

Request Strategies in Business Email Writing: Investigating Chinese EFL Learners' Written Pragmatic Ability

Xiaolin Li^{1,2,*}, Nalini Arumugam^{1,3}

¹ Faculty of Business, Information and Human Sciences, Kuala Lumpur University of Science and Technology, Jalan Ikram-Uniten, 43000 Kajang, Selangor, Malaysia

² School of Foreign Languages, Lanzhou Institute of Technology, Lanzhou, 730050, China.

³ Faculty of Education, Languages, Psychology & Music, SEGi University, Kota Damansara, 47810 Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia.

* Corresponding Author: Xiaolin Li (Email: 223923782@s.iukl.edu.my)

Abstract: To investigate the written pragmatic ability of Chinese EFL learners in business email communication, this study analyzed 29 email responses produced by senior Business English majors using the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) coding framework. The analysis focused on students' preferences in request strategies and their use of mitigation devices. Results showed a strong preference for conventionally direct request strategies (75.86% of all requests), typically marked by minimal mitigation—often limited to basic politeness markers such as “please.” There was almost no use of non-conventionally indirect strategies, with hints accounting for only 3.45%. These findings indicate a limited pragmatic repertoire and highlight the urgent need for explicit, pragmatic-focused instruction in Chinese EFL writing classrooms, particularly integrating strategies for mitigation and indirectness, to enhance learners' ability to produce more effective and socially appropriate requests in business email communication.

Keywords: Business English Learners, Pragmatic Ability, Written Communication, Business Email Writing, Request Strategies.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the ongoing implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative has significantly increased China's international engagement across various sectors, intensifying the demand for effective cross-cultural business communication. Central to this communication is pragmatic ability, a key component of communicative competence that encompasses both oral and written skills. The capacity to deploy language knowledge appropriately and accurately in both spoken and written contexts is recognized as a core indicator of foreign language learners' pragmatic competence (Konstantinidou & Perrin, 2021 [13]).

Huck (2015) [10] emphasizes the critical role of pragmatic fluency in enhancing writing quality, likening it to the vital “flesh and blood” of effective written communication. Pragmatic fluency extends beyond grammatical accuracy to include the adept use of language in context, enabling writers to tailor their tone, style, and content to suit specific audiences and purposes. This skill is essential for engaging readers, conveying clear messages, and navigating cultural norms, thereby transforming writing from mere text to a powerful communicative tool. Huck's (2015) perspective underscores the need for a comprehensive approach to writing education that prioritizes pragmatic skills alongside traditional linguistic competencies.

Despite this growing recognition, most existing research has focused on pragmatic competence in oral interactions, while the domain of written communication, particularly within business contexts, remains comparatively underexplored (Ren, 2018)[18]. Where written pragmatics has been investigated, the focus is often limited to everyday contexts or personal emails featuring routine speech acts such

as apologies, refusals, and requests. However, business email writing, especially for Business English majors, demands a more nuanced understanding of pragmatic appropriateness, given that emails are a primary vehicle for professional communication. Inadequate use of appropriate pragmatic strategies can result in misunderstandings or unintended face-threatening acts, undermining professional relationships and business outcomes (Zhu, 2012) [24].

To address this critical gap, the present study examines the pragmatic ability of senior Business English learners in the context of business email writing, with a particular focus on request strategies. The act of making requests is inherently face-threatening, thus requiring learners to make sophisticated pragmatic choices to balance politeness, efficiency, and professional appropriateness (Wu, 2020) [21]. By observing how learners employ request strategies and mitigation devices when a speech act of request-making takes place, this research aims to illuminate their capacity to adjust linguistic forms according to different social contexts in written communication. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What request strategies do Business English learners use in their business emails?

RQ2: What specific syntactic and lexical modifiers do learners employ in their business emails to communicate politeness?

This study was conducted during the first semester of the senior year with Business English majors at a university in Gansu, China, over a two-week period. By systematically investigating these questions, this research seeks to provide both theoretical insights for interlanguage pragmatics and practical implications for enhancing pragmatic ability in written communication.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Pragmatic Ability in Written Communication

While pragmatic ability has been widely studied in oral communication, research on pragmatic ability in written communication remains limited (Ren, 2018) [18]. The Standards of English Language Ability (CSE) (2018) [16], explicitly emphasize the importance of pragmatic ability across both oral and written contexts; yet, scholarly attention has focused on favored face-to-face interactions (Taguchi & Roever, 2020 [20]). Written communication, however, presents distinct pragmatic challenges, as writers must clearly convey intentions, manage politeness, and attend to relational dynamics without the benefit of immediate feedback or non-verbal cues. As a result, proficiency in written pragmatic skills—particularly within professional contexts such as business email communication—has become increasingly critical but remains relatively understudied (Zhu, 2012 [24]; Wu, 2020 [21]).

