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An Investigation of Request Types and Politeness Strategies among Senior High School EFL Learners

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A B S T R A C T

This research explores the types of requests and politeness strategies used by eleventh-grade students at SMA Muhammadiyah Program Khusus Surakarta in various social interactions. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) featuring scenarios with teachers, peers, parents, and strangers. Analysis was conducted using Trosborg's (1995) classification and Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. Results reveal that conventionally indirect requests, particularly those expressing ability, willingness, or permission, are the most common. Both positive and negative politeness strategies frequently appeared, while bald-on-record forms were mostly used in urgent or familiar situations. These findings suggest that students demonstrate sensitivity to social context and power dynamics, reflecting the influence of the school's character education in fostering polite and contextually appropriate communication in English

Keywords: *Request Strategies, Politeness Strategies, Discourse Completion Tasks, EFL Students*

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INTRODUCTION

Politeness is widely acknowledged as a fundamental element in human communication, functioning not only as a social convention but also as a means of sustaining relationships and preventing conflict. In everyday interaction, politeness helps maintain a smooth conversational flow, reducing the likelihood of misunderstanding or tension. In educational settings, politeness carries additional significance, as it is tied to moral and character development alongside language learning. Drawing on Goffman's (1967) concept of face underscores the interpersonal dimension of communication, where speakers work to protect both their own public image and that of others. Within this framework, politeness becomes a strategic mechanism for preserving social equilibrium, particularly in school environments where communication also conveys values such as respect, empathy, and cooperation.

From a linguistic perspective, politeness is often seen as the balance between achieving communicative goals and adhering to social expectations. Lakoff, (1975) conceptualizes politeness as a mechanism to reduce interpersonal tension, while Leech's (1983) Politeness Principal outlines maxims—such as tact and generosity—that complement Grice's Cooperative Principle in guiding socially sensitive discourse. Spencer-Oatey's, (2008) Rapport Management Model further integrates face needs with sociality rights, and interactional goals, offering a broader view that extends into intercultural pragmatics and institutional communication.

In the field of second and foreign language learning, politeness is closely linked to pragmatic competence—the ability to select language forms appropriate to specific sociocultural contexts (Kasper & Rose, 2002). Unlike grammatical competence, which ensures

syntactic accuracy, pragmatic competence addresses the social acceptability of utterances. This distinction is crucial when performing face-threatening acts (FTAs) such as requests, refusals, and criticisms (Brown & Levinson, 1987), which may threaten the hearer's negative face, or their wish for autonomy and freedom from imposition.

Speech act theory, first introduced by Austin, (1962) and later expanded by Searle (1976), provides the theoretical foundation for understanding requests as a type of directive — an illocutionary act intended to get the hearer to perform a specific action. Building on this, Trosborg's (1995) taxonomy classifies requests into four categories: (1) indirect requests (hints), (2) conventionally indirect requests based on hearer-oriented conditions (ability, willingness, permission, and suggestory formulae), (3) conventionally indirect requests based on speaker-oriented conditions (wishes, desires, needs, and demands), and (4) direct requests (obligation, performative, and imperative). The Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) initiated by Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1984) and expanded by Blum-Kulka et al., (1989), demonstrated how request strategies are shaped by linguistic proficiency and cultural norms, with the Discourse Completion Task (DCT) as a standardized method for eliciting comparable data.

Brown & Levinson's (1987) politeness framework remains the most widely applied model for analyzing FTAs, identifying four main strategies: (1) Bald on record — direct and unmitigated forms, used when clarity takes precedence over politeness, such as in emergencies or when speaking to close acquaintances. (2) Positive politeness — strategies that emphasize solidarity, often through inclusive language, compliments, and expressions of shared goals. (3) Negative politeness — strategies that minimize imposition through indirectness, hedging, formal address terms, and apologies. (4) Off record — highly indirect approaches that rely on hints or implicature, allowing the hearer to interpret the message without feeling pressured.

Leech (2014) updated Politeness Principle reaffirms the importance of conversational maxims such as tact and generosity in guiding socially appropriate language use, while Spencer-Oatey (2008) expands the analysis by integrating relational rights and obligations into the framework. These perspectives underscore that politeness is not solely an individual choice but is shaped by cultural norms, situational objectives, and the interpersonal relationship between speaker and hearer.

