

EFL STUDENTS' PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE IN WRITING: REQUEST STRATEGIES IN FORMAL AND INFORMAL LETTERS

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Abstract

This study examines students' pragmatic competence in using request strategies in English formal and informal letter writing, with particular attention to how learners adjust their linguistic choices according to context, social distance, and power relations. Adopting a qualitative case study design, the participants were twelve undergraduate EFL students who produced one formal and one informal letter containing request expressions. Data were collected through written tasks and supported by follow-up semi-structured interviews with selected participants to clarify pragmatic choices. The written data were analyzed based on Braun and Clarke's six phases of thematic analysis, with NVivo software employed to support systematic coding and data organization. The analysis focused on patterns of request strategies to explore students' contextual appropriateness in written communication. The findings indicate that students demonstrated emerging pragmatic competence by differentiating their use of request strategies across formal and informal contexts. In formal letters, students predominantly employed conventionally indirect strategies, particularly query preparatory forms, to show respect and avoid being too direct with institutional authority, although instances of excessive directness were still observed. In informal letters, however, flexibility, emotional expressiveness, and a wider combination of direct and indirect strategies were highlighted which reflected closer social relationships and reduced formality. The results suggest that students are developing their contextual awareness and politeness sensitivity, yet their pragmatic control remains uneven across communicative settings. The study offers the pedagogical importance of integrating explicit instruction on pragmatic features into EFL writing courses to support students' ability to formulate contextually appropriate requests.

Keywords: EFL students, formal and informal letters, pragmatic competence, request strategies, written discourse

Introduction

Pragmatic competence is one of the fundamental aspects in English language learning that students must employ because effective communication needs more than just grammatical precision and vocabulary knowledge (Hymes, 1972; Canale & Swain, 1980). Standing on the communicative competence perspective, Hymes (1972) stated that knowing a language also entails knowing how to use it appropriately in contextual communication. Through this point of view, Leech (1983) expressed that pragmatic plays important role in guiding language users to balance meaning, politeness, and contextual appropriateness. Thus, pragmatic competence can be defined as learners' ability to use language appropriately in relation to context, social norms, and communicative intentions. This theoretical understanding underlines that pragmatic competence is not only an additional skill, but an integral component of meaningful language use.

In an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, pragmatic competence is critically important because learners often believe on their own ability to interpret and deliver intended

meanings without consistent access to contextual cues available in face-to-face interaction (Kasper & Rose, 2002). Along with the shift in language pedagogy from a primarily linguistic orientation toward a more communicative framework, pragmatic competence has received increasing attention in educational research and classroom practice (Takkaç Tulgar, 2016). As the key of pragmatic study, meaning was regarded to appear through the interaction of language, context, communicative intention, and social norms (Thomas, 1995; Yule, 1996). This view suggests that language teaching should move beyond grammar and vocabulary to include explicit guidance on appropriate language use in context, particularly in EFL settings (Bachman, 1990; Kasper & Rose, 2002). Empirical research has found that language proficiency is strongly affected by pragmatic competence. The development of learners' pragmatic ability is influenced by their orientation toward the target language, not only by their linguistic ability (Matsumura, 2003). Therefore, teachers are encouraged to integrate pragmatic knowledge into EFL instruction, particularly in writing, where readers must infer contextual information that is often implicit in the text (Faisal, 2025).

Moreover, pragmatic competence also has important role in EFL writing because the ability of writers to consider not only grammatical accuracy and appropriate vocabulary is one of requirements in effective written communication. They also have to get the ability to generate how language is used across different genres, levels of formality, and communicative purposes (Bachman, 1990; Hyland, 2004). This importance is supported by research that found students with higher pragmatic awareness tend to produce more effective written texts, as evidenced by a positive correlation between pragmatic competence and writing performance (Al-Ibadi, 2022). In written work, this relationship becomes especially clear when meanings must be communicated without direct interaction or immediate response. In addition, Faghih and Ansari (2013) showed that EFL learners who experience teaching which focus on pragmatic awareness improve their writing performance better than those who were taught through traditional writing approaches. These findings suggest that the integration of pragmatic awareness into EFL writing instruction gives pedagogical value.

There has been a lot of study on pragmatic competence and EFL writing; however, there are still gaps in the literature. Previous studies have predominantly relied on quantitative measures or focused on instructional effects, providing limited insight into how learners actually realize pragmatic knowledge in authentic written texts. In particular, qualitative analyses that examine students' use of pragmatic features as reflected in real writing products across different levels of formality, as well as how the same learners adjust their pragmatic choices in formal and informal written communication, are still scarce. In the Indonesian EFL context, this gap becomes clear since learners have experienced difficulties in organizing suitable levels of politeness, indirectness, and formality in English writing, especially when referring to academic or institutional audiences (Retnowaty, 2017; Hutaaruk et al., 2020). These issues are often connected to weakness of authentic English pragmatic rules and the impact of local sociocultural customs on written communication. However, empirical data which described how Indonesian EFL students address these pragmatic issues through comprehensive examination of their actual written texts is still limited.