Email, as a distinct genre within social communication, further complicates these pragmatic demands. Writing email is not a merely mechanical task; rather, it is a social activity that requires writers to establish communicative purpose, consider the intended audience, and carefully select language to produce a cohesive and appropriate text (Dombi, 2020) [6]. Research into pragmatic ability in correspondence writing reveals that L2/EFL learners often struggle with employing appropriate pragmatic strategies, especially when making requests to authority figures—a crucial aspect of academic and professional communication.

Although recent studies on email discourse have primarily focused on routine speech acts such as apologies, refusals, and requests in everyday contexts (Carrillo Reyes et al., 2021[3]; Lin & Wang, 2022 [14]; Nguyen, 2022 [17]), business communication imposes more complex and nuanced pragmatic expectations. These include the need for efficiency, clarity, politeness, sensitivity to hierarchy, and intercultural awareness (Duan et al., 2018[7]; Wu, 2022). Navigating such professional settings requires not only the strategic selection and modification of request strategies, but also the effective deployment of various syntactic and lexical mitigation devices (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007[2]; Jia, 2023[11]). Pragmatic ability, in this sense, extends beyond formulaic language use to encompass the adaptation of formality, directness, and mitigation in accordance with power relations, organizational norms, and audience expectations (Lin & Wang, 2022 [14]; Ren, 2018 [18]).

Notably, studies conducted in China have shown that EFL students' email writing—even among more proficient learners—often contains not only grammatical mistakes, but also a wide range of pragmatic errors (Yan, 2023 [23]; Wu, 2021 [22]). The development of pragmatic ability in writing appears to be uneven, with most students finding it more difficult to express their intentions clearly and appropriately than to understand the intentions of others (Wu, 2021) [22]. Taken together, these findings underscore the complexity of written pragmatic competence in email communication, and highlight the urgent need for further research and targeted instruction to support EFL learners in meeting the pragmatic demands of professional and academic correspondence.

2.2. Request Strategies in Email Communication

Requests represent a particularly significant speech act due to their inherent face-threatening potential, making them challenging for second-language learners (Alfge & Mohammadzadeh, 2021) [1]. Previous research has demonstrated that effective request formulation in emails involves carefully balancing directness and politeness, influenced by contextual factors such as power dynamics, social distance, and imposition level (Jia, 2023 [11]). Studies in cross-cultural pragmatics reveal varied preferences for direct or indirect request strategies among learners from different cultural backgrounds, highlighting the need for pragmatic adaptability in multicultural contexts (Chauhan, 2022) [4].

Empirical studies of Business English learners (Wu, 2022) suggest that pragmatic strategy choices in business emails are influenced by factors including familiarity with the recipient, the urgency of the request, and proficiency limitations. However, relatively few studies have explored how these learners employ pragmatic strategies in professional email writing specifically.

Overall, existing literature demonstrates a clear research gap concerning pragmatic ability in written communication, particularly within business contexts. Despite extensive research into spoken pragmatics and daily email interactions, pragmatic ability in professional written communication remains underexplored. This gap underscores the need for focused investigations into how Business English learners develop and apply request strategies to navigate the unique pragmatic demands of professional emails. Addressing this gap is essential to enhance the effectiveness of instructional practices and equip learners with pragmatic skills vital for global business interactions.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Participants in this study consisted of 29 senior Business English students (5 males and 24 females) from a university in Gansu, China, aged between 21 and 24 years. Selected through convenience sampling from an intact class, these students were enrolled in an advanced Business English writing course. Participants had a strong foundation in English, with 11 students passing the Business English TBEM-4 and one passing TBEM-8. Despite lacking overseas experience, their educational background and language proficiency made them suitable for examining pragmatic ability in business email writing.

Table 1. Distribution of participants by group, age and gender

Participants	Total Number	Male	Female	Age Range
Senior Business English learners	29	5	24	21-24

3.2. Instrument

Two primary research instruments were employed:

(1) Background Questionnaire: A bilingual (Chinese-English) questionnaire gathered demographic data, including age, gender, major, years of English study, previous business communication experience, and familiarity with business email writing. The questionnaire ensured participants'

anonymity and clarity of instructions.

