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Interlanguage requests in elicited vs. naturally produced emails:

A comparative study of Hungarian EFL speakers' request realization
in student-to-faculty emails¹

Abstract

This paper analyzes interlanguage requests of different degrees of imposition produced by Hungarian advanced EFL students in elicited vs. spontaneously written emails to their teacher. Eighty-one requests written by 46 students were collected to constitute the natural email data. The other dataset comprised 78 requests elicited from the email writers through an email-like written discourse completion test (WDCT). Requests in the spontaneously produced emails and the elicited texts were analyzed in term of length, level of directness, internal modification, supportive moves, and request perspectives. Descriptive statistics, t-test, and Chi-square test were performed on both datasets to investigate the differences. Although WDCT is considered the most commonly used data collection instrument in interlanguage pragmatics due to its numerous advantages, its validity and reliability have often been questioned when compared to naturalistic data. The present study, besides shedding light on Hungarian EFL learners' request patterns drawing on data gathered through diverse sources also aims to add to the understanding of to what extent elicited data approximates naturalistic data in an interlanguage speech act research context. The results show that participants generated significantly longer request sequences in their spontaneous emails than in the WDCT emails, while using similar patterns of internal syntactic modification and supportive moves. Internal lexical modification, especially the use of the marker *please* appeared significantly more often in naturalistic data than in WDCT. As regards the realization of low vs. high- imposition requests the analysis found various statistically significant differences with regard to strategy type and request modification.

Keywords: email, WDCT, interlanguage pragmatics, request

1 Introduction

Studies on interlanguage pragmatics tend to apply a comparative design (Bardovi-Harlig 1999, Biesenbach-Lucas 2007, Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011, Kasper & Schmidt 1996, Woodfield & Economidou-Kogetsidis 2010): they examine in what ways non-native speaker' (NNS) pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge differ from those of native speakers (NS), or compare the pragmatic performance of learners of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Bergman & Kasper 1993, Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper 1989, Eisenstein &

¹ This paper is dedicated to Andor József and Martsa Sándor on their 70th birthday. I was lucky to have them as my teachers during my undergraduate and postgraduate studies, and later on as my colleagues at the Institute of English Studies, University of Pécs. Their commitment to teaching and research was inspirational for me: Jóska's passion for empirically based research of language and Sanyi's emphasis on anthropological and sociocultural factors influencing language acquisition and use shaped my understanding of language and influenced a great deal the kind of linguist I turned out to be.

Bodman 1993). Research studies on intercultural and interlanguage pragmatics have repeatedly indicated that comprehension and production of speech acts in a second language (L2) are challenging for even advanced learners (Nguyen 2013, Timpe 2013). Various projects were launched to map the interlanguage request realization of learners of various first language (L1) backgrounds (e.g.: Aribi 2018, Biesenbach-Lucas 2006, 2007, Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper 1989, Burgucu-Tazegül, Han & Engin 2016, Chen 2006, Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011, 2015, 2018, Halupka-Resetar 2014, Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig 1996, Pan 2012, Šegedin-Borovina 2017, Wei-Hong Ko, Eslami & Burlbaw 2015, to mention but a few). In the Hungarian context only one study aiming to uncover learners' pragmatic performance in requests was found (Várhegyi 2017). The study presented in this paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of interlanguage pragmatic performance by presenting salient features of advanced Hungarian EFL learners' requests in elicited vs. spontaneously produced speech acts. Gathering data from two different sources helps us to provide more solid evidence of request pattern preference of learners, and also serve to compare elicited requests to those occurring in spontaneous emails, thus contributing to a better understanding of the validity of WDCT as a data collection instrument in interlanguage pragmatics.

In the next sections first I present the discourse completion test as data collection instrument and the advantages and disadvantages associated with its application. Then I move on to briefly discuss classification of request strategies and internal and external modifications based on the seminal Cross-cultural Speech Act Realization Patterns (CCSARP) project (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper 1989), and finally present empirical studies on interlanguage request realizations in elicited and in naturalistic data. The second part of the study presents my empirical investigation of Hungarian EFL learners' requests with regard to directness, request strategy, and internal and external modifications.

2 Background to study

2.1 The WDCT and other means of data collection

Discourse completion test (DCT, and WDCT for written DCT) is a data collection instrument for controlled elicitation procedure, which has been widely used in pragmatics research since its introduction in the 1980s. It was originally used to compare speech act realizations of native speakers and learners and gained popularity after the publication of the widely-cited CCSARP project (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper 1989), an ongoing endeavor concerned with the investigation of the realization patterns of two speech acts, requests and apologies across cultures. The methodological framework for this project, as well as the procedures for analysis of data have been thoroughly documented (e.g.: Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1984, Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper 1989) which resulted in numerous studies on requests and apologies employing this comprehensive framework to shed light on request- and apology realization patterns (1) in different languages (e.g.: Szili 2002, Economidou-Kogetsidis 2005, Fukushima 1996, Suszczyńska 1999) or (2) in interlanguage speech acts produced by different L1 background learners (e.g.: Aribi 2018, Burgucu-Tazegül, Han & Engin 2016, Chen 2006, Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011, 2015, 2018, Pan 2012).

A DCT consists of a scripted dialogue representing a certain scenario, preceded by a short description of the setting and participants. This initial prompt generally includes information on social distance and familiarity as well as pre-event background of interactants to help the test-taker in producing the appropriate speech act.

Due to its numerous advantages (i.e.: easy administration, controlled situational variables, large amount of data gathered relatively quickly) WDCTs have been widely used in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics research. However, the use of WDCTs as primary elicitation instruments of speech act production has raised numerous concerns and criticisms mostly related to WDCT's inability to capture the features of spoken language and natural interaction. Some concerns were raised regarding the authenticity of the situations described in WDCTs (Kasper & Dahl 1991, Rose 1992), whereas others highlighted that WDCTs, in fact, are metapragmatic in the sense that what people think they would say in a hypothetical situation is not necessarily and exactly the same as what they would actually say in a real life interaction (Brown & Levinson 1987, Golato 2003, Tran 2004). A further criticism to WDCTs is that written data do not show discourse information on prosody, turns, conversation sequence, extended negotiation or nonverbal features (Cohen 1996, Johnston, Kasper & Ross 1998).

