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# The use of request strategies in L2 English

THE CASE OF UPPER-SECONDARY STUDENTS  
IN A SWEDISH CONTEXT

Degree project in English, ENA308

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## **Abstract**

The speech act of requesting has attracted a lot of attention in recent research, and previous studies reveal that conventionally indirect request strategies are commonly used by second language (L2) learners. A speaker will generally employ requests regularly, hence the focus on requests strategies in this study. Additionally, difficulties may occur, as a speaker's request also invites a response. This communication is most likely intended to go as smoothly as possible. The present study aims to investigate the use of request strategies by upper-secondary language learners of English in Sweden. Data were collected through a discourse completion test (DCT), which required that the students produce suitable request strategies for different contexts. These contexts were divided into three categories, varying in levels of social distance, power and status. 30 last-year students answered the DCT. The students' responses were analysed according to the levels of directness proposed by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) as well as the request perspective of the speech act. The results show that the L2 students favour the conventional indirect strategies when employing addressing requests to friends of equal status, a person of superior status and to a stranger. Thus, based on the low variability of the results, no apparent connections or patterns were found between the respective contexts of the DCT and the participants' adaption of request strategies. In alignment with the results, it is possible to conclude that the social circumstances have minimal influence on Swedish upper-secondary students' adaption of request strategies.

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**Key words:** Pragmatics, speech acts, politeness, request strategies, level of directness, request perspectives, Swedish upper-secondary students, L2 English

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## 1 Introduction

In general, the main focus of language learning and teaching is the development of learners' communicative competence (Hymes, 1972), which refers to a speaker's grammatical and lexical competence and how it is employed. The term concerns how and when to use various utterances suitably, depending on the context of situation. In other words, possessing linguistic knowledge alone is not sufficient for knowing and being able to master a language. It is also about possessing the ability to use it in communication with the help of social and cultural understanding. This *pragmatic competence* (Deda, 2013) is integral for successful communication and is an important part for the effectiveness of a speaker's communicative competence. Blum-Kulka & Olshtain's (1984) study shows that many second language speakers, even those with excellent grammatical and lexical knowledge of the second language<sup>1</sup>, fail to communicate effectively, or make 'pragmatic failures'. The problem when language learners lack pragmatic knowledge is that it may cause the speaker to insult the hearer, thus appearing rude or difficult. Therefore, the development of pragmatic competence is important.

For successful communication, it is important for the speaker to appropriately determine the social distance between themselves and the hearer. Similarly, it is also important to choose a language form suitable for the context and the speech act. Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989) write about the social stakes for hearer and speaker as a result of the choice of linguistic form when *requesting* since the speech act is *face-threatening* by definition (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Chen, 2017). As requests usually expect a response, the *level of directness* of the request should aim for minimal imposition on the hearer to create successful communication. In this sense, *politeness* is to be considered for adapting speech acts appropriately and minimizing imposition. In relation to politeness, the *request perspective* may also determine the politeness of the request, as speaker-oriented requests are normally considered politer (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). Elaboration of the levels of directness in request strategies, politeness and request perspectives will be provided below in this paper.

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<sup>1</sup> In this study, *L2* refers to second, foreign, or additional languages. The terms *L2* and *EFL* (English as a foreign language) will be used interchangeably.

It can be helpful for learners to develop their pragmatic competence early on, rather than discovering shortcomings later in adult life. Young speakers of L2 English in Sweden are expected to shift from basic grammar use, to the use of the English language on a higher level, i.e. learning to use more complex syntax and to adapt their oral and written communication to the recipient. This is also the case for Swedish learners in upper-secondary school, according to the Swedish school syllabus for English 7<sup>2</sup> (Skolverket, 2011). Within the school framework, students learn word definitions and grammar rules with textbooks to increase their proficiency and fluency in English as a second language. Nevertheless, to learn a language properly, students also require getting beyond the textbooks provided in the classroom, and understand the cultural aspect as well. Levels of directness in L2 English learners' requests have been investigated in a variety of contexts before, for example in Daskalovska, Ivanovska, Kusevska & Ulanska's (2016) and Al-Gahtani & Alkahtani's (2012) studies. This said, research on levels of directness in request strategies within the Swedish context is scarce and this study aims to fill this research gap. Against this background, this study will investigate the ability of Swedish students of English to produce appropriate levels of directness in their request strategies in the target language. Request perspectives in the results will also be analysed as an addition to politeness. This study may thus provide insights into the language learners' pragmatic competence (Chen, 2017). The following research questions will be posed to direct the analyses of the results:

- In what ways do L2 English learners in Sweden employ request strategies in English in terms of the level of directness?
  - When addressing a person of superior status?
  - When addressing a stranger?
  - When addressing a friend of equal status?
- What request perspectives are employed by the students when requesting something of a person of superior status, a stranger, and a friend of equal status?

In what follows, a background section will be provided, focusing mainly on the key terms introduced above, as well as some related aspects. The subsequent sections will outline the

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<sup>2</sup> In upper-secondary school in Sweden, English 7 is the highest level course. See section 3.1.

method and materials used in the study, followed by a presentation of the results and analyses, and ending with a discussion and conclusion.

