


A linguistic study of politeness in academic request emails sent by undergraduates to their professors in Jordan



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ABSTRACT

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The present study explored how Jordanian EFL students employed politeness strategies in academic request emails sent to their professors. The sample of the study included 116 request emails. These emails were collected between October 2023 and December 2023. The researchers examined each email and codified them according to the level of directness, forms of address, and politeness modifiers. The findings of the study demonstrated students' lack of the appropriate pragmatic knowledge to form their request emails. Moreover, this study found that students relied for the most part on the following three politeness modifiers: interrogatives, embedded sentences and the politeness marker "please". The study concluded that the lack of linguistic knowledge, the limited experience in writing academic emails, the impact of Arabic culture, the effect of technology in the format of emails and the absence of feedback from professors were the major reasons for composing inappropriate request emails by Jordanian EFL students. EFL teachers may use the findings of the study to improve the linguistic knowledge of students in writing formal academic requests.

Contribution/ Originality: The current study explored the etiquette of writing formal emails composed by Jordanian EFL students. The findings of the research can be used to teach EFL students how to write proper academic emails.

1. INTRODUCTION

Email plays a significant role in communicating within academic environments as one of the major computer-based communication means widely used. It has multiple functions like asking for information, questioning, providing guidance, detailing processes and exchanging documents (Baron, 2003; Crystal, 2002; DiBartolomeo, 2021). In addition, emails are considered a hybrid medium combining features of written and spoken language characterized by both oral and written qualities. Emails often exhibit informal styles, fragmented sentences, and slang terms resembling spoken language despite being typed (Chen, 2001; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2018).

However, academic emails to professors require appropriate structure with formal openings, bodies, and closings with a polite tone and indirectness. Non-native speakers may struggle with email etiquette leading to impolite tones, inappropriate language and informal styles. As a result, inappropriate emails can lead to miscommunication and breakdowns in relationships (Baron, 2003; Crystal, 2002; DiBartolomeo, 2021). The current

study attempts to explore the politeness used by Jordanian EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students in emails to professors aiming to address challenges and provide solutions for effective communication.

The significance of the current study arises from the observation that non-native students experience considerable challenges when emailing their professors. Although these emails may be grammatically correct and meaningful, they can often be pragmatically inappropriate. Prior to composing an email, students must be aware of the status differences between themselves and their professors ensuring that their message is polite and includes an appropriate opening, body, and closing. This study is particularly important as it aims to investigate the patterns of politeness in emails sent by Jordanian EFL students to their professors. It examines the specific issues students face when writing these emails and proposes solutions to these problems. Students can avoid threatening the recipient's face and improve their communication effectiveness by learning the proper etiquette for writing academic emails.

The aim of the current study is to investigate the nature of politeness used in academic request emails sent by Jordanian EFL students to their professors. The study focuses on the following three aspects of politeness: strategies of politeness (level of directness), address terms and politeness modifiers used in these emails. The study attempts to answer the following questions:

- What are the politeness strategies and level of directness used by Jordanian EFL students in their request emails?
- What are the politeness modifiers and address terms employed by Jordanian EFL students in their request emails?
- Is there a correlation between the level of directness and the use of address terms or politeness modifiers?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Theoretical Background

Pragmatics is a linguistic branch focusing on language use in social contexts. It helps understand the unspoken rules governing email communication in professional and personal settings. Context (such as sender-receiver relationship and communication purpose) influences email language and tone choices. Universities and colleges worldwide have quickly moved to remote learning resulting in students and professors relying more on emails for communication that would typically occur face-to-face due to the vast technological advances and the COVID-19 pandemic (Briones & Liwanag, 2023). Therefore, communication has shifted quickly towards the utilization of online platforms, specifically emails. However, digital communication lacks the qualities of face-to-face communication such as body language, facial expressions, eye contact, and hand gestures. Such absence could hinder successful communication in online settings. Therefore, a miscommunication would probably occur and pragmatic failure can happen linguistically whereas pragmatic failure might occur when two speakers misunderstand each other's intentions (Özcan, 2024).