While previous pragmatic competence research has often focused on E-mail communication and has been conducted using quantitative approach, the present study offers an in-depth qualitative, product-based analysis of how EFL students demonstrate pragmatic competence in both formal and informal letters. By examining students' use of request strategies in both formal and informal letters produced by the same learners, this study provides insights into how pragmatic choices are adjusted across different communicative contexts. Therefore, this study aims to explore EFL students' pragmatic competence in writing through their use of request strategies in formal and informal letters. The study is guided by the following research question: *How do EFL*

students demonstrate pragmatic competence in writing through their use of request strategies in formal and informal letters? The findings are expected to contribute to EFL pedagogy by offering pedagogical insights into pragmatics-informed writing instruction in higher education contexts.

Literature Review

This session presents theories of pragmatic competence in EFL writing, which focusing on students' use of request strategies in formal and informal letters. It begins from the major theoretical perspectives on pragmatic competence in communicative language use, which explain how learners select and interpret language in social and contextual communication. Then, pragmatic competence in EFL writing is presented next, which is exposing the importance of pragmatic awareness in written communication with different audiences and purposes. Furthermore, the review examines request strategies as a key pragmatic phenomenon and explores how levels of formality and politeness influence their realization in written texts. These strands of literature are essential to the present study, as they inform the analytical lens used to examine students' written requests, drawing on established frameworks primarily from the CCSARP model (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989).

Pragmatics competence in EFL students

As a part of communicative competence, pragmatic competence refers to how well students use language effectively socially, culturally, and situationally. It is not just focusing on how well they use grammar perfectly. Pragmatic competence facilitates the necessity of students to join their language skills with the context in which they are employed (Hymes, 1972). Following models have expanded this theory by highlighting students' capacity to choose suitable forms, evaluate indicated meanings, and synchronize language use with social norms and communicative objectives (Canale & Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983; Bachman, 1990). From the educational point of view, pragmatic competence involves both pragmalinguistic knowledge, related with the selection of linguistic phrases, and sociopragmatic awareness, which represents sensitivity to social variables such as power dynamics, interpersonal distance, and contextual appropriateness (Leech, 1983). In EFL learning environments, the cultivation of pragmatic competence is notably difficult due to insufficient exposure to genuine language use; yet, it is crucial for facilitating learners' ability to execute speech actions correctly and prevent pragmatic failure. Previous studies show that learners may use language grammatically valid, but not appropriate pragmatically. This situation needs evaluation of pragmatic competence because it is a fundamental part in using and acquiring language (Barron, 2003; Kasper & Rose, 2002; Li, R. et al., 2015). So from this viewpoint, pragmatic competence is a fundamental aspect of communicative competence that extends beyond grammatical accuracy. In order to achieve appropriate language use in EFL contexts, students must combine linguistic knowledge with contextual, social, and cultural awareness understanding.

Pragmatics competence in writing

Building on the broader concept of pragmatic competence in EFL learning, pragmatic competence in writing refers to learners' ability to convey intended meanings appropriately through written language by considering context, audience, and communicative purpose. Unlike spoken interaction, written communication requires learners to anticipate readers' expectations and rely solely on linguistic choices to express politeness, stance, and interpersonal meaning. Pragmatic competence in writing covers the appropriate use of speech acts, politeness strategies, and indirectness. It also includes the ability to communicate and understand meanings beyond

literal interpretation (Ifantidou, 2011; Li, R. et al., 2015). Research indicates that pragmatic awareness plays a crucial role in helping EFL learners produce coherent and contextually appropriate written texts, particularly when performing communicative acts such as requesting, apologizing, or refusing (Humayrah et al., 2024; Dey, 2023). Including pragmatic instruction into writing tasks can enhance communicative competence in EFL writing by strengthening students' ability to adapt language to different context (Noviyenti & Anwar, 2023). However, empirical research on pragmatic competence in writing is still few. Particularly qualitative studies explore how EFL students convey pragmatic meaning in written discourse across many genres. This gap emphasizes the necessity to investigate EFL learners' pragmatic ability via their written output, especially for the implementation of request methods in both formal and informal settings.

Indonesian politeness norms and pragmatic competence

In the Indonesian sociocultural context, politeness functions as a cultural framework that shapes how speakers manage interpersonal relations in communication. For example, in Javanese communicative practices, there is a clear use of hierarchical speech levels such as *ngoko*, *madya*, and *kerama*. These speech levels reflect speakers' awareness of social hierarchy, age, and interpersonal distance, which are commonly observed in local communication. From this perspective, speakers are required to carefully select their language styles in order to express respect and maintain social harmony (Atmawati, 2021; Nuryantiningsih & Hidayat, 2022). These speech levels indicate that politeness extends beyond grammatical accuracy, as effective communication involves adhering to social and cultural conventions and ensuring situational appropriateness. Taken together, these findings suggest that politeness in Indonesian contexts constitutes a form of socio-pragmatic competence that is culturally embedded and socially regulated.