## **2 Background**

This section will provide a review of relevant theories, research and terms, including pragmatics, politeness (theory), face-threatening acts, request perspectives and, most importantly, the levels of directness in request strategies.

### **2.1 Pragmatics and requests**

In today's globalized world with English as an international language, there is a growing need to investigate students' pragmatic competence in various contexts, since we regularly move between various speech communities. Therefore, language learners need to be able to adapt their language accordingly. However, it can only be performed within the frames of our knowledge. As students advance in various careers, a general assumption is that they will engage in more complex tasks, both spoken and written. Thus, their ability to adapt their language becomes more important, since they will often be judged on the suitability of their language. As opposed to a first language, the *pragmatic competence* of a learner may not be the same in the second language (Deda, 2013). Therefore, it seems reasonable that the pragmatic competence in L2 requires attention when it is formally developed – in other words – in a school context.

Pragmatics is a relatively young subfield of linguistics and the establishment of it as an independent area of linguistic research began only about 40 years ago (Kinginger, 2011). The field studies the ways in which context affects meaning. Although it is not easy to describe the whole field of pragmatics briefly, the following definition (Crystal, 1985, cited in Daskalovska et al, 2016) has been adopted for the present study: "Pragmatics is the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication" (p. 240). In accordance with this definition, the choices that learners make in their requests are part of their pragmatic competence and may affect the results of the communication (Deda, 2013).

In relation to the present study, the speaker's level of directness in request strategies may influence the hearer during communication. It has been argued (Blum-Kulka, 1991) that the main obstacle to learners' exploiting their general pragmatic knowledge may be their limited linguistic knowledge in L2 and, more explicitly, problems in retrieving this knowledge appropriately. Developing one's pragmatic knowledge in the L2 can be facilitated by the successful transfer of some aspects from one's L1 (first language), although there is no guarantee that a L2 learner will instinctively use these resources when performing speech acts in the target language.

As mentioned previously, a speaker's linguistic knowledge alone is not enough for knowing and being able to master a language fully. It is also about having the ability to use it in communication with the help of social and cultural understanding. Additionally, Krashen's (cited in Wang, 2009) Input Hypothesis maintains that language learners need to be exposed to comprehensible input that is marginally more advanced than their existing competence of the target language. Further, Ellis (1997) argues that using the contextual situation to comprehend utterances can be helpful for successful L2 acquisition. In the field of pragmatics, the speech act of requesting may be interpreted as an imposition on the hearer's freedom of action, alternatively as exercising a play of power, which in turn may present potential problems for L2 learners (Deda, 2013). Therefore, when choosing a request with high imposition on a hearer of superior status, the speaker would need to assess the contextual conditions. The speaker would also need a suitable linguistic form of expression, more so than when speaking to a friend of equal status. In this sense, the pragmatic competence of L2 learners is of importance for successful communication.

## **2.2 Politeness**

In relation to the topic of pragmatic competence, this section will elaborate on Politeness Theory and the term *face-threatening acts* (FTAs) in order to provide contexts to the speech act in question, namely, requesting. As mentioned previously, problems may occur as a speaker's requests also expect a response. Thus, s/he will most likely want it to go as smoothly as possible, with minimal conflicts and imposition on the hearer. To this end, politeness can be employed, creating some level of indirectness in the request for the purpose of minimizing imposition.

### **2.2.1 Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory**

Brown and Levinson's (1989) Politeness Theory addresses the nature and function of politeness in communication, as well as a list of politeness strategies. In this context, Brown and Levinson present the concept of *face*, which conveys that a person wants to maintain their self-image, i.e. *positive face* and *negative face*, during communication. They considered a few speech acts, such as requests, to be intrinsically impolite and therefore face-threatening, which was what led them to label them *face-threatening-acts* (FTA). The first is described as the positive and consistent self-image of a person and their desire for approval or appreciation of this self-image. Whereas positive face indicates a desire for connection, negative face involves needs of autonomy and competence (Chen, 2017). Negative face is the want to be unhindered by others, the need for freedom of action and from imposition. In relation to the notion of face, there is thus 'positive politeness' and 'negative politeness', which are used to maintain needs of positive and negative face, respectively. Politeness is integral to performing requests, provided the aim is minimal imposition and to maintain face for both interlocutors (Chen, 2017). In other words, politeness is employed by the requester to show consideration to the recipient's feelings and is normally done verbally (Elmianvari & Kheirabadi, 2013).

Politeness theory suggests that choices in using a certain politeness strategy vary depending on the social context of a given speech act (Daskalovska et al., 2016). In other words, the questions to consider are: Who is the addressee? What is your relation to the person? What will you be speaking about? Being polite can be an attempt for a speaker to save their face, and/or the face of the hearer.

Politeness theory assumes that every person has a 'face' with general face wants and needs. As previously mentioned, there are various types of face that are threatened depending on the speech act (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Further, the combination of three variables: power, distance and rank, determines the weight of a face-threatening act (Chen, 2017). The first variable refers to the perceived power relation between the speaker and the hearer, where a participant perhaps is of superior/subordinate social level, or of the same social level. The second variable concerns the social distance, e.g. if the hearer is a close friend or a distant classmate. Lastly, the third variable concerns the level of sensitivity and the cultural ranking of the topic. It refers to the level of sensitivity of the subject within the specific culture, for example asking about a woman's age in some cultures might be a sensitive issue, while in

others, it might be less so. These categories were taken into consideration when adapting the instrument for this study (see section 3.2).

