

## Exploring Request Strategies by Indonesian EFL Learners

Ayu Pardede<sup>1\*</sup>, Alfi Suci Dirgantari<sup>2</sup>, Hilga Clararissa AS<sup>3</sup>, Healty Susantiningdyah<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1,2,3,4</sup> Institut Teknologi Kalimantan, Indonesia

\*Correspondence Email: [ayu.pardede@lecturer.itk.ac.id](mailto:ayu.pardede@lecturer.itk.ac.id)

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### Abstract

Effective communication in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting requires pragmatic competence as it enables EFL learners to use language, particularly to employ request strategies appropriately. However, based on the results of previous studies, EFL learners often face difficulties in selecting request strategies that fit the communicative contexts. Therefore, this study aims to explore the request strategies employed by Indonesian EFL learners and examine the influence of social status and distance on their strategy use. Seventeen upper-intermediate university students enrolled in an English course participated in this study. The data were collected through an open-ended written Discourse Completion Task (DCT) consisting of six scenarios that described various levels of social status and distance between interlocutors. To collect the data, the DCT was distributed through Google Form and participants were asked to freely write their responses for each scenario. The responses provided by participants were analyzed based on the classification of request strategies by Trosborg (1995) through qualitative thematic analysis. The findings reveal that Indonesian EFL learners had a strong preference for conventionally indirect request strategy, particularly by questioning the hearer's ability/willingness. Moreover, they tended to overgeneralize politeness forms, in which they consistently used conventionally indirect strategy across various social contexts. This finding suggests their inability to adjust strategies in diverse social situations. Additionally, inappropriate use of informal and confrontational language was also found, indicating a need for the development of cross-cultural awareness. The findings of this study imply that Indonesian EFL learners need to enhance their pragmatic competence to navigate diverse social situations effectively in English.

### INTRODUCTION

Being able to communicate effectively in educational setting is crucial. Effective communication can facilitate teachers and students to maintain their relationships adequately and perform their learning process thoroughly. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, in particular, students not only learn English as a foreign language but also how to interact in social and cultural contexts that might be different from their first languages. For this reason, it is necessary to emphasize the importance of effective communication in EFL classroom.

One of the pivotal components of an effective communication is the ability to employ the speech act of request appropriately as it heavily dependent on pertinent social and cultural understanding. According to Trosborg (1995), the speech act of request is an act in which a hearer is asked and expected to perform an action that benefits the speaker. By performing the speech act of request, the speaker is conveying utterances that prompt the hearer to carry out a specific action or behavior for him/her.

The ability to perform the speech act of request appropriately can help prevent confusion and miscommunication with the interlocutors. Specifically in the context of social communication, the way the speaker conveys requests enormously influences the response that will be given by the hearer. If the speakers fail to deliver their request properly, it can hinder the achievement of the desired communication goals, particularly when they interact with the native speakers of English. This implies that it is essential to use strategies that is appropriate to social contexts in order to minimize misunderstanding and to achieve successful and effective communication.

However, many English classes, especially in non-English speaking countries, focus more on the technical aspects of the language such as grammar and vocabulary, rather than on pragmatic aspects such as the speech act of requests. This often leads to EFL learners having limitations in using various strategies while performing requests. The result of the previous study conducted by Daskalovska et al. (2016) revealed that Macedonian EFL learners used more polite strategies when they request, but tended to use similar strategies in formal and informal contexts. It indicates that they may have limited knowledge that politeness in the speech act of request can vary depending on the situations and even on the social relationship with the interlocutors.

In the Indonesian context, a study conducted by Nugroho & Rekha (2020) also revealed that EFL learners have limitations in using various strategies in performing the speech act of request due to their lack of pragmatic competence. In many cases, they tend to use similar strategies on several occasions. However, this study primarily focused on the influence of gender on the use of strategies, rather than exploring how EFL learners adjust their strategies based on the social status and distance. Therefore, this current study aimed to fill the gap by exploring the request strategies used by Indonesian EFL learners in relation to various social status and distance between interlocutors. The findings are expected to provide applicable implications for English teaching, so that teachers can design a more effective teaching approach and focus more on improving students' pragmatic understanding. In this manner, students can enrich their pragmatic knowledge, especially in using appropriate request strategies, according to the existing social and cultural context.