Within interlanguage pragmatics studies, pragmatic development is conceptualized as the result of interaction between learners' first-language sociocultural norms and target-language pragmatic conventions (Kasper & Rose, 2002). So, from previous studies, they have shown that such culturally specific politeness norms may influence Indonesian learners' pragmatic competence in English as a foreign language (Chintawidy & Sartini, 2022). Indonesian learners often bring their habits of indirect and respectful communication into English, which can shape how they express themselves and judge what is considered appropriate. In EFL contexts, this influence may result in pragmatic choices that differ from target-language conventions, particularly in situations involving requests or other face-sensitive acts (Chintawidy & Sartini, 2022). From this perspective, Indonesian EFL learners' use of English pragmatics can be understood as a process of negotiating between the politeness norms they are familiar with in their local sociocultural context and the pragmatic expectations of English.

Request strategies based on CCSARP

Requests have been extensively studied in pragmatic research among the speech acts aspects. The intrinsic nature of requests is to facilitate social bargaining and the regulation of face-threatening behaviors. Also, requests require language users to integrate communicative clarity with politeness and contextual suitability, rendering them a dependable measure of pragmatic skill in both oral and written discourse (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Taguchi, 2022). This balance is especially important in EFL writing, because students have to use only language choices to convey social meanings and they cannot use paralinguistic clues. As a result, the way students write requests shows how well they understand social relationships, power dynamics, and what is expected of them in certain situations.

This study applied the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Patterns (CCSARP) by Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) as a fundamental framework for examining request realization. The CCSARP clarifies the sorts of request techniques into three primary parts based on the directness. They are: direct, conventionally indirect, and non-conventionally indirect strategies. Direct strategies explicitly encode the speaker's intention and provide clarity but may increase imposition, particularly in contexts involving social distance or power asymmetry. Conventionally indirect strategies, such as suggestory formulae and query preparatory forms, rely on established linguistic conventions to mitigate face threat and are therefore most frequently used across languages and contexts. Non-conventionally indirect strategies, or hints, represent the least direct form of requesting and depend heavily on contextual inference and shared background knowledge.

Table 1. *Types of request strategies based on CCSARP framework*

Request strategies	Types and descriptions	Examples
Direct.	1. <i>Mood derivable</i> : The semantic meaning of the utterance is explicitly derived from the grammatical mood (imperative).	<i>Bring me a glass of water.</i>
	2. <i>Explicit performatives</i> : The speaker explicitly states the illocutionary force of the utterance.	<i>I'm asking you to bring a glass of water.</i>
	3. <i>Hedged performatives</i> : The illocutionary meaning is softened using hedging expressions.	<i>I'd like to ask you to bring a glass of water for me.</i>
	4. <i>Obligation statements</i> : The request is expressed through a statement of obligation.	<i>You should bring me a glass of water.</i>
	5. <i>Want statements</i> : The request is conveyed through an expression of the speaker's desire.	<i>I want you to bring a glass of water for me.</i>
Conventionally Indirect.	6. <i>Suggestory formulae</i> : The request is phrased as a suggestion or recommendation.	<i>Why don't you bring a glass of water for me?</i>
	7. <i>Query preparatory</i> : The request refers to preparatory conditions such as ability, willingness, or permission.	<i>Could you bring me a glass of water?</i> <i>Would you mind bringing me a glass of water?</i>
Non-conventionally Indirect.	8. <i>Strong hint</i> : The utterance partially refers to the desired act or object.	<i>I'm very thirsty.</i>
	9. <i>Mild hint</i> : No explicit reference is made, but the intended meaning can be inferred from the context.	<i>A glass of hot water seems delicious in this cold weather.</i>

This framework guided the identification and classification of request strategies in students' formal and informal letters. The CCSARP framework in recent studies gives important significance. In their studies, they confirm that pragmatic competence implies the capacity to evaluate contextual aspects and identify the request strategies that are in line with social interaction and communicative objectives (House & Kádár, 2021; Taguchi, 2022). Thus, comprehensive framework for pragmatic competency evaluation of EFL students can be analyzed through request methods in written discourse.

Formal and informal letter

The two genres of written communication include formal and informal letters. They vary in communicative intent, tone, structural organization, and pragmatic expectations. In educational

settings, the students must adjust the level of directness, politeness, and mitigation when forming the requests, not only the content of their messages. Formal letters are often used in schools and other institutions. They have a set of structures, a formal style, and carefully worded requests that show the writer's social distance and power over the recipient (Bhatia, 1993; Flowerdew & Forest, 2012). Empirical studies consistently reveal that requests in formal writing frequently were employed conventionally indirect techniques and linguistic mitigation to maintain propriety and politeness (Kurniawan et al., 2024; Pardede et al., 2025).

Informal letters, on the other hand, were more flexible with tone and structure. They use more casual language and share their feeling. In certain situations, requests can be made in a more direct or friendlier way; depending on how well the writer and the person receiving the request know each other and how much they care about each other (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Crystal, 2006). Research on written requests shows that students often face difficulty in changing their request techniques between various types of writing, especially in formal settings, when being too direct or not being direct enough can lead to pragmatic failure (Kasper & Rose, 2002). Studies in academic emails and personal correspondence revealed that students tend to use less direct and more indirect strategies in formal writing, while being more direct in informal settings (Alshahrani, 2024; Qin, Jia, & Ren, 2024; Nurhayati & Ariatmi, 2025). Therefore, examining request strategies both in formal and informal letters provides important notes for assessing EFL learners' pragmatic competence especially in written communication.