Empirical research across contexts confirms that cultural orientation and institutional norms influence politeness strategy selection. As noted by Gusti et al., (2019), politeness in EFL classroom interactions involves the interplay between linguistic choice and relational management, where learners employ both positive and negative politeness strategies to maintain respect while negotiating meaning and avoiding threats to the hearer's face. Similarly, Megaiab et al., (2019) highlight that in Libyan academic contexts, conventionally indirect request strategies—particularly query preparatory forms—are the culturally preferred means of reducing imposition and signaling deference toward lecturers or authority figures. In peer-to-peer interactions, Tufadilla et al., (2023) observe that positive politeness strategies, such as joking, expressing optimism, and showing solidarity, dominate conversations among English Department students, reflecting the cultural value of maintaining group harmony and rapport. From a teacher–student perspective, Santosa et al., (2024) emphasize that teachers employ all four of Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies when making requests, with bald-on-record forms frequently used to ensure clarity and secure compliance while still fostering cooperation. Extending beyond classroom settings, De Vera & Jajalla, (2025) demonstrate that in formal written requests—such as government correspondence—politeness strategies function not only as linguistic tools but also as mechanisms for preserving institutional relationships and maintaining professional decorum. In the Indonesian context, the country's collectivist cultural orientation (Hofstede, 2001) places high value on group harmony, indirectness, and respect for hierarchy, shaping the way learners make requests in English. In character-based schools such as SMA Muhammadiyah Program Khusus Surakarta, moral and religious values are integrated into daily interactions, making politeness not only a communicative skill but also part of character education. The

recent Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes interpersonal communication, functional text production, and character building, requiring high school students to engage in polite, context-appropriate communication across varied scenarios (Capaian Pembelajaran Fase F – Bahasa Inggris SMA, n.d.)

This study uses Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) to simulate real-life situations where students must make requests to various interlocutors—teachers, peers, parents, and strangers—each representing different combinations of social distance and power. This approach enables the analysis of how students' internalized values and contextual awareness shape their use of politeness strategies. The Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) reinforces the relevance of such an approach, recommending tools like DCTs for exploring pragmatic competence across sociocultural contexts.

In this study, social distance refers to the degree of closeness between the speaker and hearer, ranging from close (e.g., family members), to familiar, (acquaintances) and to unfamiliar (strangers). According to Akerlof (1997), social distance reflects the extent to which individuals share beliefs, customs, practices, appearances, and other identity markers. Power difference, on the other hand, relates to the relative social status between interlocutors, influencing the level of politeness and indirectness in requests.

While studies on Indonesian learners have explored politeness strategies in both secondary and tertiary contexts, limited research examines how students from character-based educational institutions manage request strategies across varied social distances and power relations. This study addresses that gap by investigating the request types and politeness strategies used by eleventh-grade students at SMA Muhammadiyah Program Khusus Surakarta in simulated interactions with interlocutors of differing status and familiarity. By applying Trosborg's (1995) and Brown and Levinson's (1987) frameworks, and employing DCT scenarios, the research seeks to reveal how students' linguistic choices reflect both sociocultural norms and the school's emphasis on respectful interaction.

METHOD

This research applied a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) to examine the types of requests and politeness strategies used by eleventh-grade EFL learners. The participants were 30 students from SMA Muhammadiyah Program Khusus Surakarta. The DCT comprised nine scenarios that combined two sociolinguistic variables: power relations (higher, equal, lower) and social distance (familiar, close, unfamiliar). Students were instructed to provide responses in English as though the situations were authentic.

The data collection procedure consisted of four stages: (1) developing request-making scenarios, (2) administering the DCT during class sessions, (3) compiling students' written responses, and (4) classifying the data for analysis. Request strategies were identified based on Trosborg's (1995) taxonomy: (1) indirect requests (hints), (2) conventionally indirect requests guided by hearer-oriented conditions — such as Ability/Willingness/Permission and Suggestory Formulae, (3) conventionally indirect requests guided by speaker-oriented conditions — such as Wishes/Desires and Needs/Demands, and (4) direct requests — such as Obligation, Performative, and Imperative forms. Politeness strategies were examined using Brown and Levinson's (1987) model, which includes bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies.

For systematic organization, each response was coded according to the DCT item and the alphabetical order of the participant's name. Data analysis involved coding, categorizing, interpreting within context, and drawing conclusions regarding students' pragmatic competence.

Table 1. Summary of DCT Scenarios Based on Social Power and Distance

No	Distance	Power	Scenario Description
1.	Close	Higher	Asking a nephew to help clean your room
2.	Close	Equal	Asking a friend to help with math homework

3.	Close	Lower	Asking your mother to bring your sportswear to school
4.	Familiar	Higher	Asking a junior to distribute extracurricular brochures
5.	Familiar	Equal	Asking a friend's friend for a ride home from a party
6.	Familiar	Lower	Asking your father's colleague to call your father
7.	Unfamiliar	Higher	Asking an elementary student to call your mother
8.	Unfamiliar	Equal	Asking a new classmate to go around the school with you
9.	Unfamiliar	Lower	Asking a train officer to help you buy ticket

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study investigated the types of requests and politeness strategies used by eleventh-grade EFL learners at SMA Muhammadiyah Program Khusus Surakarta. Data were collected through nine Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs).