(2) Email-Request Writing Task:

Participants were asked to complete a Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT), which required them to compose a formal business email negotiating a salary increase in response to a realistic workplace scenario created by experienced instructors.

Scenario: *Suppose you have worked in the company for five years with an annual salary of 30,300 RMB. You feel you have carried out all of duties conscientiously and have recently acquired additional responsibilities. So you hope to have an increase in salary. Make up some necessary details and reasonable grounds to make your letter persuasive.*

Such situations are characterized by a high degree of imposition (Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996) [9], typically prompting the use of more indirect request strategies to mitigate the force of the request, in line with norms of Western business communication. The importance of employing indirectness in upward request emails by native speakers of English is well-documented in the literature (Chen, 2015) [5].

3.3. Procedure

3.3.1. Data Collection

Phase One: Participants were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire, which gathered information about their personal and educational backgrounds.

Phase Two: Participants individually completed the Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT) within a 30-minute, supervised session. No external resources were permitted. This task was designed to evaluate their ability to formulate pragmatically appropriate and polite requests within simulated professional scenarios.

3.3.2. Data Analysis

The dataset for this study comprised business emails containing requests addressed to a superior or company, written in response to specific workplace scenarios. The

analysis focused primarily on quantitative method. Each email was systematically coded for request "head acts" (the core components of the request) and the use of politeness strategies, based on an adaptation of the CCSARP model as operationalized by Biesenbach-Lucas (2007). Request strategies were classified into three categories:

Conventional Directness (CD): Imperatives, performatives, want statements, and expectation statements.

Conventional Indirectness (CID): Query preparatory forms, such as questions and suggestions.

Non-conventional Indirectness (NCID): Strong hints.

For each instance, both syntactic modifiers (e.g., interrogative forms, past tense, progressive aspect, if/whether clauses) and lexical modifiers (e.g., politeness markers, downtoners, modal verbs, hedges) were also identified and coded. The frequencies and percentages of each request strategy and modifier were calculated using SPSS, enabling a quantitative comparison of the prevalence of direct versus indirect strategies, as well as the distribution of mitigation devices across the dataset.

To ensure inter-rater reliability, a second trained coder independently coded a randomly selected subset (20%) of the email samples. Cohen's kappa coefficient was calculated to assess the level of agreement, yielding a value of 0.80, which indicates substantial reliability. Any discrepancies were discussed and resolved to achieve consensus before final coding.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Request Strategies in Email Writing

There were twenty nine email letters in total by participants. Table 2 reports their frequencies of the request strategies in terms of head acts. A visual representation, such as a bar chart, is provided in Figure 1 to clearly illustrate the sharp drop-off in the use of indirect strategies across the three types (CD, CID, NCID).

