

# STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF SOCIAL CONTEXTUAL VARIABLES IN MITIGATING EMAIL REQUESTS

*LA PERCEPCIÓN DE LOS ESTUDIANTES SOBRE LAS  
VARIABLES CONTEXTUALES SOCIALES AL MITIGAR  
LAS PETICIONES POR CORREO ELECTRÓNICO*

**Victòria Codina-Espurz**

*Jaume I University, Spain*

[codina@uji.es](mailto:codina@uji.es)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8665-7040>

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## Abstract

Given the power imbalance between students and faculty members, many studies on email communication have focused on how email requests are performed in an academic setting. Research has illustrated that power-incongruent emails can lead to pragmatic failure and cause a negative effect on the email recipient. The present study explores how contextual variables, such as social distance, power and imposition are perceived by EFL students in three different situations in an academic context. Moreover, the study examines the degree of request mitigation performed by learners to adjust to these social contextual variables. Findings reveal that learners seem to be aware of social contextual variables, but they do not appear to mitigate email requests accordingly.

**Keywords:** email requests, imposition, mitigation, perception, power, social distance.

## Resumen

Dado el desequilibrio de poder entre estudiantes y profesores, muchos estudios sobre la comunicación por correo electrónico se han centrado en cómo se realizan las peticiones en un entorno académico. La investigación

ha señalado que los correos electrónicos que no son congruentes con las relaciones de poder de los participantes pueden conducir a una situación de descortesía y causar un efecto negativo en el destinatario. El presente estudio explora en qué medida las variables contextuales, como el poder, la distancia y la imposición son percibidas por los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera en tres situaciones diferentes en un contexto académico. Además, el estudio examina el grado de mitigación de las peticiones que realizan los alumnos para adaptarse a estas variables socio-contextuales. Los resultados revelan que los estudiantes parecen conocer las características sociales, pero las peticiones no están en concordancia, en lo que se refiere a la mitigación, con la distancia social y poder del destinatario.

**Palabras clave:** peticiones por correo electrónico, imposición, mitigación, percepción, poder, distancia social.

## 1. Introduction

Email has become the most common way of communication in many professional and academic contexts. Unlike face-to-face interaction, one of the advantages of communicating via email is its asynchronous nature, which gives the sender time to plan and revise his/her message (Herring 115), and the recipient the possibility of reading it and responding at his/her convenience. However, in many instances, especially in university contexts, students do not seem to benefit from the asynchrony of communication and write messages that faculty members tend to consider inappropriate given the power-unequal relationship of the interactants (Economidou-Kogetsidis *Please answer me as soon as possible* 3194).

On the one hand, student-professor interactions have become more casual over time, and this informality also transpires in email communication. On the one hand, it seems that, since an email is a written message, it should comply with the rules of written language rather than portraying the characteristics of more informal language use as a result of the immediacy of communication. Actually, part of this controversy is determined by how email writing is perceived, that is, “a replacement of the traditional letter or as an extension of informal spoken conversation” (Lewin-Jones and Mason 76).

Since most of the emails to faculty members in academic settings involve requests, many of the issues as to the (in)formality, (in)appropriateness, (in)directness of these exchanges encompass issues of politeness. In this line, the purpose of the present study is to explore how EFL students’ perceptions

of social contextual factors—i.e., social distance, power, and imposition— affect email request performance.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Social contextual variables and mitigation in requests

When a request email is sent, most likely, the sender expects the receiver to comply with his/her demands. However, as requests have been described as face-threatening speech acts (Brown and Levinson 313), lack of politeness strategies, especially when addressing superiors, may unwillingly lead to pragmatic failure. The recipient's negative face may be jeopardized by issues such as the degree of imposition the request exerts on him/her. Other variables that may affect request performance are social distance—i.e., the degree of familiarity between the interlocutors—and power distance—i.e., the social superiority of one of the interlocutors over the other—. In this respect, the addresser should appraise the contextual situation in which the request is conveyed and save the recipient's face so as not to compromise their interaction. Sociopragmatic competence requires how the interactants perceive and interpret their social communicative interaction by the degree of imposition involved, and the social distance and power differences between the interlocutors. In email communication, sender's perception of these social variables may influence the degree of mitigation of email requests—i.e., greater mitigation in power-asymmetrical relationships, for example—. In order to minimize the threat a request may impinge on the receiver; the addresser can resort to a series of mitigation devices to minimize the impositive force of the request.