The acquisition and learning of politeness strategies as a part of learning L2 pragmatics can be complicated for language learners (Blum-Kulka, 1982; Brown & Levinson, 1987). A factor that can complicate the choice of speech act strategy is the influence of the interlocutor's social, cultural and personal aspects, which Kılıçkaya (2010) suggests can shape the eventual linguistic output by second language learners. Therefore, it is of interest to investigate it in language learning and teaching.

### **2.2.2 Politeness and request strategies**

Politeness theory is of particular relevance for interlanguage pragmatics (Kinging, 2011) and for the present study, in the sense that politeness can be integrated in request strategies and aid in minimizing imposition. In other words, when employing politeness in high-imposition requests, a speaker may reduce that imposition and thus save the hearer's face. Politeness theory, like speech act theory, the cooperative principle and the concept of conversational implicature, is commonly thought to be one of the pillars of pragmatic research. Butler (1988) shows a relationship between the degree of politeness and the degree of indirectness of requests, which suggests that requests require face work to some level. Brown and Levinson (1989) proposed that it was to the mutual interest of interlocutors to preserve their respective faces and avoid using language that would lead to the loss of face of either hearer or speaker.

As the goal of politeness in requests is to avoid or mitigate the previously mentioned FTAs, politeness can alter the level of directness of the request and thus minimize imposition. Should a speaker disregard the hearer's position, the request would be considered poorly performed. Therefore, it is beneficial to use some degree of politeness in communication. Thereby, one also reduces the distance between interlocutors, referred to as positive politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Al-Gahtani & Alkahtani, 2012). Further, to avoid conflict, a speaker might also adapt politeness markers (Terkourafi, 2011), such as *please*, while employing requests, which might be more needed when the request is of high imposition on the recipient (Sifianou, 2012).

### **2.3 Request strategies**

Pragmatic research aims to study how language is affected by the circumstances in which it is used (Yazdanfar & Bonyadi, 2016). One of the ways to visualize pragmatic competence is through realising speech acts. Kinginger (2011) provides reasons for why the speech act of requesting in L2/EFL English has received growing attention, and further describes that the speech act is recurrent in language use. Requests are important to a L2 learner and they can be executed with several different strategies, including the direct, conventionally indirect and unconventionally indirect strategies, which will be presented in this paper. Lastly, they can include a wide variety of subtle implications of politeness, deference and mitigation.

In relation to request strategies, Kılıçkaya (2010) did a study with Turkish EFL students where their pragmatic competence in using certain request strategies was investigated. More specifically, the focus was on the degree of their success in terms of the level of directness of their request strategies in various contexts. The results showed that the participants had the linguistic means in order to operate pragmatically in different contexts while requesting. However, in situations requiring a certain level of politeness, their use of request strategies was not very satisfactory, according to the author. A suspected reason for this is the lack of effective language learning/teaching textbooks which do not provide much stimulation for the students' pragmatic competence (Kılıçkaya, 2010). Another study conducted by Daskalovska et al. (2016) investigated the use of request strategies by EFL learners at an intermediate level of proficiency, in the Republic of Macedonia. Data was collected by applying discourse completion tasks and role-plays, and then analyzed with the help of Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) classification of request strategies. The result of the study implies that the most commonly used request strategies by Macedonian EFL learners are conventionally indirect strategies. The next section will review cultural factors in the realization of speech acts.

### **2.4 Cultural factors in the realization of speech acts in L2 English**

When discussing speech acts in L2 English, it is worth mentioning that cultural aspects may also have an impact on speakers' use of speech acts in a second language. Speakers might have a well-developed pragmatic competence when speaking in their mother tongue. However, the effectiveness of it might differ when used in a second language. A cross-

cultural study of pragmatic competence was conducted by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) where they investigated and compared the realization patterns of requests and apologies in eight languages by native and non-native speakers. By adapting a discourse completion test, the participants of the study were asked to complete the dialogue by producing suitable requests or apologies. The focus was three types of variability: situational, individual and cross-cultural, where the results, showed rich cross-cultural variability. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) suggest some diversity in the realization of speech acts across cultures, depending on the social constraints embedded in the situation. In other words, they revealed that the realization of speech acts is closely related to the interaction between situational and cultural factors. Moreover, the levels of directness in the realization of requests were the main differences among speakers of different cultural background.

## **2.5 Requests as face-threatening acts**

Brown and Levinson (1978) describe requests as face-threatening acts where both the speaker's and hearer's faces are threatened, because the speech act of requesting creates imposition on the hearer's entitlement to freedom of action and freedom from imposition. In order to minimize the imposition, the speaker should normally use more indirect request strategies, for the purpose of sounding more polite and preserving the face of the hearer (Chen, 2017). When a request is made, the speaker infringes on the hearer's freedom from imposition, who might feel an intrusion on their autonomy of action or possibly a play for power. Meanwhile, the speaker might hesitate to request in fear of revealing a need, or out of fear of causing the hearer to lose face (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Daskalovska et al., 2016). The speaker's face could be threatened depending on the response of the hearer. If the hearer indicates any imposition or discomfort by the request, the speaker's face may be threatened. Consequently, requests may be face-threatening to both interlocutors and have a potential to become invasive and demanding, hence creates a need for the requester to reduce the imposition possibly created by that speech act (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Here is where indirect strategies of requests can be employed, in order to minimize imposition (see next section).