On the other hand, speech act theory categorizes speech acts in emails as directives (commands) and representatives (statements). Effective email communication often involves a mix of these speech acts, like a manager's email requesting a report submission while expressing confidence in the recipient's abilities. Proper use of speech acts affects the clarity and persuasiveness of emails. Pragmatics provides valuable insights into interpreting email meanings and enhancing email communication. It is a useful tool for analyzing email communication and understanding different types of speech acts used in emails.

Moreover, politeness theory in pragmatics plays a crucial role in email etiquette by emphasizing the importance of preserving positive and negative faces. This theory created by Brown and Levinson (1987) emphasizes the importance of using politeness strategies to prevent actions that may cause misunderstanding in communication. In emails, positive politeness includes showing appreciation and unity while negative politeness seeks to reduce burden on the recipient. Examples involve expressing gratitude and using warm greetings to show positive politeness as

well as hinting at requests and using softening language for negative politeness. Utilizing proper etiquette in emails can improve relationships and avoid misunderstandings or offenses between the sender and recipient (Hang, 2023).

2.2. Related Previous Studies

Several studies investigated politeness in emails used by non-native speakers. One of the most recent studies, Özcan (2024) emphasized the significance of proper communication in any academic setting depending on the person's rank. Hence, misconceptions may occur between teachers and students. It also aimed to seek the perspective of teachers' and students' email requests. The sample consisted of five emails examined using a different politeness strategy. The survey outcome demonstrated that the most used strategy was the negative politeness strategy for teachers and students.

Another study by Alemi and Maleknia (2023) explored politeness modifiers used by non-native speakers in the emails sent to an American professor. The sample of the study consisted of seventy-three Iranian EFL students. The data were collected through a self-reported questionnaire. The findings showed that the students had limited knowledge of politeness etiquette because their messages lacked structural and lexical politeness modifiers or they used lexical and structural devices inappropriately.

Salazar-Campillo (2022) highlighted the informal (tú) and formal (usted) pronouns in request emails from Spanish students to professors highlighting how students often neglect politeness norms by using tú, particularly in follow-up emails due to the vast use of emails in the last few decades. The sample was obtained from a Spanish female professor who teaches MA students forty requests emails using a pseudonym for anonymity. Most of these emails had a low level of imposition while others may have been more demanding. Ethical consent was secured and participants' anonymity was maintained using pseudonyms. In general, students neglect the difference in status between professors and students in their emails. However, students employed verbal and structural markers of politeness in the first email.

Similarly, Pham and Yeh (2020) explored the degree of imposition, level of directness, address terms, and lexical and syntactic modifiers in the academic emails sent by Vietnamese EFL students to their professors. The findings of the study showed that the students used a high degree of imposition and direct strategies in their emails. The study also found that the students overused the politeness marker "please" and used formal terms of address.

Almoaily and Riyadh (2018) investigated greetings in formal emails used by Saudi EFL learners. The data consisted of 200 email messages sent by undergraduate students at King Faisal University to their supervisors. The findings of the study revealed that the majority of emails (56%) did not contain greetings. The study concluded that the students had inadequate knowledge of greetings in formal emails as a politeness strategy.

In another study, Economidou-Kogetsidis (2018) explored requests sent by EFL students to their teachers at a private Cypriot university. The study concentrated on how students used address forms and levels of directness to express politeness in their emails. The data consisted of 200 emails. The study found that the students used direct strategies in their requests which are considered pragmatically inappropriate. Their direct strategies threatened the face of their professors.

Campillo (2018) examined openings and closings used in emails written by students in their mother tongue (Spanish) and a foreign language (English). The study found that openings in the mother tongue and foreign language did not show politeness as the students did not pay attention to the formality of emails.

In another study, Nikleva (2017) explored politeness and impoliteness modifiers used in emails by undergraduate students at Granada University in Spain. The following two methods were used to obtain the data: an opinion questionnaire and two corpora of 60 student emails collected between 2009 and 2012. The findings of the study revealed that the students failed to use in their emails politeness modifiers to some extent.

Similarly, [Rahmani and Rahmany \(2014\)](#) explored politeness modifiers and politeness strategies found in 52 emails sent by Iranian EFL students at Azad University to their professors. The findings of the study revealed that the most frequent politeness strategy was negative politeness.

