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Scrutinizing the relationship between language proficiency and the use of mitigated devices by Saudi learners

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Abstract

This study explored the intricate relationship between language proficiency and the utilization of mitigated devices among Saudi learners. Mitigated devices refer to linguistic strategies employed to soften or moderate speech acts, such as hedging, mitigation, and indirectness, which play a crucial role in effective communication. Understanding the connection between language proficiency and mitigated devices usage among Saudi learners not only contributes to the field of linguistics but also holds significance for cross-cultural communication and education. It provided insights into the challenges faced by learners and offers guidance for fostering more culturally sensitive and effective communication strategies. To achieve this aim, 98 Saudi learners took part in this study from PSAU by replying on the Discourse Completion Test. Findings showed a significant influence of language proficiency on using internal modifications devices. Regarding the influence of social variables, advanced learners were more conscious of the effect of social power and distance in altering their strategy depending on the contextual variables. The study concluded with practical recommendations for learners, educators, and policymakers to improve language proficiency and intercultural communication competence among Saudi learners. These recommendations aimed to facilitate more effective and contextually appropriate communication in academic, professional, and social settings.

Keywords: internal modifications, language proficiency, Saudi learners, speech act



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Public Interest Statement

The study addresses a critical aspect of language acquisition and communication that holds significant relevance for both academia and society at large. It investigates the intricate connection between language proficiency and the utilization of mitigated devices, with a specific focus on Saudi learners since Saudi Arabia has a rich cultural heritage and unique linguistic features, and this study can shed light on how learners navigate the complexities of language proficiency while preserving their cultural and linguistic authenticity. This study, however, has the potential to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on the preservation of cultural and linguistic identities.

Introduction

Although there have been burgeoning studies on speech act in Saudi EFL learners, there are still dearth studies entail the impact of language proficiency in using internal modification as mean of mitigated device that are used to reduce the sharpness of face threatening acts. The necessity of improving linguistic and pragmatic competence has received worthy studies (Al-Momani 2009; Lenchuk and Ahmed 2013; Lee, 2015; Ahmed and Maros 2017; Alshraah, Harun, and Kariem 2023).

These studies and more show that non-native speakers focus on lexical, phonological, and grammatical performance more than pragmatic competence by ESL /EFL learners. The reason for this is that grammatical errors, for example, obstruct effective communication, although native speakers ignore this error because it indicates a low-level proficiency in using language. However, when the speaker does not employ pragmatic performance appropriately and effectively, the interlocutor may consider the utterances as a social affront and rude (Trosborg 2011). Hence, ESL\EFL learners need to learn and enhance their pragmatic competence to achieve appropriate and successful communication.

‘Pragmatic competence can be studied by exploring instances of pragmatic failure... and one cause of pragmlinguistic failure is pragmatic transfer’ (Nelson et al. 2002:164). Barron and Steen (2017) break down pragmatic transfer into binary types; negative and positive. Positive pragmatic transfer exists while the speaker counts on his first linguistic and pragmatic competence to be used in target language context producing a speech act similar to the second language structure. In this type, speakers display their sociopragmatic and pragmlinguistic knowledge, which results in successful communication. Unlike positive pragmatic transfer, negative pragmatic transfer is outlined as the occurrence of a speaker’s pragmlinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge onto target language contexts where such occurrence leads to realization and manners different from those of target language speakers. This sort of transfer causes miscommunication and misunderstanding (Barron 2003).

Furthermore, negative pragmlinguistic transfer focuses on the extent to which the learners employ politeness and illocutionary force in their speech (Kasper and Roever 2005). Rueda (2006) contended that three strategies are supposed to achieve appropriate pragmatic performance among EFL learners, such as 1) maximizing learner’s exposure to target language 2) increasing pragmatic knowledge through intensive practicing 3) motivating awareness of pragmatic instructed aspects. Bardovi-Harlig, Sabrina, and Vellenga (2015) claimed that the pragmatic perspective could not be acquired without the existence of instructions for learning and that pragmatic competence may vary between learners based on some factors.

The essential part of pragmatics is a speech act that centers on the act when producing utterances (Brown and Levinson 1987). Speech act theory is the focal element in language communication adopted by Austin (1962). Language is a combination of sound and meaning, and in generative thinking, a language is a group of sentences having a specific meaning (Searl 1975). Critically acclaimed, these definitions do not focus on language as an activity that performs speech act described as the essential or least part of linguistic communication. As Searl (1976) mentioned, communication does not concern only words and symbols, but rather the performing words, symbols, and sentences in performative speech acts.