## 2.6 Levels of directness in request strategies

Three levels of directness in request strategies were described by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1989), which are further split into nine sub-levels. These levels of directness are the main focus in connection with the result analysis in the present study:

### - The direct/explicit level

1. Mood Derivable            Ex: Give me the remote.
2. Performative             Ex: I am asking you to give me the remote.
3. Hedged Performative    Ex: I would like to ask you for the remote.
4. Obligation Statement    Ex: You will have to give me the remote.
5. Want Statement          Ex: I would like you to give me the remote.

### - The conventional indirect level

6. Suggestive Formulae    Ex: How about handing over the remote? Why don't you hand me the remote?
7. Query Preparatory      Ex: Could you give me the remote? Would you mind handing me the remote?

### - The nonconventional indirect level

8. Strong Hints             Ex: My favourite show will begin soon.
9. Mild Hints                Ex: It has been a long time since I watched my favourite show.

The choice of request strategy in a certain context is influenced by situational and cultural factors (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Kinginger, 2009) and different cultures generally agree on typical tendencies in relation to situational variation. For example, a more demanding request would generally be asked in a more indirect and polite manner as opposed to a minor favour, such as asking a person to pass the salt. In interaction among friends, more casual requests would be employed, compared to requests from acquaintances, presuming that both situations regard the same request. On the other hand, the explicit, direct strategies appropriate for a certain situation may vary among different cultures (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1989; Yazdanfar & Bonyadi, 2016).

## 2.7 Request perspectives

Requests normally involve reference to the requester, the addressee, and/or the act to be performed. The requester possesses the power to manipulate requests by selecting from a variety of perspectives (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) when making the request:

- **Hearer-oriented:**

Ex: Could you hand me the remote, please?

- **Speaker-oriented:**

Ex: Do you think I could have the remote for a while?

Ex: Can I borrow the remote?

- **Speaker- and hearer-oriented:**

Ex: So, could we watch something else?

- **Impersonal:**

Ex: So it might not be a bad idea to see what else is on.

In Australian English, Hebrew, Canadian French, and Argentinean Spanish, the most frequent approach to requests is the first of the categories above, i.e. hearer-oriented (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). When a request is speaker-oriented it is common that it indicates a wish for consent and usually suggests that the hearer has the power to control what the requester wants. Thus, when a speaker uses the pronoun *I* instead of *you*, the request is considered more polite, since it prevents the hearer from interpreting the request as a play to control or impose (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). Accordingly, a high imposition request might be softened if the speaker were to adapt a speaker-oriented request. This will be considered in the participants' employment of requests. By adapting an indirect request, the speaker also allows the hearer to decline the request. Therefore, it is of interest to include request perspectives in the analysis of the results.

## 3 Method and material

This section will elaborate on the choice of instrument, as well as the content, the applied method and more detailed information about the participants of the study. The setting and context of the investigation are also presented in this section.

### **3.1 Participants**

30 third-year students attending an upper-secondary school in Sweden all partook in a discourse completion test (see 3.2). All the 18-19-year-olds were taught by the same teacher in their third year, who had replaced their previous teacher after the completed first year. The participants had mixed cultural backgrounds, although they had all attended elementary school in Sweden. At the time of the test, all the students were attending the English 7 course. Generally, first-year students in upper-secondary school in Sweden are required to attend the first course of English on that level, which is labelled English 5 in the Swedish education system (Skolverket, 2011). In the students' second year of upper-secondary school, they usually attend the course English 6. This course is not mandatory for all programs in upper-secondary school, however. Following is English 7, which is normally taken by third-year students as a part of their program schedule. Alternatively, students can choose to add the course to their program, which is the case for all participants of the present study. In Sweden, English 7 is not included in many upper-secondary programs, but it does add extra credit for the students' total grade by the end of their third year. A general assumption is that students who attend the English 7 course are quite proficient in English. However, learners can proceed to English 7 without a passing grade in the preceding course English 6. Consequently, a high level of proficiency in the target language is cannot be taken for granted in students who attend English 7. Given that they all chose to add the course, it may also indicate that the main reason was to gain extra credit. Ultimately, their attendance of English 7 does not necessarily correspond to their actual proficiency in the target language.

### **3.2 The DCT**

The study is of the quantitative sort and the data was collected through a discourse completion test (DCT). This instrument is employed to produce speech acts by providing various illustrated situations that require suitable requests. The scenarios used in the DCT (see Appendix) include information about the social distance between the interlocutors to clarify the situation, which the participants ought to consider when formulating a suitable request. The participants' level of education was taken into consideration as well. The DCT for this study consists of socially differentiated situations where the participants' task is to use an appropriate request strategy for each situation. The instrument was based on Daskalovska et al.'s (2016) structure with minor alterations considered suitable for the participants of the present study. The DCT was chosen for the present study in order to allow the students to

produce their own requests rather than choose among already provided alternatives. The implications of the applied method will be discussed further in section 3.3.