The comparison of data collection methods has received increased attention in the last few decades (e.g. Chen, Yang, Chang & Eslami 2015, Economidou-Kogetsidis 2013, Félix-Brasdefer 2007, Kasper 2000, Golato 2003, Rintell & Mitchell 1989, Tran 2006). Some studies highlight vast difference between data collected through WDCT or by other means: Félix-Brasdefer (2003) compared refusals collected through WDCT and open role-plays among native and non-native speakers of English and Spanish. Findings highlight that the WDCT generated only some of the refusal strategies found in the role-play data. The role-play data displayed higher levels of mitigation and elaboration, and a wider range of indirect strategies commonly found in natural conversation. Golato (2003) contrasted German compliment response data collected through WDCT to natural data. She found fundamental differences, most importantly that compliments were never ignored by WDCT respondents, whereas participants in real-life conversations often failed to notice compliments. Rintell and Mitchell (1989) analyzed speech act data elicited through WDCTs and role-plays and revealed that in situations provoked by role-plays interactants used longer answers and more supportive moves than in WDCTs.

There are some studies that apart from differences also found ways in which WDCT data approximated natural data: Economidou-Kogetsidis (2013) studied requests of NSs in service-encounter scenarios, and compared natural data to WDCT data with respect to degree of directness, syntactic and lexical internal modification and request perspective. She found that although WDCT requests and natural requests displayed significant difference, but at the same time similar trends were observable in terms of directness and lexical modification, which indicates that „to a *certain extent*, the WDCT requests represent an approximation to the naturally occurring requests” (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2013: 33, emphasis in the original). Chen, Yang, Chang and Eslami (2015) studied email requests of Chinese ESL learners to faculty at an American university. They compared natural email data to WDCT data and found that participants used similar patterns of supportive moves in both datasets, however, request perspectives were also different in certain situations and participants generated significantly longer requests in the spontaneously produced emails than in the WDCT emails (similarly to findings of Rintell & Mitchell 1989).

Taking both the advantages and disadvantages of WDCT into consideration, Kasper (2000) argues that carefully designed WDCTs are useful ways to gather information about speakers' pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge (Kasper 2000: 329) rather than actual language usage, and are also informative about what “speakers tend to view as being pragmatically appropriate linguistic behaviour” (Woodfield & Economidou-Kogetsidis 2010: 89).

2.2 *Requests elicited through WDCT*

The CCSARP Coding Manual identifies the core of the request as the *head act*, “a minimal unit which can realize a request” (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper 1989: 275). It can be realized by using different request strategies, which are of three main kinds: direct, conventionally indirect and non-conventionally indirect strategies (for more detailed discussion, see Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper 1989). In addition to selecting a particular request strategy, speakers can decrease or increase the force of their request by using internal and/or external modification. Internal modification is achieved through modifiers which appear within the head act, but their presence is not essential for the interpretation of the illocution (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1984). Syntactic downgraders include interrogative or conditional structures, negation, tense and aspect markings, whereas lexical downgraders comprise different mitigateing devices, such as the marker *please* or downtoners *just, possibly...etc.* External modifications do not operate within the head act, they are supportive moves localized within the head act’s immediate context.

As has been highlighted in the previous section, there is an abundance of studies analyzing different speech acts in interlanguage pragmatics. Studies on interlanguage requests almost exclusively use adapted versions of the CCSARP classification as provided by the Coding Manual (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper 1989). I briefly present some of the studies relevant to my inquiry with no claim to comprehensiveness.

Halupka-Resetar (2014) studied the types and frequency of internal and external request modifications in WDCT requests produced by Serbian undergraduate university students with intermediate English language proficiency. Results revealed that learners showed very little variation with respect to the use of different types of internal and external modifications. In most cases the participants used conventionally indirect requests. As for supportive moves grounders were used almost exclusively, and with regard to internal modifications only the use of the conditional construction and the politeness marker *please* was observed regularly.

Šegedin-Borovina (2017) examined interlanguage requests of Croatian EFL learners of different levels of proficiency with special regard to the use of internal and external modification. Data were collected using an oral DCT consisting of ten age-appropriate situations. Results indicated infrequent use of request modification of either type, however, weak evidence of pragmlinguistic development across levels particularly in the use of grounders was observed.

Najafabadi and Paramasivam’s study (2012) focused on Iranian EFL learners’ elicited requests and their performance was compared to American NSs of English to see to what extent they approximated NSs in using external and internal modifications. Participants were of different levels of proficiency. Results revealed that Iranian learners overused external modifications and underused internal modifications compared to American NSs. However, they showed pragmatic development toward NS norms with increase in language proficiency level, similarly to findings of Šegedin-Borovina (2017). Advanced learners approximated NSs both in the frequency of use and linguistic forms of certain types of external modifications.

In the Hungarian context Várhegyi (2017) analyzed request strategies used by Hungarian EFL learners in requests elicited through WDCTs both in Hungarian and in English. The study found that students’ most frequent request strategies in Hungarian were mood derivable, hedged performative and query preparatory strategies. As Várhegyi argues, because of negative L1 transfer, learners are more likely to use these strategies in their interlanguage requests (2017: 117). Results, however, point out that learners in fact used query preparatory strategy in their English requests the most, followed by mood derivable strategy, which indeed is a di-

rect strategy, however, it was used to a much lesser extent than query preparatory in most situations, pointing toward a conclusion that some learners may be prone to L1 transfer as regards directness of requests, but apparently most requests were realized through indirect strategies, similarly to NS norms.

Some studies analyzed requests elicited through email-like WDCTs. Woodfield and Economidou-Kogetsidis (2010) conducted a study on British NSs' and EFL learners' status-unequal requests to their professors. Significant differences were observed in internal and external modifications and in request perspective. Learners' overuse of zero marking in internal modifications and overuse of preparators and supportive moves was observed together with NSs tendency to use more impersonal perspective and various mitigating devices.

