

Do we even care about politeness anymore?

A mixed-methods study of societal perceptions on pragmatic competence in English

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Abstract

Politeness is viewed as an admirable trait by most people, yet what it means to be polite is arguably a controversial issue when it comes to using English, as people of different ages, education levels, and proficiency levels use English daily, and may have different views on politeness. These observations raise questions about whether there are certain universal pragmatic rules, or if pragmatic rules are primarily language- and/or culture-specific. The current study situates itself within the fields of cross-cultural pragmatics and English as a lingua franca and is intended to explicitly address how social distance impacts English users' views of politeness and appropriateness in English today. The study addresses this issue by investigating how speakers of English perceive appropriateness in certain speech acts, specifically requests and compliment responses, and how they justify or explain their reasoning concerning this.

The study employs a mixed-method approach to data collection, where data was collected through two steps: first, a questionnaire distributed online and, second, a set of follow-up interviews with questionnaire respondents. In total, 79 respondents contributed to the questionnaire and, out of these, eight participated in follow-up interviews. Through this dual method of data collection, the intention of the study was to provide some insight into societal perceptions on politeness today from two different perspectives. To that end, the analysis of data takes a two-fold approach: by using T-tests, the statistical relevance of the questionnaire findings is analyzed, and through an inductive analysis of the interview findings, a more in-depth view of the issue at hand is offered as a complement to the initial survey results. By providing insight to the societal perceptions of the pragmatics of English through two different perspectives, the findings of the study could inform and inspire further studies concerning pragmatic norms and, by extension, research focused on the teaching of English.

Keywords

Cross-cultural pragmatics, ELF, speech-act theory, politeness theory, sociopragmatic competence, sociolinguistics.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Rationale for the Study

In today's society, the linguistic landscape can, at best, be described as diversified and complex. Due to an ever-changing globalized world, speakers of different first languages constantly need to negotiate and adapt their language use and related choices in order to coexist and, in many domains, the English language has become the main vehicle for enabling cross-cultural communication (Seidlhofer, 2011). English is currently largely recognized as a lingua franca, enabling communication across national, linguistic, and cultural boundaries (Li, 2009; Seidlhofer, 2011). In addition to this, it is commonly argued that English should no longer be perceived as a bounded language entity, but rather as a set of varieties (see e.g., Horner & Weber, 2018; Tajeddin, Alemi & Pashmforoosh, 2018). Due to this new perception of English, some scholars assert that the denominator '*Englishes*' (i.e., in the plural form) better represents the linguistic reality of English nowadays (Sergeant, 2012). This debate concerning the nature of the English language has resulted in some controversy within diverse research domains. For instance, within sociolinguistic research various studies have been conducted focusing on the perceived legitimacy of first language (L1) versus second language (L2) speakers of English (see, e.g., Heller, 1996). Furthermore, within the field of English language teaching (ELT) there has been an ongoing discussion concerning how and what to teach when teaching English in schools, and whether English instruction should prioritize certain linguistic varieties over others (Murray, 2012), which has commonly been the case in, for instance, European language instruction (Modiano, 2009).

Needless to say, the reality of English today also brings forth the possibility of problematic situations occurring due to the fact that much communication in English occurs between interlocutors coming from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Tajeddin et. al, 2018). Such situations can include instances where mutual understanding may be hindered due to the interlocutors' differences in communicative abilities, which may invite the possibility of misinterpretations, or instances where the cultural background of interlocutors may affect their expectations of and in a specific communicative situation. As a matter of fact, most speakers of English are L2 speakers of the language (Li, 2009). Yet, despite the observation that English is rather commonly, or perhaps even primarily, used between L2 users, a perception that 'native' inner circle varieties of English such as British or American English holds legitimacy over outer and expanding circle varieties still seems to exist (Kachru, 1985; Modiano, 2009). This discrepancy between the perception of English language users and the linguistic reality of English has, in turn, inspired a plethora of studies into fields such as English as a lingua franca (ELF) and cross-cultural pragmatics. Within pragmatics, specific focus has also been directed towards how speakers navigate communication in cross-cultural settings where language users' expectations of politeness may vary due to their linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Within the field of pragmatics, specifically, there has been an ongoing debate concerning what effects globalization has had and/or should have on the teaching of the English language (e.g., O'Keeffe, Clancy & Adolphs, 2011). Various studies have approached the

issue from different perspectives and, for instance, debated whether there are certain culture-dependent rules that speakers must master in order to properly utilize the languages they know, or if there are certain universal pragmatic rules that all language users sub-consciously know regardless of their cultural or linguistic background (see, e.g. Brown & Levinson, 1987; Grice, 1975; Habermas, 1976; Wierzbicka, 2003). In terms of English education in Sweden, the curricula for compulsory and upper secondary school indicate an explicit emphasis on the need for productive pragmatic abilities (Skolverket, 2018, 2021). For instance, instruction is intended to help students to develop communicative skills in order to adapt “their language to different situations, purposes, and recipients” (Skolverket, 2021, p. 1; my translation, identical to Skolverket’s official translation from 2011) and to learn about cultural features within the English-speaking community.

In recent years, scholars have set out to compare or identify pragmatic norms of different languages (e.g., De Geer et. al., 2002; Ogiermann, 2009), or to explore possible ways of developing pragmatic competence in the classroom (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005; Murray, 2012). Other studies have focused their attention towards whether it is important to teach ‘native’ English pragmatics, that is, norms related to certain varieties of English such as British or American English (e.g., Tajeddin et. al, 2018) and many have investigated the perspective of learners of English and/or teachers and their beliefs concerning what pragmatics to teach and how to do so (e.g., Kim, 2014; Tajeddin et. al, 2018). However, while diverse studies have examined pragmatics and the need for instruction focused on English pragmatics by addressing the issue within institutional settings, fewer studies have drawn on a broader cross-section of the English user population outside of an institutional setting (i.e., not L2 teachers or students).

As such, few studies can be said to have focused their attention on the actual necessity of learning the pragmatics of a language such as English from the perspective of the people who actually use the language on a daily basis, that is, English speakers of different ages, levels of education and proficiency levels especially set in a unique location like Sweden, where there is debate as to whether it is a foreign language (EFL) or second language (ESL) context of English (e.g., Hult, 2012). Such a study would make an interesting addition to the field of cross-cultural pragmatics, as the English language could arguably not be linked to one specific ‘culture’. Therefore, the current study is intended to fill this gap by investigating perceptions on politeness in English among a diversified group of English users, drawing on two types of speech acts that could be needed in situations where the social distance between speakers can be either high or low: requests and compliment responses (CRs). The study can be perceived as an attempt to answer the call for further research concerning the importance of learning pragmatic rules explicitly, made by scholars such as Tajeddin et. al (2018).

1.2 Aim and Research Questions

Based in the debatable issues outlined above and to explore the importance of pragmatics in English within general society in Sweden, the following research questions are addressed:

1. What, if any, differences are there between how users of English perceive social distance in a set of different pragmatic scenarios as expressed by appropriateness ratings?
2. What reasons do users of English give to justify and explain their social distance appropriateness ratings in relation to different social distances expressed in a set of different pragmatic scenarios?

1.3 Outline of the Study

In the following chapter, research within ELF, politeness theory, speech act theory, and pragmatic competence is covered followed by a description of previous studies related to the current inquiry (chapter 2). In chapter 3, the methods of data collection of this study are described, followed by a discussion of ethical considerations. In latter chapters, the findings from the questionnaire and interviews are presented (chapter 4) and discussed (chapter 5) before some concluding remarks and recommendations for future research are offered (chapter 6).

2. Literature Review

In this chapter, concepts and theories that are central to the project are defined and discussed. It should be noted that the terms, concepts, and theories connected to the study of pragmatics are closely related to each other; some inevitable overlap exists. Yet, it remains vital that the main theoretical influences on the study are covered as these are crucial to the later analysis and discussion of the findings rendered through the study.

2.1 English as a Lingua Franca

In short, ELF is commonly viewed as a primarily functional concept, which can be defined as “*any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice*” (Seidlhofer, 2011, p. 7; original emphasis). In recent years, the field of applied linguistics has seen an increase in studies related to ELF, and one of many reasons for this increase in interest is because this new linguistic reality of English brings forth both possibilities and challenges for its users.

Within the ELF domain, particular interest is directed towards communicative effectiveness rather than correctness (Hülmbauer, Böhringer & Seidlhofer, 2008), which is a break from previous thinking where correctness, and “compliance with native-speaker norms” (Hülmbauer, 2009, p. 324), has been viewed as vital for intelligibility. In addition, research concerning ELF is closely connected to the field of cross-cultural communication as it is primarily in cross-cultural settings that people experience and participate in ELF-communication (Hülmbauer, Böhringer & Seidlhofer, 2008). As such, a plethora of studies within the ELF tradition has been focused on investigating how people interact in situations of ELF communication and has also directed attention towards describing ELF communication and pragmatic strategies used in such situations (see e.g., Björkman, 2011; Taguchi & Ishihara, 2018). The study of ELF-communication is arguably especially interesting as ELF speakers commonly adapt their communication in order to reach mutual intelligibility with their interlocutor and, therefore, “do not

necessarily adhere to the idealized native-speaker norms” (Taguchi & Ishihara, 2018, p. 81), as this does not guarantee mutual understanding at all times in an ELF situation.

Yet, as highlighted by Murray (2012) and Taguchi and Ishihara (2018), much research within ELF has been primarily concerned with phonology and morphosyntax, leaving ELF-pragmatics rather under-researched in comparison to other areas within ELF. Yet, studies that have focused on ELF-pragmatics so far have shown that “sociopragmatic normativity in ELF is rarely concerned with adherence to or application of ‘native’ English speakers’ interactional norms” (Walkinshaw, 2022, p. 5). Furthermore, many studies on ELF-pragmatics have focused on investigating the use of pragmatic strategies in ELF settings (see e.g., Björkman, 2011; Formentelli, 2018). The current study is intended to continue the research tradition connected to ELF and cross-cultural pragmatics, specifically outside of institutional settings, from a perspective that is not as widely researched within cross-cultural communication and ELF; that is, with a specific focus on the perceptions of language users outside the classroom with different levels of proficiency in English, ages, and educational backgrounds.

2.2 Politeness Theory

2.2.1 The Foundations of Politeness Research and Politeness Strategies

Research drawing on politeness theory “directs our attention to how features of language are interpreted in social contexts and explains why we see recurring patterns of language structure, use and inference” (Goldsmith, 2008, p. 256). The theory relies on notions such as face, face-threatening acts (FTAs), and politeness strategies and can be traced back to studies conducted in the 1960s and 1980s by, for instance, Goffman (1967) and Brown and Levinson (1987). Goffman (1967, p. 287) defines the concept of face “as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact”. He further argues that people consistently do “face-work” to maintain one’s own face and to counteract incidents or face-threatening acts that could otherwise cause, for instance, embarrassment or humiliation (Goffman, 1967). Drawing on Goffman’s definitions, his notions of face, face-work, and FTAs become highly relevant to the current study as they relate to how people perceive the level of imposition of different speech acts.

Brown and Levinson (1987) further built on Goffman’s (1967) framework, developing a framework with certain ‘universals in language use’ connected to politeness. Brown and Levinson (1987) follow Goffman (1967) in his theorization of ‘face’ while making a further distinction between what they refer to as the two components of the notion: *positive* and *negative* face. Positive face refers to the want of every language user to have his or her wants to be desirable by other people, that is, “to have one’s goals thought of as desirable” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 300). Negative face, on the other hand, refers to “the want of every ‘competent adult member’ that his actions be unimpeded by others” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 300). Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 301) further define FTAs as “acts that by their nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or of the speaker”. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), language users commonly aim to avoid doing FTAs by employing certain strategies to mitigate potential situations that can be threatening.

Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 307) further argue that the perspective of the seriousness of an FTA depends on certain factors:

- 1 The 'social distance' (D) of S and H (a symmetric relation)
- 2 The 'relative power' (P) of S and H (an asymmetric relation)
- 3 The 'absolute ranking' (R) of impositions in the particular culture.

Brown and Levinson (1987) clarify that the factors mentioned above are only interesting and relevant when one considers "the *actors'* assumptions of such ratings" (p. 308; original emphasis). That is, the individual speaker and hearer within a certain situation are the only ones whose assumptions are relevant when considering the factors' influence on the seriousness of an FTA.

Brown and Levinson's (1987) take on the notions of face, face-work and FTAs further inspired the modeling of certain *politeness strategies*, which in turn have inspired diverse studies following theirs. These strategies include, for instance, on-record strategies, off-record strategies, redressive (or non-redressive) action, negative politeness strategies, positive politeness strategies, and employing various levels of directness (Brown & Levinson, 1987, pp. 304-305). As for positive and negative politeness strategies, these cover strategies that appeal to either the positive or negative face of the hearer. Positive politeness is directed towards strengthening "the positive self-image that [the hearer] claims for himself" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 305), whereas negative politeness "is orientated mainly toward partially satisfying (redressing) ... [the hearer's] basic want to maintain claims of territory and self-determination" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 305). Brown and Levinson (1987) also make mention of so-called conventionalized indirectness, which is described as a result of a 'natural tension' between going on record to pay face and going off record in order to avoid imposing. They write that "many indirect requests ... are fully conventionalized in English so that they are on record" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 305). For instance, the question 'Can you pass the salt?' would nowadays always be interpreted as a request and, therefore, other interpretations of the utterance are most often not viable (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 305).

It should be noted that Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of politeness strategies and their discussion of face and FTAs has been criticized at times. For instance, it has been argued that "the universality of politeness and the all-encompassing claims for the model are simply overstated" (Fraser, 2005, p. 66). Yet, Brown and Levinson's theory remains one of the most influential models of politeness up until this day (Leech, 2014). Hence, it also makes a valuable addition to the current study as speakers of different languages and cultures may have different perceptions of what 'politeness' entails, and the concepts introduced here may prove useful tools for analyzing these perspectives.

2.2.2 Grice's Cooperative Principle and the Conversational Maxims

In connection to politeness theory some mentioning of Grice's Cooperative Principle and Conversational Maxims evidently must be included, as these maxims may influence how a specific speech act such as a request is perceived by speakers of different languages, since they may have different perceptions of how much weight should be given to each

of the maxims for the request to be considered polite. In short, the Cooperative Principle consists of four conversational categories: Quantity (relating to the amount of speech being produced), Quality (relating to the truthfulness of the utterance), Relation (relating to the relevancy of the utterance), and Manner (relating to how an utterance is and should be phrased) (Grice, 1975, p. 64). In the current study, a discussion of the Gricean maxims is not foregrounded, yet they remain to be of some relevance as they could be argued to affect what is considered polite in different languages and cultures. Even if the maxims are to be considered as ‘general principles’ that underscore the pragmatic reasoning of language users, the perspective of and weight given to the different maxims is arguably dependent on the interlocutors’ understanding of what is suitable in specific situations. That is, language users may fail to fulfill the maxims due to different factors. As mentioned by Grice (1975, p. 66), speakers may purposefully violate a maxim or opt out from operating within a maxim or the cooperative principle just because they are unwilling to cooperate in a specific situation. Furthermore, they may face a clash or even flout a maxim; that is, they may either be unable to fulfill a specific maxim without violating another, or “blatantly fail to fulfill it” (Grice, 1975, p. 67).