### **3.3 Content selection for the DCT**

The aim of the DCT is to gain understanding of the students' employment of appropriate levels of directness in request strategies in the given contexts. Therefore, the content of the instrument is chosen to be relative to what the participants are expected to know or experience. In the context of formal situations such as a student addressing a professor (see Appendix), it is expected to see more indirect forms of requests, given the formality of the relationship. They are categorized after the degree of familiarity between the persons involved. Moreover, they are sorted according to relative authority between addresser and addressee, hence the categories of "request to a person of superior status" "request to a stranger" and "request to a friend of equal status".

For instance, category A (situations 1, 2, and 3) involves a teacher, a well-known public figure, and a parent, who represent different degrees of familiarity, power and status in relation to the participants. It is important to note that the relation status of the parent is not the same as that of a professor or a celebrity. However, it was chosen to represent a different aspect of authority, since it is commonly believed that a parent does have authority over the child. In category B (situations 4, 5 and 6,), the students were expected to consider employing request strategies suitable for the degree of familiarity with strangers in relatively informal situations. Finally, category C (situations 7, 8 and 9) involves the use of request strategies when speaking to a friend of equal status, i.e. a classmate/friend of the same age. These different contexts were chosen to create variation in the situations provided in the DCT.

Along with the prospects of this study, it is expected that the participants take into consideration the status of the relationship between themselves and the addressees, as well as the required actions, and choose to apply an appropriate level of directness when requesting. In the contexts of category, A and B, formal and polite language is anticipated, and for category C, polite language is expected too, though less so than in connection with the previous categories.

The participants are presented with a short description of a situation, providing awareness of the social distance between who they are supposedly interacting with and the status of the respective hearer. With this description, the participants are expected to complete the dialogue with an appropriate request strategy, as they would in real-life situations. They are also expected to integrate some level of politeness appropriate to each context. The nine context situations have been used to be supposedly familiar to what the participants are likely to experience in their life.

### **3.4 Analytical procedure**

The goal is to determine what levels of directness are used by L2 learners in Sweden by investigating their request strategies in English. In order to analyse the levels of directness of the requests, the request strategies and forms will be analysed to determine what level or what strategy is most frequently used. If it is noted that the students employ requests without asking a question, it can be determined that it is the direct level of request employed, e.g. “I need two extra days to finish my essay” (see 2.5 about levels of directness in request strategies).

However, if the students write *questions* in the DCT, it will be possible to categorize them into the conventionally indirect levels, e.g. “Is it possible for me to receive two more days to finish my essay”. If the requests are made by using hints, e.g. “If I had two more days, I would probably finish writing my essay”, it is possible to categorize the request as unconventionally indirect. These examples of levels of directness in requests will be used to categorize the students’ written requests. Further, the request perspectives in the results will also be analysed and sorted according to the aforementioned categories of request perspectives. For example, if the participants refer to themselves when requesting “Can I”, the request will be sorted to the *speaker-oriented* category (see section 2.6). Limitations of the instrument will be discussed in section 6.

### **3.5 Ethical considerations**

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the DCT was administered. Vetenskapsrådet (2017) was consulted to ensure that the study followed the four aspects of good research ethics: secrecy, professional secrecy, anonymity and confidentiality. To follow these aspects, the students were asked not to write their names or any other personal information on the DCT, and anonymous participation was guaranteed to the students.

## 4 Results and analysis

With 30 students completing the DCT of 9 contexts for request strategies, there was a total of 270 requests written down, or 90 per category. Tables 1, 3 and 5 provide the overall statistics for the request strategies used. Tables 2, 4 and 6 represent the frequency of request perspectives used by the students in each category.

### 4.1 Request strategies and request perspectives

The analysis of the results will be provided in three sections where the results for each of the categories A, B and C in the DCT will be analysed separately for clarity. For each category, there are two tables that show the frequency of request strategies and request perspectives employed by the students. Apart from the tables, examples will be provided for the purpose of clarifying and determining the level of directness in the request strategies.

#### A) Requests to a person of superior status

Table 1. Frequency of request strategies used in category A.

Can I	54
Could you	23
Do you mind	4
I was wondering (...if it is possible...)	4
Would you mind	3
I wanted to ask	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>90</b>

Table 2. Request perspectives when addressing a person of superior status.

Speaker-oriented	60
Hearer-oriented	30
Speaker-hearer-oriented	-
Impersonal	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>90</b>

Table 1 reveals that the request form *Can I* is by far the most frequently used in category A, followed by *Could you*. A few other request strategies such as *Do you mind* and *I was wondering* contributed to some variation. These request forms also indicate that speaker-oriented perspectives are the most popular when addressing a person of superior status, following hearer-oriented requests. Interestingly, speaker-hearer-oriented or impersonal

requests were never used by the participants. The following sentences are examples from the results of the DCT.

*Can I have two more days to write my essay?*

*Could you give a speech at my school?*

*Can I have some money to buy a new game?*

The request strategies used for addressing a person of superior status were not satisfactory, considering the students' and the attended course's supposed level of proficiency. However, in terms of request perspectives, imposition is considered softened, since speaker-oriented requests are perceived to reduce the impact of imposition and thus more polite (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). To answer the first research sub-question, Table 1 reveals that conventional indirect request strategies were the most popular when addressing a person of superior status. The second research question concerning request perspectives can partly be answered by Table 2. The results show speaker-oriented requests to be the most favoured by the participants when addressing a person of superior status.

