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# A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF REQUESTS IN STUDENTS TO FACULTY EMAILS WRITTEN BY TUNISIANS

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## *ABSTRACT*

*This paper analyzes email requests of different degrees of imposition produced by Tunisian postgraduate students in elicited vs. Spontaneously written emails to their teacher. The natural email requests are composed of 371 e-requests found in 182 emails written by 81 Tunisian postgraduate students. The other dataset comprised 13 6requests elicited from a written discourse completion test (WDCT) elaborated by the same participants. Requests in the spontaneously produced emails and the elicited texts were analyzed according to the level of directness of request strategies.This study examines to what extent DCT requests performed by a group of Tunisian postgraduate students sent to their professor approximate their naturally occurring e-requests with respect to the degree of directness. The aim of the comparison of naturally occurring and DCT requests according to the degree of directness is to examine the validity of DCT data and to find out whether an approximation to naturally occurring requests produced by the participants may be considered. The two sets of data have fixed social parameters (low social distance between the interlocutors and social dominance of the addressee over the addresser). The classification adopted for coding the collected email requests is based on Blum-Kulkaet al., (1989) and modified by Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) and Felix- Brasdefer (2012 a). A Chi square test is used to investigate the differences. Results of DCT and natural requests display approximately the same degree of directness. Results reveal that both of the naturally occurring requests and the DCT requests are direct. This reliance on directness is related to the great use of expectation statements and mood derivable in natural requests as opposed to direct questions and need statements in DCT requests. The non-significant differences emerged in the study show that DCT findings approximate those elicited naturally. The study seeks also to examine whether the ranking of the imposition of requests affects the choice of request strategies. The findings reveal that requests for information are not responsible for any difference between the two types of data but requests for action display some significant differences and are therefore responsible for this difference. As it is attested from the findings, it is argued that the WDCT requests could provide valid results if treated with caution.*

***KEYWORDS:*** *DCT E-Requests, Naturally Occurring E-Requests, Directness*

## INTRODUCTION

Learners' performance of different speech acts was widely investigated within the field of interlanguage pragmatics in both second and foreign language contexts. Blum-Kulka et al., (1989, p. 1) asserts that speech acts are "one of the most compelling notions in the study of language use".The speech act of request is one of the most challenging units of interlanguage pragmatics for language learners as it is a prominent event in daily interactions. Requests have long

attracted the attention of a myriad number of researchers. It is attested in many research studies that requests are among the most widely investigated speech acts, especially for L2 studies (e.g. Blum-Kulka, 1991; Trosborg, 1995). People produce requests for various reasons in everyday interactions, either to obtain information or certain action, to seek support, or to acquire assistance from others (Han, 2013). It is also worthy to mention that "requests differ cross-culturally and linguistically in that they require a high level of appropriateness for their successful completion; very often they are realized by means of clearly identifiable formulae" (Byon, 2004, p. 1674).

A request is among the speech acts that students primarily perform in their emails in the institutional setting. Students always opt for requesting something from their interlocutors especially their teachers in order to achieve their purposes. Students' email requests cover a variety of issues, including for example requests for information about academic matters, requests for feedback on their work, requests for assignment extensions, and requests for appointments (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). Although a lot of work has been carried out on the speech act of request, mainly through the analysis of the realization patterns of requests in a number of languages, there has been little work on e-requests. In the context of academic email communication, the degree of politeness and formality and appropriate level of directness in email requests has been addressed in a few studies. Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) asserts that little work has been done concerning how non-native speakers(NNSs) express their L2 email requests to faculty from a pragmatic perspective and on those linguistic features that might violate the social appropriateness and power asymmetry characteristic of such status incongruent relationships. This study attempts to fill in the gap in the literature and to contribute to the field of interlanguage pragmatics through the study of email requests of a group of Tunisian postgraduate students in both elicited and spontaneously produced speech acts.

Gathering data using two different data collection methods helps to provide more solid evidence of request pattern preference of learners. It also compares requests gathered via the administration of a WDCT with naturally occurring requests and examines the extent to which WDCT requests approximate natural requests according to the request strategies and degree of directness,The study also aims to contribute to a better understanding of the validity of WDCTas a data collection method in interlanguage pragmatics.

In the next sections, first I presents the WDCT test as a data collection instrumentand the advantages and disadvantages associated with its application. Then I move on to briefly shed on light on requests in emails and refer, on the one hand, to research on requests elicited through WDCT and on the other hand research on natural request emails from students to faculty. The second part of the study presents my empirical investigation of Tunisian EFL learners' requests with regard to directness and request strategies using the coding scheme of Blum-Kulkaet al. (1989) and modified by Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) and Felix- Brasdefer (2012a).