It was also found that the most frequent lexical marker was subjectiver while the most frequent syntactic modifier was embedding. Several studies highlighted the pedagogical implication and the cultural impact of showing respect to someone in a higher rank. A well-written email is essential for pleasant teacher and student communication.

Hence, the politeness of request emails sent by EFL students to their professors is under-researched in Arabic and Jordanian contexts. Thus, this study aims to fill this gap by exploring the etiquette of writing formal emails composed by Jordanian EFL students. Additionally, many professors in the English Language Departments at Jordanian University complained about the impoliteness of emails sent by their students. Therefore, it is very important to investigate this phenomenon to unveil the main reasons and provide solutions to overcome the impoliteness of request emails.

3. METHODS

3.1. Research Design

The research is descriptive qualitative research that explores the politeness markers and address terms used in the request emails sent by undergraduate students to their professors. This method is an appropriate research design because the data consisted of utterances collected from email communication.

3.2. Data Collection

The email corpora included 116 request messages sent by undergraduate students to their professors in the English Language Department at Ajloun University College/Al-Balqa Applied University using the university email @std.bau.edu.jo.

The participants were third and fourth undergraduate students enrolled in the first semester of 2023/2024. The names of the students were kept anonymous.

The researchers asked four professors at Ajloun University College/Al-Balqa Applied University in the Department of English to help them collect the data. The researchers asked the professors to inform their students to send messages to them using the university email in English only. Then the professors were asked to forward the request messages to the researchers. The corpus was collected between October 2023 and December 2023.

3.3. Data Analysis

After collecting the data, the researchers explored only request emails written in English. Out of 200 emails, the researchers chose only request emails (116 emails). The researchers examined each email and codified them according to the level of directness, forms of address, and politeness modifiers. While the politeness strategies (level of directness) and politeness modifiers found in the emails were classified based on [Biesenbach-Lucas \(2007\)](#) classification, the forms of address were classified using [Economidou-Kogetsidis's \(2018\)](#) categorization. The researchers chose these classifications because they were the appropriate tools to achieve the objectives of the study.

3.3.1. Level of Directness

Several studies suggested that when the request is more indirect, it is considered more polite ([Brown & Levinson, 1987](#); [Leech, 1983](#)). [Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper \(1989\)](#) and [Biesenbach-Lucas \(2007\)](#) categorized the level of directness of requests into direct, conventionally indirect and hints. The current study adopted [Biesenbach-Lucas's \(2007\)](#) classification because it is more appropriate to handle request emails (see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1. Level of directness proposed.

Level of directness	Strategies	Examples
Direct	Imperatives	Please tell me what your office hours are.
	Elliptic constructions	Any suggestions?
	Performatives	I just have to ask you to extend the due time.
	Direct questions	What are your office hours?
	Want statements	I want to do a presentation.
	Need statement	I need more time to finish the assignment.
Conventionally indirect	Expectation statement	I hope you would extend the due time.
Hints	Query preparatory (Ability, willingness and permission)	Could I do a presentation in the next lecture?
	Strong hints or middle hints	Attached is my assignment.

Source: Biesenbach-Lucas (2007).

3.3.2. Forms of Address

The forms of address were categorized according to their formality into three classifications provided by Economidou-Kogetsidis (2018) as shown in the following Table 2:

Table 2. Forms of address terms.

Formality of address terms	Explanation	Examples
Formal address terms	Using the surname	Dear professor, dear Alkayed, hello Professor Alsyouf.
Informal address terms	Using the first name (FN) with or without title, dear or greetings.	Dear Murad, dear professor Murad, hello Professor Amjad.
Zero address terms	Greetings only or no salutations.	Hi and hello.

3.3.3. Politeness Modifiers

Politeness modifiers refer to lexical and structural devices used to soften the effect of request (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007). Lexical and structural modifiers found in the emails were categorized following Biesenbach-Lucas's (2007) classification with some modifications as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Lexical and structural modifiers suggested.

Structural modifiers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modals (Could, should and would) • Past tense • Embedding • Interrogatives
Lexical modifiers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understaters or hedges: Some, somehow, just, a minute • Subjectivizers: I think or feel • Politeness marker "Please" • Consultative devices: Do you think? • Downtoners: Maybe and perhaps

Source: Biesenbach-Lucas (2007).