Overall, EFL learners must modify their written requests' levels of directness, politeness, and mitigation due to the different pragmatic demands of formal and informal letters. As a result, comparing request strategies between these two genres provides a useful foundation for assessing learners' pragmatic competence in written communication. Researchers can also determine how students use language in various writing contexts to negotiate social distance and power interactions. Thus, differences in request realization between formal and informal letters offer important information about how well students can use pragmatic knowledge in written discourse.

Politeness strategies in making request

Since making request is essentially a face-threatening act that may limit the hearer's freedom, politeness strategies are crucial for completing requests (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Brown and Levinson build on Goffman's (1967) idea of "face" to talk about positive face (the need for approval) and negative face (the need for independence). Both of these are worked out through the language choices people make when they talk to each other. To manage face threats, they propose four politeness strategies: bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies, which vary in degrees of directness and mitigation.

In addition to these strategies, Brown and Levinson (1987) emphasize that the choice of politeness strategy is formed by three sociopragmatic factors: social distance (D), relative power (P), and rank of imposition (R). These variables determine how much facework is needed when formulating a request and strongly influence linguistic choices in both spoken and written communication. Social distance (D) refers to how familiar or close the speaker and hearer are. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), greater social distance increases the risk of face threat, prompting speakers to use more polite and indirect expressions. In written requests, especially formal request letters, students tend to adopt a more respectful tone when addressing lecturers or staff compared to peers. This sensitivity to social distance reflects pragmatic awareness in written communication. Relative power (P) concerns the difference in authority or status between interlocutors. Brown and Levinson (1987) and Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) note that requests directed to someone with higher power require higher levels of deference and mitigation. In EFL writing, learners usually avoid commanding forms when writing to lecturers or institutional

authorities, demonstrating awareness of hierarchical relationships and the need for more cautious request formulations. Rank of imposition (R) involves the perceived weight or burden of the request. Brown and Levinson (1987) and Spencer-Oatey (2008) believe that the stronger the imposition, the more politeness and indirectness are necessary. In written requests, asking for minor clarifications may be phrased more directly, whereas high-imposition requests, such as asking for deadline extensions or letters of recommendation, require extra mitigation, justification, and expressions of gratitude. This adjustment shows learners' ability to match linguistic form with situational demands.

The literature reviewed above shows that pragmatic competence has a significant role in EFL writing because the learners have abilities to express meaning appropriately by considering context, social norms, and sociocultural conventions. Research on pragmatic competence and writing keep pointing to the importance of pragmatic awareness in forming how learners formulate written texts, while research on request strategies shows that requests are providing media to examine learners' pragmatic competence. This becomes clearer when considering the differences between formal and informal letters, where learners are expected to adjust their levels of directness and politeness in response to changes in social distance, power relations, and situational demands. These adjustments are then working through politeness strategies. They influence how requests are realized in written communication such as letters and emails. However, despite these theoretical contributions, a lot of the existing research has focused on quantitatively assessing pragmatic competence or evaluating the effects of instructions in the classroom. Yet, there is still lack of research which actually applies pragmatic knowledge in their authentic written texts. In particular, there is still a lack of qualitative studies that explore how the same EFL learners employ request strategies across both formal and informal writing contexts. Addressing this gap, the present study seeks to qualitatively explore how EFL students demonstrate pragmatic competence in writing through their use of request strategies in formal and informal letters.

Methodology

Research design and approach of the study

This study employed a qualitative research approach to gain an in-depth understanding of EFL students' pragmatic competence in writing. Qualitative inquiry is appropriate in educational research when the focus is on exploring learners' experiences, perspectives, and meaning-making processes rather than measuring variables quantitatively (Creswell, 2013). A case study design was adopted to examine this phenomenon within a bounded context, namely a group of 12 EFL students. According to Creswell (2013) and Yin (2009), case studies enable researchers to investigate phenomena in real-life contexts through rich and detailed data. This design allowed the researcher to capture how pragmatic competence emerges in students' written requests within authentic learning situations, providing a contextual and holistic understanding that would be difficult to obtain through quantitative methods.

Research site and participants

This study was conducted at as State Islamic University in Jambi, Indonesia, specifically in the *Tadris Bahasa Inggris* (TBI) study program under the Faculty of Education and Teacher Training. The research was done to fifth-semester students with several criteria. Students had to complete sequence of writing courses, including Basic Writing, Paragraph Writing, Genre-Based Writing, and Essay Writing. These provided them with sufficient experience in developing written texts.

Students acquire writing skills foundation through these courses. They were learning to write coherent paragraphs, understanding with various genres, and developing an understanding of academic writing grammar. At the time of data collection, they were enrolled in Academic Writing and English Correspondence class, which provided an appropriate context for examining their advanced writing performance. Besides that, students who had achieved grades of A or B+ in all previous writing-related courses were included as the participants of the study. Based on these conditions, twelve students were selected to participate in the study. The students were 11 female and 1 male, aged at 20-22 years old.

To ensure the ethical integrity, each participant was given a pseudonymous initial that was used consistently in data processing and reporting. This made it easy to refer to each student's comments while keeping their privacy safe. They were then labeled as Student T, A, W, D, I, S, Dy, Y, N, R, F, and SA. The demographic information of the participants was presented below:

Table 2. *Demographic information of the participants*

Students	Gender	Age (Years)	Semester	Study Program
T	Female	20	5	English Education
A	Female	21	5	English Education
W	Female	20	5	English Education
D	Female	22	5	English Education
I	Male	21	5	English Education
S	Female	20	5	English Education
Dy	Female	21	5	English Education
Y	Female	22	5	English Education
N	Female	20	5	English Education
R	Female	21	5	English Education
F	Female	22	5	English Education
SA	Female	21	5	English Education

Table 1 presents the demographic information of the participants involved in this study. All participants are identified using initials to maintain confidentiality. This anonymization process helped maintain ethical integrity and ensured that the students' personal information was safeguarded at every stage of the research.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected primarily through document analysis. The documents consisted of formal and informal request letters produced by EFL students in response to a controlled writing task designed to elicit pragmatic performance in written communication. The researchers administered the tasks and collected the documents following standard qualitative research procedures. The writing tasks were adapted from [Qin et al. \(2024\)](#). Each participant was required to compose two English-language request letters, consisting of a formal letter to the dean and an informal letter to a close friend, under a theme predetermined by the researcher: requesting scholarship information. Each letter had to be written at least 100 words in length in order to ensure sufficient textual data for pragmatic analysis. To promote the creation of spontaneous written language, the tasks were finished in 90 minutes in a classroom context without the assistance of dictionaries or reference books. In addition, to support the interpretation of the written data, follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted with two participants whose formal request letters showed less appropriate use of request strategies in terms of politeness.

These participants were identified during the initial document analysis based on predefined criteria, namely the frequent use of direct request strategies with limited mitigating expressions when addressing a higher-status academic authority. The two participants (Student D and Student F) were selected through criterion-based purposive sampling. The interviews were conducted after the document analysis phase and served as supplementary data to clarify the participants' intentions and awareness of formality and politeness norms.

The written documents were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006), assisted by NVivo software. NVivo was used to manage the data, conduct systematic coding, and organize themes related to students' request strategies (Allsop et al., 2022). Although the CCSARP framework identifies the head act as the core unit of request analysis, this study analyzed request strategies based on the overall realization of requests in students' letters. Accordingly, both head acts and supportive moves that functioned pragmatically as requests were included in the analysis. The analysis implemented as follows: (1) *familiarization with the data* was conducted by repeatedly reading all formal and informal request letters. After inserting the files of request letters to NVivo, the researchers understand students' request realizations which were focusing on the request strategies; (2) *initial codes* were generated by identifying and coding request-related segments using NVivo software, with attention to request strategy types; (3) *themes* were searched by organizing the initial codes into broader categories, particularly request strategy types and formality orientation across formal and informal letters; (4) *the themes were reviewed* to ensure internal coherence and consistency across the dataset, with codes refined where necessary; (5) *the themes were then defined and named* to represent students' pragmatic competence in adjusting request strategies according to contextual demands; and (6) finally, *the report was produced* by selecting representative excerpts and interpreting the findings through the CCSARP framework (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) to explain how pragmatic competence was realized in students' written requests.

Regarding with ethical considerations, they were addressed by obtaining participants' informed consent through a signed consent form, ensuring anonymity, and maintaining the confidentiality of all written and interview data. While, trustworthiness was ensured through methodological triangulation by combining document analysis of students' formal and informal request letters with follow-up interviews to support the credibility of the findings. In addition, member checking was employed to confirm the accuracy of interpretations and to ensure that the analysis reflected participants' intended meanings.

Findings

The findings are organized thematically to examine EFL students' pragmatic competence through their use of request strategies in formal and informal letter writing. The analysis distinguishes between requests addressed to an institutional authority and those directed to a peer, with patterns of request strategies and politeness orientation summarized in thematic tables and supported by textual excerpts.

Request strategies in formal letter

This section presents the types of request strategies employed by EFL students in formal letter writing. The analysis is based on students' written request letters and focuses on how these strategies are realized in institutional contexts. The classification of request strategies follows the CCSARP framework proposed by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), while politeness orientation is interpreted based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory.

Table 3. *Request strategies in formal letter*

No.	Theme	Sub-themes	Politeness orientation	Representative excerpt
1	Conventionally indirect	Ability-based query preparatory	Negative politeness (mitigation, deference)	<i>"I would be grateful if you could provide me with any details regarding the specific scholarship offered, eligibility criteria, application procedures, and deadlines. Any additional details about the scholarship amounts and any additional benefit would also be greatly appreciated."</i> (Student R)
2	Conventionally indirect	Willingness-based query preparatory	Negative politeness (formality, respect)	<i>"I am writing to inquire about potential scholarship opportunities within the Faculty of Tarbiyah and Keguruan to support my continued studies at Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi. Given my financial situation, I am in need of additional financial assistance to complete my education successfully."</i> (Student I)
3	Direct request	Mood derivable	Bald-on-record	<i>"I'm looking for scholarship in our faculty, but I only get a little information about it. I really hope that I could get one on next semester. How many scholarship that we have in our Faculty? What are they? I hope you could help me to get it."</i> (Student D)
4	Direct request	Need statement	Reduced negative politeness	<i>"I am a student from English Education Department. I write this letter to you because I want to continue my study in this semester. In this situation, I really need more information about scholarship."</i> (Student F)

Based on the CCSARP framework, students' request strategies in formal letters can be categorized into conventionally indirect and direct strategies, with conventionally indirect strategies emerging as the most dominant and pragmatically appropriate. Conventionally indirect strategies were primarily realized through ability-based and willingness-based query preparatory forms, which allowed students to maintain negative politeness, reduce the level of imposition, and show sensitivity to institutional hierarchy. Ability based strategies commonly employed modal verbs such as *could* or *would*, as illustrated in *"I would be grateful if you could provide me with any details"* (Student R), effectively balancing clarity and respect. Willingness based strategies were also frequently used, particularly through formulaic expressions such as *"I am writing to inquire about potential scholarship opportunities"* (Student I), which reflect a professional tone and align with conventions of formal academic correspondence. Although minor lexical and grammatical inaccuracies were found, the use of these forms indicates students' awareness of appropriate request formulation in formal contexts.

In contrast, direct strategies appeared less frequently and included mood derivable requests and performative expressions. For instance, questions such as *"How many scholarships do we have in our department? What are they?"* (Student D), while grammatically interrogative, functioned as direct requests for information of scholarship and lacked mitigating devices, making them relatively direct for an institutional context. Similarly, statements of personal need like *"I really need to know more about the scholarship"* (Student F) conveyed urgency and clarity but reduced the level of politeness expected in formal academic correspondence. Interview data showed that these direct forms were chosen to emphasize clarity or urgency, with limited consideration of their politeness impact, suggesting that while students were confident in expressing their goals, their control over pragmatic mitigation in formal settings was still developing. Follow-up interview data further

indicated that students' choice of request strategies was influenced by perceived urgency and their confidence in using polite English forms. Students who employed conventionally indirect strategies demonstrated greater awareness of institutional norms, whereas those using direct forms tended to prioritize clarity over politeness.

In summary, students predominantly employed conventionally indirect request strategies in formal letters, especially willingness and ability-based query preparatory forms. These strategies allowed students to maintain politeness, respect institutional norms, and manage power relations effectively. While some direct strategies appeared, the overall pattern suggests that students demonstrated emerging to good pragmatic competence in producing formal written requests, despite occasional limitations in lexical and grammatical accuracy.

Request strategies in informal letter

This section presents the analysis of students' request strategies in informal letters written to close friends who had already received scholarships. Unlike the formal letters, these informal letters allowed students to use a more relaxed and personal tone. Based on the analysis of the collected data, we also revealed that there are five types of request strategies found in the letters. The requests focused on asking for information about scholarship requirements, application procedures, and personal experiences. The analysis examined how students adjusted their request strategies in a context characterized by close social distance and equal power relations. The descriptions of the results were described as follows:

Table 4. *Request strategies in informal letter*

No.	Theme	Sub-themes	Politeness orientation	Representative excerpt
1	Conventionally indirect	Ability-based query preparatory	Negative politeness (mitigation, reduced imposition in informal context)	"Because I really need money to continue my study. As you know, I have 3 siblings and they're still kids, I mean they are in the SMP and SMA and my parents don't have enough money to pay my study in this semester. <i>Can you give me more an information about this scholarship?:</i> (Student A)
2	Conventionally indirect	Willingness-based query preparatory	Positive politeness (solidarity, relationship maintenance)	"I'm particularly curious about the eligibility requirements, application deadlines, and the specific documents I need to prepare. <i>Any information you can share would be super helpful.</i> I know you've been through the process yourself, so your insights would be invaluable." (Student R)
3	Direct request	Mood derivable	Bald-on-record	"I heard from the faculty that this semester there is another awardee acceptance. So I would like to ask for complete information along with the requirements. <i>Reply to this letter as soon as possible.</i> Have a great day!" (Student Y)
4	Direct request	Want statement	Reduced politeness, explicit expression of need	" <i>I want to ask you about the scholarship,</i> because I heard you have already received the scholarship last semester." (Student N)
5	Direct request	Hedged performative	Negative politeness (softening through hedging)	" <i>I'd love to know how you prepared your application.</i> What the selection process was like, and if there are any tips or things I should focus on. Were there any challenges you faced or anything you wish you had known beforehand?" (Student W)

Based on the CCSARP framework, students' request strategies in informal letters addressed to friends can be categorized into conventionally indirect and direct strategies, reflecting reduced social distance and equal power relations between interlocutors. Conventionally indirect strategies were primarily realized through ability-based and willingness-based query preparatory forms, which allowed students to manage requests politely while maintaining interpersonal closeness. Ability-based strategies commonly employed interrogative forms such as *can you*, as illustrated in *"Can you give me more information about this scholarship?"* (Student A), functioning to soften the request by framing it as a question rather than a demand, despite the presence of grammatical inaccuracies. Willingness-based query preparatory strategies were also frequently used in informal letters, particularly through expressions emphasizing solidarity and shared experience. As shown in *"Any information you can share would be super helpful"* (Student R), students appealed to the addressee's willingness and prior experience, reflecting a positive politeness orientation aimed at maintaining rapport and reinforcing friendship ties. Although the language used was less formal and more conversational, the use of these strategies indicates students' awareness of appropriate request formulation in peer-to-peer written communication.

In contrast, direct strategies appeared more frequently in informal letters and included mood derivable requests, want statements, and hedged performative expressions. For instance, utterances such as *"Reply to this letter as soon as possible"* (Student Y) functioned as mood derivable requests and lacked mitigating devices, reflecting a bald-on-record orientation that prioritizes clarity and immediacy in a familiar context. Similarly, want statements such as *"I want to ask you about the scholarship"* (Student N) conveyed explicit personal intention with reduced politeness, which is generally acceptable in informal communication between friends. Meanwhile, hedged performative requests, as illustrated in Student W's letter, combined direct inquiry with softening devices, allowing students to maintain a degree of politeness while preserving a friendly and supportive tone, as shown in *"I'd love to know how you prepared your application"* (Student W). The use of hedged performative requests indicates that students were able to balance directness and politeness in informal peer communication, demonstrating sensitivity to relational closeness while minimizing potential imposition.

To wrap up the request strategies in informal letters, students employed both conventionally indirect and direct request strategies in informal letters written to friends, with a greater tolerance for directness compared to formal correspondence. The students' frequent use of positive politeness and clear expressions of need shows that they care about being treated equally and being close to others. As a result, the findings illustrate that students had emerging pragmatic competence in adjusting request strategies to informal, friend-based contexts, although they had limited lexical and grammar.

In summary, the results showed that students were more flexible and confident while writing informal letters to the ones who have equal status than when writing formal letters. They could switch between direct and indirect request strategies depending on their communicative intentions, emotional involvement, and perceived urgency.. Although some requests lacked consistent mitigation, the strategies used were generally appropriate for peer interaction. This indicates that students possessed developing to intermediate pragmatic competence, with an increasing ability to adjust request strategies according to social distance and communicative context.

Discussion

The findings of the research objective in exploring EFL students' pragmatic competence in writing especially in their use of request strategies in formal and informal letters are presented in this part. In response to the research question, the findings show that students were able to adjust their request strategies based on whether they were writing in formal or informal contexts,

particularly in relation to social distance, power relations, and formality. Nevertheless, their pragmatic competence was more consistently demonstrated in informal letters than in formal academic correspondence, where pragmatic challenges were more apparent.

In formal letters addressed to the Dean as an institutional authority, most students relied on conventionally indirect request strategies, particularly query preparatory forms. This preference indicates students' sensitivity toward the need to maintain politeness and reduce imposition in high power-distance situations. Similar patterns have been widely exposed in interlanguage pragmatics research, which shows that EFL learners tend to favor indirect and formulaic strategies when communicating with authority figures, as these forms are perceived as pragmatically safer in institutional contexts (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Trosborg, 1995; Daskalovska et al., 2016). Studies in Indonesian EFL contexts have likewise shown that indirectness is commonly employed to maintain institutional appropriateness and respect (Hutauruk & Puspita, 2020).

Despite this general tendency, several students still employed direct or minimally mitigated strategies in formal letters. For instance, Student F's expression "*I really need to know more about the scholarship*", while grammatically acceptable, appeared overly direct for academic correspondence. This finding supports previous research that suggest EFL learners may have clear communicative intentions but struggle to apply suitable pragmatic mitigation in formal writing, particularly when managing power relations and formality (Taguchi, 2022; Qin, et al., 2024). Follow-up interview data showed that this directness was not intended as being rude to the institutional hierarchy, but rather reflected students' spontaneous of clarity and urgency over sociopragmatic considerations. In contrast, Student R's use of modal hedging in "*I would be grateful if you could provide me with any details*" demonstrates greater awareness to institutional hierarchy and politeness norms. Such variation claims that students were standing at different stages of pragmatic development, which is characteristic of learners at an intermediate level.

The frequent use of formulaic expressions such as "*I am writing to inquire...*" and "*I would appreciate any guidance...*" further indicates that some students had begun to internalize conventional routines of academic request writing. Previous studies have highlighted the role of routinized expressions in supporting pragmatic development, particularly in formal genres, as they allow learners to manage face-threatening acts when broader pragmatic resources are still limited (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Trosborg, 1995). In the present study, interview data revealed that students relied on these expressions as safe and appropriate models of academic language, even when their overall pragmatic control was still emerging.