2.2.3 Social Distance and its Effect on Perceptions of Politeness

As the social distance between interlocutors has been proven to have a major impact on the perception of a speech act realization, this variable will be given some additional attention in the current section as it also affects the methodology of the current study. For instance, Chen (2010) writes that when it comes to compliments and CRs, studies show that the relationship between the interlocutors has an immense impact in most languages.

Concerning social distance, two aspects relevant to this study deserve attention. According to Leech (2014), social distance can be observed within two sociopragmatic dimensions: a vertical and horizontal one. Leech provides a telling example of this, writing that

in deciding to use an honorific form such as *sir* or *Dr. Smith*, we evaluate our relationship to the addressee in terms of horizontal social distance (on a scale going from the most intimate or familiar relationship to the most distant) and vertical social distance (on a scale going from someone with the lowest power or status relative to speaker to the highest power or status relative to speaker). (Leech, 2014, p. 11)

As such, the horizontal distance can be said to relate to social distance in terms of kinship, for instance, whereas the vertical distance relates to social distance in terms of power. Drawing on the factors affecting the seriousness of an FTA (as mentioned in section 2.2.1), social distance can as such be assessed both through a symmetric (i.e., kinship/familiarity level) and asymmetric (i.e., power/hierarchy difference) relationship between interlocutors. Both aspects may as such affect the pragmatic choices speakers make, and the perspective of how much weight should be given to this may also differ between speakers, as is continuously discussed in the current paper.

2.3 Speech Act Theory

2.3.1 The Foundations of Speech Act Theory

Using a language does not merely entail putting together sentences and utterances to *say* or *describe* things that are happening, but using a language actually entails *doing* things through the use of utterances and sentences. Hence, language and the utterances and sentences we produce can be described as *performative* in itself. This is arguably the essence of what is since long known as speech act theory: a research tradition dating back to the work of Austin and Searle beginning in the 1960s.

Austin (1962) describes performative utterances (e.g., requests and compliment responses, which are discussed in section 2.3.2) as utterances that are used to perform an action. For instance, Austin (1962, p. 52) mentions that in the situation of a wedding, where the wedding party says 'I do' to one another, the utterance 'I do' "does not describe my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it". However, when defining a specific utterance as a performative, it is vital that certain surrounding circumstances are fulfilled in order for the performative to actually be a performative. "Besides the uttering of the words of so-called performative, a good many other things have ... to be right and to go right if we are to be said to have happily brought off our action" (Austin, 1962, p. 54). Austin (1962, p. 54) classifies the study of things that can go wrong in communication as "the doctrine of Infelicities".

Austin (1962) further distinguishes between what he terms *locutionary acts*, *illocutionary acts*, and *perlocutionary acts*. In short, to perform a locutionary act is to say something, but while performing a locutionary act we also perform an illocutionary act (Austin, 1962). For instance, when someone is asking for a refill of coffee, they are performing the act of asking a question. Simultaneously, how the question for a refill is phrased may affect its illocutionary force; that is, certain words may have the force of a question, whereas others may carry the force of an order (Austin, 1962). The term perlocutionary act, on the other hand, refers to the "consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons" (Austin, 1962, p. 57). Especially interesting is that sometimes speakers can involuntarily produce (or not produce) a specific illocutionary force. As Austin (1962, p. 57) explains, sometimes "when the speaker intends to produce an effect it may nevertheless not occur and ... when he does not intend to produce it or intends not to produce it it may nevertheless occur". Drawing on this possibly unintentional force a performative might carry, the three levels of locutionary forces and their function in communication become relevant to the current study, as they may affect how a specific speech act is correctly or incorrectly interpreted.

The work of Austin also inspired the work of other scholars such as Searle (1979), who continues the work within speech act theory by adding five classifications of illocutionary acts. Searle's (1979) five categories are defined as follows:

We tell people how things are (Assertives), we try to get them to do things (Directives), we commit ourselves to doing things (Commissives), we express our feelings and attitudes (Expressives), and we bring about changes in the world through our utterances (Declarations). (Searle, 1979, p. viii)

As stated by Searle (1979), one utterance is not necessarily only an assertive, but may simultaneously indirectly also function as a directive, for instance. As such, one single utterance can stretch over various levels of meaning.

Although various speech acts could be investigated, this study is primarily focused on two different speech acts that were chosen because they could be used between people with different degrees of familiarity between them: requests and CRs. That is, a request could be uttered to a sister or brother, or to a stranger at a coffee shop, similarly to a CR. Clearly, the perspective of the use, manner, and appropriateness of these speech acts in different situations may differ between speakers of different L1s and cultures (as demonstrated by, e.g., Chen (2010), Chen & Yang (2010), Kallia (2005), & Ogiermann (2009)), yet this is arguably why they create such an interesting basis for inquiry. Therefore, these specific speech acts will be described more in depth in the following section (section 2.3.2).

2.3.2 Requests and Compliment Responses

Requests are directive speech acts, as the intention of stating a request is to “get the hearer to act” (Kallia, 2005, p. 217). Requests can be face-threatening as they may potentially harm the negative face of the hearer as well as the positive face of the speaker (Kallia, 2005). The face-threat resides in that “the hearer is expected to conform ... [and] the speaker is trying to have his/her own way” (Kallia, 2005, pp. 217-218). Requests can be made in various ways, and the preferred manner of stating a request may differ between languages (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984).

Drawing on Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984, p. 201), “three major levels of directness that can be expected to be manifested universally by requesting strategies” can be said to exist. The first level is the most direct, and at this level the request is delivered through an imperative or a performative (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). The second level is the “conventionally indirect level” (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984, p. 201), and such speech acts are commonly referred to as indirect speech acts. At this level, the speech act is performed through realizing “the act by reference to contextual preconditions necessary for its performance, as conventionalized in a given language” (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984, p. 201). Hence, the request is made in a more indirect manner and phrases such as ‘could’ or ‘would’ are used to express the request. The third level is the nonconventional indirect level, which is described as “the open-ended group of indirect strategies (hints) that realize the request by either partial reference to the object or element needed for the implementation of the act... or by reliance on contextual clues” (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984, p. 201). Asking ‘why is the music so loud’ or saying ‘the music is really loud’ when wanting someone to turn down the volume are examples of such requests.

Diverse studies have directed their focus towards the speech act of CRs and the differences in the realization of CRs between different languages and cultures. CRs are, in essence, Expressives, as they reflect the attitudes and emotions of the speaker. CRs make interesting sources of inquiry as they can take many different forms as the compliments they are used in response to may have different forms (Pomerantz, 1978). For instance, a compliment can take the form of ‘supportive actions’, which includes “offers, invitations, gifts, praise and so on” (Pomerantz, 1978, p. 81). In these instances, the recipient may either accept or reject the compliment through a CR (Pomerantz, 1978).

On the other hand, a compliment can also function as an assessment, to which the recipient may either agree or disagree (Pomerantz, 1978). Pomerantz (1978) highlights that the two most important aspects of completing a CR successfully are that one should avoid self-praise and that one should show agreement with the speaker.

Yet, as Herbert (1986, p. 77) states, Pomerantz’s (1978) conditions “pose a dilemma for the recipient: how can one gracefully accept a compliment without seeming to praise oneself?”. There are various types of CRs, and the taxonomy of CRs most referred to is that of Herbert (1986). Herbert’s (1986, p. 79) taxonomy is shown in Figure 1.

<i>Response Type</i>	<i>Example</i>
A. Agreement	
I. Acceptances	
1. Appreciation Token	Thanks; thank you; [smile]
2. Comment Acceptance	Thanks, it’s my favorite too.
3. Praise Upgrade	Really brings out the blue in my eyes, doesn’t it?
II. Comment History	I bought it for the trip to Arizona.
III. Transfers	
1. Reassignment	My brother gave it to me.
2. Return	So’s yours.
B. Nonagreement	
I. Scale Down	It’s really quite old.
II. Question	Do you really think so?
III. Nonacceptances	
1. Disagreement	I hate it.
2. Qualification	It’s all right, but Len’s is nicer.
IV. No Acknowledgement	[silence]
C. Other Interpretations	
I. Request	You wanna borrow this one too?

Figure 1. Herbert's (1986, p. 79) taxonomy of CRs.

Hence, although etiquette books and speakers of a language tend to teach children how one should respond (e.g., *thank you*), this differs from the strategies people actually use (Herbert, 1986).

2.4 Pragmatic Competence

In this section, *pragmatic competence* is approached from different perspectives. Similar to linguistic competence, pragmatic competence makes a vital part of what is commonly referred to as communicative competence (Leech, 2014), and is acknowledged on curriculum documents produced by Skolverket (2018, 2021), making the concept particularly relevant to English education in Sweden.

2.4.1 Socio- and Pragmalinguistic Competence

Research within pragmatics divides its focus between two sub-categories: sociopragmatics and pragmalinguistics (Marimaridou, 2011). In politeness research, these two subdomains are both equally relevant. Whereas the latter is primarily concerned with “the linguistic realizations of politeness” (Leech, 2014, p. 13), the former is focused on the social and cultural aspects that may lead people to believe that an utterance is polite or not (Leech, 2014). As such, pragmalinguistic competence can be described as the knowledge of how to convey something linguistically, whereas sociopragmatic competence has to do with the ability to weigh the degree of politeness needed in a particular setting with a particular interlocutor. Furthermore, when it comes to

sociopragmatic competence, diverse factors such as age, social class, culture, and gender may affect how an individual values a specific situation (Blum-Kulka, 1997; Leech, 2014). The study of sociopragmatic competence and politeness is especially interesting from a cross-cultural perspective, as the norms concerning what is considered polite vary greatly between different cultures (Leech, 2014). For instance, Leech highlights that:

it is generally held that English-speaking cultures place more weight on the autonomy of the individual than do most other cultures, so that avoidance of direct imposition on the hearer in directives ... shows especially elaborate development in English. In many other cultures, however, more weight is placed on the value of generosity, for example, showing oneself to be generous in offers and invitations. (Leech, 2014, pp. 14-15)

In other words, the relevance of introducing and defining the concept of sociopragmatic competence in the current study becomes clear, as the linguistic and cultural background of the participants in the study may affect their reasoning in the data collection procedure.

2.4.2 Pragmatic Failure

Attending to the fact that this study is intended to investigate societal perceptions of pragmatic competence with a specific focus on politeness, it further becomes relevant to discuss the concept of pragmatic failure, as it is closely connected to pragmalinguistics, sociopragmatics, and cross-cultural communication (Leech, 2014; McGee, 2019). After all, communication is not always perceived as successful or satisfactory by all parties involved. In its essence, pragmatic failure occurs when a speaker fails to adhere to pragmalinguistic or sociopragmatic norms when performing a speech act or when a hearer misinterprets said speech act (Leech, 2014; Marmaridou, 2011; Shaw, 1992). This fundamentally means that a pragmatic failure can occur due to either the speaker, the listener, or both. Pragmalinguistic failure, specifically, entails producing a speech act in a way that diverges from the way a 'native' speaker would perform the same speech act, whereas sociopragmatic failure "results from the speaker's miscalculation of the social conditions placed on language in use" (Marmaridou, 2011, p. 86). As a matter of fact, pragmatic failure can be quite a serious issue. When pragmatic failure occurs, this may reflect badly on the individual (Marmaridou, 2011) and some scholars, such as Leech (2014, p. 262), report that L1 speakers regard "pragmatic failure as more serious than grammatical error". The reason as to why pragmatic failure might be considered more serious could be because people might have universal pragmatic expectations, which will be discussed more in detail below (section 2.4.3).

Simultaneously, it could be argued that the very notion of 'pragmatic failure' is ill-suited to describe what happens when a problem occurs in communication. A language is never just that, one language. As Culpeper (2012) and Leech (2014) state, it is not suitable to equate a language with one specific culture or norm, as most languages actually belong to various cultures. As discussed above, English is a global language used by people worldwide, and simultaneously the varieties of the language are as diverse as the speakers of it, which is why the plural denominator *Englishes* has come into use. Hence, it is arguably unfair to discuss the pragmalinguistics or sociopragmatics of the English language and culture (Leech, 2014), as it suggests that a norm specifically related to English exists.

In relation to pragmatic failure then, it seems to be an unfair expectation that speakers of English should adhere to ‘an English norm’. Not abiding by the pragmalinguistic or sociopragmatic norms of a speech act does not necessarily have to equate producing a pragmatic failure, as the speech act may have been performed albeit not in the manner a ‘native’ speaker would expect it. As an example, using an imperative construction to make a request in English would supposedly deviate from the norm, as studies have found it to be far more common to use a modal verb in a request in English (see e.g., Ogiermann, 2009). Yet, as the imperative construction may be used for making requests in other languages such as Russian (Ogiermann, 2009), this form could plausibly be transferred into English if the speaker is used to phrase requests this way in their L1, for instance. In other words, the word “failure” does not capture the nuance of actual communication, and therefore this term will not be used in the current paper. Instead, the term “violation” is introduced as a more malleable and flexible term that acknowledges some problem but also allows for meaning to be delivered and received. This view of pragmatic failure, or violations, is reflected in the method of the current study as the participants in the questionnaire are asked to rate the acceptability of different speech act realizations on a scale, rather than deciding whether they are correct or have failed.

2.4.3 Universal Pragmatics

When a pragmatic violation occurs, it may indicate that one or the other interlocutor is operating under the expectation that there are certain universal pragmatic rules that should have been honored in the situation where the presumed violation occurred. This expectation is arguably related to the study of what is commonly referred to as *universal pragmatics* (see, e.g., Habermas, 1976). In essence, universal pragmatics refers to the idea that there are certain, universal rules that adult speakers of languages must know to be able to create utterances and perform speech acts (Habermas, 1976, pp. 155-156). Research within universal pragmatics aims to reconstruct “rule systems over which adult speakers must have mastery... regardless of the specific nature of the language to which the sentence belongs or the context in which it happens to be embedded” (Habermas, 1976, pp. 155-156). However, it is impossible to define universal pragmatics without mentioning the validity claims of Habermas (1976), which also make up much of the foundation of universal pragmatic research. The validity claims “act ... as a set of general principles on which all communication is based and which can be called into question and ‘redeemed’ by interlocutors” (Harris, 1995). The validity claims arguably relate to Grice’s maxims mentioned before, as they focus on similar aspects of communication such as the need to be truthful, relevant, and proper with regards to the specific situation of communication.

The concept of universal pragmatics has been criticized since it first surfaced. Research on universals is commonly perceived as tainted by “a strong anglocentric bias” (Wierzbicka, 2003, p. 67). Referring to Brown and Levinson (1987), Wierzbicka (2003, p. 68) argues that the politeness parameters that they argue in favor of actually “reflects ... the authors’ culture-specific (anglocentric) perspective”. Furthermore, referring to Leech’s (1983) maxims of modesty and approbation, Wierzbicka (2003, p. 68) emphasizes that although Leech (1983) is “aware that the weight of maxims ... may vary from culture to culture ... he assumes that apart from quantitative differences they are in essence universally valid”. As such, another field of research also becomes relevant when

discussing universal pragmatics and related criticisms: cross-cultural pragmatics (see section 2.4.4).

2.4.4 Cross-Cultural Pragmatics

The study of cross-cultural pragmatics can be described as “research comparing and contrasting politeness phenomena in diverse languages and cultures” (Leech, 2014, p. 275). As described by House and Kádár (2021) the notion of cross-cultural pragmatics is closely related to intercultural pragmatics, yet certain differences still exist between the two research domains concerning the focus of inquiry:

In pragmatics, ‘cross-cultural’ investigations focus on similarities and differences between patterns of use and interpretation of language across cultures. Such a cross-cultural line of inquiry differs from intercultural pragmatics, as the latter generally studies interaction between language users with different cultural backgrounds. (House and Kádár, 2021, p. 2)

The current study can therefore be said to take a cross-cultural approach to the study of pragmatics, as the intention is to investigate how people coming from different backgrounds *perceive* and *interpret* speech acts. Worth noting is that for the purposes of this study, “culture” is viewed broadly and is perceived to be influenced by and consisting of diverse variables: age, English proficiency, and education level.

Research within cross-cultural pragmatics differs from universal pragmatics as it acknowledges and presupposes that there are differences between languages that “are profound and systematic, and that they reflect, and can be explained in terms of, independently established differences in cultural traditions... values... and priorities” (Wierzbicka, 2003, p. 21). In other words, cross-cultural pragmatics acknowledge the fundamental differences that may exist between speakers of different languages and research within the field allows for inquiries where the basis of these differences are investigated and compared.

2.5 Previous Studies

2.5.1 Studies on Pragmatic Reasoning

Prior to presenting previous research related to the speech acts in focus in the present study, a brief overview of studies investigating pragmatic reasoning is provided, as these studies have inspired the present one. To begin with, Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei’s (1998) study investigated whether L2 language learners recognize grammatical errors and pragmatic violations in their target language, utilizing an acceptability test with a participant group consisting of L2 learners of English as a foreign (EFL) or second language (ESL) and their teachers. The findings of the study showed that whereas EFL learners and teachers found mistakes in grammar more severe than pragmatic errors, the opposite pattern surfaced among ESL learners and teachers (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998). Hence, the data rendered through the study showed that there is a difference in the pragmatic reasoning among users of English, depending on whether they utilize the language as a second or foreign language.

Furthermore, Siegel and Broadbridge (2016) investigated the differences in perceptions between EFL teachers and nonteacher target community members (TCM) through asking

them to evaluate five Japanese university study abroad students' spoken pragmatic output. The findings showed that there were some differences in the ratings and perceptions of EFL teachers and TCMs. For instance, "teachers tended to rate the pre-study abroad output lower than the TCMs, but generally ranked the post-study abroad responses higher than the TCMs" (Siegel & Broadbridge, 2016, p. 15). In addition, whereas the appropriateness ratings of the post-study abroad pragmatic output were similarly rated between the groups in general, the teachers tended to rate the formality of the output significantly higher than the TCMs (Siegel & Broadbridge, 2016). The findings suggested that "more awareness of, preparation for, and practice in pragmatic scenarios may be necessary so that students can communicate their intentions within their host communities" (Siegel & Broadbridge, 2016, p. 15). However, drawing on the findings from this study, it can be argued that the question remains how this may be applied in an ELF context, where there is not a clear speech community in the traditional sense.

As exemplified here, albeit briefly, there have been previous studies focused on the pragmatic perceptions and reasoning of both learners and teachers of English, as well as target community members. However, as previously mentioned, studies drawing on a wider cross-section of participants outside of institutional settings remain scarce and the relation between public perception and pragmatic reasoning in an ELF context is still rather under researched. Hence, the current study can function as a valuable addition to the research field of cross-cultural pragmatics.

2.5.2 Research on Speech Acts from a Cross-Cultural Perspective

Diverse studies have been conducted within the field of cross-cultural pragmatics directing a particular focus on speech acts from different perspectives. Therefore, this section is intended to shed light upon the findings of a selection of studies focused on speech acts that are also directly relevant to the focus and design of the present study.

For instance, investigating the speech act of requests, specifically, Ogiermann's (2009) study found that using the modal verb and personal pronoun '*can I*' was more common in English than in German, Polish or Russian whereas the interrogative style using a negation while simultaneously asking about the hearer's ability (e.g., couldn't) is considered rude in English but highly polite in Russian. Furthermore, Ogiermann's (2009) findings also exemplify that although the use of the imperative construction in making a request is rare in German, English and Polish, it occurs more frequently in requests in Russian. On a similar note, Kallia (2005) investigated the use of both suggestions and requests in British English, Greek, and German, in order to see whether the realization of these speech acts share similarities between languages. The findings indicated that whereas English speakers prefer indirect strategies for both suggestions and requests, Greek speakers prefer more direct strategies for both, and German speakers prefer to be more direct in suggestions rather than in requests (Kallia, 2005).

In addition, CRs have also received attention within the field of cross-cultural pragmatics. Chen and Yang (2010) conducted a study that was specifically focused on norms concerning CRs in Chinese, comparing these with previous findings in studies focused on Chinese, as well as English and German CR practices. They discovered that whereas previous research has found that in Xi'an Chinese the norm is either to avoid acknowledging the compliment in the first place or to direct attention towards something

or someone else so as to appear humble, their findings suggest that CR practices in Xi'an Chinese are in fact similar to English practices of acknowledging, accepting and thanking the complimenting party (Chen & Yang, 2010). Furthermore, Chen (2010) set out to investigate and summarize previous findings in compliment and CR research from a cross-cultural perspective. Chen (2010) writes that

As can be gleaned from the literature, Arabic speakers accept compliments the most, followed by English speakers in South African (sic), America, and New Zealand. Then come non-English European languages such as Germany (sic) and Spanish, ... In the middle is Irish English. Turkish and East Asian languages – Chinese, Japanese, and Korea (sic) – seem to cluster together towards the rejection end of the scale. (Chen 2010, p. 94)

However, Chen (2010) clearly emphasizes that such a comparison of CR norms is only suitable on a very high level of generalization.

As can be seen, there might be some differences concerning how speech acts are realized in different cultures and languages. Yet as most of these studies have compared the pragmatic norms of different languages (e.g., comparing compliments in Chinese and German), and not the pragmatic preferences in one single language drawing on speakers of different English proficiency levels, as has been done in the present study, previous research leave some aspects of pragmatic competence and reasoning unexplored. Furthermore, the studies found here are all conducted more than a decade ago, which could suggest that changes may possibly have occurred. As a concluding note, research on speech act realizations in ELF settings has also started to receive more attention. However, as mentioned before concerning research focused on ELF-pragmatics, most studies are seemingly concerned with describing the strategies employed in ELF situations rather than investigating perceptions of ELF-users (see e.g., Björkman, 2011; Formentelli, 2018), and, therefore, they will remain unexplored in this study.

2.6 Additional Remarks

This paper does not recognize a stark distinction between native and non-native users as previous research has done but adopts a more progressive view of language ability and proficiency. Based on this review of previous research, this study further adds to the field as it differs from previous studies in several ways: it a) is situated in Sweden, b) draws on data outside of institutional settings, and c) is primarily focused on reception, rather than production.

3. Method and Theoretical Underpinnings

3.1 Theoretical Underpinnings of the Study

In this study, a mixed method approach to data collection was applied. Mixed-methods studies enable the researcher to combine the strengths of quantitative and qualitative methods (Dörnyei, 2007). This approach to cross-cultural research is explicitly encouraged by scholars (see e.g., House & Kádár, 2021; van De Vijver & Chasiotis, 2010), since it is argued that when investigating attitudes and behaviors within cross-cultural settings different kinds of methods and empirical evidence are needed. Although a quantitative study may shed light upon differences that exist within a given population,

additional analyses from other perspectives may be needed to identify the sources and reasons for the same (De Vijver & Chasiotis, 2010). Therefore, this study employs two different approaches to data collection: quantitatively through a questionnaire (section 3.2.2) and qualitatively through follow-up interviews (section 3.2.3). By combining these two steps of data collection, the study aimed to render more representative results by including an initial survey, while the follow-up interviews add a depth to the findings that may not be attainable through an exclusively quantitative approach (Dörnyei, 2007). In addition, the interviews function as a means to confirm the survey responses provided by the respondents. In other words, through this mixed-method approach, the data is triangulated which arguably not only strengthens the reliability and validity of the findings, but also allows for a multi-level analysis that can offer a deeper understanding of the issues that are addressed in the study (Ali & Yosuf, 2011; Dörnyei, 2007).

3.2 Primary data, Method of Data Collection and Analysis

3.2.1 Participants

Participants were contacted through the electronic distribution of a questionnaire through various channels (e.g., through social media forums and via personal contacts and their acquaintances). The questionnaire was intended to attract respondents of different ages, with varying English proficiency levels and a variety of educational backgrounds. An active choice was made to not consider L1/L2 status as a defining aspect, but rather self-perceived proficiency in English as the L1/L2 dichotomy is not necessarily an indicator of level of language proficiency. Furthermore, reaching a wider population of English speakers has been encouraged in previous studies (e.g., Tajeddin et. al, 2018) as this could lead to a better understanding of the pragmatic reasoning of today’s society, an acknowledgement of the ELF position, and a move away from more ethnocentric views of who “owns” English. Thus, when the questionnaire was distributed information concerning the participants’ age, level of education, and level of self-perceived proficiency in English rated on a Likert-scale from 1 (*Beginner*) to 8 (*Fully proficient*), was gathered.

Table 1. Overview of participant background categories.

Category	Groupings			
Age	Adolescents and young adults (18–25-year-olds)	Young and middle-aged adults (26-40-year-olds)	Middle-aged adults (40–60-year-olds)	Senior adults (ranging from 60 years of age onwards)
Education level (completed)	Junior high school	High school	University (Bachelor/Master’s level)	University (PhD or higher)
Self-perceived level of English proficiency	Beginner (rating 0-2)	Advanced Beginner (rating 2-4)	Intermediate (rating 4-6)	Advanced (rating 6-8)

The grouping of participants was made accordingly because it was hypothesized that people in these different age groups and education levels are in different stages of life and may have developed and determined their perspective of politeness and pragmatic choices to varying degrees. Furthermore, self-perceived level of English proficiency was also considered as the participants' linguistic background and knowledge of English was hypothesized as a possible source of differences in pragmatic reasoning as well.

Interview participants were drafted from the pool of questionnaire respondents who indicated that they would be interested in participating in a follow-up interview to discuss their reasoning in the questionnaire. A total of 30 respondents reported their interest in participating. Out of the 30 respondents, eight interview participants were invited to participate based on their answers in the questionnaire, their age group, and self-rated proficiency level in English, as the intention was to make the study as representative as possible. This organization meant that two from each age group were interviewed, out of which one participant had reported English as their most proficient language and the other participant had reported another language as their most proficient language.

3.2.2 The Questionnaire

The first step of data elicitation was inspired by Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei's (1998) study where an acceptability task was used in order to investigate the ability to identify pragmatic violations in English among second and foreign language learners and teachers of English. In their study, a videotape with a set of 20 scenarios was used to test the pragmatic reasoning of 655 language learners and teachers from different countries (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998). However, as the present study is more limited in both time and scale, an adaptation of the method used in their study was made, drawing on the idea of using scenarios in an acceptability rating yet reformulating the manner of inquiry into a questionnaire. Furthermore, their study involved L2 English students and teachers in an institutional setting, whereas the present study aims to gather responses from a broader cross-section of participants.

To answer research question 1, the first step of data collection in the current study involved utilizing a questionnaire to gain insight into whether variables such as level of English proficiency and social distance plays a role in the respondents' perceptions of politeness/appropriateness in situations that could be considered pragmatically challenging in cross-cultural communication. To that end, the situations included in the questionnaire were composed drawing from previous studies focused on two different speech acts: requests and CRs (see e.g., Chen, 2010; Chen & Yang, 2010; Kallia, 2005; Ogiermann, 2009). The questionnaire consisted of two main parts: first, a background section where the participants were asked to provide some general background information about themselves (see section 3.2.1) and, second, an acceptability task where the participants were asked to rate the appropriateness of utterances in two different pragmatically challenging situations (see Appendix A), divided into three subsections.

To attain information concerning the participants' backgrounds in the first part of the questionnaire, questions concerning the participants' age, linguistic background, education level, and English proficiency were included. This information was gathered to

enable an in-depth analysis of the pragmatic reasoning of each respondent participating in the questionnaire, since, as previously mentioned, background variables such as age, education level and language background may affect the pragmatic reasoning of an individual (see e.g., Blum-Kulka, 1997; Leech, 2014). Furthermore, it should be noted that in the questionnaire, all participants were provided with some definitions of terms in order to help ease their understanding of the questions included in the background section. For instance, definitions of terms describing proficiency levels were offered, with reference to the self-evaluation chart provided by the Common European Framework (CEFR) of English proficiency (CEFR, 2022). Hence, the notions of ‘beginner level’ and ‘advanced level’ proficiency were briefly explained in the introduction to the background section to enable the respondents to rate their own proficiency, accordingly, thereby establishing some consistency into how these somewhat ambiguous terms were intended in the survey.

In the second part of the questionnaire, each subsection included a specific situation described in writing, followed by three utterances that could be used to perform a speech act in the specific situation. Each utterance came with two different versions of the situation where a short dialogue (in writing) between two people (Person A and B) occurred; the two versions were related to the same utterance, but the social distance between person A and B differed. The reason for this was because the same utterance could possibly be interpreted differently depending on how well the speaker knows the person, and therefore this approach was used to see if there were any differences in the answers depending on this aspect (see Table 2).

Table 2. Example of questionnaire items.

Description of Situation 1	You are registered to a course where the aim is to learn how to cook. Regrettably, you are sick for the second seminar and because of this, you reach out to one of your fellow classmates in order to ask him to take notes for you. As such, you call up your classmate and say:
Utterance 1	Hi Chris, I won't be able to come to class this week. <i>Lend me your notes.</i>
First rating: Social distance variable 1 (i.e., closer/less social distance)	You have known Chris for about 2 years, and you have taken other courses with him prior to this one. How appropriate would you say Utterance 1 is in relation to the Situation described above? <i>(Not appropriate at all) 1 2 3 4 5 6 (Completely appropriate)</i>
Second rating: Social distance variable 2 (i.e., more social distance)	Chris is a new acquaintance, and this is the first course you take together. You have only met Chris once or twice before. How appropriate would you say Utterance 1 is in relation to the Situation described above? <i>(Not appropriate at all) 1 2 3 4 5 6 (Completely appropriate)</i>

As illustrated in Table 2, the participants were asked to provide their perspective on the acceptability of the utterance provided by person A or B by rating each utterance, depending on social distance, using a 6-point Likert-scale. In the Likert-scale, a rating of 1 equated that the utterance was not appropriate at all whereas a rating of 6 equated that

it was completely appropriate in the specific situation. For each acceptability rating, the participants were also asked to comment on why they rated the utterance more or less acceptable in the specific situation in a separate, open 'comment section' following each questionnaire item. The motivation for each acceptability rating was included in order to provide some insight into each participant's reasoning, and also to provide some food for thought in the follow-up interviews.

Prior to the actual survey, the questionnaire was piloted with four individual pilot-testers to ensure comprehensibility and that they generated desirable forms of data to address the research questions. Each of the pilot-testers represented one out of the four age-groups targeted within the study. Drawing on the findings from the pilot-survey, the questionnaire was altered to ease understanding on behalf of the participants. For instance, the grouping of participants and the structure of the survey were both altered during the piloting process to make the questionnaire as efficient as possible. Prior to the pilot-testing of the study, two age groups had other age-ranges (i.e., Group 1: 18-20-year-olds, Group 2: 21-40-year-olds) but after discussions with the pilot-testers they were rearranged. During the pilot-testing, it was highlighted that the reasoning of, for instance, a 23-year-old is not necessarily similar to the reasoning of a 40-year-old, as their everyday lives may be very distinct from one another. Furthermore, a decision was made to allow for the respondents to write their motivations of the ratings in either Swedish or English, as the potential benefits of this option were emphasized following the pilot-study.

3.2.3 Interviews

Follow-up interviews were planned and conducted with participants from the questionnaire who reported interest in participating in more in-depth interviews following the questionnaire. The intention of the interviews was to reach a better understanding of the participants' pragmatic reasoning and enable yet another angle from which to address research question 2. They added an explanatory element to the study that went beyond the open response items on the survey. In addition, the interviews offered chances to confirm and further probe survey responses. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed so as to ensure that the data presented in the study is representative of what has been divulged during the interviews. Audio recordings were chosen as opposed to video recordings, as audio recordings are arguably less intrusive and may therefore render the interview "less likely to generate the observer's paradox" (Friedman, 2012).

The interviews were semi-structured (Friedman, 2012; Groom & Littlemore, 2011), which entails that although there was a set of questions from which all interviews departed there was still room for variation in the order of the questions as well as for further elaborations and follow-up questions when needed. As with the questionnaire, a pilot study was used to identify any problematic phrasings or aspects of the questions that could either be considered difficult to understand and answer or to guide the participants towards answering in a specific way. The interview protocol was piloted with the same four participants that piloted the questionnaire, meaning that one person from each age group was represented. As pilot testing has the potential of increasing the efficiency and quality of the interview, it is one of the most vital steps in interview studies (Codó, 2008). For instance, the pilot testing of this study resulted in a decision that the interviews could

be conducted in either Swedish or English, as these languages are both known by the researcher, making it easier for some of the interviewees to elaborate on their thoughts.

The interview questions were divided into two sections: first, a background section and second, a section with questions concerning the participant's pragmatic reasoning (see Appendix B). The background section included questions concerning the participant's linguistic background, self-perceived English proficiency, age, educational background, and cultural affiliations. The primary focus of the second part of the interview was directed towards the participant's pragmatic reasoning. First, the participants were asked to describe and elaborate upon their reasoning in the questionnaire they partook in prior to the interview and, when needed, this was followed by more general questions about their views on pragmatic choices and pragmatic competence to enable the participants to expand more on their pragmatic reasoning. For instance, when asking the participants about what aspects they believe bear influence on their pragmatic choices in speech a follow up question such as the one exemplified below could be used:

Interviewer: In your opinion, what aspects influence your pragmatic choices when you speak to another person?

P7: The situation, who is in the vicinity, who you are talking to.

Interviewer: When you say: 'who you are talking to', what do you mean by this?

P7: If it is a work situation, a client, a colleague, someone you have a relation with, and you take notice of the people surrounding you. If the intention is to make the question and answer understandable for everyone, then perhaps you should not only be as clear as possible to the person you are talking to but also to the audience. Then perhaps you make your question more detailed for instance.

Through this kind of interview structure, as much data as possible was arguably rendered since the interviews can be adapted in relation to each individual participant and their answers.

3.2.4 Data Analysis

The analytical approach to data analysis taken is best described as a combination of descriptive statistics (central tendency statistics) and inductive data analysis. In other words, the data provided through the questionnaire and in the following interviews were first analyzed separately and then related to each other.

For the statistical analysis, the T-test was used in order to investigate the significance of the questionnaire findings and whether the ratings of each utterance can be said to show significant statistical differences depending on the social distance of the interlocutors in each situation, as opposed to random differences. The T-test is "the simplest test of whether groups differ" (Larson-Hall, 2015, p. 177) and it is used to compare the mean scores of two different groups. For this particular study, the paired-samples T-test was used as this enables the researcher to compare two different mean scores provided by the same people, as opposed to an independent samples T-test where the participants in the two groups compared cannot be the same people (Larson-Hall, 2015).

The questionnaire used in this study included acceptability ratings in two situations, in which each participant was to rate the acceptability of three utterances per situation. For each utterance, there were two ratings as the intention was to see if differences in social distance between speakers in the situations would affect how appropriate English users believe that the utterance is. Because of this, the total number of T-tests conducted within the study was 54 separate tests (6 tests comparing general ratings of speech acts, 6 tests comparing ratings within each of the four age groups, 6 tests comparing ratings within each education level, and 6 tests comparing ratings within self-perceived proficiency level), as each utterance is tested separately to see whether the social distance aspect affected the ratings of each utterance or not.

As the study also relies on interview data, two separate approaches to data analysis had to be utilized. The comparison between the T-test results and the interview data was intended to simultaneously allow for a more in-depth analysis connected to the previously mentioned central concepts of the study. Hence, to analyze the interviews, an analytical method referred to as inductive data analysis was utilized, and the goal of inductive data analysis is “for research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes within the raw data, without imposing restraints as is the case with predetermined coding ... or analysis schemes” (Mackey & Gass, 2015, p. 231). Inductive analyses also enable the researcher to examine and interpret the data drawing on the focus of the study or research questions (Mackey & Gass, 2015).

3.3 Ethical Considerations

As this study relies on the contributions of human participants, it becomes vital to address the ethical considerations undertaken in the study. When dealing with human participants in research it is crucial that the individual participant’s privacy is respected and that all respondents may choose to withdraw from the study at any given time without further explanation (Dörnyei, 2007; Swedish Research Council, 2017). Hence, when distributing the questionnaire, the participants were not asked to leave any specific details about themselves that could lead to a possible identification, and if such information was offered anyway, this information was removed from the presentation of the results in the study.

In the questionnaire, all participants were also asked to assert their informed consent to participating in the study prior to answering any questions, and at the end of the survey they were offered to register their interest in participating in a follow-up interview. The issue of informed consent is one of the most important aspects in research dealing with human participants (Dörnyei, 2007) and, because of this, all participants were provided with information about the intent of the study as well as the theme of the questions prior to participating in the questionnaire in the very first page of the survey (see Appendix A), and then again prior to the follow-up interviews (see Appendix C). After reading the initial information sheet provided in connection to the questionnaire and interview, respectively, all participants were also asked to provide their consent in two steps. First, for the questionnaire participants, consent was obtained in the first slide of the Google Form used through a question with a checkbox that had to be checked prior to answering any further questions. Secondly, for the respondents who wanted to participate in follow-up interviews, informed consent was gathered once more through a written consent form that had to be signed by the respondent prior to the interview (see Appendix D).

4. Results and Analysis

This chapter offers an overview of the findings of the study. Attention is directed towards a detailed description of the questionnaire and interview participants (section 4.1), the results from the questionnaire and interviews related to the speech act of requests (section 4.2), and the questionnaire and interview findings concerning CRs (section 4.3). Lastly, some general ideas concerning English and cross-cultural pragmatics that surfaced during the interviews are provided (section 4.4).

4.1 Overview of Participants

4.1.1 The Questionnaire Respondents

The questionnaire succeeded in retrieving answers from a total of 79 respondents. There was a variety of English users in different ages and although participants were not completely evenly distributed between the age groups, there was some representation (at least 16%, or 13 respondents) in all four age groups (see Figure 2).

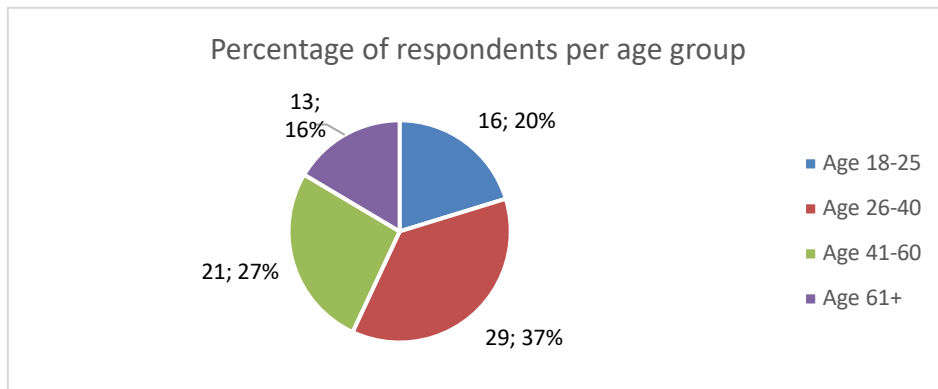


Figure 2. Overview of respondents per age group.

As for education level (Figure 3), a total of 47 of the respondents had completed a bachelor's or master's degree (amounting to 59%), and about 24 respondents (amounting to 30%) reported having completed high school at most. Only a small number of respondents had completed a PhD (8%) or only junior high (3%); therefore, these groups were not included in further analysis.

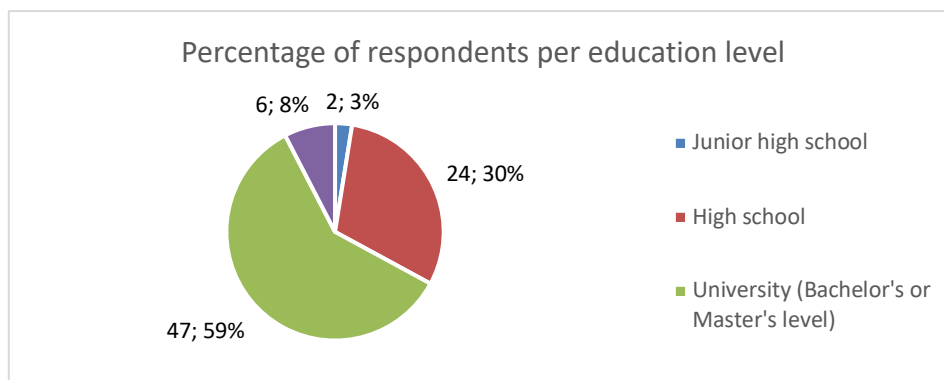


Figure 3. Overview of respondents per education level.

Most respondents (59%) reported that they were fairly proficient in English (see Figure 4), both when asked about their general proficiency as well as their proficiency in speaking and listening, respectively. That is, when rating their English proficiency on a scale from 1-8, where 1 equated having a beginner level proficiency and 8 equated being fully proficient in the language, most respondents rated themselves a 5 or higher.

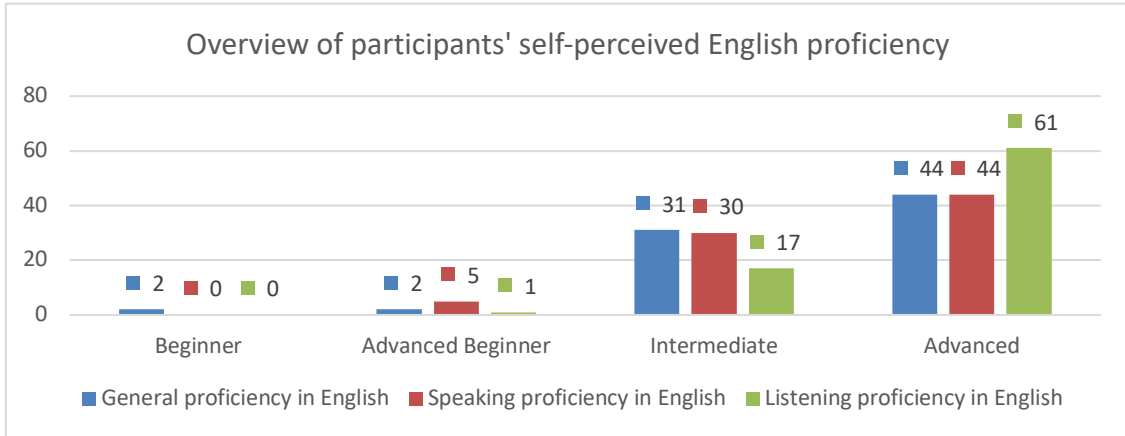


Figure 4. Overview of respondents based on self-perceived English proficiency.

It should however be noted that as the respondents were asked to rate their English proficiency on a scale from 1-8, it is still possible to see a slight difference between the levels of the participants due to the self-reported nature of this information and to variation in meaning for somewhat ambiguous terms like “intermediate” and “advanced”, which are open to interpretation. Given the low numbers in the “beginner” and “advanced beginner” groups, these categories are not used in further analysis and a choice was made to focus the analysis on the respondents who rated themselves a 5 or higher in general proficiency.

4.1.2 Interview Participants

As previously mentioned (section 3.2.1), eight respondents participated in follow-up interviews. An overview of the participants can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Overview of interview participants.

Participant	Age	Education level	Most proficient language	Cultural affiliation
P1	18-25	High school	Swedish	Swedish
P2	18-25	University (Bachelor’s or master’s level)	English	Irish, German, Korean
P3	26-40	High school	Swedish	Swedish
P4	26-40	University (Bachelor’s or master’s level)	English	Canadian
P5	41-60	University (Bachelor’s or master’s level)	Swedish	Swedish
P6	41-60	University (Bachelor’s or master’s level)	English	American
P7	61+	High school	Swedish	Swedish

P8	61+	University (Bachelor's or master's level)	English and Swedish	Swedish, Finnish, English
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As exemplified, the interviewees were evenly divided between the age groups and most proficient language, and only one of the ‘pairs’ from each group could not be represented in two separate education levels. Furthermore, it should be noted that four participants (P1, P5, P7, and P8) asked to partake in the interview in Swedish as opposed to English and, therefore, their answers were translated into English for the purposes of the present study.

4.2 Requests

4.2.1 Overall Ratings for Requests

In the first step of the analysis of the questionnaire data, all 79 ratings for each utterance were compared depending on social distance, to see whether the respondents’ ratings in general could be said to show that social distance affects the appropriateness of a specific speech act realization. In the specific situation, three different phrasings of a request to lend someone’s notes were tested. The utterances that were tested were:

1. Lend me your notes.
2. Can I borrow your notes?
3. Couldn’t you lend me your notes?

When comparing the ratings of each utterance respectively depending on social distance using the paired T-test (see Table 4), the results show that social distance influences the perception of appropriateness of each utterance as the p-value is less than $<.05$, which indicates a statistically significant difference between the ratings depending on social distance. In other words, the respondents’ ratings suggest that social distance affects the perceived appropriateness of the three speech act realizations in the survey. Drawing on the mean value of each utterance depending on social distance, it can be deduced that most utterances are considered more appropriate in situations where the social distance is lower, yet overall Utterance 1 seems to be considered the least appropriate in general.