**Written DCTs as a Means of Data Collection**

The Discourse completion test is a data collection method for controlled elicitation procedure, which has been widely used in pragmatics research since its introduction in the 1980s. Kasper and Dahl (1991) defined DCTs as "questionnaires including a number of brief situational descriptions followed by a short dialogue with an empty slot for the speech act under study" (p. 221). According to Kasper and Dahl (1991) and Nurani (2009), DCT is one of the major instruments most frequently used in pragmatic research. In Bardovi-Harlig's (1999) words "the DCT is at once the most celebrated and most maligned of all the methods used in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatic research" (p. 238).

WDCTs were originally developed in the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realizations Projects (CCSARP) to compare the speech act realization of request and apologies across thirteen languages (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). WDCTs have beenused largely as an elicitation method to collect data in the field of cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics (Sasaki, 1998; Billmyer & Varghese, 2000; Chaudron, 2005; Woodfield, 2008). As one of the most frequently used data collection methods, DCTs have numerous advantages.

Billmyer and Varghese (2000) assert that the DCT could be considered as a resource for pragmatics testing and teachingas there are to date no other sociolinguistic data collection instruments that have as many administrative advantages as it.DCTs have been used frequently in the study of such commonly studied speech acts as far as requests and apologies are concerned (Chaudron, 2005).DCTs have several advantages such as allowing researchers to gather much data within a short period of time (Beebe and Cummings, 1985; Houck and Gass, 1996; Yamashita, 1996). Written DCTs do not require transcription, which causes easier and faster data analysis process (Chaudron, 2005; Johnston et al., 1998). Furthermore, DCTs allow its users to control different factors and variables such as the age of participants, gender, the relative power relationship, social distance and the ranking of imposition (Beebe and Cummings, 1985; Houck and Gass, 1996; Kasper, 2000). Ogiermann (2009) notes that the DCT is theonly data collection method yielding large amounts of fully comparable data in an unlimited number of languages, allowing for making generalizations about what is acceptable and appropriate in a particular culture and comparing interlanguage politeness norms.

Despite its advantages, DCTs have received some criticism (as any other data elicitation method)mostly related to its inability to capture the features of spoken language and natural interaction. Some researchers (Rose, 1992; Zuskin, 1993; Martinez-Flor and Uso-Juan, 2011) were skeptical about the authenticity of WDCTs. They think that DCTs have low validity and convey little information about the relationship (e.g., status, positional identities) between the speaker and the hearer. Additionally, DCTs are also criticized for their artificiality (Chen et al., 2015). Some researchers questioned the authenticity of the situations described in WDCTs and argue that the subjects might situations that are different from the real ones(Kasper & Dahl 1991, Rose 1992, Woodfield ; 2008). Other researchers point out that WDCTS, in fact, are metapragmatic in the sense that what people think they would say in a hypothetical situation is not necessarily and exactly the same as what they would actually say in a real-life interaction (Brown & Levinson 1987, Golato 2003, Tran 2004).

Indeed, the comparison of data collection methods has received increased attention in the last few decades (e.g. Chen, Yang, Chang & Eslami 2015, Economidou-Kogetsidis 2013, FélixBrasdefer 2007, Kasper 2000, Golato 2003, Rintell & Mitchell 1989). For example, Martínez-Flor (2013) makes a comparison of WDCT data and oral role-play data, and found no statistically significant difference in lengths, types, and numbers of refusal strategies.Economidou-Kogetsidis (2013) compared natural requests of NSs in service encounter scenarios to WDCT data with respect to the degree of directness, syntactic and lexical internal modification and request perspective. She found that although WDCT requests and natural requests displayed significant difference, at the same time similar trends were observable in terms of directness and lexical modification, which indicates that the WDCT requests represent an approximation to the naturally occurring requests, to a certain extent. (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2013, p. 33). Chen et al (2015) studied email requests of Chinese ESL learners to faculty and compared natural email data to WDCT data. They found that the participants used similar patterns of supportive moves in both datasets, however, request perspectives were different in certain situations and participants generated significantly longer requests in the spontaneously produced emails than in the WDCT emails.

