



Request Strategies in BELF Emails

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Abstract: Email is one of the common means of communication in international business nowadays, and it plays an important role in information exchange, cooperation promotion and rapport management. Request through business email is pervasive, where the speaker uses words to make the hearer perform a certain behavior which is usually beneficial to the speaker. From the perspective of politeness theory, request is an impolite behavior that threatens the hearer's negative face, so the speaker often adopts request strategies to help him/her mitigate the threat imposed on the other party's face, trying to make the other party more receptive to the request. The study, taking the authentic English business emails written by BELF speakers as research data, analyzes the emails' request strategy pattern and interprets BELF email writers' choices on different request strategies from the perspectives of contextual, channel and communicator factors. Through quantitative analysis, it is found that mood derivable, one of the direct strategies, is the most commonly used request strategy in BELF emails, followed by query preparatory under the category of conventionally indirect request strategies, and mild hint under the category of non-conventionally indirect request strategy is hardly found. BELF email writers' frequent choices on direct request strategies (71.1%) and conventionally indirect request strategies (26%) may result from social power, the nature of BELF language and email as well as communicators' focus on information content, lack of English proficiency and their mother tongue's impact. This study is helpful to enrich the research on request speech act and provides insights for business English teaching in that it researches naturally occurring language in business context and from the perspective of BELF instead of native English.

Keywords: request strategies; business emails; BELF

1. INTRODUCTION

The advance of communication technology is so rapid that, in the past several years, email has already replaced letters and other traditional means of communication because of its convenience, low cost, efficiency, and so on. In the age of globalization, email serves as one of the main means of communication between business people as it is not bound by personal schedules, geographical limitations or time zones. Business email is, to some extent, an essential and vital part to achieve business activities, such as information inquiry, offers making, complaint, etc. Making a request through email is a very routine act in business setting since companies wishing to achieve business purposes have to frequently inquire information and in turn reply the other party's inquiry. Ho (2018) adapts Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) definition by augmenting it with the one by Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris (1996) and defines a request as a pre-event act that expresses the email sender's expectation for the recipient with regards to some prospective action required by the workplace circumstances, and a request email, which is pervasive in everyday life, is defined as an email whose main communicative purpose is to request the email recipient to provide information or perform an action for the sender or the organization to which the sender or the recipient belong. Though requesting is a very routine act especially in business setting, making a request is not so easy because the act of request challenges and damages the rapport between the two parties (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). So when making a request, it is conventionally assumed that being polite may ensure or facilitate better communication, and Leech (1983) holds that using a more indirect kind of illocution can increase the degree of politeness for it can increase the degree of optionality and make its force more diminished and tentative. Therefore, people are often told to be more indirect when making request in order to show politeness.

Additionally, given its status as the most widely used language in the world, English has become the common language of choice among speakers who come from different linguacultural backgrounds, or in many commercial activities taking place in neither party's first language (Jenkins, 2009; Li, 2016).

The common language of choice under the internationally operating business circumstance is called English as a business lingua franca (BELF) which, being greatly context- or situation-specific and dynamic, is absolutely different from the natural language spoken among native speakers. As for BELF speakers whose ultimate goal is to get work done, language competence is not any more in line with the role model shared by native speakers for, nowadays, the status of English has already shifted greatly as a shared resource among nonnative speakers.

In light of the points mentioned above, though people are conventionally told to be more indirect when making request in order to show politeness, is it always true in BELF practice where practitioners share different linguacultural backgrounds? Does indirectness in business emails necessarily imply a higher degree of politeness from the perspectives of business practitioners?

Taking the authentic English business emails written by BELF speakers as research data, the study attempts to analyze the emails' request strategy pattern and find out which request types are most frequently used. The study aims to find out whether business practitioners would try to be indirect when making requests in real business settings. After conducting quantitative analysis, the study will continue to interpret from the perspectives of contextual, channel and communicator factors why BELF email writers may not necessarily try to be as indirect as possible in practice.

This study has filled the gap by researching ESP discourse in the study on request, since the current studies on request strategies are mainly focused on daily communication without giving due attention to ESP discourse which deserves more attention for the reason that the use of request strategies in daily communication is greatly different from that in specific English fields. For example, in Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) studies, they found that non-conventionally indirect request strategies are more favored while in this study direct request strategies are more frequently used. What's more, there are some pedagogical implications from this study which explores the request strategies in English business emails from the perspective of BELF and is of guiding significance for optimizing the current business English teaching. The traditional business English teaching still takes the native and standard English as reference which is, to a certain extent, outdated in the globalized business market nowadays where English is used as a shared code among native or nonnative speakers to get work done. It is advised that business English teaching should take into account BELF characteristics and the updated views from practitioners. Moreover, apart from the linguistic ability, understanding of national cultures, competence in BELF may help improve students' business communication skills and strategic skills in international business.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Previous Studies on Emails

With the development of technology and the popularity of internet, email has come to be a convenient form of communication, replacing most traditional communication means of higher cost and low pace in information exchange such as fax, letters and so on. Email is widely used in daily life nowadays because of its instant exchange of information regardless of interlocutor's time zone or location, so it is favored by business people whose business running gradually goes across national border nowadays. Email begins to serve as more than a communication medium, taking its role as the main means of business communication, which is capable of conveying rich information and reaching interventional goals in business settings (Jensen, 2009).

The current research on email concentrated around genre. Early works on email drawing comparison with other forms of communication pointed out that it was predominantly informal in nature (Maynor, 1994; Yates, 2000; Gimenez, 2000). Li (2000), taking the emails of faculty interaction from one Hong Kong university as research data, found that email was primarily characterized by abbreviations, register-specific words while showing a lack of adherence to traditional grammatical rules and presence of an informal style. Her findings were also supported by Li Junru (2007) who compared business emails with person emails as well as business letters. Some scholars held that email was hybrid in nature and was characterized by colloquialism, personalization, arbitrariness, flexibility, etc. Gimenez (2000) made a comparison between business emails and business letters all sent to and from an import-export company based in the UK whose customers were around the world, suggesting that electronically mediated communication had already affected business written communication since it showed a tendency towards a more flexible register. Gimenez reckoned that emails combined "features of spoken discourse (its nature) with those of written discourse (its representation)" (Gimenez, 2000, p. 239).