Based on the aforementioned explanation above, the basic goal of this study was to explore the request strategies performed by Indonesian EFL learners. In addition, this study was also set to investigate the influence of social status and distance on the choice of request strategies performed by Indonesian EFL learners.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Pragmatic Competence**

Pragmatic competence is a key element in creating and developing effective communication. According to Dorcheh & Baharlooie (2016), pragmatic competence refers to the ability of a speaker to use appropriate language in various social contexts. This skill enables speakers to recognize when to use formal or informal language, how to make polite requests, and how to respond appropriately in conversations based on the context. Similar definition was also suggested by Ko & Eslami (2021). They stated that pragmatic competence is an individuals' competence that enables them to use language in different social settings. To put it differently, pragmatic competence is the ability to use language that fits the situation and context. To achieve this, speakers must not only have proper

grammar and vocabulary but also be able to produce contextually appropriate utterances in specific situations.

It is important to note that having grammatical competence does not necessarily mean that a speaker has pragmatic competence. This is in line with the statement of Prabha & Raja (2024), that people with exceptional English skills must be accompanied by pragmatic skills in order to communicate effectively. This implies the necessity for the speakers to adapt their language to the context during communication. For example, while the utterance “Turn on the lights!” is grammatically correct, it would be considered inappropriate if spoken by a student addressing a teacher, as it is too direct and might be perceived as impolite. This highlights the importance of pragmatic competence for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, as it helps them avoid misunderstandings during communication. Ahmed (2022) further explains that pragmatic competence also allows hearers to understand the speaker’s intent—whether they are making a request, offering a suggestion, or even issuing a threat. Such competence will undoubtedly create and facilitate effective interactions with interlocutors. Thus, mastering pragmatic competence is essential for effective and socially appropriate communication.

### **Speech Act of Request**

The speech act of request is one of the types of speech act that is most often used in everyday conversation and in various social contexts. A speaker can use the speech act of request when he/she intends to borrow something, ask for permission or help, and many more. According to Trosborg (1995), when requesting goods or services, the requester creates some sort of obligation on the requestee. In this context, the requester expects the requestee to carry out or fulfill his/her request. As a result, the request imposes a duty on the requestee to comply with the request that benefits the requester, whether it be to provide particular goods, services, or help.

Alfge & Mohammadzadeh (2021) argued that speakers will gain favorable feedback if they are able to convey their request appropriately. In contrast, failure to convey appropriate requests may result in communication breakdown. Similar opinion was given by Michelle & Manivannan (2023). They emphasized that when a speaker employs the speech act of request, hearers might have different interpretations about it, and therefore, the speaker must pay attention to the level of directness and social contexts. This highlights the necessity of strategies in conveying request, and adapt it to the existing situation. Trosborg (1995) categorized the strategies in which speakers can make requests into four major categories. Each category is proposed with specific techniques as can be seen in the detailed overview below:

#### **1. Indirect requests**

When the speakers choose to use indirect request strategy, it means that they do not state their intention explicitly. Rather, they often rely on hints and expect the hearer to get their intention.

##### **a. Mild hint**

Example: I am so hungry. (It can be a request to prepare foods or meals)

##### **b. Strong hint**

Example: I forgot to bring my umbrella. It looks like it might rain. (The hearer must figure out that the speaker wants to borrow his/her umbrella)

#### **2. Conventionally indirect requests**

This category emphasizes the hearer’s ability or willingness to comply with the request.

##### **a. Questioning hearer’s ability/willingness**

Example: Would you buy me a car?

##### **b. Statements of ability/willingness**

Example: You can start the presentation now.

##### **c. Suggestory formulae**

Example: Why don't you redo this report now?

3. Speaker-based conditions

In this category, the focus shifts to the speaker's desires, making the request more direct.

a. Statements of the speaker's wishes and desires

Example: I would like to have the fried rice for lunch.

b. Statements of the speaker's needs and demands

Example: I need to talk to him now.

4. Direct requests

By using this category, the speaker tends to make the requests explicitly.

a. Statements of obligation and necessity

Example: You must finish the report now.

b. Performatives

Example: I order you to leave now.

c. Imperatives

Example: Get out of my class.

These four categories shows that there are some strategies in making request, from the most indirect to the most direct forms of strategies. This classification facilitates the researchers to understand the request strategies employed by Indonesian EFL learners in various social situations.