A request comprises the head act, which actually performs the action of asking and the peripheral modifiers, which can soften—i.e., mitigators—or intensify—i.e., aggravators—the imposition of the request either internally or externally (Márquez Reiter 36; Sifianou 158). Two types of internal modifiers, lexical and syntactic, have been commonly distinguished—see Faerch and Kasper; Sifianou; Trosborg among others—. The internal modifications, realized as lexical additions and syntactic choices, although non-essential in the request head-act, serve to soften—i.e., downgraders—or intensify—i.e., upgraders—the coercive nature of the request. Lexical modification devices include *subjectivizers*—i.e., the requester expresses his/her opinion—, *polite markers*—e.g., *please*—, *understatements*—e.g., *a bit, a little*—, *downtoners*, which minimize the force of the request and offer the possibility of not complying with the request—e.g., *if possible*,

*perhaps*—, among others. Syntactic modifications include the use of past tense, progressive, conditional, subjunctive, embedded- and if-clauses, among the most frequently used—see, for example, Trosborg 209-212, for an exhaustive description of syntactic downgraders—. The external modifiers that accompany the request head act—i.e., supportive moves—can either precede or follow the request act and have also the function of mitigating or emphasizing the force of the request. Some of the supportive moves commonly described in the literature—see Cohen and Shively 208-209; Márquez Reiter 92-93; Pan 145; among others—include: *Grounders*—i.e., expressing a reason for the request—, *preparators*—i.e., preparing the recipient for the immediate request—, *precommitments*—i.e., attempting to get the receiver to agree to comply beforehand—, *offer of reward*—i.e., the promise of a reward to increase the recipient’s compliance with the request—, among many other categories.

## 2.2. Research on mitigation in email requests

Research on requests is extensive, but an area that has received a lot of interest for some years now is how requests are performed in email communication. Given the potential threat to the receiver’s negative face, special attention has been placed on the use of mitigation devices. How mitigation is conducted has been widely researched within the scope of politeness research. Most studies on mitigation in emails have focused on examining the linguistic patterns and frequency of downgraders and how the use of these devices affects the interaction between the interactants. Although many studies on mitigation in email requests have analyzed the frequency of internal and/or external modification (Economidou-Kogetsidis *Please answer me as soon as possible* 3202-3203; Pan 139, 143,146; Zarei and Mohammadi 10-11; to name a few), other issues tackled in the study of mitigation are: (1) the effect of instruction (Alcón-Soler *Instruction and pragmatic change*; Chen; Eslami, Mirzaei and Dini), (2) gender differences (Chen, Yang, Chang and Eslami; Rahmani and Rahmany), or (3) the effect of language proficiency (Tseng). Many studies are comparative and have examined email requests by native—NSs—and non-native speakers—NNSs—of English (Alcón-Soler *Mitigating email requests in teenagers*; Biesenbach-Lucas; Deveci and Hmida; Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig; Woodfield and Economidou-Kogetsidis) or explored differences in email requests in the L1 and L2 (Codina-Espurz and Salazar-Campillo; Félix-Brasdefer).

Research discrepancies in pragmatic performance are mainly due to methodological issues regarding type of data and data collection: elicited vs. spontaneously produced data, different requests types analyzed—i.e., appointment, action, etc.—or L2 proficiency level of the participants, thus, making comparability of results more challenging. However, despite the heterogeneity of data collection and research procedures, much of the literature on email interaction has revealed differences between NSs and NNSs. Requests, especially by NNSs, include a considerable number of pragmatic infelicities, namely a deficient or inadequate use of mitigation devices, which are not congruent with the higher status of the receiver (Economidou-Kogetsidis *Please answer me as soon as possible* 3195; Shim 186; Zarei and Mohammadi, 20). Internal modification appears to be more frequent among NSs (Deveci and Hmida 202) and although NNSs also make use of lexical and syntactic modifiers, studies concur that, due to their limited pragmalinguistic competence, NNSs tend to resort to external modifications more frequently (Pan 155). In short, research has quite consistently found that internal and external modification of email requests by NNSs is insufficient and inadequate when writing an email to an authority figure, and that NSs produce a wider variety of modifiers. In this respect, a similar outcome has also been observed among learners with a higher proficiency level, who were able to produce a wider variety of internal and external mitigators in comparison to less proficient learners (Tseng 23).

Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig conducted one of the earliest studies on email requests. The authors compared how NSs and NNSs of English differed in the emails sent to faculty. Their findings revealed that NNSs ignored the power difference with the professor and used fewer mitigators than their American counterparts when sending a request. Degree of imposition in requests to faculty was addressed by Biesenbach-Lucas. In comparison to native English speakers, this author found that NNSs showed an “inability to select appropriate lexical modification” (74) due to their limited resources for creating polite email requests to faculty. Overall, both groups of students showed a preference for syntactic over lexical modification, and both groups exhibited a preference for past tense as a syntactic mitigating device, but differed in the use of lexical mitigation. While the NS group relied on *subjectivizers*, NNSs preferred the polite marker *please*. The preference of this polite marker as a way of internally modifying the request head-act has been reported by many researchers (Economidou-Kogetsidis *Please answer me as soon as possible* 3207; Shim 186; Tseng 20; Zarei and Mohammadi 10, to name a few).

In a study of elicited and spontaneously produced emails in an academic context, Chen, Yang, Chang and Eslami (82) found differences with regard to length—i.e., elicited emails tended to be shorter—, but similarities in supportive moves, as *grounders* were commonly found in both types of data. These authors further argued that the differences in writing style—i.e., email length—could be due to the vested interest students had when producing an authentic email, and recommended to further explore how attitude may influence email writing. An over-dependence on *grounders* has also been reported in other studies (Chen 143; Deveci and Hmida 203; Economidou-Kogetsidis *Please answer me as soon as possible* 3208; Tseng 21; Woodfield and Economidou-Kogetsidis 98). In a comparative study of email requests produced by female and male EFL learners, Rahmani and Rahmany (60) claimed that *subjectivizers* were the preferred lexical politeness marker whereas *embedding* was the syntactic politeness device most frequently used in both groups, and concluded that there were no gender differences in politeness strategies.

Perception has mainly been evaluated from the recipient's point of view—see, for example, Economidou-Kogetsidis *Variations in evaluations of the (im)politeness of emails*—. In this respect, studies seemed to agree that pragmatic failure portrays a poor image of the sender (Economidou-Kogetsidis *Variations in evaluations of the (im)politeness of emails* 14). Especially in power-unequal situations, inadequate or inappropriate politeness renders email requests as being impolite towards the recipient, who may be reluctant to comply with the request. Therefore, learners, predominantly NNS students, need to be aware of how faculty perceive requestive emails to be able to communicate with them appropriately (Hashemian and Farhang-Ju 146).

Not many studies, though, have been conducted from the sender's perspective. One of the few studies on evaluation of social variables and mitigation in email requests was carried out by Alcón-Soler (*Mitigating email requests in teenagers*). She examined how perceptions of social distance and degree of imposition in requests affected request mitigation in academic cyber-consultation. In particular, this author analyzed differences in internal and external mitigation between international and British teenagers as well as the perception of degree of imposition in the email requests addressed to the students' mentor. No relevant differences were found with regard to the production of internal modification; in general, students showed a preference for the lexical marker *please*. However, with regard to syntactic modification,

whereas international students relied heavily on the conditional *could*, British students opted for a combination of multiple syntactic modifiers. As for externally-modified email requests, both groups showed a preference for the use of *grounders*, but overall production of external modifiers was greater in the international group. As regards perception, Alcón-Soler (*Mitigating email requests in teenagers* 793) reported that, although teenagers did not judge the student-mentor relationship as distant—+social distance—, international students perceived a higher degree of imposition when having to send an email to their mentor.

Some studies, although not in email communication, have investigated how perception of social contextual variables affect request realizations—e.g., Shahrokhi—. In a study on requests collected by means of Discourse Completion Task—DCT—with Persian males, Shahrokhi examined the influence of contextual variables such as imposition of the request—i.e., a context-internal variable—and social dominance and distance—i.e., context-external variables—on request performance, and pointed out that the production of request strategies was culturally specific as a new request strategy—i.e., *Challenging Ability*—emerged in the data provided. The author claimed that participants used this strategy “especially when the speaker is dominating the hearer, they know one another well, and the imposition of the request is low” (685).

The studies presented above discussed mitigation realizations and/or perception of imposition when mitigating an email request; however, to our knowledge, not much attention has been paid to how addressers adjust email performance to these perceived social variables. Thus, the present study intends to explore if the sender's perceived degree of imposition of a request is actually reflected in the actual performance of the email request. Specifically, the purpose is to examine whether the use of mitigation devices in email requests is related to the degree of imposition, social distance and power that students detect and assess when sending a requestive email in an academic context.