## **B) Requests to a stranger**

Table 3. Frequency of request strategies used in category B.

Could you	26
Can I	24
Can you	19
Could I	17
Would you	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>90</b>

Table 4. Request perspectives when addressing a stranger.

Hearer-oriented	49
Speaker-oriented	41
Speaker-hearer-oriented	-
Impersonal	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>90</b>

Table 3 shows similar levels of frequency for the request forms *Could you* and *Can I*, followed by *Can you* and *Could I*. *Would you* is also employed by the students in category B, though with significantly lower frequency. All of these requests have one aspect in common,

namely to belong to the conventional indirect level of request. This said, the second research sub-question concerning what level of directness is employed in the participants' requests when addressing a stranger is answered. Following, the last research question of the study concerning what request perspectives are employed by the students when requesting, in relation to category B (requests to a stranger), we can observe Table 4. There, it is revealed that hearer-oriented perspectives were dominantly used in this category, closely followed by speaker-oriented requests. Again, speaker-hearer-oriented and impersonal requests were never employed by the participants. This shows that unconventional indirect levels were not employed.

### C) Request to a friend of equal status

Table 5. Frequency of request strategies used in category C.

Could you	46
Is it OK if I	18
Can I	10
Can you	9
Could I	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>90</b>

Table 6. Request perspectives when addressing a friend of equal status.

Hearer-oriented	55
Speaker-oriented	35
Speaker-hearer-oriented	-
Impersonal	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>90</b>

For the last category of the DCT, Table 5 reveals the request form "Could you" to be vastly popular when addressing a friend of equal status, followed by "Is it OK if I".

Could you

Ultimately, Table 5 answers the third sub-research question and reveals that conventional indirect levels of requests are solely used when addressing a friend of equal status. This is in alignment with the two previous research sub-questions, which also resulted in no use of direct level requests, and of no nonconventional indirect ones. Additionally, Table 6 – in alignment with Table 2 and 4 – reveals no use of speaker-hearer oriented requests, nor that of impersonal ones. However, in the case of category C, hearer-oriented requests were the most

popular among the students, followed by the speaker-oriented ones. In accordance with Blum-Kulka (1989), the latter is considered as more polite, which would lead to the conclusion that the average level of politeness represented by the students' suggested requests was comparatively low.

## 4.2 General analysis of results

Following the analysis of the individual results, a general analysis of the participants' request strategies is provided in this section, for the purpose of gaining a broader impression of the results. The criteria used in defining the levels of directness in the participants' request strategies were those of Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1989), as presented above. Daskalovska et al. (2016), among other previously mentioned authors, also employed these criteria to define levels of directness in request strategies.

According to the aforementioned levels of directness of request strategies, the requests that the L2 students used in the present study match the “conventionally indirect” type, in which the students made a specific reference to the hearer or speaker, as well as the action requested to be performed. Unexpectedly, there was no use of speaker-hearer-oriented requests such as *Could we* or *Is it possible for us to*. Additionally, impersonal requests never occurred either, just as there was no evidence of unconventionally indirect levels of requests. The following are examples of the most frequent formulations – more or less in these exact forms – employed by the students:

*Can I have a ride with you?*

*Could you hold a speech in my school project?*

*Mom, can I borrow money from you to buy a new game please?*

*Excuse me, could you close the curtain because I feel a little bit tired?*

*Excuse me, can I get a gum, please?*

*Can you move your car so I can get out?*

*Johanna, could you borrow me 150 SEK so I can buy the table I want?*

These requests belong to the conventionally indirect level and are collected from all three categories of the DCT. Additionally, there was no evidence of direct levels of requests in the results, leaving the conventionally indirect level to be the most favoured in all categories of the DCT.

## 5 Discussion

This section will discuss the most frequently adopted level of directness employed by the participants of this study, namely the conventionally indirect level. Further, the learning environments of these Swedish students will also be discussed in relation to the English subject and the findings of this study.

### 5.1 Conventionally indirect request

The results show that request strategies of the category *conventionally indirect requests* were employed by the majority of the students. This is in alignment with previous studies by – among others – Kasper (1981), House and Kasper (1987), Blum-Kulka and House (1989), Kılıçkaya (2010) and Daskalovska et al. (2016). The choices of request strategies by the participants who were at an intermediate level, in formal or informal contexts, did not vary to a great extent, as in the present study.

In the context of requests to a person of superior status (see Table 1), more polite and formal strategies were expected, considering the formality and social distance between the interlocutors. The following sentences were extracted from the completed DCTs and illustrate the most commonly used request forms employed by the students:

*Can I please have two more days to finish my assignment?*

*Can I send in my assignment tomorrow instead since I was sick for a week?*

*Can you hold a speech for my school project?*

*Could you please hold a speech in my school for my project?*

*Can I have some money to buy a game, please?*

More common polite forms such as “I was hoping to”, “Would you mind” or “Could I” were expected to be employed in this particular part, which would have minimized the imposition on the hearer’s face (Chen, 2017). Given the students’ level of education and the course syllabus, it was expected that they would be able to employ more polite forms of requests when addressing a person of superior status. In relation to the criteria in the syllabus for English 7 (Skolverket, 2011), the results for this part are considered unsatisfactory from a pedagogical point of view.

