief and optimism for cooperation. Directness may be an ineffective strategy in an L2, however, as the tone may be perceived as coercive and the directness gives the impression of elevating a student's rights in an academic setting (Bardovi Harlig and Hartford 1993).

L1 English speakers' status-preserving strategies have been shown to rely heavily on internal modification (e.g., Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Li 2018) and this study is no exception. In fact, evidence of what might be described as a multiple layering of mitigation, such as the co-occurrence of more than one modifier in the request head act, may be a distinct feature of British email requests. This multilayering technique signals the importance of this strategy for the expert user group to further emphasise distancing, tentativeness and optionality. These effects are mainly achieved using three devices in this study: subjectivers, consultative devices and understaters, meaning experts rely on a limited number rather than a wide range (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007), but employ them frequently. As reported elsewhere (e.g., Chen 2006; Wang 2011; Halenko and Jones 2017), L2 users, on the other hand, rarely adopt this mitigating technique and instead appear to prefer external modification through small talk and supportive moves, prior to the core request, to achieve the same status-preserving effect. As in this study, this often means requests are much longer than in expert user emails, though from a Chinese perspective, lengthiness also serves to increase the likelihood of compliance and adds a personal touch (Chen 2006). Underusing internal modifiers, however, often leaves L2

learners open to pragmatic failure as their emails may be perceived as overly direct and assertive. According to Li (2018), the lack of equivalent English internal modifiers in Chinese (e.g., past tense inflection, bi clausals), the unavailability of Chinese internal modifiers in English (e.g., particles and honourific pronouns), L1 interference and the processing complexity of internal modification are all major obstacles in the uptake of mitigating devices by L1 Chinese users of English. Such non-L2-like tendencies in relation to greater request directness, lower use of internal request softeners and a reliance on external request modification are not exclusive to L1 Chinese learners, however, but feature in learner requests from other L1 backgrounds (Alcón-Soler 2015; Ali and Woodfield 2017; Göy, Zeyrek and Otcu 2012; Hassall 2001, Vilar-Beltran 2008). Taken together with the challenges of operating within a UK negative politeness society (emphasising privacy and freedom of action), which may contradict the values of a positive politeness culture such as China (emphasising group solidarity and a desire for approval), all add to the interlanguage and intercultural load L2 students need to negotiate as part of their SA stay.

The experts' preference for the 'we' and 'impersonal' request perspectives may be linked to the general trend of adopting the most polite linguistic features at their disposal to maximise distance and tentativeness, as noted elsewhere (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Merrison et al.; Zhu 2012). By contrast, novice users' reliance on speaker and hearer request perspectives could be linked as much to L1 linguistic practices as to the broader L1 Chinese sociopragmatic view of rights and obligations between teachers and students. In Chinese societies, students often draw on the teachers' moral obligations to help and take for granted their rights to appeal directly for this help (see Chen 2006).

The second research question examined developmental change in novice emails over one academic year. Unlike Chen's (2006) study, long term exposure to emails and increased experience in email writing did not seem to advance the novice users' pragmatic development or reduce the non-L2-like features present in the first half of their SA period. Marginal decreases were only found in the number of want statements. As declines in this feature from exposure alone have been reported elsewhere (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Chen 2006), suggests want statements may be recognised as inappropriate options much earlier than other features. Otherwise, direct strategies remained the preferred choice throughout the academic year. As sociopragmatic skills are known to develop much more slowly than pragmalinguistic skills (Chen 2006; Li 2018), it is perhaps unsurprising to observe little development in this area when the learners are clearly influenced by the need to make direct appeals in their requests, as discussed earlier.

Proficiency may also have played a role with the intermediate novices in this study. Biesenbach-Lucas' (2007) low-advanced students showed less of a pragmatic gap than the current study. Tseng (2016) reported higher proficiency learners increased some aspects of internal modification and Li (2018) found his higher proficiency learners showed less directness and more indirectness in their email requests. As is often the case though, these studies also note learners' underperformance against L1 benchmarks.

It is also possible the length of stay was too short to determine positive effects of other aspects of requests. Only after 18 months did Chen's graduate student reduce the frequency of want statements and it took two years to reduce the length of request emails. Intensity of interaction (the types and frequency of L2 interactions) is in fact said to play a more decisive role in pragmatic development (Bardovi Harlig and Bastos 2011; Bella 2011). In this UK academic

setting, students regularly receive multiple emails from staff so the quality and quantity of (implicit) input is available. However, how frequently the L2 students responded to or initiated emails to gain valuable experience and practice was not investigated in this study. Low engagement in email writing, or L2 social interaction more generally, may also then account for the findings, underlining the importance of the partnership between the facilitative expert and interactive learner found in sociocultural theory.

It is the size of the pragmatic gap between expert and novice users, however, which is somewhat unexpected. Since L1 user data is generally provided by American participants, a plausible explanation for this gap may lie in the British academic context within which this study is located. Examining email data to faculty from British and Australian students, Merrison et al. described their British email requests as "deferentially dependent" and "lacking entitlement", leading the authors to suggest that British students orient to a perceived institutional hierarchy. This is evidenced, they say, through the use of linguistic forms such as *just* and *wondering* (among others), which are also distinctive features of the present study. Such markers position the requests as "either beyond the rights or skills of someone in their (low) position or would be an onerous deal for them" (2012: 1094), even when the request falls within an academic's expected duties. The authors contrasted this deferential dependence with the Australian request data which claimed to show "interdependent egalitarianism" through more well-wishing and establishing personal common ground, for instance. Australian students seemed to perceive faculty members as social equals rather than elevating their lecturers as British students did. The findings, the authors suggest, demonstrate "systematic cultural differences", even though a common language exists between the two settings. A concluding comment that, "knowing a language is not enough, users need to know how to do politeness in

a particular cultural and situational context" (2012: 1096) seems highly applicable to the study in this chapter and may go some way to further understanding the pragmatic gaps identified.