In short, the issues addressed in the study are subsumed in the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent is students' perception of imposition of a request via email affected by social distance and power?

RQ2: To what extent do students mitigate requests to adjust the degree of imposition that they perceive and write power-congruent emails?

### 3. The study

#### 3.1. Participants and Data collection

Data were collected from 20 female Spanish university students, who voluntarily participated in the study. Half of the participants were about to complete their undergraduate university degree while the other half had already started their MA in English Language Teaching. They all had at least an upper intermediate level of English (B2) according to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR).

Participants were asked to write an email request in English in three different scenarios, which were devised taking into consideration the social contextual variables of social distance, power and imposition, and depicted tasks commonly conducted in their academic context. The email requests consisted of asking (1) a faculty member to sign a learning agreement, (2) a classmate to revise a paper, and (3) the head of a school to grant the student permission to conduct a placement in her school. The tasks were controlled for gender as both email senders and recipients were female subjects, and level of imposition was considered similar and moderately high in each situation as students' emails required to perform a *request for action*. Thus, level of imposition was neutralized by asking receivers to perform an action, which initially was thought to be similar in terms of being quite demanding in each situation. However, context-external variables varied among the three scenarios. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the scenarios in the present study.

Situation	1. Professor	2. Classmate	3. Head of school
Request	Sign a learning agreement	Proofread a paper	Acceptance for school placement
Addresser	Female student	Female student	Female student
Addressee	Female professor	Female student	Female head of school
Social distance	Close (known person)	Close (known person)	Distant (unknown person)
Power distance	Power asymmetry (Addresser<Addressee)	Power-equal	Power asymmetry (Addresser<Addressee)

**Table 1.** Scenario features

Participants were also asked to rate the imposition of their requests in a scale from 1 (low imposition) to 5 (high imposition) and provide feedback for their rating in each situation. Although the emails were to be written in



English, in an attempt to elicit elaborative input, students' feedback about their ratings were accepted in English as well as in the student's L1 (Spanish or Catalan) as the feedback language was not germane to the study.

### 3.2. Data analysis

Internal and external modifications to the request head acts were identified and quantified. Internal request modifiers were analyzed following Faerch and Kasper (224). With respect to the analysis of syntactic modifiers, these syntactic choices were considered marked and coded as a way of downgrading the request head act if they could be replaced by a simpler syntactic form (e.g., *Could* you sign the learning agreement? vs. *Can* you sign the learning agreement?).

Cohen and Shively's (208-209) framework was adapted to analyze supportive moves to the email requests in this study. However, a new category, *offer for non-compliance*, was added to the coding scheme to fit the data in the study. The addresser used this new external move as a way of facilitating the addressee a way out and avoiding complying with the request, by providing an option to refuse to do so and, in turn, enhance positive face with the addressee. Table 2 displays examples of the data in the present study.

Supporting move	Examples
Preparator	<i>I have not received the learning agreement. Could you please sign it and send it to me?</i> (to professor)
Precommitment	<i>Have you finished your master's projects? I'm a little overwhelmed with them and I need help.</i> (to classmate)
Grounder	<i>I need your signature in order to start the practicum.</i> (to professor)
Acknowledgement of imposition	<i>I know I'm asking for a lot.</i> (to classmate)
Importance	<i>It is very important for me.</i> (to head of school)
Appreciation	<i>Your help would be extremely helpful.</i> (to classmate)
Expectation	<i>I will be waiting for your answer or for the email notifying that the agreement has been signed.</i> (to professor)
Appeal	<i>I need some help and I thought of you.</i> (to classmate)
Promise of reward	<i>I owe you a beer.</i> (to classmate)
Offer of non-compliance	<i>If you haven't time or you don't want to do that, don't worry; feel free to let me know.</i> (to classmate)

**Table 2.** External modifiers in the current study

Uncertainties that could arise when coding the data were discussed with a colleague until agreement was reached. Frequency of occurrence of internal and external modifiers was taken as an indicator of the degree of mitigation students used in response to the perceived degree of imposition in each situation. As for examining how students perceived degree of imposition in each scenario, their ratings were quantified. Their judgments also offered valuable qualitative information about the choices they made.

## 4. Results and discussion

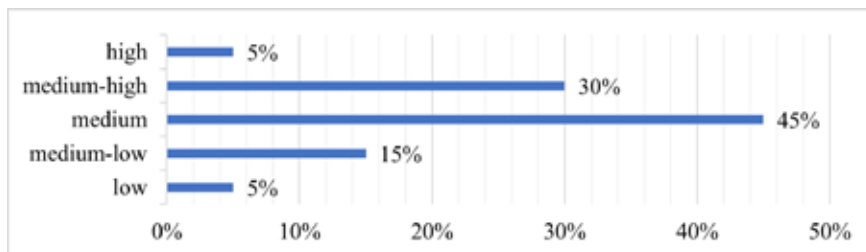
### 4.1. Perception of degree of imposition in email requests

With regard to level of imposition, the analysis of the ratings provided by the students revealed that it varied across the three situations, but at the same time, not everybody perceived the same situation as having the same degree of imposition. As figure 1 illustrates, on average, learners indicated the lowest degree of imposition in email requests to a classmate, and the highest rating to the head of school. Requests to the faculty member were evaluated as slightly lower in imposition in comparison to those to the head of school. Despite the power difference with a faculty member, learners evaluated asking the professor to do something as more coercive and face threatening than asking a classmate, but not as much as asking a head of school, with whom they maintain a greater social distance.



**Figure 1.** Means of students' perceptions of degree of imposition in the three scenarios

The analysis of each situation offers a more comprehensive account of students' perceptions of email requests. In the professor scenario—see fig. 2—almost half of the students—45%—rated the situation as having a degree of medium imposition. The rest of the students appeared to be more antagonistic in their ratings and see the request as low/medium-low—20%—or at the higher end of the scale—35% of the participants—.



**Figure 2.** Students' perception of degree of imposition in requests to professor

A further analysis of the students' feedback offered a deeper insight on the choices they made regarding the degree of imposition of the requests. In the first scenario, most of the students who rated this situation as medium-high/high referred to the urgency of the situation and the requirement of having the learning agreement signed prior to starting their placement, as the following example illustrates:

1. I think it is urgent, since the fact of not receiving the document signed could postpone the beginning of the internship, which is important. I am trying to ask politely that I am waiting for the tutor's signature—high—.

It is interesting to note, though, that some did not appraise the situation as urgent and even viewed it as inconsequential:

2. It is not a big deal for me, so it can be fixed before starting or along the first week—medium —.

3. Si no puedo empezar el lunes que viene, empezaré otro día—medium-low—.

[If I can't start next Monday, I'll start another day]

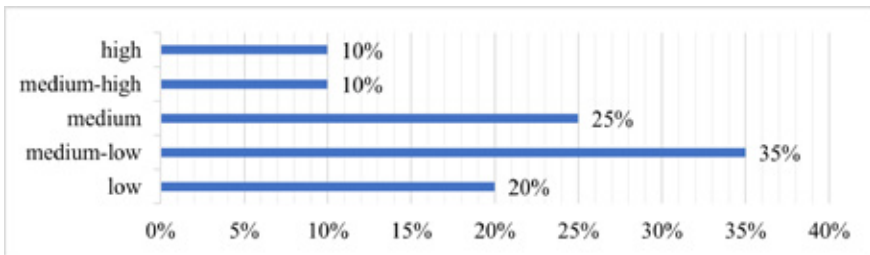
A low rating of imposition was explained by assigning other causes—e.g., technological problems—for not having a signed learning agreement, in which case this was perceived as a legitimate reminder:

4. La intención del mensaje no es imponer, sino que el mensaje es más bien de estilo recordatorio y cauteloso. Puede que haya habido algún problema tecnológico—medium-low—.

[The intention of the message is not to impose, but rather the message is of a reminder and cautious style. There may have been a technological problem]

5. The reasons why it is not signed may be totally unrelated to the tutor and depend on other factors—medium—.

When asking a classmate to proofread a paper that has to be submitted promptly, the tendency was quite different, and only 20% of the students felt that imposition was high or medium-high in this situation. As figure 3 depicts, most students—80%—provided an imposition rating of medium or lower in this situation.



**Figure 3.** Students' perception of degree of imposition in requests to classmate

Despite this general sense of low imposition of the requested act, some students appraised the situation as highly burdensome as the example below shows:

6. Honestly, I believe that this situation puts the other person in a huge commitment. If I were Susi [the addressee], I would end up checking the project even if that meant an overload of work, since if not, I could be considered a bad classmate—high—.