3.4. Instruments

The researcher is the main instrument of the study because the research is designed as a descriptive qualitative study. The researchers of the study collected, codified, classified, analysed, and concluded the data.

3.5. Statistical Analysis

The frequency and percentage of politeness strategies, address terms and politeness modifiers were calculated. Additionally, the chi-square test for association was employed to find out the correlation between level of directness and address terms and politeness modifiers.

4. RESULTS

This section presents results related to the politeness strategies (level of directness), politeness modifiers, and forms of address used by Jordanian EFL students in their request emails.

4.1. Politeness Strategies and Level of Directness

Table 4 showed that the students used direct strategies more than indirect strategies and hints.

Table 4. Request strategies.

Request strategies		Examples	Frequency/Percentage	
Direct	Imperative	Please give me another attempt at the quiz.	7 (6%)	Total 63 (54.3%)
	Elliptic construction	-	0	
	Performatives	Dear professor, I think I have to ask you to repeat the quiz, please.	4 (3.44%)	
	Direct question	Hi. What types of questions will be in our midterm exam?	21 (18%)	
	Want statement	May God bless you. I want to know your office hours. I want to ask you some questions about the material.	25 (21.55%)	
	Need statement	I will not be able to submit my paper next Sunday. I need more time to work on it.	2 (1.72%)	
	Expectation statement	Dear professor, I wish I could do a presentation next week.	4(3.44%)	
Indirect	Excuse me professor, could you please tell me the date of the midterm exam?	52 (44.8%)		
Hints	Hello doctor, I submitted the assignment yesterday and I am not sure whether you received it or not.	1 (0.86%)		

Table 4 revealed that the most frequent strategies used by undergraduate students were the direct strategies (54.3%). The results also showed that want statements (21.55%) and direct questions (18%) were the most frequent direct strategies. The data also showed that the students used indirect strategies 52 times (44.8%). However, hints were used only once (0.86%).

4.2. Forms of Address Terms-Level of Directness

The results of the study showed that contrary to the expectation the students used informal address terms more than formal address forms (see Table 5).

Table 5. Address terms.

Formal	37 (31.89 %)
Dear + title	10 (8.62%)
Dear + title + surname	6 (5.17%)
Title + surname	4 (3.44%)
Title + first name (FN) + surname	2 (1.72%)
Dear + title + surname + FN	1 (0.86%)
Greeting + title + surname	5 (4.31%)
Title	2(1.72%)
Greeting + title	7 (6%)
Informal	70 (60.34%)
Dear + title + FN	29 (25%)
Title + FN	18 (15.51%)
Greeting + title + FN	23 (19.82%)
Zero	11 (9.48%)
Greeting only	6 (5.17%)
Zero address form	3 (2.58%)

Table 5 shows that the most used address terms were informal address terms with 70 instances (60.34%). These informal address terms included a 'dear+ title + first name (FN)' form (e.g. dear professor Murad) (25%), a greeting + title + FN' form (e.g., hello Professor Amjad) (19.82%), and a title + FN' form (e.g., Professor Mohammed) (15.51%).

On the other hand, 31.89 % of the requests were structured with formal address forms. Most formal address forms involved a 'dear + title' form (e.g., dear professor.) (8.62%), a 'greeting + title' form (e.g., Hello Dr.) (6%), a dear + title + surname' form (e.g., dear Professor Alkayed) (5.17%), and a greeting + title + surname' form (e.g., good evening, Professor Alkayed) (4.31%).

Finally, the students used zero forms of address in 9.48% of the requests. Greetings only were used in 5.17% of the requests while zero address terms were employed in 2.58% of the emails.

The researchers noticed that the students used a number of religious greetings such as "God give you strength" and "God bless you". Out of 41 greetings used in formal, informal and zero address forms, ten greetings were considered literal translations of Arabic religious greetings.

A chi-square test for association was used to figure out whether there is an association between address forms and level of directness.

The results showed no association between address terms and level of directness ($X^2 = 7.74$; $df = 7$; $p (0.32)$). This indicated that address terms (formal, informal and zero address terms) were used in all types of requests whether they were direct or indirect.