Researches on the genre of email have discussed that email is a very special form of communication with great flexibility, thus the pragmatic strategies, which are beneficial to achieve communicative purposes, used in emails might be different from those in other types of written discourse.

When it comes to business emails, politeness, whose theory rests on three basic concepts, namely face, face threatening acts (FTAs) and politeness strategies, is one of the most popular topics when scholars research business emails from the perspective of pragmatics. Alafnan (2014) studied Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies used in Malaysian workplace English emails, revealing that respondents from different countries had various preferences on the choices of politeness strategies, and social distance played a more significant part than power imbalance in the actual choice of politeness strategies. Jensen (2009), shedding light on hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self-mention, and engagement markers in business email negotiation, found that the metadiscourse markers may perform various functions ranging from politeness showing to trust and relationship building. Additionally, refusal and request, which are FTAs, are two of the most researched head acts in business emails. Based on Face Theory and Politeness Principles, Kuang & Wu (2012) investigated the refusals in English business emails by Chinese, summarizing that Chinese's rejection in business email had the features of formatting, euphemistic, interpersonal relationship-driven and formality. The speech act of request in business emails written by BELF speakers has been studied by Lindgren (2014), Li (2016) and Millot (2017), which will be mentioned in section 2.2.

Unfortunately, because of the confidentiality of business emails which carry a variety of corporate information, researchers may find it hard to collect enough authentic business emails for research, so studies on them are not so much. This study, with 415 authentic emails from business settings, may enrich the research on email request in business settings.

2.2. Previous Studies on Request Strategies

Speech Act Theory, which was first put forward by John Austin (1975) in *How to Do Things with Words*, is one of the most important research directions in pragmatics. As one of Austin's student, Searle revised and developed the Speech Act Theory whose classification was then divided into three sub-actions, namely utterance act, propositional act and illocutionary act. Searle(1976) specifically classified the illocutionary acts into five categories which were directives, representatives, commissives, expressives and declarations. Directives was defined by Searle as the attempt to get the hearer to do something that the hearer was able to do, including the acts like request, invitation, order, suggestion, etc. As a typical act of directives, request has received a lot attention from researchers.

Brown and Levison (1978) defined request as a kind of face-threatening act. Since it has the feature of imposition, speakers need to be polite enough to save hearers' face. Bach & Harnish (1979) defined requests as a speech act expressing the speaker's intention (or, if it is clear that he doesn't expect compliance, his desire or wish) that the hearer took as a reason (or part of his reason) to act. Besides, Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) considered request as a pre-event act where hearer was expected to fulfill the speaker's want in the future. Blum-Kulka et al.(1989) had established the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project(CCSARP) where requests, as well as apologies, were studied in different cultures. Their contribution included a classification of request strategies, which consisted of three major levels of directness and nine distinct sub-levels called strategy types (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984), and a discourse completion test (DCT) which was designed to elicit the research data. DCT has been employed in various comparative studies on preference and difference of requestive strategies between native speakers and non-native speakers.

Conclusions drawn from previous research on request strategies between native and non-native English speakers were not identical. For example, Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) investigated the similarities and differences in the expression of request in different languages and cultures, and their findings indicated that although request behavior varied in language and culture, the structure embodied in it has some common pragmatic characteristics. In their research focusing on daily communication, they found that, in English, French, Hebrew and Spanish, the conventionally indirect request strategy was most frequently used. However, Economidou-Kogetsidis (2009)found that the request strategies (e.g. lexical/phrasal modifiers and external supportive moves) used by Greek ESL university students and British English native speakers in the power-asymmetrical discourse elicited from DCTs greatly varied. Compared with native speakers, an underuse of lexical/phrasal down graders and a greater number of supportive moves (external modification) were displayed in Greek students' interlanguage requests.

A majority of studies on request obtained data through DCTs without considering the naturally occurring requests (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007). However, most of the studies on email requests have used the authentic messages as their research data (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Pan, 2012; Zhu, 2017). The findings of their research on non-native speakers' pragmatic strategies in request emails varied. Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) examined email requests sent by native and non-native English-speaking graduate students to faculty in an American university and applied Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) classification to qualitatively distinguish levels of directness. The results showed that, for non-native English speakers, in lowest imposition situation far more requests were realized through direct strategies and conventionally indirect strategies while more conventionally indirect strategies were employed in the highest imposition situation. However, Pan (2012) investigated the pragmalinguistic choices and socio pragmatic judgements of 15 native speakers and 15 Chinese learners of English in making email requests to their professors. The study found that both groups of students tended to be indirect in making requests and, instead of employing certain syntactic devices, they preferred using lexical/phrasal and external mitigating moves to soften the requestive force. Zhu (2017) examined and compared requesting strategies used in academic request emails to professors between Chinese and English postgraduate students, and revealed that English speakers were more reliant on indirect request head acts in unequal-status communication while Chinese speakers markedly adopted direct request strategies.

The pioneering findings on BELF (see section 2.3) have paved the ways for researchers who were then interested in the pragmatic strategies in BELF interaction. Politeness/impoliteness was one of the current interests of researchers. Shedding light on the formality in greetings and closing as well as directness in request, Lindgren (2014) studied politeness strategies in BELF email correspondences. The findings showed that, in the emails, requests were predominantly direct with greetings mainly being informal while closings being formal, which would conventionally suggest impoliteness. However, based on the development of email and BELF, the study reckoned that the "impoliteness" was deemed acceptable by BELF users. Li (2016) explored the relationship between different speech email acts and the occurrence of impoliteness and non-politeness in the workplace email of Chinese users of English who could be regarded as BELF users. She revealed that message enforcers were the most common impoliteness device and the assertive speech act embodied most traces of impoliteness. Millot's (2017) study on a corpus of 400 emails sent and received by 14 French professionals showed that the messages written by BELF users tended to be more inclusive than those written by their counterparts who were native speakers of English, meaning that BELF users were more likely to include the voices of email recipients. One of the explanations for it lay in BELF users attempt to emphasize politeness in order to avoid ambiguity and make sure that the content will be socially accepted by the recipients.

The differences in the use of request strategies among speakers from different cultures have been already found in both daily communication and business interaction. Non-native speakers of English may not employ request strategies in the same way as native English speakers. Moreover, practices in business context largely vary from that in daily communication since business puts more emphasis on conciseness and keyness of content. This study, with an aim to reveal the request strategies in BELF emails, which are worth studying because of the pervasiveness of the shared language code in the globalized business settings, attempts to find out whether BELF speakers use request strategies in the same way as what Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) have suggested.

2.3. Previous Studies on BELF

English as a Business Lingua Franca, shorten as BELF, is characterized as a simplified, hybridized and highly dynamic communication code shared by internationally operating business professionals (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010). The concept was actually originated from two large research projects, which were inspired by research into English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and conducted at the Aalto University School of Business from 2000 to 2009 (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2013).

The beginning research stage of BELF mainly witnessed the first project which lasted from 2000 to 2002, aiming to explore the in-house communication in Finnish-Swedish merger. It demonstrated the significant impact of BELF in internationally operating business. Observation study of a Finnish business manager's discourse activities (Louhiala-Salminen, 2002), authentic discourse analysis on meetings (Louhiala-Salminen & Charles, 2006; Nikko, 2009) and emails (Kankaanranta, 2006) within

the Finnish-Swedish merger company had contributed to the construction of the concept of BELF as a language used among Finnish and Swedish business professionals. The project concludes that neither native speakers nor non-native speakers are included in BELF interaction which merely has business communicators dealing with their daily jobs, and yet BELF is not “culture-neutral” or “cultureless” (Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005).

The second research stage was accompanied by the second project which advanced the notion of BELF and further explored why and how BELF mattered in globalized business settings. Researchers tended to conduct empirical studies including questionnaires, surveys and interviews in globally operating multinational companies (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010; Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010; Ehrenreich, 2010; Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2011). Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen (2010) conducted an empirical research on BELF users’ perception towards daily BELF communication at work by administering online questionnaire, qualitative interview and text investigation. Respondents were required to rank the three characteristics considered essential for effective communication by the business communication textbooks (e.g. Munter, 2007). In the interviews, BELF respondents attached great importance to clarity which was ranked higher than directness and politeness, and they considered grammar less important than knowledge of particular context in which the language was situated, which meant that BELF was regarded as simply a tool to get work done. These findings were in line with Kankaanranta & Planken’s (2010) one, which concluded that BELF competence called for clarity and content accuracy rather than linguistic correctness as well as knowledge of business-specific vocabulary and genre.

The first decade of 21st century has witnessed the advance of research on BELF, which contributes to a more improved picture of BELF as “a neutral and equal alternative in business communication” (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2013: 25). BELF speakers together construct the unique community of practice (CofP), where they possess common and clear interactional goals, that are, to get work done and create rapport with English used as a lingua franca. It can also be inferred from the relevant researches that BELF exhibits unique features in communication, which are largely distinct from the language spoken by native English speakers. It can be inferred from the relevant researches that, first, BELF language is simplified because its users, who are not the native speakers of English, want to get work done with the help of simple and clear English instead of trying to express as proficiently as native speakers. Second, BELF contains abundant business-related vocabulary, technical jargon and it is context-specific which requires users to develop expertise in the according area. Third, BELF expressions may include a hybrid of features that partly from the user’s mother tongue and partly from other people’s mother tongue for BELF users frequently interact with people from various cultures (Louhiala-Salminen, 2002; Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005; Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010; Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010; Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2013; Kankaanranta et al., 2015).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Data collection

The corpus for this study includes 415 business emails, containing 30885 words in total, written in English from 2015 to 2018 by non-native speakers in companies carrying out international transactions from Asian countries as well as European countries, including China, Japan, India, Russia, Italy, Germany, etc. The emails have a wide range from ordering, meeting arrangement to document transmission and other business-related activities.

3.2. Research Method

Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) was put forward by Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1984) to compare cross-cultural and interlingual differences of the realization patterns of two speech acts, that were, requests and apologies. Even though the main purpose of this article is not to draw a comparison between different languages, the definition of request and categorization of request strategies in CCSARP can be used as the coding framework for this study. Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) divided request strategies into three broad categories according to the degree of directness. The three categories are direct request, conventionally indirect request, and non-conventionally indirect request. Under the three categories, there are altogether nine distinct sub-levels (or request types), that are, mood derivable, explicit performatives, hedged performatives, obligation statements, want statements, suggestory statements, query preparatory, strong hints and mild hints.

The categorization of Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) request strategies is shown in the following picture.

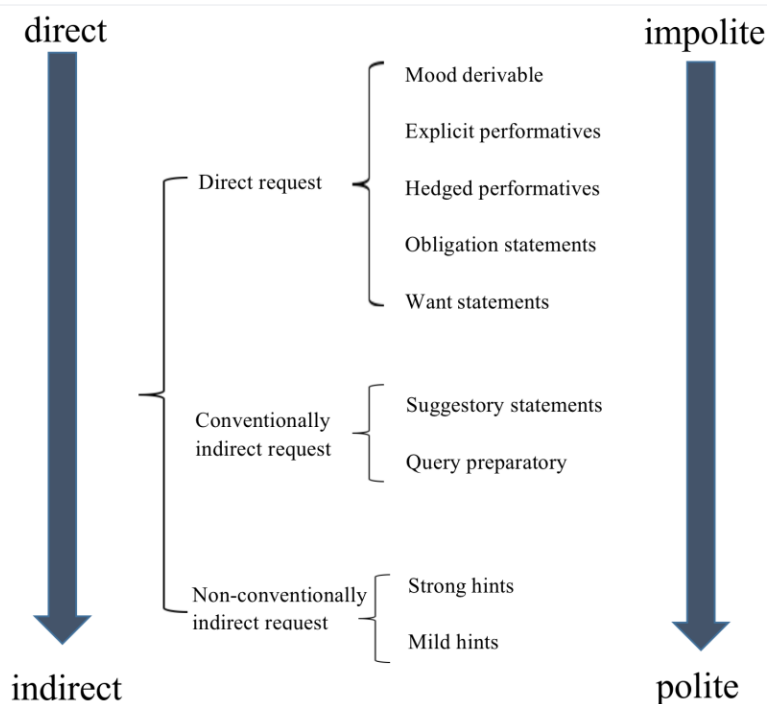


Fig3.1. Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) classification

- a. Mood derivable: the grammatical mood of the verb in the utterance marks its illocutionary force as a request. (Open the door/Give me the book, please.)
- b. Explicit performatives: the illocutionary force of the utterance is explicitly named by the speakers. (I'm asking you to open the door.)
- c. Hedged performatives: utterances embedding the naming of the illocutionary force. (I would like to ask you to open the door.)
- d. Obligation statements: the illocutionary point is directly derivable from the semantic meaning of the locution. (You have to open the door.)
- e. Want statements: the utterance expresses the speaker's intentions, desire, or feelings vis a vis the fact that the hearer does something. (I want you to open the door.)
- f. Suggestory formula: the sentence contains a suggestion to do something. (It's better to open the door.)
- g. Query preparatory: utterance contains a reference to preparatory conditions (e.g. ability or willingness, the possibility of the act being performed) as conventionalized in any specific language. (Could you please open the door?)
- h. Strong hints: utterance contains a partial reference to an object or to elements needed for the implementation of the act. (You've left this kitchen in a right mess.)
- i. Mild hints: Utterance that makes no reference to the request proper (or any of its elements) but is interpretable through the context as requests. (I am a nun (in response to the persistent boy)).

The request strategies are categorized based on their relative degree of directness. It can be inferred from Fig. 3.1 that, if the nine top-down request types are viewed vertically, the degree of indirectness for each type becomes higher. And Leech (1983) held that using a more indirect kind of illocution can increase the degree of politeness for it can increase the degree of optionality and make its force more diminished and tentative. Therefore, based on the previous studies, it can be inferred that as the degree of indirectness increases, the degree of politeness for each type becomes higher. That is to say, non-conventionally indirect requests are assumed to be more polite than conventionally indirect requests, while direct requests are assumed to be the least polite strategies, so people are often told to be more indirect when making request in order to show politeness.

In order to find out whether the above assumptions are also applicable in business context, the authors are going to carry out both quantitative and qualitative analysis. First, according to the sub-levels, namely the nine request types, within Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) classification, all the request speech acts in the corpus will be examined to identify their respective request types. Then all the request types used in the corpus will be calculated by frequency and percentage in order to show BELF email writer's preference for different request strategies. It is found from the quantitative analysis that direct requests are used far more frequently than the other two, which deviates from what previous studies suggest, that is, people should employ more indirect request strategies so as to show politeness. In view of the deviation, the authors further conduct qualitative analysis to look at all the request speech acts closely, attempting to interpret BELF email writers' choices on request strategies from the perspectives of contextual, channel and communicator factors.

The study is guided by the following two research questions.

1. What are the request strategies employed in BELF emails?
2. What are the factors attributing to BELF email writers' choices on request strategies?

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. Request Strategies Adopted in BELF Emails

In this study, a total of 415 BELF emails are examined to select the ones with at least one request act. It is calculated that there are altogether 239 request emails containing a total of 346 request acts in the corpus collected. Then a total of 346 request acts are identified and categorized by the authors according to the classification by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989). The results are shown in the Table 4.1.

Table 4.1. *The frequency of three request strategies*

Strategies	Frequency	Percentage
Direct request strategies	246	71.1%
Conventionally indirect request strategies	90	26.0%
Non-conventionally request indirect strategies	10	2.9%
Total	346	100.0%

Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) divided the request strategies into three categories, namely, direct strategies, conventionally indirect request strategies and non-conventionally indirect request strategies. In the corpus studied, the direct strategies appear 246 times in total, accounting for 71.1%; the conventionally indirect request strategies appear 90 times, taking the percentage of 26.0%; and the non-conventionally indirect request strategies appear only 10 times, taking a share of 2.9%. It can be inferred from the results that unlike the findings from Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), the use of direct request strategy, whose frequency is 71.1%, is far more frequent than that of conventionally indirect request strategy.

The frequency of request types under different strategies also varies considerably, which is shown in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2. *The frequency of different request types*

Request strategies	Types	Frequency	Percentage
Direct request strategies	Mood derivable	191	55.2%
	Explicit performatives	5	1.4%
	Hedged performatives	21	6.1%
	Obligation statements	3	0.9%
	Want statements	26	7.5%
Conventionally indirect request strategies	Suggestory formulae	4	1.1%
	Query preparatory	86	24.9%
Non-conventionally indirect request strategies	Strong hints	10	2.9%
	Mild hints	0	0
Total		346	100%