Table 4. Findings from paired-samples T-test of questionnaire data (all ratings of requests).

Utterance	Social distance	n	df	Mean	T-value	P-value
1	<i>Low</i>	79	78	2,898	-9.099188	<.00001*
	<i>High</i>	79	78	1,379		
2	<i>Low</i>	79	78	5,164	-8.950664	<.00001*
	<i>High</i>	79	78	3,734		
3	<i>Low</i>	79	78	3,848	-4.812385	<.00001*
	<i>High</i>	79	78	3,113		

*Note: the result is significant at $p < .05$.

4.2.2 Ratings within Age Groups, Education Level, and Groups of Self-perceived English Proficiency

In the second step of the quantitative analysis, the responses were compared between age groups, education levels, and self-perceived levels of English proficiency, respectively. This section provides an overview of the second round of T-tests with regards to appropriateness ratings of requests, specifically, within each group/category.

Table 5 exemplifies the results from the T-tests focused on comparing ratings within each age group. Only one instance in which a difference in appropriateness depending on social distance (Utterance 3, Age group 1) was evident. In the instance where a significant difference was not found, the mean values of the two ratings depending on social distance show that within age group 1, it is equally appropriate to use a modal verb together with a negation regardless of social distance (e.g., *couldn't*).

Table 5. Findings from paired-samples T-test of Utterance 1, 2, and 3 (within age groups).

	Age group	Social distance	n	df	Mean	T-value	P-value
Utterance 1	1 (18-25)	<i>Low</i>	16	15	3.562	-6.472755	<.00001*
		<i>High</i>	16	15	1.312		
	2 (26-40)	<i>Low</i>	29	28	2.827	-3.989169	.00043*
		<i>High</i>	29	28	1.655		
	3 (41-60)	<i>Low</i>	21	20	3	-5.334936	.00003*
		<i>High</i>	21	20	1.238		
	4 (61+)	<i>Low</i>	13	12	2.076	-3.949684	.00193*
		<i>High</i>	13	12	1.076		
Utterance 2	1 (18-25)	<i>Low</i>	16	15	5.625	-2.611165	.01966*
		<i>High</i>	16	15	4.687		
	2 (26-40)	<i>Low</i>	29	28	5.103	-5.029412	.00003*
		<i>High</i>	29	28	3.896		
	3 (41-60)	<i>Low</i>	21	20	5.333	-6.557439	<.00001*
		<i>High</i>	21	20	3.285		
	4 (61+)	<i>Low</i>	13	12	4.461	-3.82546	.00242*
		<i>High</i>	13	12	2.923		
Utterance 3	1 (18-25)	<i>Low</i>	16	15	5	-1.385301	.18622
		<i>High</i>	16	15	4.562		
	2 (26-40)	<i>Low</i>	29	28	3.862	-2.480863	.01938*
		<i>High</i>	29	28	3.241		
	3 (41-60)	<i>Low</i>	21	20	3.523	-3.068606	.00606*
		<i>High</i>	21	20	2.476		
	4 (61+)	<i>Low</i>	13	12	2.923	-2.667892	.02049*
		<i>High</i>	13	12	2.076		

*Note: the result is significant at $p < .05$.

Hence, social distance seems to impact what is considered appropriate regardless of age of the respondent in nearly all instances. Yet, the mean values of each rating, in each utterance, in all age groups also show that Utterance 1 received the lowest scores all around. What this means is impossible to say without closer analysis using, for instance,

a statistical tool as ANOVA, which could show statistically whether there was a preference for one of the utterances over the other two. Yet the results could suggest that in general it is considered more appropriate to use a more indirect strategy when posing a request, regardless of social distance.

T-tests were also used to analyze the perception of social distance within only two education level groups: 1) people with a high school education at most and 2) people with a bachelor's or master's level of education at most. The T-test results of the ratings of the utterances focused on different realizations of requests are shown in Table 6 below.

Table 6. Findings from paired-samples T-test of Utterance 1, 2, and 3 (within education level).

	Education level group	Social distance	n	df	Mean	T-value	P-value
Utterance 1	1 (High school)	Low	24	23	3.208	-6.349012	<.00001*
		High	24	23	1.416		
	2 (University: Bachelor's or master's level)	Low	47	46	2.765	-8.421498	<.00001*
		High	47	46	1.129		
Utterance 2	1 (High school)	Low	24	23	5.541	-5.948497	<.00001*
		High	24	23	3.75		
	2 (University: Bachelor's or master's level)	Low	47	46	5.148	-6.855256	<.00001*
		High	47	46	3.723		
Utterance 3	1 (High school)	Low	24	23	4.583	-2.013251	.05594
		High	24	23	4.041		
	2 (University: Bachelor's or master's level)	Low	47	46	3.638	-4.320991	.00008*
		High	47	46	2.744		

*Note: the result is significant at $p < .05$.

The results of the T-tests comparing the ratings of utterances depending on social distance within education level groups show remarkably similar results as the results from the same T-tests within age groups. That is, all T-tests except one show that the differences in the responses depending on social distance are significant. Interestingly enough, the only T-test that did not show that there was a significant difference between the ratings depending on social distance was the rating of Utterance 3 among high school-graduates; a finding that echoes the T-test comparing the ratings of Age group 1 (18-25 years) of the same Utterance (see Table 5).

Lastly, the questionnaire responses related to requests specifically were analyzed in terms of how social distance was perceived in these utterances within groups of people who have rated themselves more or less proficient in English.

Table 7. Findings from paired-samples T-test of Utterance 1, 2, and 3 (within groups of self-rated proficiency level in English).

	Self-rated proficiency level group	Social distance	n	df	Mean	T-value	P-value
Utterance 1	Intermediate (Rating 5-6)	Low	31	30	3.129	-7.371255	<.00001*
		High	31	30	1.387		
	Advanced (Rating 7-8)	Low	44	43	2.722	-7.521898	<.00001*
		High	44	43	1.295		
Utterance 2	Intermediate (Rating 5-6)	Low	31	30	5.032	-5.173733	.00001*
		High	31	30	3.709		
	Advanced (Rating 7-8)	Low	44	43	5.318	-7.054101	<.00001*
		High	44	43	3.840		
Utterance 3	Intermediate (Rating 5-6)	Low	31	30	4.161	-2.528103	.01697*
		High	31	30	3.483		
	Advanced (Rating 7-8)	Low	44	43	3.613	-3.815868	.00043*
		High	44	43	2.886		

*Note: the result is significant at $p < .05$.

As Table 7 exemplifies, social distance had a significant effect on the ratings in all three utterances, which makes these results stand out in comparison to the two rounds of T-tests made within the groups of age and education level. Whereas the other rounds of T-tests showed that social distance had an effect in all cases according to all groups except for in relation to Utterance 3 and the ratings of 18–25-year-olds and high school graduates, the T-tests used to compare the ratings within groups of self-rated proficiency showed that social distance was perceived to affect the ratings in Utterance 3 as well, in both groups.

In general, based on the means of all the T-tests made in the different groups (age, education level, level of self-rated proficiency in English), all utterances are seemingly considered more appropriate when the social distance between the speakers is perceived to be smaller. The only instance in which social distance was not shown to be an influence was in Utterance 3, where both 18-25-year-olds and high school graduates considered it equally appropriate to use the phrasing ‘couldn’t you lend me your notes’ regardless of social distance; the means in both groups show that the utterance received a fairly high rating around 4 out of 6 regardless of social distance.

4.2.3 Interview Findings related to Requests

All interviewees had similar ratings in the questionnaire, but as will be shown in the current section, probing their reasoning further revealed some differences in the train of thought underlying the ratings.

All interviewees seemed to consider the first speech act realization pattern (*Lend me your notes*) the least appropriate in the first situation described in the questionnaire, regardless of social distance. The reasoning for this rating was highly similar between the

participants, as most of them seemed to feel it was too direct (P5), demanding (P7 and P8) and even threatening (P3). This reasoning is further exemplified below:

P1: I think it sounds a bit unpleasant if you just, like, count on that someone will do it for you, you can ask nicely It is like you take it for granted that “you will give me your notes”.
(Translated from Swedish)

P4: So, my thought is: You’re asking them to do this, and there is no obligation where they have to do this for you. And, because you need something from them, it is in my view completely inappropriate to say ‘lend me your notes’. Like, I’m not asking, I’m telling you to do this for me.

The excerpts from the interviews show that there seemed to exist a consensus among the interviewees concerning that the directness of the speech act realization in Utterance 1 made it more difficult to digest.

Yet, as shown in section 4.2.2 above, the ratings of the first Utterance did show a significant difference depending on social distance in all T-tests, where the mean scores were higher in the cases where the interlocutors knew each other a bit better (e.g., if the interlocutors had known each other for about two years as opposed to being completely new acquaintances). Possible explanations for this surfaced in the interviews, for instance in the interviews with P2 and P6:

P2: So, I would have rated them both as a one, but then with friends I think you have a bit more leeway to be a bit more rude in a way, like, you wouldn’t be taking too much offense, especially if it’s the right context.

P6: It’s like if you didn’t know Chris that well, then to say ‘Lend me your notes’ is just pretty demanding for someone you don’t know that well. If it’s someone you’ve known for a long time and you’ve exchanged notes before, then ‘hey, lend me your notes’ could be, you know, a little more acceptable.

As such, it can be said that even if Utterance 1 was considered very direct by all participants, it was also emphasized that among friends and in a situation where the social distance between speakers was lower, it could possibly be an acceptable realization of a request.

When asked to elaborate on their rating for Utterance 2 (*Can I borrow your notes?*) and 3 (*Couldn’t you lend me your notes?*), both of which received fairly high mean scores regardless of social distance, it became clear that most participants found that phrasing a request as a question (*can I/ couldn’t you*) rather than using the imperative construction (*Lend me*) was preferred. However, through the interviews it also became clear that there was a preference between the two manners of phrasing the request as a question as well. As exemplified in the interview excerpts below, Utterance 3 was considered to carry an almost blaming or shaming function:

P2: Really weird. It’s a very weird wording. It’s like, almost like a trap ... Of course, I probably would give them my notes because they’re at least not being rude about it. But I’d still be a bit put off, like, you can, you can just ask me straight out, you don’t need to put on that blaming in a way.

P4: For me, like, ‘couldn’t you lend me your notes’ sounds like they have said no before, and you’re like come on, come on, couldn’t you do this for me this one time. Despite being a question, it feels like, not asking, like, almost like shaming them into doing this.

P5: Well, I think this sounds a bit blaming. ... it’s a bit like you’re putting the burden on the other person. (Translated from Swedish)

P6: I think it almost puts a little pressure on the person ... like why can’t you do this? Like, you’re a terrible person if you’re not going to do this for me.

This kind of reasoning was seen primarily among the participants who considered English to be their strongest, or most proficient, language but it was also highlighted by one of the participants (P5) who did not rate English as their strongest language, but who had lived in the US for 20 years.

The interview findings show that, when making a request, people tend to consider the social distance between speakers, albeit for different reasons. When asked if they would reason the same way regardless of the identity of the person making the request some variables that could possibly affect their reasoning surfaced, apart from the already mentioned variable of social distance. For instance, aspects such as the speaker’s L1 and age, as well as the social hierarchy between interlocutors were discussed and argued to have an impact on the appropriateness and/or acceptability of the different realizations of requests exemplified in the questionnaire.

4.3 Compliment Responses

4.3.1 Overall Ratings for CRs

In the second part of the questionnaire, all respondents were asked to rate the acceptability of three different realizations of CRs that functioned as a response to a compliment concerning the addressee’s sweater. The CRs differed in, for instance, directness and that have been deemed to be more or less appropriate in certain cultures/languages according to previous studies (e.g., Chen & Yang, 2010; Chen, 2010) and the phrasing of them were as follows:

4. My sister gave it to me for my birthday.
5. Oh, thank you!
6. This old thing? Don’t lie.

When analyzing all respondents’ ratings of the appropriateness of CRs for Utterance 4, 5, and 6, the results showed that social distance had a significant effect on the ratings in Utterance 4 and 6 but not in Utterance 5. These findings are displayed in Table 8 below.

Table 8. Findings from paired-samples T-test of questionnaire data (all ratings of CRs).

Utterance	Social distance	n	df	Mean	T-value	P-value
4	<i>Low</i>	79	78	4,759	-7.237043	<.00001*
	<i>High</i>	79	78	3,797		
5	<i>Low</i>	79	78	5,708	-0.490822	.62493
	<i>High</i>	79	78	5.670		

6	<i>Low</i>	79	78	4.506	-10.042128	<.00001*
	<i>High</i>	79	78	2.734		

*Note: the result is significant at $p < .05$.

As shown in Table 8, the means of the ratings for Utterance 4 and 6 are higher in the case of a lower social distance between speakers, whereas they are significantly lower in the case where the social distance is greater. As such, these findings suggest that when the social distance between interlocutors is lower, for instance due to a longstanding relation, interlocutors may have a greater degree of freedom as to how to respond to compliments. Yet, it is interesting to see whether the differences in ratings remain similar when analyzed within age groups, education levels, and groups of self-rated proficiency. Hence, the following section serves to provide a more nuanced analysis of the ratings.

4.3.2 Ratings within Age Groups, Education Level, and Groups of Self-perceived English Proficiency

First, the ratings within each age group were compared with regards to any differences in ratings depending on social distance. The results from the paired-samples T-tests within each age group are shown in Table 9.

Table 9. Findings from paired-samples T-test of Utterance 4, 5, and 6 (within age groups).

	Age group	Social distance	n	df	Mean	T-value	P-value
Utterance 4	1 (18-25)	<i>Low</i>	16	15	4.875	-3.296705	.00489*
		<i>High</i>	16	15	3.5		
	2 (26-40)	<i>Low</i>	29	28	4.620	-3.414772	.00197*
		<i>High</i>	29	28	4		
	3 (41-60)	<i>Low</i>	21	20	4.952	-5.318719	.00003*
		<i>High</i>	21	20	3.857		
	4 (61+)	<i>Low</i>	13	12	4.615	-3.122499	.00881*
		<i>High</i>	13	12	1.076		
Utterance 5	1 (18-25)	<i>Low</i>	16	15	5.75	-0.323875	.7505
		<i>High</i>	16	15	5.6875		
	2 (26-40)	<i>Low</i>	29	28	5.620	0	1
		<i>High</i>	29	28	5.620		
	3 (41-60)	<i>Low</i>	21	20	5.761	-0.825723	.4187
		<i>High</i>	21	20	5.619		
	4 (61+)	<i>Low</i>	13	12	5.769	1	.33705
		<i>High</i>	13	12	5.846		
Utterance 6	1 (18-25)	<i>Low</i>	16	15	4.25	-4.070106	.00101*
		<i>High</i>	16	15	2.8125		
	2 (26-40)	<i>Low</i>	29	28	5.068	-6.786927	<.00001*
		<i>High</i>	29	28	3.034		
	3 (41-60)	<i>Low</i>	21	20	4.476	-5.180748	.00005*
		<i>High</i>	21	20	2.666		
	4 (61+)	<i>Low</i>	13	12	3.615	-3.333333	.00596*
		<i>High</i>	13	12	2.076		

*Note: the result is significant at $p < .05$.

The T-tests within age groups show highly similar results as the T-test made comparing all ratings of all utterances (Table 9). That is, the T-tests within age groups show that social distance had a significant effect in Utterance 4 and 6, but not in Utterance 5.

Similar findings can be seen when comparing the ratings depending on social distance within the groups of education levels (high school or university level education), as exemplified in Table 10.

Table 10. Findings from paired-samples T-test of Utterance 4, 5, and 6 (within education level).

	Education level group	Social distance	n	df	Mean	T-value	P-value
Utterance 4	1 (High school)	Low	24	23	4.833	-4.812513	.00007*
		High	24	23	3.416		
	2 (University: Bachelor's or master's level)	Low	47	46	4.829	-5.284287	<.00001*
		High	47	46	4.085		
Utterance 5	1 (High school)	Low	24	23	5.833	-0.327073	.74657
		High	24	23	5.791		
	2 (University: Bachelor's or master's level)	Low	47	46	5.744	0.941672	.35128
		High	47	46	5.829		
Utterance 6	1 (High school)	Low	24	23	4.5	-5.572253	.00001*
		High	24	23	3		
	2 (University: Bachelor's or master's level)	Low	47	46	4.446	-7.353767	<.00001*
		High	47	46	2.744		

*Note: the result is significant at $p < .05$.

Lastly, paired-samples T-tests were used to see whether the ratings of different CRs depending on social distance differed within groups of people drawing on their self-rated proficiency in English. The findings of the T-tests are shown in Table 11 below.

Table 11. Findings from paired-samples T-test of Utterance 4, 5, and 6 (within groups of self-rated proficiency level in English).

	Self-rated proficiency level group	Social distance	n	df	Mean	T-value	P-value
Utterance 4	Intermediate (Rating 5-6)	Low	31	30	4.645	-4.409426	.00012*
		High	31	30	3.612		
	Advanced (Rating 7-8)	Low	44	43	4.863	-5.151218	<.00001*
		High	44	43	4		
	Intermediate	Low	31	30	5.741	0.297044	.76848

Utterance 5	(Rating 5-6)	High	31	30	5.774		
	Advanced	Low	44	43	5.795	-1	.3229
	(Rating 7-8)	High	44	43	5.681		
Utterance 6	Intermediate	Low	31	30	4.677	-6.62772	<.00001*
	(Rating 5-6)	High	31	30	2.838		
	Advanced	Low	44	43	4.454	-6.969866	<.00001 *
	(Rating 7-8)	High	44	43	2.75		

*Note: the result is significant at $p < .05$.

Table 11 exemplifies that the T-tests within groups of self-perceived English proficiency rendered similar results as those made within age groups and groups of education level. Drawing on the results of the T-tests within all groups, it can be said that only one out of three utterances used to respond to a compliment in the questionnaire was not considered to be affected by social distance by the respondents, which was Utterance 5 (*Oh, thank you!*).

4.3.3 Interview Findings related to CRs

When probing the issue of how to properly realize the speech act of CRs during the interviews, it became clear that the participants were more adamant in their preferences when rating the CRs than the requests. For instance, saying ‘oh, thank you’ was considered most polite and suitable regardless of social distance by most participants as it shows an acceptance of the compliment (as confirmed by the consistent non-significant T-test results described above). However, deflecting the compliment by directing attention towards something else was not always considered appropriate, especially in the case where the social distance between speakers was higher such as when using a deflecting strategy with a colleague from work:

P2: If it's just a normal colleague situation with people you see once a day and you don't really know each other, then I think it will be acceptable, but it would be a bit weird. I wouldn't be put off. But I wouldn't really understand why they said that because I don't really care that they have a sister and that they gave it to her for her birthday.

P5: I'm thinking that if you have known the person for like a while, then perhaps the person knows your sister, and then it's like ‘yeah, I got it from Malin’ ... If it is a colleague that you know just a little, then I'm thinking that it is less appropriate because it, like, it is not interesting... (Translated from Swedish)

P7: Yeah, I think that if you know each other well you can answer pretty much anything. If the other person believes this is essential information to provide, then I would accept that. The other, if you work with each other, you might not have that kind of relation to the other person, then it might feel more like an excuse that ‘this is not a choice that I made myself, but someone else made it for me’. That's fine, but it feels more unnecessary, it would be enough with a thank you. (Translated from Swedish)

Thus, a direct strategy such as saying ‘thank you’ was preferred by most participants regardless of social distance as it shows that you accept the compliment and depending on the social distance between speakers a deflecting strategy such as saying ‘My sister

gave it to me for my birthday' could be considered superfluous. Even if the participants did not consider the strategy rude, there seemed to be a consensus that a deflecting strategy runs the risk of making the CR redundant.

Furthermore, in the interviews, it became clear that most participants seemed to believe that with CRs, it does not matter how well you know or do not know the language, as not saying 'thank you' was generally considered rude regardless:

P1: Here, it doesn't matter. It is still not nice. (Translated from Swedish)

P2: There is always more room for acceptance for people who have it as a second language. But I think for this one I'd be more annoyed than with the first one. So the first one is just, for me, requests, there's a lot of ways to perform requests, right, and how to say it. ... I think with this one, I would be a bit more impatient than I would be with the other one, because it's just annoying, no matter the culture. Maybe it's just a personal preference. I don't know.

P4: I don't feel that differentiation in here ... it's not like they are making a mistake in the tense.

P6: I think, yeah, as far as someone's level in English, the first two would be perfectly fine, but um, this one I would probably expect, if someone is putting that sentence together, they know what the word 'lie' means, and I would kind of wonder why are you choosing that word? Yeah.

P7: I do not think that it [language background] would have mattered. This probably reveals more about how you are as a person. (Translated from Swedish)

As such, it can be said that whereas the realizations of requests were said to allow for a greater variation in phrasings as the intent of the request could be delivered even if the realization of the speech act was not as nicely phrased as they would have preferred, the same could not be said for CRs.

Interestingly enough, when discussing the CRs, the participants attributed their thinking to their cultural backgrounds to a greater degree than with the requests, without any prompting from the interviewer.

P2: Of course, they can say, Oh, thank you. That would be for me the appropriate answer. I'd probably say it that way. At least Germans, I think. With other people, I know that. Except for the American culture, that would be extremely rude. Because accepting compliments isn't really a thing. You kind of have to add a 'but', but the culture or the country and language that I grew up with, it's very acceptable and I think the nicest way because you just avoid all the crap.

P3: It doesn't cost you anything to say thank you. It's the other way around, you know? I probably say thank you and sorry too much, I'm always like sorry, sorry, thank you, thank you. ... I don't know if maybe that's a Swedish thing or something...

Yet, drawing on the discussions with the participants, it can be said that although they considered their own cultural backgrounds as factors affecting what they perceived as a polite CR, most participants did not seem to recognize the possible effect of their interlocutor's cultural background.

Only one out of the eight interviewees said that knowing whether the other person had English as their first or second language would affect how appropriate a CR would be.

P5: No, there I would probably have thought that it would be more ok if it was a second language. But I will tell you why – if someone had said, like, ‘yeah, I got it from my sister’ then I would probably think that ‘yeah, so it is from your home country’ or so, so it would be a bit, a bit different actually. But that is also because I am a second language speaker myself, then you might be more forgiving. But this ‘This old thing? Don’t lie’ I would not expect from a second language speaker, that is a pretty American thing to say. (Translated from Swedish)

However, it would not affect the appropriateness because of their supposed proficiency level, but rather because if the participant knew that the other person was from a specific country and used a deflecting strategy this could be because they wanted to talk about their homelife, and if the person used a rejecting strategy coming from a culture where this is common, it would be more understandable.

4.4 General Findings from the Interviews

As this study was intended to provide insight into the pragmatic reasoning of English users of different proficiency levels, ages, and education levels, and whether there is a necessity to gain knowledge of pragmatic norms in English, specifically, some general findings that surfaced in the interviews will also be provided prior to the discussion of the results in chapter 5. Not only did the participants expand on their pragmatic reasoning in general in connection to the ratings they had made in the questionnaire, but their more general views on pragmatics in English were discussed as well.

Some general themes surfaced concerning what aspects the participants considered influential when they decide on how to realize a certain speech act, as well as when they decide how to receive and interpret a speech act realization made by another speaker. For instance, the specifics of the communicative situation, as well as age and level of language proficiency of the interlocutors were all highlighted. However, certain aspects were given more weight than others, as exemplified below:

P2: Of course, it's all unconscious, but I think the two most important things, of course I consider these unconsciously, number one is how close I am with that person. So, you know, some things are very appropriate with friends, but they're super inappropriate with strangers or even inappropriate with acquaintances, ... and then the age and position in society in a way, if that makes sense. ... I would speak differently to a child than I would speak to someone who's 60 and then to someone who is my boss or my professor.

Similar to P2, most interview participants insisted that the relation to the other speaker, the social distance and hierarchical position one has to the other person is what they believe to be most influential.

When asked about whether the participants thought that it was necessary to learn the pragmatic norms of English specifically, or whether norms considering, for instance, politeness, were universal, several interesting perspectives on pragmatics and politeness surfaced. To begin with, most participants agreed that it is in fact vital to learn how to be polite in English if speakers intend to use the language for business purposes or, in general, to any larger extent in their everyday lives:

P1: In school, we were always taught that it is vital to say ‘thank you’ and ‘please’ as often as possible, and that you cannot say it too much, as otherwise they will find you unpleasant. (Translated from Swedish)

P4: I think there would be nuances and things in English that may require specific attention because they are not present in other languages, so depending on the level you’re learning the language at if you are at a university language in English doing your master’s in English which is your second language then it is incredibly important to learn ... In the language you are conducting business in you need to be polite.

As exemplified in the excerpts above, English is emphasized to have specific nuances with regards to politeness, and this is a recurring theme across all age groups in the interviews.

Surprisingly enough, although the participants argued that English politeness norms are specific, and seemingly necessary to learn explicitly, some controversies seem to exist. For instance, there were instances where a participant testified that when they use English, they still rely on the pragmatic norms of their most proficient language and expect other L2 speakers to do the same. For instance, P3 said that they “would use Swedish norms and culture. If they use German, I would expect the same kind of level [in English] as in German”. Furthermore, several participants also emphasized the need to consider what is important in the country and culture you are in, when deciding on what politeness strategies to utilize. This was, for instance, seen in the reasonings of P1, P2, and P8:

P1: It is different in different cultures, what is polite and not. If it is important to say please and thank you in English, then I’d like to know that so that I can be polite towards them. At the same time, if I am traveling somewhere I want to be nice, that is, adjust to them so that they find me pleasant. (Translated from Swedish)

P2: Even you know with English, there are different cultures that speak it, if you want to do American English you need to learn those nuances, if you want to do British English, you need to learn those nuances, if you want to speak English in a different country, that doesn’t have English as a first language, it’s a mix between ‘let me use my English nuances, my German ones, and let me try to understand what is considered polite in Sweden’.

P8: I don’t think it matters if you use British or American English, but rather what country you are in, what is considered polite in that country? (Translated from Swedish)

As such, it can arguably be concluded that the participants recognize that politeness norms differ between cultures.

Finally, it should be clarified that almost all participants claimed that there is a difference between so-called L1 speakers and L2 speakers of English. The participants stated that L2 speakers are granted more freedom when it comes to how to express themselves in English. This recurring line of reasoning is exemplified in the testimonies of P4 and P7:

P4: I think when people are speaking English as a second language and they are not exceptionally comfortable in it, I guess I widen my horizon of what I think is polite, and if they say something that I’m like, oh that was a weird way how you said that, I kind of just brush that off and give it more, attribute that more towards the language learning and the language barrier

than that person actually being impolite. Whereas if it's a native speaker and they say something like that I will be more like 'oh' because you probably meant what you said because you said it in your language.

P7: It is more important to understand what you're talking about, not if it's grammatical. With people that are from different countries, cultures, languages, I think you have more patience as it is first and foremost the mutual understanding that is supposed to come across, and secondly the correctness. (Translated from Swedish)

Hence, most participants claimed to feel more patient in cross-cultural communication when it comes to politeness because speakers might draw on different norms and structures when realizing a speech act in English.

5. Discussion

5.1 Discussion of Findings

This study set out to answer two specific research questions. The first research question "What, if any, differences are there between how users of English perceive social distance in a set of different pragmatic scenarios as expressed by appropriateness ratings?" was answered through the initial questionnaire, and some differences in reasoning emerged between the different respondent groups targeted within the study.

All utterances were constructed drawing on previous literature on speech acts from a cross-cultural perspective and, therefore, when comparing the three realization patterns of requests used in Situation 1 some general statements can be made in relation to the respondents' ratings. As mentioned before, previous research has found that, generally, a more indirect strategy is preferred in English whereas languages such as Russian, Greek, and, to some degree, German may be more forgiving to a higher level of directness in requests (Kallia, 2005; Ogiermann, 2009). That is, using an imperative construction is not necessarily frowned upon in languages other than English, but in English this is generally not perceived as appropriate. As such, it is hardly surprising that Utterance 2 (*Can I borrow your notes?*) received relatively high mean scores in most groups whereas Utterance 1 (*Lend me your notes*) received relatively low mean scores in all groups (section 4.2.2), as such a direct strategy (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984) as using the imperative is not very common in English, at least at certain social distances. Based on these findings, the question formation including the modal auxiliary verb "can" was viewed as more polite or appropriate than the imperative "lend me".

Yet it is interesting that the only utterance in which a significant difference in ratings was not found in all instances where Utterance 3 (*Couldn't you lend me your notes?*) in Age group 1 (18-25) and Education level 1 (high school). As shown in section 4.2.2, Utterance 3 received high means regardless of social distance in both Age Group 1 and Education level 1. As shown in Table 5 (section 4.2.2), the mean ratings of Age Group 1 were a 5 for when the social distance was low, and 4.562 for when the social distance was higher. Similarly, Table 6 (section 4.2.2) shows that the ratings of Education level 1 were very similar, with the means for a low social distance being 4.583 and a high social distance

4.041. As the appropriateness of Utterance 3 was affected by social distance in all other groups, this result could be because older people and those with higher education levels may have had more contact with other English speakers due to their longer lifespan, and since they may have had different educational experiences in comparison to their younger peers. Drawing on previous research, factors such as age and culture may affect an individual's perspective of a communicative situation (Blum-Kulka, 1997; Leech, 2014), and findings from the present study seem to align with these previous conclusions. The age and level of education in the other groups may therefore have influenced their view of appropriateness, making them more sensitive to nuances between different realization patterns and grammatical structures in English.

Concerning CRs, there was one utterance that showed no difference depending on social distance in all T-tests, namely Utterance 5, showing that it was the only CR realization pattern that seemed to be similarly acceptable across all groups. The means in all T-tests concerning Utterance 5 (*Oh, thank you!*) were above 5, regardless of social distance between the interlocutors. This finding is not surprising as saying 'thank you', and as such acknowledging and accepting the compliment, has been found to be considered appropriate in many languages such as the South African, American, and New Zealand varieties of English, as well as Xi'an Chinese, Arabic, German, and Spanish (Chen, 2010; Chen & Yang, 2010). As such, while "thank you" as a CR may not be universal, previous research and the present findings suggest that it is a general pragmatic norm in many languages and geographic locations.

However, as mentioned before, there are some languages in which this approach is not perceived as acceptable to the same extent. For instance, studies have shown that in Turkish and East Asian languages, such as Japanese and Korean, people may be more inclined to reject compliments (Chen, 2010). As seen in the findings of the current study, both Utterance 4 (*My sister gave it to me for my birthday*) and 6 (*This old thing? Don't lie*) show that there is a significant difference in the appropriateness of the speech act patterns depending on social distance, in all groups. This aligns with previous literature on CRs, and social distance mentioned earlier (section 2.2.2), that have found that the relationship between interlocutors affects how CRs are perceived in most languages (Chen, 2010). The current findings show that both utterances are considered more appropriate in situations where the social distance between interlocutors is lower.

Drawing on the phrasings of the speech acts in Utterance 4 and 6, they can both be considered so-called non-agreement response types (Herbert, 1986). In Utterance 4 acknowledgement of the compliment is avoided and focus is transferred to something else, and Utterance 6 (*This old thing? Don't lie*) exemplifies another non-agreement response type in the form of a scale down or rejection. Hence, drawing on the questionnaire findings, it can be said that in the case of non-agreement strategies such as rejections, although these may be considered less appropriate in general in English (Chen, 2010; Chen & Yang, 2010), the current findings suggest that they are more likely to be accepted in cases where the social distance between interlocutors is lower, as are avoidances. However, when comparing the mean ratings of Utterance 4 and 6, it seems as if within most groups the avoiding acknowledgement of the compliment is considered the more polite choice between the two in general, but this cannot be statistically proven without closer analysis and comparison.

Hence, to answer RQ1, some differences can be said to exist with regards to how English users perceive the appropriateness of different speech act realizations in relation to social distance. First, it can be concluded that, in general, requests are granted a greater variation in realization patterns than CRs, regardless of social distance. Second, the results of this study also suggest that level of education and age may, to some extent, affect how appropriate certain speech act realization patterns are perceived to be. Third, the findings also indicate that in the case of requests, a higher level of directness is generally not considered appropriate regardless of social distance whereas in the case of CRs, a direct strategy of accepting a compliment and acknowledging it is generally considered highly appropriate.

In answering the second research question, “What reasons do users of English give to justify and explain their social distance appropriateness ratings in relation to different social distances expressed in a set of different pragmatic scenarios?” several interesting findings emerged. Through the follow-up interviews, it became clear that all participants had their own ideas concerning the underlying reasons behind the ratings of the requests and CRs, but some patterns can be identified when the findings are related to previous research on politeness and speech act theory, pragmatic competence, and ELF.

First, when probing the reasoning behind the questionnaire ratings together with each interviewee, it was clear that requests were generally allowed a greater freedom in realization patterns than CRs according to all participants. There could be several reasons for this, but as highlighted earlier, it seems as if the participants believe that CRs create bases for more severe FTAs than requests. For instance, most participants seemed to believe that rejecting a compliment poses a threat towards the addressee’s positive face (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967), as it may suggest that the addressee’s taste and opinion is wrong, posing a threat to their self-image. Although using direct strategies in requests may also be potentially face-threatening, imposing on the hearer’s negative face as it may threaten their desire to maintain self-determination (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967), this was seemingly not considered equally threatening. As such, the current findings suggest that the positive face of the hearer is deemed more important to consider than their negative face, which may explain why requests are granted a greater freedom in speech act realization patterns than CRs.

Furthermore, in the interviews it also became clear that different aspects of social distance affect the appropriateness of a speech act realization. For instance, in section 4.4, social distance is discussed on two levels: a familiarity level depending on how well the interlocutors know each other and a hierarchical level depending on what societal position one holds. Hence, the insights provided by the interviewees in this study arguably exemplify what Brown and Levinson (1987) denote the social distance (D) and the relative power (P) and what Leech (2014) refers to as a horizontal social distance and a vertical social distance, and the effects these factors have on our perception of appropriateness.

In addition, evidence that the participants value effectiveness rather than correctness (see e.g., Hülmbauer, 2009), or so-called “native speaker norms”, in communication emerges through the interviews. As such, the findings align with previous research on ELF communication and ELF pragmatics (see e.g., Taguchi & Ishihara, 2018; Walkinshaw, 2022), which has found that ELF users are highly flexible and adapt in order to reach a

mutual understanding. Although the interview participants emphasize the importance of recognizing English politeness norms, their own testimonies show that they, in fact, aim to adapt to the communicative and cultural situation that they are in, and that they take notice of their interlocutor's linguistic abilities and preferences.

Moreover, drawing on the interview findings and the reasoning of the participants presented in section 4.2.3, 4.3.3, and 4.4 pragmatic violations to 'English norms' do not necessarily equate pragmatic failure when it comes to cross-cultural communication. The interviewees in the current study continuously underlined the importance of being more patient when talking to L2 speakers of English, as such speakers may not know that they are in fact violating a norm. It seems more likely that a pragmatic violation leads to pragmatic failure if the speaker is known to have a very high proficiency level in English and/or the status of a L1 language user. As such, the interview participants in this study arguably show that there is a general understanding of what Austin (1962) writes concerning the possibility among language users to unintentionally produce one specific illocutionary act, when they in fact mean to produce another. Drawing on this, the findings of the study arguably show that although politeness norms seem to be culturally based there is still one universal norm, albeit not in the sense of universal pragmatics as described by Grice (1975) and Habermas (1976). That is, the interviewees' reasonings bear witness to that a universal norm of understanding towards that cultural and linguistic influences in the English of L2 users exist. Once again, this understanding testifies of the adaptability and flexibility of ELF users mentioned earlier.

Yet, the interview findings also show that if the language user committing a pragmatic violation is known to be highly proficient, the violation is more likely to carry a negative perlocutionary force onto the listener (see, e.g., section 4.4). The reason for this, arguably, is because speakers who have high proficiency levels in English are assumed to have the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge necessary to be polite in English. This is an interesting finding considering the reality of English today, where the plural denominator *Englishes* and the normality of ELF-communication is what best defines English (Li, 2009; Seidlhofer, 2011; Seargeant, 2012; Tajeddin et. al, 2018) and since, as mentioned before, politeness norms vary greatly between cultures (Leech, 2014). Drawing on the multifaceted nature of English, it would be understandable if even high proficiency level users of English would at least violate certain sociopragmatic norms with interlocutors from different cultural backgrounds (broadly defined, including age, proficiency level, and education level) as they are not excluded from cross-cultural communicative situations. It is perhaps plausible that this view of inner-circle English users (Kachru, 1985) should adhere to the sociopragmatic expectations people seem to have in communicative situations in English itself testifies to that a "native-speaker"-ideal may still linger in the societal perceptions of politeness today.

In essence, when relating the findings in relation to RQ1 and RQ2, it becomes clear that not only do different levels of social distance affect how appropriateness is perceived in relation to speech act realization patterns of requests and CRs, but other factors come into play as well. For instance, the linguistic and cultural background of the speaker carrying out the speech act seemingly affects the extent to which the interview respondents would take offense when interpreting the speech act. Interpreting these findings in a wider, societal sense, the results of this study arguably indicate that although politeness in

English remains an important linguistic asset, it is not adhering or not adhering to the politeness norms of a specific ‘English’ that matter. Rather, being able to interpret and adapt to different communicative situations, while acknowledging and understanding the fact that ‘users of English’ is not an easily defined group of people sharing the same pragmatic expectations, seems to be what is more important.

Taking into consideration previous research that bears witness to the overrepresentation of certain English varieties in European classrooms (Modiano, 2009), for instance, the findings of the current study could further add to the ongoing debate concerning English instruction today (O’Keeffe, Clancy & Adolphs, 2011), suggesting that English instruction could benefit from applying a wider perspective of pragmatic reasoning in the classroom. Applying a wider perspective could mean that prescriptions of pragmatic norms and how one ‘should behave’ to be polite in English are avoided and that a wider understanding of cultural differences, and how to adapt to and ensure intelligibility in cross-cultural and ELF communication is promoted instead. By enhancing a wider understanding of cultural differences in communication among students, and how to adapt to these in communication, instruction would arguably not only help prepare people for cross-cultural communication, something that most English users will inevitably participate in eventually, but it would also better correspond to policy documents such as Lgy21 that emphasize the importance of developing pragmatic competence in English (Skolverket, 2018, 2021). Thus, the current findings may be used as a basis for teachers and other scholars in planning and further studying how to best approach the matter of pragmatics in English instruction.

5.2 Limitations

This study was intended to shed light upon societal perceptions concerning politeness and social distance, yet some caveats to the project need to be acknowledged. As emphasized in section 4.1, the groups of participants were not as equally distributed as intended, which is a risk that must be considered when a non-random sample with a voluntary response is used, as it becomes difficult to control the sizes of the target groups. In addition, cultural backgrounds stretching beyond Western culture remain underrepresented in the current study. Trying to get a more evenly distributed sample would therefore be valuable to provide further insights into societal perceptions on pragmatic reasoning.

Furthermore, the method of data collection could be varied in diverse ways, and it is possible that using the same acceptability test yet drawing on audio and video recordings instead of written descriptions of pragmatically challenging situations could yield other results. Yet this would demand even more planning and choices concerning who to include in the recordings with regards to, for instance, age, L1/L2 speaker, ethnicity, and gender as this may affect how a realization of a specific speech act is received (see e.g., Lindvall-Östling, Deutschmann & Steinvall, 2020, and their research on linguistic stereotyping and its effect on perception), which is a direction far too in-depth for a study of this scope and timeframe. In addition, there are certain limitations to the analytical approaches used in the study. The T-test used here is a somewhat blunt instrument that only allows for comparison between two groups and, therefore, has certain inherent limitations. Furthermore, the open answers in the questionnaire could have been used more productively, but due to the limited scope of this study they were not focused upon

in great detail. Yet, as this study can be said to reveal some preliminary insights into societal perceptions, it can be used as a basis for further studies where more refined statistical tools for analysis are utilized.

Lastly, it should be mentioned that in this study, the initial intention was to also investigate societal perceptions of the speech act of the address (e.g., using honorifics or titles to address an interlocutor) as these could also be perceived as speech acts labeled as Expressives (see section 2.3.1) as they arguably express attitude and emotion towards the addressee and are also used with people of different social distance or power relations as well. This variety of speech acts surfaced repeatedly throughout the interviews in the study, but due to the scope of the study this idea had to be excluded. As such, this could be another possible venture for future studies into societal perceptions of politeness today.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate contemporary societal perceptions on politeness and the effect social distance has on people's views of different speech act realization patterns, drawing on a broad cross-section of respondents outside of institutional settings. To that end, a questionnaire consisting of acceptability ratings was used to elucidate differences in people's reasoning depending on social distance, followed by in-depth interviews to further discuss the participants' views on politeness and pragmatic choices.

Drawing on the findings presented here, the social distance variable still holds significant power over the 'dos and don'ts' in communicative situations in English. Furthermore, the findings suggest that speech act realization patterns that potentially function as FTAs towards the hearer's positive face are considered more severe than those that may threaten the hearer's negative face. Yet, in a world where English is largely used as a tool in cross-cultural and ELF communication, English users seem to be highly prepared to look past deviations from their perceptions of how a speech act should be realized as different cultures may have different speech act realization expectations. However, this acceptance of what a hearer could perceive as a pragmatic violation seems to only apply to certain language users. That is, as long as the language user committing a perceived pragmatic violation is not highly proficient or an L1 speaker of English, pragmatic violations are seemingly not considered highly problematic.

In conclusion, the answer to the question posed in the title of the current study is yes, people actually do care about politeness up until this day. Yet, what politeness entails is not a one-sided coin; it is something that is affected by the communicative situations in which people find themselves in their daily lives, the people they meet, and the amount of information they relate to the people they interact with. As such, the findings generated through the current study indicate that, in general, politeness is perceived similarly regardless of age, education or English proficiency. Knowing how to be polite in English today does not necessarily entail knowing how 'native English users' perceive politeness and adhering to these expectations, but rather knowing how to adapt to your interlocutor and adjust your own expectations in communication drawing on the situation you are in. Yet, as previously stated, future studies would benefit from drawing on an even more diversified group of respondents consisting of people of, for instance, different ages,

education levels, proficiency levels in English, and cultural backgrounds, to enable an even more representative picture of the pragmatic climate of English today. Furthermore, drawing on more refined statistical tools and other speech acts such as address terms could enable even further insights concerning what pragmatic competence and politeness in English actually entails.

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Appendix A: The Questionnaire

The pragmatics of English: A study of politeness

Hi!

This survey is directed towards people who speak English as a first, second or additional language and use English for different purposes and to different extent in everyday life. The survey is a part of a study conducted by me, Nellie Lindqvist, as part of my master's thesis project within Applied English Linguistics, focused on public perceptions of pragmatic conventions concerning, for instance, politeness. The estimated time for finishing the survey is about 20 minutes.

Participation in the survey is completely voluntary and all information that could lead to a possible identification of specific participants will be removed in the presentation of the questionnaire findings in the actual thesis. The results found through the questionnaire will solely be used for the purpose of the current study. Prior to participating, you, as participants, are asked to indicate that you contribute to the study out of your own free will. If you want to participate in the study, please indicate this below before proceeding with the questionnaire.

If you have any questions about your participation and/or the study in general, please contact me or my supervisor Joseph Siegel.

Nellie Lindqvist
Email: nellie.lindq@gmail.com

Joseph Siegel
Email: joseph.siegel@english.su.se

By clicking the box below you attest to that you have been informed of the intent of the study and that you understand that participation is completely voluntary and that your identity will be kept confidential (your name will not be used when reporting results).

- Yes

Background

In this first section of the survey, you will be asked to answer questions about your background and your language use. In order to enable you as a participant to answer the questions below as exact as possible, some definitions of relevant terms are provided here. Please read through these definitions prior to answering the background questions.

Beginner level spoken proficiency: You are able to recognize and make use of basic words and phrases concerning yourself, your family and your immediate concrete surroundings. You can interact with people in English provided that the conversation is about familiar topics and that the person you talk to may repeat or rephrase things in order to ease your understanding. (Definition based on the CEFR self-evaluation chart)

Advanced level spoken proficiency: You have no difficulty understanding any kind of spoken English regardless of situation and/or speed of production. You can partake in conversations and discussions in English about different subjects and solve problems that arise in communication with ease. (Definition based on the CEFR self-evaluation chart)

1: How long have you lived in Sweden?

- I have never lived in Sweden
- Less than 1 year
- 1-2 years
- 2-5 years
- 5-10 years
- More than 10 years

2: How old are you?

- 18-25 years old
- 26-40 years old
- 41-60 years old
- 61+

3: Is your most proficient language English?