In spite of its weaknesses, DCT is considered by some researchers among the most efficient elicited data instruments in interlanguage pragmatic research (for eg, Nurani, 2009). Kasper (2000) argues that carefully designed WDCTs are useful ways to gather information about speakers' pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge (Kasper 2000: 329) rather than actual language usage, and are also informative about what ''speakers tend to view as being pragmatically appropriate linguistic behavior'' (Woodfield & Economidou-Kogetsidis 2010: 89). Gathering data using two different elicitation methods helps to provide more solid evidence of e-requests preferences of learners. It also serves to compare elicited requests to those occurring in spontaneous emails, thus contributing to a better understanding of the validity of WDCTas a method in interlanguage pragmatics.

**Requests in Emails**

Requests have long attracted the attention of a myriad number of researchers. According to several researchers, requests are among the most widely investigated speech acts, especially for L2 studies (e.g. Blum-Kulka, 1991; Trosborg, 1995). The speech act of request is composed of two parts: the head act and the modifiers. Requests include a main utterance, which carries the actual meaning of what is said or written. This is called a request head act. In addittion to the head act, internal and/or external modifications are achieved through modifiers, but their presence is not essential for the interpretation of the illocution (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1984). According to Byon (2004), a request head act is the main utterance that functions as a request and can stand by itself without any supportive move, required to convey the request.

Indeed, the focus of the analysis of requests in this study is on the head acts of requests whereas the modifiers are not taken into consideration. Requesting is a very popular function of email as it is indicated in previous research on politeness in emails(AlAfnan, 2014). The purposes of requests in emails include building a relationship, getting information/advice about course materials, negotiating late work policy, challenging grades, showing interest in and understanding of course material, and "getting on the instructor's good side" (Martin et al., 1999, p. 160; Collins, 1998; Payne, 1997; Poling, 1994, cited in Chen, 2006).

**Research on Requests Elicited through WDCT**

In most studies on requests addressed by students to faculty, data was collected primarily through DCTs(such as Blum-Kulka, et al., 1989; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2008, 2009; Woodfield & Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2010) or oral role-plays (such as Felix-Brasdefer, 2007), because it is easier to elicit larger amounts of simulated data than to obtain natural and authentic data (Chen et al, 2015). Among the few studies that examined email requests by students to their faculty elicited through WDCTsis the study carried out by Woodfield and Economidou-Kogetsidis (2010) in which they compared British NSs' and EFL learners' status-unequal requests to their professors. The CCSARP framework was used to code the data. The findings found significant differences in internal and external modifications and in request perspective. It was observed that EFL Learners' overuse zero marking in internal modifications and overuse of preparators and supportive moves. However, NSswere found to use more impersonal perspective and various mitigating devices.

Zhu (2012) investigated the directness level as well as the mitigation features and lexical and phrasal modifiers of Chinese-English in email request strategies. He compared two NNS groups with different levels of English proficiency: non-English majors (NEM) and English majors (EM). Zhu (2012) used a DCT to collect data and supplemented it with a questionnaire to rate the level of the imposition of each email. The coding scheme adopted in this study is the CCSARP modified by Biesenbach-Lucas (2007). Results revealed that both groups of the study have a low level of pragmatic

linguistic competence and low proficiency in English, which caused a low level of socio-pragmatic competence, according to the correlation analysis.

A recent study by Deveci and Hamida (2017) investigated the structure, request strategies, and modifications used in student emails. It also aimedto evaluate whether students have obtained any benefit from instruction to improve their request speech act use in emails. To collect data, a DCT was used to compare data from 105 Arab students and21 British NSs. The researchers used Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) framework. The findings revealed that Arab participants have a tendency to use more direct strategies than conventionally indirect requests. The Arab students tended to use few intensifiers in their requests compared to NSs. The study suggests that Arab students were influenced by their first language when requesting because they rely heavily on imperatives. Results revealed also that instruction in the composing of email requests in English did increase the students' awareness of politeness strategies.

**Research on Natural Request Emails from Students to Faculty**

In addition to the research investigations on requests elicited through DCTs, many studies rely on authentic emails to gather data. Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig's study (1996) was among the first studies on student-faculty email requests. This study focused on spontaneously email requests written by Ll and L2 college students to faculty, analyzed the email requests of native and NNSs of English and investigated how students' requests were evaluated by the faculty for their positive or negative effect on the addressee. The authors found that NNSperformance of request strategies are different from those of NS in the fact that they used fewer downgraders with negative impact, mentioned personal time needs more often and acknowledged more imposition on the faculty members.

Biesenbach-Lucas (2002, 2004) applied the CCSARP framework to NSs and NNSs' natural email requests of faculty and found that the differences in the degree of the directness of the e-requests between the two groups were comparatively small. However, NNSs tended to choose more direct strategies than NSs. NNSs were also found to employ less syntactic modification than NSSs and made use of more lexical rather than syntactic modifiers.