Pan (2012) reports on a study also using WDCT to investigate the pragmalinguistic choices and sociopragmatic judgments of American students and Chinese EFL learners. The study found that students tended to make indirect requests, but used fewer syntactic devices as downgraders, instead, more lexical downgraders were used internally, and they also made excessive use of external modifications to soften the illocutionary force. As for judgment of the requests, learners were less confident regarding language appropriateness and they also perceived the requests more imposing than NSs.

2.3 Requests in natural emails

Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996) were among the first to investigate authentic student-to-professor emails at an American university with pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic foci. They analyzed emails sent by native and non-native English speaking students. They did not find substantial difference in the linguistic request realization forms. However, NNSs used fewer downgraders than NSs.

Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) studied email requests of NSs and NNSs of Asian background studying at an American university. A tendency to use more direct and non-conventionally indirect strategies than conventionally indirect strategies was detected in case of both groups, especially for low-imposition requests. Native speakers tended to modify their requests syntactically in all request types, however, NNSs used more lexical modification (particularly the marker *please*) when requesting feedback and extension.

Burgucu-Tazegül, Han and Engin (2016) examined 34 email requests written by Turkish EFL students at an English-medium Turkish university. They found that the e-mails diverted from NS norms in various ways: learners used direct strategies rather than conventionally indirect strategies, overused direct questions and want-statements, underused query preparatory questions, did not make use of mitigation strategies to make the request appear less imposing, and tended to apply inappropriate greetings and closings.

Aribi (2018) analyzed a total of 371 requests written by 81 Tunisian postgraduate students over a period of two years. The study revealed that even though participants in some cases used conventionally indirect strategies and mitigations, they largely resorted to direct strategies – mostly mood derivables in requests for information and want-statements in requests for action.

An overall finding of the studies focusing on the request performance of learners of various L1 backgrounds is that there are certain features that are general characteristics of non-native email requests (e.g.: limited use of modifications, not much variance in request strategies), however, there are salient characteristics that seem to be specific to certain groups of learners. These findings highlight how culture-specific norms impact interlanguage requests. These

deviations from the native-like norm are most probably due to the influence of learners' L1 and native culture, to diverse pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic norms, as well as different politeness orientations (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011) and even personality traits.

The studies outlined in this section contributed to an understanding of how and to what extent NNSs' email requests diverge from NS-based norms. The empirical study presented in the next section aims to add to this understanding by analysing email requests sent by Hungarian advanced EFL students to their professor at a Hungarian university.

3 Interlanguage requests: An empirical study

The study analyzes requests made by advanced EFL speakers in student-to-faculty emails at a Hungarian university. The research questions guiding the inquiry are as follows:

- (1) What characterizes Hungarian EFL speakers' requests in an institutional setting in terms of directness, strategy choice and request perspective?
- (2) What kinds of internal and external modifications are used by students to mitigate their requests?
- (3) What are the differences between high- and low imposition requests in both datasets?
- (4) What are the differences between naturalistic and elicited requests in terms of directness, strategy choice, request perspective, internal and external modification?

3.1 Participants and data

The email data used for this study comprised 81 email requests written to one faculty member (the author) over one academic year. There were 63 situations in this period in which my Hungarian students made requests to me in English via email. These 63 emails were written by 46 students, who were contacted to ask if their emails could be used for research purposes without reference to their identity. All students agreed to be part of this study. Students were also encouraged to forward any other emails they wrote to faculty which contained requests in English. This, of course, was voluntary, and students were asked to delete confidential information from the emails. As a result 14 more emails were forwarded to me. As some emails comprised more than one request head acts, altogether 81 requests in the natural email data were identified.

There were 30 female and 16 male participants, and their age varied between 20 and 27 years (Mean: 21.23, SD: 2.06). They have been learning EFL for 5-14 years (Mean: 11.43, SD: 2.42). All participants were Hungarian native speakers, and they all had completed the institutional proficiency exam, which equals C1 level as defined by the CEFR.

Participants were also asked to complete an online email-like WDCT, which included two scenarios that were designed on the basis of spontaneously produced emails, and therefore meant to elicit the same kind of requests. The first situation described a low-imposition request-situation that was based on frequently occurring requests in the natural email data. The prompt was as follows:

You signed up for a seminar entitled Intercultural Communication, but you couldn't attend the first week's class. Write an email to the instructor inquiring about course-related information.

Dear _____

The second scenario described a high-imposition request situation, again based on authentic data:

You are a graduate student lagging behind with your thesis. You finally managed to complete the first part of the thesis, but you are really short on time. Write an email to your supervisor to ask him/her to give you some feedback on your writing.

Dear _____

Thirty-nine participants gave valid answers to both request-scenarios of the WDCT, thus, the elicited dataset comprised 78 requests.

3.2 Procedures

Both the natural and the elicited requests were coded and analyzed with regard to 1) length, 2) level of imposition, 3) directness, 4) request perspective, and 5) internal- and 6) external modifications. Similarly to most ILP studies, the analysis of the requests followed the CCSARP framework developed by Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989).

In case of the natural email data, the content of the emails were categorized and a level of imposition (low vs. high) was assigned to each category, as shown in Table 1.

Request	Nr of emails	Imposition
Asking for an appointment	15	Low N=41
Asking for information about course/assignment	14	
Asking for deadline extension	12	
Asking for help with administrative issues	5	High N=40
Asking for files	16	
Asking for letter of recommendation	8	
Asking for feedback about thesis/paper	11	
Total		81

Table 1. Content of natural email requests and their level of imposition.

The judgment of imposition is relatively subjective – all these tasks are among the tasks of faculty members. The basis on which I decided to assign requests to low vs. high imposition categories was how much action or extra effort they required on behalf of the teacher. Requests for action were considered to be of higher imposition than requests for appointment, information or deadline extension.

The request head acts in both datasets were categorized into request strategies representing one of three directness levels identified in CCSARP (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper 1989): direct, conventionally indirect, and non-conventionally indirect, as shown in Table 2.