Speech act is considered as a challenge for second language-acquisition students (Austin 1962) in areas such as requesting, warning, compliment, thanking and apologizing. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1986)

attributed speech acts as “one of the most coercive aspects in the study of language use”. The researcher believes that pragmatic competence is difficult for non-native speakers to achieve their intentions due to the cultural differences between the two languages.

Research Objectives and Questions

The current study seeks to examine linguistic variability concerning the relationship between SEFL’s English proficiency levels and strategies of making requests. Also, it seeks to discuss the situational variability regarding the differences in pragmatic realization of making requests across high and low SEFL proficiency learners. Finally, the goal of this research, after analyzing and discussing data, is to reveal the similarities and differences in the production of request act by HAs and LAs. Due to the lack of studies on SEFL’s English proficiency levels and strategies in making requests, such reasons have prompted the researcher to bridge the gap on the lack of information about this issue, this study entails the pragmatic competence in general and it amplifies in speech act as branch of pragmatic competence.

In doing so, the study reveals the impact of language proficiency in producing and realizing request act by Saudi EFL. Hence, this paper investigates the following research question?

1. What connections can be observed between the language proficiency of Saudi EFL learners and their ability to employ softened language elements in their communication?
2. In what ways do Saudi EFL learners with different language proficiency levels differ in their application of internal modifications in response to contextual factors?

Literature review and theoretical framework

The process of acquiring and mastering politeness tactics within the context of learning second language pragmatics can present challenges for language learners (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1986; Brown and Levinson, 1987). One complicating factor in determining the appropriate speech act strategy is the impact of the interlocutor’s social, cultural, and individual characteristics. Locher and Watts (2005) propose that these factors can significantly influence the linguistic choices made by second language learners, thus making it a compelling area for exploration from both language learning and teaching perspectives.

Face is a universal phenomenon among cultures defined as a public self-image which requires the speaker to respect feelings and expectations of others and to take into consideration how to prevent face threatening acts. This concept was adopted by Brown and Levinson (1987), which has become essential work in the field of social communication. The notion of the face has been classified into two classifications, negative face and positive face. These classifications are based on two-dimension values or social relations of social distance (D) and power (P) as Brown and Levinson (1987:77) defined power as “The degree to which hearer can impose his own plans and his own self-evaluation (face) at the expense of S’s plans and self-evaluation”. This classification is adopted in the current study to reveal the pragmatic realization among HA and LA in performing request act which will be discussed in the answering the second question of the present study which aims at investigating the pragmatic realization of making requests across high and low SEFL proficiency learners (situational variability).

The current study is based on Brown and Levinson politeness theory (1987) and Cross - Cultural Speech Act Realization Pattern (CCSARP) as a conceptual framework and Brown and Levinson politeness theory (1987) in order to address the impact of English language proficiencies on pragmatic realization in making requests across high and low SEFL proficiency learners. However, Brown and Levinson (1987) examined the theory of politeness and proposed that politeness may be achieved if we show and acknowledge the notion of face. Brown and Levinson (1987) claimed that some types of acts are by default Face Threaten Act (FTA); the researcher categorized these acts as follows: Threatening the speaker’s positive face, threatening the speaker’s negative face, threatening the audience’s negative face, and threatening the audience’s positive face.

Internal modification is the most significant part of the request act which is used to reduce level of directness (Brown and Levinson 1987). Depending on CCSARP, internal modifications include two strategies

that are upgraders and syntactic or lexical downgraders. The speech act of request does not have upgrades, unlike apologies and compliments, so this study focuses on mitigation and politeness used in request act, it entails downgraders. In the present study, expressions of internal modification were analyzed depending on Blum-Kulka (1989) and Alshraah et al. (2023), such as Play-down (past tense), Conditional clause (hedge), Subjectivize, and Embedding.

It is important to emphasize that the impact of language proficiency is intertwined with both pragma-linguistic and socio-pragmatic knowledge. Pragma-linguistics encompasses a speaker's capacity to employ various lexical, vocabulary, and grammatical elements. At the level of discourse, Geyer (2007) has asserted that individuals classified as High Achievers make use of a wider range of lexicons and grammatical structures in their speech acts, such as contrasting opinions and making adjustments. This results in a higher level of discourse features production compared to Low Achievers. Consequently, High Achievers possess the capability to master the language, distinguishing them from their Low Achiever counterparts.

Regarding employing written request act via emails by Emirates EFL, Deveci and Hmida (2017) investigated the difference of pragmatic competence between native speakers of English and Arab students in the Emirate in writing emails. To achieve this purpose, data were collected by asking students in response to DCT by email to their professors. Regarding the employment of strategy choice, external and internal modifier, and discourse strategies, results revealed that there were few significant differences between native speakers of English and nonnative speakers of English in performing these strategies. The limitation arises in the above study (Deveci and Hmida, 2017) from two angles; few numbers of participants and the participants from different nationalities that may influence the results. This way of gathering participants has been highly criticized by many researchers (e.g., Al-Issa 2005).

Since there is a direct relation between request and politeness and cultural norms, there is a need for several studies in politeness to bridge this gap. Therefore, Huwari (2018) conducted a contrastive study of politeness strategies between Asian and Jordanian students in a Jordanian university. It focused on the cultural differences among both students in using politeness techniques. Discourse Completion Test (DCT) was used for collecting data. The sample consisted of 6 Jordanian undergraduate students and 6 Asian undergraduate students. The results showed the similarities and dissimilarities used by Jordanian undergraduate students and Asian undergraduate students in using apology. Findings showed that gratitude considers less employed among Asian participants when apologized by an equal and lower status person. In this respect, the findings of this study might be worthy in intercultural comparisons studies. It is hoped that instructors to be aware of their own culture and the cultures of their students to make this cultural training more successful. Learners should learn apologizing strategies in such a way to grasp their both semantics meaning and pragmatic use for employing them appropriately. It is useful if the researcher compares between Jordanian students with native speakers of English or Asian students with native speakers of English.

In another study, Atamna (2016) attempted to investigate politeness, direct and indirect strategies in the use of request act employed by Algerian students in academic emails. The study was conducted to investigate the common strategies in which proficient students of English exploit request act with regard to social variables and politeness strategies. It mainly examined the correlation between linguistic proficiency and cultural norms of learners and the level of request behaviors. Data were collected within two years, including 80 emails. The researcher found that there was a significant connection between simplicity and explicit request behaviors and proficiency level of students and the effect of their culture on the politeness conception. According to the CCSARP framework, it was found that the strategy most often employed by learners was the direct strategy with 55.5 %, followed by conventional indirect strategy 40.8%, and the least used strategy was non-conventional strategy 4%. Intrinsically, the reason behind using direct strategy in request act was the learner's dependence on their pragmatic-linguistic competence and socio-pragmatic knowledge. Moreover, the learner's request act was found to be influenced by their cultural norms and pragmatic knowledge and, as he argued, that there is a significant correlation between request behavior of learners and their level of English proficiency. This study is useful in terms of defining the differences

between the students who belong to the same culture, but it is preferable if such study concentrated on the spontaneous written request. As such, the information will be more precise and accurate.

In a recent study, Alsulayyi (2017) investigated the implementation of strategies of politeness and apology by Saudi EFL teachers compared to native speakers of English to explore to what extent Saudi EFL teachers make apology and politeness in the target language. To achieve the above objective, the researcher adopted DCT by choosing 30 Saudi EFL instructors and contrasted them with 30 native speakers of English. This study deduced that there is a different tendency in employing politeness and apology, depending on the variable considered. To clarify, it revealed that the most common politeness strategies used by the British are downgrading then illocutionary force in contrast with the Saudis for whom the most used strategy is illocutionary then downgrading. Moreover, regarding gender, British and Saudi males showed higher levels of utilizing illocutionary force than does their female counterparts. It is advisable if this study was gender specific in order to define either males or females' tendency in using speech acts.

Methodology

The Study

This study aims to investigate the relationship between SEFL's English proficiency levels and strategies of making request act and the differences in pragmatic realization of making requests across high and low SEFL proficiency learners. 98 participants took part in this study aged 18-22 as undergraduate students. In the current study, the participants were required to read the given situation in open-ended DCT to produce request expressions.

Research Context

Despite the importance of the English language in the multi sectors in communication, SEFL learners still face difficulties in using English language effectively in academic and nonacademic fields. The reason behind this obstacle may refer to the insufficient pragmatic competence for SEFL learners (Elyas and Badawood 2016). For instance, Rouissi (2016) stated that SEFL learners present pragmatic failures in their communication in using English language, recommending more communicative approaches should be exploited to improve EFL instructions and increase pragmatic competence. The current study is conducted in the specific context of the Saudi public university; Prince Sattam bin Abdalaziz University, located in Kharj, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Table 1. Distribution of participants

Level of proficiency	Number of students	Age
Advanced proficiency learners	48	18-20
Low proficiency learners	50	18-20
Total	98	

The distributions of the scores are derived from Touchstone Placement Test (TPT). This test is used by the Assessment and Test unit in PYP before admitting the students in the college. If the student gets ≥ 44 and above, it means the examinee is considered as High Achievers (HA) in using English. And if the examinee gets less than ≤ 43 , it indicates the speaker has limited knowledge in the English language as Low Achievers (LA).

Table 2. Classification of the groups according to their scores

Score	Group
≥ 44	High Achievers
≤ 43	Low Achievers

Results and Discussion

The first column includes nine strategies as sub types of internal modifications. Next, the number of occurrences and percentages for both groups are presented in column two and three. This is followed by the Pearson Chi-Square values that indicate the frequency and percentage for each situation between groups. The P-value in the last column tells us if there is significant difference between groups in using these strategies.

Table 3. Percentage, raw frequency, and Pearson chi-square values of internal modification by group in the social category

Internal Modification	High		Low		Pearson Chi-Square	p-value
	N	%	N	%		
Politeness device	301	74.68	164	67.76	11.550	0.001*
Play-down (past tense)	30	7.44	15	6.19	3.630	0.000*
Conditional clause	15	3.72	28	11.57	1.815	0.000*
Subjectiviser	11	2.72	8	3.3	2.000	0.157
Embedding	4	.99	0	0.00	-	-
Understater	17	4.21	7	2.8	6	0.014*
Appealer	3	.744	0	0.00	-	-
Hedge\Downtoner	8	1.98	7	2.8	0.286	0.593
Consultative device	14	3.47	13	5.3	0.154	0.695
Total	403		242		27.689	0.000*

* Statistically significant at the level of significance ($p < 0.05$)

To answer the first question ‘What connections can be observed between the language proficiency of Saudi EFL learners and their ability to employ softened language elements in their communication?’

In Table 3, the chi-square results show that HAs (n= 402) employed significantly internal modifications more than LAs (n=242) with Chi-square (27.687) at P-value (0.000*). As shown in above table, the overall distribution of internal modifications examines the use of request strategies between HAs and LAs students. Therefore, the specific proportions in the choices between the more direct and less direct strategies can be attributed to academic differences between both. The choice of request strategies is influenced by their pragmatic realization of social power and distance variables. It is clearly obvious that the most commonly used request strategies are politeness devices, which is an optional device that may be added to a request act to enhance cooperative behavior, that accounts for (67.76%) among LAs and (74.68%) among HAs. For instance, “*could I borrow your calculator, please?*” (S11, HA# 36) and “*can me give please,* (S11, LA# 49) for LAs, respectively. It is clear that LAs wrote incorrect sentence structure that is fragment structure with the pronoun “me”, followed by the verb, rather than saying “*can you give me your summary, please?*”. Surprisingly, politeness devices request strategy has occupied the highest ranks among LAs and HAs. High use of “please” as sub subtype of internal modifications by both groups is an indicator as a negative politeness strategy. Brown and Levinson (1987) assumed nonnative speakers inclined to use “please” as a necessary tool of smoothing communication, and it is simple to use compared with other internal strategies, and it reduces the interlocutor’s disturbance.

Results show the second preference strategy among HAs was play down (n=30), whereas, the third was understate (n=17). Findings indicate that HAs employed all of internal modification strategies. On the contrary, the second strategy used by LAs was conditional clause (n=28) and the third was play down (n=15). The second strategy used by LAs is conditional clause hedge by including a conditional sentence

(11.57%), the requester might further separate his or her request from reality.

On the other hand, the least commonly used internal modification sub-strategies among HAs was *appealer* (n=3) which was used to claim for requestee understanding the request such as “*can you turn down the volume, okay*” (S8, HA#36). However, *hedge/ downtoners*, (2.8%) which are used by the speaker in order to modulate the impact the request is likely on the hearer (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1986) have occupied the lowest rank among LAs with the percentage of (2.8) such as “*it possible turn the volume down?*” (S8, LA#18). surprisingly, the least strategy also used by LA *understate* (2.8%) “*can you turn decrised the volume little*”(S8, LA#25). It is noticed grammatical (past form after modal) and spelling (decrised instated of decrease) mistake in this statement.

It is clear that HAs tended to use mitigating expressions to reduce the potential threat such as “could you”, “please?”. Remarkably, the general preference among HAs is “politeness devices”. The reason behind that might be attributed to the fact that the participants inclined to avoid face threatening act by using politeness devices. On the contrary, the findings suggested that HAs exhibit a high frequency of play-down tense (n=30) as second sub-strategy. A possible explanation of this might be that HAs attempts to avoid face threatening act by asking for the hearer’s possibility to perform the request.

As the main goal of the current study is to investigate the influence of social variable on the performance among both groups, the below Table 4 provides the frequency of using strategy in the social category. Based on chi-square results on the use of internal modifications among two groups in different social classifications, it is evident that HAs tended to use internal modification significantly more than LAs in the following category (+P\+D, -P\+D, =P\ -D, -P\ -D and =P\+D) meaning that only on one category there is no significant difference (+P\ -D).

As indicated in Table 4, which shows the pragmatic differences in the use of internal modifications by both HAs and LAs in social categories (Brown and Levinson, 1987) in terms of using request strategies, the first category (+P, +D) indicates the existence of power and social distance variables on the speaker over the hearer; it is clear that HAs percentage (16.37%) was significantly more than the percentage of LAs (12.80%) at p-value (0.006). The situations that fall under this category are 3 and 4.

Table 4. Percentage, raw frequency, and Pearson chi-square values of internal modification by group in the social categories

Category	Social Category	Low		High		Pearson Chi-Square	p-value
		N	%	N	%		
1.	(+P, +D) 3 and 4	31	12.80	66	16.37	7.538	0.006*
2.	(-P, +D) 1 and 6	49	20.24	71	17.61	4.033	0.045*
3.	(=P, -D) 9 and 11	38	15.7	69	17.12	5.053	0.025*
4.	(-P, -D) 7 and 12	30	12.39	59	14.64	6.128	0.013*
5.	(=P, +D) 2 and 5	39	16.1	71	17.61	6.877	0.009*
6.	(+P, -D) 8 and 10	55	22.7	67	16.62	1.180	0.277
	Total	242		403		27.689	0.000*

* Statistically significant at the level of significance (*p < 0.05)

According to their responses to the designed situations, the HAs used three types of internal modifications strategies: politeness device. They used this strategy in the third situation in which the speaker is supposed to be a lecturer in the university; thus, he has social power and distance over his students, the speaker's role is embodied in asking one of the students to bring his laptop charger from his office, HAs were inclined to use politeness device such as "*could you give my laptop charger from my office, please?* (S3, HA#23). Second, HAs used play down such as "*I was wandering if you.....* (S3, HA#36) and consultative device in which the speaker tries to include the hearer and bid for speaker cooperation. such as "*would it be alright if you could bring my laptop charger from my office?* (S3, HA#15)". However, the LAs were inclined to use two types of internal modification sub-strategies, namely, politeness device such as "you can give charge please (S3, LA#15). It is clear that the word order produced by LAs is incorrect as the sentence is fragment. The second commonly used internal modification request sub-strategy by LAs was "downtoner", which is an adverbial device that underrepresents the state of affairs such as "what is *the way you give the charger to me*" (S3, LA#23).

Under this category in which there is a social power and distance (+P, +D) between the speaker and the hearer. The researcher found that three sub-strategies was used by HAs, namely, politeness device such as "*could you, please?* ", play down "*I was wandering if*", consultative device such as "*would it be alright if*". However, the researcher found that two sub-strategies were used by LAs, namely, politeness device such as "you can....please?" And play down (past tense) such as "I wanted?".

In respect of the second category (-P, +D), in this category the distance variable exists between the requester and the requestee and the requestee has a kind of power over the requester. The percentage of performing requests among HAs concerning this category is (17.61%), while the percentage of performing requests among LAs is (20.24%). The situations that fall under this category are 1 and 6. At this category, there is significant difference in using internal modification between groups according to Chi-Pearson results (4.35) at P-value (0.045*).

The researcher found that three sub-strategies were used by HAs, namely, the use of downtoner such as "*I just want....?*", the use of consultative device such as "*is it possible to....?*", and the use of politeness device such as "*could you please?*". However, the researcher found that two sub-strategies were used by LAs, namely, a politeness device such as "I can absent", and a play down such as "*I asked could I if...*".

With regard to the third category (=P, -D) In this category the distance variable does not existed which means that the requester and the requestee are familiar to each other, and they have equal power between speaker and hearer. LAs percentage accounts for (15.7%) significantly fewer than HAs amounts to (17.12%) at P-value (0.025*). The situations that fall under this category are 9 and 11.

According to their responses to the designed situations, the HAs used types of internal modifications strategies such as a politeness device. To illustrate, they used this strategy in the ninth situation regarding asking your close friend for giving you the material of "Islamic Studies", HAs were inclined to use politeness device such as "*can I please take your summary of Islamic Studies?*(S9, HA#44) " and conditional clause "*if you finish your guys, could I take it for*(S9, HA#34) and consultative device such as "*would you mind lending me your summary of Islamic studies?* (S9, HA#3□". However, the LAs were inclined to use one type of internal modification strategies: politeness device such as "*I can need summary please?* (S9, LA#45)". It is clear that the question structure is incorrect it should start with the politeness device "modal verb" can, followed by the subject "I", moreover, LAs wrote a sentence that lack of the proper main verb "take, lend, borrow" as well as the lack of the possessive pronoun "your" and the lack of the object "of Islamic studies" after "summary".

Considering the fourth category (-P & -D) in this category the hearer has a kind of power over the speaker and there is no social distance between them. HAs percentage accounts for (14.64%) significantly more than LAs amounts to (12.39%) at P-value (0.013*). The situations that fall under this category are 7 and 12.

According to their responses to the designed situations, the HAs used many types of internal

modifications strategies. To illustrate, they used a different strategy in the seventh situation regarding asking the head of the department for writing a recommendation letter. In addition, HAs used subjectivizer strategy in this situation by showing his subjective opinion " *I wonder if you could assist me in my recommendation letter*" (S7, HA#33). They used play down by using the past tense but contain a present time reference to decrease the perlocutionary effect such as " *I was wandering if you could write a recommendation letter because I need it for pursuing my master degree*, (S7, HA#39) " and consultative device such as " *would you mind writing a recommendation letter for me?*" (S7, HA#22)". However, the LAs inclined to use conditional clause as type of internal modification strategy, conditional clause such as "..... *if you had time rite me recommendation letter*" (S7, LA#45). It is obvious the speaker tries to mitigate the request by using if clause to make distance but actually he has some spelling mistakes (rite instead write), grammatical mistake (had instead have), missing article (a), the lack of the preposition "for" and the object pronoun "me", such as "you could write a recommendation letter". All in all, the whole sentence should be "*if you have time*, could you write a recommendation letter for me?"

As regards the fourth category (=P, +D) in this category the distance variable is existed which means that the requester and the requestee are not familiar to each other and there is an equity of power between them. HAs percentage accounts for (17.61%) more significantly than LAs (16.1%) at P-value (0.09*). The situations that fall under this category are 2 and 5.

According to their responses to the designed situations, the HAs used types of internal modifications strategies such as appealer which is used to as discourse element such as " *I would like to share my ideas, okay*" (S2, HA#18). To illustrate, they used a politeness device in the second situation regarding being a student and asking a friend who are not familiar with the speaker to share ideas about the presentation. HAs had been inclined to use politeness devices such as " *can I share my ideas, please?*" (S2, HA#43). (see appendix, 11) " and consultative device such as " *would you mind sharing my ideas?*" (S2, HA#9). However, the LAs were inclined to use two types of internal modification strategies: politeness device such as " *I share my idea please*" (S2, LA#40).. It is clear that the question structure is incorrect it should start with the politeness device "modal verb" can, followed by the subject "I", moreover, LAs wrote a sentence fragment that lack of the possessive pronoun "my" and the object "ideas", the incorrect word choice such as "give" rather than "share".

In terms of the sixth category (+P, -D) in this category the speaker has a kind of power over the hearer and no social distance between them. HAs percentage accounts for (16.62%), whereas LAs amounts to (22.7%). The situations that fall under this category are 8 and 10. The eighth situation regarding asking neighbors' kids to turn the volume down, the HAs used for example the embedding strategy such as " *I am happy if you turn down the volume down*" (S8, HA#39). LA, for instance, used understater such as " *turn the volum down little abet*" (S8, LA#34). It is evident that LAs used direct request with grammatical and spelling mistakes.

Under this category in which there is an equity of social distance between the speaker and the hearer and the superiority of power on the part of speaker over the hearer (+P, -D). The researcher found that two sub-strategies were used by HAs, namely, the use of politeness device such as " *can you please ...?*", the use of consultative device such as " *would you mind...?*" and the use of play-down such as " *I was wandering if.....*". However, LAs used conditional device ".....*if you want*".

According to Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, this stated that the HAs' use of request were more softened, mitigated, and socially acceptable in respect of politeness. It was also noticed that HA groups used more internal modifications in their requests when addressing higher status interlocutors than to equal and lower status interlocutors. The following section reveals the awareness of each group to social distance and social power to answer the second research question.

Contextual Variable in Using Internal Modifications between HAs and LAs

This section focuses on the effect of social variables (power and distances) on each group regarding the use of external modification. The comparison between two groups in term of different social power -P

(S<H), +P (S>H) and =P (S=H) based on Brown and Levinson theory of politeness (1987) stated that HAs clearly altered their use of external modifications based on the power weight. They used more strategies in (-P) situations, then (=P) situation and least in (+P). Chi-square demonstrated statistical difference in three power relation with P-value (0.000*) in all types. On the other hand, LAs showed less consciousness of social variables, they vary slightly in using according to social power with no significant difference.

Table 5. The influence of contextual variables (power) on internal modifications

Internal Modification	+P		=P		-P	
	HA	LA	HA	LA	HA	LA
Politeness device	51	49	100	55	150	60
Play-down	7	16	8	7	15	5
Conditional clause	5	4	5	6	7	5
Subjectiviser	0	0	5	4	6	4
Embedding	2	0	0	0	2	0
Understarter	3	0	4	3	8	4
Appealer	0	0	0	0	3	0
Downtoner	0	1	1	2	7	4
Consultive device	3	4	6	6	5	3
Total	7 (17.61%)	1 74 (30.57%)	129 (32%)	8 3 (34.29%)	2 0 3 (50.37%)	8 5 (35.12%)

* $p < 0.05$

Table 6. Chi-square results effect of social power between HAs and LAs in using internal modifications

Groups	+P	=P	-P	+P\=P Chi – square P – value	+P\ -P Chi – square P – value	=P\ -P Chi – square P – value
HA	7 (17.61%)	1 129 (32%)	2 0 3 (50.37%)	16.820 0.000*	63.591 0.000*	16.494 0.000*
LA	7 (30.57%)	4 8 3 (34.29%)	85 (35.12%)	.516 0.473	.761 0.383	.024 0.877

* $p < 0.05$

As shown in Table 6, HAs were sensitive to the role of social power in the use of internal modifiers, as they altered their use of internal modifiers based on the value of power. When the social power of the hearer increased, they employed more internal modifications. P-value (0.000*) confirmed the significant statistic among power relations. Regarding LAs performance, social power factor did not appear to be a significant variable for LAs in using internal modifications, who employed the same level of this strategy less or more equivalently with no significant differences in three power relations.

Table 7. The influence of contextual variables (distance) on internal modifications

Internal Modification	Familiar		Unfamiliar	
	HA	LA	HA	LA
Politeness device	184	90	117	74
Play-down	23	12	7	16
Conditional clause	7	7	10	8
Subjectiviser	7	4	4	4
Embedding	3	0	1	0
Understarter	11	5	4	2
Appealer	3	0	0	0
Downtoner	6	4	2	3
Consultive device	9	10	5	3
Total	250 (62.03%)	132 (54.54%)	150 (37.22%)	110 (45.45%)

* $p < 0.05$

Pertaining social distance as presented on Tables 6 and 7, it is observed that the HAs group employed significantly more internal modifications when using speech act of request requesting from a familiar than from an unfamiliar interlocutor. However, LAs were not aware of the influence of social distance in using requests with familiar or unfamiliar interlocutors.

Table 8. Chi-square results in the effect of social power between HAs and LAs in using internal modifications.

Group	Familiar		Unfamiliar		Familiar- Unfamiliar
	N	%	N	%	
HA	250	(62.03%)	150	(37.22%)	Chi- square (25.000) P-value (0.000*)
LA	132	(54.54%)	110	(45.45%)	Chi- square (2.000) P-value (0.157)

* $p < 0.05$

Conclusion and Recommendation

The findings showed that HAs (n= 403) overused internal modifications compared LAs (n=242) with Chi-square (27.68) at P-value (0.000). It is observed that both groups showed the most preference for politeness devices (HAs = 302, LAs= 164) with a significant difference at P-value=0.001. The reason behind the preference of SEFL learners in using politeness devices frequently may be attributed to follow Grice’s cooperative maxims of clarity by employing evident and explicit utterances such as “please”. However, HAs appeared high level of pragmalinguistic knowledge when using variety of mitigation device such as consultative device, playdowns and downtoners compared with LAs who show less use of internal modifications and no occurrence of some strategies such as embedding and appealer

The use of such sub-strategy was the most common among HAs such as “*can you turn the volume up, please?*”. Politeness device “*please*” means “An optional element added to a request to bid for co-operative behaviour” (Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989:283). This finding agrees with Halupka-Rešetar (2014) the only strategies that the participants systematically used for request is politeness as sub strategy of internal modification, regardless of the degree of imposition. The findings of the present study clearly meet the category found in the Blum-Kulka et al.’s (1989) framework request strategies that occur within the

speech act itself (e.g., *Could you, please...*). However, the reason behind less use of internal modifications might be attributed to the lack of proficiency level among LAs, therefore, not all of them are aware of using politeness devices in making requests, particularly for addressing those of higher power and social distance.

Referring to social categories as appeared in Table 4, HAs employed internal modifications significantly higher than LAs in five categories as follows: +P, +D (HA 16.37% and LA 12.80%), -P,+D (HA 20.2% and LA 17.6%), =P, -D (HA 17.1% and LA 15.7%), -P, -D (HA 14.6% and 12.3 %), and =P, +D (HA 17.6 and LA 16.1) and only in the category (=P, +D) no significant difference between them at $P=(0.277)$.

In respect of internal modification, HAs used appeler and embedding strategies while LAs never used them because LAs were not aware of using internal modification as polite requests, particularly for addressing those of higher power and social distance. The results pertaining to internal modifications used by LAs confirm Hassall's (2011) study as stated that L2 learners face difficulties to utilize internal modification in their speech. To sum up, less using of internal modifications does not only affect only the request act but also on the other everyday communication (Alshraah et al. 2023).

HAs altered their production of internal modifications based on social (power and distance) significantly according to results on table (3 and 4). However, it is observed the LAs groups were not influenced by social variables in using proper request act strategy. As mentioned earlier and compared to directness level and external modifications, Both HAs and LAs show less use of internal modifications strategies. According to Taguchi (2015:3), "pragmatic competence may not develop hand in hand with grammatical ability". The reason for this decline in the use of these strategies is due to the need for a competent communicative competence for learners to have the ability to use a range of internal modifications in their speech appropriately and effectively. This findings are in the line with Alshraah et al. (2023:67) as they stated "that HAs have a higher proficiency level and familiarity with request strategies that manifest in their tendency towards using conventionally indirect and non-conventionally indirect strategies".

As indicated from the current findings, there is a significant gap between two groups in producing and realizing mitigated devices. Based on the results, there are important pedagogical implications of this study. LAs show significant pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failure in use request act. So, this finding may help teachers and course designers to improve the curricula to develop SEFL's pragmatic competence and reduce pragmatic failure by increasing the exposure to real-life situation to the target language and use a variety of speech act in each semester from the beginning stage (Bardovi-Harlig et al. 2015; Kasper and Roever 2005).

The findings of this study cannot be generalized to other students from different colleges or another university or schools in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The gathered data was collected via DCT and SRQ that means using any other tool may lead to different results. Moreover, the aim of this study is to compare between two groups of Saudi EFL so another group as native speakers of English is not included. So future studies should add another group as native speakers of English which strengthen the results and use the data as a baseline.

This study is one of the few studies that tackles the influence of language proficiency in using request act under the aspects of sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic levels. So there is a crucial need to develop this study to cover other factors such as length of residence in improving pragmatic competence and also to expand the sample to cover both gender and age from different universities and high schools.

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Authorship and Level of Contribution

Both authors have participated substantially in the manuscript's conceptualization, drafting, revision, and final approval.

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