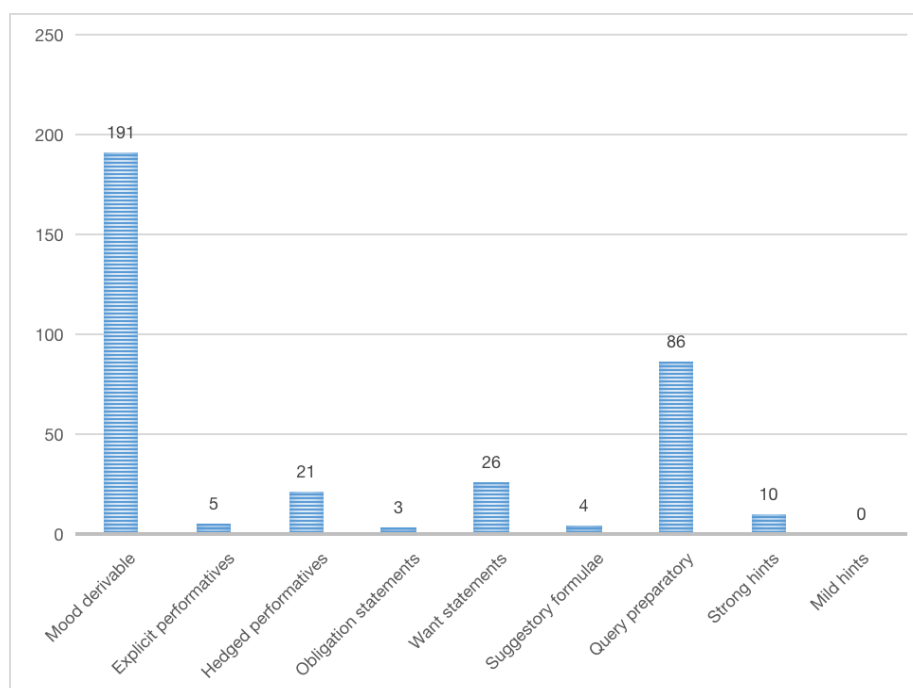


Fig4.1. Frequency of Different Request Types

Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) divided request strategies into three major levels of directness and nine distinct sub-levels called strategy types. The frequency of these nine strategy types in business emails is significantly different. The number of mood derivable under direct strategies is highest among all the nine types, which is 191, followed by 86 tokens of query preparatory under conventionally indirect request. Other strategy types register relatively low frequency. Want statements appear 26 times, accounting for 7.5%; hedge performatives appear 21 times, accounting for 6.1%; strong hints appear 10 times, accounting for 2.9%. And the frequency for explicit performatives, obligation statements and suggestory formulae is lower than 5. Mild hints are hardly found in the corpus.

Examples for each request type will be extracted from the corpus and illustrated in the followings.

4.1.1. Direct Strategies

Direct strategy refers to the behavior to make a request explicitly and directly, where illocutionary force can be recognized by the hearer in a direct way for the speaker hardly uses down graders to mitigate the directness of his/her request. According to the degree of directness, direct strategies are classified into five types, that are, mood derivable, explicit performatives, hedged performatives, obligation statements and want statements.

a. Mood Derivable

Mood derivable is the most direct one among all the request strategies. The most prototypical form achieving mood derivable is imperative.

(1) *As you know it is for French market, so Reach compliance.*

(2) *Please send itinerary list coveredall information from members to concerned persons especially to Aoki-San ASAP.*

(3) *Please send me catalogue pictures of machine with all specification and prices.*

Sentences above are three authentic examples of mood derivable. By employing this type, the speaker tends to express his/her request quite directly, which could avoid misunderstanding and improve work efficiency. In sentence (1), the writer uses “*reach compliance*” to request the hearer to pay more attention to and ensure the quality of the products. No downgraders are employed by the writer in this sentence, which renders the request more like an order. The writers in sentence (2) and (3) use the word “*please*” in an attempt to show their politeness, making sentence (2) and (3) less direct than sentence (1). In addition, what makes sentence (2) different from (3) is that there is a time intensifier “*ASAP*” in the former because time intensifiers, such as *ASAP*, may create an imposing tone of voice

and bring about FTA (face-threatening act) when used in the context of a directive (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). Even though all of the three examples belong to the request type of mood derivable, there are still some differences in the degree of the directness. Mood derivable is the most commonly used strategy type in the corpus.

b. Explicit Performatives

Performative verbs, such as *request*, *demand* and *ask*, are employed in explicit performatives to express the writer's request.

(4) *We request you to please let us know the products coming in target price range of \$.20 to .50.*

(5) *In the fair I asked you to please email me the quotation for the attached item.*

Only a few explicit performatives are found in the research data. Sentence (4) and (5) are two examples. The speakers choose the performative verbs, "*request*" and "*ask*", to voice their request, requiring the hearers to provide some information they need. But in all the data collected, a "*please*" co-occurs in every explicit performative to soften the mood of imposition.

c. Hedged Performatives

Compared with explicit performatives, the speakers are more likely to use roundabout ways to express their request in hedge performatives. For example, the phrase "*would like*" is placed before the performative verbs.

(6) *I would like to inquire about your products.*

(7) *I still would like to know the price for iron cabinet and the die casting if it is possible for you to quote.*

(8) *Since now we find a lot of trouble about shipping document for import shipment, so we would like to request for your cooperation as followed;*

In these three examples, the phrase "*would like*" is used to modify the verb "*inquire*", "*know*" and "*request*", which to some extent mitigate the imposition of the requests. In addition, the degree of directness varies in the three sentences, with sentence (6) being the most direct one. In sentence (7), "*if it is possible for you to quote*" is a kind of syntactic downgraders, which could mitigate the speech act of request while, in sentence (8), the speaker explains the reason before making a request, which helps making it more acceptable to the hearer.

d. Obligation Statements

In obligation statements, the speakers conduct the request act by emphasizing the hearers' obligations. This kind of request usually uses the second person pronoun as the subject and contains modal verbs like "*must*", "*need to*", "*have to*", "*should*", etc.

(9) *You need to send me same small size 110 power adopter so we can install in display.*

(10) *Please must attention that, if the bank call you ask the many for, it is for "consult".*

Both the two sentences above contain modal verbs, that are, "*need to*" and "*must*", indicating that the hearers have the obligation to send same small size 110 power adopter and cooperate with the bank. It can be inferred that, when receiving requests expressed with obligation statements, the hearers do not have much room to refuse the request.

e. Want Statements

Want statements are used to show the speakers' wish for the hearers to meet their requests by using the emotional expressions like *need*, *want*, *hope*, *look forward to*, etc.

(11) *I hope China team members should prepare for things related itinerary with responsibility and inform all related members.*

(12) *I hope it can still be possible to lower the minimum order quantity.*

(13) *Looking forward to hear from you ASAP.*

In these three examples of want statements, the speakers use emotional verbs, “*hope*” and “*look forward to*”, to voice their requests. There are some differences between sentence (11) and (12) even though they both contain the same emotional verb, “*hope*”. In sentence (11), after the emotional verb “*hope*”, the speaker also uses a modal verb “*should*”. “*Should*” represents a sense of obligation just as illustrated in the examples in obligation statements. While in sentence (12), the speaker uses the phrase “*be possible to*” after showing his/her hope, trying not to threaten the hearer’s face. Therefore, the latter one is much more indirect than the former one. Generally speaking, “*looking forward to hear from you/looking forward to your reply*” is commonly considered as a fixed move, which is a part of the email structure, instead of a request. However, if it is plus with a time intensifier, as shown in sentence (13), the structure will become more a request than a routine in an email, meaning that the speaker really wants the hearer to reply as soon as possible.

4.1.2. Conventionally Indirect Request Strategies

Conventionally indirect request is the way to realize the request through reference to contextual preconditions necessary for its performance. For example, “*could/would you please do something*” is a typical expression for conventionally indirect request strategy. The conventionally indirect request strategies mainly include two types which are suggestory formulae and query preparatory.

f. Suggestory Formulae

Suggestory formulae is the strategy to make a request by offering a suggestion.

(14) *So we suggest you send the cargo by Express.*

(15) *In order to get the best performance, we suggest to use the very good materials, the details are following ...*

In the above two examples, the speaker makes a request by offering the hearer a suggestion which actually implies the request from the speaker. For example, in sentence (14), the speaker requires the hearer to send the cargo by Express. And in sentence (15), the speaker even lists the details to which the hearer should pay attention.

g. Query Preparatory

Query preparatory refers to the speakers’ euphemistic requests by inquiring the hearers’ ability or willingness to complete an action. The most typical form begins with “*could/would you please....*”. The following two sentences are query preparatory written by BELF users in workplace.

(16) *Can you please shipping charges please and send me final invoice so i can pay.*

(17) *Could you finish all samples this Saturday?*

Though the word “*could*” is the past tense of “*can*”, in these sentences, it represents the differences in mood rather than in time. “*Could*” is less certain and more euphemistic than “*can*” in terms of possibilities, making these requests sound more polite and respectful. Modal verbs in English have an important function to indicate politeness in requests by softening the force of imposition of speech. Moreover, the past tense, or future tense, in English is more euphemistic and polite than the present tense. So apart from “*could*”, the words “*would*”, “*might*”, “*should*” are politer than “*will*”, “*may*” and “*shall*”. Query preparatory actually employs the negative politeness strategies, for there are modal verbs in the sentence structure. Using politeness strategies in requests can not only mitigate the imposition of requests but improve the hearer’s identity of the speaker, which would even increase the possibility for the hearer to meet the request.

This is also the main sentence pattern that Chinese students learn in making requests from traditional English writing course. Since politeness is one of the traditional virtues of Chinese culture, the Chinese, since a young age, have learned to save face for each other and to be as euphemistic as possible when expressing requests, criticisms, etc.

4.1.3. Non-conventionally Indirect Request Strategies

Non-conventionally indirect request strategy is the most indirect one among the three request strategies, which is to make a request in the way of demanding the hearer to deduce the illocutionary force from the context of interaction.

In the data collected, mild hints, one of the two request types under non-conventionally indirect request strategy, is hardly found. And the non-conventionally indirect request strategies take a small share of 2.9% in the corpus, which are all expressed in the way of strong hints.

h. Strong Hints

Compared with mild hints, the request intention in strong hints could be recognized much easier by the hearers.

(18) *Sorry i gave you enough time to solve the issue and you did not get serious.*

(19) *Matter is URGENT.*

The above are two examples of strong hints. Sentence (18) is extracted from a complaint email. From this sentence it could be inferred that the speaker's concern has not been solved, which leads to his/her dissatisfaction. Therefore, the writer's real intention in sentence (18) is to ask the hearer to solve the issue as soon as possible. The locutionary force of sentence (19) is to emphasize the urgency of the matter. The capitalization of "urgent" further emphasizes the severity of the matter. However, apart from telling the hearer how urgent the matter is, the real intention of the speaker is to require the hearer to solve the problem related to this matter as soon as possible.

4.2. Discussion for the Request Strategies Adopted

In the corpus totaling 415 emails, there are 239 emails containing at least one speech act of request, and a total of 348 request head acts are collected. It can be inferred that the speech act of request appears quite frequently (57.6%) in business email, that is, roughly 5.7 out of 10 emails contain at least one request act.

After investigating the request strategies used in the request head act, it is found that mood derivable, query preparatory, and want statements rank in the top three in terms of frequency. Mood derivable registers a percentage of 55.2 which outnumbers the percentage for the request types ranking in the second place (24.9%) and the third place (7.5%). The top three requesting sub-categories jointly make up a percentage of 87.6, leaving each of the rest sub-categories making up a relatively small share.

Both mood derivable and want statements belong to the dominate category of direct request strategies while query preparatory is one of the sub-categories under conventionally indirect strategies. It can be inferred that direct strategies are overwhelmingly used by BELF speakers, which is followed by query preparatory from conventionally indirect strategies. Moreover, one of the sub-categories, mild hint, within non-conventionally indirect strategies, is even hardly found in the corpus. And the other one, strong hints, merely records a percentage of 2.9% which ranks in the fifth place among the nine sub-categories.

From Brown & Levinson's point of view (1978), request is a face-threatening speech act, and generally speaking, people tend to employ some strategies to mitigate the illocutionary force of the utterance and try to be polite for the purpose of making the hearers more receptive. Brown and Levinson (1987) believe that the more indirect the requester's strategy is, the more polite it will be. Theoretically speaking, people should be more inclined to indirect request strategies when implementing the speech act of request. However, as revealed in the corpus, the most frequently used ones are direct request strategies followed by conventionally indirect request strategies. And non-conventionally indirect request strategies, which are the most indirect ones among all, register lowest frequency. Moreover, according to Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), mood derivable is the most direct type of request, but it is most frequently used in the corpus, which is inconsistent with Brown and Levinson's view. And the most indirect type, mild hint, which is conventionally regarded as the politest strategy, is even hardly found.

The mismatch between the theories and the practical employment of request strategies in BELF context is worth studying because it indicates that practitioners may not always practically follow the ways proposed by researchers in theories, which may lend great implications to the teaching of business English writing by enabling business English learners to fully understand the practical use of English in real business settings. But it is necessary to first understand the reasons why the mismatch takes place. From the literature review, it is learned that email is hybrid in nature because of its intermixture of both spoken and written style. Communication through emails may be different from

the communicative conventions in other communicative means. And, as indicated in literature review, BELF speakers, who are non-native English speakers in most cases, tend to show some specific characteristics of their own in communication which are likely to differ from that of native English speakers. Moreover, the classification from Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) may not necessarily take the business context, whose communicative focuses are by no means the same as that in daily communication, into consideration. Therefore, the nature of email, the characteristics of BELF communication, business context and rituals, etc. are all the possible factors that should be taken into account since any deviation of one of the factors may lead to different use of pragmatic strategies in practice. Section 4.3 is going to make explanation on the possible factors that contribute to BELF email writers' choices on request strategies from the perspectives of contextual, channel and communicator factors

4.3. Factors Leading to the Choices of Request Strategies

4.3.1. Contextual Factors

Contextual factors associating with BELF email writers' choices on request strategies include the objectives in business settings and the social power pertaining between interlocutors.

Striving for reaching a deal and establishing long-term relationship between two parties, business communication is task-based and relationship-oriented by nature. Keyness of information, which drives the communication process, matters a lot in business interaction, so priority may be given to content of the information rather than how the message is expressed. Moreover, businessmen cherish time a lot which determines whether a party can win the opportunity earlier than other competitors. In order to avoid ambiguity and vagueness, which are time-consuming most of the time, and pursue efficiency in communication, businessmen are encouraged to communicate in a direct and concise way which gives much attention to the content rather than the language form of email messages.

Additionally, according to Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, there are three social variables based on which speakers would vary their request strategies. They are social distance, power (i.e., the relative power between interlocutors, e.g., boss and the subordinate), and rank of imposition (referring to the size of the burden on the other party), among which social power may play a role in affecting email writers' choices on request strategies though social distance and rank of imposition are difficult to determine in this study.

Social power, the relative power relationships between interlocutors, is "the degree to which hearer can impose his own plans and his own self-evaluation at the expense of speaker" (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 77). Examples are the relationships between a boss and subordinates, between a professor and students, or between a parent and children. Generally speaking, the greater the social disparity between the speaker and the hearer, the higher the level of politeness required. For example, in the relationship between superior and subordinate, the superior can even use commanding words which are impolite, while the subordinate should instead try to show necessary politeness to the superior. However, in business dealings where two parties are trading partners who are often in an equal position regardless of hierarchy, both sides, holding mutual interest and benefit, are more flexible on the choices of request strategies and they may not be easily threatened by the use of sentences with moderate or even lower politeness levels in general because power disparity between the interlocutors is not so great as that in teacher-student or superior-subordinate relationship.

Given the two contextual factors mentioned above, keyness in information and social power between interlocutors, BELF writers, giving more attention to the content rather than the language form of email messages in the context where power disparity is not so great, may not excessively pursue a higher level of politeness when writing a business email. They can partly explain why direct and conventionally indirect request strategies are more frequently used by BELF email writers. For example, mood derivable, which is the most direct yet least polite strategy in the eyes of Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) to state the required tasks for the email recipients to fulfill, successfully avoids ambiguity or misunderstanding. Recipients may immediately get the intention and the content of the messages, which contributes to the acceleration, one of the objectives for business interaction, of the whole communication process.

4.3.2. Channel Factors

Channel here implies the means how people communicate including the language code manipulated by speakers and the platform where information is exchanged.

The language code manipulated in the corpus is BELF since the researched emails are all written by non-native English speakers in the globalized international business contexts. BELF speakers are no longer called “non-native speakers” because there is no need for BELF, which is a neutral and shared communication code in international business activities, to conform with the linguistic conventions of native English. That is to say, BELF communication is not regulated by the native English language or the social culture of either party. And what BELF communicators need to do is to have the consciousness and ability to understand, tolerate, and respect the language spoken by people from different cultures. Therefore, BELF communicators may have a greater understanding and tolerance of the various (im) polite strategies caused by cultural differences.

Additionally, further studies also reveal the more important components for business interaction. The Model of Global Communicative Competence in a business context proposed by Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2011) suggests the three layers for business communication nowadays, among which “competence in BELF” implies the fact that communicators should pay more attention to the content of business communication rather than exactly correct language form. Moreover, Li & Li (2018) argue that BELF communication is content-oriented, where directness and clarity are valued over language forms.

BELF communicators’ willingness to tolerate and orientation to content accuracy and clarity (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010; Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010) may well explain why BELF communicators prefer direct request strategies over indirect ones. Since “*please send itinerary list*” or “*I would like to inquire about*” expresses the email writer’s intention more directly than “*matter is URGENT*”, which helps the email recipients immediately interpret the request from the writers, the former two are more preferred in the globalized business context.

It is also supported by the nature of email as the communication platform, which is less formal, in business interaction. The development of electronic information technology has brought great changes to business exchanges, and email is gradually replacing correspondence, telephone, fax, and other communication media.

Huang (2005) thinks that electronic discourse absorbs some characteristics of both oral and written discourse and constitutes a new text by itself, not their simple synthesis or mixture. Compared with formal written discourse, email is “undisciplined, inconsistent, unfocused on grammar and lexical, and more arbitrary” (Ruan, 2002). It can also be seen from Gimenez (2000) that business email is less formal than business letters, faxes, etc. and its register is more flexible.

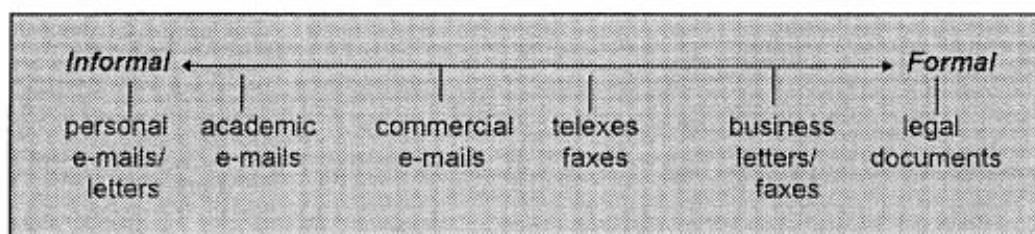


Figure 5.1. *The Style Flexibility Cline in Written Communication (Gimenez, 2000: 250)*

Moreover, generally speaking, both parties who communicate with each other by email are relatively far away, and even if there is an act of hurting the other interlocutor’s face in the message, the threat is less than that in face-to-face interaction. Email’s informality and the distance between interlocutors render the writer’s speech in the email more colloquial. While in colloquial expression people tend to speak out their views more directly, which leads to the high frequency of the use of direct request strategies in BELF emails.

On the other hand, business email also has some characteristics of business letters where people should follow seven writing principles, namely, the “7Cs principle” (Net 1) which includes clearness, conciseness, correctness, concreteness, courtesy, consideration and completeness. “Clearness”

requires the writer to make the content explicit and avoid ambiguity so that the other person can better understand the message without misunderstanding. And “conciseness” requires the writer to use the least words to express the richest and complete content. From these two writing principles, it can be inferred that when the speaker uses clear and concise sentences to make a request, the hearer may understand the speaker's implication more accurately without harboring misunderstanding, which may also save the time of the two parties, thus improving the working efficiency. Therefore, indirect and euphemistic expressions, like mild hints or strong hints, which may lead to ambiguity, are not frequently used by BELF writers in email interaction because the real intention of the writers may be unfortunately ignored by the hearer.

4.3.3. Communicator Factors

Communicator factors pay much attention to the personal characteristics and self-knowledge of the interlocutors, such as communicators' mother tongue, proficiency in English, etc.

BELF speakers, whose first language is not English, may experience mother tongue's impact on their English expressions. For example, when making a request in Chinese, we are likely to employ the pragmatic marker, “请” (the equivalent of “*please*” in Chinese), which is more commonly and specifically presented prior to an imperative sentence, to signal politeness. Chinese are told from the young age that the word, *please*, should be used to indicate politeness whenever they are asking others to do something. As a consequence, transferring this convention to English writing, Chinese BELF speakers tend to adopt the sub-strategies of mood derivable (e.g. *Please send itinerary list...*) and query preparatory (e.g. *Can you please shipping charges...*) when making a request since the two request types are more commonly and specifically employed with the pragmatic marker. Since a part of the writers of the researched emails are Chinese, the frequent employment of mood derivable and query preparatory, which jointly contribute to a percentage up to 80.1%, may result from the mother tongue's impact from Chinese BELF speakers.

Another factor is BELF speakers' lack of English proficiency. From internal aspects, BELF speakers, whose mother tongue is not English, receive education on English in different ways. Some learn English by practicing in the workplace while others learn from university. But their proficiency, most of the time, is nowhere near that of native English speakers because of the lack of long-time immersion in native environment, such as overseas studying. From external aspects, BELF speakers construct a unique community of practice (CofP) where members are brought together by a common task which they pursue and negotiate through regular interaction developing their own communicative resources (Ehrenreich, 2010). Within this community, BELF speakers' common and clear interactional goal is to get work done with the help of simple and clear English instead of trying to express as proficiently as native speakers. The simplified language code, though being capable of enabling the information exchange between BELF speakers, is by no means near the proficiency of native English. Therefore, BELF speakers, who are able to reach understanding among each other within BELF community, may not fully understand the pragmatic conventions of native English, which means that chances are they don't necessarily comprehend which request strategy is most indirect or which one is most impolite. As a consequence, they are actually not intended to be impolite when using direct request strategies in business settings because they may not even recognize that indirectness equals to politeness in the eyes of native English speakers.

5. CONCLUSION

Request is a very routine yet face-threatening act. When making a request, it is conventionally assumed that being polite may render the hearer more receptive, and Leech (1983) holds that using a more indirect kind of illocution can increase the degree of politeness for it can increase the degree of optionality and make its force more diminished and tentative so people are often told to be more indirect when making request in order to show politeness. Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) have categorized request strategies into three broad categories according to their (in) directness degree. Based on Leech's view, it can be inferred that the non-conventionally indirect and conventionally indirect request strategies should be employed more often by requesters in order to show politeness.

However, the authors attempt to find out whether indirect strategies are necessarily employed more frequently than the direct ones in business context where BELF is overwhelmingly used. Therefore, the study, with a corpus of 415 authentic BELF emails totaling 30885 words, first identifies request

strategies used in BELF emails under the framework proposed by Blum-Kulka et al (1989). Then the statistics surprisingly show that direct strategies (71.1%) and conventionally indirect strategies (26%) jointly take up an overwhelming percentage of 97.1%, with non-conventionally indirect strategies seldom found, which are not in accordance with Leech's view. In view of the statistics, the authors try to explain why the request strategy pattern used in practice doesn't necessarily conform to the view proposed by former scholars that indirectness should prevail over directness in request speech act.

This study mainly interprets BELF email writers' choices on request strategies from three perspectives, that are, contextual factors, channel factors and communicator factors. From contextual factors, the nature of business which attaches great importance to keyness and content of information and the social power between interlocutors may result in BELF email writers' focus on what information should be clearly conveyed rather than how it is conveyed. As for channel factors concerning the language manipulated and the platform enabling the interaction, the fact that BELF email communication is content-oriented, where directness and clarity are valued over language forms, may lead to BELF email writers' frequent choices on direct request strategies. Last but not least, communicator factors also play a large part in influencing BELF email writers' choices because both BELF speakers' mother tongue and their English proficiency may impose an impact on their understanding of pragmatic strategies in English, thus affecting their cognition on the relationship between (in) directness and (im) politeness.

The observations cannot warrant sufficient statistical credibility though it, using authentic emails as data, could be regarded as a contribution to studies on business communication. Rather than collecting data from the discourse completion test (DCT), which is often used by previous researchers, the study employs authentic business emails as research data for naturally occurring emails better reflect the request strategies used in practical business settings. On theoretical level, this study may enrich and provides a new research angle for the research field of CCSARP where current studies mainly focus on the similarities and differences between native speakers and non-native speakers. On the practical level, the study lends guidance to practitioners involved in global business as to how to make and understand a request through email properly. Last but not least, from the pedagogical perspective, the study, which finds out that indirectness doesn't necessarily equal to politeness in real business context, sends insight to the teaching of business English writing where students are told to be as indirect as possible when making requests to show their politeness.

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