In category B (see Appendix) the participants were expected to adapt their request strategy according to the social distance between them and the hearer (a stranger). Conventionally indirect levels of request strategies were the most popular. Example utterances written by the students in this category include the following:

*Could you give me a ride home since we live on the same street?*

*Excuse me, could you close the curtain because I feel a little bit tired?*

*Excuse me, can I get a gum, please?*

Considering the absence of familiarity between the interlocutors, less imposing and more polite utterances such as “would you mind” or “is it possible” were anticipated. As the requests expect responses, politeness is of importance to reduce imposition on the hearer and achieve successful communication, considering the level of familiarity when addressing a stranger.

Category C, where less formality than in the previous two parts was anticipated, actually showed *more* polite forms. Unexpectedly, the highest level of politeness is evident in the contexts with the highest level of familiarity between hearer and speaker. In other words, where politeness was most evident were it was least expected. Recurrent utterances produced in this section are as follows:

*Johanna, could you please borrow me 150 SEK so I can buy the table I want?*

*Is it OK if I borrow your notes so I can study for the exam?*

*Could you please move your car? I need to leave.*

The request strategies for this category are considered more appropriate than the results of the previous categories, in relation to the degree of familiarity and social status. The results of previous categories, A and B, were expected to be more polite and less direct, considering the formality, authority and degree of familiarity of the relationships in those scenarios (Blum-Kulka, 1987). Given that the participants are addressing a friend of equal status more or less in the same manner they address a stranger or a person of superior status – in comparison with category A and B – the produced requests in category C are considered more appropriate.

## **5.2 Conditions of the learning environment in relation to the findings**

In a formal language-learning environment, teachers have a responsibility to provide students with an opportunity to develop their ability to adapt their language to different purposes, recipients and context, according to the Swedish school syllabus for the course English 7 at upper-secondary school level (Skolverket, 2011). Further, the course curriculum also states that the students should be given an opportunity to use different language strategies in different contexts. However, it is not explicitly mentioned how these opportunities ought to be provided, which makes the individual teacher's selection of methods and materials decisive for the students' language development. Considering the low variability in the students' request strategies, their ability to adapt their language might not be as well-developed as expected by the syllabus for their current course. However, it is difficult to determine the reason as to why the criteria for the course appear not to have been quite met, to judge from the results of this study. Then again, the syllabus for the English subject includes many other aspects than the students' pragmatic competence. Consequently, it can be said that the students' low variability in request strategies is far from sufficient for assuming that they are not meeting the criteria of the course in general.

Krashen's (cited in Wang, 2009) input hypothesis argues that for successful language acquisition, the learner needs to be exposed to comprehensible target language, and more specifically, input of grammatical and semantic forms that is marginally more advanced than the existing state of the learner's competence. This could be considered for developing students' communicative competence. An alternative is to develop learning methods where the students can practice using their communicative competence in illustrated contexts that require communication, such as the DCT in this study. Further, the teacher could challenge the students by gradually increasing the level of proficiency. When L2 learners encounter input exceeding their current proficiency level, they might thereby modify this input and output to both comprehend and be comprehended (Wang, 2009). In this sense, it is part of the teacher's responsibility to adapt materials in accordance with the students' proficiency level. Thereby, it is possible to provide an opportunity for them to develop their pragmatic competence appropriately.

As explained above, one should not assume that learners, though with excellent grammatical and lexical knowledge of the second language, would not commit pragmatic mistakes. They might be aware of specific categories of pragmatic features, such as politeness markers e.g. “please”. However, it is of importance that they develop their understanding of the relation between these forms and the context of a situation, so as to use pragmatic features appropriately, and understanding the effects of context on one’s linguistic choices.

Since speech acts are normally situated in certain social contexts, the linguistic form is normally influenced by these contexts. Among other things, speech acts provide information about the social relation between speaker and hearer. However, the students participating in this study may not purposely be adapting their request perspectives at all, but rather focus on politeness markers such as “please”, not seeing the reasons to soften their utterances in other ways as well.

### **5.3 Informal learning environments in relation to the results**

Since this study is executed in the context of language learning, it is of relevance to include some general background of the participants’ language learning environments in relation to the results. Wang (2009) refers to Krashen’s two varieties of linguistic environments when it comes to investigating the role of environment in L2 learning: formal and informal environments. The latter type is similar to the “natural setting” where learning takes place in real-life situations. It has no set objective in terms of learning outcomes, and is generally not intentional from the learner’s perspective. In other words, it is informal learning which takes place naturally in connection with some other activity. The formal linguistic environment concerns education that is usually provided by teachers in a systematic, intentional manner. The participants of this study have previously partaken in discussions with the author of the present study, where information and experiences have been shared. They have claimed to have developed the English language mostly in informal environments. Such environments include social media, online games and watching movies or TV shows. It is possible to assume that these activities would produce a variety of language stimulations while they also have the students’ full attention. However, the degree of formality in this kind of input is questionable, considering the results of this study. As the results show low variability in the degree of directness in request strategies, it is possible to conclude that the students’ proficiency to adapt their language to different contexts is relatively low.