In contrast, students' informal letters revealed greater flexibility and naturalness in request realization. Direct strategies, including want statements and emotionally expressive forms, occurred more frequently and were pragmatically acceptable due to reduced social distance and equal power relations between interlocutors. For example, Student N's repeated use of want statements reflects an appropriate adjustment to peer-based communication. This pattern is consistent with previous findings that learners tend to increase directness and emotional involvement when interacting with close interlocutors (Trosborg, 1995). At the same time, many students continued to employ conventionally indirect strategies in informal contexts, particularly ability-based query preparatory forms. Expressions such as "*Could you please tell me the requirements?*" indicate that students were able to combine politeness with informality, rather than rigidly separating formal and informal styles. This supports the view that pragmatic competence develops dynamically, allowing learners to adapt their linguistic choices flexibly across contexts (Taguchi, 2022).

According to politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), formal letters students' wrote mostly reflected negative politeness strategies which aimed at minimizing impoliteness through indirectness and modal mitigation, while informal letters more frequently employed positive politeness strategies that emphasized friendliness and shared experience. Although students

showed some awareness of these distinctions, the inconsistent use of mitigation in formal writing shows that their pragmatic competence has not yet fully stable. This pattern indicates that students are still in the process of developing consistent pragmatic control when navigating power relations in academic writing. In particular, their strategic choices suggest a gradual, rather than fully established, understanding of how politeness norms function in institutional contexts.

Overall, the results shows that students' position was in emerging to intermediate pragmatic competence in writing. They could switch between formal and informal communicative contexts and adjust their request strategies properly but their pragmatic mismatches (particularly in formal contexts) indicate that their control over indirectness and mitigation is under development. In fact, these results are aligned with established theory in interlanguage pragmatics that pragmatic competence develops gradually, moving from more direct and literal expressions toward more indirect, contextually appropriate, and socially nuanced forms (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989).

Some practical implications for EFL writing instruction can be observed from the pedagogical perspective. First, the mismatched pragmatics used in formal letters shows that explicit instruction is needed especially in speech act like request strategies and politeness norms in academic writing, particularly regarding indirectness and mitigation. Second, since there are found students' stronger performance in informal letters, informal writing tasks may be used as scaffolding to support the development of pragmatic competence in formal genres, for example by asking students to transform informal requests into formal academic requests. Third, feedback on students' writing should address pragmatic appropriateness along with grammatical accuracy, helping learners refine their pragmatic choices in institutional contexts.

Instead of these contributions, this study also has several limitations. From the context of research participants, in this finding the participants were drawn from a single institutional context, which may limit the generalization of the findings. In addition, the study only focused on written request letters, excluding other written genres and spoken interaction that may reveal different aspects of pragmatic competence. Follow-up interviews were conducted selectively to clarify instances of pragmatic mismatch in formal letters and were not intended as a comprehensive data source. Finally, using controlled writing task may not fully evaluate how well students can communicate in real situation. Future research may cover these limitations by examining a wider range of genres which involve more different participant groups, and employing longitudinal designs to trace the development of pragmatic competence over time.

Conclusion and recommendations/implications

This study investigated how EFL students' pragmatic competence in writing is employed through their use of request strategies in formal and informal letters. Referring to the research question, the results show that students demonstrated pragmatic competence by modifying the way they formulated requests in response to differences in audience, social relationship, and communicative setting. The analysis of the findings revealed that students diverting formal and informal writing situations differently. In letters written for academic authorities, students tended to apply indirect request formulations that signal respect and restraint, which was indicating an emerging understanding of institutional communication norms. However, the emergence of unmitigated explicit requests suggests that students had not yet fully aware of pragmatic control in formal academic writing. In contrast, students show more ease and adaptability when using direct expressions to their friends. They also showed the appropriateness use of relational language, and softening devices for close interpersonal interaction. These results reveal that students' pragmatic competence was more consistently realized in informal contexts than in formal ones.

Overall, the findings indicate that EFL students were in developing pragmatic competence level in written communication. Their ability to switch between direct and indirect request strategy

in different contexts shows sensitivity to situational demands. However, further instructional support was urgently needed since inconsistent use of mitigation in formal writing appeared. This directly answers the research problem by showing that pragmatic competence in writing is reflected not only through lexical and grammatical aspects, but also through how they tailor their requests to different social and institutional conditions. The results of this study have clear implications for classroom practice. Teacher can use context-based comparison tasks in writing instruction to examine students' samples of formal and informal requests to identify different power relation, social distance, and imposition. Teachers may also assign genre transformation activities, requiring students to revise peer-oriented requests into institutionally appropriate letters with attention to politeness and indirectness. In addition, guided analysis of model texts can be used to help students recognize pragmatic functions of specific expressions, such as hedging and modal verbs. They also can use them purposefully in their own writing. These tasks can improve pragmatic control in academic writing contexts. This study emphasizes that pragmatic competence in EFL writing gradually and inconsistently develops in many different communicative situations. Educators can better motivate students to create more contextual written requests that fulfill both social and academic expectations by inserting pragmatic-based guidance into writing instruction.

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