Request Strategies

This section presents the distribution and qualitative analysis of the request types employed by the students, categorized according to Trosborg's (1995) taxonomy. Quantitative results are shown first, followed by qualitative examples and interpretations for each type. The distribution of request types in students' responses is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of Request Types (Trosborg, 1995)

No	Request	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Indirect – Hints	6	2,22%
2.	Conventionally Indirect (Hearer-Oriented)		
	a. Ability/Willingness/Permission	205	75,93%
	b. Suggestory Formulae	12	4,44%
3.	Conventionally Indirect (Speaker-Oriented)		
	a. Wishes/Desires	11	4,07%
	b. Needs/Demands	5	1,85%
4.	Direct		
	a. Obligation	0	0%
	b. Performative	0	0%
	c. Imperative	31	11,48%
Total		270	100%

As shown in Table 1, Ability/Willingness/Permission was by far the most frequent request type (75,93%), followed by Imperatives (11.48%). Other forms such as Suggestory Formulae (4.44%), Wishes/Desires (4.07%), Hints (2,22%), and Needs/Demands (1.85%) appeared less frequently. No examples of Obligation or Performative requests were found.

Ability/Willingness/Permission

This type was found across most DCT scenarios and is marked by modal verbs that check the hearer's capacity or readiness to perform the action.

"Mom I'm sorry, I forgot to bring something, can you help me?" (DCT3/11)

This sentence falls under the category of Ability/Willingness/Permission because it contains the question "Can you help me?", in which the speaker checks the hearer's willingness rather than issuing a direct command. The opening clause, *"Mom, I'm sorry, I forgot to bring something"*, serves as a grounder—providing a reason that mitigates the imposition. This strategy aligns with polite request-making in hierarchical, close relationships.

"Would you please call my father?" (DCT6/24)

The use of the modal "would" combine with please elevates the level of politeness, framing the request as contingent upon the hearer's consent. This is suitable for the familiar–lower context (student to parent's colleague) where deference is expected. According to Trosborg, such formulations exemplify the "permission" subtype, as they explicitly ask for the hearer's agreement before action.

"Excuse me, can you help me to get the ticket, please?" (DCT9/30)

The expression begins with "Excuse me", functioning as an attention-getter and politeness marker. The modal "can you" inquiries about the hearer's ability, avoiding direct imposition. Given the unfamiliar–lower context (student to a station officer), this form demonstrates pragmatic awareness by maintaining formality and respecting social distance

Imperative

Imperatives are direct forms that explicitly instruct the hearer to perform an action, often without modal verbs. Their appropriateness depends heavily on the social context, power relations, and urgency.

"Help me to tidy up my room, please?" (DCT1/10)

The verb "help" appears in bare imperative form, directly commanding the hearer. The addition of please softens the tone slightly, but the absence of modal verbs signals higher imposition. In a closer–higher context (older sibling to younger), this directness is socially acceptable.

"Share this to your friends, okay?" (DCT4/25)

The sentence uses a direct verb (share) and includes, "okay?" as a tag for minimal mitigation. This aligns with the familiar–higher context (senior to junior), where authority legitimizes directive speech. Trosborg classifies this as imperative because the core verb is unmitigated by modal or interrogative structures.

"Help me to go around the school" (DCT8/30)

Here, the direct request leaves no room for negotiation. The imperative verb help marks high imposition. In the unfamiliar–equal context, this form risks sounding too blunt, showing that some participants may not adjust linguistic form to social distance

Suggestory Formulae

Suggestory formulae present the requested action as a suggestion or option for the hearer, often using conditional or modal phrases such as "Would you mind…" or "Do you want to…."

"Would you mind calling my father?" (DCT6/4)

The use of "Would you mind" softens the request significantly, signaling respect for the hearer's autonomy. In a familiar–lower context, this acknowledges the higher status of the addressee while still being clear.

"Do you want to come with me to walk around the school I'm new kids in here" (DCT8/5)

By framing the action as an invitation "Do you want to…", the speaker reduces the coercive force of the request. This is appropriate for an unfamiliar–equal situation, promoting solidarity while avoiding direct imposition.