The above example uncovers the high concern the addresser has about how the request may affect her personal relationship with her classmate and, therefore, her comradery and self-image are at high stakes, which may affect the sender's vulnerability. In this respect, as Czerwionka (1169) argues, mitigation may be understood as a way of diminishing the feeling of being emotionally vulnerable. This author explored how mitigation is affected by the interaction between imposition and certitude, which she defined as "the speaker's degree of conviction related to a set of communicated information" (1164). By means of data elicited in role-plays situations, she found that

speaker uncertainty together with imposition increased the degree of mitigation only in highly demanding situations, which contributed to illustrate “the pluridimensionality of mitigation” (1164).

However, most of the students appraised the situation as simply asking a favor to a friend, who had the right to refuse and assessed the situation as low in imposition, as the following examples illustrate:

7. Considero que no hay ningún tipo de imposición. Amablemente se le pide un favor a una compañera de clase—low—.

[I consider that there is no imposition. A classmate is kindly asked a favor]

8. It is not mandatory for her to check—low—.

9. El correo va dirigido a una amiga y no hay obligación por su parte—medium-low—.

[The email is addressed to a friend and there is no obligation on her part]

In these instances, students seem to perfectly understand that compliance with the request will depend on the recipient's willingness to do so. Independently of whether the situation had been rated as high or low, the comments revealed a feeling of empathy towards the recipient of the email. The addresser is able to put herself in the situation of the addressee and comprehends that friendship outweighs non-compliance of the request.

As for asking the head of school's permission to conduct a placement in her school, which was a requirement to complete their university degree, the majority of students rated this situation as being of high—35%—or moderately-high—30%—in level of imposition—see fig. 4—.

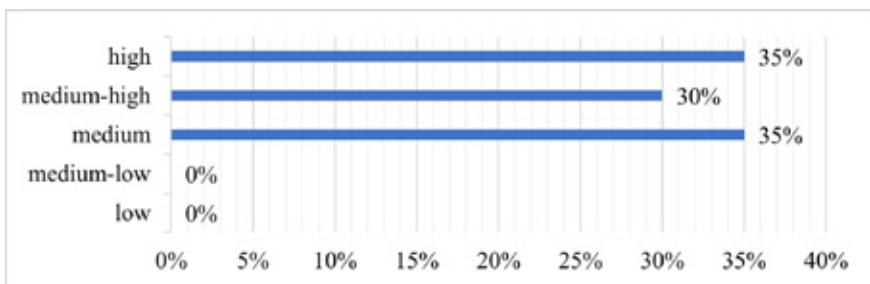


Figure 4. Students' perception of degree of imposition in requests to head of school

In their comments, students acknowledged the social distance with the addressee, and were aware that they had to write emails congruent with her status as shown in the following examples:

10. I do not know Jane [the head of school] and I have to show her more respect than ever—high—.

11. You do not know the receiver of this email, so that the writing must be more formal using the appropriate words and structures for this specific context—medium-high—.

12. De este email depende que se acepte mi petición—medium-high—.

[It depends on this email if my request is accepted]

A medium-imposition rating was usually explained by the receiver's lack of obligation about compliance, or the addresser having an alternative of considering another school for their placement:

13. I believe I am just presenting my case and asking for the possibility, without any pressure or obligation to accept my proposal—medium—.

In light of the students' ratings, the three scenarios have been assessed as varying in degree of imposition—see fig. 5—; the highest being the email addressed to the head of school—+ distance, + power—and the least imposing being the request addressed to a classmate— - distance, power equal—. Given the characteristics of the second scenario— - distance, + power—, email requests towards the professor have been perceived as of medium imposition; not too high due to the close relationship with the professor, but not too low either due to the power-asymmetry of their relationship. As expected, students seemed to be aware of the social contextual variables of social status and distance when judging the degree of imposition of a request and rated the situations accordingly. These results indicated that social distance and status may influence the sender's perceptions about the degree of imposition of an email request—see fig. 5—and, in turn, affect the type of mitigating strategies senders use in email requests.

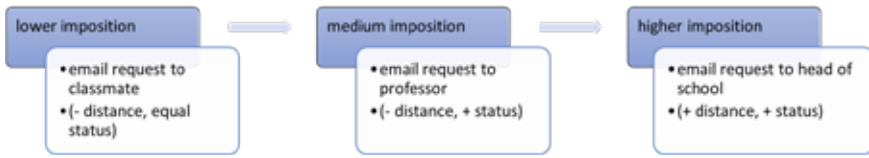


Figure 5. Level of imposition in email requests

Thus, in response to the first research question of this study—i.e., To what extent is students' perception of imposition of an email request affected by social distance and power?—, the findings indicate that students pay attention to contextual variables such as social distance and power, and rate degree of imposition of an email request accordingly—i.e., the greater the distance and/or power, the higher the imposition—.