Chen (2001) analyzed and compared natural email requests sent by Taiwanese (NNSs) and U.S. (NSs) graduate students to their professors in relation to three types of requests: requests for an appointment, recommendation letter, and special consideration. Chen's study (2001) examined both emails to faculty whom students either knew or did not know. Chen (2001) foundThe author reported differences in the amount of lexical and syntactic modification employed by Taiwanese and American graduate students. She asserted that both groups favored query preparatory strategies and Taiwanese students used different request strategies than the U.S. students due to culturally different perceptions of power relations, familiarity and imposition.

Economidou- Kogetsidis (2011) examined spontaneously occurred email requests sent by Greek Cypriot university students to faculty over a period of several semesters. The author analyzed the degree of directness, mitigation, and forms of address found in the corpus. She reports that the subjects rely heavily on direct strategies and there is an absence of lexical mitigators and inappropriate forms of address.Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) also noticed the nonuse of that the openings and closings by non-native speakers. She also asserts that such emails were perceived as impolite and could be the source of misunderstanding between the interlocutors.

Other studies on learners' performance of email requests have examined whether their performance is conditioned by the type of request and thus whether the ranking of the imposition of the request affects the choice of request strategies. Bisenbach-Lucas (2007) study focused on e-politeness in natural email-requests of the students to faculty members. It investigated how NSs and NNSs of English formulate e-requests to faculty and examine the degrees of directness and indirectness in three types of requests (requests for an appointment, for feedback and for an extension of deadlines). E-requests were analyzed from the pragmatic and lexico-syntactic point of view, the directness of requests and syntactic and lexical politeness markers were analyzed according to Blum-kulka et al., (1989) framework. The findings of this study revealed that students used applied more direct strategies for lower imposition request and more conventional indirect requests. They also opt for politeness devices for higher imposition request. The researcher suggests that the level of the imposition of the request influences the degree of the directness of the request.

Felix-Brasdefer (2012a) analyzed the request head acts and lexical and syntactic modifiers found in 240 email requests written by US university-level students. Emails were written in L1 English and L2 Spanish to faculty members in four situations that ranged from low to high imposition, namely requests for validation, requests for information, requests for feedback and requests for action.The findings of study showed that the level of imposition of the requests affects the distribution of email requests and use of strategies. Similarly, the use of strategieswas reported being conditioned by the level of imposition. As far as the internal modification of requests is concerned, it was found that lexical and syntactic modifiers predominated in L1 requests were less frequent in L2 request data.

## METHOD

The current study analyses the requests formulated by a group of Tunisian postgraduate students from two different sources (naturally occurring e-requests and DCT requests). It also examines the extent to which DCT requests performed by Tunisian EFL students sent to their professor approximate their naturally occurring e-requests according to the degree of directness. For this purpose, data were collected from both naturally occurring e-requests and DCT requests.

### Participants

The emails writers are 81 Tunisian postgraduate students of English, 67 of whom are female and 14 are male. While it is important to keep in mind that there may be gender preferences concerning the realization of requests (cf. Kouletaki, 2005), this factor is not considered in this study due to feasibility concerns. The participants' meanage is 30.5. Their first language is Arabic and all of themknew the professor personally. They are enrolled in postgraduate programs, sothey are supposed to be advanced at the level of language proficiency.

### DCT Data

The participants were asked to complete an online email-like WDCT, which included two scenarios. The two prompt situations were as follows :

**Situation one states:** *You are in the process of conducting your research and you need to make clear some methodological issues. You write an email to your supervisor in which you request him/her to meet him/her to discuss such points. What would you say in this email?*

**Situation two states:** *You have finished writing your Ph.D. thesis and you want professor 'X', whom you were one of*

*his/her students, to proofread it. You write an email to request your professor to proofread your work. What would you say in this email?*

To determine the degree of directness, the researcher used a modified version of request strategies that was proposed initially by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) and revised by Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) and Felix- Brasdefer for both naturally occurred and DCT data.

**Naturally Occurring Requests Data**

The corpus of this study consists of 182 emails written by 81 Tunisian postgraduate students enrolled in several institutions in Tunisia to their professor. The gathered emails were sent between the years 2010-2012. The data were collected from the inbox of the researcher's supervisor. The emails were naturally occurring discourse as opposed to elicited discursive data.A total of 371 requests was found in the corpus because some participants formulated more than one request in a single email. For ethicalconsiderations, the participants were contacted via emails and granted permission for use of data for research The gathered emails are student-initiated interactions, which await a response. Both the natural and the elicited requests were coded and analyzed with regard to thelevel of imposition and directness. To identify the type and the frequency of requestive head acts of naturally occurring email requests, the data was analyzed, and the frequency of occurrence and percentage of each type of strategy were calculated as it is clear from table 1 below.