"Want you go around with me?" (DCT8/14)

Though grammatically less standard, the utterance still functions as a suggestory formula by presenting the action as an option. The lack of overt mitigation markers here might make it sound slightly more casual, fitting the relatively equal peer context

Wishes/Desires

Wishes/desires state what the speaker wants, indirectly implying a request. They often include expressions like "I want you to…" or "I hope…."

"I want you teach me, bro?" (DCT2/26)

This construction directly states the speaker's desire while using a question mark for slight mitigation. It's indirect because it doesn't explicitly command, but the obligation is clear.

"I want you share this extracurricular brochure, bro" (DCT4/26)

Similar to the previous example, this states the speaker's want outright. The casual term bro reflects familiarity, which makes this direct expression more acceptable in the familiar–higher context.

"I want you help me to booking my ticket" (DCT9/26)

This phrase explicitly conveys the speaker's need, with minimal mitigation. Given the unfamiliar–lower context, it risks sounding too forward, suggesting limited adaptation to social norms.

Hints

Hints are indirect and rely on the hearer to infer the intended request. They often omit explicit mention of the action desired.

"Do you know my mom? Where is she?" (DCT7/11)

The speaker does not explicitly request the addressee to call the mother but implies it by asking for her location. The listener is expected to infer the intended action.

"*How to buy the ticket?*" (DCT9/3)

This question appears as a request for information, but in context, it implies that the speaker needs the hearer to assist in buying the ticket.

"*Sir, how can I get the ticket?*" (DCT9/29)

Framed as a question seeking directions, this utterance subtly prompts the hearer to either explain the process or directly help. The lack of explicit request marks it as a hint

Needs/Demands

Needs/Demands convey a sense of urgency or necessity, often realized through expressions such as "I need you to…" or similar structures. They typically carry a high level of imposition and are common in situations involving urgency or authority.

"*I want you help me, can you drive me to my home?*" (DCT5/26)

The utterance opens with the declarative form "I want you help me", directly expressing the speaker's desire without any mitigating elements. This structure delivers the request in a straightforward manner, resulting in a high level of illocutionary force.

"*Sorry, I want you help me, I want you call my father*" (DCT6/26)

The utterance employs a declarative structure expressing the speaker's personal desire through the pattern "I want you" According to Trosborg's (1995) taxonomy, this form is categorized as a Need/Demand Statement, in which the request is conveyed explicitly as the speaker's want or need without mitigation. Such a formulation carries a high illocutionary force, as it directly places the responsibility on the hearer to perform the action.

"*I need you call my mother, my mother is teacher in this school*" (DCT7/26)

The modal "need" signals necessity and urgency, leaving little choice for the hearer. This matches Trosborg's needs/demands category, as it removes negotiation from the request overall, the findings reveal that students' request-making behavior tended to favor conventionally indirect forms, particularly Ability/Willingness/Permission, as these allow speakers to remain polite while still communicating the request clearly. Such forms often co-occurred with positive politeness in familiar or equal-status contexts, and with negative politeness in hierarchical or unfamiliar situations. Direct forms like imperatives were mostly used in closer or lower-status relationships and in urgent scenarios, while hints were rare and tended to occur in contexts where the speaker wished to avoid imposing directly. This distribution suggests a pragmatic awareness of social distance and power relations, reflecting the influence of character-based education in shaping students' linguistic choices.

Politeness Strategies

This section examines the types of politeness strategies employed by students in making requests, categorized according to Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework. The quantitative distribution of strategies is presented first, followed by a qualitative analysis of representative examples for each category.

The distribution of politeness strategies in students' responses is summarized in Table 2.

Table 3. Distribution of Politeness Strategies

No	Politeness	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Bald On Record	41	15,19%
2.	Positive Politeness	112	41,48%
3.	Negative Politeness	104	38,52%
4.	Off-Record	13	4,81%
Total		270	100%

As shown in Table 2, positive politeness was the most frequently used strategy (41,48%), followed by negative politeness (38,52%). Bald on record strategies accounted for (15,19%) of requests, while off record forms were rare (4.81%).

Positive Politeness

Positive politeness strategies aim to minimize social distance and emphasize solidarity between speaker and hearer. They often use inclusive language, terms of address, or expressions of appreciation.

"*Sis, can you help me clean this room?*" (DCT1/7)

The use of "Sis" as an affectionate address signals closeness, while the modal can you softens the request. This builds a sense of shared responsibility typical of positive politeness.

"Bro, can you help me finish my math homework?" (DCT2/1)

The friendly address term "Bro" indicates an informal, equal relationship. The modal can you invites cooperation rather than imposing, fostering camaraderie.

"Hey bro, can you help me to share the extracurricular brochure to your friend in the class?" (DCT4/13)

The combination of a casual greeting "Hey bro" and collaborative tone reduces imposition, making the request feel like a shared task rather than a burden.