4.3. Politeness Modifiers-Level of Directness

The results of the study revealed that undergraduate students used lexical and structural modifiers to mitigate their request emails as shown in Table 6.

The data showed that the students used lexical modifiers more than grammatical modifiers, 93 (57.4%) instances and 69 (42.6%) instances, respectively. A detailed analysis of lexical and structural modifiers was presented below.

Table 6. Politeness modifiers.

Politeness modifiers	Frequency/Percentage
Structural modifiers	69 (42.6%)
Modals	8 (4.93%)
Past tense	6 (3.7%)
Embedding	20 (12.35%)
Interrogatives	33 (20.4%)
Lexical modifiers	93 (57.4%)
Understaters/Hedges	14 (8.6%)
Subjectivers	8 (4.9%)
Please	62 (38.3%)
Consultatives	3 (1.85%)
Downtoners	6(3.7%)
Total	162

4.3.1. Structural Modifiers

Structural modifiers refer to all syntactic devices used to decrease the impact of the request. They include modals, past tense, embedding sentences, and interrogatives. The findings of the study showed that undergraduate students used structural modifiers 69 times (42.6%). Table 6 showed that the most used structural modifier was interrogatives with 33 instances (20.4%) followed by embedded sentences (20 instances) (12.35%). Additionally, the data revealed that the students underused some structural modifiers such as modals (8 times) (4.93%) and past tense (6 times) (3.7%).

4.3.1.1. Interrogatives

Interrogatives were the common device used to mitigate students' requests. It was the most frequent strategy and it was used 33 times (20.4%). Consider the following example:

"I did not submit the assignment on time. Can I submit it next week?"

In the previous example, the student performs his or her request without using any address terms or greetings. He or she used interrogative structure to reduce his or her request by asking his or her teacher if there was a possibility of submitting the assignment the week after.

4.3.1.2. Embedding Sentences

Another syntactic device used frequently by Jordanian undergraduate students was embedded sentences. It was employed 20 times (12.35%).

"Hello professor, could you tell me if I can retake the quiz, please?"

The student in the previous example used a formal address form "Hello Professor", and then he or she asked his or her teacher to retake the quiz. Embedded structure and the politeness marker "please" were used to soften the force of the request.

4.3.1.3. Past Tense

Past tense is another syntactic device used to mitigate the force of a request. The use of the past tense was considered more polite than using the present tense as it does not force the hearer to act in the present time as illustrated in the following example:

"Dear professor, I was wondering if I could submit the assignment next week. Thanks"

4.3.1.4. Modals

Modals such as would, should and could be used to soften the impact of the request. Consider the following example.

“Dear professor, I did not submit my homework on time. I hope you could extend the deadline.”

The study found out the students used the modals would, should and could in eight utterances only. However, it is also found that the modals “can” and “may” in the present form were used in 30 utterances. It is well known that using modals in the past form like could and might is more polite than using them in the present form.

4.3.2. Lexical Modifiers

They refer to lexical devices used to soften the impact of requests. Table 6 showed that the most used lexical device was the politeness marker “please”. Out of 93 instances of lexical modifiers, 62 instances were the politeness marker “please”. Additionally, the findings showed that the students underused other lexical devices, such as understaters or hedges, subjectivers, consultatives, and downtoners. They were used only 21 times.

4.3.2.1. Politeness Marker “Please”

The data of the study showed that the students overused the politeness marker “please” totalling 62 times (38.3%) in their request emails. In the following example, the students employed a direct request strategy and mitigated his or her request using the politeness request “please”. “Hello professor, tell me about your office hours, please?”

The researchers noticed that some students did not use the politeness marker “please” appropriately in 19 instances. They use it after a command (e.g., “dear professor, explain the notion of performance, please.”) or at the beginning of indirect questions or requests (hello doctor). Please, could you answer the exercises on page 25?”

4.3.2.2. Understaters or Hedges

Understaters or hedges refer to “adverbial modifiers by means of which the speaker underrepresents the state of affairs denoted in the proposition” (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). They include lexical modifiers such as a minute, a little, sort of, some, somehow, any and just. Consider the following example:

Hello doctor, I just want to ask you about the final exam, when will it be sir? Thank you.”