Level of directness	Request strategy ²	Example from the dataset
Direct	Mood derivable	<i>Please send me the readings for next week.</i>
	Hedged performative	<i>I would like to ask you to write me a recommendation letter.</i>
Conventionally indirect	Query preparatory	<i>Could you recommend or send some more readings about culture and translation?</i>
Non-conventionally indirect	Mild hint	<i>I would like to visit you, but have classes in your office hours.</i>

Table 2. Request strategies in the dataset

In addition, within each head act the syntactic and lexical devices that mitigated the imposition of the request were identified. Examples are presented in Table 3.

Syntactic modifiers	Conditional structure:	<i>Could you give me....</i>
	Conditional clause:	<i>....if it was possible to....</i>
	Tense:	<i>I wanted to ask...</i>
	Aspect:	<i>I was wondering...</i>
Lexical modifiers	Marker <i>please</i>	<i>please</i>
	Consultative devices	<i>would you mind..., do you think.,</i>
	Downtoners	<i>possibly, perhaps, just, maybe</i>
	Hedges/ understaters	<i>sort of, kind of, a bit, a little</i>
	Subjectivizers	<i>I am afraid..., I wonder...</i>
	Intensifiers	<i>really</i>

Table 3. Syntactic and lexical internal modification in the dataset³

A further way to modify requests is by external means. In addition to or instead of modifications within the request head act, the speaker might choose to apply external modification, which indirectly modifies the illocutionary force by affecting the context in which the speech act is embedded, by for example, justifying the request or making it plausible, etc. (Blum Kulka & Olshtain 1984: 204, Trosborg 1995: 215).

Type of external mod. ⁴	Example from the dataset
<i>Grounder</i>	<i>I'd like to ask you for an extension because we had some problems with the rent and I had to move to a different place last week.</i>
<i>Preparator</i>	<i>I need your favour with registration: can I have your permission to sign up as an extra student for the Monday seminar?</i>
<i>Discourse orientation move</i>	<i>I'm currently working on the Conclusions section and reference list. I would like to ask for help.</i>
<i>Apology</i>	<i>I am sorry to bother you with this email, but I wanted to ask you to help me.</i>

Table 4. External modifications in the dataset

² Based on Blum-Kulka et al., 1989 – only those identified in the data are listed.

³ Based on Blum-Kulka et al., 1989 – only those identified in the data are listed.

⁴ Based on Blum-Kulka et al., 1989 – only those identified in the data are listed.

Finally, the request perspective (i.e.: who is named as the primer performer of the action entailed in the request) was also analyzed. Three of the four possibilities listed by Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989) were instantiated in the data, these were:

- (1) Hearer-oriented: *Could you please send me a copy of the syllabus?*
- (2) Speaker-oriented: *Can I possibly have your permission to postpone the deadline and finish later?*
- (3) Inclusive: *I hope we can solve this problem next week.*

3.3 Results

In order to obtain results on characteristic features of the request data, first, descriptive statistics were calculated for the variables of (1) directness, (2) strategy type, (3) request perspective, (4) internal modification, and (5) external modification. To be able to compare the naturalistic data to elicited data, t-test and Chi-square test were performed on both datasets using SPSS for Windows 20.0⁵.

3.3.1 Degree of directness, strategy choice and request perspective

The analysis of the degree of directness and strategy choice of participants indicated that participants tended to use conventionally indirect strategies in both spontaneous and elicited requests, which was realized exclusively through query preparatory strategy (72.3% of all requests). Direct requests were also found in the dataset, realized through mood derivable (4.4%) and hedged performative (22.0%) strategies. The analysis also revealed that participants used query preparatory in their emails more often than in the WDCT requests (76.5% in emails as opposed to 67.9%), whereas WDCT requests used proportionally more hedged performatives than natural requests (26.9% in WDCT data as opposed to 17% in natural data). Non-conventionally indirect requests, i.e. mild hints were very rare in the sample, and occurred only in spontaneously produced emails (2.5%). For all results see Tables 5-6.

Level of directness	email (N=81)		WDCT (N=78)		Total (N=159)	
Direct	17	21.0%	25	32.1%	42	26.4%
C-Indirect	62	76.5%	53	67.9%	115	72.3%
NC-indirect	2	2.5%	0	0.0%	2	1.3%
total	81	100.0%	78	100.0%	159	100.0%

Table 5. Level of directness of requests of requests

Strategy	email (N=81)		WDCT (N=78)		Total (N=159)	
Mood derivable	3	3.7%	4	5.1%	7	4.4%
Hedged performative	14	17%	21	26.9%	35	22.0%
Query preparatory	62	76.5%	53	67.9%	115	72.3%
Mild hint	2	2.5%	0	0.0%	2	1.3%

Table 6. Request strategies

⁵ The t-test was used to compare the length of emails, and the Chi-square test was used to compare all other nominal variables.

As for the request perspective, results show that participants applied hearer-oriented requests the most in both datasets, more than half of all requests employed this perspective (54.7% for all requests). Speaker oriented perspectives were employed in 34.6% of all requests, and inclusive orientation was not very frequent in the datasets, 10.7% of all requests used this point-of-view. Impersonal requests – these are typically realized through passive structures and are frequently used by NSs as strategy to save face in request situations – were not used by participants. Results are displayed in Table 7.

Perspective	email (N=81)		WDCT (N=78)		Total (N=159)	
Hearer-oriented	45	55.6%	42	53.8%	87	54.7%
Speaker-oriented	26	32.1%	29	37.2%	55	34.6%
Inclusive	10	12.3%	7	9.0%	17	10.7%

Table 7. Request perspective.

3.3.2 *Internal and external request modification*

Although analyzing level of directness of interlanguage requests can be very informative to decide to what extent learners approximate native-like usage, paying attention to different request modifications is essential to understand how learners try to mitigate the face threats realized by their requests. To illustrate this, consider the following examples:

(3) *Can you send me Hall (1959) Chapter 2?*

(4) *I would like to ask you to correct this paper earlier as I would really need grades before 1 December for my study abroad scholarship.*

Although (4) is a direct request realized through a hedged performative strategy, it is modified both internally and externally which affects its illocutionary force making the request appear less face-threatening as opposed to (3), which is an unmodified indirect request.