**Table 1: Type of Strategies and Degree of Requestive Directness: General Results (N: 371)**

| Strategy | | Number of Occurrence | Percentage (%) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Direct | Mood derivables (imperatives) | 54/371 | 14.55 | 73.85 |
| | Performatives | 26/371 | 7.00 | |
| | Want statements | 21/371 | 5.66 | |
| | Need statements | 31/371 | 8.35 | |
| | Direct questions | 47/371 | 12.66 | |
| | like/appreciate statements | 32/371 | 8.62 | |
| | expectation statements | 63/371 | 16.68 | |
| Conventionally indirect | Query preparatory | 80/371 | 21.56 | 21.56 |
| Non-conventionally indirect | Hints | 17/371 | 4.58 | 4.58 |

The 371 requests are made up of 217 requests for information and 154 requests for action. Thus, 58.5% of the requests are requests for information (eg. Please, sir, tell me when you'll be available during this week (Email No. 3) ) while 41.5% of them are requests for action (eg. Please, check my report and sign it (Email No. 36)). The following pie chart illustrates the distribution of requests across the corpus.

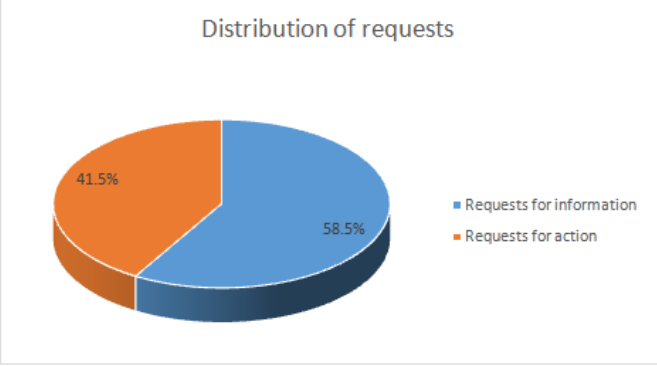


**Figure 1: Distribution of Requests According to their Types across the Corpus**

Both email requests for information and requests for action were investigated according to the coding scheme suggested by Blum-Kulka et al., (1989) and revised by Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) and Felix-Brasdefer (2012a) as it was done for the overall requests. The judgment of imposition is relatively subjective. The basis on which I decided to assign requests to low vs. high imposition categories was how much action or extra effort they required on behalf of the teacher. Requests for action were considered to be of a higher imposition than requests for appointment or information.

## RESULTS

In this study, the differences between the spontaneously produced email data and the written DCT data are examined with regard to their level of directness.

### Comparison of the Degree of Directness of DCT Requests and Naturally Occurring Requests

The findings of the DCT situations were compared to those of natural requests. For this reason, the Chi-square tests of independence using GraphPad Prism 6.0 for Windows (GraphPad Software, San Diego, CA) were used in the statistical analysis. The analysis of the degree of directness revealed non-significant differences between the two sets of data for direct strategies ($X^2$= 0.804, df=1, P=0.369) and conventionally indirect strategies($X^2$ = 3.393, df=1, p=0.065, NS) as it is shown from table 2 below. As it is clear from the table, the findings reveal a greater number of hints (non-conventionally indirect strategies) in natural requests compared to DCT requests. As it can be seen, 17 hints (4.58%) were found in natural requests compared to only one occurrence in DCT requests especially in requests for action where there is a statistically significant difference at a $p < 0.01$ level. The statistical analysis shows a significant difference between the two sets of data at the level of non-conventionally indirect strategies ($X^2$ = 4.301, df=1, p=0.038). So, naturally occurring requests use significantly more hints than the DCT ones.

It is found that 73.85% of natural requests compared to 69.85% of DCT requests are direct but the difference is not significant. Results reveal that 16.98% of natural requests are expectation statements and 14.55% of them opt for mood derivable. On the other hand, 15.44% of DCT requests are direct questions and 12.5% of them are need statements. This difference was found to be statistically non-significant at a $p < 0.01$ level. Results further indicated that DCT requests employ more conventionally indirect strategies with a percentage of 29.41% than that of natural requests (21.56%) but the difference is non-significant.

**Table 2: Degree of Directness/Indirectness: Main Strategies and Sub-Strategies (Naturally Occurring Requests (N: 371)/DCT Requests (N: 136))**

| | Natural Requests(N :371) | DCT Requests (N : 136) | Chi Square Test Results |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Most direct** | | | |
| Mood derivables | 73.85%(274/371) | 69.85% (95/136) | $X^2$= 0.804, df=1, P=0.369 NS |
| Performatives | 14.55%(54/371) | 10.29%(14/136) | X2 = 1.552, df=1, p=0.212, NS |
| Want statements | 7% (26/371) | 3.67%(5/136) | X2 = 1.924, df=1, p=0.165,NS X2 = 2.417, |
| Need statements | 5.66%(21/371) | 9.55% (13/136) | df=1, p=0.120,NS X2 = 1.994, df=1, |
| Direct questions | 8.35% (31/371) | 12.5% (17/136) | p=0.157,NS X2 = 0.658, df=1, p=0.417,NS |
| like/appreciate statements | 12.66%(47/371) | 15.44%(21/136) | X2 = 0.539, df=1, p=0.462,NS |
| expectation statements | 8.62%(32/371) | 6.61% (9/136) | X2 = 2.059, df=1, p=0.151,NS |
| **Conventionally indirect** | 16.98%(63/371) | 11.76% (16/136) | |
| Query preparatory | 21.56% (80/371) | 29.41% (40/136) | X2 = 3.393, df=1, p=0.065,NS |
| **Non-conventionally indirect:** Hints | 4.58% (17/371) | 0.001%(1/136) | X2 = 4.301, df=1, **p=0.038** |

**Comparison of the Degree of Directness in Requests for Information in DCT and Naturally Occurring Requests**

The aim of this part of the analysis is to find out whether there is a significant difference of directness in relation to the degree of requests' imposition manifested in requests for information and requests for action. Thus, the first set of data comprises requests for information considered as low impositions while the second set is made up of requests for action which are considered as high impositions. As far as requests for information are concerned, it is found that the results of natural and DCT requests are quite similar. As it attested from the statistical analysis, there are non-significant differences between natural and DCT requests at any level of strategies and sub-strategies.

As it is clear from the table below, 74.65% of natural requests are mostly direct compared to 76.31% of DCT requests. As it is indicated from the table, it is found a higher number of expectation statements (8.75%) and like/appreciate statements (6.91%) in natural requests than in DCT requests. On the other hand, the DCT included more direct questions (27.63%), mood derivable (15.78%) and need statements (10.52%).

**Table 3: Degree of Directness/Indirectness: Main Strategies and Sub-Strategies Used in Requests for Information (Naturally Occurring Requests (N: 217)/DCT Requests (N: 76)**

| | Natural requests (N : 217) | DCT requests (N : 76) | Chi-square test results |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Most direct** | | | |
| Mood derivables | 74.65%(162/217) | 76.31%(58/76) | $X^2$=0.083, df=1, P=0.77,NS |
| Performatives | 13.82%(30/217) | 15.78% (12/76) | X2 = 0.176, df=1, p=0.674, NS |
| Want statements | 10.59%(23/217) | 6.57% (5/76) | X2 = 1.052, df=1, p=0.304, NS |
| Need statements | 7.37% (16/217) | 6.57%(5/76) | X2 = 0.052, df=1, p=0.817, NS |
| Direct questions | 5.52%(12/217) | 10.52%(8/76) | X2 = 2.209, df=1, p=0.137, NS |
| like/appreciate statements | 21.65%(47/217) | 27.63%(21/76) | X2 = 0.239, df=1, p=0.624, NS |
| expectation statements | 6.91%(15/217) | 2.63% (2/76) | X2 = 1.887, df=1, p=0.169, NS |
| **Conventionally indirect** | 8.75%(19/217) | 6.57%(5/76) | X2 = 0.345, df=1, p=0.551, NS |
| Query preparatory | 23.50%(51/217) | 22.36%(17/76) | X2 = 0.040, df=1, p=0.840, NS |
| **Non-conventionally indirect** | | | |
| Hints | 1.84% (4/217) | 1.31% (1/76) | X2 = 0.093, df=1, p=0.759, NS |

**Comparison of the Degree of Directness in Requests for Action in DCT and Naturally Occurring Requests**

Results of requests for action indicate some significant differences between natural and DCT results. Natural requests employ more non-conventionally indirect strategies (8.44% compared to 0% in DCT requests) - statistically significant difference at a $p < 0.01$ level, $p= 0.0028$). DCT requests employ more conventionally indirect strategies than natural occurring requests (38.33% compared to 18.83% for natural requests- statistically significant difference at a $p < 0.01$ level; $p= 0.0028$). On the other hand, the findings revealed a non-significant difference between natural and DCT requests at the level of direct strategies ($X^2=2.49$, df=1, P=0.11).