### Previous Studies in EFL/ESL Context

Apart from the studies conducted by Nugroho & Rekha (2020) and Daskalovska et al (2016), there are several studies that also investigated request strategies by EFL learners. Alshraah & Daradkeh (2021) compared the request strategies used by Arabic native speakers in Arabic and English. The findings reveal that in both language situations, they used conventional indirect request more frequent than other strategies. Further, Joyce (2020) investigated the request strategies produced by Chinese EFL learners and highlighted the importance of pragmatic competence in the strategies production. The findings suggest that the strategies produced the Chinese EFL learners influenced by their first language, indicating their pragmatic failure in selecting appropriate strategies in English. In addition, Alsalem (2024) examined the pragmatic competence of Saudi ESL learners in making email requests. The findings denote the highest frequency strategy used by Saudi ESL Learners was conventional indirect strategy. The findings also suggest the importance of explicit instruction in pragmatics for non-native speakers of English.

## METHOD

### Participants

This study aimed to investigate the strategies used by Indonesian EFL learners in making requests. To achieve this objective, the study involved 17 second-semester university students enrolled in an English language course. They were at an upper-intermediate level as determined by their score on International English Assessment Test (IAET). They were selected through purposive sampling, which aimed to select students who were considered to be actively interacting using English in the classroom. This sample size was considered appropriate and sufficient in this qualitative study as the analysis of all responses from all 17 participants revealed similar patterns in each scenario. This indicates that data saturation had been attained and was considered adequate to provide in-depth understanding on request strategies patterns used by Indonesian EFL learners.

### Instruments

The data in this study were obtained through a Discourse Completion Task (DCT), a tool used to collect data on speech acts or language responses in specific social situations. The DCT used was

an open-ended written DCT which allows participants to openly write their own responses more naturally and richly to the given scenarios without being limited by the choices provided. The DCT was a modified DCT from the DCT previously used by Blum-kulka & Olshtain (1984), Nugroho (2012) and Daskalovska et al (2016). It consists of six scenarios that describe various situations and imply social status and distance between the interlocutors (borrowing a close classmate’s notes, asking an unfamiliar neighbour to lower the music volume, requesting an extension for a seminar paper, inviting an unfamiliar speaker for a speech, asking a child to open the door, asking a student to turn off their phone). In each scenario, the participants were asked to write down their request strategies that they considered appropriate to use if they were faced with the situation in the scenario. This method allowed the researchers to obtain an overview of the request strategies used by Indonesian EFL learners in different social contexts in a shorter period of time.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

To collect the data, the DCT was presented in the form of a Google form and distributed through email, accompanied by a brief explanation of the study and instructions for filling out the DCT. Once the responses were collected, the data were organized, categorized and coded based on the classification of request strategies proposed by Trosborg (1995).

For the analysis, a qualitative thematic analysis was conducted, following thematic analysis method developed by Braun & Clarke (2006), which consists of six phases: (1) familiarizing oneself with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Through this process, the responses provided by participants were analyzed and grouped into broader thematic categories to identify patterns in their request strategies. This approach enabled the findings to reveal the patterns of request strategies used by Indonesian EFL learners as well as the role of social context on their strategies choice.

**FINDINGS**

This study highlights the request strategies employed by Indonesian EFL learners and investigates the influence of social power and distance on the choice of the strategies. From the data collection results, 102 responses were obtained. All responses were analyzed, categorized and classified into several categories as can be seen in the following table.

**Table 1 Strategy categorization in each scenario**

Strategy	Scenario					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Indirect request	0	0	0	0	0	0
Conventionally indirect request	17	0	0	0	0	9
Speaker-based conditions	0	0	3	0	0	0
Direct request	0	2	0	0	4	8
Conventionally indirect request + Speaker-based conditions	0	15	14	17	10	0
Conventionally indirect request + Speaker-based conditions + Direct request	0	0	0	0	3	0

This strategy categorization was then analysed qualitatively and organized into four themes.

## Strategy Use

### *Preference for Conventionally Indirect Requests*

Based on the analysis, the most common strategy used by Indonesian EFL learners was the conventionally indirect request strategy, which was found in almost all of the responses and scenarios. The participants tended to question the hearer's ability/willingness by employing expressions such as "can I..." or "could you..." as can be seen in the responses provided by participants in different scenarios below:

- (1) Scenario 1: borrowing a close classmate's notes  
P2: *Can I borrow your notes?* I was sick yesterday, so I couldn't come to class.  
P4: Hi, sorry but *could I borrow your notes from yesterday's lecture?* I missed the class because I was so sick and I need to keep up with the materials.
- (2) Scenario 6: asking a student to turn off their phone  
P16: Excuse me, *could you please turn off your phone?* Thank you  
P9: Excuse me, student. *Could you please silence your mobile phone?*
- (3) Scenario 4: inviting an unfamiliar speaker for a speech  
P1: Hello sir/mam, [self-introduction]. We have been searching for a volunteer to give a speech about ecological disaster and we would like to invite you for a speech. *Would you be able to give the speech?* We will really appreciate it.  
P17: Hello sir, [self-introduction] *Do you have time to give a speech on this ecological disaster?* thank you

In all three different scenarios above, participants showed their preference to use conventionally indirect request strategy. This strategy use reflects their tendency to show politeness by reducing the force of the request and allowing the interlocutor to refuse the request.

### *Tendency for combined strategies*

Most of the participants preferred to combine two or more strategies when they employed the speech act of request. This combination often included conventionally indirect requests (e.g., questioning of hearer's ability/willingness) and speaker-based condition. Another pattern found was the use of conventionally indirect requests (e.g., questioning of hearer's ability/willingness) followed by speaker's-based condition (e.g., statements of the speaker's wishes and desires) and direct request. The combination examples can be seen in the responses provided by participants in diverse contexts below:

- (4) Scenario 2: asking an unfamiliar neighbor to lower the music volume  
P12: Excuse me bro, I'm from the next room. Sorry in advance, but *can you please turn down the music a bit?* because I have an exam coming up so *I want to focus on studying*, thanks.
- (5) Scenario 5: asking a child to open the door  
P15: Hello, son, *could please open the door for me.* I'm carrying a heavy load on my hands, so I can't reach the door handle and *I need you to open it for me.* Please help me. *Hurry up*
- (6) Scenario 4: inviting an unfamiliar speaker for a speech  
P13: Hi, *may I have a moment of your time?* [self-introduction] we're a nonprofit organization and *I would like to invite you to give a speech* about ecological disasters.

The responses provided by P15 combines conventionally indirect requests ("Could you open...") with speaker-based condition ("I need you...") and direct request ("Hurry up"). Meanwhile

P12 combined a conventionally indirect requests (“can you...”) and speaker’s-based conditions (the wish to focus). Similarly, P13 combined a conventionally indirect request (request to spare some time) and speaker-based conditions (an intention to invite the speaker). In these three responses, the participants combined multiple strategies to maintain politeness and to increase the likelihood of receiving a cooperative response.

### **Influence of Social Power and Distance**

#### ***Limited sensitivity to social status and distance (overgeneralization of politeness forms)***

Further analysis reveals that in some contexts, participants had the ability to use appropriate language and strategies in employing their requests, specifically when they interact with higher status or unfamiliar interlocutors. For instance, in formal situations such as requesting a deadline extension to a lecturer, they tended to start their request with apologetic expression (e.g., “I am sorry” or “Excuse me”) followed by an explanation for request and then proceeded to convey their request using a conventionally indirect request strategy. Likewise, in situation where they need to ask unfamiliar interlocutor to be a speaker at an event, they tended to introduce themselves first, then convey their request through speaker-based conditions and mostly followed by conventionally indirect request strategy. This pattern suggests that participants have sufficient pragmatic awareness in adjusting their language and strategies based on social context like social status and distance.

Nevertheless, in other contexts, such as when they were dealing with equal status and familiar interlocutors, they still tended to use conventionally indirect requests. The same strategy was also applied when they acted as parents asking their children to open the door. Moreover, in contexts where they acted as lecturers asking students to turn off their mobile phones – a situation where they had higher social status or authority – most of them still chose to employ the same strategy. The requests were also preceded or followed by pre-request marker (e.g., “Excuse me”) and mitigator (e.g. please) as shown in the responses provided below:

(7) Scenario 5: asking a child to open the door

P9: Honey, *could you please open the door for me?*

P10: Ethan! *Can you open the door for your father please?*

(8) Scenario 6: asking a student to turn off their phone

P5: *Excuse me, could you please turn off your mobile phone?* it is important that we minimize distractions during class, thank you

P14: *Excuse me, could you please turn off the mobile phone during class?* Thank you.

These responses indicate that despite having the ability to be aware of social factors in choosing strategies, the participants tended to choose indirect forms of requests and maintain politeness, even when the situation allowed them to use more direct strategies.

#### ***Overuse of informal language***

In addition, overuse of informal language was found in situation where the participants were dealing with equal status and unfamiliar interlocutors, as shown by responses provided below:

(9) Scenario 2: asking an unfamiliar neighbor to lower the music volume

P3: *Yo!* I would be thankful if you turn down your *tasteless jedag jedug* music for me, I’m trying to study for the night.

P11: Hey, can you turn the music down? I have an exam tomorrow and I really need to focus on studying, *why would you even play music this loudly at night*, you might disturb others too. Can you please turn it down so that I can focus studying for my exam? It would really help if you do, thanks.

The strategy conveyed by P3 above indicates a pragmatic failure in adapting speech register to the social context. Although the participant attempted to convey his request less direct (I would be thankful if you...), the use of address such as “Yo!” is considered to be too informal since it is typically employed for casual interactions among familiar interlocutors. Moreover, the use of phrase such as “your tasteless *jedag jedug* music...” is too direct and may lead to offense and misunderstanding in communication since it could be perceived as rude even when dealing with close interlocutors. Similarly, the response provided by P11 above shows good intent by attempting to explain the reason for the request. However, the use of phrases like “why would you even play music this loudly...” illustrates a confrontational tone which could reduce effectiveness and appropriateness particularly for a situation that may require more social tact. These responses indicates that participants have limited pragmatic competence in adjusting the level of formality and politeness to the context of interaction, particularly when they interact with unfamiliar interlocutors.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal the strong preference for the use of conventionally indirect request strategies by Indonesian EFL learners. By using this strategy, they denoted their attempts to maintain politeness and uphold harmony in interpersonal relationships. This strategy use reflects their awareness of cultural norms, as indirectness is often perceived as more polite and respectful in Indonesian cultural norms. This finding is in line with the findings by Nugroho & Rekha (2020). Their study similarly revealed that Indonesian EFL learners used conventionally indirect request strategies frequently.

Furthermore, the findings of this study reveal that Indonesian EFL learners overused conventionally indirect requests. They used this strategy even in high-power positions (e.g., lecturers asking a student to turn off their phone), even though they could have used a more direct strategy. This finding indicates that they still face challenges in adjusting their language pragmatically as they consistently use polite language in diverse social situation and contexts. This supports the findings of previous study conducted by Daskalovska et al. (2016), which showed that EFL learners tend to use polite strategies in both formal and informal situations. This finding suggests that similar patterns of request strategies may emerge among EFL learners even across diverse cultural contexts, possibly due to inadequate knowledge about pragmatic competence.

In addition, the findings on informal and confrontational language usage in certain contexts also imply that Indonesian EFL learners failed to use appropriate speech register, indicating a lack of awareness of social context in communication. Therefore, the findings of this study confirm the preference of Indonesian EFL learners on conventionally indirect request strategy and their need to improve their pragmatic ability and contextual sensitivity while using English.

## CONCLUSION

This study investigated the request strategy employed by Indonesian EFL learners and examined how social status and distance influence their choice of strategies. The findings reveal that Indonesian EFL learners had a strong preference for conventionally indirect requests strategy across a variety of social contexts. This choice of strategy indicates their tendency to maintain politeness and mitigate the degree of imposition as indirectness is often considered a form of politeness in Indonesian culture norms. In addition, the findings also reveal that Indonesian EFL learners often employed combined strategies to strengthen their requests and increase the chance of compliance.

However, the findings also indicate limitations in pragmatic competence. Most of participants had the tendency to use indirect strategies even in contexts where direct strategies would be more appropriate (e.g., acting as lecturers), which indicates the limitation in strategy variety. Furthermore, some participants showed their lack of contextual sensitivity and linguistic appropriateness, as

reflected in the overuse of informal expressions and confrontational tones, particularly when dealing with unfamiliar interlocutors. These findings suggest the essence of enhancing pragmatic competence in English language teaching in Indonesia. English instruction should emphasize not only linguistic accuracy but also linguistic appropriateness. Indonesian EFL learners should be taught to develop their cross-cultural pragmatic awareness, particularly of the cultural differences in English and Indonesian norms to strengthen their ability to navigate diverse social situations effectively in English. Therefore, they are able to use English not only correctly but also effectively across different cultural contexts.

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