With this in mind, managing academic relationships may be perceived as somewhat contradictory in UK HE settings and may cause confusion for international students. On the one hand, there is the expectation in email communication, for instance, that the asymmetrical power relationship and imposition on the tutor's time is acknowledged through appropriate linguistic means, as noted earlier (+SD in Brown and Levinson's (1987) terms). On the other hand, academic staff are generally known for fostering informal relationships with students and actively encouraging first name use, without the use of formal titles, in online and offline communication (-SD). This is illustrated in the following (appropriate) example request from the expert data which has both +SD elements (indirect strategies, multiple internal modifiers) and -SD elements (use of first name, informal greeting and closing).

Hi Nicola,

I was wondering if I could possibly meet with you later this week? I'm struggling a bit with my assignment and I could do with a little advice. I would be grateful for any help. Please let me know if this is ok and when you are free to meet.

Thanks,

Joe (pseudonym)

This subtle yet sophisticated combination of maintaining friendly informality whilst activating multiple status-preserving strategies such as indirectness and repeated layering of internal modification is understandably challenging for L2 users. In such situations, pedagogical intervention may be the best course of action, as discussed in the next section.

6. Pedagogical implications

To help learners address the shortcomings of their current email practices and avoid having to rely on guesswork, most email studies point to the favourable benefits of explicit instruction (Alcón-Soler 2015; Chen 2015; Nguyen 2018). This conclusion is consistent with recommendations for advancing pragmatic knowledge more generally and is particularly important when preparing learners for a SA experience. Studies examining pre-SA instruction (Halenko and Jones 2017; Halenko et al. 2019) and in country SA instruction (Halenko and Jones 2011) found that Chinese L2 English learners reduced their reliance on L1 transfer and showed a heightened awareness of which linguistic request strategies to use for the best pragmatic effect. Without the benefits of instruction, pragmatic development is known to be slow, and gains are minimal (Chen 2006; Taguchi 2010).

In terms of choice of pragmatic targets for intervention, since some well-used English request devices have no Chinese equivalents (bi-clausal structures, past tense inflections) (Li 2018; Lin 2009) or some Chinese request devices have less politeness value in English (imperatives and performatives) (Li 2018), these seem to be sensible starting points for novice Chinese students of English. As this study also revealed experts favoured particular request strategies, internal modifiers and request perspectives more than others, class time can be used efficiently to introduce these predictable patterns as valuable discussion points and include them as the basis for practice activities in email writing. These pragmalinguistic features could be explicitly presented and practised as pragmatic routines or formulaic expressions within emails: an approach which has been shown to be particularly effective (Bardovi Harlig and Vellenga 2012; Wang and Halenko 2019) and would also benefit lower proficiency learners. Structured

linguistic input would need to sit within broader discussions of the institutional and community-wide cultural conventions specific to the SA community in which the learners are based, as it was noted earlier that expectations within different L1 English SA settings and international academic institutions may vary.

7. Conclusion

L2 pragmatics research has observed the development of situationally-appropriate email requests to be no less challenging for L2 learners than face-to-face exchanges. That email writers have opportunities to plan, edit and revise their requests, unlike in synchronous interactions, does not seem to offer many advantages. This conclusion also best summarises the data found in this study. Whilst spoken request data has found novice L2 users tend to operate at a lower pragmatic level than their expert peers, the data in this study finds the gap to be much wider in written email request production. Possible explanations may lie in the British context within which the study was based and the distinct behaviours of the expert cohort, the L1 Chinese background of the novices, or the well-documented challenges of employing situationally-appropriate netiquette in an L2. Without the necessary guidance, it is clear L2 learners tend to fall back on the safety of the L1 systems and this leaves learners open to pragmatic failure.

There are limits, however, to the interpretability of these findings. Since the study was limited to expert users of British English and novice Chinese users of English, the results are not generalisable to the wider international student population but instead provide insights to these specific learner groups in a university context. Using organically-grown data meant a focus on changes in group performance but a larger corpus may be able reveal changes in individual

behaviour through a larger data set. The addition of qualitative interview data would have provided possible motivations to the learners' linguistic and sociopragmatic choices, as undertaken in other studies of this kind (Chen 2006; Li 2018; Tseng 2016). Finally, understanding the appropriateness of the emails from the lecturers' perspective, such as Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011, 2016) and Savić (2018), would have completed the picture and helped provide an understanding of how all these data sets interact with one another in the SA environment.

This study is one of a growing number of studies to show the incompatibility of sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic transfer from L1 Chinese to L2 English on several dimensions. Email writing involves a set of considered behaviours which need to be learnt and practised within the particular cultural context of the SA site. It is clear students need to be fully prepared for their SA periods which includes being able to construct academic emails confidently and successfully. Pre-departure or in-country instruction appear to be best ways forward since exposure alone, over a typical academic year abroad, appears to have minimal impact.

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