A total of 44.7% of participants' requests were syntactically unmodified. The most typical syntactic modification was the conditional structure in 45.3% of all requests. The elicited data contained conditional structures to a somewhat greater extent (48.7% in WDCT as opposed to 42.0% in natural data), but it was not statistically significant. The second most frequent internal modification was tense in 9.4% of all requests. Tense was employed in spontaneous emails to a greater extent than in elicited data (13.6% as opposed to 5.1% – this is an observable, but statistically not significant difference). Results on all types of internal syntactic modifications are presented in Table 8.

	email (N=81)		WDCT (N=78)		Total (N=159)	
Zero marking	35	43.2%	36	46.2%	71	44.7%
Marked (total)	46	56.8%	42	53.8%	88	55.3%
Conditional structure	34	42.0%	38	48.7%	72	45.3%
Conditional clause	3	3.7%	3	3.8%	6	3.8%
Tense	11	13.6%	4	5.1%	15	9.4%
Aspect	1	1.2%	3	3.8%	4	2.5%

Table 8. Types of internal syntactic modifications⁶

⁶ The number of internal syntactic modifiers is not equal to the number of marked requests as in some cases more than one modifier was employed within the same request.

Internal modification can also be achieved through lexical modifiers. Participants made greater use of lexical internal modification than of syntactic modification: only 27% of all requests lacked lexical modification. The remaining 73% of all requests were modified, and some requests employed more than one lexical modifiers. Natural emails were significantly more often modified lexically than elicited data, 77.8% of all emails contained at least one lexical modifier, as opposed to 67.9% of elicited requests ($p=0.013$, significant at a $p<.05$ level). However, as Table 9 presents, lexical modification in elicited data was more varied: only elicited data contained hedges, subjectivizers and intensifiers, whereas lexical modification in spontaneously produced emails was restricted to the marker *please*, downtoners and consultative devices.

	email (N=81)		WDCT (N=78)		Total (N=159)	
Zero marking	18	22.2%	25	32.1%	43	27.0%
Marked (total)	63	77.8%	53	67.9%	116	73.0%
marker <i>please</i>	49	60.5%	34	43.6%	83	52.2%
consultative devices	9	11.1%	4	5.1%	13	8.2%
downtoners	14	17.3%	10	12.8%	24	15.0%
hedges/ understaters	0	0.0%	1	1.3%	1	0.6%
subjectivizers	0	0.0%	3	3.8%	3	1.9%
intensifier	0	0.0%	1	1.3%	1	0.65

Table 9. Types of internal lexical modifications⁷

Speakers may choose to apply external modification(s), in other words, supportive move(s) to mitigate the face threat realized by the request or aggravate the request's coerciveness. Participants' made use of external modification to some extent: 61.6 % of all requests was modified externally, and 25.1% of all request sequences included more than one supportive move, most typically a grounder combined with an apology or a discourse orientation move. The most typical supportive moves in both datasets were grounders (58.5% of all requests), followed by apologies (15.7%) and discourse orientation moves (11.3%). Apologies were more characteristics of WDCT data (19.2% vs. 12.3% in natural data), whereas preparators and discourse orientation moves were more typical in the spontaneously produced requests. These differences are observable, but they were not found to be statistically significant. What is evident from the results (see Table 10) is that not only does natural data comprise more external modifiers than WDCT data, but these moves are also more varied: preparators and moves getting precommitment only appear in natural data.

	email (N=81)		WDCT (N=78)		Total (N=159)	
Zero marking	29	35.8%	32	41.0%	61	38.4%
Marked (total)	52	64.2%	46	59.0%	98	61.6%
Grounder	48	59.3%	45	57.7%	93	58.5%
Preparator	6	7.4%	3	3.8%	9	5.7%
Getting precommitment	1	1.2%	0	0.0%	1	0.6%
Imposition minimizer	3	3.7%	0	0.0%	3	1.9%
Apology	10	12.3%	15	19.2%	25	15.7%
Discourse orientation move	11	13.6%	7	9.0%	18	11.3%

Table 10. Types of external modifications⁸

⁷ The number of internal lexical modifiers is not equal to the number of marked requests as in some cases more than one modifier was employed within the same request.

3.3.3 *Difference between low-imposition and high-imposition requests*

A potential (and because of the even distribution rather obvious) way of comparing the requests was by their levels of imposition. As presented in Table 1 of Section 3.2 *Procedures*, the content of the spontaneous emails were analyzed and assigned to low- vs. high-imposition categories, and these authentic contents served as a basis for designing prompts for the WDCT as well.

A t-test and Chi-square test performed on low- vs. high-imposition requests across datasets revealed a variety of significant differences between the request sequences.⁹ As shown in Table 11, both elicited and spontaneous high-imposition requests were realized through longer request sequences, were more characterized by query preparatory strategy and used more inclusive perspective than low-imposition requests.

As for modification, tense as internal syntactic modification device appears more dominantly in low-imposition requests, as opposed to aspect, the use of which is restricted to high-imposition requests exclusively. External modifications are more characteristic of high-imposition requests, and the difference is significant in case of the following four supportive moves: grounders, preparators, apologies and discourse orientation moves.

Variable	Low-imposition requests (N=80) Mean	High-imposition requests (N=79) Mean	LIR-relative frequencies (%)	HIR-relative frequencies (%)	p-value ¹⁰
Length ¹¹	32.81	49.68			0.000
Hedged performative	0.313	0.127	31.3	12.7	0.004
Query preparatory	0.613	0.835	61.3	83.5	0.002
Speaker-oriented perspective	0.450	0.241	45.0	24.1	0.005
Inclusive perspective	0.025	0.190	2.5	19.0	0.001
external modification	0.425	0.810	42.5	81.0	0.000
External modification Grounder	0.388	0.785	38.8	78.5	0.000
External modification Preparator	0.013	0.101	1.3	10.1	0.015
External modification Apology	0.063	0.253	6.3	25.3	0.001
External modification DOM	0.063	0.165	6.3	16.5	0.043
Internal modification Tense	0.150	0.038	15.0	3.8	0.016
Internal modification Aspect	0.000	0.051	0.0	5.1	0.042

Table 11. Difference between low-and high-imposition requests

⁸ The number of external modifiers is not equal to the number of marked requests as in some cases more than one modifier was employed within the same request.

⁹ The difference was found to be statistically significant at a $p < 0.05$.

¹⁰ Statistically significant at a $p < 0.05$ level. Only the variables below the threshold are listed.

¹¹ Length is expressed in number of words. All other values in Table 11 refer to frequency.

These results clearly show that participants realized requests of different impositions in markedly different ways.

3.3.4 *Difference between spontaneously produced emails and elicited data*

The fourth research question concerned the comparability of the two datasets in order to see to what extent elicited data approximates naturally occurring written requests. Although some results presented in earlier sections already shed light on various aspects in which the two datasets differed from or were similar to one another, a more concise presentation of results is provided in this section.

As shown in Table 12, there were only 3 variables which were found to be significantly different in the two datasets: the length of spontaneously produced emails is significantly longer than that of elicited emails, the number of total lexical modification in spontaneously produced emails is significantly higher than in WDCT data and the marker *please* is applied significantly more frequently in naturalistic data. However, no statistically significant difference was found between the two datasets in terms of directness, request strategy, request perspective, internal syntactic modification and external modification. Thus it can be concluded that elicited data comprised shorter emails with less lexical modification and most dominantly with fewer instances of the marker *please* from spontaneously collected data.

Variable	Email Mean	WDCT Mean	Email relative frequencies (%)	WDCT relative frequencies (%)	p-value
Length	44.03	38.24			0.003
Nr. of lexical mod	0.888	0.679			0.013
marker <i>please</i>	0.604	0.435	60.5	43.6	0.033

Table 12. Difference between natural email data and data elicited through WDCT

3.4 Discussion

3.4.1 *Directness, strategy use and request perspective*

The analysis revealed that with regard to directness, Hungarian EFL speakers' email requests tended to be indirect, which approximates native-like usage. In interlanguage pragmatics most studies report on learners' extensive use of direct strategies (among others: Aribi 2018, Burgucu-Tazegül, Han & Engin 2016, Biesenbach-Lucas 2007, Chen 2006, Economidou-Kogetsidis 2005, 2011, 2018, Karatepe 2016). Hungarian students, quite contrary, realized only a small portion of their requests through direct strategies. Requests realized through direct strategies included hedged performatives (5) and mood derivable strategy (6):

(5) *I would like to ask you to forward your syllabus.*

(6) *Please consider writing a student recommendation for my Erasmus mobility.*

Várhegyi (2017) also found that Hungarian EFL students performed some of their requests through direct strategies (mood derivable and hedged performative strategies), albeit only in power-symmetrical social situations. Findings regarding all the examined situations clearly show that most of participants' requests were realized through query preparatory strategy,

which was the most dominant in all cases as reported by Várhegyi – a finding that is confirmed by the present study as well. An obvious possibility for the use of direct strategies is L1 transfer, which has also been suggested by other researchers (e.g.: Economidou-Kogetsidis 2005, Várhegyi 2017). A further reason may be language proficiency: students with lower proficiency may focus on getting the intended illocution across, and fail to pay attention to the actual realization of the locution (Kasper & Rose 2002). In addition, it is also possible that participants wanted to ensure that their illocution secures uptake. This might be due to the power-asymmetrical academic situation which makes these email requests rather high-stake. It must also be noted that even though indirect strategies are the preferred way of NSs request realizations, comparative studies have found that NSs also employ direct (mood derivable, hedged performatives and want-statements) strategies under certain circumstances (see: Biesenbach-Lucas 2007, Pan 2012) and modified by a wide range of lexical devices and syntactic structures.

However, conventionally indirect requests, realized exclusively through query preparatory strategy were the most dominant in both datasets of this study. This is a preferred strategy in NS usage as well, as found by a range of comparative studies (e.g.: Biesenbach-Lucas 2007, Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig 1996, Woodfield & Economidou-Kogetsidis 2010). Query preparatory is perceived to soften the imposition of the request and save face for the addressee by inquiring about their ability or willingness to perform the request. Some interlanguage pragmatics studies have found learners' usage of indirect strategies, but mostly (1) restricted to certain L1s (Šegedin-Borovina, 2017, Halupka-Resetar 2014), with (2) higher level of proficiency (Hendricks 2008, Pan 2012) or (3) extended stay in the host culture (Chen 2006). There are various theories behind why query preparatory is a favored way of request realizations: Blum-Kulka (1987) argues that politeness is an interactional balance achieved between the need for pragmatic clarity and the need to avoid coerciveness (1987: 131) and this is best achieved by query preparatories. Trosborg (1995) also points out what makes query preparatory a particularly effective request strategy: by employing a preparatory condition, the requester actually performs dual facework – besides protecting the addressee's negative face the requester also exhibits a protective orientation towards their own face in that they do not take compliance for granted (1995: 235).

Similarly to other studies on email requests, hints were very infrequent in the data, presumably because the written interaction lacks the contextual cues that make hints appear more natural and less face-threatening. There were only 2 hints in the whole dataset, they both appeared in the email data, which confirms Biesenbach-Lucas' suggestion that hints are not often found in elicited data, as in DCTs the task is to write a request and there is no social context in which the face is actually threatened by using more direct language (2007: 68). The two examples were the following:

- (7) *I would like to visit you, but have classes in your office hours. I don't know what to do. I'm lost.*
- (8) *I am making very little progress and I don't know what to do. I don't think I can finish this chapter before the weekend.*

It is evident that it takes more inferencing activity for the addressee to derive the writers' requestive intent in these cases. Notions of indirectness and politeness do not necessary present parallel dimensions in the case of requests. Blum-Kulka (1987) indicates that adherence to pragmatic clarity is an essential part of politeness, and this is violated in the case of non-

conventionally indirect requests – hints; this probably is one more reason why they were not very frequent even in spontaneously produced data.