4.3.2.3. Subjectivers

Subjectivers refer to lexical items in which the speakers express their subjective opinion as shown in the following example:

“Hello doctor, I was wondering if there was a chance to do a presentation tomorrow.”

4.3.2.4. Consultative

Consultative refer to lexical items employed to consult the hearer’s point of view or opinion as illustrated in the following example:

“I am writing to ask you if it is possible to do a presentation on any topic in sociolinguistics. What do you think?”

4.3.2.5. Downtoners

Downtoners were lexical modifiers that decrease the force of the request, such as possible, possibly, probable, perhaps, maybe and probably. Consider the following example:

“May God give you strength doctor; is it possible to come to your office on Sunday to ask you some questions about sociolinguistics?”

Contrary to the expectation that politeness modifiers were used mainly in indirect strategies, the results of the chi-square test for association showed no association between politeness modifiers in general and politeness

strategies ($X^2 = 1.210$; $df = 1$; $p (0.271) > 0.05$). The results also showed no association between lexical modifiers and politeness strategies ($X^2 = 2.922$; $df = 1$; $p (0.087) > 0.05$). Lexical modifiers were employed in all types of requests. However, the results revealed an association between structure modifiers and politeness strategies ($X^2 = 4.813$; $df = 1$; $p (0.028) < 0.05$). Structural modifiers were associated with indirect strategy. This finding was expected because structural devices such as interrogatives and embedded sentences were used for indirect requests.

5. DISCUSSION

The study found that Jordanian EFL learners depended mainly on direct strategies to perform their requests. These findings agree with the results of other studies such as Economidou-Kogetsidis (2018) and Pham and Yeh (2020). EFL learners in these studies preferred using direct strategies. One possible explanation for the directness of emails came from the influence of technology on emails sent by students. Students depended on their smart phones to send these emails, so they viewed academic emails not as formal letters but as formal text messages which are characterized with directness, informality and shortness (Frehner, 2008).

Contrary to the expectations, the results also showed that the students used informal address terms more than formal address terms in academic emails. Informal address terms consisted of three patterns: dear + title + FN, title + FN, and greetings + title + FN. These address terms were considered informal in English because of the use of first names. In Jordanian culture, it is common to use the first names in formal greetings. Thus, the use of first names in the previous patterns is not considered impolite in Jordanian culture. Undergraduate students transferred the formal address terms used in Arabic into English. This indicates the influence of culture in the use of address terms. The use of first name in formal greetings is not traced only in Jordanian culture. Similar results were found in other cultures such as the Vietnamese (Nguyen, 2019; Nguyen & Le Ho, 2013; Pham & Yeh, 2020). The influence of Jordanian culture is not only found in the effect of using informal address terms but in the use of greetings. A number of greetings were literal translations of religious expressions in Arabic such as "God may strengthen you", and "God bless you". Another reason for using informal address terms is related to the influence of technology on emails. One common feature of electronic messages or emails is the informality of style (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2018).

The study expected that with less direct strategies, the students would use formal address terms. However, the investigation of the correlation between address terms and the level of emails' directness revealed no association between the address forms and the strategies used in the emails. This showed that students used address terms randomly. These results suggested that the students were not linguistically competent in formal academic etiquette.

The preference of students for direct strategies and informal address terms indicated that these students lacked the knowledge of etiquette for writing formal academic emails. Their emails threatened the face of the addressee, so their emails were considered impolite. Another reason for the impoliteness of students' emails is that they were not taught how to write academic emails to their professors (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007). Moreover, professors rarely gave feedback on the emails of students (Chen, 2001). Thus, students were not sure how to address their professors appropriately. The uncertainty of how to form appropriate emails led some students to transfer their knowledge of addressing their professors from Arabic into English. This is evident in the use of informal address terms and religious greetings. Additionally, modern technology allows people to use different messaging applications to send messages like WhatsApp and Messenger. These messages include the use of colloquial language, informal style, emoji, abbreviations, and informal spellings. Thus, students may consider emails sent to their professors as messages sent by these applications to their friend and relatives.