#### 4.2. Degree of mitigation in email requests

As internal and external modifications contribute to saving face and soften the imposition of a request, students' perceptions about level of imposition should be reflected in the level of mitigation used to soften request imposition. With regard to internal modification, two issues are worth noting from the results. On the one hand, the preference for syntactic modifiers—75 instances—and, on the other hand, a greater degree of mitigation in the email requests addressed to the classmate, as illustrated in table 3.

A similar number of lexical modifiers was used in the three situations. That is, almost a third of the total number of lexical modifiers were used in each situation; however, there are differences regarding the types of lexical modifiers used in each scenario. As table 3 shows, *subjectivizers* were the only lexical softener used in the requests to the head of school—100%—, and the most frequent—63.6%—in emails addressed to the classmate. The polite marker *please*, which was hardly used in these two scenarios, was the preferred mitigation device in email requests to the professor—40%—. Actually, when writing to the faculty member, it is interesting to note that the second highest lexical modifier was an *aggravator*—30%—. The fact that it was the professor's responsibility to sign the learning agreement, and that having her signature was a prerequisite to start the placement could have prompted students to intensify the illocutionary force of the request and express the urgency of compliance. In line with previous research (Biesenbach-Lucas 71; Economidou-Kogetsidis *Please answer me as soon as possible* 3202;

Rahmani and Rahmany 60; Shim 185-186; Zarei and Mohammadi 10), the participants in this study also favored *subjectivizers* and the polite marker, *please*, as lexical mitigating devices.

		Professor	Classmate	Head of school
Lexical Modifiers (Total 30)	Total percentage	33%	36%	30%
Downgraders (Total 27)	Subjectivizer	10%	63.6%	100%
	Understatement		9.1%	
	Downtoner	20%	18.2%	
	Politeness marker <i>please</i>	40%	9.1%	
Upgraders (Total 3)	Upgrader	(30%)		
Syntactic Modifiers (Total 75)	Total percentage	16%	46.6%	37.3%
	Past tense		14.3%	10.7%
	Past modal	50%	22.8%	7.1%
	Conditional	16.6%	17.1%	32.1%
	Subjunctive	16.6%	8.6%	10.7%
	Embedding/if clause	16.6%	20%	32.1%
	Progressive aspect		17.7%	7.1%
Internal modification: Lexical+ Syntactic (Total 105)		20.9%	43.8%	35.2%

**Table 3.** Internal modification of email requests in the present study

As for syntactic modification, *past tense modal* was frequently used as a syntactic modifier of the request head act. Although most studies included modals in the past tense category—see for example Biesenbach-Lucas 69—, given the high production of *past tense modals*, mainly in scenario 1—50%—, following Pan (138), *past tense* and *past tense modal* were established as two distinct categories in the present study. In line with this author, our



students made a frequent use of modals in the past tense, but *past tense* modifications do not seem to be common in their repertoire of modifiers yet. *Subjunctives* were frequently used preceded by an expression of gratitude—e.g., *I would be incredibly grateful if you could sign it digitally*—. Overall, students produced a greater variety and number of mitigation devices with their classmates—43.8%—than with the professor—20.9%—or the head of school—35.2%—, which could indicate a higher concern for saving face with the person of equal status.

Students appeared to have a similar preference for external modification—100 instances—, as the total number of these devices was alike to the production of internal mitigators—105 instances—. The results of our study revealed a greater use of supportive moves in email requests to the classmate—see table 4—. In this context, some students included almost every type of external mitigator possible, which resulted in unusually long emails, causing a verbose effect (Hassall 261; Pan 122). In the professor scenario, most students opted for a *preparator*—65%—or *precommitment*—20%—. These two moves were also the preferred ones in email requests to the head of school. The former may indicate a sense of carefulness towards the recipient by trying to anticipate the situation, whereas the latter attempts to obtain the addressee's binding agreement in advance.