As regards request perspective, the emails in this study tended to use hearer-oriented perspective, probably because the most typical request strategy type was query preparatory, which by definition inquires about the hearer's ability or willingness to perform the desired action. This goes against NSs' tendency to favor speaker-oriented or impersonal perspectives in academic requests as found by Biesenbach-Lucas (2007). The speaker-oriented perspective was slightly more frequent in the WDCT data, most probably because this dataset contained a greater number of hedged performatives, in which the speaker is clearly named as the one carrying out the request:

- (9) *I would like to ask you for your understanding with this delay.*
 (10) *I just wanted to request some of the readings, because I can't open them in Dropbox.*

Impersonal request perspective (e.g.: **Is there a chance for an urgent meeting?*¹²) was completely absent in the data, a finding similar to that of Biesenbach-Lucas (2007): in her sample NSs tended to use impersonal perspective as opposed to NNSs, who did not use it at all.

3.4.2 Internal and external modification

Faerch and Kasper (1989) argue that internal modifications function as sociopragmatic devices which affect the social impact of the utterance on the hearer. Thus, their presence is vital in achieving the desired illocution. Studies on interlanguage pragmatics typically found that learners tend to underuse syntactic modification and overuse lexical modification, as compared to native speakers (Biesenbach-Lucas 2006, Economidou-Kogetsidis 2008, Faerch & Kasper 1989, Felix-Brasdefer 2007a, Pan 2012, Woodfield & Economidou-Kogetsidis 2010). This study reports similar results: 55.3% of all requests were syntactically modified as opposed to lexical modifications which were applied in 73.0% of all requests. Spontaneously produced requests used more internal modification than elicited requests, however, only in the case of lexical modification is this difference statistically significant (77.8% in naturalistic email data as opposed to 67.9% in WDCT data, $p=0.013$, the difference is significant at a $p<0.05$ level).

The marker *please* was the most dominant lexical modification device in both datasets, appearing altogether in 83 requests. This finding is in line with those of numerous other studies emphasizing learners' overuse of the marker *please* (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007, Faerch & Kasper 1989, House & Kasper 1987, Karatepe 2016, Pan 2012). Faerch and Kasper (1989) argued that learners' ultimate preference for the marker *please* can be explained by its double function as illocutionary force indicator and transparent mitigator, thus, students use it both in an attempt to look polite and to urge professors' response (Chen 2006). Downtoners and consultative devices were also found in both datasets, and hedges, subjectifiers and intensifiers were instantiated in the WDCT data. Some requests were found to have multiple internal modifications, as in the following example, which is syntactically modified, and the marker *please* is employed together with a downtoner in the same request head act:

- (11) *Could you just have a look at my draft, please?*

¹² The * indicates that this example is not authentic.

The most important finding as regards internal modification was that participants did use syntactic and/or lexical devices in an attempt to mitigate the requestive force in their emails, however, they were using these in a proportion that deviates from typical NS usage.

Requests also employed external modifications, i.e. supportive moves outside the request head act. Similarly to findings of other studies (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2008, Pan 2012, Wei-Hong Ko, Eslami & Burlbaw 2015, Woodfield & Economidou-Kogetsidis 2010), external modifications appeared in many requests (61.6% of all requests). The most typical instances of external modifications were grounders, which occurred in 94.8% of marked cases, followed by preparators, apologies, discourse orientation moves, imposition minimizers and in one case a move aiming to get precommitment was also identified. The high frequency of grounders is in line with findings of previous studies (e.g. Hassal 2001, Pan 2012, Woodfield & Economidou-Kogetsidis 2010) coming to the conclusion that the application of grounders can be viewed as a core constituent of request speech acts. In some cases the emails contained more than one external modification type, similarly to the findings of Economidou-Kogetsidis (2008). The combination of discourse orientation move+grounder or grounder+apology were rather typical, as shown in the examples:

- (12) *You probably remember that the deadline for the thesis is end of next week. {discourse orientation move} I am done with most of it could you please have a look? {request head act} Because I'm not sure I'm on the right track. {grounder}*
- (13) *I couldn't show up this week in your OH, I had to stay in [name of home city] for family reasons. {grounder} Can we reschedule a meeting? {request head act} I am so sorry for this. {apology}*

A reason for the strong preference of these mitigating moves may be that learners do not feel confident about how appropriately the request head act was formulated, and try to justify the request externally. Pan (2012) also observed excessive use of some types of external supportive moves, e.g. apologies in case of NNSs, which probably serve as deferential strategy to enhance the negative face of the requestee.

3.4.3 Difference between low-imposition and high-imposition request realizations

Participants tended to realize low- and high-imposition requests in significantly different ways as regards level of directness, strategy use, request perspective and modification. With regard to the interface between pragmatic and semantic processing Stewart et al. (2018) found that statements phrased indirectly were read more quickly in contexts where the level of imposition on the receiver was high versus when the level of imposition was low. In contrast, the processing of statements phrased directly did not vary as a function of level of imposition, which points towards the conclusion that speakers are more likely to look for inexplicitly communicated meaning in high-imposition situations.

Requests are face-threatening for the hearer's negative face (Brown & Levinson 1978), and they also involve high social stakes for both interlocutors, thus they call for redressive action and require sufficient mitigation to make up for the possible face threat (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper 1989). This, indeed, was achieved by participants: high-imposition requests in both datasets were realized through longer request sequences, were more characterized by query preparatory strategy and used more inclusive perspective than low-imposition requests, similarly to findings of Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) in case of both NSs and NNSs. High-imposition requests made greater use of aspect as a syntactic modifier, and these types of re-

quests contained more supportive moves, too. A typical example of aspect (sometimes in combination with tense) as a syntactic modifier in high-imposition requests included the “*I was wondering if you could+VP*” structure, which can be regarded as a routinized way of a very polite request in British English – probably a reason why advanced EFL learners use this structure in high-imposition requests. This structure was not detected in the low-imposition requests of either datasets.