Negative Politeness

Negative politeness strategies are used to avoid imposition and respect the hearer's autonomy, often employing indirect forms, apologies, or formal address.

"Would you mind calling my father?" (DCT6/4)

The phrase "Would you mind" directly acknowledges the hearer's right to refuse, showing deference in a familiar–lower context.

"Excuse me, can you help me to get the ticket, please?" (DCT9/30)

Opening with "Excuse me" marks formality and mitigates the imposition. The politeness marker please further acknowledges the hearer's autonomy.

"Sir, could you help me please? How to book a ticket? This is my first time boarded with the train." (DCT9/5)

The honorific "Sir" and the apologetic framing "This is my first time…" serve as strong mitigators, fitting negative politeness by showing respect and minimizing pressure.

Bald on Record

Bald on record strategies are direct, unmitigated requests where the speaker makes no attempt to soften the imposition. They are often used in emergencies, close relationships, or when efficiency is prioritized over politeness.

"Help me to tidy up my room, please?" (DCT1/10)

Although "please" is present, the imperative Help me remains unmitigated, making it a bald on record directive in a close-higher context.

"Share this to your friends, okay?" (DCT4/25)

The direct imperative share this shows an assumption of compliance. The tag "okay?" slightly softens tone but doesn't alter the directness.

"I need you call my mother" (DCT7/19)

The phrase "I need you…" leaves no option for refusal, conveying urgency without mitigation, fitting the bald on record category.

Off Record

Off record strategies are indirect and rely on implication, allowing the hearer to interpret the request voluntarily.

"Do you know my mom? Where is she?" (DCT7/11)

The speaker avoids explicitly asking for help, instead implying the request through questions. This preserves the hearer's freedom to offer assistance or not.

"How to buy the ticket?" (DCT9/3)

Presented as a request for information, this utterance subtly prompts the hearer to either explain or directly assist.

"Sis, how get the ticket?" (DCT9/29)

The utterance takes the form of an information-seeking question about the way to get the ticket, without explicitly asking the hearer to perform the action. By leaving the request open to interpretation, the speaker allows the hearer the option to offer assistance voluntarily, thus minimizing imposition and protecting both the speaker's and hearer's face.

Overall, the findings suggest that students prioritized positive politeness in order to maintain solidarity and minimize social distance, particularly in familiar or equal-status interactions. Negative politeness was employed in hierarchical or unfamiliar contexts, reflecting an awareness of the need to respect the hearer's autonomy. Bald on record forms

tended to occur in close relationships or urgent situations were efficiency outweighed politeness. Off record strategies were the least frequent, appearing in contexts where the speaker wished to leave the request implicit. This distribution highlights students' pragmatic adaptability, aligning their choice of strategy with the interplay of social distance, relative power, and situational urgency.

Combined Discussion of Request Types and Politeness Strategies

The comprehensive analysis of students' request production demonstrates a marked inclination toward conventionally indirect strategies, especially those falling under the Ability/Willingness/Permission category. Such forms were frequently paired with both positive and negative politeness strategies, suggesting that learners aimed to balance interpersonal harmony with the communicative clarity of their requests.

In familiar, equal-status interactions, Ability/Willingness/Permission requests were often combined with positive politeness, characterized by inclusive phrasing and friendly address terms to reinforce solidarity. In contrast, in hierarchical or unfamiliar contexts, the same request type tended to be accompanied by negative politeness, marked by formal address terms, apologetic language, and modal verbs to convey respect and minimize the imposition. Direct strategies, such as imperatives, were largely associated with bald on record approaches, typically emerging in urgent situations or where the speaker had greater authority or shared close rapport with the hearer. This indicates that directness was perceived as acceptable when efficiency was prioritized or when relational closeness mitigated potential face threats.

More implicit forms, such as hints, were seldom used, yet when present, they were generally linked to off-record strategies. These tended to appear when speakers sought to avoid explicit imposition or when the desired action could be offered voluntarily by the hearer.

CONCLUSION

This research investigated how Indonesian EFL students construct requests and select politeness strategies in interactions involving different levels of social distance and power. The findings indicate a strong preference for conventionally indirect, hearer-oriented requests—particularly in the ability/willingness/permission form—which function to minimize imposition. Positive Politeness and Negative Politeness emerged as the dominant strategies, reflecting the students' developing pragmatic competence and growing awareness of social norms in English communication. These results also underscore the contribution of the school's character-based education in fostering respectful and contextually appropriate interactions, and suggest the importance of continued pragmatic instruction to further refine students' ability to adapt language use across contexts.

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