- Yes
- No

4: If your previous answer was no, what is your most proficient language?

5: Do you view English as your second/additional language?

- Yes
- No

6: Other than your first language, what languages are you comfortable communicating in?

7: What level of education do you have? Please check the box for the last level that you have completed. (Note! Do not check the box for the education level you are currently in)

- Junior high school (högstadiet)
- High school (gymnasiet)
- University (bachelor's or master's level/ kandidatnivå eller masternivå)
- University (PhD level or higher/doctorand eller högre)

8: For what purposes do you use English in your everyday life? Please check the boxes for all the situations in which you use English.

- For work (speaking/listening)
- For work (writing/reading)
- For leisure activities (hobbies such as e.g., playing sports)
- Talking to friends
- Chatting with friends online
- Talking to family
- Chatting with family online

- Reading
- Watching movies/TV-series/etc.
- Gaming
- Other

9: If you checked 'Other' in the previous question, in what situations do you use English in your everyday life?

10: How often would you say you use English every week? Please indicate how often by clicking the box that best describes your English use.

- Less than 10 hours a week.
- Between 10-20 hours a week.
- Between 20-40 hours a week.
- More than 40 hours a week.

11: How proficient would you say that you are in English (in general)? Please indicate your proficiency on the scale below.

1 Beginner	2	3	4	5	6	7	8 Fully proficient
---------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	--------------------------

12: How proficient would you say that you are in English (listening skills)? Please indicate your proficiency on the scale below.

1 Beginner	2	3	4	5	6	7	8 Fully proficient
---------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	--------------------------

13: How proficient would you say that you are in English (speaking skills)? Please indicate your proficiency on the scale below.

1 Beginner	2	3	4	5	6	7	8 Fully proficient
---------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	--------------------------

The pragmatics of English

In the following questions you will be faced with different situations related to how to properly make a request, respond to compliments and call for someone's attention in English, depending on how well you know the other person. In each situation you are asked to indicate whether you believe the example utterance given in each conversation is appropriate (on a scale ranging from 1-6) for the situation based on your perception of the situation drawing on the contextual information given and the actual phrasings in the conversation.

Situation 1: Requests

In this section, focus is directed towards requests. You will be faced with a description of a situation and then three different ways in which a request could be made in the situation.

Your objective is to rate the acceptability of the phrasings of the three different requests, drawing on the contextual information given.

Please read the description of the Situation below carefully before rating the acceptability of the phrasings of requests in Utterance 1-3.

You are registered to a course where the aim is to learn how to cook. Regrettably, you are sick for the second seminar and because of this, you reach out to one of your fellow classmates in order to ask him to take notes for you. As such, you call up your classmate and say:

UTTERANCE 1

Utterance 1

Hi Chris, I won't be able to come to class this week. *Lend me your notes.*

1: You have known Chris for about 2 years, and you have taken other courses with him prior to this one. How appropriate would you say Utterance 1 is in relation to the Situation described above?

1 Not appropriate at all	2	3	4	5	6 Completely appropriate
--------------------------------	---	---	---	---	--------------------------------

2: Chris is a new acquaintance, and this is the first course you take together. You have only met Chris once or twice before. How appropriate would you say Utterance 1 is in relation to the Situation described above?

1 Not appropriate at all	2	3	4	5	6 Completely appropriate
--------------------------------	---	---	---	---	--------------------------------

3: Please explain why you answered the way you did for Utterance 1 (for instance, due to the amount of language produced, directness, etc.). Write your answer in Swedish or English here:

UTTERANCE 2

Utterance 2

Hi Chris, I won't be able to come to class this week. *Can I borrow your notes?*

1: You have known Chris for about 2 years, and you have taken other courses with him prior to this one. How appropriate would you say Utterance 2 is in relation to the Situation described above?

1 Not appropriate at all	2	3	4	5	6 Completely appropriate
-----------------------------------	---	---	---	---	--------------------------------

2: Chris is a new acquaintance, and this is the first course you take together. You have only met Chris once or twice before. How appropriate would you say Utterance 2 is in relation to the Situation described above?

1 Not appropriate at all	2	3	4	5	6 Completely appropriate
-----------------------------------	---	---	---	---	--------------------------------

3: Please explain why you answered the way you did for Utterance 2 (for instance, due to the amount of language produced, directness, etc.). Write your answer in Swedish or English here:

UTTERANCE 3

Utterance 3

Hi Chris, I won't be able to come to class this week. *Couldn't you lend me your notes?*

1: You have known Chris for about 2 years, and you have taken other courses with him prior to this one. How appropriate would you say Utterance 3 is in relation to the Situation described above?

1 Not appropriate at all	2	3	4	5	6 Completely appropriate
-----------------------------------	---	---	---	---	--------------------------------

2: Chris is a new acquaintance, and this is the first course you take together. You have only met Chris once or twice before. How appropriate would you say Utterance 3 is in relation to the Situation described above?

1 Not appropriate at all	2	3	4	5	6 Completely appropriate
-----------------------------------	---	---	---	---	--------------------------------

3: Please explain why you answered the way you did for Utterance 3 (for instance, due to the amount of language produced, directness, etc.). Write your answer in Swedish or English here:

Situation 2: Compliment responses

In this section, focus is directed towards compliment responses. You will be faced with a description of a situation and then three different ways in which a compliment response could be made in the situation. Your objective is to rate the acceptability of the phrasings of the three different compliment responses, drawing on the contextual information given.

Please read the description of the Situation below carefully before rating the acceptability of the utterances in Utterance 4-6.

You (Person A) are meeting a friend (Person B) for a drink. When you see your friend, you notice that she is wearing a new sweater and you decide to compliment her on it. As such, the following conversation takes place...

UTTERANCE 4

Utterance 4

Person A: Hi Kim! What a nice sweater!

Person B: *My sister gave it to me for my birthday.*

1: Person A and B have known each other since kindergarten. How appropriate would you say that the phrasing of Person B's compliment response is in Utterance 4 in the Situation described above? Please indicate your rating on the scale below.

1 Not appropriate at all	2	3	4	5	6 Completely appropriate
-----------------------------	---	---	---	---	-----------------------------

2: Person A and B work together, and the conversation is taking place during an afterwork (AW). How appropriate would you say that the phrasing of Person B's compliment response is in Utterance 4 in the Situation described above? Please indicate your rating on the scale below.

1 Not appropriate at all	2	3	4	5	6 Completely appropriate
-----------------------------	---	---	---	---	-----------------------------

3: Please explain why you answered the way you did for Utterance 4 (for instance, due to the amount of language produced, directness, etc.). Write your answer in Swedish or English here:

UTTERANCE 5

Utterance 5

Person A: Hi Kim! What a nice sweater!

Person B: *Oh, thank you!*

1: Person A and B have known each other since kindergarten. How appropriate would you say that the phrasing of Person B's compliment response is in Utterance 5 in the Situation described above? Please indicate your rating on the scale below.

1 Not appropriate at all	2	3	4	5	6 Completely appropriate
-----------------------------	---	---	---	---	-----------------------------

2: Person A and B work together, and the conversation is taking place during an afterwork (AW). How appropriate would you say that the phrasing of Person B's compliment response is in Utterance 5 in the Situation described above? Please indicate your rating on the scale below.

1 Not appropriate at all	2	3	4	5	6 Completely appropriate
-----------------------------------	---	---	---	---	--------------------------------

3: Please explain why you answered the way you did for Utterance 5 (for instance, due to the amount of language produced, directness, etc.). Write your answer in Swedish or English here:

UTTERANCE 6

Utterance 6

Person A: Hi Kim! What a nice sweater!

Person B: *This old thing? Don't lie.*

1: Person A and B have known each other since kindergarten. How appropriate would you say that the phrasing of Person B's compliment response is in Utterance 6 in the Situation described above? Please indicate your rating on the scale below.

1 Not appropriate at all	2	3	4	5	6 Completely appropriate
-----------------------------------	---	---	---	---	--------------------------------

2: Person A and B work together, and the conversation is taking place during an afterwork (AW). How appropriate would you say that the phrasing of Person B's compliment response is in Utterance 6 in the Situation described above? Please indicate your rating on the scale below.

1 Not appropriate at all	2	3	4	5	6 Completely appropriate
-----------------------------------	---	---	---	---	--------------------------------

3: Please explain why you answered the way you did for Utterance 6 (for instance, due to the amount of language produced, directness, etc.). Write your answer in Swedish or English here:

Participation in interviews

If you are available for a short follow up interview where the answers you have provided here will be discussed, please leave your contact information below in order to allow the researcher (Nellie) to contact you.

1: Are you interested in participating in a follow-up interview? (If you are interested, please see questions below)

- Yes
- No

2: If you are interested in participating, what is your name?

3: If you are interested in participating, what is your email and/or phone number?

Thank you for your participation!

If you have any questions about your participation or the study in general, please email me (the researcher) and/or my supervisor Joseph Siegel.

Nellie Lindqvist
Email: nellie.lindq@gmail.com

Joseph Siegel
Email: joseph.siegel@english.su.se

Appendix B: The Interview Protocol

Interview questions

Part 1: Background questions

1. How old are you?
2. What level of education do you have?
3. What do you consider to be your strongest language or the language you are most comfortable using?
4. Are there any other languages that you feel that you can communicate in? Which ones?
 - a. *Are there any differences in your communicative ability in language A / B?*
5. What cultures do you identify with? Why?
6. When did you start learning English and in what context?
7. How well would you say that you know English, in general?
 - a. *How comfortable are you when it comes to speaking in English?*
 - b. *Do you experience that you understand different kinds of spoken English well?*
8. In what circumstances or conversational situations do you typically use English as a main tool for communication?
9. How often would you say you use English during a week?

Part 2: Your perspective of pragmatic competence (drawing on the earlier questionnaire and Murray, 2012)

1. In the questionnaire, you were faced with diverse situations where you were to rate the acceptability of different responses in a pragmatically challenging context. Can you please describe your reasoning in the different acceptability ratings?
2. Follow-up questions:
 - a. In your opinion, what do you think are some of the things that influence what we say and how we say it when we speak to others?
 1. *Follow up: Why do you think they affect our conversational manner?*
 2. *Follow-up: Do you experience that you need to change the way you talk depending on the person you are talking to? If so, depending on what factors and in what way?*
 - b. Why are we sometimes indirect in the way we say things?
 1. *Follow up: Do you think it is important to be able to vary in level of directness when you speak? If so, why? If not, why not?*
 - c. What happens when we use very informal language in formal situations and vice versa?
 1. *Follow up: Do you think that the divide between formal and informal language is as strong today as it has been compared to recent decades? If so, how?*
 2. *Follow-up: Do you see a change in this divide between formal and informal language during your lifetime? If so, when did you start noticing a change?*

3. *Follow-up: Do you think some people react more to improper use of informal language than others and, if so, what people?*
- d. Is the amount of speech we produce important? Why/why not?
 1. *Follow-up: What factors influence how you decide on the amount of speech you produce?*
 2. *Follow-up: For instance, when someone is stating a request to another person, why do you think they sometimes include a possible reason for the request?*
 3. *Follow-up: When someone responds to a compliment, why do you think they sometimes try to 'explain away' the compliment they have received?*
 4. *Follow-up: How do you know that the amount you say is 'enough'? Do you believe that people of different cultural backgrounds may have different opinions concerning how much information one should share in conversation?*
 - e. Do you think that it is important to know how to be polite in *English*, specifically?
 - f. Do you think it is important to learn about pragmatics (how to say things to whom) in *English* specifically? If so, why/why not?
 1. *Follow-up: If you do think it is important, what pragmatic rules do you experience to be most necessary to learn explicitly?*
 - g. Do you experience that you use different strategies to be polite in the different languages you know, or do you use similar strategies? That is, does it matter what language you try to be polite in when you want to state a request, respond to a compliment, or address someone?

Appendix C: Information Sheet (Interview)

Do we even care about politeness anymore? A mixed-methods study of societal perceptions on pragmatic competence in English

Nellie
MA Student
Department of English, Stockholm University
Phone: 0700448661
Email: nellie.lindq@gmail.com
[Teacher of the course / supervisor: Prof. Joseph Siegel](#)
Research conducted as part of the MA degree project.

The intention of the current project is to investigate public perceptions on matters such as politeness in English today, when English is used as a means of communication connecting people with different first languages and cultural affiliations worldwide.

Participating in the study at this point entails participating in an interview following the online questionnaire you participated in earlier, on the same subject. The themes in the interview will revolve around your answers in the questionnaire and your pragmatic reasoning, in general. The interview will take about 40-60 minutes. With your consent, I will audio record and transcribe the interview. In the unlikely event that sensitive issues should come up in the interview or for any other reason, you can ask to stop the recording. Please note that your participation is voluntary and, as such, you can withdraw from participating at any time.

The data rendered through the interviews will be used for the sole purpose of the present study. It will be analysed in light of previous studies related to the current one and discussed in order to highlight possible future areas for research. Furthermore, when presenting your answers in the thesis project, any information that could be used to identify you directly will be anonymized using pseudonyms for names or removed completely. The information you provide will be handled with care. The recordings will be kept in a safe space and will be deleted after the conclusion of the project in line with GDPR.

Appendix D: Consent Form (Interview)

Nellie Lindqvist
nellie.lindq@gmail.com

Do we even care about politeness anymore? A mixed-methods study of societal perceptions on pragmatic competence in English

Who I am

My name is Nellie Lindqvist, and I am currently conducting a study focused on politeness and pragmatic reasoning as part of my thesis project in the master's program of Applied English Linguistics at Stockholm University.

What the project is about

The intention of the project is to gather information about public perceptions on matters such as politeness in English today, when English is used as a means of communication connecting people with different first languages and cultural affiliations worldwide.

What participation involves

Participating in the study at this point entails participating in an interview following the online questionnaire you participated in earlier, on the same subject. The themes in the interview will revolve around your answers in the questionnaire and your pragmatic reasoning, in general. The interview will take about 40-60 minutes. With your consent, I will audio record and transcribe the interview. In the unlikely event that sensitive issues should come up in the interview or for any other reason, you can ask to stop the recording. Please note that your participation is voluntary and, as such, you can withdraw from participating at any time.

What will happen to the data

The data rendered through the interviews will be used for the sole purpose of the present study. It will be analysed in light of previous studies related to the current one and discussed in order to highlight possible future areas for research. Furthermore, when presenting your answers in the thesis project, any information that could be used to identify you directly will be anonymized using pseudonyms for names or removed completely. The information you provide will be handled with care. The recordings will be kept in a safe space and will be deleted after the conclusion of the project in line with GDPR.

Contact details

For any further questions, please do not hesitate to email me at: nellie.lindq@gmail.com
Supervisor: Joseph Siegel, joseph.siegel@su.se

**Consent to participating in the research project:
Do we even care about politeness anymore?
A mixed-methods study of societal perceptions on pragmatic
competence in English**

I have read and understood the information about the study in the document "Information sheet - Do we even care about politeness anymore? A mixed-methods study". I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and I have had them answered. I may keep the written information.

I consent to participating in the study described in the document "Information sheet - Do we even care about politeness anymore? A mixed-methods study"

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Place, Date: _____

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