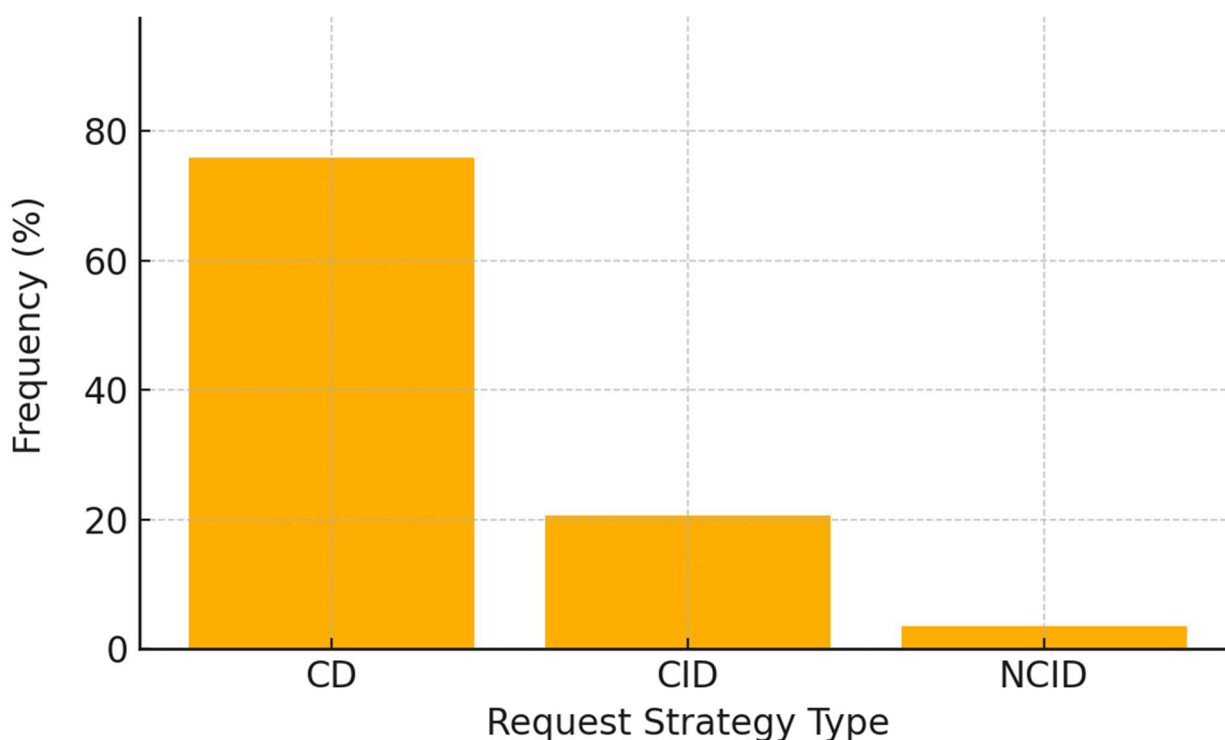


Figure 1. Distribution of Request Strategies Used by Learners

Table 2. Frequencies of the Request Strategies Used by earners

Request Strategies	Sub-strategies	Frequency (%)	Example Extract from Data
Conventional Directness (CD)	Imperatives	10 (34.48%)	“Please discuss a salary increase with me.” (P10)
	Performatives	8 (27.59%)	“I am writing for the purpose of requesting an increase in salary.” (P5)
	Want statements	3 (10.34%)	“I want to have a higher salary.” (P16)
	Expectation statements	1 (3.45%)	“I hope the company can increase my salary.” (P20)
Total CD		22 (75.86%)	
Conventional Indirectness (CID)	Query preparatory	6 (20.69%)	“As I continue to grow in my role, are there any opportunities for career advancement or salary adjustments?” (P24)
Total CID		6 (20.69%)	
Non-conventional Indirectness (NCID)	Strong hint	1 (3.45%)	“It has been a long time since my last salary adjustment.” (P12)
Total NCID		1 (3.45%)	
Total		29 (100%)	

The results indicate that participants predominantly relied on conventionally direct strategies (CD), which accounted for 75.86% of all requests. Within this category, imperatives (34.48%) and performative statements (27.59%) were the most common, exemplified by statements such as “Please discuss a salary increase with me” and “I am writing for the purpose of requesting an increase in salary.” This strong preference for directness may reflect classroom practices that emphasize clarity and efficiency in business communication (Ren, 2018) [18]. However, it also raises concerns about the potential for such directness to be perceived as overly assertive or impolite in hierarchical workplace contexts.

Conventionally indirect strategies (CID), represented by query preparatory strategies, appeared less frequently (20.69%). Typical examples include questions like “Are there any opportunities for career advancement or salary adjustments?”, which demonstrate some awareness of politeness and face-saving strategies, although their usage was comparatively limited.

In contrast, non-conventionally Indirect strategies (NCID), such as the use of strong hints, was rare (3.45%). This low frequency suggests that participants may have had limited exposure to or confidence in employing more nuanced and implicit request forms (Liu, 2020 [15]).

4.2. Mitigation Features in Email Requests

The analysis of mitigation features focused on the use of syntactic and lexical modifiers designed to soften the force of requests and enhance politeness. As presented in Table 3, the most frequently used syntactic modifiers were interrogative sentences (20.69%) and progressive aspect constructions (17.24%). These forms indicate an attempt by learners to adhere to politeness conventions in written business communication. Nevertheless, more advanced syntactic mitigators, such as the use of past tense (13.79%) and conditional clauses (3.45%), appeared much less frequently. This pattern points to a limited repertoire of grammatical strategies for expressing indirectness and mitigating imposition.