Supportive moves (Total 100)	Professor 20% of total	Classmate 50% of total	Head of school 30% of total
Preparator	65%	10%	40%
Precommitment	20%	16%	40%
Grounder	10%	14%	
Acknowledgement of imposition		18%	6.6%
Importance			3.3%
Appreciation		12%	6.6%
Expectation	5%		3.3%
Appeal		6%	
Offer of reward		6%	
Offer of non-compliance		18%	

**Table 4.** External modification of email requests in the present study

As for the second research question—i.e., To what extent do students mitigate requests according to the perceived degree of imposition and write power-congruent emails?—, the greater number of mitigating devices used towards a classmate seemed to indicate that students overlooked these social variables in favor of either a vested interest in obtaining compliance—i.e., getting their paper revised—, or a sense on empathy towards the recipient and put more effort in mitigating the request towards a peer than a superior.

In this particular study, contrary to what it was expected, the higher number of politeness devices used in emails addressed to the classmate seemed to indicate that students were more concerned with minimizing the threat to the classmate's negative face than that of their professor or the head of school. Surprisingly, students manifested a greater concern for deference towards a classmate than a higher-up. Although the three scenarios depicted a *request for action*, in view of these results, students probably did not regard the three situations as having the same degree of imposition. The fewer mitigation devices used in emails to the faculty member indicated that the request was perceived as low in imposition. To sign the learning agreement is a mere academic transaction within the student's right, which could explain the lower interest in softening the email request and in enhancing politeness in this situation. Assuming that the amount of mitigation could be an indication of degree of imposition, then, it appears, that the degree of imposition was greater towards a classmate than asking the head of school's permission to have their placement experience in her school or requesting the faculty member to fulfil one of her obligations and sign the learning agreement.

Moreover, the results on mitigation appear to contradict students' ratings. The initial evaluation of imposition changes when learners actually perform the email request. As observed in the present study, the situation that was initially rated as the least imposing becomes the one that prompts more mitigating devices, therefore indicating that the sender feels she is being very demanding. Students are able to assess degree of imposition attending social contextual variables of power and distance, and rate the degree of imposition of the situations from lower to higher—classmate<professor<head of school—. However, when writing the email, their actual performance appears to be influenced by a sense of vulnerability in front of peers, which affects degree of mitigation—professor<head of school<classmate—. If a situation of equal power and social distance between the interlocutors is perceived as the least imposing—i.e., classmate situation—, one would not expect a

preference for mitigation towards peers. Although there is no social distance between sender and receiver in this situation, and both interactants share the same power, the higher incidence of downgraders used may indicate that the sender's email request bears a higher degree of imposition than the request addressed to the professor or head of school—i.e., an interactant of greater power distance—. Therefore, although social contextual variables play a role, we cannot disregard the nature of the request performed.

As these findings suggest, students seemed to be aware of the role contextual variables play in determining the degree of imposition of an email request as their ratings indicated. Nevertheless, a desire to avoid confrontation with a classmate may motivate learners to mitigate more. It is interesting to note that on some occasions, students understood “degree of imposition” in terms of how the request affected them rather than how demanding the action was for the receiver. Perception may change when the addresser actually needs to perform the email request.

## 5. Conclusion

The findings in the present study reveal that students acknowledge the difference in status of the participants; however, in line with Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (61), students appear to overlook these differences between the participants and do not downgrade their requests accordingly. A lower degree of mitigation in—+power, +distance—situations could be explained in terms of students' miscalculations regarding the rights and obligations of both interlocutors (Economidou-Kogetsidis *Mr Paul, please inform me accordingly* 508). As this author states, degree of imposition depends on factors such as “time, effort and psychological burden on the addressee” (508). Perhaps in the classmate scenario, students perceive that compliance with the request requires a greater effort than in the other two situations.

In view of these results, it seems that students are aware of the relevance of contextual variables and how to write to a person of greater social distance and dominance. However, when writing to an equal, they are probably able to put themselves in the receiver's place, empathize with an equal, and understand the degree of imposition better. Equals may be afraid to risk their interpersonal relationship and compensate by over-mitigating their requests. Mitigation should be understood in interaction, as appraisal of an event may be related to “the acceptability of the event, the responsibility of the parties, the shared knowledge among interlocutors, and the vulnerability of the interlocutors” (Czerwionka 1169).

This study is not exempt from limitations. First of all, the number of participants is modest. Although the three scenarios were devised taking into consideration feasible request actions that students would carry out in a real academic setting, other requests for action could yield different results; therefore, the findings presented here should be taken as preliminary. Considering that research evaluating emails requests from the sender's perspective is scarce, more studies are needed. Moreover, it would have been interesting to interview students about the judgments and choices they made, which may open new venues for further research.

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