The rank of imposition very much depends on the sociocultural context. The use of more elaborate syntactic structures and more supportive moves, as well as longer sequences suggest some pragmatic awareness on the part of the participants in that they differentiate between requests of different imposition levels: while request for action may be perceived as more face-threatening, requests for information or course-related help may be assumed as part of the students’ rightful requests in educational settings. This pragmatic awareness also surfaces through the use of query preparatories. As has been discussed above (based on Blum-Kulka 1987, and Trosborg 1995) this type of conventional indirect request provides a balance between social appropriateness and illocutionary transparency, not imposing on the requestee’s negative face yet being clear and unambiguous as compared to non-conventionally indirect strategies. The fact that participants dominantly used this strategy in high-imposition requests indicates that they are aware of these advantages inherent in the application of query preparatories.

As for external supportive moves, grounders and apologies were more frequent in case of high-imposition requests, as if participants felt that they needed to provide more contextual clues for these requests, probably due to the asynchronicity of email communication as opposed to face-to-face interactions. The more frequent use of apologies in high-imposition requests can be interpreted as respondents’ desire to avoid being seen to impose too much upon their teacher’s face needs (Pan 2012).

The choices of linguistic strategies and internal and external modification in requests depend highly on the sociopragmatic features of the context: situations involving a higher degree of imposition seem to call for longer, more elaborate requests than situations in which the perceived degree of imposition is lower.

3.4.4 A comparison of naturalistic and elicited data

The fourth research question addressed to what extent elicited data approximates naturally occurring written requests in terms of directness, strategy choice, request perspective, and internal and external modification.

In recent years a number of concerns were raised related to WDCT, which all highlighted that elicited data differs from naturally occurring data in a sense that when instructed, people tend to write down what they believe they would say in different situations, but that is not necessarily the same as what they would actually say should such a situation arise. However, as Felix-Brasdefer (2010) points out, despite the criticism WDCT is being widely utilized in various contexts, which is most certainly due to its potential to systematically gather large amount of data on otherwise difficult-to-observe linguistic phenomena (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2008: 117).

What findings of the present study indicate is that in the case of email requests elicited data is not significantly different from naturalistic data. The t-test and Chi-square test performed on the dataset revealed that elicited requests approximated real-life requests in almost all aspects examined. A striking difference was the length of the request sequence, which was considerably longer in the case of natural emails (similarly to findings of Chen, Yang, Chang &

Eslami 2015 and Rintell & Mitchell 1989). In real emails students tended to elaborate more on certain problems, were more specific about courses, which also contributed to natural emails being more detailed than elicited ones, where more general requests were produced. Moreover, the WDCT was anonymous – students' face was not at real risk, thus they might have not felt the need to invest in face work and be more polite by using more mitigation.

The second difference concerned lexical modification, which was more frequent in spontaneously produced emails, especially in case of the marker *please*. This finding supports those of previous studies which showed that WDCTs produce less complex data. A possible explanation is that spontaneously produced emails represent real-life situations and have the potential of actually impacting student-faculty relationship, whereas completion of the WDCT might have been regarded as a task of lower importance by the students, who may have spent less time on producing the requests.

Most comparison studies contrasted WDCT data to role plays or natural spoken data (Felix-Brasdefer 2003, 2007b, Golato 2003, Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig 1992, Rintell & Mitchell 1989). The fact that this study compared *written* requests might also have influenced the findings: the electronic WDCT that students were asked to complete was very similar to an email writing situation: participants had enough time, they could plan, compose and edit their writings the same way as in the case of emails. A further similarity between the two data collection methods is that emails also often provide single-turn responses similarly to WDCT, whereas spoken data may provide requests evolving as the interaction proceeds, over various turns.

An interesting finding of this part of the analysis is that the data collection method seems less likely to determine participants' choice of request realization in terms of directness, strategy and modification. What appears more influential in the selection of pragmalinguistic forms employed by learners is the imposition realized by the request.

The results of this inquiry seem to add support to Economidou-Kogetsidis' (2013) claim that "WDCT requests can indeed approximate natural data to a *certain extent*" (2013: 34, emphasis in original) and thus WDCT as a data collection instrument is not without validity. Data obtained through WDCT should, however, be treated with caution: it can provide invaluable insights into participants' pragmalinguistic knowledge and what they tend to view as socially accepted norms, but it does not necessarily reflect the linguistic forms that speakers would actually use in real-life situations. As Kasper argues, WDCT data can tell us what "L2 speakers *know* as opposed to what they can *do*" (Kasper 2000: 330, emphasis in original).

4 Conclusion

This study examined how Hungarian advanced EFL learners formulate requests to faculty in elicited vs. spontaneously written emails. The aim of the study was to find out what characterizes participants' interlanguage requests in terms of (1) directness, (2) strategy choice, (3) request perspective, and (4) modification. The analysis revealed that requests tended to be overwhelmingly indirect, realized mostly through query preparatory strategy. As for internal modification, learners relied more on lexical downgraders than on syntactic devices to mitigate the face threats realized by their requests, a phenomenon that has been documented by other researchers in a variety of settings with learners of various L1 backgrounds and EFL/ESL proficiency. External modification was also employed by participants, realized mostly through grounders, discourse orientation moves and apologies. As regards the realiza-

tion of low vs. high- imposition requests the analysis found various statistically significant differences with regard to strategy type and request modification.

Apart from giving a detailed analysis of Hungarian EFL speakers' request realizations, the study also aimed at contrasting spontaneously produced and elicited data. Findings revealed that there were only few features which differentiated natural email requests from elicited ones, supporting the claim that if treated with caution, elicited data can provide valid source for understanding certain interlanguage pragmatic phenomena.

Further research is definitely needed to contribute to a better understanding of interlanguage requests. Most importantly, the collection of authentic request data should continue, as more requests can definitely provide more solid statistical results. A possible further direction is asking the email senders how they view the requests in their emails in terms of politeness and imposition, and also asking faculty members how they perceive these emails. Finally, research into how changes in communication technology affect pragmalinguistic choices is also needed, as it might be the case that a shift in pragmalinguistic and socio-pragmatic considerations as a result of the increasing use of smart devices is also to be observed in case of NSs of English.

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