Table 3. Frequency and Examples of Identified Syntactic Modifiers

Syntactic Modifiers	Frequency	Percentage	Example Extract from Data
Interrogative sentence	6	20.69%	“As I continue to grow in my role, are there any opportunities for career advancement or salary adjustments?” (P24)
Past tense	4	13.79%	“Would you accept my request?” (P25)
Progressive aspect	5	17.24%	“I am seeking your assistance regarding salary.” (P11); “I am hoping to discuss my salary.” (P20); “I am hoping that you could consider my request for a salary adjustment.” (P28)
If or whether clause	1	3.45%	“If I met all my targets last quarter, would it be possible to discuss a raise?” (P8)
Total	16	55.17%	

In terms of lexical modifiers (Table 5.3), participants relied heavily on modal verbs (34.48%) and politeness markers (27.59%), such as “please” and “thank you”. While these elements are effective for expressing politeness, the use of more subtle mitigators-including hedges (17.24%), down-toners (6.90%), and subjectivizers (3.45%)-was comparatively rare. This limited variety suggests that the learners’ pragmatic ability in written communication is constrained, potentially due to the influence of cultural norms and a stronger instructional emphasis on grammatical accuracy over pragmatic appropriateness (Wu, 2022).

A closer examination of the data suggests that learners

often relied on lexical choices-such as modal verbs and politeness markers-to compensate for their limited use of syntactic mitigation strategies. While the overall repertoire of syntactic devices (e.g., conditional clauses, interrogatives) was narrow, the frequent use of formulaic expressions like “please” or “I hope you can...” served to soften direct requests at the lexical level. However, this reliance on lexical mitigation cannot fully substitute for the pragmatic subtlety achieved through more varied syntactic constructions.

Furthermore, an integrated analysis of mitigation features and directness level of strategies reveals that students who occasionally employed conventionally indirect structures

(such as query preparatory forms) tended to use a richer array of lexical modifiers as well. This pattern suggests a possible interaction, where learners with some awareness of indirectness were also more attuned to the pragmatic functions of lexical mitigation. Nevertheless, the majority of

participants did not demonstrate this combination, indicating a gap in their ability to strategically integrate multiple layers of mitigation—a key feature of native-like business email communication.

Table 4. Frequency and Examples of Identified Lexical Modifiers

Lexical Modifiers	Frequency	Percentage	Example Extract from Data
Modal verbs	10	34.48%	“I would like to request a salary increase, and I believe it’s a suitable time for it.” (P17); “I might need to discuss the salary review, as I feel I’ve contributed significantly.” (P6)
Politeness markers	8	27.59%	“I would like to request a raise, and I appreciate your consideration on this matter, thank you.” (P4); “Please consider my request for salary adjustment.” (P18)
Hedges	5	17.24%	“Perhaps I’ve shown significant improvement in my work, do you suppose I could discuss a pay raise?” (P14)
Down toners	2	6.90%	“If I met all my targets last quarter, would it be possible to discuss a raise?” (P8)
Subjectivizers	1	3.45%	“I feel like I’m contributing a lot to the company, do you think I could get a raise?” (P22)
Total	26	89.66%	

4.3. General Discussion

Compared to native-speaker norms in professional business communication, Chinese EFL learners in this study exhibited a markedly higher reliance on direct request strategies, particularly imperatives and performatives. Corpus-based research, such as analyses of the ENRON email corpus and the Cambridge Business English Corpus, demonstrates that native English speakers typically favor conventionally indirect forms (e.g., “Could you possibly...”, “I was wondering if...”) and employ multiple layers of lexical and syntactic mitigation to express politeness and reduce imposition. These forms align with the sociopragmatic norms of professionalism, where politeness, diplomacy, and relationship management are prioritized over efficiency.

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The present findings resonate with studies (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2015) [8] showing that even when learners use politeness markers like “please,” native-speaker raters perceive email requests as insufficiently polite if key features are omitted—such as salutations, greetings, reasons/explanations, closing formulas, or acknowledgments of imposition. For instance, emails that use a bare “please + imperative” without any opening or justification are consistently rated as abrupt, impolite, and inappropriate in hierarchical, academic, or business contexts. Native speakers expect multiple layers of mitigation—not only “please” but also external mitigation (e.g., giving reasons, thanking, acknowledging the imposition), a proper salutation (e.g., “Dear Dr. Smith”), and appropriate closing.

A closer look at native-speaker feedback (as in the referenced study) reveals:

The degree of imposition is crucial: requests requiring significant time or effort are judged more harshly when

mitigation is lacking.

Salutation and greeting matter: emails without a proper greeting or using only the recipient’s name are seen as disrespectful, especially in power-asymmetrical situations.