As far as the sub-strategies are concerned, compared to DCT requests, results also reveal that natural requests employ more expectation statements (28.57% Vs 18.33%; statistically significant difference at a $p < 0.01$ level, $p= 0.0007$ ) and mood derivable (15.58%Vs 3.33%; statistically significant difference at a $p < 0.01$ level; $p=0.013$).On the other hand, DCT requests results indicate that they include more want statements (13.33% Vs 3.24% for natural requests, statistically significant difference at a $p < 0.01$ level; $p=0.001$) and need statements (15% Vs 12.33% for natural requests having statistically significant difference at a $p < 0.01$ level, $p=0.031$). Thus, as it attested from the findings, it is found that requests for information are not responsible for any difference between the two different data but requests for action display some significant differences and are therefore responsible for this difference as it is shown from table 4.

**Table 4: Degree of Directness/Indirectness: Main Strategies and Sub-Strategies Used in Requests for Action (Naturally Occurring Requests (N: 154)/DCT Requests (N: 60)**

| | Natural Requests (N : 154) | DCT Requests (N : 60) | Chi Square Test Results |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Most direct** | 72.72%(112/154) | 61.66%(37/60) | $X^2=2.49$, df=1, P=0.11 |
| Mood derivables | 15.58%(24/154) | 3.33% (2/60) | X2 = 6.072, df=1, **p=0.013** |
| Performatives | 1.94%(3/154) | 0% (0/60) | X2 = 1.185, df=1, p=0.276 |
| Want statements | 3.24%(5/154) | 13.33% (8/60) | X2 = 71.81, df=1, **p=0.0001** |
| Need statements | 12.33%(9/154) | 15% (9/60) | X2 = 4.698, df=1, **p=0.031** |
| Direct questions | 0%(0/154) | 0% (0/60) | **X2 = 0.176, df=1, p=0.674,** |
| like/appreciate statements | 11.03%(7/154) | 11.66% (7/60) | X2 = 3.589, df=1, p=0.058 |
| expectation statements | 28.57%(44/154) | 18.33% (11/60) | X2 = 11.381, df=1, **p=0.0007** |
| **Conventionally indirect** | | | |
| Query preparatory | 18.83%(29/154) | 38.33% (23/60) | X2 = 8.928, df=1, **p=0.0028** |
| **Non-conventionally indirect** | | | |
| Hints | 8.44%(13/154) | 0% (0/60) | X2 = 5.393, df=1, **p=0.02** |

## DISCUSSIONS

The aim of the comparison of naturally occurring requests and DCT requests according to the degree of directness is to investigate the reliability of DCT data and to find out the extent to which an approximation to naturally occurring requests produced by the participants may be considered. The two sets of data have fixed social parameters (i.e. social authority of the addressee over the addresser and low social distance between the interlocutors).Results of DCT and natural requests displayed approximately the same degree of directness. The analysis revealed that with regard to directness, email requests of Tunisian postgraduate students tended to be direct.

The widespread use of expectation statements is behind the reliance on directness (e.g. I expect to hear from you soon (Email No. 126)) and also of mood derivable(e.g. Please send me your comments (Email No. 157)) in natural requests as opposed to direct questions (e.g. Is it possible to fix an appointment to meet you) and need statements (e.g. I need your

help in proofreading my dissertation to for DCT requests). Some researchers (e.g.: Economidou-Kogetsidis 2005, Várhegyi 2017, Aribi ;2018) argue that L1 transfer is behind the extensive use of direct request strategies by EFL learners. Kasper & Rose (2002) assert that language proficiency may be another reason since students with lower proficiency may focus on getting the intended illocution across, and fail to pay attention to the actual realization of the locution. However, in the current study, the participants have a good proficiency of language since all of them have their BA in English and are pursuing postgraduate programs. Therefore, it seems that the reason behind the choice of direct strategies is L1 transfer.

It is also worthy to note that even though indirect strategies are the preferred way of NSs request realizations, comparative studies have found that NSs also employ direct (mood derivable, hedged performatives and want statements) strategies under certain circumstances (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007, Pan 2012) and modified by a wide range of lexical devices and syntactic structures (Dombi, 2019).In this study, In DCT requests, it is found that the requests were more conventionally indirect but more non-conventionally indirect strategies were found in natural data (17 occurrences), especially in relation to requests for action. Hints are rare in email requests presumably because as suggested by previous studies the written interaction lacks the contextual cues that make hints appear more natural and less face-threatening (Dombi, 2019).Biesenbach-Lucas asserts that hints are not often found in elicited data (such as in DCTs)because the task is to write a request and there is no social context in which the face is actually threatened by using more direct language (2007, p. 68).

Furthermore, results reveal that there are some differences in the distribution of certain strategies and sub-strategies and this depends on the level of the imposition of requests. More specifically, natural requests for the information included a higher number of expectation statements and like/appreciate statements than that of DCT requests as opposed to more direct questions and mood derivable in the DCT data but the difference is non-significant. The non-significant differences which emerged in the study show that the findings from the DCT are approximative to those elicited naturally.

As far as requests for action are concerned, results reveal that natural requests employ more expectation statements and mood derivable and also more hints. On the other hand, DCT requests for action results indicate that they include more want statements and need statements. Yet, importantly, the differences between these sub-strategies were significant. It could be said that both of the naturally occurring requests and the DCT requests were more direct. However, the similar proportions of the two sets of data in terms of requests strategies produced seemed to indicate that the DCT requests could indeed approximate natural data to some extent.The results of this study seem to support Economidou-Kogetsidis' (2013) claim that "WDCT requests can indeed approximate natural data to a certain extent" (2013, p. 34).

Many studies claim that elicited data from WDCTs differs from naturally occurring data in the sense that when instructed, the subjects will write down what they believe they would say in different situations, but that is not necessarily the same as what they would actually say in real situations. However, as Felix-Brasdefer (2010) points out, despite the criticism, WDCT is being widely utilized in various contexts, which is most certainly due to its potential to systematically gather large amount of data.

DCTs can provide researchers with useful information to elicit request strategies. As Kasper and Rose (2002) argue, the DCT ''can provide useful information about speakers' pragmalinguistic knowledge of the strategies and

linguistic forms by which communicative acts can be implemented'' (p. 96). Indeed, because the DCT data can approximate natural data, it could be saidthat the DCT is ''a good way to discover what semantic formulas are frequently used (or expected) in performance of a speech act'' (Beebe and Cummings, 1996, p. 73) and can help in the creation of an initial classification of semantic formulas and strategies that will occur in natural data (Wolfson et al., 1989, p. 184). Data obtained from WDCT should, however, be treated with caution: it can provide valuable insights into participants' pragmalinguistic knowledge and what they tend to view as socially accepted norms, but it does not necessarily reflect the linguistic forms that speakers would actually use in real-life situations (Dombi, 2019). As Kasper argues, WDCT data can tell us what "L2 speakers know as opposed to what they can do" (Kasper 2000, p. 330).

## CONCLUSIONS

This study examines how Tunisian post graduate students formulate requests to faculty in elicited vs. Spontaneously written emails. The aim of the study was to find out what characterizes participants' inter language requests in terms of directness. The analysis revealed that requests tended to be overwhelmingly direct. The study also aimed at contrasting spontaneously produced and elicited data. Therefore, the findings of the DCT situations were compared to those of natural requests.The analysis of the degree of directness revealed non-significant differences between WDCT data and natural requests for direct strategies and conventionally indirect strategies but a significant difference between the two sets of data at the level of non-conventionally indirect strategies. It is found that naturally occurring requests use significantly more hints than the DCT ones.

The current study also aims to find out whether there is a significant difference of directness in relation to the degree of requests' imposition manifested in requests for information (considered as low impositions) and requests for action (considered as high impositions). As it attested from the findings, it is found that requests for information are not responsible for any difference between WDCT data and natural requests but requests for action display some significant differences and are therefore responsible for this difference. As such, it can be claimed that the WDCT as a data collection instrument is not without validity. Thus, this paper suggests that the written DCT can be used as an effective data elicitation method if treated with caution.In line with Economidou (2008), the use of a WDCT should be used along side other research instruments and tested against other data (i.e. naturally occurring data, role-play data, verbal reports, interviews)through methodological triangulation.

The study has been limited in terms of the samples. Therefore, a larger number of emails would be beneficial in order to ensure that the data collected from the sample can be generalized and to provide more solid statistical results, Further more, the number of the informants who agree to participate in the study is relatively small, so, for future research, a larger number of participants from a variety of universities could be considered. Further research with other types of data are therefore needed in order to test the validity of the WDCT further Another suggestion in future research is to ask faculty members how they perceive received emails.The current study is based solely on the directness level of requests head acts, future research is needed to analyze the requests' internal and external modifiers.

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