The study found that the EFL students soften their requests by using structural and lexical devices. Lexical modifiers were used more than structural modifiers. This preference of lexical devices was due to the overuse of the politeness marker 'please', as it is used 62 times (38.3% of all politeness modifiers and 66.66% of lexical modifiers). The findings of the study also showed that the most used structural modifiers were interrogatives and embedded

sentences. Regarding the use of embedded sentences, these findings were in the same line with the results of the study of [Rahmani and Rahmany \(2014\)](#) and [Pham and Yeh \(2020\)](#). On the other hand, the students underused some structural modifiers such as past tense and modals. The results showed that the students used the modals in the present form 30 times whereas they employed the modals in the present form in eight instances only. It shows that the students did not know how to use modals in polite requests since modals in the past form are more polite than modals in the present form.

Furthermore, the findings revealed that the most used lexical device was “please”. These findings agree with the findings of other studies such as [Biesenbach-Lucas \(2007\)](#); [Le \(2011\)](#) and [Pham and Yeh \(2020\)](#). The overuse of “please” in request emails was found in the requests of non-native speakers which is considered a drawback in the linguistic knowledge of EFL learners ([Pham & Yeh, 2020](#)). EFL learners depend on the “please” marker because they do not have the appropriate linguistic knowledge of other lexical devices. Additionally, the results of the study showed that a number of students used “please” inappropriately as they employed it after command or at the beginning of indirect questions or requests. The use of some lexical and structural modifiers inappropriately by Jordanian non-native speakers inappropriately agrees with the findings of other results such as [Alemi and Maleknia \(2023\)](#).

However, the study showed that the students underused some lexical modifiers such as understaters or hedges, subjectivers, consultatives, and downtoners. Overall, the findings revealed that the students depended mainly on interrogatives, embedded sentences, and the politeness marker “please” to reduce the force of their requests. This indicates that some students lack the appropriate linguistic knowledge to use other politeness modifiers such as past tense, modals, downtoners, etc.

Moreover, the study expects that politeness modifiers are usually associated with less direct strategies but it was not proved by the findings of the study. There was no relationship between politeness modifiers and politeness strategies. These results showed that the student used politeness modifiers randomly in all types of politeness strategies. The randomness of using politeness modifiers indicated a shortage in the linguistic knowledge of students in how to perform formal academic requests.

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The current study aimed to investigate the politeness of request emails sent by Jordanian EFL undergraduate students to their professors. It focused on the following three aspects of politeness: levels of directness, address terms and politeness modifiers. The study found that the emails sent to the professors lacked adequate email etiquette because of the followings: first, the undergraduate students preferred using direct strategies and informal address terms in their request emails that made their emails pragmatically inappropriate and impolite. Second, while the study found that the students preferred using three mitigating devices: interrogatives, embedded sentences, and the politeness marker “please”, they underused other structural and lexical devices. Third, the use of some politeness modifiers such as the politeness marker “please” and religious greetings was inappropriate. Fourth, the students used politeness modifiers and addressed terms randomly in all types of politeness strategies which is considered a drawback in their linguistic knowledge.

The study suggested different factors behind such performance when writing emails. First, the lack of adequate knowledge of writing request emails which can be attributed to the lack of linguistic knowledge, limited experience in writing academic emails and the lack of feedback from professors on student’s emails. Second, technology and the use of different messaging applications such as “WhatsApp” and “Messenger” in personal communications affected the shape and tone of emails. Students perceived emails as an extension of online text messaging platforms that are characterized by directness, informality, shortness, and the absence of openings and closings. Third, the impact of Jordanian culture was evident in the use of informal address terms and greetings. Some students transferred the address terms and openings from Arabic into English.

It is suggested that students should be taught how to address their professor appropriately using formal academic emails to overcome the impoliteness when writing emails. Professors should take part and take the responsibility to correct the mistakes of their students and give them feedback on the etiquette of writing formal emails. Additionally, students should pay attention to the appropriate use of address forms, politeness modifiers, and greetings in English when sending request emails to their professors. The study also recommends conducting other studies that tackle the impact of gender and age on the politeness of emails sent by EFL students to their professors in a Jordanian or Arabic context.

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Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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