Mitigation is multi-layered: “Please” alone is not enough. Native speakers expect apology, reason/explanation, and acknowledgments of the imposition.

Closing moves such as “thank you for your time” or “thank you in advance” can sometimes be double-edged: the latter may presuppose compliance and thus be received negatively in requests to higher-status recipients.

Notably, even formulaic or grammatically incorrect forms (like “Dr Paul”) are often tolerated, while omission of key politeness strategies or use of direct imperatives is seen as a more serious pragmatic infelicity. Intensifiers (e.g., “as soon as possible”) further aggravate the sense of imposition and pressure, and are thus discouraged.

The observed gap suggests that while the learners demonstrate some awareness of politeness through lexical choices (e.g., modal verbs and politeness markers), their pragmatic repertoire lacks the syntactic subtlety and softening devices characteristic of native-like business email communication. The marked decline in the use of indirect strategies and advanced mitigation devices highlights the need for targeted pragmatics instruction that integrates exposure to authentic business communication models and explicit practice in indirectness.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Major Findings

This study set out to explore the request strategies and politeness devices employed by Chinese EFL Business English learners in their written business communication. In response to RQ1, the findings revealed a dominant preference for direct request strategies, particularly imperatives and performative verbs, resulting in email requests that are often less pragmatically appropriate. In hierarchical or upward communication, such as emails to superiors, it is generally expected—especially in Western English business contexts—that more indirect strategies be used to mitigate the imposition of requests. However, the participants in this study seldom employed such strategies, which limits the degree of politeness and appropriateness in their communication.

Regarding RQ2, the analysis showed that learners employed a narrow set of lexical and syntactic modifiers, with

modal verbs and interrogatives being the most common, yet used inconsistently and often without appropriate contextual alignment. These results underscore the need for explicit pragmatic instruction, especially in professional email writing contexts where tone and formality are critical. Collectively, the findings illustrate learners' partial awareness of politeness conventions, but also a lack of syntactic variety and strategic flexibility compared to native-speaker norms.

5.2. Implications

The results underscore that even advanced English majors may lack native-like pragmatic competence when composing polite, effective upward request emails. English proficiency alone does not ensure pragmatic appropriateness. Pedagogically, these findings highlight the urgent need for explicit, pragmatics-focused instruction in Chinese EFL writing classrooms. Instruction should extend beyond grammatical accuracy to foster pragmatic awareness and the internalization of target cultural norms for polite speech act realization (Kasper, 2001 [12]; Taguchi, 2019 [19]). Consciousness-raising activities, authentic communicative tasks, and explicit teaching of mitigation devices and indirect strategies are recommended. Curriculum design should incorporate pragmatic materials, and teachers should make use of digital resources and real-world examples to give learners opportunities to observe and practice native-like pragmatic routines. In sum, advancing EFL learners' written pragmatic ability-particularly for polite, high-formality contexts-requires explicit, sustained instructional intervention and greater access to models of native-speaker discourse.

5.3. Limitations and Future Directions

However, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study's participant base was relatively narrow, consisting exclusively of senior Business English majors from a single institution, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the gender distribution of participants was unbalanced, with a disproportionate number of females ($n=24$) compared to males ($n=5$). Prior research suggests that gender may influence politeness strategy use, with female learners typically demonstrating higher sensitivity to face concerns and more frequent use of indirect or mitigating devices in request formulation (Holmes, 1995; Tannen, 1994). This imbalance may have skewed the data toward more polite or softened expressions than would be observed in a more gender-balanced sample. Future research should include learners of varying proficiency levels, educational backgrounds, and adopt a stratified sampling approach to better explore potential gender-based pragmatic variation and to provide more generalizable insights.

In addition, this study relied primarily on the Written Discourse Completion Task (WDCT) as the data collection instrument. While useful for investigating pragmatic production, the inclusion of self-perceived questionnaires or reflective interviews in future studies could yield a more comprehensive evaluation of pragmatic competence. Furthermore, incorporating WDCT scenarios with varying levels of social distance would facilitate the diagnosis of learners' sociopragmatic ability across diverse contexts.

Despite these limitations, the findings of this study provide meaningful evidence of students' limited pragmatic ability in written communication and underscore the importance of explicit instruction on writing culturally appropriate and contextually adequate emails. Future studies could employ

longitudinal classroom interventions or cross-institutional samples to explore the development of pragmatic ability over time and across contexts.

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