## 6 Limitations and conclusion

The DCT in its written form might have prevented the participants from producing certain types of requests, whereas they, in real-life situations, might have used different request strategies. This might have affected the validity of the results. In other words, asking the students to produce written forms of what they would normally produce verbally in a naturally occurring manner, in various real-life circumstances, may have affected the accuracy of the data. On the other hand, producing the results in written form also gives the participants a chance to look over their answers and possibly change them. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that they simply did not know how to adapt their request strategies appropriately.

Another aspect that constitutes a possible weakness of the present study, and a suggestion for future studies, is the quantity of contexts and the number of participants. More contexts, together with more students, would perhaps have produced more comprehensive data and led to enhanced analysis and results. Among other things, the present study did not compare the request strategies of the learners with lower grades with those of higher grades. This might lead to interesting results in future studies similar to the present one. However, given the low variability in the results of the present study, taking into account aspects such as the students' grades might not have revealed considerable differences after all.

The purpose of the study was to investigate L2 learners' ability to adapt the speech act of requesting to various situations. Anticipation of the participants' results was to find requests more appropriately adapted to the various contexts, in terms of formality and politeness. However, in view of previous research, the results are not considered unexpected. The results suggest that the participants seemed to have the linguistic means to make use of their requests in various contexts when using certain levels of directness, though not as pragmatically efficient as expected. Further, it can also be concluded that the highest frequency in conventional indirect levels is in alignment with the results of Kılıçkaya's (2010) research. A surprising result was that the nonconventional indirect strategy was never applied by the participants. The analysis of the results leads to a general conclusion that context or the students' relationship to the hearer has little influence on the choice of request forms.

The participants in the present study also had different cultural backgrounds, which might be interesting to include in future studies. Given the low variability in the findings of this study, however, it might not have yielded significant outcomes. Still, cultural aspects might be included in future studies to ascertain their role, if any, for pragmatic proficiency. Then again, as the participants of the present study had attended secondary and upper-secondary school in Sweden, it might explain the low variability in the results, from a cultural point of view. As evident in previous research (Blum-Kulka & Ohlstein, 1984; Ghavamnia et al., 2012), comparisons of requests strategies of language learners with different cultural backgrounds show more variability than this study. If a similar study were to be conducted with students of different cultural and educational backgrounds, it might lead to different outcomes.

It was expected that the participants take into consideration the status of the relationship between themselves, the addressees, the required actions, and apply an appropriate level of directness when requesting. The results for categories A and B did not correspond to the formal and polite language that was anticipated. For category C, polite language was expected, however less so than for the previous categories. Surprisingly, the levels of directness in requests when addressing a friend of equal status, were the most proficient, in comparison with category A and B. The overall low variability in the students' level of directness indicates that circumstances – requiring suitable levels of politeness – were not met with particularly suitable requests, however not unexpected. Moreover, it is worth remembering that the syllabus for the English subject requires assessment of several other aspects than the students' pragmatic competence. Consequently, it can be said that the students' low variability in request strategies is far from sufficient to assume they are not meeting the criteria of English 7.

For future studies, it could be considered to use a DCT in dialogue form, written or by using role playing, which may produce different forms of requests. Another consideration for further studies could be to compare the results for the less proficient students with those for the more proficient ones. Grades from the students' previous English courses could also have been used to create groups in terms of proficiency level. Finally, the results of this study, specifically the low variability of them, might be taken into consideration when planning lessons for students in order to provide them with opportunities to develop their pragmatic competence in L2 English.

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## Appendix

### DISCOURSE COMPLETION TEST

#### A) Requests to a person of superior status:

1. You have been ill for a week and you have an assignment to hand in tomorrow. You have not had enough time to work on it. You want to write an e-mail to your teacher to ask for two more days before handing it in. You write to your teacher:
2. You are organizing a presentation for your school project and you have decided to ask a well-known person to participate by giving a speech. This person is well known for her achievements in politics. You happen to meet this person and you ask:
3. All of your friends are talking about this new game they are playing. It sounds like a lot of fun, but you have not saved enough money to buy it yet. You want your mom to help you with the rest of the money. You approach her and ask:

#### B) Requests to a stranger

4. You got off work late this evening. Your bus still has not shown up and you need to get home. You see the couple who live on the same street as you, and they are getting into their car. You would like a ride with them and you say:
5. You are going out late at night to meet a friend. You check your breath and realize you need a stick of gum, but you do not have any. There is someone sitting and chewing gum on a bench nearby. You approach them and say:
6. You are sitting on a bus early in the morning, next to a stranger. This person pulled up the curtain and now the sun is in your eyes. You are feeling tired and you want to ask the person to close the curtain again. You say:

**C) Requests to a friend (equal status)**

7. It has been difficult for you to keep up with the latest class sessions. Your friend Mike always takes notes during class, and you would like to borrow his notes to study for the exam.

You ask him:

8. You found a kitchen table on sale for 500 SEK, but you only have 350 SEK on you. Your hard-working friend, Johanna, is out with you and you need that 150 SEK so you can finally have a table. You ask her:

9. You have just had a delicious dinner at your friend's house, but it is time for you to get back home. His car is blocking yours and you need him to move it. You ask: